

CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH

Volume 7

Follow-Up Interviews, Discussions, Talks, and Texts



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, fourteen 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)*. December 4, 2003. <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf>.
See now: *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 4.
 - *Figures of the Thinkable, Including Passion and Knowledge*. February 2005. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf>.
See now: *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 6.
 - *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*. January 2013. <http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf>.
 - *Window on the Chaos*, Including “How I Didn’t Become a Musician” (Beta Version). July 21, 2015. <http://www.notbored.org/WoC.pdf>.
 - *A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, and Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism*. With a Translator/Editor’s Introduction by David Ames Curtis (March–April 2016). London, Eris, 2018. 488pp. <https://soubrans.org/SouBA.pdf>.
 - *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 1. March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-1.pdf>
 - *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 2: *Human Domains*. March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-2-human-domains.pdf>
 - *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 3: *World in Fragments*. March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-3-world-in-fragments.pdf>
 - *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 4: *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*. March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-4-rising-tide-of-insignificance.pdf>
 - *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 5: *Done and To Be Done*. March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-5-done-and-to-be-done.pdf>
 - *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 6: *Figures of the Thinkable*. March 2022. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-6-figures-of-the-thinkable.pdf>
 - *More Political and Social Writings, 1945–1997*. Books 1 and 2. *The Question of the Workers’ Movement*. Volumes 1 and 2. Beta Version (Translator/Editor’s Foreword forthcoming). October 2023. <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-mpsw-i-ii-question-of-the-workers-movement-1-2.pdf>
- 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]). May 2013. <http://vimeo.com/66587994> (FR/EN subtitles).
 - 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. 281pp.

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. 438pp. <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. 471pp. <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. 379pp. <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. 336pp. <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. 384pp. <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. 402pp. <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*.
- MPSW1-2 *More Political and Social Writings, 1945-1997*. Books 1 and 2. *The Question of the Workers' Movement*. Volumes 1 and 2. Beta Version (Translator/Editor's Foreword forthcoming). <http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-mpsw-i-ii-question-of-the-workers-movement-1-2.pdf> Electronic publication date: October 2023. 435pp.
- 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 Insignificance, Including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificance. 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. 388pp.
- [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. 172pp.

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. Paris: Flammarion, 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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Translator/Editor's Foreword

Building on efforts that date back to “The Nature and Value of Equality”—the first Cornelius Castoriadis text translated by David Ames Curtis, published in 1986¹—and on several books previously translated and edited by Curtis (*Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, *World in Fragments*, *The Castoriadis Reader*) during Castoriadis’s lifetime or posthumously by the Anonymous Translator (*The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)* and *Figures of the Thinkable including Passion and Knowledge*), as well as even earlier efforts—translations by others or Castoriadis texts appearing directly in English in various journals, including *Social Research*, *Telos*, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, *Stanford Literature Studies*, and *Thesis Eleven*—the six volumes of translated and edited Castoriadis texts brought together for the first time in one place in the *Crossroads in the Labyrinth (CL) collection* appeared in March 2022. These writings and petitions, talks and interviews—translated and edited by Curtis in agreement with Castoriadis’s widow and Eris Press but ultimately made available by the Anonymous Translator and *Not Bored!* in an “electro-Samizdat” edition as a public service after the widow and Eris Press publisher Alex Stavrakas failed to ensure the proper conditions for a serious critical edition²—enlarge upon what Castoriadis called the

¹*Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 11:4 (Fall 1986): 373-90; errata, *ibid.*, 12:4: 388 (reprinted in *CL2*). Curtis had begun translating this text even before he first met Castoriadis at the latter’s home forty years ago, in early January 1985, when he showed Castoriadis a first draft.

²See, for example, “Appendix: Potential Errata” in *each of the first six Crossroads translations*. The Castoriadis literary heirs and their “Association Castoriadis” were so dysfunctional that they could not even produce for Curtis, upon request, complete lists of the *errata* that had been noted by Castoriadis in his own copies of the *Carrefours* volumes. Eris

“source ideas [*idées mères*]” (Preface, [CL1](#), xvi) he had expounded in his 1975 *magnum opus*, which was translated in 1987 by Kathleen Blamey as [The Imaginary Institution of Society \(IIS\)](#). Now, three years later, a seventh *Crossroads* volume—not explicitly foreseen when Castoriadis published during his lifetime the first five *Carrefours du labyrinthe* volumes ([1978](#), [1986](#), [1990](#), 1996, 1997) and not planned by the French Editors when they brought out what they considered a final, posthumous sixth French volume in 1999³—is now offered to the English-language reading public under the title *Follow-Up Interviews, Discussions, Talks, and Texts*.

Selected from among the vast amount of French- and English-language material available in print, online, and from various video and audio sources,⁴ these written and transcribed *Follow-Up* chapters have been chosen for their potential to advance one's understanding and critical

Press publisher Alex Stavrakas was powerless to convince Castoriadis's widow, Zoé, that she needed to supply this normally provided information.

³One may very well speculate whether this unofficial seventh volume may have the same ultimate effect as the first electro-Samizdat translation, [RTI\(TBS\)](#) back in 2003, when its Appendix, listing “non-*Carrefours* texts considered for possible inclusion,” forced the Castoriadis literary heirs to publish another volume in French, along the same “rising tide”-themed lines, whose publication they had not foreseen. That volume was then translated as a public service by the Anonymous Translator/Editor as [A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today](#) in 2010, after [FTPK](#) came out in 2005.

⁴See, for a partial bibliographical accounting, the lists compiled in “Appendix: Potential Future Translation Projects” ([WoC](#) [2015], 132-38). Many of these projected translations have now been published in [CL1-6](#) and the [first two volumes of MPSW](#), while some others remain “potential future translation projects.”

appreciation of key themes and topics invented by Castoriadis and/or examined and elucidated by him in *IIS* and in the *Crossroads series*. This seventh, “unofficial” volume thus extends the first six ones while often shedding fresh light on their contents, just as *CLI-6* had done in relation to *IIS*. Only one of these new chapters, the first, has heretofore appeared in book form in English, and many of those previously existing only in French that are now translated here have been available only disparately, in obscure or out-of-print books, journals, web-based recordings, and incomplete transcriptions. So, this *Follow-Up* volume is truly intended to be a *public service* for English-language readers interested in continuing to gain direct access in English to Castoriadis’s thought and in improvising their own responses.

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Some texts considered for inclusion in *Crossroads 7*, as it may now be called, have been left aside, at least for the time being, because, while often interesting and informative when read out of the context of the extant English-language Castoriadis publishing history, they do not substantially add to what had been offered in the previous six volumes or they largely repeat material already printed in those tomes or they exist merely as precursor texts. For example, his 1985 talk “Imaginaire social et changement scientifique (Social imaginary and scientific change)”⁵ came out the next year in

⁵This May 23, 1985 contribution to a series of public lectures on science appeared two years later in the collective work *Sens et place des connaissances dans la société* that reprinted, in three volumes, the Acts of these conferences; see vol. 3 (Paris: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), pp. 161-83.

the second *Carrefours* volume in a fuller version whose translation now appears as “Ontological Import of the History of Science” in [CL2](#). (Included in *CL7*’s “Logos” section, nevertheless, is “Social Imaginary and Scientific Change: Discussion,” the 1985 post-lecture exchange with his audience.) Similarly, “Pour soi et subjectivité (For-itself and subjectivity),” another 1985 talk—this time given for a colloquium, organized around the work of Castoriadis’s friend, coauthor, and longtime interlocutor Edgar Morin, whose Acts were finally published in 1990⁶—is an earlier, abbreviated version of his article “The State of the Subject Today” (1986, now in [CL3](#)). “Tract,” a highly unusual Castoriadis text because it was made available as an insert for a work of art appearing for Costis Triandaphyllou’s *Espace électrique* catalogue (Athens: Artbook, 1995),⁷ might have served as another chapter in the *Poiēsis* section of *CL7* to add to the one already there. However, it is comprised simply of excerpts from his November 24, 1987 interview with François Dosse, which was translated as “What a Revolution Is” and published in [ASA\(RPT\)](#).

Other texts did not fit in tightly enough with those already published in [Crossroads 1 through 6](#). Among these

⁶*Colloque de Cerisy: Arguments pour une méthode (Autour d’Edgar Morin)*, Daniel Bournoux, Jean-Louis Le Moigne, and Serge Proulx, eds. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), pp. 118-27.

⁷On page 63 of this catalogue, “Tract” is acknowledged as constituting Castoriadis’s “participation in the exhibition” as relates to Costis’s “Oeuvre #5a/b,” and it is dated as “1989-1993.” The work itself, depicted there in a small photographic image, is described as consisting of “two electronic lightning strikes, air, Castoriadis’s text, iron filings, and plexi[glass], 70 × 114 × 18 cm.” A full-page photograph of “5a” appears on page 41.

are texts of substantial interest about Russia that may instead be included in an expanded translation of Castoriadis's *Écrits politiques* series the French Editors had published from 2012 to 2020 through Éditions du Sandre as itself an expanded version of Castoriadis's *Socialisme ou Barbarie*-era writings, which he had published in eight volumes between 1973 and 1979 via Éditions 10/18 and for which a beta version of [the first two books in the More Political and Social Writings, 1945-1997 translation series](#) has appeared in October 2023, building on the [volume 1](#), [volume 2](#), and [volume 3](#) of the *Political and Social Writings* translated and edited by Curtis and published by the University of Minnesota Press from 1988 to 1993. Such additional texts could be combined with a set of texts, "omitted from [CL2](#)...that have subsequently been reprinted by the French Editors in the fifth and sixth volumes of Castoriadis's posthumously published *Écrits politiques*,"⁸ to supplement the corresponding, forthcoming *MPSW* volumes.

Also omitted are posthumously published transcriptions of various individual Castoriadis seminar sessions not integrated into seminar volumes already published by the French Editors.⁹ These include "Fragments of a Philosophical Seminar,"¹⁰ "Fragments of a Seminar on

⁸Quoting here the Translator/Editor's Foreword to [CL1](#), xxix.

⁹*CFG1-3* and *SV*, which are to be translated by the Anonymous Translator/Editor (Castoriadis's seminar [On Plato's Statesman](#) already exists in a 1999 English-language translation by Curtis).

¹⁰"Fragments d'un séminaire philosophique," *Humanisme: Revue des francs-maçons du Grand Orient de France*, 199/200 (September 1991): 104-106.

Virtue and Autonomy" (1984),¹¹ and "The Conditions for the New in History" (January 18, 1989),¹² translations of which the Translator/Editor will eventually make available in an appropriate venue. Other seminar sessions have already been translated for *WoC*,¹³ while two more, on the 1989-1990 turning point in Eastern Europe,¹⁴ may be translated for the sixth volume in the *MPSW* series.¹⁵

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As *Follow-Up Interviews, Discussions, Talks, and Texts, Crossroads in the Labyrinth* 7 may be said to appear under the sign of *encounter*.¹⁶ "Encounter"—in French: *rencontre*, which can also mean "meeting"—is an

¹¹"Fragments d'un séminaire sur la vertu et l'autonomie," *Areté: Revista de filosofía*, 11:1-2 (1999): 293-313.

¹²"Les conditions du nouveau en histoire," *Cahiers Critiques de Philosophie*, 6 (Summer 2008): 43-62.

¹³"Window on the Chaos," drawn from Castoriadis's seminars of January 22 and 29, 1992.

¹⁴"L'histoire au travail: 1989-1990 en Europe de l'Est (History at work: 1989-1990 in Eastern Europe)" is comprised of two Castoriadis seminars from January 17 and 24, 1990.

¹⁵See also now online, in French, the first installment in an ongoing project of transcribing unpublished Castoriadis seminars: *Ontologie et modes d'être*: <https://notbored.org/castoriadis-seminaires-1989-1990.pdf>.

¹⁶See "Entrevista a David Ames Curtis. Pregunta 1: La trayectoria de David Ames Curtis," Curtis's 2011 self-filmed interview at Walden Pond in English with Spanish subtitles, which deals with the word *encounter/encuentro* in Castoriadis's work and beyond.

underthematized and *underthought* or at least *underarticulated*, yet remarkably significant, word, oft repeated in Castoriadis's vocabulary, that is utilized in all sorts of contexts and with greater or lesser emphasis and force. In *IIS*, for example, one encounters "the symbolic," doing so with "institutions" (117), an "autonomization of symbolism in history" (126), as well as, for example, "paradox[es]" (162), while in *CL1-6*, encounters occur with "obstacles" (*CL2*, 72), with "limit[s]" and "bounds" (*ibid.*, 263; *CL3*, 178), with a "supreme paradox" (*CL3*, 268), and with "the psychical dimension" (*CL3*, 289), just as there is an "encounter between different societies" (*CL3*, 29). Moreover, "encounters" may raise insurmountable questions of location and relation, as when they somehow occur *between*, for example, the physical and psychical levels or regions of being: "And *that which*" molecules of alcohol or Largactil (a brand name for the antipsychotic drug chlorpromazine) "encounter when they act—well," asks Castoriadis pertinently but wonderingly, "*where* do they encounter it?" ("Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science," 1968, now in *CL1*, 42).¹⁷ To which question he understandably supplies no locative/relational answer that would be restricted merely to our three- or four-dimensional physicalistic or natural world.

Indeed, the very first line from the first chapter of what became the first part of *IIS*—reprinted from "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (*MRT*, 1964-1965)—reads: "For

¹⁷Twenty-five years later, in "False and True Chaos," Castoriadis reiterates the conundrum raised by such *transregional encounters*: "Compounds found in Largactil molecules or alcohol compounds somewhere encounter this 'immaterial' that is the psyche. Where they encounter it, I do not know" (*CL6*, 371).

anyone who is preoccupied with the question of society, the encounter with Marxism is immediate and inevitable" (9). Nevertheless, Castoriadis adds immediately thereafter, so as to in effect undercut this opening affirmation: "Even to speak of an encounter in this case is inappropriate, inasmuch as this word denotes a contingent and external event." For, Marxism has become, according to Castoriadis in the first installment of this final, five-part series for his revolutionary review *[Socialisme ou Barbarie](#)* (1949-1965), "part of the historical landscape that frames our comings and goings"—as if to say that an "encounter," deemed "contingent" and "external," is simply too *fortuitous* or *adventitious* (though one would have to think further and deeper in relation to the etymology of this last adjective) to belong to an instituted "historical landscape," even when that encounter is described as "immediate and inevitable."

Clearly, at the time (*[S. ou B.](#)*, 36 [April-June 1964]) Castoriadis had not yet, in relation to "encounter," thoroughly thought through *contingency*, let alone *metacontingency*, as he had done as early as his paper, "Institution of Society and Religion" (dated "August 1978-May 1980" but first published in French in 1982; now in *[CL2](#)*; see 343) as well as in his 1981 talk, "The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy" (first published in 1983; now translated in *[CL2](#)*; see 412). And yet, by the second installment of *MRT* (originally published in the *[July-September 1964 issue of S. ou B.](#)*) he had noted, as if to correct his own earlier assertion, "that necessity and contingency are constantly bound up with one another" and "that 'nature' outside of us and within us is always something other and something more than what

consciousness constructs" ([IIS](#), 56).¹⁸ By 1981, *contingency* was recognized by others as such an integral part of Castoriadis's thinking that in June of that year the organizers of the Cerisy Colloquium at which he also presented his "Logic of Magmas..." talk set up a special after-hours debate on the topic between him and the French anthropologist-philosopher René Girard that is now translated in the present volume as "Contingency in Human Affairs: Debate with René Girard."¹⁹

Yet even before his initial, wavering statement about "the encounter with Marxism," Castoriadis had already written about an "encounter" of much broader scope, beyond the supposed contingency and/or necessity of actual events, in "Recommencing the Revolution." This text, "circulated within the group in March 1963" ([PSW3](#), publication note, 27), was finally published in [S. ou B.](#), 35 [January 1964], the

¹⁸One thus witnesses Castoriadis starting to correct himself and rethink his terminology and assertions *within* his five-part *MRT* series of articles, from one installment to the next. Even in the second half of *IIS*, Castoriadis does not yet succeed in formulating metacontingency explicitly, though he is already approaching it there negatively: "philosophy knows only the contingent and the necessary, and *legein*, which is neither 'contingent' nor 'necessary,' is that on the basis of which alone necessity and contingency can have any meaning at all" (258).

¹⁹"As Curtis wrote at the start of his [censored 2004 talk](#) on 'Effective actuality and reflectiveness in the experience of a translator of Castoriadis' (our translation from the French): 'What follows is an essay in search of its form.' He added: 'This approach therefore lives in the *contingency of encounters*, in the creation of unprecedented responses, within the labor of translation as well as within its reflection on this experience of the translator, while not neglecting either anything about all that surrounds this experience or anything about all that it entails. (It therefore is not a matter of a phenomenological description)'" (quoting the *Translator's Postscript* to [PSRTI](#), lxxxii, n. 54, emphasis added).

issue immediately prior to the appearance of the first part of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” after the consummation of an internal split, with the minority who opposed his daring “new orientation”²⁰ leaving the S. ou B. group and the review while retaining the *Pouvoir Ouvrier* (Workers’ Power) newspaper. Though Castoriadis cautiously confines this particular encounter to “the frontiers of our reflection and our practice,” he asserts there that

we encounter problems whose solution we do not know in advance, and perhaps we will not know for a good while; we may not even know whether the solution will oblige us to abandon positions we would have died defending the day before. Whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, each of us is obliged in our personal lives to display this lucidity and this courage in the face of the unknownness of the perpetually renewed creation into which we are advancing.²¹ Revolutionary politics cannot be the last refuge for neurotic rigidity and the neurotic need for security ([PSW3](#), 34).

A confrontation with the “unknown” and thus with ongoing “creation” goes by way of an “encounter” the so-called “Anti-Tendency,” which he labeled “paleo-Marxist,” did not have the “courage” to recognize and engage in.

In fact, “encounters” play an appreciable, recurrent

²⁰See the partial translations of this internal October 1962 S. ou B. document contained in “For a New Orientation,” in [PSW3](#).

²¹This theme is teased out further in “Revolutionary Perspectives Today,” Castoriadis’s February 13, 1973 talk delivered to Solidarity comrades and supporters in England, which may now be found in [ASA\(RPT\)](#).

role both in [*IIS*](#) and [*CL1-6*](#) as regards what may retrospectively and broadly speaking be termed the “world in fragments” theme in his work.²² As early as this aforementioned second installment of *MRT*, Castoriadis articulated an early version of this theme while exploring a possible meaning for *praxis* beyond its existent Marxist formulations:

If there is an activity that addresses itself to a “subject” or to a lasting collectivity of subjects, this activity can exist only by being grounded in two ideas: the idea that it **encounters**, in its “object,” a unity that is not posited by the activity itself as a theoretical or a practical category but which exists first of all for-itself (whether clearly or dimly, implicitly or explicitly); and the idea that what is specific to this

²²On this theme, see the Translator/Editor's Foreword to [*Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, vol. 3: *World in Fragments*](#). Curtis wrote there:

Because in science the observed always depends on the theory of what is being observed, and because it nonetheless cannot be said that the theory fully *determines* what is being observed, “the question of knowing, in an ultimate sense, what comes from the observer and what comes from the observed is undecidable.” What is and what is known are neither fully separable nor identical, he argues. This principle, which recalls the Heisenberg uncertainty principle and Gödel's proof of the existence of undecidable propositions in mathematical logic, but whose philosophical implications far surpass both these immensely important scientific statements, immediately puts “three quarters of all philosophy” out of commission, as Castoriadis quietly and proudly asserted while discussing this section of the translation ([*CL3*](#), xli).

Curtis had noted [*ibid.*, xxii, n. 14] that “Castoriadis kindly told me that my Translator's Foreword to [*WIF*](#) was one of the best presentations of these issues relating to his philosophical views.”

unity *for-itself* lies in the capacity to supersede every prior determination, to produce the new, new forms and new contents (new in the manner of organization and in what is organized, the distinction between these being relative, of course, and a matter of “optics”). As concerns praxis, one can sum up the situation by saying that it **encounters** the totality as an *open-ended unity in the process of making itself* ([IIS](#), 88-89, **boldface** added here and below to distinguish from extant or added italicization).²³

In “The Social Imaginary and the Institution” (*SI*)—the second half of [IIS](#), published along with *MRT* ten years after this first half—Castoriadis develops further this budding “world in fragments” theme that critiques (Kantian) “critical

²³This early articulation of praxis contains the curious, retrospectively inappropriate phrase “grounded in two ideas.” Also in this second installment is a prior statement of another aspect of this “world in fragments” theme as it relates to “encounters”:

we **encounter** here something analogous to what occurs in the knowledge of nature: when one has performed the reduction of everything that can appear as rational in the physical world and ascribed it to the rationalizing activity of the knowing subject, there still remains the fact that this arational world must itself be such that this activity can grasp it, which excludes its being chaotic ([IIS](#), 51).

The dependent clause “which excludes its being chaotic” would later need to be complexified. See, for example, “False and True Chaos” (1993, [CL6](#)) as well as his statement, as early as a 1981 talk, that “Being is Chaos, Abyss, or the Groundless. It is a Chaos with a nonregular stratification: that is, with partial ‘organizations’ that are specific to the various strata we discover (discover/construct, discover/create) in Being” ([CL2](#), 148). A blanket denial of *chaos* had persisted in some [CL1](#) texts (see 97, 221, 278, 281), just as it does in the next quotation in the body of the text (from 1975), when Castoriadis speaks of “alleged chaos.”

philosophy”²⁴ while speaking again in terms of “encounter”:

Critical philosophy, however, must **encounter** in its later stages the fact that nothing in thought itself guarantees that what is given is such that the categories have an effective hold on it—in other words, it **encounters** the fact that the alleged chaos of sensations is nevertheless organizable and, moreover, that the world is not merely filled with possible supports for the category of substance, that it is not simply organizable but already in a certain manner organized (that there are stars, trees, dogs, etc.), for without this the legislation of consciousness would be without any object (*IIS*, 342).

This theme is raised anew during a 1982 radio interview, “Imaginary Significations,” in the form of “a final question that cannot, in good faith, be evacuated: Are we in the process of imposing our schemata of thought—or new schemata of thought—on a new stratum of reality; or have we **encountered** something that shows that certain schemata of thought effectively correspond to something that goes beyond us?”, only to affirm: “Both are always there” (*ASA(RPT)*, 81). At the end of the same decade, the question is restated ontologically, and in an even more affirmative way, with “encounter” again playing a key role: “What is the being of this (human) being that can freely create forms, which then

²⁴The previously quoted *MRT* passage about “knowledge of nature” includes a callout to the following footnote: “What Kant, in the *Critique of Judgement*, called ‘a happy chance’” (*sic*, *IIS*, 378, n. 57; in *CLI-6* and elsewhere, Curtis provides the more usual translation for Kant’s phrase *glücklicher Zufall*: “happy accident”).

turn out to have something to do with, and *encounter*, something externally given?" ("The 'End of Philosophy'?", 1989, now in [CL3](#), 324)²⁵

Castoriadis's reply to critics in the December 1989 *Festschrift* volume Giovanni Busino published around his work²⁶ demonstrates a persistence and continuity to this question of a world self-forming in fragments that people may encounter: "Let me backtrack a moment to explicate the answer to the question I posed in [IIS](#) by generalizing it: If the for-itself brings everything out of itself, how and why would it ever **encounter** anything other than its own products?" ("Done and To Be Done," [CL5](#), 13). However, this *generalization* of the question adds, in some cases, a moment of *limitation* or *restriction* to the challenging encounter of "the unknownness of the perpetually renewed creation" he had urged one in 1963 to have the courage to face and to the praxis-oriented encounter with the "totality as an *open-ended unity in the process of making itself*" he had written about back in 1964. As he states further on in this same 1989 text:

We create knowledge. In certain cases (mathematics) we also create, thereby, the *outside time*. In other cases (mathematical physics) we create under the **constraint of encounter**; it is this **encounter** that validates or invalidates our creations. ... Leaning on certain ensidic elements, we have to try to recreate

²⁵The Translator/Editor added in a footnote: "This sentence dropped out of the French translation, perhaps by mistake."

²⁶*Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (December 1989), also published in book form as *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société: La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis*, ed. Giovanni Busino (Genève: Droz, 1989).

them—here again, under **constraint of encounter** ([ibid.](#), 61).

Switching the next year from the naive, epistemologically restrictive, empiricist descriptor of traditional philosophy, viz., “what is given,” to the ontologically framed “what is,”²⁷ in “Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics” (1990) Castoriadis asserts: “We must call *truth* not a property of statements, or any result whatsoever, but the very movement that breaks closure as it is each time established and that seeks, in an effort of coherency and of *logon didonai*, to have an **encounter** with what is” ([CL4](#), 154). Specifying the meaning of this Greek phrase, Castoriadis explains in his 1992 text “Passion and Knowledge” that, in addition to the general constraint of the “closure of meaning” (“which is broken through interrogation and the process of knowledge”):

knowledge subjects itself to another constraint, that of *logon didonai*—giving an account of and reason for—and rejects everything that avoids the question. This constraint can be itemized in the following two exigencies: internal coherence and an **encounter** with what is” ([CL5](#), 169).

“Constraint” becomes here an “exigency” or “requirement” (*exigence*) when one seeks knowledge unconstrained by traditionally instituted beliefs and practices. The last paragraph of this same essay offers a summary, which, while

²⁷Regarding his oft-used phrase “what is,” see “On the Translation,” in [CL1](#), xcvi.

also referencing his theme of “the thinkable,”²⁸ again places *encounter* under the signs of *opening* and *capacity* via its confrontation with “what is”: “The true becomes creation, ever open and ever capable of turning back upon itself, of forms of the thinkable and of contents of thought capable of having an **encounter** with what is” (*ibid.*, 182).

With this play of *contingency* and *necessity*, of *chaos* and *self-organization*, of *opening* and *closure*, and so on, would an *encounter* aiming at truth (as a process, engaged through the project and process of knowledge, and thus not just as a result or a mere concordance with the naively “given”) serve as the guarantee such terms as *lived experience* or *Dasein*, in their relations to the *Lebenswelt* (“life-world”), might previously have been intended to play? In “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition”—a text drafted in 1976-1977, soon after *IIS* was published and now available in *CL5*—Castoriadis implicitly

²⁸On this theme of “the thinkable,” one may read the Translator/Editor’s Foreword to *CL6: Figures of the Thinkable*. In one passage from “Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection”—a 1997 mashup of a [1991 French text](#) and a [1994 English-language one](#)—the themes of “thinkability,” constraint, internal coherence, and encounter all come together:

The history of philosophy is not a history of any “rational development,” either immanent or forced by how positive knowledge has evolved, and neither is it a history of the humors and whims of philosophers. It is a history of the creation of new schemata (and not “concepts”) attempting to render thinkable, that is, to elucidate, the totality of human experience (including the development of knowledge), under the constraint of internal coherence and of **encounter** with the content and forms of this experience (*CL5*, 375).

(Castoriadis’s mention here of “concepts” is his dig against Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s 1991 book *What is Philosophy?* See [WoC](#), 98-99, including n. 6 on 99.)

answers the question via questions raised by his own encounter with Merleau-Ponty's late articulation of *perceptual encounter*, which exemplifies the residual weight of this tradition within *The Visible and the Invisible*.²⁹ Castoriadis first provides a quotation from Merleau-Ponty's last draft chapter of this posthumously published essay, as edited by *S. ou B.* cofounder Claude Lefort:

Perception as an **encounter** with natural things is at the foreground of our research, not as a simple sensorial function that would explain the others but *as the archetype of the originating encounter, imitated and renewed in the encounter with the past, the imaginary, the idea* (p. 158; quoted by Castoriadis, with italics added by him, in [CLS](#), 212-13).

"The Primacy of Perception" had been the title and programmatic precept for a November 23, 1946 public "address...given shortly after the publication of Merleau-Ponty's major work, the *Phenomenology of Perception*."³⁰ At the other end of his career, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty in effect maintains this assertion of perception's assumed primacy—which perplexes Castoriadis,

²⁹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Followed by *Working Notes* (1964), ed. Claude Lefort, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

³⁰"The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," tr. James M. Edie, in [The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology](#), ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1964), p. 12, n. 1. Prior to *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty had published in 1942 the work later translated as *The Structure of Behavior*.

an admirer of Merleau-Ponty's valiant and impressive efforts to go beyond subject-object dualism,³¹ and raises for him a series of pointed rhetorical questions about perception being viewed as the "archetyp[ical]" *encounter*:

How, after having affirmed that one was not prejudging the relations that might exist between different "layers," "nor even that they are layers," could one distinguish and oppose perception as "**encounter** with natural things" and the "**encounter** with the past, the imaginary, the idea"? What has authorized us, at this stage, to tell apart absolutely

³¹The first two paragraphs of Merleau-Ponty's "The Primacy of Perception..." read as follows:

The unprejudiced study of perception by psychologists has finally revealed that the perceived world is not a sum of objects (in the sense in which the sciences use this word), that our relation to the world is not that of a thinker to an object of thought, and finally that the unity of the perceived thing, as perceived by several consciousnesses, is not comparable to the unity of a proposition [*théorème*], as understood by several thinkers, any more than perceived existence is comparable to ideal existence.

As a result we cannot apply the classical distinction of form and matter to perception, nor can we conceive the perceiving subject as a consciousness which "interprets," "deciphers," or "orders" a sensible matter according to an ideal law which it possesses. Matter is "pregnant" with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the "world." We experience a perception and its horizon "in action" [*pratiqument*] rather than by "pos[it]ing" them or explicitly "knowing" them. Finally the quasi-organic relation of the perceiving subject and the world involves, in principle, the contradiction of immanence and transcendence (*ibid.*, pp. 12-13).

perception and the imaginary? Above all, what allows us to consider perception, not as explanatory principle, but, what is infinitely weightier, as “archetype,” and to affirm that the “**encounter** with...the imaginary” is the imitation and the renewal thereof? ...The **encounter** of two seers then challenges something other and something much more than anonymous visibility and vision in general, it can only be a more or less broad and deep coincidence of two “personal institutions,” highly dependent on their social-historical institution that makes them each exist as an individual; all the while being possible, this coincidence is never assured, though it must be said, more specifically, that in a sense it always succeeds, whatever the social-historical and personal “distances” involved, and, in another sense, that it *always fails*, whatever the “proximity” of the two seers. Now, this way of posing the question *excludes* one from ever being able to think this *necessity* of the failure of concordance—in the same manner in which and for reasons profoundly analogous to those that make it, like all inherited thinking, exclude the possibility of thinking the being of error other than as a deficit and absence of truth ([CL5](#), 212-13).

In *encounters*, one cannot, Castoriadis is saying, privilege perception.³² For, perception as an encounter cannot be

³²“You remember that philosophers almost always start by saying: ‘I want to see what Being is, what reality is. Now, here is a table, what does this table show to me as characteristic of a real being?’ No philosopher ever started by saying: ‘I want to see what Being is, what reality is. Now, here is my memory of my dream of last night, what does this show to me as characteristic of a real being?’” (“The Imaginary: Creation in the

separated fully from the radical imagination of the singular psyche or from the radical social instituting imaginary. There is no special perceptual access to the world without the *cooriginary participation* of the “imaginary element,”³³ which places all encounters among subjects and with objects under the sway of the “principle of the undecidability of origins,” as he enunciated it a decade later.³⁴

Indeed, *encounters not only have no guaranteed outcomes but they also, in a sense, invent the subjects and objects or interlocutors in their present state at the moment of the encounter and thereby transform them beyond what they would have been without the encounter.* Human encounters are necessarily social-historical in nature, both bringing to bear *creativity* and giving rise thereto—though often masked, unacknowledged, denied, and/or covered back over. In “The Anticipated Revolution,” which was composed and published during the events of May-June 1968, Castoriadis examines those historical events in theatrical terms as

the first great play by a new author, still probing his way, and the only public performances that have been

Social-Historical Domain,” 1984, now in [CL2](#), 151).

³³“French Editors: From an unfinished work, *L'Élément imaginaire* (The imaginary element), the author published only two chapters: ‘The Discovery of the Imagination,’ which appeared in *Libre*, 3 (1978) and which is reprinted [in [CL2](#)], and ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition’” (Preface, [CL2](#), xiii, n. 1).

³⁴“Ontological Import of the History of Science” (1978), [CL2](#), 421. Castoriadis had just formulated this principle as follows: “All knowledge is a coproduction. And, in nontrivial cases, we cannot truly separate out what ‘comes from’ the subject and what ‘comes from’ the object.”

staged so far were a few mere curtain raisers, at Berkeley, in Warsaw, and elsewhere. The play's central character has no predecessors among the classics. As always in the theater of history, it is a complex and collective character, presented in a new guise and with unprecedented qualities. This character embodies youth, student youth in particular but not just student youth, and parts of the modern strata of society—especially the parts of the intelligentsia that have been integrated into its “culture”-producing structures ([PSW3](#), 147-48).

Yet this invention of a new, collective character and the innovation that invention thereby comes to embody and to instigate pass by way of *encounter*. And its adventitious³⁵ encounter with other characters create *history*, beyond repetition and variation (though often with a good dose of both, reframed and transformed as they are by their very enactments of repetition and variation):

Of course, the reason why this character can create around itself real drama and animate this drama instead of giving rise to a mere incident is that it **encounters** other characters, themselves ready to take to the stage, like always, for motives and ends that are their own. Yet, as opposed to all theater, and as in the unique *King Lear*, the play is *history*, in that several separate and heterogeneous plots [*intrigues*] are woven together, and forced by events, time, and a common pole, to interact [*interférer*] ([ibid.](#), 148).

³⁵Here, *adventitious* is intended *nonconventionally* and in the sense of the “advent” of something new.

Of note, just two months before this exposition of history as self-generated out of multiple, disparate encounters and thus as self-generating itself as something other,³⁶ Castoriadis wrote in the very first sentence of a draft chapter for *Fondement imaginaire du social-historique* (Imaginary foundation of the social-historical)—which is now available in the present volume as “The Imaginary as Such”—that what “we **encounter** in history” is “the imaginary as continued origin, ever-actual foundation, central component wherein are engendered both what holds every society together and what produces historical change.”³⁷

While one does not encounter the word *encounter* further along in this short introductory chapter, which was composed seven years before the original publication in French of *IIS* and which never became the book Castoriadis intended it to be, other evocative phrases in this unfinished text provide some glimpses into how one might begin to think through his utilization of *encounter* beyond the assorted uses extant in his writings from the Sixties onward that have briefly been reviewed in the present Foreword. Halfway through this ambitious effort to think “the imaginary as such,” Castoriadis maintains that, “at the originary level, the

³⁶See Fabio Ciaramelli's “The Self-Presupposition of the Origin: Homage to Cornelius Castoriadis,” *Thesis Eleven*, 49 (May 1997): 45-67 and his “The Circle of the Origin,” in *Reinterpreting the Political: Continental Philosophy and Political Theory*, Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, 20, Lenore Langsdorf and Stephen H. Watson, eds, with Karen A. Smith (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 127-40.

³⁷This is reminiscent of Castoriadis's key statement in *MRT*, three years earlier, about the social-historical being “the union and the tension of instituting society and of instituted society, of history made and of history in the making” (now in *IIS*, 108).

constitution of something fully real, and already its mere concept, is but one of the two sides produced by a *primal and perpetually renewed scission*, the one by which a subject in the world and a world for the subject come into being” (emphasis added). Nearly a decade before his second text (1976-1977) on Merleau-Ponty,³⁸ wherein he affirms the ineliminable contributions of the imagination and of the imaginary to human perception, Castoriadis asserts immediately thereafter, and much more broadly, in this March 1968 text: “Something humanly real does not exist before and independently of the imaginary, that is to say, independently of representing and making/doing.”³⁹ Already three pages prior in “The Imaginary as Such,” he had advised that one “must endeavor to grasp the relation between making/doing and representing—which is assuredly one of the most difficult relations to think—in the mode of an identity within the most radical distinction, of a bifurcation, starting from an unthinkable common root, of two trunks, each of which continues to belong in some way to the other” (emphasis again added). And one page after the first passage quoted above, in another new phrase that will already appear here though not later, he writes that “the possible and the real

³⁸Castoriadis's first text on Merleau-Ponty was originally published in 1971 and may now be found translated as “The Sayable and the Unsayable” in [CL1](#).

³⁹It is notable that, while “making/doing [*le faire*]” is present in his 1964-1965 series *MRT*, “representing [*le représenter*]” does not seem to have appeared *in print* in Castoriadis's work until *SII*, the second half of [IIS](#), which was completed in 1974.

emerge simultaneously as *conjugated dimensions*.”⁴⁰

Unlike the dualist René Descartes, who sought in the pineal gland the connection to bridge the impossible gap Descartes himself had hollowed out between body and soul (“I am now dissecting the heads of various animals, in order to explain what imagination, memory, etc. consist in,” Descartes wrote to Marin Mersenne in 1632 apropos of his efforts at animal vivisection),⁴¹ Castoriadis (the “dehiscence...between the ‘psychical’ and the ‘somatic’” is, he states in *SII*, “never fully realized”)⁴² frankly admits that he

⁴⁰“The Imaginary as Such” also includes the following extraordinary statement, framed along the same lines as the phrases cited immediately above in the present paragraph:

It can be said that representing and making/doing are *equioriginary*, on the condition that one understands thereby not only that there is between them no possible relation of logical or real priority but that they *are* origin, one and the same [origin] in its differentiation. I do not intend thereby the mere formal reciprocity that could be expressed by saying: Representing is still making/doing and there is no making/doing that is nonsimultaneously represented. I mean first of all this, that representing and making/doing embody in undivided fashion this essential modality of the human that is: evoking into existence, giving rise to, being able to be only by giving itself another term that is at once self and nonself, being able to be only by making be.

⁴¹*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 40. Descartes engaged in vivisection upon animals in order to find out how the body and soul could communicate.

⁴²*SII*, in *IIS*, 301 (cf. “Done and To Be Done,” *CLS*, 33). One page earlier in *IIS*, he had expounded his nonteleological revision of Aristotle’s position: “Perhaps no one will ever be able to add anything to what Aristotle said about the psyche as existing only as ‘form’ or ‘entelechy’ of

knows not *where* alcohol or drug molecules might come into “contact” with the psyche, though they evidently somehow do, and so he does not worry about this lack of a literal location when it comes to “conjugated dimensions” involving the real and the imaginary, whose “common root” is properly “unthinkable.”

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It is, of course, beyond the purview of a Translator/Editor's Foreword—whether written by Curtis, the Anonymous Translator, or a scab translator authorized by the Castoriadis heirs (who, previously, had ridiculously challenged the very principle of writing a Translator/Editor's Foreword, only to allow its appearance in other cases than that of Curtis's work)—to reconstruct fully (were this even possible) the mixed and somewhat motley collection of Castoriadis's verbal and written usages of *encounter*, let alone to offer a fully reconceived version thereof. Nevertheless, a few negative and positive elements can be recalled here for readers who may wish to think further, upon expenditure of their own reflection and action, about this matter and to report on their own thoughtful encounters with *encounter* in

the body—on the condition that these terms be separated out from the metaphysics in and through which they were posited and that we understand that the psyche is a form in so far as it is forming, that the ‘entelechy’ in question here is something entirely different from the predetermined predestination in view of an end, a definite *telos*, that this ‘entelechy’ is the radical imagination, *phantasia* subjected to no given end but the creation of its ends, that the living body is the human living body in so far as it represents and represents itself, that it puts things and itself into ‘images’ far beyond what would be required or implied by its ‘nature’ as a living being.”

Castoriadis's work. A Translator/Editor's Foreword is not a substitute for the translated author's own words but, rather, a public obligation on the Translator/Editor's part to give his/her own account of the philosophical and other questions raised by the Translator/Editor's own experience and practice of transforming the social imaginary significations of one linguistic realm into those of another, while providing contextual information to which readers may not otherwise have ready access.⁴³

Negatively, it is safe to remark, given its highly critical treatment in several of the *Crossroads 7* texts, that *individualism*—whether of the American “rugged individualist” sort (as largely captured in classical, neoclassical, neoliberal, or right-wing libertarian ideology, and thus preponderantly “economic” in character and content) or in the neo-Tocquevillean brand incoherently advanced by Luc Ferry in Castoriadis's radio discussion with him or with an anarchist bent, as is almost inevitably present and quite evident in the thinking of the hosts on their *Radio Libertaire* show—would not be the way in which Castoriadis conceives *encounters*, since they are not, for him, onesidedly or exclusively individualistic in nature.⁴⁴

⁴³See again David Ames Curtis, [“Effectivité et réflexivité dans l'expérience d'un traducteur de Cornelius Castoriadis,”](#) inaugural lecture delivered May 28, 2004 at the first Séminaire Interdisciplinaire de Recherches Littéraires (SIRL) of the Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis (Bruxelles), during the “L'Imaginaire au carrefour de l'interdisciplinarité: Autour de Cornelius Castoriadis” colloquium, followed by a May 2009 addition at the end of the text: “*Les Cahiers Castoriadis* et la censure (Lettre ouverte).”

⁴⁴In “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” (now in [CL3](#)), his published review of Philippe Raynaud's book on Max Weber, Castoriadis makes clear that he does not subscribe to a Weberian “methodological individualism,” either.

More positively speaking, one may venture to say that it is rather obvious, from both IIS as well as now from all seven volumes in the Crossroads series, that *encounters*—with other individuals; among groups, classes, historical-theatrical collective “characters,” and so on; or in the vast natural world as experienced by humans—always pass by way of the instituted and instituting social imaginary significations borne and conveyed by those encounters’ protagonists or through subject-object relations (“nature” being humanly instituted and altered as well as a self-evolving regional entity beyond all ultimate human control) and go by the ways in which these significations may or may not be challenged, implicitly and/or explicitly, in the course of such encounters. Encounters will be accompanied by misapprehensions, misunderstandings, missteps, deceptions, disappointments, lapses, loves, hatreds, cross purposes, professional rivalries, struggles both personal and political as well as historical, and so on and so forth, but may also be amenable to creative interactions that have the potential to go beyond anything any particular interlocutor might be said to have intended at the outset, thereby driving such encounters further than what the result of any “mere incident” might entail while perhaps sending them in new directions.

The chapters contained in this unauthorized collection of *Follow-Up Interviews, Discussions, Talks, and Texts* are often presented as more colloquial in their expression than the finished ones that had appeared in the first five *Crossroads* volumes under Castoriadis’s pen during his lifetime or in versions prepared posthumously by the French Editors in the sixth. Retained, especially in the interviews and talks registered directly in English but also in the various transcriptions of French oral interventions, now translated, are many halting locutions and ideas, sometimes broken off mid-

sentence, which are formulated during these actual encounters with others in discussion and/or before a live audience, whether in person or via the radio. Like the mounting, run-on thoughts artfully expressed in/by Shakespeare,⁴⁵ but here enunciated in the actual heat of the moment without the possibility of going back over what has been articulated, except in his immediately following phrases, Castoriadis develops what he has to say in the modes of confrontation and connection. When faced with another, he makes mistakes (“Nottingham Hill”—perhaps thinking of Robin Hood?—instead of “Notting Hill”), misspeaks on occasion (“But perhaps I am being optimistic [*correcting himself*] pessimistic”), once confuses one book with another (as in the 1997 *Le Monde* interview “Learn to Discern,” in which he mixes up an 1858 French children’s book with a 1991 high-selling popularized Norwegian philosophical novel of dubious value for teenagers: “Here we have an interesting slip of the tongue,” Castoriadis observes about his own error), frequently catches himself midsentence only to develop immediately his thoughts along other lines, and so on.⁴⁶ These chapters often document encounters engaged in “on the fly,” in which he finds himself obliged to “think on his feet,” so to speak (this last metaphorical expression contrasting with the immediately preceding one), improvising his responses “on the spot” and

⁴⁵“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” (“Notes on a Few Poetic Means,” posthumously published in [CL6](#), 55).

⁴⁶The same is true, of course, for his various questioners and interlocutors.

in the face of others and before the public, though he also steadily relies upon what have become for him nearly stock responses and arguments and phrases that echo more extended developments in [IIS](#) and [CL1-6](#).

Readers are therefore called upon to think not only with or against Castoriadis but also on their own in relation to his overall work and in general during their encounters between this seventh *Crossroads* volume and all of Castoriadis's previously published writings. At times, the dialogue in which he is engaged *precedes* the ostensibly canonical treatment he later offered, for example in his discussion with Philippe Raynaud; see "It's the People Who Are Instituting," which was recorded for a September 1987 radio program before the initial February 1988 publication, in the French journal *Esprit*, of his review of Raynaud's book on Weber ("Individual, Society, Rationality, History," now in [CL3](#)). At other times, as in the December 1986 radio program "The Republic Dies Without People's Political Participation," the discussion *follows one month after* the first French publication of "The Movements of the Sixties" (now in [CL4](#)), Castoriadis's sharp critique of Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut's book, about what these two authors termed "'68 thought," which he had originally prepared for a May 1986 colloquium but also claimed was part of a larger essay that, however, never saw the light of day. In several instances, the follow-up is quite immediate, as in the "Round Table Discussion" conducted the day after his September 28, 1981 "The Nature and Value of Equality" talk (itself now in [CL2](#)); "Self-Organization: From the Physical to the Political," a radio interview with Gérard Ponthieu conducted around the time of the June 1981 Cerisy Colloquium on "self-organization," in which Castoriadis had participated by delivering his paper "The Logic of Magmas and the Question

of Autonomy” (now in [ibid.](#));⁴⁷ and, as mentioned above, the discussion with the audience for his “Social Imaginary and Scientific Change” lecture, though in this last instance, as was noted above, the lecture was itself later revised as “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” (now in [CL2](#)), and so, here again, Castoriadis’s oral answers precede the final written version of the text. Thus, in these cases and others, readers find themselves obliged to decide to what extent particular statements made in one version of an encounter, an earlier or a later one, should be treated, not as “definitive,” but as more informative, enlightening, and helpful in light of the questions readers themselves may wish to raise as they encounter differing formulations, emphases, intentions, and contexts of possibly greater or lesser significance and import.

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The first encounter in this new volume is one of birth. In an unusual (for him) contribution—to Mariana Cook’s photography book, *Fathers and Daughters: In Their Own Words*⁴⁸—Castoriadis offers a sparingly composed literary

⁴⁷A more extended radio interview from around the time of the 1981 Cerisy colloquium (January 30, 1982), this time with Michel Tréguer, has since been republished by the French Editors and now appears in translation as “Imaginary Significations” in [ASA\(RPT\)](#).

⁴⁸Photographer Mariana Cook, the “last surviving protégé of Ansel Adams” ([English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)), was at the time the companion of psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook, defender of Castoriadis at the moment of the latter’s break with *Telos* (see Whitebook’s reply to [Robert D’Amico’s 1984 negative *Telos* review](#): “Cornelius Castoriadis, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*,” *Telos*, 63 [Spring 1985]: 228-39), contributor to Busino’s

meditation on his early encounters with his second child, Cybèle, born in 1980.⁴⁹ As early as his 1974 lecture, “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality’” (now in [CL2](#)), he had spoken of the “newborn little monster” that is the infant, a psyche-soma wherein an uncontrollable psychical monad, uncontested except perhaps by its bodily needs and functions, predominates before its gradual but necessarily violent socialization. Here one witnesses Castoriadis describing and reflecting upon her postnatal growth and human development, her entry into the social world, as well as some early signs of creativity and personal achievement on the part of his daughter, who would later become, after his death, [a professional singer](#).⁵⁰

This somewhat unclassifiable text is placed as the sole chapter of an initial *Poiēsis* section for this seventh *Crossroads* volume. The French Editors had initiated this heading for the posthumous [CL6](#) volume in order to place two otherwise anomalous pieces regarding his reflections on literature: “Anthropogony and Self-Creation” and “Notes on A Few Poetic Means.” Castoriadis, it may be noted, had been writing about psychoanalysis as a *practico-poietic activity* at least since “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has

1989 Castoriadis *Festschrift*, and later the author of, among other works, [Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory](#) (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press, 1995), which makes extensive reference to Castoriadis's psychoanalytic writings.

⁴⁹Cybèle Castoriadis's mother is Castoriadis's widow, Zoé. His first child, the psychiatrist Sparta Castoriadis, was born in 1948 to Castoriadis and Jeanine “Rilka” Walter (“Comrade Victorine” in France's early postwar Fourth International's [Parti Communiste Internationaliste](#)).

⁵⁰Though, it may be observed, no thoughts are offered about the gestational period.

Been Able to Be Presented as a Science" in 1968 (now in [CLI](#)),⁵¹ but it was in the Preface to [CL2](#) (xxv) that he began to speak of "the effort to distinguish at once *and* to think together the ensidic dimension and the *properly imaginary, or poietic*, dimension of Being" (emphasis added), thus showing that, in his work, he treated the Greek word *poiēsis* as practically synonymous with the imaginary (cf. "the properly imaginary, or poietic, dimension," [ibid.](#), 437), though he also went on to contrast "the poietic domain, what in a society goes beyond what is merely instrumental" ([CL5](#), 125), with "the functional" while raising the caveat that "the distinction between the functional and the poietic is not itself a material distinction, it is not in the 'things'" ([CL4](#), 266), as well as with the "dimension" of the "ensemblistic-identitarian" ([CL5](#), 121), calling a "*libido formandi*...this potential and this desire...the *poietic* element of humanity" ([CL4](#), 271).

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Castoriadis himself explains, in one of the *Crossroads* 7 interviews, the meaning of the second section, *Kairos*, another Greek word, which he began employing as a section title in [CL2](#):

Kairos is a quite beautiful Greek word that means *instant* or *occasion*. It's what happens. Hippocrates said, "Time is that in which there is *kairos*, and *kairos* is that in which there is not much time." It's there now; one must act here and now. *Kairos* is the

⁵¹There is a single passing reference to "a singular practico-poetic [*sic*] context—that of analysis" in *III* (now in [IIS](#), 27). See also the added note "6*" for *MRT* ([ibid.](#), 380)

moment for the surgeon to intervene, for example; a half hour later, it's too late. Or, for politics, to make a decision for the community. It's current events, huh? It's current events as opportunity to intervene and to reflect.

This section, too, includes encounters, here with Luc Ferry on a France Culture radio program hosted by Alain Finkielkraut; interviews with the Swiss francophone newsweekly *L'Hebdo*, with the libertarian-communist and revolutionary-syndicalist monthly *Alternative Libertaire*, with the British psychoanalytic, cultural, and political periodical *Free Associations* (which has published several of Curtis's translations of Castoriadis's writings⁵² as well as texts about Castoriadis's work,⁵³ along with a review of Castoriadis

⁵²"The First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions" (now in [CL6](#)) and "From the Monad to Autonomy," with an introduction by David Ames Curtis and Sparta Castoriadis (now in [CL5](#)).

⁵³*Free Associations* reprinted two Castoriadis obituaries—Curtis's "Cornelius Castoriadis: Philosopher of the Social Imagination" (a reprint of "Cornelius Castoriadis: An Obituary," *Salmagundi*, 118-119 [Spring-Summer 1998]: 52-61, [now available on the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website](#)) and Joel Whitebook's "[Requiem for a Selbstdenker: in Memoriam Cornelius Castoriadis \(1922-1997\)](#)" (which originally appeared in *Constellations*, 5:2 [June 1998]: 141-60)—as well as Curtis's "Castoriadis on Culture," Fabio Ciaramelli's "Human Creation and the Paradox of the Originary" (tr. David Ames Curtis), and Fernando Urribarri's "The Psyche: Imagination and History. A General View of Cornelius Castoriadis's Psychoanalytic Ideas" (tr. Nora Stelzer and Veronica Chehtman, with additional editing by David Ames Curtis), all in 7:3 (1999).

volumes by *Free Associations* Editor Paul Gordon,⁵⁴ who conducted this interview), and with *Variant*, this last interview being an evening follow-up to Castoriadis's own follow-up as respondent for Hans Magnus Enzensberger's afternoon ICA reading in London; and his effort to get a few words in edgewise during round-table discussions with a large lineup of religious, intellectual, and political stars brought together by the first President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, who was an admirer of Castoriadis, the left-wing anti-Communist.⁵⁵

Castoriadis's joint radio appearance with Ferry around the topics of the May 1968 student-worker rebellion—which *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is widely acknowledged to have in part inspired—and of the December 1986 student protests in France against *sélection*, or differential treatment in college admissions among those who have passed the French *baccalauréat*, is perhaps the most substantive and in-depth chapter in this section, on account of its extended argument over the meaning and implications of *individualism*, whose conceptualization in the writings of Ferry, his coauthor Alain Renaut, Gilles Lipovetsky, and others Castoriadis strongly and repeatedly contested. In “The Movements of the Sixties,” his criticism was scathing: “Ferry’s and Renaut’s misinterpretation [*contresens*] is total. ‘Sixty-eight thought’ is anti-’68 thought, the type of thinking

⁵⁴See Gordon’s review of [PSW3](#) and [PPA](#) in *Free Associations*, 5:3 (1995): 390-94. Gordon also reviewed [WIF](#) and [CR](#); see “Why This Law Rather Than Another One?”, *Times Literary Supplement*, January 16, 1998: 10, which he reprinted in *Free Associations*, 7:3 (1999): 397-401.

⁵⁵Havel had long abandoned his early advocacy of direct democracy and workers’ management by the time he invited Castoriadis to speak at the Prague Castle in 1997.

that has built its mass success on the ruins of the '68 movement and as a function of its failure" ([CL4](#), 35). For, these authors failed to register the deliberately demobilizing ("diversionist") character of what Castoriadis labels "the French Ideology."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Castoriadis maintained cordial relations with Ferry,⁵⁷ as one can observe in this translated radio transcript, and there are in fact several points upon which they agree, including "the corporatist aspect" of the '86 student protests—"especially...at the start," Castoriadis is careful to add—and the *conformist* character of 1980s "individualism." These overlaps in assessments did not, however, lead Ferry, an exponent of French republicanism, to take to heart Castoriadis's key point—viz., "The Republic Dies Without People's Political Participation." Like many a public intellectual tempted to play the role of counselor to the Prince (in his case to neo-Gaullist French President Jacques Chirac), Ferry went on to exercise the post of Minister of Youth, National Education, and Research while invoking the "ethic of responsibility" over an "ethic of conviction," the same false dichotomy Castoriadis criticized in his joint radio appearance with Philippe Raynaud a year later. Ferry's indulgent professions of sympathy—in this case for what he considered the naivety of the French student

⁵⁶On "the French Ideology," see "The Diversionists" (in [PSW3](#)) and other instances of Castoriadis usage of this phrase referenced in [CL2](#), 20, n. 1. Ferry/Renaut's 1985 book, translated into English as *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), devotes one chapter each to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Lacan.

⁵⁷In [Cornelius Castoriadis 70th Birthday Party Home Movie by Chris Marker](#), one can see Ferry's wife at the time in attendance; though invited, Ferry himself was unable to be present.

protestors of '86—did not last. A neo-Tocquevillean, Ferry seems to have adopted the position of the original Tocquevillean, Alexis himself, who, despite his image, on both sides of the Atlantic, as a champion of civil “association,” argued in the second volume of *Democracy in America* that “the right of association [must be] confined within narrow limits.” Yet, unlike Tocqueville, who wryly added:

These blessings are doubtless invaluable, and I can imagine that, to acquire or to preserve them, a nation may impose upon itself severe temporary restrictions: but still it is well that the nation should know at what price these blessings are purchased. I can understand that it may be advisable to cut off a man's arm in order to save his life; but it would be ridiculous to assert that he will be as dexterous as he was before he lost it.⁵⁸

Ferry, during the widespread and long-lasting working-class “yellow vests [*gilets jaunes*]” protests of 2019 against the cost of living in France, vociferously urged the employment of “weapons [*armes*]” against demonstrators reportedly

⁵⁸Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, the Henry Reeve text as revised by Francis Bowen now further corrected and edited with introduction, editorial notes, and bibliographies by Phillips Bradley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945); see the last lines of ch. VII: “Relation of Civil to Political Associations.” One is tempted to compare Tocqueville's relative complacency about metaphorically “cut[ting] off a man's arm” to the real cutting off of hands under sharia law. The public intellectual Alexis would himself go on to serve in 1849 as Minister of Foreign Affairs after justifying for more than a decade the “unfortunate necessities” involved in the invasion and colonization of Algeria.

attacking the police (without him acknowledging police provocations and brutality),⁵⁹ only to backtrack later, explaining that he was advocating simply for “nonlethal” weapons (a specification not found in his original statement) and that he had “defended the movement from its origin.”⁶⁰ Obviously, nearly forty years after his discussion with Castoriadis, Ferry had still not thought through, clearly and consequentially, the relationship between his (French) “republicanism,” on the one hand, and, on the other, the will to participation to which a republic characterized by “representative democracy” constantly gives rise while also necessarily endeavoring to thwart such participation, including by violent means.

Castoriadis's public reply to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 1992 reading of the latter's article, “The Great Migration,” serves as an occasion for the former to examine what has since become an increasingly fraught economic, social, political, and cultural issue during the past third of a century: migration. This is an issue about which Castoriadis

⁵⁹By contrast, U.S. President Donald J. Trump called for shooting protestors only in the legs.

⁶⁰[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luc_Ferry#Appel à l'utilisation d'arme s contre certains Gilets Jaunes s'en prenant aux policiers](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luc_Ferry#Appel_à_l'utilisation_d'arme_s_contre_certains_Gilets_Jaunes_s'en_prenant_aux_policiers). Apropos of “university autonomy” from the central government, foreseen in the ill-fated Devaquet Bill against which the students were protesting in 1986 but which later was implemented to some degree, it is interesting to note that Ferry was forced to retire early from his university teaching post after it was revealed that he had been drawing a salary for years from the University of Paris-VII without actually teaching there. “Matignon”—that is, the office of the French Prime Minister—eventually had to step in and pay back to the university the misappropriated funds; see [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luc_Ferry#Affaires des salaires versés par l'université Paris-Diderot \(1997-2011\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luc_Ferry#Affaires_des_salaires_versés_par_l'université_Paris-Diderot_(1997-2011)).

had previously made not much more than passing references in his work, though he was certainly aware of it and concerned by it.⁶¹ His balanced and clear-eyed approach to a “really tragical situation,”⁶² in which “there is no optimal” solution, retains its full relevance for today, for he sets this “hard nut to crack” back within its ongoing global context. His uneasy remarks are intended to show that there is no easy and straightforward moral solution, one that would fail to think through the real-world consequences of any ethical stance; for, the reactionary counterresponse might indeed be a return to Nazi-era *Festung Europa*—“Fortress Europe” as Castoriadis correctly translates this German phrase in his English-language talk while also clearly evoking the dangers represented by “all the quasi-fascists or neo-fascist demagogues in France, in Britain, in Germany, in Italy, and everywhere.” Again, one is reminded of Castoriadis’s principled challenge to the conceptually and practically incoherent Weberian choice between “conviction” and “responsibility.”

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The next section appears under the heading of *Koinōnia*—a title that was already employed in [CLI](#) and that, as Castoriadis explains to his anarchist interlocutors at Radio

⁶¹Castoriadis raises the question of where one might “draw and set the limits” for the political participation of alien residents in “The Stakes Today for Democracy” (1986, in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), 166-67), only to conclude that no political philosophy could in practice provide an *a priori* answer.

⁶²Another chapter from this same section is titled “The Tragic Superiority of the West.”

Libertaire, “is society, it’s the community, it’s what grounds the political [*le politique*], that of which the political is a dimension.” Its first chapter contains the 1982 Geneva round-table discussion about his paper “The Nature and Value of Equality” (itself now in [CL2](#), as noted above). Here one may bear witness to a conflict that is resurgent many times among the encounters in this volume, between the expectations and interests of his interlocutors—here, Busino: “The ideas of Mr. Castoriadis having been elaborated within one determinate civilization and culture, we seek to confront them with some worldviews coming from other cultures”—and what Castoriadis wants to talk about in his encounters with them. After making some brief remarks about religions, he tries to reorient the discussion around “three themes” relating to the question of equality that is the object of this colloquium, only to see Busino again seek a confrontation between Castoriadis and “specialists of other civilizations”—a somewhat portentous characterization—instead of an exchange around the kinds of issues for which Castoriadis was hoping to foster further joint reflections that would advance understanding and action today in relation to the difficult project of instituting an egalitarian world society. Nevertheless, in response to this insistence on Busino’s part he does offer here a series of comments on philosophy in India and China (Taoism)—rather rare reading within Castoriadis’s work as a whole⁶³—that serve to clarify what he considers key differences between “extra-European” historical instances of the emergence of

⁶³See the anonymous Translator/Editor’s n. 4 (104) of the present volume. In “Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics,” Castoriadis reflects briefly on “the initial Buddhistic creed”—which, however, “boils down to acosmism, that is, retreat from the world, and it also did not last but became an ordinarily instituted religion with holy men, monasteries, and things like that.”

philosophy and his own thesis of a civic “cobirth” of philosophy and politics in ancient Greece.⁶⁴

Similarly, when Castoriadis was confronted with the request, coming from the moderator at a public presentation for a *Lettre Internationale* issue to which he had contributed,⁶⁵ “to speak of the South”—meaning the so-called global South, since “Monsieur Cornelius Castoriadis, you’re Greek in origin, right? That’s the South East”—he politely demurs, declining this preposterous invitation to cosplay an intellectual hero of the Third World⁶⁶ (“I don’t feel particularly inspired for the moment to speak of the question of the South and of North-South relations”) and volunteering instead: “Yes, rather I’d like to speak of *Lettre Internationale*.” Indeed, *Lettre Internationale* was one of a few reviews—after *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and along with *Textures*, *Libre*, *Esprit*, for a time *Telos*, and *Thesis Eleven*—where he could

⁶⁴This “initial Buddhistic creed” (see previous footnote) is said to be a “half example” of the eventual ability of “human beings ever [to] face frontally their limitation and their mortality.” In the first six volumes of the *Crossroads* series, Castoriadis makes passing mentions of Buddhism at [CL1](#), 315; [CL2](#), 349; [CL3](#), 353; [CL4](#), 71, 75, 155, 182, 191; [CL5](#), 63; [CL6](#), 193, 290, 335. *MRT*, now in [IIS](#), also offers a short vignette about Buddha (94-95).

⁶⁵Four Castoriadis pieces eventually appeared in the French-language version of *Lettre Internationale* (to use the French title here): issues 15 (Winter 1987), 21 (Summer 1989), 23 (Winter 1989-1990), and 37 (Summer 1993). They have been translated, respectively, as “Intellectuals and History,” “Psychoanalysis and Politics,” and “The Revolution Before the Theologians: For a Critical/Political Reflection on Our History” (all three now in [CL3](#)), as well as “The Ethicists’ New Clothes” (now in [CL4](#)).

⁶⁶See “Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy” (1985, now in [CL2](#)) for Castoriadis’s critical stance against the political implications of Third Worldism.

publish his work, if not regularly, at least on an ongoing basis.⁶⁷

Moreover, he takes the opportunity here to speak with high praise for this international “letter,” musing about the extent to which its open-ended editorial line might intersect in some respects with his own concerns at the time:⁶⁸

I don't know whether I am perhaps drawing it too much to my side, but it's perhaps the look the review has of being something that is not against conformism as such, but that has no conformism, and that among all the collaborators, one sees—right?—that none obey any kind of conformism, be it the conformism of anticonformism or the form of conformism *par*

⁶⁷In a mid-December 1982 letter of apology to Castoriadis from the Pannekoekian Council Communist Cajo Brendel for the false claims Brendel had made about Castoriadis's conduct while a member of S. ou B., Brendel suggested:

Henri Simon and the undersigned, deeming ourselves responsible for the personal turn this polemic has taken, and for the consequences that this could have for you, would hope that a correction—based on a text we would agree to beforehand—might be published in a publication that could eventually reach the readers of the various publications mentioned in the aforesaid polemic ([MPSWI-2](#), 38).

In his March 6, 1983 written reply, Castoriadis confessed that he was not at the time in contact with any journals that would print such a correction:

As for the publication of a clarification—or, more exactly a correction—I do think that that would be a good thing. But it is obviously up to you and Simon to take the initiative; moreover, for my part, at present I do not have access to any publication in which such a text could be inserted ([ibid.](#), 41).

⁶⁸See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992, now in [CL3](#)).

excellence that is Postmodernism, and so on and so forth. There is a kind of nonconformist attitude in it that is wholly characteristic.

Castoriadis had also found the occasion, during his broadcast discussion with Ferry, to recall what Curtis has analyzed thematically as the “present contending alternative” built into the very title of his original review, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*:

And I'm not going to boil everything down to what has already been said before. But, for me, these two elements—that is to say, the struggle for autonomy and this withdrawal into the private sphere—are *continuing, in a sense, to express at present the dilemma, if I may say so: socialism or barbarism*. It's nothing other than that (emphasis added).

He thus is implicitly distinguishing his journal's eponymous formulation of the “socialism or barbarism” alternative from the merely *projective* (hazily future-oriented) ones that had been offered by Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, and Trotsky.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, when pressed to make a succinct contribution during an event in which he was limited to interjecting a few quick phrases, he lapses into a predictably *predictive* mode: “Two alternatives seem discernible for the future,” he states in “Two Alternatives: Interventions during Václav Havel's Forum 2000” in the *Kairos* section.

There is even an echo of the conclusion to “The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*,” the

⁶⁹See David Ames Curtis, [“Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis,”](#) which was published in the 1989 Busino *Festschrift*.

June 1967 circular addressed to *S. ou B.*'s subscribers announcing the review's suspension *sine die*. There, Castoriadis had promised:

We will continue, each in our own area, to reflect and to act in terms of the certainties and of the interrogations that Socialisme ou Barbarie has permitted us to sift out. If we do it well, and if social conditions are propitious, we are certain that we will one day be able to recommence our enterprise upon more solid grounds and in a different relation to those who have followed our work ([*PSW3*](#), 121-22).

Castoriadis ended his English-language response to Enzensberger's talk with an expression of hope that "the lesson of this discussion, of this meeting, should not be unbridled pessimism but taking consciousness of the problems and attempting to speak out about what we see, wherever we find ourselves." Becoming aware of a tragic situation is not a prelude to demobilization⁷⁰ but a call to clear-eyed vigilance with a view to supporting and furthering the project of autonomy, wherever and whenever feasible.

Confronted with the maddeningly complacent religio-"scientific" syncretism of René Girard, Castoriadis showed himself, at times, less inclined to patient and polite deferral and redirection—to the point where the organizers of this debate on "Contingency in Human Affairs" had to request

⁷⁰This runs counter to the main thesis of Philippe Gottraux's book "*Socialisme ou Barbarie*": *Un engagement politique et intellectuel dans la France de l'après-guerre* (Lausanne: Éditions Payot Lausanne, 1997), which is meant as a Bourdieu-inspired study of gradual political "disengagement."

that he keep silent and wait his turn during a debate in which he was one of the two protagonists. What is at stake, in this showdown between the Christian Girard and the Atheist Castoriadis is nothing less than what the latter calls—in the *Psyche* section's chapter "Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics"—"the question of the origin of society"—or rather—since he explicitly rejected the organizers' suggested title, "Psychoanalysis and the Origins of Society"—*the question of the origin of society and of society's institution in relation to extrasocial attempts at "explanations" thereof*. Just as he rejects, in this latter chapter, any "psychoanalytical answer" to this question, such as the "mythical" one found in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*,⁷¹ here he takes on Girard—who modestly claims, "I am saying very few things beyond the Freud of *Totem and Taboo*"—and the latter's very broadly applied mimetic theory of desire. Girard's efforts to explain the origin of society by "desire" have strange resonances here, it might be noted, with the otherwise highly dissonant and discordant Nineteen-Seventies representatives of the "philosophy of desire," which Castoriadis had always denounced as a form of "imposture." Moreover, to indicate the naive artificiality of such attempts at explanation of society's origin, Castoriadis exclaims to Girard: "I believe that I'm hearing a classical economist describing the genesis of the economy," to which Girard replied, with lame but swaggering assurance: "You don't comprehend that I am describing the genesis and the degeneration of the social institution." Soon thereafter, Castoriadis provided this decisive statement on the matter of society's origin:

⁷¹*Totem and Taboo* is also discussed during the *Free Associations* interview, in the *Kairos* section of the present volume, in which he speaks of "the *radical imaginary* at the origin of the creation of institutions."

We're smack dab in the middle of this contingency that is the creation of the institution. It's an illusion to believe that there could be a derivation of the first fact of the institution of a society. The institution of a society is neither producible nor morphogenetizable nor anything at all. It is creation.

Right before branding Girard as no better than a "classical economist," Castoriadis laid out why, as against all extrasocial explanations, the *social self-origin* of society is unavoidable and inevitable:

There is a history, there is a society, and there is no object that would be able to become the stake in a rivalry if it is not socially instituted—which means that man is not an animal, that woman is not necessarily an object of rivalry, nor money. The object is socially instituted, which makes all the difference.

In affirming—in opposition to what was assumed in Girard's mimetic theory of desire—that "woman is not necessarily an object of rivalry," Castoriadis provides here one of several statements that exemplify his distinct and largely sympathetic approach to what may be called *feminism*—at least when the latter does not engage in identity politics but instead opens up to the project of autonomy whose existence he had noted in the historical women's movement.⁷² Several university-based

⁷²This approach on his part is not wholly positive or uncritical, as when he speaks of "some American feminists" and of their "attempts to invert the Freudian scheme." (He was equally critical of this "Freudian scheme." For, when it comes to the "inequality of genders," he says, "the first culprit" within psychoanalysis "is Freud himself.") Castoriadis elucidated the far-reaching implications of the women's movement in a 1978

thinkers, including Linda Cardinal, Alice Pechriggl, Laurie Naranch, and Lois McNay, have explored how Castoriadis's social and psychoanalytic thought may be relevant to feminist issues. In *Crossroads* 7, a number of such implications and insights are teased out by Castoriadis himself. In contrast to the simplistic contrast between "the Ancients" and "the Moderns"—to which many intellectuals opposed to direct democracy have appealed by adopting Benjamin Constant's pat formula—Castoriadis complicates matters by inquiring pertinently: "For, if one is speaking of the equality of the Moderns starting in the late eighteenth century, when then did women obtain political rights?" He thus is reminding the other discussants that the women's movement⁷³—like its "project-of-autonomy" precursors or contemporaries (the worker, student/youth, and minority movements) Castoriadis also championed—both involves and entails a long-term social and political struggle that cannot be encapsulated within a simplistically dichotomous History-of-Ideas analytical framework. Indeed, the historical reality, though not

unpublished interview "Transition" (now available in [CL2](#), 10):

What the women's and youth movements, for example, have called into question are institutions, norms, values, and significations that are far older and deeper than those of capitalism: patriarchal family and morality, passive "education," etc. What these movements are as a matter of fact expressing is the refusal of domination in all domains, the search for autonomy.

⁷³As early as the third and last installment of "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (now in [PSW2](#)), which was first published in the [thirty-third issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* \(December 1961-February 1962\)](#), Castoriadis was writing, beyond traditional economistic Marxist explanations, about "the double oppression imposed upon women and youth."

absolute necessity, of “gender domination” is one of the main themes explored in “Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics,” in which he tells his audience that “male domination is, in the end, an arbitrary historical creation, which doesn’t make it less real, but does mean that it can equally well be done away with.” When, in a later chapter, the historian and former French Communist Party member François Furet comfortably denounces from a historical distance those enamored of the idea of Communism who made a show of their willingness to explain away *and* to accept unprecedented levels of violence, Castoriadis pertinently interjects that a Fellow Traveler of this sort also “partakes of a kind of virility” as a puffed-up, gendered mode of justifying his criminal coverup of others’ crimes.

Castoriadis’s 1987 radio dialogue with Philippe Raynaud about Weber has already been mentioned several times. Raynaud’s first book, *Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne*, had just appeared from Presses Universitaires de France at the time of their discussion. Let it be noted here that, since 1984, Raynaud, a political scientist specializing in Liberalism (in its Continental sense), has published more than a dozen books and articles making at least brief mentions of Castoriadis’s work and ideas, including several substantial reviews of Castoriadis volumes. Moreover, he was responsible for organizing the 1990 Cerisy Colloquium devoted to Castoriadis’s work.⁷⁴

Castoriadis speaks respectfully, almost glowingly, of

⁷⁴For a number of videos drawn from this colloquium, including an audiovisual recording of Castoriadis’s principal Cerisy talk, see <https://www.agorainternational.org/videos-cerisy-1990-castoriadis.html>. See also [Agora International’s videotaped interview with Raynaud](#), conducted during this week-long event.

Furet's work as historian of the French Revolution and of the latter's book on the Russian Revolution, *The Passing of an Illusion*, which is discussed in another joint appearance on Finkelkraut's radio program.⁷⁵ He does not have much respect, however, for Furet's idea of *ideocracy*, or rule by ideas, and the History-of-Ideas-to-the-second-degree approach this idea represents, any more than did S. ou B. cofounder Claude Lefort, who wrote an entire book in 1999 to challenge Furet's, as well as Martin Malia's, interpretations of Russian Communism,⁷⁶ since both Castoriadis and Lefort devoted decades of their life to studying "bureaucratic capitalist" Russia under "Communism" as a "social regime," to borrow the title of a 1977 Castoriadis talk (see "The Social Regime in Russia," now in [CR](#)). In his Radio Libertaire discussion, he is more direct and politically to the point when one of his interviewers inquires about Furet, who finally broke from Communism at the time of the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956:

These are the neo-Tocquevilleans, who were all on the Left in various capacities (including Communist ones, in the French CP) but who, having discovered the

⁷⁵As mentioned below, p. 155, n. 6, Castoriadis does not hesitate to take a sly but unmistakable dig against one of Finkelkraut's own books (known in English as *The Defeat of the Mind*) in the latter's presence during Finkelkraut's Castoriadis/Raynaud broadcast.

⁷⁶Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, tr. Julian Bourg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). See also, online, the "[Curtis-Bourg Exchange Concerning the Claude Lefort Translation Complications from Dick Howard/Columbia University Press.](#)"

horrors of totalitarianism, have completely tipped over to the other side, becoming champions of existing democracy.

It should be remembered here that Castoriadis, who endeavored to bring out “the *positive* content of socialism” (in “On the Content of Socialism, II” [1957], now in [PSW2](#), emphasis added) would be ill classified as just another *antitotalitarian*.

As much as the Girard, Raynaud/Weber, and Furet discussions translated in the *Koinōnia* section, Castoriadis's extended encounter with anarchism in the person of his two Radio Libertaire interviewers is a major chapter here, for it features his most expansive engagement with anarchist thought in the entire body of his work. Back in 1949, anarchists took note of his negative historical assessment of them in the eponymous editorial “Socialism or Barbarism” for the very first issue of his *S. ou B.* journal:

Only a few minute organizations seem to have survived the general shipwreck, organizations such as the “Fourth International,” the Anarchist Federations, and a few self-described “ultraleftist” groups (Bordigists, Spartacists, Council Communists). These organizations are very weak, not only because of their numbers (numerical strength by itself is never a criterion), but above all because of their political and ideological bankruptcy. Relics of the past rather than harbingers of the future, they have proved themselves utterly incapable of understanding the fundamental social transformations of the twentieth century and even less capable of developing a positive orientation toward them ([PSW1](#), 77).

Castoriadis did concede: "In some countries, the Anarchist Federations still enjoy the support of a number of workers with a healthy class instinct." "But," he adds immediately, "those workers are very backward politically, and the anarchists keep them that way. The anarchists' constant refusal to venture beyond the sterile slogan 'No Politics,' or to take theory seriously, contributes to the confusion. This makes anarchism one more blind alley for workers to get lost in" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, since this broad, harsh, initial dismissal—"the 'Fourth International,' anarchists, and 'ultraleftists,' are but historical memories, minute scabs on the wounds of the working class, destined to be shed as the new skin readies itself in the depths of its tissues" (*ibid.*)—his relations with anarchists have historically been generally good, as Castoriadis is also able to note at the start of this radio program, and a good number of them have engaged seriously with his work over the decades, especially because of what they take to be his principled *antistatist* attitude.

There is thus genuine camaraderie and affection, as well as mutual expressions of admiration and joint affirmations of overlapping viewpoints, in this *meeting* of radical-democratic and anarchist minds, based firmly on their shared conviction that the State is a hindrance to a free society and must be abolished. The jokes they tell each other are made at the expense of established authorities (State, Church, capitalists, a formerly Maoist French newspaper editor, etc.), and the cutting remarks made elsewhere against a Ferry, a Furet, or a Finkelkraut are wholly absent here, as are the wearied sighs one hears Castoriadis occasionally emit when dialoguing "live" with others.

Nevertheless, Castoriadis's initial negative assessment of the widespread "confusion" that leads anarchist workers into "blind alleys" returns at points in their exchange—

centered, interestingly, around the question of “individualism” that had in part divided Ferry and Castoriadis. When Radio Liberaire cohost Jacques Bouché at one point begins a sentence with “But the political [*le politique*], it too being a form of contract...,” Castoriadis, with some thinly veiled exasperation, interjects: “Unh, if you wish, well....” Bouché dissolves social and political relations into “contracts between individuals”—though, he also adds “between groups,” while still retaining a “contract”-based model for society—and goes on to restate, in a way, the “No Politics” stance Castoriadis had criticized forty-seven years earlier.⁷⁷ “There is nothing completely political [*Il n’y a pas un politique, complètement*],” Bouché flatly declares. “There is nothing political that is external, in a way, to individual relations and to group relationships.” What follows is an extended exchange around concepts of individualism, freedom, the institution of society, with the anarchist Bouché constantly wavering and failing to grasp a principled standpoint beyond anything that cannot be reduced to the individual or intersubjective/group level:

C.C.: There is nothing political external to common, social relationships. But the risk is that you will be heard as speaking of the individual as if this were an ultimate anchorage.

J.B.: No, it’s not an ultimate anchorage, but...

C.C.: Because the individual is what society makes of it.

⁷⁷ Approximately a century before Castoriadis’s inaugural *S. ou B.* editorial criticizing “No Politics” anarchism, the American protoanarchists of the day who put forth this same exact “No Politics” slogan were Abolitionists led by William Lloyd Garrison, who himself burned the U.S. Constitution in public while describing it as “a covenant with death, an agreement with hell.”

J.B.: Yes, but there, be careful, the autonomy of the individual and his liberty is nevertheless the foundation, well, the point...

C.C.: No, it's one of the goals, as much as is the autonomy of the collectivity. That's why I am always speaking of individual and collective autonomy.

J.B.: For me, the autonomy of the collectivity has meaning only if the autonomy of the individual is set as the point of departure.

C.C.: And as objective.

“Liberalism and Marxism,” Castoriadis states in “Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics,” “are absolutely identical” as regards their adoption and furtherance of “a secular religion of progress.” It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, on the question of “the individual” as well as on “politics,” Anarchism, as seen here, is just as hard pressed to articulate an alternative view to inherited ways of thinking as are these other two main ideological doctrines with roots in the nineteenth century: Liberalism, with its explicit “individualism” and its denigration of politics to the “benefit” of economics; and Marxism, with its implicit “individualism,” as Louis Dumont has shown, and its ultimate denial of politics.⁷⁸

Anarchism, with its head-on opposition to *the State*—an opposition shared by Castoriadis—clearly distinguishes itself from the compromises inherent in both Marxism (where, in practice, the State never really manages to “wither away” since there is an incoherent and unattainable, non-

⁷⁸See David Ames Curtis's [Translator's Forward to Jean-Marc Coicaud's *Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility* \(Cambridge University Press, 2002\), pp. x and xxi-xxii.](#)

political “communist” state ever lying beyond that serves as alibi) and Liberalism (which opts for a “minimal State” that can accommodate itself quite well to authoritarian statist enforcement mechanisms via key, supposedly residual, coercive governmental entities and functions that are preserved on the theoretical as well as practical level; principally: the police and the army). And yet such admirable and adamant opposition on the level of principle and theory may, in Castoriadis’s view, blind anarchism to other social phenomena:

C.C.: There, perhaps, we will have a divergence of opinion. I ask myself whether there is not, behind that, some different ideological conceptions. In a sense, you are committed to thinking in terms of a strong and ever stronger State. As for myself, if I saw a future, it would be, rather, the dislocation of States and their replacement in power by capitalist mafias. See what I mean? Private armies, almost.

J.B.: A bit like in Russia?

C.C.: Absolutely. There again, it’s quite curious, because Russia, which is very backward, is offering, in its present-day dilapidation, a kind of avant-garde image. But the French State is in the process of becoming dislocated. Well, that’s always been a bit the case, yet there was a period when the State succeeded in being the guarantor of the general interests of the system.⁷⁹ This is no longer the case.

⁷⁹On the French State in the 1950s, whose capture by competing private groups led to a segmentation and disintegration of state functions, and the Sixties, when Gaullism ushered in, not a renewed Fascism, but “modern capitalism,” see various *S. ou B.* articles written by Castoriadis that are now available in [MPSW1-2](#).

Now, it's completely beneath the heel of some capitalist group or other.

Castoriadis also manages, during one of his fleeting Prague interventions, to make this point about rising contemporary mafia-like or mafia-lite arrangements. Turning from a future-directed "two alternatives" projection to current tendencies within contemporary capitalism, he expresses "misgivings about the corrosion of the State prevalent today in the former Soviet Union, where in fact the constituted powers are not exercising any real power at all. Real power is exercised elsewhere, most of it, we know, by more or less decent Mafias." One thus can read here some indications of a quite late development in his overall social and economic analysis, only hinted at in his final written text, "The 'Rationality' of Capitalism," in which he related these recent changes to his ongoing ecological concerns:

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 ([CL6](#), 115, emphasis added).

Thirty pages prior, in this same posthumously published article, Castoriadis had observed in a footnote: "We have had a new demonstration *in vivo*—and *in anima vili*—[of "primitive accumulation" described by Marx, but which nonetheless 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"] in the *mafia-like* 'primitive reaccumulation' being carried out through the process of 'privatization' in the societies of the ex-Communist countries" (*ibid.*, 85, n. 12; emphasis added for "mafia-like").

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The penultimate section of this new, unauthorized *Crossroads* volume is *Psyche*. This heading was first introduced as the title for the first section—followed by *Logos* and *Koinōnia*, in that order—in [the very first Crossroads volume](#) (1978 in French), and it included two texts: "Epilegomena..." and "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation." This time, *Psyche* contains but one chapter, "Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics." It could very well be argued that this text belongs, rather, in the *Koinōnia* section of the present volume, just where "Freud, Society, History," composed as an entry for a 1996 *Dictionnaire de philosophie politique*, was located in [CL4](#), when Castoriadis was still alive and editing his own books. By way of contrast, the *Free Associations* interview, "Psychoanalysis and Society III"—which references, in its title, two previous interviews with psychoanalysts, now titled "Psychoanalysis and Society I" and "Psychoanalysis and Society II," that may now be found, at Castoriadis's direction, in [CL2](#)'s *Kairos* section—appears in the present volume's *Kairos* section, too. Moreover, to complicate things still further, his 1987 Hannah Arendt lecture "Psychoanalysis and Politics" was republished in the *Polis* section of [CL3](#).

In the end, one cannot but speculate about the placement and organization of chapters for a book Castoriadis

himself never envisioned publishing⁸⁰—which is meant not as a copout but as an admission and recognition of the complexities and ambiguities of his selection and instauration of *Crossroads* section headings for organizing his rich, varied, and highly interconnected writings. It must frankly be admitted that there is a certain (though not wholly unjustified) *arbitrariness*, somewhat reliant on the ensemblistic-identitarian, to the section divisions Castoriadis instituted and practiced in [the *Crossroads* volumes published during his lifetime](#), as well as to the choices of what to include, and of where to include them, in each successive volume,⁸¹ not to mention the educated guesses the French Editors tasked themselves with performing for the creation of [the sixth, posthumous volume](#)—which, as noted above, included a section heading Castoriadis himself never employed. The “magmatic unity-in-the-making that is Castoriadis’s overall oeuvre”⁸² both admits of such hard-and-fast divisions and erratically tends to flow beyond, disrupt, and, in the creative reader’s mind, possibly reorder them. In any case, “Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics” offers the chance for English-speaking readers to read Castoriadis speaking in English on “four main themes” related to psychoanalysis—

⁸⁰As contrasted, that is, with what became the posthumous [CL6](#), whose choice of potential chapters Castoriadis had discussed extensively with Curtis. Curtis had already drawn up a draft table of contents for a post-[WIF](#) English-language volume and discussed it with Castoriadis before his death.

⁸¹See, for a discussion of the editorial dilemmas and choices Castoriadis faced after the French publication of [CL2](#) in 1986, the Translator/Editor’s Foreword to [CL4](#), especially xxi-xxiv.

⁸²This phrase appears in the last paragraph of the Translator/Editor’s Foreword to [CL4](#), lxiii.

ones that, however, might have, if taken separately, tempted one to position certain aspects of these distinct but internally linked topics in the *Kairos*, the *Koinōnia*, the *Polis*, and, perhaps even in the *Logos* section, *Poiēsis* remaining again the orphan.

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In another turn back to [the first *Crossroads* volume](#), the final section of the present volume is titled *Logos*, a heading generally used to designate texts related to philosophy, science, and mathematics—though, interestingly, in [CL1](#) the *Logos* section had appeared *after* the *Psyche* one but *before* the one designated by the heading *Koinōnia*. Here, it is set at the end of the volume, as was the case with [CL2](#), [CL3](#), [CL5](#), and [CL6](#), the *Logos* heading being entirely absent from [CL4](#) (*The Rising Tide of Insignificance*), which was purposely “devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics” (Notice, in [CL4](#), xii).⁸³ Thus may it be seen that the initial or introductory section ordering constituted in [CL1](#) had evolved in the succeeding volumes, as new section headings were created and a more settled order was established.

The major text in this final section clearly is the first one, “The Imaginary as Such.” As noted above, this draft for a never-published work dates from March 1968—that is, thirteen years before the first previously published text incorporated into the present translation (Castoriadis’s 1981 round-table discussion that followed the delivery of his “The Nature and Value of Equality” paper). As a precursor text to

⁸³On the publishing context, see again the Translator/Editor’s Foreword to [CL4](#), in particular xxiii-xxiv.

[*IIS*](#) (1975 for the French original), which had served as the ostensible basis and locus for the *idées mères* laid down there and then explored in the [six-volume *Crossroads* series](#), “The Imaginary as Such” offers breathtaking vistas of how early some of these “source ideas,” or antecedents thereto, actually began to be formed as well as tantalizing hints that point to other, even earlier developments. Drafted only nine months after the circulation of “The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*” (June 1967), three months before the distribution, in the heat of May ’68 events, of the initial roneotyped version of “The Anticipated Revolution” (now in [PSW3](#)), and six months prior to the publication of the first text by Castoriadis not published under a pseudonym (“Epilegomena...”), “The Imaginary as Such” already articulates his conviction that “every effectively lived meaning,” being “necessarily *de facto* individual,” has, as “its site of existence,” the “region of individual *representing-aiming at-being affected*” (emphasis added). This now-well-known tripartite characterization of the interconnected vectors both of the radical imagination of the singular psyche and of social-historical entities formed by the social instituting imaginary as well as of particular societies as a whole does not figure among the expressions employed in “Epilegomena...” and reappears in printed form only in *SII*, the second half of [*IIS*](#), which was completed in 1974—first, somewhat anomalously, in the phrases “objects of practical, affective and intellectual investment”⁸⁴ and “determined

⁸⁴I.e., *cathexis*, to use the standard Freudian term in English later often employed in translations by Curtis and the Anonymous Translator, instead of translator Kathleen Blamey’s [*IIS*](#) rote translation here of the correct French term *investissement* (which itself, like *cathexis*, translates Freud’s German term *Besetzung*).

practically, affectively and mentally" (145 and 146), and then in the canonical formulations "representation-desire-affect" (*ibid.*, 213) and "representative/affective/intentional flux" (*ibid.*, 255, 274 [where this flux includes all three of these vectors "indissociably"], 297, and 369).⁸⁵

The Translator's Postscript to *ASA(RPT)* (see lxxi-lxxii) examined the question of when Castoriadis originally stipulated that his affirmation of "creation *ex nihilo*" does *not* mean that such creation would also happen *nihilo* in two of its other ablative forms, viz.: creation occurs neither *in nihilo* nor *cum nihilo*. It was already noted there that "Done and To Be Done," his 1989 reply to critics that offers many reminders and callbacks about his past writings, reaffirms that "creation is *ex nihilo*" while adding: "But as I have already written, it is certainly not *in nihilo*, nor is it *cum nihilo*...innumerable passages from *IIS* show this, and I have specified it again recently" in "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (written in "Burgos, March 1978—Paris, May-June 1988" but first published in French in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 93:1 [January-March 1988]) and "Individual, Society, Rationality, History" (composed in "Tinos, August 1987—Paris, January 1988" and first published in *Esprit*, February 1988), both of these 1988-published texts now appearing in *CL3*.⁸⁶

⁸⁵See also "representation, intention and affect" (*ibid.*, 291) and "absolute congruence between intention, representation and affect" (*ibid.*, 296). In Curtis's translations, the adjective *IIS* translator Blamey had offered, "representative," is rendered more clearly and less ambiguously as "representational."

⁸⁶Another 1980s appearance of *ex-nihilo-but-not-in/cum-nihilo* comes from his "Time and Creation" paper, which was composed at "Cerisy-la-Salle, June 1983—Stanford, February 1988—Paris, September 1988." Castoriadis writes: "The new *eidōs*, the new form, is created *ex nihilo* as

Notwithstanding this retrospective assertion, it turns out that the Latin phrase *ex nihilo* explicitly appears only four times in [IIS](#), the first two of these in the 1974 Preface (2):

The ideas which had already been brought out and formulated in the part of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” published in 1964-[196]5—those of history as creation *ex nihilo*, of instituting society and instituted society, of the social imaginary, of the institution of society as its own work, of the social-historical as a mode of being unrecognized by inherited thought....

and on page 3 (“the works of the imaginary, which is creation *ex nihilo*”), along with pages 156 (“the bourgeoisie was born...truly *ex nihilo*”) and 361 (“the central or primary imaginary significations of a society...create objects *ex*

such. It is not, *qua* form, *qua* *eidos*, producible or deducible from what ‘was there.’ This does not mean that it is created *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*” ([CL3](#), 359). Without admittance to the [Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine \(IMEC\) Castoriadis Archives](#), access to which is strictly controlled, there is no way of attempting to ascertain whether this particular instance of how he specified the distinction in question was presented on June 23, 1983 in his “Temps et création” lecture during the [“‘Temps et devenir \[Time and becoming\]’ colloquium](#) at the Cerisy-la-Salle International Colloquium Center” (see Castoriadis’s Preface in [CL2](#), xiv) or whether, as is more likely given the other composition dates from 1988, it was introduced only at the time of the “reworked text,” which “served as the basis for my introductory lecture” at the February 1988 Stanford colloquium on “The Construction of Time” (see the “Time and Creation” publication note, [CL3](#), 331). (One would also have to look into the IMEC Castoriadis Archives in order to try to confirm or to disprove that the beginning date of composition for “Power, Politics, Autonomy” mentioned above—“Burgos, March 1978”—might or might not signal a decade-earlier date at which this distinction might first have been made.)

nihilo”). None of these four instances, it should be noted, are from *MRT*, the first half of *IIS*.⁸⁷

This is not to say that Castoriadis would have failed to introduce “creation *ex nihilo*,” both the idea and the actual phrase, earlier than in his December 1974 Preface. Indeed, in the [second issue of *S. ou B.*](#), under the pseudonymous pen of “Pierre Chaulieu,” Castoriadis writes expressly of “the most astonishing example,” which “is the creation *ex nihilo* of a monstrous kolkhoz bureaucracy” (“The Relations of Production in Russia,” May 1949, [PSW1](#), 153, emphasis now properly added for this Latin phrase) so as to indicate that, as stressed in the [first issue](#)’s eponymous March 1949 editorial, the rise to power of bureaucratic capitalism entails the formation of “a new social stratum” and not just some variations on the arrangements of “traditional capitalism” already encapsulated by extant Marxist analysis.⁸⁸ Nor should one forget his dazzling statement in the first paragraph of “Proletarian Leadership” (1952): “The revolutionary and cosmogonic character of...the creative activity of tens of millions of people as it will blossom during and after the revolution...consists precisely in the fact that its content will be original and unforeseeable” ([PSW1](#), 198).

Castoriadis does introduce his distinctive usage of the phrase “creation *ex nihilo*”—perhaps for the first time since “The Relations of Production in Russia”—in “Epilegomena...” (first published, it was noted, in October

⁸⁷As with all such assertions about the presence or absence of particular words and phrases, the basis is an electronic word search within digitalized versions of the relevant available documents.

⁸⁸The word *new* appears thirteen times in two untitled “Socialism or Barbarism” editorial sections stretching from the bottom of page 77 to the top of page 80 in [PSW1](#).

1968 as a text appearing under his own name):

It is in representation that one finds the moment of creation in the psychical process (I am speaking, obviously, of creation *ex nihilo*), first in its very surging forth, and just as much in its deployment and its products. It is here that what is irreducible to any combinatory, to any formalization, dazzlingly appears ([CLI](#), 32).

No express specification is advanced, even here, about how such creation is neither *in* nor *cum nihilo*. However, now returning to the seventh volume in the *Crossroads* series and specifically to the *Logos* chapter titled “The Imaginary as Such,” Castoriadis, while addressing the issue of the relation between the imaginary and language, states that, “in order for a tongue to emerge, in order for, among the infinity of possible combinations, a determinate, though not closed, sampling to be performed and a concrete language to be instaurated,” the “sampling” in question—which “exemplifies the imaginary’s mode of operation”—is “at once *unmotivated and conditioned*” (emphasis added).

This stipulation in “The Imaginary as Such” affords an alternative way to look back at the first half of [IIS](#)—which, Castoriadis had asserted, contained at least implicitly the idea that the affirmation of the existence of (nondivine) *ex nihilo* creation does not imply any assertion that such creation would be *in* or *cum nihilo*. While the word *unmotivated* does not appear in *MRT*, and does so only twice in *SII* (see [IIS](#), 247 and 337), the specification *conditioned* may be found already in the [very first part of MRT \(April 1964\)](#). Addressing the then-current, and raging, Marxist debate over the alleged primacy of “infrastructure” over “superstructure,” Castoriadis writes:

What we have just said shows that there is not, nor has there ever been, an inertia of the rest of social life, nor a privileged passivity of the “superstructures.” These superstructures are no more than a fabric—of social relations, neither more nor less “real,” neither more nor less “inert” than the others, and just as “conditioned” by the infrastructures as the infrastructures are by them, *if the word “conditioned” can be used to designate the mode of coexistence of the various moments or aspects of social activities* (*MRT*, now in [IIS](#), 20, emphasis added).

The aforementioned second text from 1988 that is said to have helped clarify *ex nihilo* creation—“Individual, Society, Rationality, History”—clearly brings out this connection between creation *ex nihilo* and *conditionality*:⁸⁹ “‘Creation *ex nihilo*,’ ‘creation of form,’ does not mean ‘creation *cum nihilo*,’ that is to say, without ‘means,’ unconditionally, on a *tabula rasa*” ([CL3](#), 64).⁹⁰ The link Castoriadis after the fact sought to reestablish between *MRT*, *SII*, and his later writings starting in 1988 can now thereby be confirmed, though further exegetic investigations on this matter in *MRT* may also warrant being conducted.

This chapter on “The Imaginary as Such” also brings

⁸⁹It may be interesting to (re)read, in the present context, the list of “conditions” Castoriadis lays out in his avowedly incomplete “theory of the effective types of connection” (“Done and To Be Done,” [CL5](#), 16).

⁹⁰While one can read here “*cum nihilo*,” the phrase “*in nihilo*” does not appear even once in “Individual, Society, Rationality, History.” Surprisingly, in the other 1988 text Castoriadis cites in this connection (“Power, Politics, Autonomy”), “creation,” which is often mentioned, is spoken of explicitly in relation neither to *ex* nor to *in* nor to *cum*.

out another important feature relating to Castoriadis's views, this time on combinatory logic and computers. As was seen above, Castoriadis had already written, in "Epilegomena..." (October 1968)—while speaking of "representation" (without mention of either "affect" or "intention")—about "what is irreducible to any combinatory, to any formalization."⁹¹ Yet, six months earlier, in "The Imaginary as Such," when Castoriadis asserts that the "sampling" a tongue performs within the "infinity of possible combinations...exemplifies" the "unmotivated and conditioned" character of "the imaginary's mode of operation," he is contrasting the imaginary realm with what may be called *combinatorics*—a word that starts to appear explicitly in *SII* (now in [IIS](#), 171 and 239), though the phrase "a purely combinatory singularity" can already be found once in *MRT* (now in [IIS](#), 142). (It may be helpful to point out that the overall context at the time was Castoriadis's struggle against Structuralism and against its will to seek/impose a combinatorics emptied of human meaning.)

Castoriadis's early concerns with data processing and computer science are thus evident in this March 1968 text. Yet such concerns do not date just from this previously unpublished draft. Back in 1957, in "On the Content of Socialism, II" (*CSII*, now in [PSW2](#)), he had already been advocating for the employment of computers in a "plan factory" to work out the "productive implications" of "technical coefficients" applied to diverse industrial inputs that would yield varied outputs for consideration and adoption

⁹¹In all, the word *combinatory* is written four times in "Epilegomena..." ([CLI](#), 19, 22, and 24, as well as in the phrase quoted again in the present text, which had appeared in [ibid.](#), 32).

by a direct-democratic central workers' council.⁹² He summarized his conclusions from *CSII* quite sanguinely in *MRT*:

Finally, an analysis of the possibilities which would result from making available to society, organized into councils of producers, economic knowledge and the existing techniques of information, communication and computation—the “cybernation” of the global economy in the service of the collective self-management of human beings—shows that, however far we can see, not only is there no technical or economic obstacle to the establishing and the functioning of a socialist economy, but that this functioning would be, in its essential aspects, infinitely simpler and infinitely more rational—or: infinitely less irrational—than the functioning of the current economy, whether private or “planned” (now in [IIS](#), 84).

Less rosy, however, were his actual professional experiences: among the disagreeable and uninteresting chores he was tasked with fulfilling for his day job during his time as Director of Statistics, National Accounts, and Growth Studies at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development—and which helped push him to opt for early retirement in 1970—was to oversee the purchase of “the first IBM for OECD, the implementation of the IT service, technical discussions about the choice of IBM or Burroughs

⁹²“The field is in constant expansion,” Castoriadis affirms in [PSW2](#), 153, n. 17, citing writings by Wassily Leontief.

computers, and all the rest.”⁹³ He thus had already given considerable thought to the purchase and usage of computers, but also to their ontological implications—as contrasted with “the radical imaginary,” a term he had first introduced in *MRT* (see [IIS](#), 127-28)—when he wrote, in “The Imaginary as Such”:

That which in human thought remains irreducible to the thinking machine is the possibility of giving rise to elements or relationships that are not predetermined, not defined in advance, and not known by the memory, the program, and the operating rules of the supposed machine.

This sentence may readily be viewed as an early precursor to such statements as the following from the third paragraph of “Passion and Knowledge” (1992):

Why is a computer unable to replace the human mind? Because the former is devoid of imagination. Because, therefore, it can neither go beyond the rules that make it function nor go back before they were laid down (unless, precisely, one has specified this as a rule, and obviously, in this last case, it would be impossible for the computer to posit a new rule capable of leading to

⁹³See the [Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview, Cerisy Colloquium \(1990\)](#): 15. Sales of Burroughs computers and other business equipment, of course, were what generated a small annual stipend for Beat Generation writer William S. Burroughs, the grandson of the company's founder. Castoriadis himself did not possess a personal computer until some of his students chipped in and bought him one in the early 1990s. He said that he would retain his old manual typewriter for “polemical texts” he wanted to continue to bang out violently on its keys.

meaningful results). And because it is devoid of passion and therefore incapable of suddenly changing its object of inquiry on account of some new, hitherto unsuspected idea of which it has become enamored along the way. None of these deficiencies can be made up for by random operations ([CL5](#), 158).⁹⁴

With these connections and differences clearly laid out, one may also be able to comprehend the context within which he wrote, in “Done and To Be Done,” of “the *negative* paradigm of ‘artificial intelligence’” ([ibid.](#), 34).

Similar concerns may be seen to be at play in another sentence from “The Imaginary as Such”:

For, polysemy is not only the blood of poetry but also what renders possible the presence within language of *true, that is to say, nonalgorithmic significations*, that

⁹⁴The dancer-choreographer [Clara Gibson Maxwell](#) has employed this paragraph to dramatic-reflective effect in French—during a 2004 multiarts, ambulatory, “site-responsive” performance in the Salle des Arcades of Paris’s Hôtel de Ville (City Hall) at the invitation of the French Green Party Deputy Mayor in Charge of New Technologies, Danièle Auffray, a former member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*—and in Spanish—during another such performance, in 2011, at the Casa de la Primera Imprenta de América (House of the First Print Shop in the Americas, 1539). The latter performance—dealing with encounters (*encuentros* in Spanish) and exploring the interface between artistic creation and technological innovation for an “Encuentro—Creación humana” colloquium organized by the [Cátedra Interinstitucional Cornelius Castoriadis](#)—has since become a videodance, *Encuentro-Encuentro* (2012), that has been projected at more than a dozen venues in Europe, North America, and Asia; see the English-language version of the five-minute trailer: <https://vimeo.com/kaloskaisophos/encuentro-encuentro-trailer-english>.

is to say, ones that always refer to something else, starting from something (emphasis added).

Castoriadis is beginning to lay out here both the possibility of “nonalgorithmic significations,” beyond computational calculation, and the role of the imaginary in what, a few months later in “Epilegomena...,” he explicitly began calling *referral*.⁹⁵

The status of algorithms was already brought together in *MRT* with Castoriadis's well-known assertion therein about symbolism's dependence on the imaginary:

There is an immediate use of the symbolic, in which the subject may let himself be dominated by the latter, but there is also a lucid or reflective use. Even if this second use can never be guaranteed *a priori* (no language can be constructed, *not even an algorithm*, in which all error would be “mechanically” impossible), it is realized nonetheless and in this way shows the path and the possibility of another relation in which the symbolic is no longer autonomous and can be made adequate to the content (now in *IIS*, 126, emphasis added).

Castoriadis thus is *reiterating*, in “The Imaginary as Such,” the affirmation, made in *MRT*, of a dependency when he expresses his ongoing regret about “an insufficient elucidation

⁹⁵In *SII*, Castoriadis elucidates this new term in relation to signification: “What is a signification? We can describe it only as an indefinite skein of interminable *referrals* to *something other* than (than what would appear to be stated directly). These other things can be both significations and non-significations—that to which significations relate or refer” (*IIS*, 243).

of the concept of symbolism,” which is said to stem from an overly generalized view of the symbolic: “In the case of society, one has nothing to do with any sort of symbolism in general, but instead with a specific symbolism, and this specificity of social symbolism stems from the fact that the latter rests on the imaginary.”

On the other hand, a phrase from “The Imaginary as Such” in turn *anticipates SII* and its key philosophical term, *magma*—a term he introduces with the declaration “We cannot think of the social, as coexistence, by means of inherited logic” (*IIS*, 182)⁹⁶—which in turn *harks back* to when he ventured to say, in *MRT*, that being “conditioned” may be construed in terms of the “mode of coexistence” of “social activities.” As Castoriadis had explained, in “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy,” not only about the origin of, but also about the predecessors for, his term *magma*: “After various terminological peregrinations—cluster [*amas*], conglomerate, and others—for this mode of being, as well as the logico-ontological organization it bears, I have ended up with the term *magma*” (*CL2*, 367). One may now read in print what is perhaps the earliest instance of Castoriadis using *conglomerate* as an anterior alternative for *magma*, for it is in “The Imaginary as Such” that Castoriadis, thinking of a Freudian term from *The Interpretation of Dreams*,⁹⁷ speaks of “the unconscious conglomerate in which

⁹⁶The first section of the seventh and final chapter of *IIS* is devoted to “The Magmas” (to cite Blamey’s perhaps unnecessary use of the definite article in her translation of its original French title: *Les magmas*).

⁹⁷“The essence of the decoding procedure, however, lies in the fact that the work of interpretation is not brought to bear on the dream as a whole but on each portion of the dream’s content independently, as though the dream were a geological *conglomerate* in which each fragment of rock required

language finds one of its origins.”⁹⁸ It remains to be discovered whether “cluster [*amas*]” was ever employed in print or in a draft written by Castoriadis to designate what he would later label *magmas*.⁹⁹ One may also wonder what “others” in this line of prior alternatives may one day show up, as additional, previously unpublished Castoriadis texts are brought to light.

a separate assessment” (Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 4, p. 99; see also *ibid.*, p. 104 for another instance of “conglomerate” and *ibid.*, 449 for an instance of “breccia,” mentioned in the next footnote).

⁹⁸“The State of the Subject Today” (1986) includes the following sentence that contains the word *conglomerate*: “The Freudian psyche thus presents itself as a conglomerate of psychical subspheres, arranged and held together somehow or other” ([CL3](#), 256). (The ending of the sentence, “held together somehow or other,” is reminiscent of the Notice that introduces this third *Crossroads* volume (1990), titled *World in Fragments*: “The world—not only ours—is fragmented. Yet it does not fall to pieces. To reflect upon this situation seems to me to be one of the primary tasks of philosophy today.”) Also, in “From the Monad to Autonomy” (1991), Castoriadis renders explicit the connection between this Freudian term *conglomerate* and the term he invented and eventually settled upon, *magma*:

Freud had some very beautiful images. He speaks of conglomerates and of breccia [*brèches*], volcanic rocks in which hard fragments are caught within solidified lava flows. At moments, this lava brings back up to the surface (as we see all the time in our life and in clinical practice) elements from the deepest magmas (now in [CL5](#), 122).

⁹⁹The two instances of the use of *cluster* in Curtis’s translation of the September 1974 round-table discussion that followed “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality’”—both as “ideological/imaginary cluster”—render instead an alternate French word, *nébuleuse*.



Encounters, in the present volume and generally, can be and indeed are enacted in a variety of ways. One of these ways is, beyond straightforward “mistakes” and “misunderstandings,” *missed opportunities*. Castoriadis is asked by Michel Audétat of *L’Hebdo*, “Are you still attached then to the self-management [*d’autogestion*] model?” Lest one think that, like others on the Left who have renounced their revolutionary past (which for him, until the end, was not the past),¹⁰⁰ he seemingly feels that he must respond positively, and he does so without nuance within this short-interview format: “I am indeed absolutely attached to the model of self-management of all productive activities and to self-government.” Missed here—amid this built-in effort to highlight his continued advocacy of the management of production by the producers themselves but also his championing of the self-governance of society as a whole—is the opportunity to explain (at least) two things. First, that a creative upsurge from below does not base itself on “models.” He generally did not engage in misleading, usually economics-centered, discussions of the relative merits of, for example, the “socialist model” vs. the “capitalist model.” And a key aspect of his writings on ancient Greece revolves around his specification that he did not advocate for Athenian democracy as a “model”—or, for that matter, as an “antimodel”—but as a “germ” (his own English-language translation of the French *germe*, which could also be rendered

¹⁰⁰See Castoriadis’s last interview, published posthumously, and controversially (since it did not have his widow’s prior authorization) as “I Am a Revolutionary” (1997, [PSRTI](#)).

into English as *seed* or *sprout*).¹⁰¹ Second, that what he originally advocated was *workers' management*,¹⁰² as distinguished from the so-called self-management extant in, for example, Tito's Yugoslavia, and later on from what Castoriadis said was being "called 'self-management' [*autogestion*] usually in order to make of it a reformist cosmetic for the existing state of affairs or a 'testing ground' while carefully remaining quiet about the colossal implications, upstream and downstream, of the idea of self-management" ("Socialism and Autonomous Society," 1979, now in [PSW3](#), 320). And as he explains in the 1972 General Introduction to his reissue of his *S. ou B.* writings, "I

¹⁰¹"Revolutionary praxis," he affirms in *MRT* as regards "models," is:
not required to produce the complete and detailed model of the society it intends to establish; nor does it have to "demonstrate" and provide an absolute guarantee that this society could solve all the problems that might ever arise. It is enough that it show that there is nothing inconsistent in what it proposes and that, as far as can be seen, its realization would greatly increase society's capacity to face up to its own problems (now in [IIS](#), 90, emphasis added).

And in a 1973 interview with former *S. ou B.* member Christian Descamps, "A Thoroughgoing Shakeup of All Forms of Social Life: An Introductory Interview," he states his refusal "to think history, and society, on the basis of any 'model' whatsoever" ([PSRTI](#), 59).

¹⁰²As early as "The Problem of the USSR and the Possibility of a Third Historical Solution" (1947), Castoriadis was writing: "To collectivize the economy means to give the actual possession, the management, and the enjoyment of the fruits of the economy (each being inseparable from the others) to the collectivity of workers" ([PSW1](#), 51, point 21 in this "preparatory discussion material for the Second Congress of the Fourth International" [*ibid.*, 44; see the publication note]). By the time of "The Relations of Production in Russia" (1949), he was using the phrase *workers' management* explicitly (see [PSW1](#), 118).

tried in *CSII* to respond to this question by showing that not a mechanical transposition of the model of the self-managed factory but the application of the very same profound principles to society as a whole contained the only key to a solution” ([PSW1](#), 21). These two considerations—rejection of models/antimodels and the promotion of workers’ self-management/societal self-governance—also came together in his 1977 retrospective essay, “The Hungarian Source”:

it is of course no accident if most of the organizations advocating “self-management” (in particular, but by no means only, reformist parties and unions) keep silent about Hungary and prefer to refer, for example, to the more respectable (and contentless) Yugoslavian “model” (now in [PSW3](#), 251).

Given more time, Castoriadis might have found the opportunity in his reply to make both these points.

Another missed opportunity, perhaps one for which he might not even have made the connection in the midst of his discussion with Ferry and Finkelkraut, is the latter’s observation, made as a way of denigrating what Finkelkraut considered the *cucul* (the present translation opts for “corny”) aspect of the 1986 French student demonstrations: “Twenty-eight year olds who were saying ‘The adults with us’—that seems rather curious to me,” since a 28-year-old graduate student is usually considered an adult. An element of Castoriadis’s analysis of the May ’68 student protests, and more generally of the youth movement of the time, had related to the phenomenon of “juvenilization” within a changing society:

The general “*juvenilization*” of society is just as

certain, but much less ambiguous. Everyone has become nonattached and irresponsible, and people's only choice is to recognize or fool oneself about this. At the limit, governmental ministers can play at being ministers; they know very well that they really decide nothing and that they are not truly responsible for anything ("The Anticipated Revolution," [PSW3](#), 153).¹⁰³

This last sentence, from 1968, could nevertheless easily be read as a forerunner to Castoriadis's vigorous denunciation here—to the amusement, protestations, and ultimate horror of Ferry and Finkelkraut—not only of the French governmental ministers of '86 but of Eighties (and not only Eighties) society as a whole:

This corny dimension is the dimension of contemporary society. That's what the television is telling us every day. That's what the governmental ministers are telling us. That's what the Prime Minister is telling us. The President of the Republic itself, that's the tone in which he speaks.

So, he did not completely miss out on this opportunity. Nor are opportunities, in another sense, missed in this seventh, added volume, several of whose chapters serve as occasions to promote and sell one or another of the five *Carrefours du*

¹⁰³In his premonitory 1963 *S. ou B.* article on "Student Youth" in France, Castoriadis's very first line reads: "There are 250,000 of them, neither children nor adults" ([PSW3](#), 64).

labyrinthe volumes published by a commercial press (Éditions du Seuil) during his lifetime. When one of the two anarchist radio program cohosts kindly plugs the title and publisher of his fourth volume, Castoriadis chimes in: "And it costs 130 francs." *Promotional encounters* figure among the encounters found here and in other *Crossroads* volumes.

Other encounters take place than just those with his face-to-face interlocutors such as Ferry, Furet, Raynaud, various interviewers, a live audience with questioners, and so on. For, Castoriadis may also be said to be engaging in encounters with other contemporary thinkers who are his *indirect interlocutors*, and he does so in the form of asides or mentions or more substantive commentary and criticism that refer the reader back (or forward) to other comments Castoriadis has made about these figures. The anthropologists Pierre Clastres and Marshall Sahlins, for example, are mentioned in passing in "The Nature and Value of Equality: Round Table Discussion" (1981), when Castoriadis volunteers the observation that "equality in the sense of the absence of a constituted power...would have to...be studied in a closer way than [they] have done." In answer to a query about the symbolic and the imaginary during the "Social Imaginary and Scientific Change: Discussion" from 1985, Castoriadis decides that it "is worth opening a parenthesis...about [Noam] Chomsky" wherein Castoriadis asks whether Chomsky's celebrated idea of *deep syntactic structures* entails a commitment to the "genetic predetermination" of language.¹⁰⁴ He had already examined

¹⁰⁴In "Individual, Society, Rationality, History," Castoriadis draws a similar conclusion regarding Habermas's theory of communication: "The existence of the social-historical is revealed (and even 'proven') by its irreducible effects; if we do not grant its existence then we must, in no

the implications of Chomsky's views on language in "The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy" (now in [CL2](#), 368-69) as he would also later do in "First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions" (1986, now in [CL6](#), 148-49), in "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988, now in [CL3](#), 149), and "Done and To Be Done" (1989, now in [CL5](#), 25 and 28). In answer to a question from the *Variant* interviewer in 1993, Castoriadis shares his take on Toni Negri, whom he knew personally. Among the texts to be included in *MPSW3-4* will be translations of a June 11, 1979 protest letter of unknown destination about the "Negri Affair" as well as of a January 26, 1982 personal written reply to a letter from Negri, who at the time was incarcerated in an Italian prison. Castoriadis's short reply, to *Variant*'s query about "a theorist like Toni Negri," offers him the chance to make known his actual, quite critical views on the Autonomist Marxist Negri and on the latter's work, which are articulated here beyond Castoriadis's principled defense of Negri, who had been arrested April 7, 1979 on trumped-up terrorism charges, based solely on his writings.¹⁰⁵ In his 1987 radio discussion with Raynaud, Castoriadis interjects that "one can raise the strongest objections against certain views of Max Weber as well as of certain things worked out by Habermas, about the

uncertain terms, make of language, and of languages in the plural (and this is only one example), a biological phenomenon (as Habermas practically does)" ([CL3](#), 63).

¹⁰⁵See also this Spanish-language text by Rafael Miranda Redondo, perhaps the only person ever to have studied with both Castoriadis and Negri: "[Cruce de caminos con Toni Negri, In memoriam,](#)" *Revista Transversales*, 65 (January 2024).

potential for rationalization that would be that of religions.”¹⁰⁶

Two years earlier, it may be noted, Habermas had published *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, with an alternately praising and critical “Excursus on Cornelius Castoriadis: The Imaginary Institution” interposed between the penultimate (eleventh) and ultimate (twelfth) chapters.¹⁰⁷

Back in October 1979, Castoriadis had delivered the first version of what would become his seminal lecture, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,” to a Max Planck Institute seminar led by Habermas, and Castoriadis prepared his own English-language translation of “Power, Politics, Autonomy” for a 1989 multilanguage Habermas *Festschrift*. “Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime” (1996, now in [CL4](#)) is largely devoted to positions he says are held by Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and Habermas, while “Done and To Be Done” (1989) returns to criticisms of Habermas on several occasions.¹⁰⁸ Finally, there is Jacques

¹⁰⁶Castoriadis is firmer as well as more explicit in his subsequent written review of Raynaud's book: “I consider completely false Weber's idea, which has been revived and expanded by Habermas, that ‘all religions have to resolve the problem of theodicy’ and that there is an ‘*internal logic of religious representations*’” (“Individual, Society, Rationality, History,” now in [CL3](#), 74).

¹⁰⁷The volume was translated into English by Frederick Lawrence as *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

¹⁰⁸See also mentions of Habermas in “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1990, now in [CL3](#), 5-6, 19) and “The Ethicists' New Clothes” (1993, now in [CL4](#), 285), as well as in “Market, Capitalism, Democracy” (1990, [ASA\(RPT\)](#), 210, 215), “War, Religion, and Politics” (1991, [ibid.](#), 238), “Response to Richard Rorty” (1991, [ibid.](#), 99, 104-105, 108), “The Project of Autonomy Is Not a Utopia” (1993, [ibid.](#), 5), [Democracy and Relativism](#) (1994, 39), and “A

Derrida, an early article of whose Castoriadis had praised as a “rigorous text” in *IIS* (396, n. 31). In “Anarchy and Radical Democracy” (1996), however, he shows no patience and grants no serious intent to Derrida’s 1993 work *Specters of Marx*, exclaiming simply: “it’s comical.”



Perhaps the most striking—though by no means the most surprising—feature of this set of *Follow-Up Interviews, Discussions, Talks, and Texts* is Castoriadis’s persistent will to *deepen the encounters* in which he has had the occasion to engage. In a rather straightforward yet still somewhat nuanced way, he admonishes Ferry: “One must not tinker around [*bricoler*] with political ideas more than is necessary.” Ferry earlier had explained his point of view about “’68 thought”—which, as was pointed out earlier, Castoriadis had termed, in a stark contrast, “anti-’68 thought”—concluding: “I think that we diverge here.” Castoriadis’s reply, while not seeking a Deleuzoguattarian *dissensus* for its own sake, agrees that indeed there “are divergencies.” He asserts, moreover, that “they must be deepened. We’re not here to smooth out rough edges, if we want to reflect.” In the Radio Libertaire interview, he gently suggests to his hosts: “Perhaps we can leave aside the history of ideas, once again, which is not for us today that fundamental,” so as to concentrate on more pressing issues, including “the key question”—in this case, that of direct democracy, its character and implications. After showing that democracy has created institutions, dating

Rising Tide of Significancy? A Follow-Up Interview with Drunken Boat” (1996): “Nobody cares about Habermas’s ideas on democracy; there are really no practical issues in his political philosophy” (*RTI(TBS)*, 163).

“back to ancient Greece,” that are not just “fundamental...and that the workers’ movement rediscovered at the outset,” but also “eminently educative” due to their mass participatory nature, he emphasizes that “it is on the basics that we must come to an agreement,” so as not simply to paper over differences—for example, the fact that having delegates that are “not only elected but revocable at any moment”—as in the early workers’ movement and every time direct democracy again arises—is not the same thing as the “imperative mandate” Radio Libertaire’s Gérard Jan wants to include in order to preserve a tie to his anarchist version of an illusorily residual, contractual individualism.

Such truth-seeking *parrhēsia*—*frankness* or “the commitment for all to really speak their minds concerning public affairs” (“The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,” [CL2](#), 246)—also leads Castoriadis to supply some clear, definitive answers. When, for example, the first questioner during “Social Imaginary and Scientific Change: Discussion” seeks unambiguous terminological clarification, “Do you or do you not consider ensemblistic-identitary logic to be socially constructed?”, Castoriadis replies unequivocally: “Ensemblistic-identitary logic is socially constructed.” Yet he also offers some nuance right afterward—while appealing, as a matter of fact, to what humanity *encounters*: “But,” he adds, implicitly introducing here a key aspect of the “world in fragments” theme, “I think that it **encounters** something independent of every social construction.” Nevertheless, there is perhaps, in his immediate public answer, another *missed opportunity*, as he could also thereby have challenged the *social constructivism* of many proponents of what he called *the French Ideology* (mistakenly labeled “’68 thought” by Ferry/Renaut) and spoken instead of *social invention* or *collective creativity* at this point.



Let us conclude, provisionally, by examining briefly an encounter that occurs within Castoriadis's own upwardly spiraling work itself. In answer to another question from the *Variant* interviewer, Castoriadis reviews some of the issues addressed in *MRT*. Here he introduces the *imaginary element* in human history to underscore the "fact that all these tremendous varieties of societies and then of types of institutions can by no means be explained by differences in the mode of production," as had been done in Marxism: "This conclusion leads in a totally different direction from Marx's rationalistic, economistic positivism." Yet he goes on to remark that this effort to go beyond Marx "coincided, accidentally or not, with a renewed interest on my part in psychoanalysis and *the two things more or less coalesced*" (emphasis added). Castoriadis does indeed affirm—as already noted, quoting "The Imaginary as Such"—that, for example in "the relation between making/doing and representing," there is "an identity within the most radical distinction, ... a bifurcation, starting from an unthinkable common root, of two trunks, each of which continues to belong in some way to the other." But there is also, in his work, not some nostalgia for an original, yet unattainable, *unity of duality* that would explain away all difference or that at least would always point back exclusively to "an unthinkable common root," especially as concerns the "world in fragments" people inhabit. The social-historical—of which Castoriadis is an integral part as much as any other human being since there have been human beings—is change, alteration, self-alteration that includes creation of new forms within the context of disparate, self-invented elements that encounter one another.

It was not preordained that Castoriadis would become

the discoverer of the social-historical domain, beyond and in accompaniment with his deepening investigation of the psychical realm. And yet something substantially new arose out of this confrontation/coalescence—precisely because of his will to recognize (beyond inherited individualist premises) the encounter with the social-historical and, around the same time but not strictly simultaneously, because of his desire to deepen his encounter with the psychical, both by undertaking an analysis of his own in the early Sixties and by questioning Freud while also trying both to deepen Freud's thought and to overturn it, when deemed necessary (Castoriadis's intentions here stand in stark contrast to the syncretic Freud-Marxism popular during the Sixties and Seventies). "When you read 'Marxism and Revolutionary Theory'"—the first half of the "source ideas" from [*IIS*](#) that the [*Crossroads series*](#) seeks to elaborate, elucidate, and extend—he asserts that

you can see that the break with Marx does not only take Freud into account, but also attempts to go beyond Freud, because Freud also, as it were, commits the sin of trying to fit society to a singular psychology, which to my mind doesn't hold water. Nevertheless, I thought that psychoanalysis was very important.

Castoriadis again expresses his resistance here, as regards both the social-historical and psychical levels, to all "explanations" of the "origin of society" that deny the role, and the implications, of recurrent but irregular upsurges of unprecedented creativity.

It was seen that, in writing in theatrical terms about the May '68 student-worker rebellion, Castoriadis notes that "several separate and heterogeneous plots are woven together,

and forced by events, time, and a common pole, to interact.” This fragmentary creative process, wherein what is disparately posited may come together and tear apart in inventive new ways through unprecedented encounters, is as true for his own evolving, and constantly revolutionizing, thinking process as it was for the coalescent events he and his review *Socialisme ou Barbarie* played such a deep role in instigating.

—April 2025

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 seventh volume: Latin West, Big Bang, political correctness, borderline.

POIĒSIS

Cornelius and Cybèle Castoriadis Writer, Psychoanalyst; Paris, 1991*

This woman. This love. This swelling womb. Plans and daydreaming. The accidents. The birth pangs. A child. A daughter.

Before a newborn baby, women are usually in ecstasy. But for a man, at least for me, unlike a kitten or a lamb, a newborn human baby is ugly. A strange, big frog-like creature, more wrinkles than skin. Only its almost-nonexistent nails are pretty.

Then gradually it smooths out. Still, for months and months, it mostly sleeps or cries. Sometimes, it smiles.

Suddenly a recognizable expression forms on her face. Sparse hair on the head. Intense and severely thoughtful—eyes, forehead, mouth, chin—she looks in the photos of the time like the famous picture of an aging Hegel: fathoming the meaning and the meaninglessness of the surrounding flux. Will she ever recover this pristine intensity of the glance? She will, in this photograph.

Babbling. Gesturing. Crawling. Syllables. Words. The first “sentence.” Then the sprouting and blossoming. The rediscovery of the world through her eyes. Strange world, so different. We call progress and growing up the assimilation, this ontological decay: her world starts resembling ours. She becomes like us—but not quite. Miracle and banality relentlessly alternate. The impossible dream: keep the miracle

*“Cornelius and Cybèle Castoriadis: Writer, Psychoanalyst. Paris, 1991,” *Fathers and Daughters: In Their Own Words*, intro. William Styron, photographs by Mariana Cook (San Francisco: Chronicle Books: 1994), p. 66. [T/E: Cook’s photograph of Cornelius and Cybèle Castoriadis, appears in *ibid.*, p. 67.]

intact, eliminate the banality.

Still. Each year brings some new miracles. And new hurdles. For endless months you despair: she will never go over it. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, she jumps. She did it.

The last: for years, playing the piano or the harpsichord with some independence of the two hands was impossible. Then, a few weeks ago, walking by her room, I don't believe my ears. A Bach fugue. An easy one, sure. But a fugue.

Would that it last forever. It will. But I will not be there anymore.

KAIROS

“The Republic Dies Without People’s Political Participation”: A Discussion with Luc Ferry*

*December 11, 1986 debate at the French Senate building between Cornelius Castoriadis and Luc Ferry for Alain Finkielkraut’s *Répliques* program, which was broadcast December 13, 1986 on the France Culture radio network. [T/E: The present translation is based on a corrected version of the [Youtube automatic transcription](#) of an [August 8, 2021 rebroadcast of the original French audio](#), itself a “Les Nuits de France Culture” rebroadcast of a December 6, 2020 rebroadcast, which included the following introductory remarks:

On November 12, 1986, the French Senate voted, in a first reading, for a bill on “University liberty” introduced by Minister of Higher Education and Research [Alain Devaquet](#). The law was to allow, in particular, for a selective admission of students to universities and an increased autonomy for educational establishments that would allow them to compete with one another.

A few days later, a large student mobilization was organized that led, in particular, to demonstrations bringing together thousands of people throughout France. The movement was also marked by the [death of Malik Oussekkine](#), a 22-year-old student beaten to death by policemen on December 6, 1986.

Minister Devaquet offered his resignation the same day and the bill was definitively withdrawn two days later. On December 13, 1986, [Alain Finkielkraut](#) had invited to his *Répliques* program on the France Culture radio network two philosophers to debate the meaning to be given to the events of May 1968 on the occasion of the publication of an issue of the review *Pouvoirs* that was devoted to this issue.

The first, [Luc Ferry](#), a future Minister for Youth, National Education, and Research in the [neo-Gaullist] government of [Jean-Pierre Raffarin](#), had published the previous year with [Alain Renaut](#) a book titled *La Pensée 68*, in which he defended the paradoxical and polemical idea that ’68 was an individualist movement.

The second, Cornelius Castoriadis, was the founder of the revolutionary group and review [Socialisme ou Barbarie](#), one of the major influences on May ’68.

This debate, planned long before the outbreak of the movement against the Devaquet law, ultimately was devoted to these *two*, multiply overlapping issues: that of the legacy of ’68 and that of the import of the student movement. The dialogue is all that richer to listen to today as it singularly resonates with the present time, for example when Castoriadis explained how the parliamentary republic, as it has been seen to develop in the modern age, cannot but die without people’s genuine political participation.

N.B.: Castoriadis’s contribution to this 1986 *Pouvoirs* issue now appears in translation as “The Movements of the Sixties” in [CL4](#); Ferry/Renaut’s

Alain Finkielkraut: The latest issue of the review *Pouvoirs*, which was out a few weeks ago, is devoted to May 1968. In reading it, one notes that divergencies over the nature, over the meaning of these events have shifted, that they no longer pit revolutionaries against conservatives, utopians against realists, libertarians against supporters of order and tradition, and yet they remain as lively as ever. Rather cheerfully does one enjoy this apparently very calm set of academic texts. Some, like Luc Ferry, defend the idea that May '68 is an individualist movement whose success stems from the way in which it has accelerated how our society has evolved toward individualism. Others, like Cornelius Castoriadis, state, and I quote the very first lines of his article:

The “interpretation” of May '68 in terms of a preparation (or an acceleration) of contemporary “individualism” constitutes one of the most extreme efforts I know of—the good faith of the authors remaining unquestionable—to rewrite, despite all appearances to the contrary, a history through which most of us have lived, to distort the meaning of events that are still, if I may say so, almost “hot” ([CL4](#), 25).

It was my wish for the written debate to continue orally. I therefore have invited Luc Ferry—founder of the [Collège de Philosophie](#), who has written three volumes of Political Philosophy and who, with Alain Renaut, has an already famous book, *La Pensée 68*—and Cornelius Castoriadis—

book, *La Pensée 68. Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), appeared in English as *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, tr. Mary H. S. Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).]

founder of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, who has published numerous texts, including [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) and two volumes in the [*Crossroads in the Labyrinth series*](#) from Éditions du Seuil. Though our France Culture radio network may live in the eternity of spiritual values, it is no less lapped by history, and we couldn't act as if this program, scheduled a long time ago, as the diplomats say, did not take place here and now, that is to say, after two weeks of student unrest that many are trying to define in reference to '68. I would therefore like us, if you don't mind, to reserve a portion of our program, for example the last quarter hour, to discuss this issue. But first of all, and in order to avoid all conceptual misunderstandings, I would like to ask Luc Ferry what he means by *individualism*, when, rather paradoxically, he defines May '68 as an individualist movement.

Luc Ferry: I'd like to offer two or three remarks about the *Pouvoirs* issue, because there is obviously a concept of *individualism*, the current concept, that at bottom signifies egoism, withdrawal into the private sphere, narcissism, what happens in consumer society and in liberal [in the Continental sense of capitalistic] society, the ideology of competition, for example, and, obviously, were it said that May '68 is an individualist movement in this current sense, that would be absurd. So, I think that there exists another meaning of the word *individualism*, a meaning that, roughly speaking, appears on the political scene with the French Revolution and that presents, I believe, two characteristics it would perhaps be necessary to go back over as the discussion continues.

First of all, individualism is a revolt by individuals in the name of equality, what Tocqueville calls *democracy*. In the name of equality as against hierarchies—so, at the moment of the French Revolution, it's hierarchy, obviously the hierarchies of the *Ancien Régime*. In May '68, you had, for

example, the Mandarins' hierarchy at the university or the bureaucratic hierarchies in the factory. And then there is a second characteristic of what could be called this *revolutionary individualism*, which is the revolt, let's say, of individuals, in the name of Liberty or in the name of autonomy, against traditions, with *traditions* understood as those values, those laws, those customs individuals inherit in a way without having willed them, without having justified them. Therefore, I would say that the strong meaning of the term *individualism* is antihierarchy in the name of Equality, antitradition in the name of Liberty, and the thesis we—Renaut and I, but also a certain number of other people like, for example, [\[French philosopher and sociologist\] Gilles Lipovetsky](#)—have wanted to defend is that there was a tie between the two forms of individualism, between militant individualism, if you wish, and liberal individualism, and that this tie was the tie that existed, basically, between May '68 and the '80s.

Therefore, after the critique of hierarchies, after the critique of traditions that characterize, obviously, May '68, after this demand [*revendication*] for autonomy that characterizes May '68, demands for equality, liberation at all levels, there may be said to be, in a way, once this movement was spent, once Leftism totally disappeared from the political scene, an emergence of narcissistic individualism, of a culture of authenticity, as Lipovetsky says, therefore with the right to difference as a basic value, and this culture of narcissistic individualism, therefore, is no longer revolutionary individualism; it may be said to mark, quite, quite broadly, the '80s and in particular the early '80s. So, that's the tie we wanted to establish between the two. And obviously, if our interpretation of May '68 were presented as a, let us say, individualistic movement, in the vulgar sense of the term...

A.F.: ...egoistic...

L.F.: ...egoistic, right, this would obviously be to bypass all the collective projects that obviously characterize May '68, but which we interpret as being projects that are perhaps inessential in themselves but essential *qua* demand for autonomy and freedom [*liberté*] as against traditions and as against hierarchies. So, well, I haven't developed that. I think that Corneille [i.e., Cornelius Castoriadis] will have many things to say....

A.F.: Cornelius Castoriadis, do these specifications from Luc Ferry lead you to attenuate your criticism?

Cornelius Castoriadis: But look, I believe that the discussion is going to stop right away, for lack of combatants, because if Luc Ferry and Alain meant what Luc has just said now, or if this could be understood to mean that, I myself would not have written this article or not like that because, well, what Luc Ferry has just summarized in rightly imputing them, moreover, to what is essential to May '68 are nevertheless the theses that, for my part, I have been defending [since the end of World War II]. But I would never have dreamed of calling that *individualism*.

A.F.: This is the meaning everyone gives to the term *individualism*.

C.C.: Yes, but anyway though, an author whom I think highly of, whom I greatly respect, is relatively quite recent and the values you were just talking about are values that have been around since there have been emancipatory movements in the West. That is to say, these values, as you had quite rightly said, and I am very pleased to hear it, are the antihierarchy values we had made into our battle horse in Socialisme ou Barbarie—and antitradition values, absolutely! This is for me, much more than any other definition, the very characterization of what I call an *autonomous society*, a

democratic society, a society that contains the germs of autonomy, that is to say, a society that is capable of challenging its own institutions, which are no longer for that society sacralized or which are not grounded upon some sort of eternal Reason in the possession of the Legislator at the moment he lays down the laws.

Well, then, if things are like that, we take back up the analysis I myself, moreover, had made at the time of May '68 as being part of those movements that began, let's say, with the Western bourgeoisie's movement for self-government, which was continued in the workers' movement, which became a youth movement, which became a women's movement, and which, in May '68 in France, but during the '60s generally in all the countries in the Western world, set the world on fire by bringing in...—I don't believe that this appears in your book, but we're not here to discuss the book—to speak of the things themselves, this movement challenges dimensions of the institution of society that had not been challenged by prior movements—right?—that explicitly challenges what could be called, what was indeed called at the time, what one is again calling today the *cultural dimension*, more generally what I myself will call the *instituted imaginary of society*, precisely the relationships among individuals as well as other aspects the traditional workers' movement, for example the revolutionary movement, did not call into question.

So, a final remark before turning to something else about this question of individualism. For my part, I do not see why one would call that *individualism* for the very simple reason that, if I can utilize a bit the facile jargon of philosophy, at the empirical, *de facto* level as well as at the *de jure* level, the level of principles, it is impossible, in these movements, to lay the stress solely on the dimension of the

liberation of the individual. The individual's liberation is one of the two vectors. Yet there is another vector, without which these movements could not even have started up, and which has always been there, that has been the movements' bearers, and this vector is the vector of collective autonomy. That is to say, this is the vector of collective self-government. This involves the decision to instaurate new forms of collective life in general, but especially on the political plane, that is to say, new forms of government, new forms of self-government. This vector is expressed, as a matter of fact, in all these fantastic attempts, which we have just seen again these past few days with the movement of college and high-school students, a movement that is already one of self-organization.

L.F.: Yes, no, I am rather surprised by what Corneille has said, because I was under the impression that here, indeed—we are not here to speak of the book *La Pensée* 68, but in what we had written apropos of May '68, both in *Pouvoirs* and in this book, the reference to Tocqueville was, I think, sufficiently clear for people to understand that the individualism to which we were alluding was situated within the tradition of the French Revolution and in the tradition of breaking with hierarchy and traditions. That being said, where I believe, to reassure Corneille, that there is nonetheless a major point of divergence between us, which is that what seems important to me in May '68, once again, is individuals' claim [*revendication*], as was said, against the system, the claim as such and not so much the political projects within which this demand for autonomy might have been set. This is why, I believe moreover, leftist political projects, whether Maoism, Trotskyism, or, for example, even the [March 22nd \[1968\] Movement](#), therefore, demands for self-management, well, these projects within which the demand for autonomy might have been set very, very quickly disappeared from the

political scene, were reduced to nothing as early as the mid-1970s, and what has remained in the '80s is, as it were, the demand for individual freedom cut off from the collective projects within which it might have been set. Which has yielded in the '80s, but I think that that's the tie between '68 and the '80s, that's the reason I would say that the '80s are not the failure of May '68 but the truth of May '68.

A.F.: Here, I believe that the divergency is being expressed in full. It is not my impression that Castoriadis would be in agreement about this connection.

L.F.: That is why I want to reassure him. And I believe that what characterizes the '80s is precisely this withdrawal into the private sphere. Others have analyzed it better than I have, but it is this withdrawal into the private sphere, the absence of collective projects, and, especially, I would say, a culture of authenticity. That is to say: What does it mean that the individual no longer has to be measured against external norms? Yet for individuals in the '80s, it really is a matter of being small, mobile, and intelligent.

A.F.: That's a form current in the '80s.

L.F.: ...which launched this phrase, as a matter of fact, in the '80s.¹ There is, I believe, perhaps a phrase that summarizes this '80s ideology, which is *the right to difference*. Now, the thesis I will defend here is that this ideology of the right to difference is really the heir to May '68—it is really what remains of May '68—that this ideology is quite problematic and that it is the heir to May '68 in the following two components, that is to say, heir of the '68

¹T/E: King Crimson guitarist and songwriter Robert Fripp formulated this phrase at least as early as 1979 to describe “small, mobile, and intelligent” music-making “units”: [https://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_Robert_Fripp_in_Melody_Maker_\(1979\).](https://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_Robert_Fripp_in_Melody_Maker_(1979).)

movement *qua* social and political movement, but at the same time heir of this ideology of the right to difference, of what we had called *la pensée 68* ['68 thought] and, in particular, I am thinking of the ideologies in the style of [Michel] Foucault and [Gilles] Deleuze—Foucault, Deleuze, and [Félix] Guattari. There you have it; I think that we diverge here.

A.F.: Yes.

C.C.: There are divergencies. And I believe that they must be deepened. We're not here to smooth out rough edges, if we want to reflect. We must dig deeper into the points of disagreement. If one cuts off—and that's the reason I was just talking on the level of principle—if one cuts off the demand for freedom or for autonomy of individuals from a collective political project; you just need to state these terms for it to become absurd.

L.F.: But it's not me saying that...I am saying that that's what's happened.

C.C.: No, no, no, no. Well, precisely. So, we're in agreement, then, about what has happened. According to what you yourself are saying, this is the effect of the failure of '68—I will come back to this—which is set, too, within another historical sequence. But if one cuts the project of individual freedom—that's something everyone must understand, because here we are right in the middle of the discussion of the pseudoideology that has become rampant the last few years—if one cuts individuals' freedom off from every collective project, what are these individuals doing, what does that mean? Are there no laws in the society in which they live? Who makes these laws? Is there no government? Are there no taxes? Are there no buses?

L.F.: We are in agreement about that.

C.C.: Therefore, quite obviously, the ideology of an individual freedom that is cut off from a collective political

project that might ensure for individuals life within a free society, which means, precisely, ensuring, too, that individuals participate to the fullest extent in the formation of society's political decisions and laws—such a separation is absurd. And that's the absurdity of this ideology that is being pounded into our ears over and over again [since the early '80s]. And thus, moreover, one may see the effects. This ideology, in a sense—I don't want to sound bombastic, but I was going to say—has just dissolved before our eyes. But we're going to work on it. We're going to show it, indeed. That is to say, we have just seen that everything we're being told about free enterprise, about [\[businessman and Socialist Party politician\] Bernard Tapie](#), about this, about that, etc., starts to disappear the moment when people want to do something, when they want to posit something, and that's what we've seen in the student movement as it has evolved the last two weeks.

Now, a second thing. For my part, I don't think that the withdrawal into the private sphere would be—how to put it?—the effect of '68; it's the effect of the failure of '68. But it's more than that, because this withdrawal into the private sphere is, in the long term, characteristic of modern capitalism. Personally, I had been describing it since '59 under the heading of *privatization*. Right. And I would say, even more generally, that this is one of the two components of modern political society. This had practically been theorized by Constant. Benjamin Constant's problem—and even before him Adam Ferguson, already in 1770²—was: How is one to have a society that would not be a society of

²T/E: See Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns" (1819), and Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1759).

political slavery if no one wants to take care of political affairs? The answer: for my part, I believe that this is pretty much trying to square a circle, that is to say, you can't have it. But, anyway. Therefore, this withdrawal into the private sphere that has, with redoubled intensity, characterized the post-'68 period has been there all along. It was there much more since modern capitalism has settled in, with consumerism and all the rest. And I'm not going to boil everything down to what has already been said before. But, for me, these two elements—that is to say, the struggle for autonomy and this withdrawal into the private sphere—are continuing, in a sense, to express at present the dilemma, if I may say so: socialism or barbarism. It's nothing other than that. A society in which everyone would be withdrawn into the private sphere would be a society abandoned to [\[neo-Gaullist Prime Minister Jacques Chirac's strong-armed Interior Minister\] Monsieur \[Charles\] Pasqua](#), to Mr. [Ronald] Reagan, etc., etc. And if society were completely turned over to those people, well, those people would not be content with quietly managing a society as it exists, right?

A.F.: Luc Ferry perhaps [has something to say]. And then, I will attempt to intervene on my own.

L.F.: I'd like the points of divergence to be the right ones, that is to say that we would stand in opposition where we ought to stand in opposition. Clearly, we are in agreement, I think, both of us, in criticizing individualism in the bad sense of the term, the apathetic individualism of the '80s. Our disagreement bears on the fact that I don't think that the project of direct democracy or the project of self-management would be the solution to be given to this sort of individualism, which is indeed criticizable. That's the first point. The second point, which I leave for you to underscore is that if one dwells for one more moment on the question of the interpretation of

May '68 and the failure or the truth of the movement—here, I believe, is the problem, when one tries to compare '68 to the '80s. The thesis we have defended is the following—in any case, the thesis I will defend is the following—it's that the individualism of the '80s, the kind we're both criticizing, even if it is in the name of political projects that are different, is really this individualism of the '80s. It really is the heir of May '68. It is not the failure of the movement, and that, I believe, is the point on which we are opposed.

And I would like to give—I wouldn't say a *proof*, but let's say in any case an indication that seems to be quite interesting, and which is not devoid of meaning—it's the sole text I will quote from, a text I brought with me, a quite recent one that was published two weeks ago by Dany Cohn-Bendit and Félix Guattari. So, Dany Cohn-Bendit—everyone knows who Guattari is; he's a philosopher who was of great importance in the '60s and '70s, who wrote, as one knows, with Deleuze. Here is the text I would like to submit to Castoriadis. The text is called "Contribution for the Movement." The word *movement* refers to the major theses of Deleuze and Guattari. Here is what was written, signed by Cohn-Bendit and Guattari:

The goal [L.F.: therefore today] is no longer to reach an approximate consensus about a few general statements covering all current political problems but, quite to the contrary, to favor what we call *a culture of dissensus*, working to deepen particular positions and to resingularize individuals and human groups. What nonsense to pretend to agree about one and the same vision of things: immigrants, feminists, rockers, regionalists, pacifists, ecologists, and computer enthusiasts! What is to be aimed at is not a

programmatic agreement that erases their differences.³

So, I'd say that this is exactly the heritage of '68. This is exactly the ideology of the '80s. This is exactly the individualist ideology of the right to difference. This is the refusal, I'd say, of both what interests me, namely, the Republic, and what interests you, namely, direct democracy, and unless you are to explain to me that Dany Cohn-Bendit is of no importance as concerns '68 and that he's not the leader of the March 22 Movement, and that Guattari is not a French philosopher of the 1970s, I'd have a hard time thinking that this text is of no interest and that it is not significant, as a matter of fact, for this heritage the '80s represent in relation to the '68 movement.

A.F.: I wanted to intervene here, but I think that we must let Castoriadis respond, because the attack is very direct.

C.C.: No, there are many points. First of all, as Luc Ferry himself would say, Dany has led a double life, right? He is, on the one hand, the figure who was the leader of March 22 and of May '68, etc., one of the leaders, well, at least one of the spokesmen. On the other hand, he is, as would be said, an empirical individual. *[laughter]* He has the right to have opinions that evolve and to say things. This text you quote, with which I am familiar, that there would be these stories about the culture of dissensus, but they were there even in '68, even during the events. What's the essential thing? What does one privilege? I myself, in the text from *La Brèche*, combated tendencies of this kind, which appeared as early on

³T/E: [Félix Guattari and Dany Cohn-Bendit, "Contribution pour le mouvement," *Autogestion. L'Alternative PSU*, 153 \(November 24 1986\): 10-11; see: 11.](#)

as then.⁴ We will be in agreement in saying that a culture of dissensus—in the sense that is said here—is certainly liable to the same reproach of being absurd. That is to say, the issue is not to make immigrants and French people and who knows who else come to agreement about musical tastes or about the fact that Panzani pasta is the best pasta in the world. The issue is that there can be no society that would not have a minimum of intolerance—right?—for a minimum of heterogeneity.

A.F.: It can also be said that the question is to avoid locking people into their identity as immigrants, rockers, feminists....

C.C.: ...Absolutely, absolutely.

A.F.: Here there is nevertheless, under the pretext of privileging difference, people's fixation in their identities, which is....

C.C.: That's a whole other problem. Let me, if you will, say one more word. The issue...of course, I myself advocate a resumption of the forms of direct democracy under the conditions of modern life, which obviously means that they will be something else, they would be something else, or they will be something other than what they were in the past. One must nevertheless agree at least upon this, mustn't one? Direct democracy or no direct democracy, this republic—here, such as it exists, which *I* call *liberal oligarchy*—dies without people's political participation. Now, as these institutions are dying, that is to say, they produce Monsieur Pasqua—that's what they produce: they produce Mr. Reagan.

⁴Castoriadis is referring to his contribution to *Mai 68: La brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard). This volume, first published in June 1968, was cowritten, under the pseudonym Jean-Marc Coudray, along with Claude Lefort and Edgar Morin. Castoriadis's contribution now appears in translation in [PSW3](#) as "The Anticipated Revolution."

Right. Now, as these institutions...

A.F.: ...That's a rather rapid shortcut...

C.C.: It's a rather rapid shortcut. They don't produce only that. But they produce the "Savary Bill,"⁵ for example, which the government was obliged—one must, one would have to *reflect* on that, on all these problems, right? What does it mean that the Government of this Republic—either one is republican, and then one would have to say that neither should [\[French President François\] Mitterrand](#) have withdrawn the "Savary Bill," because it was done under the fallacious pretext that there was a public demonstration, nor should Chirac have withdrawn the Devaquet Bill, under the fallacious pretext that there were demonstrations. [\[World War I French Prime Minister and Minister of War Georges\] Clemenceau](#) would never have accepted that. Right. And a true republican should never have accepted that. Right. What does this mean? This means that, as the institutions of this Liberal Republic ensure not people's participation but their *nonparticipation*, this Republic can survive only to the extent that, periodically, it undergoes these sorts of crises, spasms, sudden outbursts that put a brake on the absurdity of those who govern and on the absurdity of the system. And that's the question of participation. Now, I cannot [see] how there can be, direct democracy or not, a political philosophy that ignores this question, that on this topic bypasses participation.

A final tiny point. We must nevertheless see what is behind the slogans. Small, mobile, etc. individuals, or the right to difference: they may be said to cover over—what, in

⁵T/E: In 1984, [French Socialist Minister of National Education Alain Savary](#)'s proposed reform for the funding of private schools met with large protests from supporters of these schools. His bill was withdrawn in June and he resigned the next month.

reality, do they cover over? They cover over the vacuousness—don't they?—of repetitious advertising, the fashionable repetition throughout all levels of society. This is a totally deceptive slogan, corresponding to no reality.

A.F.: Luc Ferry, you may respond about that, and then we will pass to the second part of the program, that is to say, the question of the events through which we have just lived.

L.F.: I'm in agreement with a lot of what Corneille Castoriadis has just said. Simply, in order to understand this question of direct democracy, and here, then, beyond all polemics or even oppositions. I'm under the impression that if one conceives the great social movements of the post-French Revolution era as individualist movements in the revolutionary sense of the term—individualist in the antihierarchy, antitradition sense—it's clear that the horizon of these movements is always direct democracy, that is to say, it's still the idea of participation. Each time one criticizes hierarchies or traditions, it is indeed in the name of autonomy. And consequently, I understand very well how, at the horizon of such movements, what I shall call *the phantasm of direct democracy* is ever present. I don't think, for all that, that direct democracy would genuinely be the solution for these demands, let's say, for participation in political power or for the "Liberty of the Ancients," as Constant said, which are, moreover, quite legitimate. Right.

Why don't I think so? Because I think that direct democracy has two disadvantages that are, in my opinion, quite catastrophic. The first disadvantage is grounding law on an absolute movement, on an absolute mobility that is that of assemblies, which can think already what [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau says—at bottom, one can criticize all laws; one can criticize the laws one hasn't made, because one has not made them, in the name of the critique of traditions. But one can

also criticize the laws one has made, because one has made them and because one is the master of them. And I think that this is the absolute mastery of law by the will of individuals.

A.F.: And [what about] transcendence?

L.F.: There no longer is any transcendence. This will is perfectly mobile and, consequently, even if there is a demand [*exigence*] for political participation [which] is entirely legitimate, I don't think that that could be via direct democracy, because direct democracy is, at bottom, the negation of the rule of law [*l'État de droit*] in the name of popular sovereignty. And in addition, I think that, in practice, as much as I find direct democracy a wonderful thing for two weeks, having assemblies, how that functions, well, extended to the whole of society, to all political, economic, and other questions—I think that this is no more nor less than the institutionalization of relations of force among individuals. That is to say, you know very well how things happen in assemblies after a while. In the beginning, things go wonderfully, everyone has a voice, it's quite nice [*sympathique*]. At the end of two weeks, well, a number of individuals have taken power, and you know very well that it ultimately becomes impossible to have a genuine debate in this assembly atmosphere if these assemblies were, let us say, institutionalized as a genuine mode of self-government.

C.C.: Yes, our problem is not, however, direct democracy. It's the meaning of May '68. But I would say, nevertheless, two words on this matter. You can't let yourself say sometimes that direct democracy is the horizon of revolutionary movements and sometimes that it is their phantasm. That doesn't mean the same thing.

L.F.: For me, it does.

C.C.: But no. But no. Because when one thinks, there is always a horizon, and when one acts, there is always a

horizon, and one can discuss whether this horizon is a genuine horizon, whether it is beyond reach and whether it recedes as one advances or whether it's a pure phantasm.

Well, then I'll willingly have a discussion with someone who says that direct democracy is the horizon. But I would like to dispel two misunderstandings. It's not a matter of denying the rule of law. It's a matter of finding some institutional arrangements that allow for the passage from the *effervescent* forms of self-government with which we are familiar during revolutionary phases, or with which we are now familiar in the student movement, to permanent forms ensuring participation. And the parliamentary republic is not a form that ensures that; it is a form that ensures the opposite, nonparticipation, of course.

A.F.: So, as promised, we are going to devote our last fifteen minutes precisely to these effervescent forms of self-government, to use Castoriadis's phrase, through which we have just lived. What do you think about them? How do you describe this movement in relation to '68 as it was in itself, and, to borrow, too, from Luc Ferry's phrase, is there, in your view, an "'86 thought"?⁶ So, I am posing the question. But I would like, if you have no objections, to enter myself into the arena and respond thereto, as you will do and after you. So, first, Luc Ferry.

⁶T/E: The next year, Ferry/Renault published 68-86. *Itinéraires de l'individu* (Paris: Gallimard), expressly dedicating to Castoriadis this volume comparing the 1968 and 1986 student movements while misquoting Castoriadis, however, in order to make him into a champion of Ferry/Renaut-style "individualism." See T/E's addition to the publication note for "The Movements of the Sixties," [CL4](#), 23-24. See also what Castoriadis has to say directly about "'86 thought" in his November 24, 1987 interview with François Dosse, now translated as "What a Revolution Is" in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), 197.

L.F.: Yes, I myself have lived through this movement at quite close distance, well, as a Professor at the Institute of Political Studies in Lyon. So, I have to say that I feel a lot of sympathy for it while having at the same time a certain number of criticisms, insofar as I think that this is a movement that has, despite all, remained rather corporatist.

I think that such movements must be resituated within the wake of the '80s. For, much has been read in the press about people who said that the '80s is individualism, the students are individualistic dolts [*veaux*]. In fact, it is quite clear that this is completely false because they have woken up, there have been some wonderful forms of self-government, etc. Now, I believe that one must temper one's enthusiasm a bit. I believe that, in the '80s, there have in fact been two things, to be very brief—well, there have been many things, but there have been at least two major things during these years. There was a very, very strong individualist movement, a very sharp withdrawal into the private sphere, and, at the same time, as Renaut and I, moreover, had noted a few years ago in a book, there was a return of law [*droit*].⁷ I believe that what has truly marked the '80s, in relation to '68, is the return of law, a return of the Rights [*Droits*] of Man, a return of the rule of law, etc. You know that, in '68, on March 22, written on the Law School in Nanterre: "Law is the Vaseline for assfucking the proletariat." I believe that no one—I'm sorry for saying something so coarse during a program on France Culture—but that was a slogan from '68.

A.F.: Absolutely.

L.F.: I believe that it must be quoted. I believe that no

⁷T/E: See Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *Philosophie politique*, vol. 1: *Le droit: la nouvelle querelle des anciens et des modernes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984).

one would say that today, and that that's the heritage of the '80s. To be very brief, I would say that what I find in the movement of '86 is, on the one hand, an individualist movement, in the bad sense of the term, a corporatist movement. And here I believe that when one says *moral generation*, one has spoken a bit hastily. The students have not reflected much—it's a pre-Marxian movement. The students hadn't reflected very much on real inequalities when they demanded formal equality. And I believe that they have remained—there was a quite cautious, very conservative “Hands off my university [*Touche pas à ma fac*]” side.⁸ They wanted the Devaquet Bill withdrawn. They didn't so much want anything else.

And then, alongside that, which can be criticized, there was something quite wonderful, in my opinion, and quite nice, that I truly saw among the students, which was the extraordinarily democratic character of the movement, in every sense of the term. *Democratic* in the sense Corneille Castoriadis gives to it as well as *democratic*, I would say, also in the sense of the rule of law. And that's why I think that there is no contradiction between, let's say, the Liberal Welfare State in which we are living and these types of democratic demands. I can testify to the fact that, in these general assemblies, everyone was able to express themselves, or almost everyone was able to express themselves freely and there really were elections that were democratic.

Therefore, I believe that here we have two components, a wholly democratic movement, with a real possibility of making arguments, and at the same time a quite

⁸T/E: The implicit reference here is to the “Hands off my pal!” (*Touche pas à mon pote*) slogan of [SOS Racisme](#)'s youth-oriented antiracist movement in mid-1980s France.

cautious corporatist movement. And I believe that there are these two aspects. Consequently, one must be rather measured when speaking of the '86 movement. One can neither say that it's wonderful nor say that it's '68 all over again, it's hell, the people are in the street, etc.

C.C.: Yes, here, on the contrary, I note a rather great convergence of views with Luc Ferry, though there are points I would like to underscore in addition. I am in complete agreement about the corporatist aspect—in any case, at the start and especially, even, I would say *at the start*—about a cautious defense, a bit of a *status quo*, that was, after all, just as criticizable and just as much to be reformed as the one Devaquet wanted to advance. Right. So, there was that.

But on another hand, there was also—well, it indeed goes hand in hand therewith—at the start, precisely, the absence of any horizon going beyond the student world and the sphere of student demands, as if one were taking no interest in society, and let society make do on its own [*se débrouille*], let it give us good universities and then we have nothing to do with the rest. Right. So it's like that.

But this is a movement that began with some very young people and you also have to look into it. If I had my ideas and their age, if I were there, I would have said what I have just said. Well, that's one thing.

But, on another hand, there are those elements you have emphasized, that is to say, this fantastic capacity for self-organization, this relearning or maybe it's a rediscovery of a genuine democracy, democracy in the assemblies. I would note that the delegates were revocable, weren't they? The delegates to the national coordinating committee [*coordination*]...[*he laughs*].

A.F.: One mustn't talk too much about delegates, because there are many things to be said about that.

C.C.: But no. That's not what was most democratic. But I would also say this: Despite the fact that it isn't clear how such a movement—this remains one of the crosses of every movement for a major reform of society or for revolution—how could the movement become coordinated on the French national level, without the [traditional, established] organizations poking their noses into it? What one sees with the small, or large, organizations is that the movement nevertheless is going remarkably well—not by keeping them at a distance but precisely by not letting themselves, as a matter of fact, be manipulated by these organizations, by the groupuscules, or by groups, or by the Socialist Party, etc., even if there are attempts at cooptation—which, after all, is in the nature of these things, in the way the game is played....

But I also wanted to say: there are two things that make the movement important. On the one hand, I believe that there was, nevertheless, a rapid learning process on the part of the participants, in their inevitable, inescapable insertion within the social and political sphere in general. I believe that the young have seen this, have understood it. We have testimony, of the most direct kind and quite, quite widespread. And that is very important. And on the other hand, people are advancing beyond, of course, pseudorevolutionary illusions, like “the *Grand Soir* is for this morning,” etc.⁹ [*laughter*] and understanding that there is long, hard work ahead. And there is another aspect, which in my opinion is very important and which goes beyond the import of this student movement that is, yes, corporatist.

Now, like May '68 at the outset, the movement acts in such a way that it is revelatory of society. And what does the

⁹T/E: A French expression from the nineteenth century designating an anticipated “great night” leading to a thorough social revolution.

movement unveil? The movement unveils the total vacuousness, no pun intended,¹⁰ that reigns in the heads of those who govern us. The anarchy, at the level of government...

A.F.: No, no, it's not, no...

C.C.: Absolutely. And, I believe, everyone has seen it. And I shall end by repeating once again what I was just saying, because in my opinion it's very important. One must not tinker around [*bricoler*] with political ideas more than is necessary. I mean, if one recognizes that the movement not only was positive but also had a certain legitimacy...

A.F.: ...Yes...

C.C.: That means that one is rejecting, in a sense, the legitimacy of existing institutions...

A.F.: Well, before...

L.F.: It's very complicated...

C.C.: It's not very complicated. Because it's not just a point of view: constitutional law says that the Parliament makes the laws, etc., not the street and not demonstrations. And if Clemenceau was there, he would have said: Well, the laws are made by and for the representatives of 55 million French people and not a category of one million persons.

A.F.: Before Luc Ferry responds to you—I hope that there will be enough time—faithful to my promise and to the exception I've wanted to instaurate, I'd like to respond myself to the question I have raised: Is there a “'90s thought”?

C.C.: ...'86.¹¹

¹⁰T/E: The potential, though unintended, pun may be between *vacuité* (vacuousness) and the Education Minister's last name, Devaquet.

¹¹T/E: In French, there is only a one-letter difference in pronunciation between “86” (*quatre-vingt-six*) and “90” (*quatre-vingt-dix*).

A.F.: ...’86, excuse me. I would all the more like to respond as I will be introducing, perhaps, a bit of divergency. Because, for me, this movement wasn’t revolutionary. Certainly not, but neither was it moral, utopian, as some have defined it; it was above all, and I find no better word, *corny*.¹² I believe that we have just lived through two extremely corny weeks.

So, *corny*, first in the sense that the young people who have made up this movement have shut themselves off from adulthood. They have said: “The adults with us”—which is quite extraordinary, because, biologically, they nevertheless have every right to lay claim to their majority [*maturité*]. Because the right to vote is set at 18 years old, and because some of them are 20 to 25, or even, for the leaders of the movement, 28 years old. Twenty-eight year olds who were saying “The adults with us”—that seems rather curious to me. But this is not very important. More important, in what I call this *corniness*, is that we have a movement that is, as I see it, sentimental and thoughtless—*sentimental*, I say, insofar as what it wants to struggle against were selective criteria for university admissions [*sélection*]; *thoughtless*, I say, insofar as it has said that such selective admissions and racism stemmed from the same exclusionary logic, insofar, too, as it repealed the Devaquet Bill, thus reinstating the Savary Bill, which, as [\[French commentator and former union leader\] Jacques Julliard](#) wrote today, contains, in its most contested points, pretty much the same measures as the Devaquet Bill—so, there was no victory. *Corny*, finally, because perhaps the most scandalous aspect of the Devaquet Bill concerned the revenge of the University’s Mandarins, and the

¹²T/E: The French word Finkielkraut employs here, *cucul*, can mean corny, tacky, silly, cheesy, or, perhaps, kitschy.

students, who barely saw beyond the tip of their noses, absolutely didn't mobilize on that. And I believe that this wouldn't be serious. For me, it is not a matter of challenging this movement itself, because there was indeed some potential. People got out of their anomic situation, of individualism in the bad sense of the term. They discussed things among themselves. And there was a collective warmth. Debate became possible. For that, however, these young people in movement would have had to meet up with some interlocutors. Now, in my opinion, the only people they met were flatterers. Therefore, we have witnessed a general movement toward a *cornification* of society.

First of all, the photographers. And I have to say that these photographers who constantly were presenting, in the newspapers, retrospectives of a movement in the making, have reinvented Socialist Realism. We were shown youth, its face fixed toward the horizon, which was beautiful, like the cornifiers themselves. [*laughter*]

On the other hand, the journalists and politicians have competed with one another to come up with adjectives. If they were to be believed, the students were both enthusiastic and wise; they combined maturity, youth, and so on. Finally, they were everything. And everything is a bit too much. And on the other hand, I would also like to say that the tragedy—namely, the death of Malik Oussekiné—could have put a halt to the corniness. Now, as I see it, corniness has swallowed up the tragedy. Malik Oussekiné is dead. He lost his family name. He became Malik, our buddy, everyone's buddy. And that, in my opinion, is rather disagreeable. And it has some other consequences; well, it has some rather serious consequences. Because through this movement, the young are said to have been born into politics. Now, what's politics, what's being born into politics? It is to become aware of the

difference that exists between the categories of private life and those of public life. And here we have seen the categories of intimate private life, our buddy, and so on dribble into public life, really dribble, thanks to the students and especially to how the journalists and politicians have passed this along. And this is, as I see it, the opposite of a birth into politics. And here I'll stop talking. I am returning to my role as moderator. Luc Ferry, Cornelius Castoriadis, you have the last five minutes. Please excuse me.

L.F.: Very, very quickly, I find you are being a little bit harsh with the movement, even though I am rather in agreement with what you are saying, but a bit harsh nonetheless. Well, it's true that there is a very great deal of demagoguery coming from one's elders [*les anciens*]; ultimately, there was—how to put it? As a banner seen in the movement—which was rather funny, and which was obviously ironic—put it: “The veterans [*Les anciens*] of '68 call for support of the just struggle of their young comrades.” It's a bit in the style of the *Manifeste des Intellectuels*, which was rather tiresome in this regard. That said, I believe that there was, well, ...one can speak of the empty-headedness [*vacuité dans la tête*] of those who govern us. Right. I don't believe that our political class is the stupidest one in the world, well, on the Right as well as on the Left, no agreement on that. I think that above all there was a big mistake on the part of the Right, which was to think that, for example, the denationalizations¹³ and the Devaquet Bill were going to be passed right together, because the logic was the same. This

¹³In 1986, neo-Gaullist Prime Minister Jacques Chirac privatized (“denationalized”) many of the banks and industrial groups Socialist President François Mitterrand had nationalized after he came to power a half decade earlier.

was an American, neoliberal, etc. logic: university autonomy, OK; denationalizations of the universities. And I believe that this was a big mistake, because what the Right hasn't understood at all is that everyone couldn't care less about the denationalizations, because that didn't affect people's private lives. Whereas the Devaquet Bill was perceived that way. When it is said that passing the baccalaureate isn't enough to enter into university, when it is said that something more is required, there is going to be selective university admissions, the students understood that like this: We're going to designate from the get-go who will be unemployed, who will not be unemployed, who will be an executive, who will not be an executive. And I believe that one must not underestimate, here again, the *very* individualist origin. And here, I believe that I will agree with what Alain Finkielkraut was saying about the very individualist and very corporatist origin of the movement, even if I am in agreement to say that there is a completely other, very sympathetic dimension.

A.F.: The last two minutes belong to you, Cornelius Castoriadis.

C.C.: Yes, the Right made a mistake, but mistakes that stack up and that concern both the Right and the Left are no longer *mistakes*; it's *a structure*. And this system, that's what it produces. It has been producing that for two hundred years now, each time there's a period of calm. OK. So, therefore there are not only the mistakes of the Right. There is a very profound [*inaudible*] of the system that ensures that one can have today only rulers like Reagan, Chirac, [\[Chirac's Socialist predecessor as Prime Minister Laurent\] Fabius](#). That's the first thing.

I believe that one can and should be harsh with this movement. I myself tried to do so in an interview I gave to *Libé[rarion]*, which was redacted, moreover, and I believe as

if by chance, on the harshest spots for the movement.¹⁴ One cannot—indeed, Finkelkraut has found a word that may hurt, that is excessive, but there is some of that. There was a corny dimension, at the outset, and this corny dimension isn't something they invented. This corny dimension is the dimension of contemporary society. That's what the television is telling us every day. That's what the governmental ministers are telling us. That's what the Prime Minister is telling us. The President of the Republic itself, that's the tone in which he speaks.

Right. [*laughter*]. So, they're your kids—aren't they?—and if they are like that, it's you who have made them like that. Right. Yet it's that, it's not that. It's the fact that they are beginning to wrench themselves free from this corny tone and they are doing something else. And among the slogans, there are not just those that have been quoted. There were slogans that had nothing to do with this corny world. There was something else entirely. Here, I stop.

A.F.: Well, listen [*laughter*], I believe that we can end here. This conclusion perhaps brings us all together, despite the divergences, despite the ongoing dissensus.

¹⁴T/E: Castoriadis's interview with Jean-Michel Bouguereau, which was published as "Les ambiguïtés de l'apolitisme" in the December 11, 1986 issue of the Paris daily *Libération* (p. 14), has now been translated into English, also in its available truncated form, as "The Ambiguities of Apoliticism" (in [PSRTI](#)).

“The Tragic Superiority of the West”: An Interview with *L’Hebdo**

Michel Audétat: In your latest book, you ferociously go after the decomposition of the contemporary world. But cannot this world be considered, particularly in its extreme individualism, as a product of the quest for autonomy that you defend?

Cornelius Castoriadis: This is a thesis that is indeed quite widespread. I often hear it said: What are you complaining about? The world of the Enlightenment and, after it, the democratic world are worlds of autonomous individuals. And, starting from the moment when each acts as he pleases, one is challenging not only the traditional values but also every general value.

This thesis calls for three remarks. Firstly, one notes in contemporary society that it is absolutely false to say that each acts as he pleases and this is why I speak of *generalized conformism*.¹ When one sees the results thereof, this alleged free acting on the part of individuals is not at all individual free acting. This is the most stereotypical acting possible. Secondly, the project of autonomous society is one in which individuals free themselves in order to create things. Now, they are creating less and less, and those who support the thesis that individualism necessarily signifies such decomposition are incapable of explaining that. Thirdly, the

*“Entretien. La tragique supériorité de l’Occident” (interviewed by Michel Audétat), *L’Hebdo* (Lausanne), January 10, 1991: 44-45. Preceded by “Cornelius Castoriadis: Un philosophe-citoyen,” Audétat’s review of [MM](#) and *SB(n.é.)*, *ibid.*: 42-44.

¹T/E: See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism,” now in [CL3](#).

autonomy project cannot be conceived correctly as being the fact that individuals do what they want and that's all. In the contemporary world, individuals have completely abandoned to the State, to party bureaucracies, and to media managers the domain where decisions are made concerning common affairs. They are therefore not at all autonomous, because they do not participate in the constitution of these laws or in their adoption. In conclusion, one cannot conceive autonomous individuals outside of a genuinely democratic society that self-governs itself and self-institutes itself [*s' autogouverne et s'auto-institue*].

M.A.: Is there then no way out of this crisis within existing political structures?

C.C.: No. As was already being said in 1960,² these political structures are part of the problem and not the solution. Representative democracy is set up to distance the people from the management of their own affairs, to discourage it. This is its purpose and this is how the great Liberals like Benjamin Constant defended it.

M.A.: Are you still attached then to the self-management [*d'autogestion*] model?

C.C.: I am indeed absolutely attached to the model of self-management of all productive activities and to self-government. That said, if you read the text I wrote in 1957 on the content of socialism, you will see that I have always advocated the maintenance of the market.³ But a genuine market, in which consumers would be not only free but

²T/E: Castoriadis is referring to his three-part *Socialisme ou Barbarie* article (1960-1961), now available as "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" in [PSW2](#).

³T/E: See "On the Content of Socialism, II," now in [PSW2](#) and excerpted in [CR](#) and [SouBA](#).

equally sovereign. A market in which the decisions of consumers as expressed in their purchasing acts would have to be traced back to the production units and determine thus what these units produce.

M.A.: You defend the uniqueness of our culture, which would be said to be the sole one to promote universal values. Doesn't this thesis seem dangerous to you?

C.C.: What may be noted is that it is only in the West that the germs of ideas of autonomy, of liberty, of equality, and of secularization [*laïcité*] have been laid down. I don't find these germs outside the West. What is, after all, the tragic superiority of the West? It's that *this-here* history has given birth to these ideas and that it has tried for better or for worse to achieve them. But all that remains unfinished and partial. And not to defend the universality of that is to enter into a boobytrapped discussion. The true problem is that I cannot rationally defend democracy or the free investigation of the truth without immediately positing that that holds for everyone. To say that this “everyone” stops at the Mediterranean or at the Urals is racism.

M.A.: In your book *Le Monde morcelé* [now translated as the [fourth Crossroads in the Labyrinth volume, The Rising Tide of Insignificance](#)], you also describe the disturbing state of scientific knowledge over which no one has mastery. Do you think that the participation of philosophers in ethics committees would be a solution?

C.C.: I think that ethics committees are useless. It's a plaster cast on a wooden leg, as one says. These committees speak once the research has fully matured. It is upstream that questions must be posed, about the very type of research that is to be conducted, and that implies another kind of responsibility on the part of scientists regarding what they do, regarding the Earth, humanity, and life on Earth.

Moreover, “ethics committee” seems to me to be a ridiculous, typically postmodern title. It’s a bit as if one had bureaucratically decided to set up [*instaurer*] an Authenticity Commission or a Ministry of Creation. Ethics is or it isn’t; it comes out of society. That being the case, I think that the philosopher has to take an interest in science because science is obliged to think and because, in the torrent of the present-day scientific world, the questions that are posed are being covered over or are not elaborated. The philosopher is to elaborate them, show their urgency, and follow through on them in order to fertilize his own thought as a philosopher.

M.A.: Do you not find these questions in art?

C.C.: Yes, I do. But I am not someone who makes the rounds of everything like that.... Perhaps, one day I’ll write a book about music.⁴ But, for the moment, that isn’t one of my priorities.

⁴T/E: Castoriadis never published a book on music, but one can read the 1982 and 1996 interviews, “Music Abolishes the World” and “How I Didn’t Become a Musician,” both in *WoC*, as well as the Preface (composed in November 1977) to *CLL*, xxxvii-xxxviii.

Interview with *Alternative Libertaire**

Alternative Libertaire: [The first Gulf War] has posed again the problem of intellectuals' commitment. There was a time when a left-wing intellectual who was "committed [*engagé*]" was a "fellow traveler" with the French CP. People have recently spoken, paradoxically, of the "silence of the intellectuals"¹ apropos of the conflict [in the Gulf]. That's not entirely true: one has been able to read them every day, in either [of the French dailies] *Libération* or *Le Monde*, and this within a very brief time frame. What role can an intellectual play today as relates to a conflict?

Cornelius Castoriadis: A vast question. They have been seen in the newspapers, but how many people read newspapers, and what category of people? The key thing is nevertheless the big media, that is to say, television, and I don't believe that there have been so many intellectuals intervening there.

What role can an intellectual play as relates to a conflict; what role can an intellectual play in general in politics?

I detest the term *intellectual*, which is at once arrogant and falsely humble.² But people who think and write have a

*"Entretien avec C. Castoriadis," *Alternative Libertaire*, 3 (June 7, 1991): 6 ("interviewed in Caen on March 20, 1991 by Emmanuel et Jean"). [T/E: *Alternative Libertaire*'s single footnote, explaining autonomy vs. heteronomy in Castoriadis parlance, has not been retained.]

¹T/E: On the concocted French theme of the "silence of the intellectuals," see Castoriadis's 1986 interview, "We Are Going Through a Low Period ...," now in *ASA(RPT)*, 171-72, as well as his 1994 interview, "The Rising Tide of Insignificance," now in *CL4*, 124-125.

²T/E: See "Intellectuals and History" (1987), now in *CL3*.

role to play by fulfilling a critical function with regard to what exists. Are they fulfilling it in this moment? I don't think so. The majority is caught up in what I call the "generalized conformism" of the age,³ that is to say, the adoration of reality. Not that they approve of all that is happening, but after the disappearance of the fellow travelers, the collapse of the totalitarian regimes in the East, how Social Democracy and French Socialism have evolved, practically all of them are accommodating themselves to the existing regime in the West while lodging some quite minor criticisms. They do so with the fallacious argument that "It's not the Gulag." This is a sophism. To say that is to say that there no longer is any historical future, no prospect, no project. One would have to limit oneself to repainting the facade of public buildings, for example.

A.L.: Another aspect of this conflict is the way in which it has been presented, which raises the problem of democracy in France, since the democratic coalition also includes both Syria—which is still sheltering an old Nazi—and Morocco, but also some other countries whose democracy is perhaps quite contested, like the United States and France. That also poses the problem of civil society today, where one sees growing abstentionism that is in fact reflective of a decline in participation on the part of citizens and a progression, perhaps not of a totalitarian society, but of a society in which citizens intervene less and less.

C.C.: That's certain. Those who have said that the war was a war for democracy were mystifying people. Saddam Hussein certainly was a gory executioner, but this war against him was made with [\[Syrian President\] Hafez al-Assad](#), with

³T/E: See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism," now in [CL3](#).

the emirs and Arab kings, and you know what happens in these countries. This was a completely demagogic argument. That doesn't mean that the Western regimes—which are not democracies, which are liberal-oligarchic regimes—are comparable to totalitarian regimes. But what must be seen is the way these regimes have evolved, and not only their evolution. They have always been like that, but there was, in these societies, some social and political conflict, there were struggles on the part of various categories of the population, essentially workers' struggles, subsequently the struggle of women, students, the ecologists, etc. Later on, all that has been in a state of reflux. Such conflict appears to be vanishing today. I am not going to offer some political meteorology and say that this will last a season, a year, two years, four years, but ultimately this is the case and it's rather profound. This is the corollary of what I have called, since 1960, the *privatization of individuals* in contemporary society, a corollary, too, of political apathy, of citizens' nonparticipation, of nonactivity.⁴ One of the most striking things is to see that when people are open to doing something, the things they do are always limited, local, sector-based. As soon as the question of an overall vision of society emerges, is posed, people pull back in horror, the slogan being “no politics.” The term and notion of *politics* have been discredited and it is constantly being prostituted. For, what's politics for the average citizen? It's what one sees: scandals, televisual, electoral, or other sorts of manipulation. There is obviously a crisis of politics, as there is also a more general crisis. We are presently living a societal crisis, only this crisis

⁴T/E: Castoriadis is referring to his three-part *Socialisme ou Barbarie* article (1960-1961), now available as “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” in [PSW2](#).

is a flabby one [*molle*]. It is not explosive. It does not produce violent conflicts. It's a wearing down, at both the social and individual level, of ideas, of values, of creation.

A.L.: During this conflict, Israel was designated *a posteriori* by Saddam Hussein as the issue at stake in the war. Israel seems, moreover, to be one of the keys for the resolution of the conflicts in the Middle East. What do you think of the legitimacy of the existence of the State of Israel and of the action, at present, of the Palestinians?

C.C.: First of all, Saddam Hussein invented the Palestinian question only after the fact when he saw that his coup in Kuwait wasn't working. I therefore grant no importance to what he might have said. Nor do I grant any importance to everything the Arab or Muslim governments might be telling anyone; it's still demagogy. Israel, or the Jews, are once again, and more strongly still, the scapegoats, who allow these ultrarotten regimes to maintain their domestic situation while diverting [*détournant*] all attention onto the Palestinian brothers to whom they are granting truly no interest. If the Palestinians truly want a National State—personally, I'm against National States, but that's another story—I don't see why the Palestinians would have less of a right to have a National State than the Iraqis, the Greeks, the French, and the Germans.

The problem of Israel is twofold: the legitimacy of the State of Israel and the present policy of the Israeli government.

I don't think that one could reopen the question of the legitimacy of the State of Israel. It's there; there are around 3.5 million Israelis of Jewish origin, plus quite a lot of Arabs on the territory of Israel. I am not speaking of the occupied territories. They have been there since 1948 and there are other Jews who are coming. If one reopens the book of

history, the whole earth is going to be put to fire and the sword if one wants to be coherent. Indeed, forty years ago⁵ there were no Israelis in Palestine but 1600 years ago there were no Arabs in Palestine. And so on. And 700 years ago, there were no Turks in Turkey. That's what my [Greek] compatriots say when they say that we must retake Constantinople, that we must retake Asia Minor. That's what the Germans would say for Lorraine, the Italians for Nice and the Savoy.

Basically, we have here a concept that doesn't hold at all, either philosophically or politically: rights to the earth that would be imprescriptible, independent of the will of the populations inhabiting these places. It happens that now, and not since yesterday, but for forty-two years, there is this State recognized by the so-called *international community* save for the Arab countries, including Russia at the time, and in which the Israelis have settled down [*installés*]. I refuse to call back more into question the legitimacy of the State of Israel than the legitimacy of any other State. Calling into question the division of humanity among States is another story.

Now, the policy of the Israeli government is absolutely aberrant, intolerable, and condemnable. They reject all discussion. Again yesterday, [\[Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir\]](#) declared that it was out of the question to turn the Golan back over to the Syrians. I don't care that it's Hafez al-Assad who is the head of Syria: they took the Golan and they are refusing to the Palestinians their right to existence. In the name of what? And they are starting up again with the

⁵T/E: Castoriadis is rounding things off here and skimping slightly on the count. For an interview conducted in March 1991, he should have said (as he does below), "forty-two years" ago to take us back to the time of the founding of Israel (May 14, 1948).

same dishonesties as the French government had toward the Vietnamese or the FLN [Front de libération nationale ([Algerian National Liberation Front](#))] from 1954 to 1961. That is to say, first phase: One cannot discuss it. Second phase: We'd really like to discuss, but not with you because you are not the legitimate representative. Finally, we're really obliged to discuss with the *de facto* representative. But even if one says, "The PLO [[Palestine Liberation Organization](#)] is not the legitimate representative of the Palestinians," very well, let's organize elections in the occupied territories, under the supervision of the UN or whomever you want, and let the Palestinians designate their legitimate representatives. But Israel has no right to be in the occupied territories. Its policy is mad, aberrant. I know that people on the Left don't like a policy being described as mad because they always think that this is rational, that it's the interests calculated on a Wall Street computer, and all this sort of nonsense.

This policy is mad because behind it is the myth of Greater Israel, which, according to the Old Testament, goes from the Nile to the Euphrates.

A.I.: Let's leave behind current events to take back up, historically in the past, the substantive questions. Let's talk, then, rather than being intellectual, "of being a committed human being." You began your militancy in the ranks of the Marxist-Leninists. What triggered your challenging the Leninist project and strategy?

C.C.: *Marxist-Leninist* has come to mean *Maoist* and I never was Maoist, on the contrary. I consider it one of the worst, aberrant forms of Leninism. I was Leninist between 15 and 23, in the sense that I was Communist, first, then rapidly Trotskyist. I have given the reasons why I broke with Trotskyism numerous times (in the [General Introduction](#) [1972, now in [PSWI](#)] and in the first chapter of [IIS](#) [first

published in 1964]). Marx's conception is false, false as to the economic analysis of capitalism, false as to that of the history of humanity. The theory of historical materialism is false and politically catastrophic because it shares the same imaginary signification of the capitalist universe, that is to say: The sole thing of importance is to develop technics, the productive forces; freedom will result from the development of the productive forces. It's an aberration.

A.I.: You have made another critique, starting from psychoanalysis. What is it, according to you, that leads in psychoanalysis to an enrichment of sociological analysis and, perhaps, to a transformational vision of society?

C.C.: Directly, nothing. Save that, on the theoretical plane, psychoanalysis sheds light in a new way on the human being, the human soul, the human psyche, and notably it destroys the myth of a naturally good human being, as well as of a naturally mean human being.

It lays the stress on the importance of the individual's Unconscious. This is very important because, even if Freud never pronounced the word, everything he says is related to this "defining" faculty of the human being that is the radical imagination. The human being makes images, forms, significations arise that the human being does not "peel off [*décolle*]" from things, that it does not find in nature.

Now, *that* is wholly fundamental. The equivalent in the social-historical field is what I have called the *radical imaginary*, the instituting imaginary that is at the root of society's creation. In practice, there is no immediate extrapolation from the psychoanalytic field to the political field: there is, on the one hand, important work that can be accomplished in a psychoanalytic treatment if it is well conceived and well oriented, that is to say, a labor that aids the subject in acquiring her own autonomy, and there is, on

the other hand, the light psychoanalysis sheds on the fundamental problems of society. I am thinking in particular of education, the “teacher/pupil” relation, which absolutely should be taken back up and examined starting from considerations involving “depth psychology” and which is pitifully treated at present, where education has become a simple matter of credits, of programs, of the “80% *au bac*” goal,⁶ and other stupidities of this kind, which are quite secondary.

A.L.: People have spoken of growing ideological apathy, which corresponds to a civilizational crisis; they have spoken of “the imagining human being.” Do you still believe in the transformational capacity of utopias?

C.C.: I don’t like the term *utopia* and I don’t think that the project of individual and social autonomy would be a utopia.⁷ A utopia is by definition something that cannot exist. At best, that can be like Kant’s polar star that guides the navigator, but which this navigator does not try to reach.

This project of autonomy can be carried out [*est effectuable*] in history, and the proof is that it has in part been carried out. These germs of autonomy have been deposited in history, first by ancient Greece, then by Western Europe, by the emancipatory political movements that have taken place and philosophy itself, such that we today are able to hold a free discussion. Therefore, it’s not a matter of a utopia: if that were the case, we would still be in a theocratic society, or in a Chinese imperial society. It’s something of which there is a

⁶T/E: In 1985, the [French Minister of National Education Jean-Pierre Chevènement](#) set a goal of [80% of French students passing the baccalauréat](#).

⁷T/E: See “The Project of Autonomy Is Not a Utopia” (1993), in [ASA\(RTP\)](#).

beginning of a realization, even if today, indeed, there is a risk of it becoming lost in the swamps of consumer society and growing privatization.

Psychoanalysis and Society III: An Interview with *Free Associations**

Paul Gordon (P.G.): Many people, myself included, first knew of you as Paul Cardan, the author of “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” [1960-1961, now in [PSW2](#)] among other texts. Paul Cardan disappeared and you reappeared as Cornelius Castoriadis, writing on psychoanalysis and practicing as an analyst.

Cornelius Castoriadis (C.C.): Well, not only. I appeared as Castoriadis when I had the legal possibility of appearing under my own name in France, that is since 1973 when I published in paperback all my texts from *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in eight volumes, and then *The Imaginary Institution of Society* in 1975. Until that time I was forced to publish under a pseudonym because under French law at that time I was expellable with no recourse within 24 hours.

P.G.: Because you were not a French citizen?

*“Cornelius Castoriadis Interviewed by Paul Gordon,” *Free Associations*, 24 (1991): 483-506. [T/E: Reprinted on the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) website: <https://pep-web.org/browse/document/fa.002d.0483a?page=P0488>, but without the corrections Castoriadis had himself noted on his copy of the original journal issue, which are now incorporated into the present, only lightly edited version (to reflect Castoriadis’s speaking style in English, with an Americanization of spellings). The first three pages of the text include Gordon’s brief introduction to Castoriadis’s work as well as a “Bibliographical Note.” At the start of Gordon’s “Notes” on p. 506, it is stated: “This interview was conducted in English in Paris, March 1990. It owes much to the thoughts and inspiration of Melissa Benn to whom I am indebted.” It may be noted that [Melissa Benn](#), the daughter of [late British Labour Party politician Tony Benn](#), is Gordon’s wife. N.B.: “Psychoanalysis and Society I” (1982) and “Psychoanalysis and Society II (1984)” appear in [CL2](#); while “Psyche and Society Revisited” (originally published in 1996) appears in [CL6](#).]

C.C.: Yes. I was naturalized in 1970.

P.G.: Can you tell us about the development of your interest in psychoanalysis?

C.C.: This is a very long story. For me, from my youth or adolescence, Freud was a very important figure. This part seemed to me always neglected in classical Marxism. When I came to France, I also came in contact with some of the work of [Wilhelm] Reich, which, as you know, has much more contact with the political side of affairs and you will find in the first part of “The Content of Socialism” in 1955 already some developments concerning the importance of the psychoanalytical or psychical point of view relative to the social and political questions.¹ Some years later I started a personal analysis for personal reasons. This came when I was definitely breaking away from Marxism and also developing my own conception about the imaginary element and especially the importance of the radical imaginary for the institution of society, the grounding character of the instituting imaginary. Therefore, from that time on, the work on the theory of society and history on the one hand, and on the theory of the psyche, went more or less hand in hand. After 1963/64, I plunged again into the whole literature, Freud and the rest.

The main reason why I decided to undertake a second analysis in 1971 and to start work as an analyst was that I felt I needed firsthand experience of the analytical practice and of the Unconscious, apart from my own, in order to be able to talk seriously about it. So I started in 1973 and it goes on from there and will go on.

P.G.: You work as an analyst at the same time as

¹T/E: See “Alienation in Capitalist Society,” the last section of “On the Content of Socialism, I” (1955), now in [PSW3](#), 305-308.

teaching and writing. How do you divide your time?

C.C.: There have been periods when the division of my time was very heavily slanted in favor of psychoanalysis. Now I have limited it to something like 34-35 hours a week, 40-42 sessions—this is the afternoons, including Saturdays. Mornings and evenings are for the rest.

P.G.: I'd like to ask you a question which never seems to be asked, even in radical political circles, and that is about what seems to me the inherently elitist nature of psychoanalysis. By its nature, psychoanalytic training, at least in Britain, is available only to a small number of people, and as a form of treatment it is available also only to a limited number of people. How does the practice of psychoanalysis relate to a radical politics?

C.C.: There are two aspects to this question, let me say, the intrinsic aspect and the actual or empirical aspect. I don't think that intrinsically psychoanalysis is elitist. My experience is that, from the point of view of psychoanalytic treatment, people who are well-to-do or people who are intellectuals have no inborn, no *a priori* privilege relative to people who are not. It is true that psychoanalysis requires some attributes on the part of the patient. These are some capacity for introspection and association and, of course, some intelligence. I have found these as strongly in people who are not at all acculturated or highly educated, intellectuals or well-to-do people. With the latter, one of the main difficulties in psychoanalysis is that they think they know, therefore they tend immediately to rationalize, explain, be clever, and so on and so forth, which in fact stops the whole process, which other people do not. So far for the intrinsic aspect.

The real or empirical aspect is that, as it is now, psychoanalysis is a very long and expensive process and this

an individual psychoanalyst can take care of only through halfway-house measures. You can—and that's what I do—adjust your rates to the means of the patients which cannot go very, very far; but you can do so that the weight of the analysis is bearable and tolerable for most of the patients of limited means. The other aspect is the sociological nature of the demand. It is true that in private practice most of the demand comes from people of the middle classes or intellectuals, and so on and so forth. Of course, things are different in institutions. I worked in psychiatric hospitals, when I was training and a long time after that, where you have the reverse selection in a certain sense and where you can also see that there is no intrinsically elitist character in this respect. I am now, for personal reasons, forced to have only a private practice, therefore certainly my clientele is biased in terms of the sociological spectrum, toward the middle classes.

P.G.: Just as a matter of interest, how often do you see patients?

C.C.: The standard practice for me is three sessions a week, 45 minutes per session. One cannot go below three sessions. I have had some experience with four sessions but I don't think it really helps you much, while it makes the financial problem for the patient much more difficult. Freud as you know practiced five sessions a week.

P.G.: You have criticized the idea that the aim of psychoanalysis is knowledge and I wonder when you begin an analysis with a patient if you have an aim and if so what it is.

C.C.: If you wish to put it this way, the aim of psychoanalysis is not *just* knowledge. The aim of psychoanalysis is the transformation of the patient toward what I call autonomy, not in the American sense of autonomy, but in the sense which I have explained in [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) and [*Crossroads in the Labyrinth*](#), that is,

an important degree of self-knowledge and the capacity to somehow or other continue a sort of self-analysis even after the treatment is finished and mostly a capacity to screen among one's desires, filter if you wish, not to repress them anymore but to screen and say, "All right, everything well considered, I will or I will not act upon this desire or wish."

P.G.: So that when one is deciding not to do something one knows what one is deciding not to do and that one is making a choice?

C.C.: Yes, and one knows that perhaps one would like very much to do it but.... The main point here is the instauration or rather the creation of a degree of reflexivity or deliberative instance in the subject. Instance in the sense of *Instanz*....

P.G.: Agency?

C.C.: Agency, yes—not a very good translation. That is an agency which is able to take over again the contents of the Unconscious, of the impulses and drives, to reflect upon them and also to dispose of enough energy, to use the Freudian term, to be able to stop some of them from being acted out. The main characteristic of autonomy for me is the opening of the subject, the capacity to discover new contents in himself or herself or in the others, to stop living in a closed repetitious system which is one of the main characteristics of psychopathology.

P.G.: Is this what you mean when you say that psychoanalysis aims at a self-transformation which actualizes not the faculties of an individual but the capacity of a capacity to be?

C.C.: Yes, that's it. Why do I say the capacity of a capacity? If I just say the capacity to...that means that, for instance, someone who has finished a treatment to the common satisfaction of himself and the therapist is foolproof.

But one is never foolproof. Neither is the analyst foolproof. But you know we never commit a final act, unless we commit suicide. We can always come back and correct, reflect, etc.

P.G.: Is it possible to say, following from what you have just said, how your practice might differ from that of more traditional analysts?

C.C.: Let's start from the beginning. There are many formulations of Freud about the end of the analysis, to restore the capacity to love,² for instance, or to transform neurotic misery into banal unhappiness, and so on.³ In this, I think, Freud was a bit too pessimistic, for there is not just banal unhappiness in life. There is neurotic misery certainly and the neurotic misery has to be dissolved through the analysis and if it is not dissolved the analysis is not successful. But we can also live moments or periods of nonbanal happiness. But let's take the famous formulation of Freud, "Where Id was Ego

²T/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, Elms acknowledges, "the general idea is there" within Freud's work. See, e.g., *SE* 9: 90.

³T/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" (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [hereafter: *SE*], vol. 2, p. 305). The phrase "neurotic misery" appears twice in Freud's work: in his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1917), *SE* 16: 382, and in *Lines of Advance in Psycho-Analytic Therapy* (1919), *SE* 17: 166, where he speaks of "prevent[ing] immeasurable unhappiness."

must become” or “should become” or “ought to become.”⁴ If you look at this phrase, which is very beautiful as such and could belong to a pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus for instance, everything seems fine until you read the context. The context talks about the reclaiming and drying up of the Zuider Zee by the Dutch.⁵ Therefore the Unconscious is implicitly presented there as a sort of dirty, stagnant water which you have to reclaim, to dry up and to cultivate. Well, I think this is both unrealistic, utopian, and wrong. And I would complete Freud’s sentence by saying: Where Ego is, Id must also appear. The possibility of having the contents of the Unconscious emerge is one of the main aims of the analysis. In this respect, the traditional idea seems to be to clear up the Unconscious, to close this chapter and to have the subject, the patient, living happily ever after with a strong Ego. This has been the classical American tendency and the American meaning of “autonomy.” I think this is wrong because the true nucleus of the individual’s radical imagination is rooted in the Unconscious and this has to come out, which does not mean that all the products of the radical imagination are “good,” but they have to come out. In this respect, I think it is equally important to have permanently⁶ for the subject the capacity to let the drives, fantasies come out, come to his or her awareness. In fact, we never reclaim the contents of the Id. You change the relationship between the two agencies, that’s all.

⁴T/E: The standard English translation reads “Where id was, there ego shall be” in Freud’s *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933), SE 22: 80. See [IIS](#), 102.

⁵T/E: *Ibid.*

⁶T/E: Castoriadis’s copy corrects the typo “impermanence” here.

P.G.: So this is what you mean when you say we cannot eliminate the Unconscious but we can alter our relationship to it?

C.C.: Exactly. In what is perhaps partly, but certainly not totally, a caricature, the traditional established psychoanalysts somehow or other simply think that if we have analyzed the contents of the Unconscious, this will keep them quiet forever and the subject will just live by its Ego or some transformation of the contents of the Unconscious. I think the whole scheme is wrong.

P.G.: You mentioned the concept of the radical imagination, which is obviously central to your work. Could you give us a brief elaboration of what it is that you mean by radical imagination?

C.C.: That's a very lengthy subject and difficult to sum up. We are talking about the singular human being; we are not talking about the social-historical field. The social-historical field has something which is analogous, which I call the *radical imaginary* at the origin of the creation of institutions—languages, norms, values, etc., etc. But let's talk about the singular human being. By *radical imagination*, I mean first of all the capacity of the singular human being—which is in a certain sense already there in the living being as such, and rooted biologically—to create for itself a world.

I call it *radical imagination* because between this world and what, for instance, a metaobserver would say is the "external world," there might be and must be some correspondences, but there is certainly not a relation of copying or of mirroring.

P.G.: It's purely originary?

C.C.: It's purely originary. Let's take the old philosophical example which has been used the wrong way in the whole history of philosophy. Something corresponds to

the colors we see. But this something is certainly not a color. It is an electromagnetic wave, but this has none of the characteristics of the color and no physicist will ever be able to explain why that length of wave is red, is seen as red, and that is seen as blue. Well, this is radical imagination, common to all humans, though of course color vision raises other problems. So we have this building, this creation of a world which is not just sensory but also intellectual. You have mental categories and so on and so forth. And whilst in other types of living beings there is some sort of imagination but limited to purely functional tasks, in humans imagination becomes unfettered and you live in this permanent flux of representations, ideas, affects, and desires which wells up all the time, which does not obey any logical rules, although in a sense logic is always there, which is essentially defunctionalized and which is a property of human beings. And it is because of this radical imagination that, for instance, sexuality takes in human beings the importance and the character it takes. Sexuality in human beings is defunctionalized and this is unique in the whole animal kingdom. If we consider what the sexual life of humans is, we see that 98 per cent of it has nothing to do with the reproduction of the species. Why? Of course, there is what Freud called the leaning on, the *Anlehnung* in German, on the biological part, on the pleasure in the strict sense, etc. But around this element there is this tremendous elaboration of phantasies, of ways of doing, or just of having sex for the fun of having sex which is something that animals just do not have, which is one of the expressions of the importance of radical imagination in the transformation of the biological nature of the human being. The main point in this is the defunctionalization of the representation and this spontaneous and perpetual emergence of representations, affects, and

desires, which is, in my view, the essence of the Unconscious. This is radical imagination, which is in the human being something totally different from what one could call, say with respect to higher mammals—apes, etc.—some degree of imagination, the degree which allows a chimp, for instance, if a banana is hanging up on the ceiling to take a stick and try to bring it down. The chimp in this case is not acting purely instinctively; it is somehow inventing something; but this is extremely narrow and always functional. The chimp will not invent a religion. Human beings have created religion.

P.G.: And this radical imagination is parallel to what you found in your study of society, the institution of society, human progress, however you want to put it. In the individual there is an imagination at work in the same way as there is an imagination at work in a social sense....

C.G.: Yes, though of course they are totally opposed. Let us consider the singular human being. I don't say *individual* because for me "individual" is a technical term meaning the human being-as-it-has-been-fabricated/manufactured by society. You are an individual in part; I am an individual in part, but not only. It is this aspect which I call *individual*. In the singular human being, there is this defunctionalization of the imagination and this defunctionalization means also of course the unlimited reign of what Freud called *the pleasure principle*. And the nature of the psyche is such that, to begin with, all representations are geared toward the pleasure principle and representation as such is a source of pleasure, for example, the hallucination of the breast by the baby. Now, if this were the whole of the story, this particular animal species would be extinct very quickly because there is nothing in the psyche as such which corresponds to anything like a reality principle and there is certainly a difference with at least some interpretations of

Freud. The reality principle is imposed on the psyche, and is imposed on the psyche by society and by the representatives of society; on a newborn, first of all, of course, by the mother. And what Freud calls all the time reality, and the problem of reality, is always social reality. It is the problem of the other or the others, and it is never, never, never physical reality. I have never seen a patient, however psychotic he or she might have been, who would, unless it was a suicidal act, ignore the fact that the fire burns. This is never the problem. Or that if he jumps out of the window he will break his neck. This is never the problem. The problem is always the difficulty or the impossibility of coping with or recognizing social reality, that is, human reality, the reality of other humans, the reality, of course, of institutions, laws, values, norms, etc.

P.G.: This takes me on to the question of the socialization of the individual, what you have described as *the breakup of the psychic monad*. You describe this in terms which are quite violent. You have talked just now of an imposition and you have written of a violent break imposed on the psychic monad, the mother destroying the psychic monad and the fact that she has to. And these are terms which are quite different from the picture we often get from within the British psychoanalytic tradition. I'm thinking in particular of [Donald] Winnicott or even, albeit to a lesser extent, of Melanie Klein....

C.C.: Well, Klein would be much less so....

P.G.: For you it is always a violent event?

C.C.: *Violent* does not mean that the mother beats the child. The psychical monad tends to close itself upon itself and to find pleasure in its own representations first and then all the things we know already from Freud—omnipotence of thought, etc., etc.—and if one is sincere, a grown-up person, then a psychoanalyst of 60 years of age ought to recognize

that he never totally gave up in himself somewhere the attitude of omnipotence of thought. Never, never, never. What does this mean? It means that in its real, its true view, the psyche would never want to recognize that it is a limited something among other limited somethings in the world, that pleasure is not permanently due, that it is not the center of the world, and so on and so forth. So when I speak about the violence of the social fabrication of the individual, I mean that this radically closed psychical monad has to be somehow or other broken. Whether you do it by the gentlest means or by the cruellest means, you break—you have to break—this self-sufficiency of the newborn, which of course is not a self-sufficiency on the biological level, but it is a self-sufficiency on the psychical level. Unless you break it, you just leave the baby to go over to psychosis. There is the famous sentence by Humpty Dumpty, “Words mean what I want them to mean”⁷—the child has to recognize that words do not mean what it wants them to mean, what he or she wants them to mean; they mean what society has decided they mean. This is already something extraordinarily violent. And you can see the ramifications of this in education. Of course, you can handle the thing. You can have very rigid persons as educative parents, saying, “Don’t play with the words. It doesn’t mean that.” Or you can have parents who, I don’t know why, indulge in playing, word-playing with the children or in other sorts of play which, of course, is much more positive because it smooths the transition, fetters less the

⁷T/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.

radical imagination when the radical imagination starts having a grip on the social language. But, anyhow, at some time the psyche has to accept the fact that there are rules, which do not correspond for the psyche to any pleasure. There are just rules.

P.G.: And for you this will always be the case, regardless of the kind of society?

C.C.: Yes. This will always be the case. This is the nature of society. I don't believe in a natural paradise where children grow and would become, how to say, unrepressed and happy human beings just by being left alone.

I believe very strongly that there is an enormous amount of things, an unimaginable amount of things to be changed in society and in education, and that all this will also help very much singular human beings to change their relation to their Unconscious, but I don't believe that it is possible ever to overcome this necessity, somehow or other to force the psyche to come out of its monadic cave. You have to force it to come out.

About the whole English tradition, especially Winnicott, I have very much sympathy with them, but I think that all this comes after, in a certain sense, logically, that is, there are ways of easing the transition and making it less traumatic.

P.G.: This raises for me another question which has been a stumbling block, I think, for people on the Left, particularly for feminists, and that is the question of how a new individual can be created, a new type of individual. There were ideas, for instance, that with different child-rearing practices a new type of man and woman, boy and girl would come into being, and that hasn't happened. And I wonder how, according to your thought, that can be achieved if there is always going to be this violent breakup.

C.C.: First of all, let's again clear up the point that *violent* means violent from the point of view of the psyche. It doesn't mean violent in any physical sense or even in the sense of strong words. *Violent* means, for instance, that the person who takes care of the child or who has charge of the child is not all the time attempting to respond to the desires of the child. And we know that if somebody were to do that, that would be extremely pathogenic. Right? So this is violence. I mean the fact that the child wants something and you just don't do it. And also one could say that the very existence of the external world and even of its own body is lived by the child, the newborn I mean, very often as something negative. You have the fact that—I don't know whether you have children—the angel wakes up at two o'clock in the morning for no reason and starts screaming for two hours and there is nothing that can be done about it. The angel is not sick. It has had plenty of milk during the evening. Just like this. What happened nobody knows. But what happened in fact is that somehow or other there has been a very disagreeable discrepancy between his own, say, phantasmatic world and something that was more or less imposed upon it by reality, its own corporeal reality perhaps, or outside reality, or perhaps by contradictions which started appearing within its own representative world. Now when we come to the problem of new ways of rearing an individual, I think there is an extraordinary amount of things which can and should be changed in this respect, but I don't think we could have an education which would produce individuals who would be automatically immune from neuroses, psychoses, intolerable expressions of aggressivity, and so on and so forth.

There are a lot of things we know which are already there in Freud, which were taken up later by [Wilhelm] Reich, by [Herbert] Marcuse, for instance that there is certainly a

surplus repression of the drives in present-day education, which is not only useless, it is traumatic. Or there is—not to speak about more general social problems which are paramount in this respect—the type of education we have. One can very well imagine or think that, say, a system of bringing up children like the Samoan one as described by Margaret Mead where different classes of age of children take care of the younger ones and so on and so forth, have a sort of period like that, perhaps might be much healthier, or much more promoting of some self-reliance and independence of the children than our own system of just having adults care for children. All this is to be considered. But at the basis you have the fact that you have to bring the child into a society where some things can be done and some things cannot be done.

P.G.: Which leads me on to the way in which you have written about sublimation. You say, I think against Freud or traditional interpretations of Freud, that sublimation is not just a desexualization of drives or instincts but what you call the establishment of a “nonempty intersection between the private and the public world.”⁸ Can you elaborate on that intersection?

C.C.: I think there is a tremendous gap in the Freudian conception. What do we have there? There have been, as you know, successive constructions of Freud about the structure of the singular human psyche but still in the end we are left with drives, on the one hand, the Id, if you wish, in the second topography—let’s leave aside the Superego—and an Ego that tries to balance the demands of the Id, the demands of the Superego, and the demands of reality. Now where is language in there? Where are institutions? Where are social norms?

⁸T/E: [*IDS*](#), 313.

Why does this individual accept to work? Why does it choose one profession rather than another? Why does it accept that by using the language he or she has to reach some degree of truthfulness, just speak quietly or not just say anything which crops up in the mind? Cathexis in the Freudian sense, either it is the cathexis of a proper libidinal object or it is what? And Freud talks about sublimation as if, in some cases, some people are able to displace, to transfer, the cathexis from a libidinal object or from their faeces, say, to painting or to poetry or I don't know what. But they transfer their drives, for instance, to work or they transfer their drives to other sorts of activities which are not just work in order to earn one's livelihood, which one could call a reality principle. In other cases, where is the reality principle? You have a social object. So what happens during the social fabrication of the individual is that what in the beginning were strictly private objects of cathexis have to be replaced or fused with objects of cathexis which are of a social nature and are socially positively valued. And this—we need a concept and a term for this. For example, I use my mouth—there is an oral drive. When I talk, I use my mouth but I don't talk unless I am a merry wife of Windsor; I don't use my mouth just in order to bubble and bubble and bubble, you know, and have the organ pleasure, the physical pleasure of having the tongue playing in the mouth. Even if I have a pleasure in talking, it's a pleasure of a different kind. So we need a concept and a term and the concept and the term of sublimation I use in this sense: that is, sublimation is a psychical process whereby the subject is made, is driven to, is led to, is induced to cathect objects which do not procure him an organ pleasure and which are socially cathected as well, socially valued, be it by the great society or be it by a smaller circle. It can be just a gang of delinquent youths. That is one of the problems there

again; the fact of being with the gang and having, I don't know, your hair this way or this other way, this is not an organ pleasure. It is a pleasure through a social recognition, by agreement with the values of the group which, in this particular instance, happens to be a particular subgroup of society, possibly deviant, and so on and so forth, but never mind.

But in general humanity couldn't exist, humanity couldn't reproduce itself unless people were brought to cathect objects which do not procure an organ pleasure and unless they were induced to identify themselves with social roles which they value and which become the concrete, so to speak, embodiments of the Ego-ideal or ideal Ego—I don't want to enter a discussion of these terms—which means that it is worth being a good carpenter and you have pride in being a good carpenter. If for thousands of years people did not take some pride in being good carpenters or good hunters or this, that, or the other, there would not be human society and I would not be a psychoanalyst. There would be no Vienna in 1890. So, all this is sublimation in one sense and has to be taken as such. When Freud writes, what is he doing in Freudian terms? Is he having an organ pleasure? Is this just what he would call *Wißtrieb*, the drive to know?⁹ First of all, the idea of a drive to know is a very funny idea. One doesn't see any biological grounding for it. Anyway, if there was a drive to know it would be very limited. If there was a drive to know it would be like a chimp's, to know the immediate surroundings and to handle the immediate surroundings. That's not the case with humans and there you have a whole

⁹T/E: On *Wißtrieb*, see "Freud, Society, History," [CL4](#), 194-95, "Passion and Knowledge," [CL5](#), 170-71, and "Imagination, Imaginary, Reflection," [ibid.](#), 371-72.

historical process. The drive to know is not so much a drive to know; it is the need to make sense and there we enter the whole social-historical field, institutions, religions, and so on and so forth, the need to have a world which is organized and gives some meaning to the mortality of human beings, usually by negating this mortality, etc. But all this, supposedly a drive to know, we know very well from history and ethnology,¹⁰ in almost all societies is very rapidly saturated by the stock of imaginary significations or would-be knowledge which society supplies. A primitive tribe has a knowledge about the world. There are tribes, as we know, which do not recognize the role of the father in fertilization. They are satisfied with that, they don't go trying to find out what really happens in fertilization and that's that. And then, at a certain moment, speaking metaphorically, this closure of the social institution and the knowledge going with it breaks and people start inquiring. And this is not biologically grounded, nor is it sexually grounded. This is social-historical. And this, *inter alia*, brings Sophocles to write *Oedipus Rex* and Plato to write the *Convivium* (*The Symposium*) and Freud to write *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trying to find out. But what is the pleasure that Freud has in writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*? Well, it's a sublimated pleasure, of course. Of course, this knowledge is related to sexual things and one could say that Freud tends to replace the infantile sexual theories by some seriously adult questioning of infantile sexual theories. But what about Einstein? What about a philosopher?

So you have there within the sublimation a second stage whereby you don't just have sublimation in the sense, say, the Azande, or I don't know which Australian primitive

¹⁰T/E: Castoriadis's copy corrects the typo "ethology" here.

tribe, had sublimation. You have sublimation in a second degree, which is the pursuit of knowledge *per se* or the pursuit perhaps, say, of artistic beauty *per se*, and so on and so forth. Or the emergence of an idea of political justice or of sharing the power in society, which doesn't accept the traditional norms and which puts into question the existing institution of society. But in order for this also to happen, you have to have a society correlative; you have to have individuals who become able to cathect, say, the search for truth as strongly and perhaps more strongly than they cathect their own lives, their preservation. And there are historical examples—Socrates, Giordano Bruno, the researchers in radioactivity, etc.

P.G.: People who wanted to know more, for whom the existing is not enough?

C.C.: Yes, who have cathected this search for truth, as people had cathected, say, the fight for another social order and people who have been killed in revolutions and other events like that certainly were not after an organ pleasure. They were after something else. In this respect, there is a void in classical psychoanalysis and in present psychoanalytic theory because psychoanalysts, in general, continue to be more than lethargic. They are blind to the social-historical dimension. But without the social-historical dimension we can neither understand the birth of psychoanalysis itself, nor can we understand really the development of human beings from the newborn baby to the social individual with a defined set of values, norms, identifications, and so on and so forth.

P.G.: Unlike others, you have never claimed to have discovered the "real Freud"....

C.C.: No. That is Lacanian nonsense....

P.G.: But if I understand you correctly you have argued that Freud both discovered something momentous and

yet could not see fully the depth of what he had discovered, particularly the idea of the radical imagination, creative indetermination. And in the same way, you have spoken of the blind spots for Freudian theory—the social-historical institution and the psyche as radical imagination. Is it possible to account for these blind spots, why it was that these existed for Freud?

C.C.: It's always very difficult to say what stopped a truly great thinker from going beyond some point. From the point of view of the radical imagination, it's perhaps easier. All the time in the history of thought there has been a fundamental suspicion against the imagination. The imagination was always considered—there is the famous sentence by the French philosopher Malebranche, “*La folle du logis*”¹¹—the madwoman in the house. Imagination is just a source of error, delusions, illusions, and so on and so forth. Now, Freud was starting an endeavor at the end of the 1890s which was subverting most of the beliefs of society. He was talking about children as polymorphous perverts, people

¹¹T/E: Castoriadis's copy corrects the typo “*logie*” here. [Daniel Lagache](#), whom Castoriadis mentions below, had published an article in 1964 that now appears in his *Œuvres*, vol. 6: *La folle du logis: la psychanalyse comme science exacte* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986) and that has been translated into English as “The Capricious Woman of the House: Structures, Processes and Products of Fantasy” (now in *The Works of Daniel Lagache, Selected Papers, 1938-1964*, tr. Elisabeth Holder [London: Karnac, 1993]). Lagache cofounded the [Société Française de Psychanalyse](#) with Jacques Lacan in 1953. In a split with Lacan, Lagache cofounded the [Association Psychanalytique de France](#) in 1964, as Castoriadis explains below. It may be noted, in relation to the idea of psychoanalysis as an “exact science,” that the title of Castoriadis's inaugural text on psychoanalysis, now available in [CL1](#), is “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science” (1968).

wanting to sleep with their mothers, etc. If he had also started talking about imagination, he would have been laughed out of court.

The blind spot in Freud is not so much a blind spot as being silent about the imagination which is, first of all, due to the strong tradition in Greco-Western thought of suspicion of the imagination. We have this paradox that from a certain moment Freud speaks all the time about phantasies, *phantasieren*, and so forth, and one never knows what exactly *phantasieren* and phantasies are, where they come from, to what they correspond from the point of view of the human being—and the perplexity of Freud concerning them. An example of this is that, even after he abandoned the theory of infantile seduction, Freud, for instance in the Wolf Man analysis, all the time is looking to try and find the real primal scene and you have the long footnote at the end when, at long last, he says, never mind if the primal scene was real or not real, the patient phantasized about it and it played this role. The same problem appears with the whole question of what he calls in German—a fine expression—*Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*, that is, the presentation of the drive through a representation in the soul, where you have the fact that the drive, which is, as he says, at the frontier of the psychical and the somatical, has to be presented in the psyche, of course cannot be presented as such, therefore a representation of the drive has to come, which from now on acts as a sort of ambassador of the drive within the psychical sphere or space. Now, where does this representation come from and what is its metapsychological status? This remains, so to speak, covered up in Freud and that's why I say here we have again radical imagination playing its role.

Now, as to the social-historical, the reasons are perhaps even deeper, because Freud inherited again the

traditional perception, that humanity is individuals, that there is something substantive and substantial—a substance in a metaphysical sense—which is the human individual, body and soul, never mind what you think about the division between body and soul, and that somehow society is made up as a composition of these individuals. And despite some phrases in *Totem and Taboo*, this remains in a certain sense the basic position of Freud, and this one can see in his attempt to derive, so to speak, religion just from psychical contents, which is, of course, impossible. A religion has to correspond to psychical contents, but it can't be derived from psychical contents. After all, if Freud's derivation of monotheism in *Moses and Monotheism* was correct, one wonders why the human Unconscious waited 100,000 years to produce a monotheistic religion. With this view, there can be no history of humanity, and in fact this is also involved when I say that the social-historical is a blind spot. The blind spot concerns the social side as well as the historical side. There is a tremendous black hole in the standard psychoanalytical conception concerning human institutions. Why, if everything boils down to the Unconscious—an Unconscious, which is everywhere the same—¹²why is it that you have history? At best you could have a history in a naive sense as a sort of learning process whereby this animal, I mean man and woman, somehow learns and makes all the time better tools. But this is not human history.

I am always amazed by the deafness of all psychoanalysts concerning this question.¹³ There is really a

¹²T/E: Castoriadis's copy corrects the placement of the em-dash here.

¹³T/E: See [CL6](#), 143, n. 10 in "Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads."

medical deafness, there are no other words—and I want this to be on record like this: Why is there human history, in a psychoanalytical perspective?

P.G.: You say somewhere something I rather liked, that philosophers have given the example of the table and said this is reality or a thing...

C.C.: And no one ever said let me take my dream of last night as an example of reality...

P.G.: Or a symphony....

C.C.: Yes.

P.G.: It is very difficult for us in Britain to get a clear picture of psychoanalysis in France, particularly, if you like, psychoanalytic politics. It's a big question, but I wonder if you could give us an idea of what is happening now.

C.C.: I am not the most appropriate person to do that because I keep quite aloof from the whole scene. I am near to one of the organizations, which is called the Fourth Group, which split with the Lacanians in 1968 when Lacan started his new folly of *la passe*. He introduced a new idea and method of christening psychoanalysts and giving them grades, which he called *la passe*. The formal situation is that there are two societies which are recognized by the [International Psychoanalytical Association](#), the traditional Société Psychanalytique de Paris [[Paris Psychoanalytic Society](#)] and the Association Psychanalytique Française,¹⁴ and there is the Fourth Group which is not recognized by the IPA, but people are invited, have common symposia, and so on. And then there is this proliferation of the Lacanian groups just

¹⁴T/E: The correct name is the [Association psychanalytique de France](#), which, as explained in note 11 above and by Castoriadis below, was cofounded in 1964 by Lagache in a split from Lacan. It is unclear whether Castoriadis misspoke here or whether this was a transcription error.

exploiting the heritage of Lacan and nothing more.

P.G.: Can you say something about these groups?

C.C.: This is the whole history of the splits in France. There is the first split which happened when Lacan split with the French Society in 1960. Then, in 1963, various people, [\[Didier\] Anzieu](#), [\[Jean\] Laplanche](#), [\[Jean-Bertrand\] Pontalis](#), [\[Daniel\] Lagache](#), split with Lacan and they created the APF, which has been recognized also by the IPA. The important thing is not the splits, the important thing to my mind is the theoretical sterility, if the word is not too harsh, apart from some exceptions. This is a problem which I have touched upon in one of my texts, “Epilegomena”¹⁵ Why is it that one doesn’t have a really important continuation of the work of Freud? I mean you have worthy things, contributions on this and that and the other, but certainly nothing comparable. And I think this is linked both to the character of psychoanalysis—it’s not a science, and has no cumulative progress—and probably also to the general trend in thinking in this period we are now in, which I consider a period of waning creativity in all fields.¹⁶

P.G.: Why might this be true, especially in the field of psychoanalysis?

C.C.: I cannot say. I don’t think one can explain why a society, a whole society, a whole group of societies like all the Western societies, enters at a certain moment and after a certain period a phase where far fewer things happen, or less important things happen or other things which have happened

¹⁵T/E: See n. 11, above.

¹⁶P.G. note: An account of the development of the various psychoanalytic groups in France can be found in Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud’s French Revolution*, rev. ed. (Free Association Books, 1992).

have moved on to other fields. I mean video-clips and better and better digital recorders and so on and so forth—but if you look at music, or philosophy, even painting and writing, I have the feeling that it is not comparable to what was going on seventy-five years ago.

P.G.: And yet in some parts of the world there seems to be a new, maybe not creativity, but certainly political energy....

C.C.: You mean Eastern Europe?

P.G.: Yes.

C.C.: Yes, this has been totally unexpected and extremely hopeful in a certain sense and one must be happy for the changes for us and for them. But one must not forget also the other side of the coin, that in all these movements which have been tremendously courageous and inventive from a tactical and strategic point of view, one doesn't see the slightest invention or creation in the field of new organization and institutions. I mean people just want to have a part in what they call the free market, that is, some version of the capitalist economy. In a certain sense, this is already very somber—with the big proviso, of course, about Russia itself, and what happens there is another story which is perhaps just starting.

P.G.: You seem, in your writing at least, to keep politics and psychoanalysis quite separate. For instance when you write about the crisis in modern society¹⁷ or what you

¹⁷T/E: "The Crisis of Modern Society"—a lecture Castoriadis gave "in May 1965, in Tunbridge Wells (Kent, England) before the comrades and supporters of Solidarity"—is now available in [*PSW3*](#).

have called the “Gorbachev Interlude”¹⁸ it’s very much about that; you are not applying psychoanalytic concepts to what you are writing about. And I wonder what you make of attempts by people who do this. I’m thinking particularly, say, of someone like Christopher Lasch, who uses the concept of narcissism and others, and also the work of a lot of the people involved in *Free Associations* who make use of Kleinian concepts such as projection, splitting, and so on.

C.C.: Lasch is perhaps the least bad of all these attempts. I mistrust these very much because in this respect I am strictly Freudian. Freud was not faithful to himself when he made all these excursions into Moses and so on and so forth. I strictly believe that a psychoanalytical interpretation has claims to validity and to sense only within the framework of a session. I don’t believe in parlor-room interpretations—*interprétations de salon*—and I think when you move into the social sphere you risk very easily either banality or saying things which do not hold. I very strongly believe in the use of psychoanalytical theory or metapsychology, at least in the way I see it and try to reelaborate it, in order to complement, to make the other half, so to speak, of a theory of society. In this sense, yes. There are general requirements which the psyche imposes on the institutions of society and so on and so forth. Now, to say that, for example, in the fourteenth century the Byzantine psyche underwent such a transformation that the Turkish conquest became possible is *a priori* nonsensical.

¹⁸T/E: “The Gorbachev Interlude” (translated by Castoriadis himself into French as [FR1987J/FR1990B2](#)), *New Politics*, New Series 1 (Winter 1988): 60-79. Reprinted in: *Thesis Eleven*, 20 (1988): 5-29; [The European Journal of International Affairs](#), 1:1 (Summer 1988): 34-61; and *Gorbachev: The Debate*, ed. Andrew Arato and Ferenc Fehér (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), pp. 61-83, as a reedited version. It will appear in the forthcoming sixth volume of the *More Political and Social Writings* series.

Even when you take phenomena like Nazism or Stalinism, when it would appear that it is easy, there again you see that it's not easy at all if you try to be specific and concrete. I mean, even Reich's interpretations of Nazism—there is something there but this is banal: that the Jew comes to represent the unfettered libido and so on and so forth, and therefore the hate against one's own unfettered libido is turned against the Jew. Well, it's true and we know this, but it's so general. It doesn't explain Nazism because this is certainly also true in a certain sense concerning Whites in the United States in regard to Blacks. There is no problem about the phantasm of the Whites that the "Niggers" rape women and that women would like to be raped, their own women would like to be raped by Negroes. There is not the slightest doubt that there is a phantasy like that in the minds of Whites. So what? It doesn't give Nazism. It gave lynching and all this. Or in France at the time of the Algerian War, even now with the North Africans, there is certainly a phantasm going around about the sexual capacity of the North Africans....

P.G.: There is not much that can be done with this knowledge?

C.C.: No. It becomes an ingredient of the whole racist complex, which is much more complicated than that. It does not contain only that. And it is there some of the time, most of the time; but the phantasm is there also with the ancient Jews. In the Old Testament, marriage or sexual intercourse with individuals of nations other than the Hebrews is all the time qualified as prostitution. The word which occurs all the time, obsessively, is prostitution. That means that the others are impure. Why are they impure? Is it because their sexuality—their sexness—is phantasized as unfettered? Perhaps. Who knows? At any rate, this element at best becomes one of the important but not specific traits which are

always attached to the whole complex by which one tribe or one nation tries to establish its own identity in opposition to the others, this opposition being not just an alterity or a difference but a difference in valuation. They are not as good as we are, and they are oversexed, they are perverse. It does not take us very far.

P.G.: Lacan continues, at least in Britain, to enjoy some popularity among people on the Left. Yet in your essay on [\[François\] Roustang](#) you denounced a lot of Lacanian practice and posturing.¹⁹ What are your objections to Lacan? How do you account for the influence of someone you seem to regard, in many respects, as little more than a charlatan?

C.C.: I can't discuss Lacan again now. It would be too lengthy and I have discussed this already a great deal. The disagreements are not even disagreements. There are so many points where I think that Lacan has nothing to do with Freud or, indeed, with the very notion of the Unconscious, when, for instance, he asserts that the Unconscious is structured as a language, which is both nonsensical in itself and certainly contrary to what Freud rightly thought. The second point is not the important point. The important point is that in fact the Unconscious is *not* a language. What is really amazing is what you say, which is also true in other quarters. It is well known that there are some feminists who are Lacanians and trying to combine Lacanism with feminism, which is absolutely incredible when you consider the content of Lacan's conceptions. Also about the Leftists. Lacan in the political field—I don't speak about what he voted for, I don't even know if he voted, probably he never voted for anything—in the political field, the conclusion of the Lacanian theory is: there is nothing to be done. You will

¹⁹T/E: See "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation" (1977), now in [CLL](#).

always be under a master, and this he told to the students at [Vincennes \[University\]](#) after the events of '68. "You want a master, you need a master, you will have him."²⁰ And that is the political message of Lacanism. The other aspect of it is that, in the Lacanian framework, there certainly cannot be the slightest thought about what I would call a *community of equals*. This thing doesn't make sense within the Lacanian perspective. So why some Leftists and feminists feel the need to, I don't know how to call it, attach themselves to Lacan or to borrow—borrow what, I don't know what they borrow—the only explanation for this I have is again the epoch. The epoch is an epoch of intellectual fashions and fads. It is the same thing with deconstruction. Everybody talks about deconstruction which allows people not to say anything about the substantive things. It has become a jargon which allows people, instead of talking about today's problems and today's questions of reality, to deconstruct texts of the past. And with all this Lacanian affair, we have something quite similar. You are in a blind alley, you repeat a certain jargon, there is nothing to be done—except to analyze indefinitely. And you give to yourself the impression of being very subversive and also you are very comfortable because you are just practicing Lacanian psychoanalysis, that is, you keep the patients for 10 minutes, take the fees, have 40 patients a day, never speak and that's that.

²⁰T/E: On p. 239 of *L'envers de la psychanalyse (1969-1970)*, Book 17 of the *Séminaires*, Lacan, in answer to a question posed during his December 3, 1969 Seminar, responds: *Ce à quoi vous aspirez comme révolutionnaires, c'est à un maître. Vous l'aurez*. This statement appears in English in Philippe Julien's *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, tr. Devra Beck Simiu (New York: NYU Press, 1994), p. 64, as "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will have one."

P.G.: In 1968, in your essay “Epilegomena ...,” you said that psychoanalysis’s “absorption by the social system” has “sterilized” it, and nearly ten years later, in your essay, “Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation,” you said that it was “not inconceivable that psychoanalysis might finish up by becoming fully, in its social reality, a pure and simple instrument for the preservation of the established order.”²¹ Ten more years after that, how do you see psychoanalysis?

C.C.: That’s a very difficult question because there are lots of contradictory tendencies and trends and historical currents in there.²² To put it briefly, I still consider that psychoanalysis has a very important potential concerning the project of autonomy. On the other hand, it is true that at a social level it more or less functions—more or less—as a sort of instrument of adaptation to the existing order. This depends very much of course on the analyst, who is doing analysis, and how he is doing it, and so on and so forth. But in the main I think that’s the case. In a certain sense, it was unavoidable. I mean, you cannot have something which becomes an institution and which goes on functioning for almost a century within established society which keeps intact its subversive potential. As Marilyn Monroe said, something would have to give.²³

²¹T/E: Using here the translations of these phrases as they appear in [CLI](#), 7 and 147.

²²T/E: See Castoriadis’s 1997 prepared talk, “Psychoanalysis: Situation and Limits,” whose draft, completed in September 1997, shortly before his final surgery, was read at a William Alanson White Institute conference in New York by Joel Whitebook in November, and posthumously published in [CL6](#).

²³T/E: A reference to [Something’s Got to Give](#), a 1962 American motion picture that was incomplete at the time of Monroe’s death.

Reply to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's Reading of "The Great Migration"*

[*Hans Magnus Enzensberger reads extracts from his essay on European policy and migration, "The Great Migration," followed by comments from Cornelius Castoriadis.*]

Cornelius Castoriadis: Well, I suppose my task is first of all to thank—this is not a task but is a pleasure—Hans Magnus for his beautiful essay I hope you will all read in its full version, which is even richer and more *geist*-full than what you have heard here [*H.M.E. laughs*].

Now, if you don't mind I would like to formulate some thoughts before opening the floor to all the people who want to talk—er—by some very, very summary statements, which all attempt to drive home this point, I think, that we find ourselves, both the so-called developed and of course the underdeveloped [countries], in a really tragical situation. *Tragic* means that there is no optimal situation. The general situation is, approximately, that there are, at most, one billion people living in more or less decent economic and political

*T/E: Edited version of a transcription, by Jules Alford, of Castoriadis's reply to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's reading of excerpts from "The Great Migration" during a July 12, 1992 [Institute of Contemporary Art \(London\)](https://www.instituteofcontemporaryart.org/talks/024M-C0095X0962XX-0100V0) talk from the "Globe '92: European Dialogues" series. The sound recording, previously posted by the British Library Sound Archive at: <https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/ICA-talks/024M-C0095X0962XX-0100V0>, is no longer available online due to a cyber attack on the Sound Archive website. Enzensberger's "The Great Migration," *Granta*, 42 (Winter 1992), tr. Martin Chalmers, appears online at: <https://granta.com/the-great-migration/>. A book with this title, *Die Große Wanderung: Dreiunddreißig Markierungen. Mit einer Fußnote "Über einige Besonderheiten bei der Menschenjagd"* also appeared in German (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp) that same year.

conditions, and even this would have to be taken with a pinch of salt because even in the developed countries we know that there is unemployment, poverty, and what has been called the Fourth World, and so on—and you have outside of that four to five billion who are living mostly under tyranny and misery. It's unavoidable that there is going to be tremendous pressure for migration, which is already manifest and of course, needless to add, which you all know, that this pressure is being created both by local conditions in the poor world—I mean, sheer famine and tyranny, etc.—and by the “demonstration effect” of the rich countries because the only thing the others get are some TV pictures depicting a more or less mythical situation, but still this is the magnet, the dragnet that attracts.¹

This pressure is already manifest in North America—Hans Magnus gives figures in his essay. It is also manifest in Western Europe. I think it's not yet manifest in Western Europe as it will be increasingly with time. Here you have, first of all, what Churchill had called the soft [under]belly of Europe—southern belly. You have something like 40,000 kilometers of coast which can easily be reached even with row boats from the African side of the Mediterranean.

And now we know—I mean it has been known for a long time, but now the journalists have started writing about it—you have people from Gibraltar who cross into Spain and these people are not Moroccans. These people started from Ethiopia or from Ivory Coast. Now you have to imagine how somebody from Ethiopia or the Ivory Coast has been able to gather the hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred dollars in order to make this ghastly [trip], pay the passage with the boats, people steal from them, of course. People

¹T/E: On the “demonstration effect,” see [CL6](#), 109, n. 26.

perhaps drown in [the Strait of] Gibraltar, and then enter Spain and across the Pyrenees—no problem about it—and they spread all around. But now there is also the same thing in Greece coming from Turkey, people from Iraq, from Asia in general—Philipinos, Pakistanis, everything. And then you'll have the whole problem of Eastern Europe. Perhaps you will not have it with Poles, Hungarians, Czechs and so on but you will probably have it—well, you already have it because of the situation with Yugoslavia, with Bosnia, and all that—but you will very probably, unfortunately, have it with the people of the ex-USSR, where the problems are not solved, where the situation is becoming more and more serious in every way.

Now, what are you going to do? What are we going to do about it? The great danger, and the word that springs to mind immediately is a word with very ghastly memories, is “Fortress” Europe, is that you fill the Mediterranean with torpedo ships, arrest the African immigrants and erect a new Berlin Wall with automatic machine guns over the four or five thousand kilometers which go from the Baltic to the Black Sea or to the Adriatic, I don't know what. Such a development, of course, cannot remain limited to the external periphery of Europe. In order to have that, you will have to have, certainly, considerable transformations in the internal regimes of the European countries.

The other solution, as Hans Magnus has said, which is a development of these countries, is, at present at least, out of the question. There are not the resources and there is not the political will, neither in the ruling strata nor, I would unfortunately add, in the whole of the population. Nobody is going to accept extra [sizeable] contributions for a hypothetical development in Third World countries, which has not happened up to now and which, if it did happen—Hans

Magnus alluded to it—but you may very easily imagine if you had brought the terrestrial environment to this ghastly state, with only a fifth of the population enjoying this level of consumption—of an irreversible destruction of natural resources, what would happen if you had the five-fifths of the terrestrial population reach this—and, in addition, the characteristic of the modern civilization in the West, perhaps for the first time, is not a static level of wealth. This per cent per annum rises and the x percent rises and you know it's an exponential curve and what it can give as a destruction of the environment, let alone if it were to be expanded onto the rest of the world.

So, we have this terrible problem and all the theoretical answers which could be given to it outside the political will and consciousness of the Western population—which is not there—these answers are absolutely hopeless or meaningless.

Just a word about “the boat is full!”² France, where I live, is a country of 550,000 square kilometers, with a population now of about 55 to 58 million people. The Japanese are very rich. Now, apply the density of population per square mile or per square kilometer—as you want—of Japan to France. You would have a country which would be able to feed gloriously 150 million to 200 million people. There are 120 million Japanese in 300,000 square kilometers, and in lesser proportions you would have the same thing in Germany, but of course there is no question of the French

²T/E: Enzensberger discusses this phrase in his talk. It may be a reference to the 1981 German film *Das Boot ist voll*, whose title

derives from what was expressed by the Swiss during World War II, for as a nonbelligerent country many refugees desired entry there, with most being denied permission. They were frequently told, “Our boat is full,” a reference to passengers of a lifeboat after a ship sinking frequently refusing to allow any further survivors to enter their craft after it had reached a level of occupancy felt to approach the limit of safety ([“The Boat is Full,” English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)).

accepting 120 million immigrants in France and neither for the other ones nor for the British...and there I must stop in a certain sense and I must finish. We have one of the hardest nuts to crack in modern political thinking. The fact is that, ideally, we know that humanity is one, that people ought to be in solidarity, but they sometimes tend to be...or they stop being when it comes to such matters, that beyond this are not only material conditions but factors which, in my mind, are much more important than material conditions: what I call *imaginary significations*. We are German, we are British, we are French, we built the Cathedrals, we had Goethe, we had Shakespeare, we have the way of life, we have the cottage, so on and so forth...and who are these people who are coming in here? And so on and so forth.

And of course for me particularly as an expatriate Greek living in France, and considering Germany my second spiritual fatherland and Britain the third, and Italy the fourth, and so on and so forth, it is very easy to say that we just make a synthesis of all this...though nobody does this synthesis... but this is not the same with the run-of-the-mill citizen. And there is the hard nut to crack and this is where I ask you to express yourself. Thank you. [*Applause*].

C.C.: Needless to say, the last consideration is of course the main weapon of all the quasi-fascists or neo-fascist demagogues in France, in Britain, in Germany, in Italy, and everywhere....

[*Virtually inaudible audience questions follow—answered by Castoriadis and Enzensberger.*]

H.M.E. ...We have a West German problem, but we also have a European problem, and I would like to ask Castoriadis to comment a bit on how he would evaluate the situation in France in this respect.

C.C.: I wanted to say something on this because I

think that, of course, the German problem is there, is serious. But I think that too much is made out of it in relation to other countries. I don't want to offend anybody. But I think that one of the first racist riots that we had in postwar Europe were in Nottingham Hill in Britain, weren't they? [*Audience member: Notting Hill.*] Notting Hill, yes. That is in 1960-something. [*More inaudible comments from the audience; the Notting Hill race riots took place in 1958.*] No, no, no, that's not at all to attack the British. Now, it has just been said that this is humanity. Now, it might manifest itself more or less in some places or others. But still, I mean, the French are considered racist and xenophobic; they are in a certain sense. I don't know if they are more than my original compatriots, the Greeks, who pretend that they are very hospitable and go back to Homer, and so on and so forth. But it is almost to say that, if somebody behaves as a foreigner, that is an insult. I mean, "He's a foreigner, you see." You know that there was a huge, [sizeable] Greek minority in southern Albania. And when the regime collapsed there, these Greeks started coming into Greece. They are Greek! And they kept their Greekness, their Orthodox religion, and so on and so forth. And they started coming into Greece. And suddenly the Greeks started calling them "Albanians." I mean, these same Greeks who would be able to go to war, ten or forty years before, to recover northern Epirus. And then suddenly, one discovered that in Athens all the crimes that are committed are committed by "Albanians." No Greek kills anybody, no mugging, nothing! [*Audience laughter*] Everything is done by the "Albanians." So, we had, two weeks ago, riots in Spain.

H.M.E.: Yes.

C.C.: And there is also a historical dimension to this. I spoke before about Notting Hill. Britain is perhaps the first country where anti-Semitism—I'm not speaking about *social*

anti-Semitism—never had a public official expression. You had Disraeli as prime minister, that fantastic individual, in the nineteenth century. And there were depressions. People were unemployed. Nobody said it's because the Jews are taking our jobs or because the Jews...and so on and so forth. And then, in 1960-something, you have Notting Hill. You see? This terrible thing of xenophobia, of racism, is like a virus. Really, the medical metaphor is the only one, like the AIDS virus—maybe dormant for a long time. And you never know why, for instance, in the eleventh century, you have, in the Rhineland, the first anti-Semitic riots.

H.M.E.: Pogroms, yes.

C.C.: And why, then, don't you have them continuously? No, you don't. But you have them from time to time. And the basic thing, I think, is that people have not been able, up to now, to go beyond the tribal or national imaginary, which is always there and which remains for them a very important element of identification. Who am I? I'm a Greek, British, German.

[...]

H.M.E.: Would you care to comment on this [question]?

C.C.: It's one of the difficulties of the problem. Nobody has an answer. How should they be going about changing their ways of life? I mean, what would it be...*[inaudible continuation from questioner]*? Sorry? *[inaudible continuation from questioner.]* Oh, that's a different.... Then, you talk to my heart. I have written that the only way to avoid an ecological catastrophe and to give some decent life to the whole of the population of the Earth would be to go back to the 1929 average standards of living of the rich countries. Now, go tell that to the Marines! I mean, to the people in the street. We *need* a humanity which is able to live

with frugality and, like the Romans said, like a *diligens pater familias*, a father of a family who knows that, if he cuts down a tree, he has to plant another tree, etc. We are not like that. I mean, *people* are not like that. People want more and more of everything in these countries and they are not ready for any [inaudible]. In order to change things, there we are really going into deep waters. You have to change the whole magma of imaginary significations, which hold this society together. What is this magma, today? It is more and more material consumption and TV masturbation. That's all. OK? Then you have to change this. In order to do it, you should be able to give—or the people, because you cannot give it, nobody gives it, we don't have prophets. The people should be able to create out of themselves new meanings for life, new things that are worth living for and even dying for, and so on and so forth. And not just changing their car every two years. Now, this is a fantastic change.

[...]

C.C.: You, now, when I'm thinking about politics, I try to think as much as [I can as] a *Realpolitiker* and a cynical, wicked [person].... From the point of view of the imperialistic West, the best policies—please don't get terrified—would be to leave the Africans to die of AIDS and hunger and killing each other. If the West was rational—from the *imperialistic* point of view—this is how they would like to have it. Of course, they can't have it, for various reasons. And of course there are the reactions of the populations. And already Somalia and Yugoslavia are a scandal, which has been there for more than a year. And in the end—let's leave aside whether Bush wants to leave the presidency with some gesture and so on and so forth. But anyhow. This is not the problem of colonialism. It's another problem. It is the problem that we have disrupted these countries—it's not even

economic exploitation. This is nonsense. We have disrupted the traditional ways of living of these countries, which were not ideal, not pastoral, but which were what they were, and were in some equilibrium. And tempt them—force them—or pretend that we are forcing them or helping them to enter into the Western way of industrial production and parliamentary democracy. Now, these things are not God-given to every nation, tribe, culture, historical period on the Earth. These things have grown in the West. This does not mean that the West is “rationally superior.” But it means that they are historical products. Now, when you just transplant these things in Africa, or even in South America, you have, if you follow what happens there, situations that are tragicomical in a certain sense. I mean, look what happens in Zaire with [Mobutu \[Sese Seko\]](#).

[Audience question about the West helping to reduce infant mortality in the developing world and encouraging population control and the US banning programs allowing talk of abortion and family planning.]

C.C.: Sure. This was one of the results of the Rio Carnival, which has been called the [Rio Conference](#), with this unholy alliance between Bush and the Catholic Church, and which goes on. This is a scandal. But this is also our responsibility, after all, huh?

[...]

C.C. [as moderator]: Well, I think that we have to stop now, to thank Hans Magnus Enzensberger for the essay and the discussion. Thank you all for participating. And I hope that, if I dare say, the lesson of this discussion, of this meeting, should not be unbridled pessimism but taking consciousness of the problems and attempting to speak out about what we see, wherever we find ourselves. *[Applause]*

Imagining Society: A Discussion with *Variant**

Question: Did you know Hans Magnus Enzensberger?

Cornelius Castoriadis: Yes. I have known him for more than ten years now. I formed almost a kind of united front with him against Gunter Grass, who was more or less a fellow traveler twenty years late.¹ What Enzensberger has written in “The Great Migration” is very good. Of course, he

*“[Imagining Society—Cornelius Castoriadis Interview](#),” *Variant*, 15 (Autumn 1993): 40-43. *Variant* notes: “Present at the conversation were Paul Anderson, John Barker, Martin Chalmers, Kevin Davey, and Peter Kravitz. The conversation was transcribed and edited by Martin Chalmers.” A four-paragraph introduction to Castoriadis’s life and work precedes the interview. The last two of these introductory paragraphs read as follows:

Our conversation took place on a mild, drizzly winter evening in London in early ’93. Earlier in the day, at a lunchtime meeting in the ICA, Castoriadis had responded to Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who had read from his recently published essay on racism—“The Great Migration” (*Die Große Wanderung*) [T/E: See now, above, a transcription of Castoriadis’s remarks].

There’s less time than expected. In the afternoon Castoriadis had visited his old Solidarity comrade, Chris Pallas, in hospital. Later in the evening he is giving a talk on his perspective on psychoanalysis [T/E: See now, below, a transcription of Castoriadis’s talk: “Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics”]. Castoriadis, looking like a more rotund Michel Foucault, spoke English in a wonderfully rich Franco-Greek accent, the sentences often ending in a melancholy fall. Though whether this was because of the state of the world, because of having to give another interview, or both, I cannot say.

[T/E: Chris Pallis is the real name of Castoriadis’s longtime pseudonymous English-language translator, “Maurice Brinton.” See also Paul Anderson’s account of this interview: “Rethinking the Left: Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis,” *Tribune*, January 15, 1993: 6, now available online: <http://paulandersonjournalist.com/1993/01/15/rethinking-the-left-interview-with-cornelius-castoriadis/>.]

¹T/E: *Variant*’s in-text parenthetical note adds here: “(i.e., at the time of the anti-nuclear arms movement in early ’80s—Grass supported Communist Party positions which were uncritical of the Soviet Union).”

doesn't provide any solutions.

Q.: At lunchtime you talked, in a jokey way, about television, referring to "this television masturbation..."—is it worrying that radical social thought so often seems to be simply anti things? It complains about Rambo being watched in the Philippines and in Brazil, that Hollywood is destructive of people's thinking.... Are there no positive elements in the spread of TV all over the world? What do you see as the positive element, as opposed to the masturbation—if there is one?

C.C.: It depends, but if you take TV as it is just now, then apart from some exceptional things, at least three very serious criticisms can be made of it. The first is the content, which is 90% sheer stupidity. It flatters—not even the base instincts of the public—it just flatters intellectual inertia. That's why I call it masturbation. The second thing is the very structure of the medium. It's not the usual point against Marx, it's not that the instruments are good, but the bloody capitalists put them to a bad use. It is that the alienated structure of society is embodied in the technology, it's embodied in television, and you can very easily see how it's embodied in TV as it is now in the sense that TV is a unicenter [*sic*] emitter with a passive, dispersed public. This is the ideal of political alienation and manipulation. So what a really interactive TV would be, how this medium could be put to another use, that is not just a question of changing the content of the films, of the news, it's a matter of inventing, creating new ways by which people can intervene. The third thing, of course, is the sheer ideological role of TV today, which is quite evident most of the time.

Q.: Do you feel any sense of schizophrenia moving from the lunchtime talk to the one on psychoanalysis?

C.C.: It's not the same subject, of course, but it's the

same universe in a sense.²

Q.: Conservative governments, authoritarian ones, seem to have a great fear of psychoanalysis.

C.C.: Yeah, after all, you have a massive example in Stalinist Russia, where psychoanalysis was a forbidden subject, as it also was in the GDR [[German Democratic Republic](#)] and all those countries. But you know the Hungarians and the Czechs managed to do a bit semi-clandestinely...and in the Nazi Reich there was an attempt to do a kind of “German” psychoanalysis.

Q.: Doesn’t California present a problem for that kind of argument, in terms of the overkill of analysis and therapy?

C.C.: Yes, it’s true, but there is a sort of typical American deformation of psychoanalysis. For example: You don’t love your wife, you come to therapy and you will love your wife. You hate your children, you come to therapy and you will love your children. You hate your boss, that’s a nonresolved Oedipus Complex, you can love your boss and so on and so forth—that’s ridiculous.

Q.: You have a number of patients or clients every week. Do you sometimes feel, occasionally, suddenly transformed by an image a patient brings to you?

C.C.: To say transformed would perhaps be saying too much, but elated, if one can use the word.

Q.: Do you have an example of how this has happened?

C.C.: I can’t tell you just now, but there are dreams which are fantastically creative, beautiful and deep, where

²T/E: The “lunchtime” talk (“Reply to Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s Reading of ‘The Great Migration’”) may be read above; the latter talk, given the same day (“Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics”), may be read below.

there is an interweaving of the imagination beyond rationality and logic. Yet you also have logic used as an instrument in order to enable this imagination to function. Or you have the reappearance of problems which had been discussed, and which you thought were resolved, but which were resolved only at a superficial level, and then they appear again and the patient him/herself discovers other aspects of the thing.

Q.: Do people come to you already aware of your work, already radically political in some way?

C.C.: The people who come to me are aware of my work, I certainly don't have people who are politically reactionary among my patients. I wouldn't throw out somebody who was—as long as it doesn't interfere with the analysis. The point is not to inculcate perfect ideas; it is to make people become self-critical, reflexive, critical of others—though not critical in an irritating sort of way—to open their eyes, especially about their own motives, and to encourage them to be autonomous. I think this is both the main aim of analysis and the prerequisite for social change.

Q.: The idea of autonomy is absolutely central to everything you've been writing about. Perhaps it can be seen as a continuation of the revolutionary project that goes through all your work in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Do you still understand the revolution, considered in the same way as when you were writing in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, as the end of your project, the one that you associate yourself with?

C.C.: The project which I support and pursue is of radical social transformation. This is what I call a revolution. Of course, a revolution not necessarily means barricades or storming the Winter Palace. It is the fact that people decide to change fundamentally their institutions.

Q.: Your writings, those that were published in Britain in the 1960s and '70s, were very influential. To what extent

was psychoanalysis a move in another direction? Publicly, at least, you ceased to be interested in issues like economic planning which you'd written a lot about.

C.C.: Well, economics was never my main interest. My main interests were politics and philosophy, and economics was only important—of course also because it is an important part of the real world—because of the tremendous weight it had been given in Marxism. Now, when I started coming out, getting out of Marxism at the beginning of the '60s, a process in part marked by texts which form the first part of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) [1975; English translation 1987]—the section called “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” [1964-1965]—then by the same token, the economic dimension became very much more limited from my perspective. The main problem for me, from then onwards, was what I called the *imaginary element* in human history. The fact that all these tremendous varieties of societies and then of types of institutions can by no means be explained by differences in the mode of production. I mean, you have perhaps 200 primitive hunter-gatherer societies one next to the other and each one has different totems and taboos and matrimonial rules and so on. This conclusion leads in a totally different direction from Marx's rationalistic, economic positivism—as I see it. This coincided, accidentally or not, with a renewed interest on my part in psychoanalysis and the two things more or less coalesced. When you read “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” you can see that the break with Marx does not only take Freud into account, but also attempts to go beyond Freud, because Freud also, as it were, commits the sin of trying to fit society to a singular psychology, which to my mind doesn't hold water. Nevertheless, I thought that psychoanalysis was very important. It was as if with it you could see human, radical

imagination working live, and that's why I decided to take it up after I stopped working as an economist.

Q.: Do you retain any sympathy for other traditions? I'm thinking particularly of ones emanating from Italy and of a theorist like Toni Negri. Do you have any sympathy for the way they hold on to a rather politicized conception of autonomy?

C.C.: Well, I met Negri in Paris many times. We have, I think, a good deal of personal sympathy for one another. I don't have much sympathy for his ideas and way of putting things. I think, despite whatever he says, underneath his Postmodernist trappings he is still what I would call a *paleo-Marxist*. He still thinks in terms of *the* capital, *the* proletariat, and so on, and for me these are *dépassé* categories. They are not important things.

Q.: A minute ago you used the phrase "coming out of Marxism," as if Marxism was something you had to break free from in a sense. Could you perhaps briefly say something about your relationship to Marxism before the early '60s? ...And what you have still kept from that tradition since then?

C.C.: Well, it's a complicated question.... I adhered to the revolutionary ideas of Marxism at a very young age, a ridiculously young age. And I always tried to understand, first of all what it really was about, and secondly to behave responsibly. It became clear to me at an early stage that lots of things needed to be revised. That is to say the least. But the question was, how to revise them whilst keeping the inspiration and the framework. This is all part of a longer story, which is recorded there in two-thirds of the numbers of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. In them there is a revision of what socialism is, of the role of technology; the analysis of why Marxian economics will not hold, what modern capitalism is, and why the proletariat in any concrete sense of the term

cannot be given the messianic mission which Marx wanted to entrust to it. Finally you reach a point, and that's the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, where you see that the theoretical framework itself is rotten, that it belongs to the capitalist imaginary. Marx thinks that if only productive forces were developing rapidly enough, the problems would be solved.

Q.: The critique of Marxism in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* ends up being associated with the critique of Keynesian demand management—the Keynesian Welfare State, if you like. Now it seems that since the mid-‘70s that has fallen to pieces. And one of the questions that arises is how far the mess which we now face has to do precisely with the collapse of that consensus? Do you think that social democracy, which seemed to have created a stable capitalism up to 1975, has any hope of regaining that position?

C.C.: No, I don't think so, because what happened in the thirty years from '45 to '75—in French they call them the “*trentes glorieuses*” [and in English the *Long Boom*—contained, to use a Marxian phrase, the seeds of its own destruction. It was never possible to solve the problem of price stability and wage stability simultaneously—relatively, external equilibrium and full employment. There was always a contradiction between these, and there was bound to be, and this exploded after 1974 and 1978 with the two so-called oil crises.³ This, in turn, unleashed, again in traditional Marxist terms, a counteroffensive by the conservative strata, Reagan and Thatcher and all that. The Socialists, or the so-called Socialists, have not been able to respond. There are two

³T/E: For Castoriadis's analyses during this period, see “Author's Introduction to the 1974 English Edition” of *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*, now in [PSW2](#), 326-43.

things which we can note in this respect. First of all, there is the tremendous poverty of the neoliberal ideology. I mean, compared to all these bastards, John Stuart Mill or Adam Smith are transcendent geniuses, which they are, in fact. I mean, the Chicago Boys are just ridiculous, they're nothing. But at the same time there's the appalling poverty of the political imagination of the activities of the official Left, who are not able to respond. What did the French Socialists do? After one year of repeating stale demagogic slogans, they became the best implementers of liberal capitalist policies and that's all. The only difference to Thatcher is that they tried to maintain much more of the social safety net in, of course, the well-understood self-interest of the system. Thatcher was ruinous for British capitalism and not only for the British working class. She has ruined British capitalism and British industry.... She brought in the Japanese and all the rest of it. I mean, we don't care about that, but one should see the degree of mental and intellectual decomposition, both of the ruling strata and of the official opposition, in order to understand the mess we find ourselves in today.

Q.: Where, briefly, since '89, do you see the important emancipatory or liberatory projects today? Especially since '89, since the end of the Cold War.

C.C.: I must confess, not in many places—that's the understatement of the century. There is the [PT \(Workers' Party\) in Brazil](#) which has some elements which are hopeful. In France there has been a movement, I don't know if you've heard of them, called the *Coordinations*, involving people who are fed up with the official trade unions and who created organs of coordination, the nurses, for example, the railroad workers, the Air France workers, and so on.⁴ I'm not

⁴T/E: See "The Coordinations: A Preface" (1996), now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).

implying, of course, that this society is a dead society, but for the time being it's a sleeping society. There's no doubt about it.

Q.: Where would you expect, if expect is the right word, things to show themselves?

C.C.: I don't have the answer and I don't think there is one.... As you know, I have experience as an economist. When I was working as an economist, it was very easy to predict what would happen to the GDP in Britain, in the next twelve months, in France and the United States, and so on as long as things were going smoothly. You were following a trend, you could say that the trend would repeat itself next year, so there would be 3% growth, etc. The things which were consistently missed were the turning points: when the boom busts or when the bottom of the recession has been reached and things start going up again, and I think the same thing is true of history. I mean, if nothing happens then one can foresee increasing cretinization of the whole population. But history is precisely the field where things do not repeat themselves. Now, how and when this will happen is the question, I mean, May '68 was a total surprise, especially in France, a total surprise.

Q.: What do you think is going to happen in France in the next couple of years in terms of politics?

C.C.: The same ridiculous things. In May, the right wing will win the election, will form the government.⁵ [\[President François\] Mitterrand](#) will carry on his usual maneuverings, trying to put banana skins under their feet, etc. In '95, there'll be the presidential elections and probably the

⁵T/E: After the victory of a center-right coalition in French legislative elections, [Édouard Balladur](#) became France's Prime Minister on March 29, 1993 in a second "cohabitation" government.

right wing will win.⁶ Now what will they do? They won't do anything very much different from the Socialists. They may be a bit more authoritarian and strict on immigration, throw people out, but even that is not so certain, but they would probably try it, in order to please the right wing. I don't think they can touch very much, like the social security funds.⁷ However, they will not be able to cope with the economic problems. There are about three million unemployed now. I don't see how they can cope with it; unless there is a major American boom, followed by a Japanese boom which lifts the whole world economy and gives it momentum and I don't think there is going to be such a thing.

Q.: Did you vote in the referendum?⁸

C.C.: I did vote in the referendum and I did vote "Yes," reluctantly, very reluctantly, after very long thought, despite all the objections which you can imagine I have. I was voting as an ordinary citizen, who today votes essentially

⁶T/E: The neo-Gaullist Mayor of Paris, [Jacques Chirac](#), was indeed elected France's President on May 17, 1995.

⁷T/E: After Chirac won the 1995 French Presidential election, his [Prime Minister Alain Juppé](#) attempted that Fall a reform of social security and of other social and economic policies, which triggered in November-December of that year a general strike, conducted primarily in the public sector. This "largest social movement in France since May '68" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1995_strikes_in_France) led the neo-Gaullist government to scrap the "Juppé Plan." See Castoriadis's "No to Resignation, No to Archaism" (December 1995), in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), as well as Max Blechman's "A Rising Tide of Significancy? A Follow-Up Interview with *Drunken Boat*" (April 1996), in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).

⁸T/E: The [Maastricht Treaty](#) founding the European Union was submitted in 1992 to a vote—either a legislative ratification or, as in France and Denmark, a referendum—of the then-twelve members. The French referendum passed by the narrow margin of 50.8% to 49.2%.

negatively. He votes against. The Americans voted against Bush, they wanted anybody but Bush. And in France, who was against the positive vote? It was [\[far-right National Front President Jean-Marie\] Le Pen](#), it was the right wing of the RPR [the Rassemblement pour la République, i.e., the neo-Gaullists' [Rally for the Republic](#) political party], it was the Communist Party. So....

Q.: Are you saying in a way, capitalism can't afford social democracy anymore? Would you say now that it was social democracy or barbarism?

C.C.: I wouldn't say that absolutely objectively it can't afford it. I say that in order to have social democracy of the 1950-1975 variety in Europe, you must have new ideas on a new situation, and the Social Democrats are unable to produce these new ideas, that's absolutely clear. ...I mean, it was fantastic what happened in Britain. The Labour Party no longer has popular support. After this eleven-year orgy of Thatcherism.... I was absolutely flabbergasted!

Q.: Do you feel yourself to be a chameleon because of the different areas...?

C.C.: No, I don't see myself as a chameleon. I see myself as someone who attempts, perhaps in a certain vague and unsatisfactory way, to rise up to the challenge of the present period. I think all the fantastic specializations, such as politics, psychoanalysis, or even science, which have been going on, have extremely negative effects. The task is to dare and to think, even if one is deluding oneself—not to make a system, that's not the problem—to attempt to show that we are not totally lost in this world and that philosophy and science are not as divided as they say. And psychoanalysis has very important contributions to make to philosophical theory, and so on.

Two Alternatives: Interventions during Václav Havel's Forum 2000*

Two alternatives seem discernible for the future. Either the Westerners recover their spiritual and political creativity and are capable of decisively influencing a fertile blend of the European political tradition with other cultures (the beginning of such a movement can, of course, also take place in the non-Western world), or the whole world becomes more and more enslaved by the autonomized movement of

*T/E: *Civilization: The Magazine of the Library of Congress*, 5:2 (April-May 1998) published brief excerpts from the first Forum 2000 conference, September 3-6, 1997, that include two Castoriadis interventions: (1) Elie Wiesel, Fritjof Capra, Vaclav Havel, Bronislaw Geremek, Seizaburo Sato, René-Samuel Sirat, Cornelius Castoriadis, "Man's Freedom, God's Will," *ibid.*: 54-57, and (2) Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Novak, Timothy Garton Ash, Cornelius Castoriadis, Michael Mann, Richard von Weizsäcker, "The Prospect of Politics," *ibid.*: 70-77. Reprinted here are the transcribed words of Castoriadis on pp. 57 and 74 (see also Castoriadis's excerpted quotation on p. 67). According to the [Forum 2000 website](#), "The first Forum 2000 conference ["Concerns and Hopes on the Threshold of the New Millennium"] was held at Prague Castle...on the initiative of President Václav Havel and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. Prominent representatives of the world's religions and internationally recognized politicians, scholars, writers, and artists came together to discuss three major topics: 'The World We Have Inherited: Burdens, Divisions, Values, Assets and Visions,' 'Our World Today: Review of Our Main Spiritual, Intellectual, Political and Socio-Economic Harmonies, Disharmonies and Tensions,' and 'Hopes for the Future: Options, Responsibilities and Dilemmas in Our Quest for a Better World.'" The links on this website no longer contain any documents from the 1997 Forum 2000 meeting, whereas previously this website offered sustained transcriptions of contributions from Castoriadis and others—with, however, many apparent transcription errors.

technoscience and of economic growth for growth's sake. Events prove that a Madonna video-clip cannot offer a valid alternative to the Koran.

...[It has often been said] that national governments or states will not surrender their sovereignty to international institutions. But we see today that these governments are surrendering their sovereignty to other bodies, multinational trusts, national corporations, financial oligarchies, and other institutions. There are even cases of a Mafia organization becoming almost sovereign on a world scale. I'm not talking about some Monaco, which is not ruled by the Mafia, but very important countries.

So the possibility for a demise of national governments in the 21st century should not, to my mind, be seen in the perspective of an international world government, but in terms of misgivings about the corrosion of the State prevalent today in the former Soviet Union, where in fact the constituted powers are not exercising any real power at all. Real power is exercised elsewhere, most of it, we know, by more or less decent Mafias.

KOINŌNIA

The Nature and Value of Equality: Round Table Discussion*

Cornelius Castoriadis: Certainly, even though it seems to me difficult to present in three minutes an hour-long talk, one that is itself a condensed summary of works that have appeared or have yet to appear.

I will just recall some points, no doubt contestable for many, beginning with the affirmation that equality, like, moreover, freedom [*liberté*], cannot be deduced from metaphysical, theological, natural, or rational considerations. For me, it's a matter of what I call *social imaginary significations* and in particular, in this case, ideas that embody a will that concerns society. And I think that every attempt at deduction starting from something else is fallacious.

Let's take an example: several religions affirm the equality of humans as creatures of God, or as promised to an eternal destiny, whereas historical experience shows us that,

*T/E: September 29, 1981 round table, chaired by Giovanni Busino (due to Paul Thibaud's sudden illness), during the 28th Rencontres Internationales de Genève. Translated here are Castoriadis's portions of the "Equalities and Inequalities: Heritage or Western Myth" discussion of Castoriadis's talk from the prior day: "The Nature and Value of Equality" (itself already translated in [CL2](#)). By way of introduction, Busino explained:

The goal of this round table is to discuss, in light of other values than Western ones, a number of ideas presented yesterday evening during Cornelius Castoriadis's lecture. The ideas of Mr. Castoriadis having been elaborated within one determinate civilization and culture, we seek to confront them with some worldviews coming from other cultures.

For this confrontation, we have invited Mr. Gérard Berthoud, a specialist in cultural anthropology, Mr. Pierre Centlivres, an ethnologist and specialist in Southeast Asian cultures, and Mr. Jean-François Belleter, a specialist in problems relating to China. But before giving them the floor, perhaps Mr. Castoriadis might summarize for us the main points of his argument?

starting from the moment when these religious movements became instituted, became an integral part of the established order, they were able to accommodate themselves to practically any social system whatsoever. I know very well that long discussions took place within Western theology apropos of situations where the faithful might have the right not to obey the law or to rise up against tyranny, discussions that fill up entire libraries. But I don't think that this was overwhelmingly the social, historical truth of Christianity. I believe that the same goes for properly philosophical attempts, but we'd have to discuss them.

Second point: the properly historical dimension, including the thesis that equality and freedom—like, moreover, interrogations into the justness and justice of the law and those of the justness of the collectivity's instituted representation of the world—appear only within a particular segment of universal history, a segment the philosophers call *Greco-Western*, and which we call, for our part, *European*, without geographical, racial, or national connotation.

Of course, one can speak of primitive societies, where equality in the sense of the absence of a constituted power—still less of a separate state apparatus, opposed to society and dominating it—are said to have reigned. This sort of equality would have to, moreover, be studied in a closer way than [\[Pierre\] Clastres](#) and [\[Marshall\] Sahlins](#) have done, because there is, of course, a difference in status between men and women, this without one being able to make of it, following certain Marxists or alleged Marxists, a class difference between males and females, which is ridiculous. There nevertheless is inequality. In addition, the equality among adult males is indeed an articulated equality of rights and duties, but it is situated within the framework of what I call a *heteronomous institution of society*. That is to say that it

exists for a collectivity in which the idea that one could call into question the established law, the law bequeathed to us by the ancestors, is not only a transgressive and reprehensible idea but, above all, properly speaking, an inconceivable one. The mentality of individuals living in this society is produced by the social institution in a such way that they could not even think that it might be otherwise. It's not that they lack the brain cells or that their IQ would be lower than ours; this is due to society's very institution. Personally, I think, for example, that the initial aim of a totalitarian regime—as Orwell has decisively shown in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, since, as is known, novelists often go much further than the sociologists and the analysts—is to make its subjects unable to think otherwise. In Russian, a dissident is not called a *dissident* but really he who thinks otherwise. Another example? Islam affirms I don't know really what apropos of equality among men, but what may be noted is that, starting from the moment when the intraworldly institution of this religion has again become virulent, thinking otherwise becomes radically forbidden.

Coming back now to the first article of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) quoted yesterday by [\[Swiss philosopher of human rights\] Madame Jeanne Hersch](#), I must really admit that her description seems to me strange and debatable, inasmuch as it is said that “All men are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”¹ I know very well that, in this text, this “are born” designates a *should be* [*devoir être*], but

¹T/E: Castoriadis mistakenly says “*tous les hommes* [all men]” here, whereas, at the urging of the [“reformist, social activist, educator, independence activist, feminist and writer from India” Hans Jivray Mehta](#), this Universal Declaration speaks instead of “*Tous les êtres humains*”/“All human beings.”

I find that it would have been better to say: “We want all men to become equal in dignity and rights.”

Indeed, in this way one would not give to the uninitiated the impression that one is saying something false, since these men who “are born free and equal in dignity and rights” are, as someone else said, everywhere in chains,² on four-fifths of the planet. Saying that we want them to be equal in dignity and rights shows that this is a political task that is far from having been achieved, and it reminds the individuals who populate the earth of the enormous problems this task raises. For, there is nonetheless some truth in the old criticisms that appear, already well before Marx, apropos of what has, wrongly, been called *formal liberties*; it’s not a matter, obviously, of formal rights but really of partial ones. The equal right of all to vote is not formal; it is partial starting from the moment when the citizen does not dispose of information or when, deprived of all active participation in political matters, this citizen cannot form his own judgment, or again when, spending fifty hours a week on the assembly line, the sole thing the worker can do in the evening is swallow what the government is making him swallow through the television. Such is, in fact, the situation of these countries called *democratic*, which, personally, I name *liberal-oligarchic* countries. But I don’t want to enlarge too much upon this last point.

To sum up, I propose for the discussion three themes. First, the nonderivability of the ideas of equality and freedom starting from something else, their character as having a political will rooted in our tradition.

²T/E: Castoriadis is referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous statement, in bk 1, ch. 1 of his *Social Contract*, that “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.”

Next, the specificity of this tradition and the strange paradox it contains, since, born here, it claims to be universal, we Westerners deeming that, whether they want it or not, the others should themselves, too, try to make themselves free and equal, without, however, going so far as to say, with Rousseau, that, if need be, we shall force them to be free.³

Finally, the extraordinary range of political tasks, tasks involving the transformation of society, which the ideas of equality, liberty, and justice require [*imposent*] us, as responsibly acting subjects, to confront.

[*Busino turns the discussion instead toward the question of “what happens in other civilizations” and of whether “the notion of equality [is] specific to our Western civilization,” asking “specialists of other civilizations” to intervene. After contributions from Gérald Berthoud, printed in the acts of the colloquium, and, apparently others, including [Jesuit Father Joseph Joblin](#), Castoriadis is asked to reply:*]

C.C.: I am totally in agreement with what Father Joblin was saying about social movements: equality as we know it really has been born in the wake of sociopolitical movements. In fact, I am struck by two great historical events on the political plane: the constitution of the Greek *polis*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the reconstitution—for the first time in this geographical and historical area—of a new political collectivity by the protobourgeoisie in the West, in the twelfth and thirteen centuries. In the latter case, all of a sudden some serfs, people who have escaped from feudal estates, constitute free cities and constitute themselves as a political collectivity, managing their lands in common, which is unheard of in the medieval world.

³T/E: See bk 1, ch. 7 of Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

In this sense—as revolutionary as one might be—it must be recognized that the great historical importance of the bourgeoisie is not, as Marx thought, to have developed the forces of production but, rather, to have reconstituted a political community in Modern Times starting from which, of course, it developed the whole civilization with which we are familiar—and not only industry. That sheds light for us, moreover, on the differences that are to be established with respect to certain extra-European domains, whether it is a matter of China or of India, where one also finds philosophical efforts to call things into question that are as radical as what happened in Greece. Yet these movements of thought won't become, at the same time, democratic movements on the part of the collectivity. Hindu philosophy is, ultimately, a court philosophy. As for Chinese philosophy, there really are some collective movements, including, for example, Taoism, but what one does not observe is this mysterious interpenetration between a movement of ideas, a calling into question of the instituted representation of the world, and collective social activity.⁴

On the contrary, in Greece, at Rome, there is an affirmation of the collectivity as source of the law, which one finds again in Modern Times, when, starting in the eighteenth century, it is clearly recognized that the constituent power is the power that belongs to the people. True, it is immediately added “that it is exercised through its representatives,”⁵ even

⁴T/E: On Castoriadis's later expression of his views on Taoism, see [DR](#), 15 and 19.

⁵T/E: While Castoriadis is summarizing and paraphrasing a bit here in this quotation, Article 4 of the [French Constitution of 1946](#) does indeed state that “In constitutional matters, the people exercise [national sovereignty] by the vote of its representatives and by referendum” and Article 3 of the

if, for grand political philosophy, representative democracy is not true democracy; for Herodotus, for Aristotle, election is an aristocratic principle, the genuine democratic principle being rotation, sortition. Rousseau himself writes somewhere, “The English people thinks it is free because, every five years, they elect representatives.”⁶ And even not so radical thinkers like Madame de Stael and Benjamin Constant state that representative democracy is not truly a democracy, but that it is the sole possible form....

Finally, apropos of the Hebrews, it is true, as regards the prophetic movement, that this movement, too, calls social practices into question. I nonetheless believe that the difference comes, on the one hand, from the absence of a corresponding social movement—these prophets being individuals who are opposed to the state of society and are, for this reason, generally persecuted to the point of becoming poles of thought—and, perhaps, of Jewish action, posthumously. On the other hand, what must really be seen is that these prophets propose what they propose in the name of the Eternal; the existence of a transcendental source that feeds their preachings is indicative, all the same, of a difference with respect to both the Greek world and the modern European one.

[French Constitution of October 4, 1958](#) states: “National sovereignty belongs to the people who exercise it through its representatives and by way of referendum.” The constitutions for all five of the French Republics (with the exception of the [Third](#), which speaks instead of “deputies”) mention “representation” and/or “representatives.”

⁶T/E: See 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 full and correct quotation is: “The 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.”

[*After interventions from various speakers, Castoriadis responds:*]

C.C.: I shall try to be brief, at the risk of seeming even more dogmatic than I am.

It is indeed obvious that in democracy there is a question of scale, as has been known for a long time, right! Aristotle said that one couldn't make a town of 100 persons and, still less of 100,000 persons, into a *polis*. Here we have a problem that runs through all modern political reflection, whether it's Rousseau or it's Jefferson in the United States, for example. And I myself had thought for a time, in the great revolutionary tradition, that the workers' councils form, extended beyond business enterprises, would allow one to reconcile the requirements of a direct democracy with the scale of modern societies.

I have not spoken, [Monsieur \[Nicolas\] Tertulian](#) tells me, about economic questions. Now, I am an economist, and I consider all alleged economic justifications for inequality to be radically absurd, devoid of meaning. I say this as strongly as possible, but of course I am ready to have a discussion on this with those who say the opposite.

On top of that, please know that I am not speaking from the German Romantic view of 1830 and that I consequently have nothing to do with [Ludwig] Feuerbach. Besides, reread Pericles' Funeral Oration; this is the most important political text that has ever been written from the democratic standpoint. You will note that Pericles speaks of the Athenians as "creators" and describes how they have instituted the succession from one generation to the next ones in the city. A city ruled by law, but one in which each is left free to find his happiness as he wishes. Also when one states that the equality of the Ancients may be said to have nothing to do with that of the Moderns, we need to analyze well what

this equality of the Moderns is. For, if one is speaking of the equality of the Moderns starting in the late eighteenth century, when then did women obtain political rights?

It is equally false to state that what preoccupied the ancient philosophers solely served justice. Thus, when Aristotle, in the fifth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, tries to explain what justice is, it's not only legality but also equality. Equality, then, is not an answer but a question, and a question in all domains.

This same Aristotle establishes a distinction between arithmetic equality and geometrical equality. On the political plane, equality among citizens is based on an equal participation in power, in the governance of the city. And it is only because some rough versions of a rough equality have appeared that one usually confines oneself, as [\[the philosopher\] Madame \[Janine\] Chanteur](#) has just done again, to stating that equality has but a mathematical meaning, which is what [\[the biologist\] Monsieur \[Albert\] Jacquard](#), too, was saying yesterday evening.

Now, this is false! It's utterly false! You're tilting against windmills! For, I know of no advocate of equality who would propose that one build strictly identical housing, that one distribute strictly identical rations to newborns and adults, that one pass out clothing all of the same size, etc. And it is quite obvious that when one speaks of equality in the social domain, one does not at all intend *mathematical* equality.

I was saying yesterday that equality is a social creation even before having the political content of which we are speaking. An archaic society treats the members of an age group as equals. It does not say that they are identical; it does not say that they necessarily need the same food. It says that, in relation to certain things, the rights and duties of these individuals are similar. This is what all modern law codes say

when they speak of equality before the law. I don't think that even the stupidest bourgeois legislator would have ever thought that individuals were equal numbers. This legislator has thought, simply, that if a judge applies such and such a rule in this or that case, this judge has to apply the same rule in all analogous cases: here we have what equality from the social standpoint signifies.

Contingency in Human Affairs: Debate with René Girard*

Serge Sidoroff: I would like to provide a few brief explanations as to the subject of this meeting—contingency in human affairs—in order to avoid our falling back into the blind alleys of last night’s debate on novelty. I would like people to take the word *contingency* in two, very precise senses. The first is that of the arbitrariness of the choice of the

*T/E: Excerpts from Cornelius Castoriadis, René Girard, *et al.*, “La contingence dans les affaires humaines. Débat Cornelius Castoriadis-René Girard” (June 13, 1981 at the Cerisy Colloquium), *L’Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*, Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, eds. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983: 282-301). Led by Jacques Schlanger, the debate’s participants included: Henri Allan, Didier Bigo, Marie-Claire Boons, Cornelius Castoriadis, Jean-Marie Domenach, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Yvonne Emsellem, René Girard, Jean-Claude Guillebaud, Pierre Lantz, Pierre Livet, Maurice Milgram, Claude Mouchot, Lucien Scubla, Serge Sidoroff, and Isabelle Stengers (see “Les auteurs,” *ibid.*, pp. 552-57). A short editorial introduction is provided on p. 281:

Didier Bigo and Serge Sidoroff took advantage of the “*ciclo* [cycle of lectures]” to propose a debate between Cornelius Castoriadis and René Girard on the theme of contingency in human affairs. Between these two men’s *oeuvres*, which are so different, what passageway might be found if not, precisely, that both grant a critical place to contingency? Were the resonances the colloquium organizers had perceived between different domains and sensibilities clear to the other participants? Yes, if one is to believe the number of people who came to cram themselves, for two hours straight, into a small room that rapidly filled up with smoke, some standing up, others seated, on the ground, on chairs, or tables, who formed a circle around the drama’s two protagonists. Unless they had come, as spectators, to see close at hand the confrontation between these two powerful personalities? Here, transcribed in its near totality, is this debate, which was informal, often tense in its reservedness, and sometimes marked by humor and lack of mutual comprehension.

Castoriadis’s main talk for this 1981 Cerisy colloquium appears in translation as “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy,” now in [CL2](#), where Castoriadis speaks of “the *metacontingency* of meaning” (*ibid.*, 412). A reprint edition of *L’Auto-organisation* was issued by Hermann Éditeurs (Paris) in 2022.

emissary victim in the resolution of the mimetic crisis in René Girard's work. As is known, it is the misrecognition of this arbitrariness that allows the mechanism of society's institution to function. The second is that of the contingency of the laws a society gives itself when it self-institutes itself in Cornelius Castoriadis's sense. Here we have two problematics that grant a central place to contingency, but in two different senses and with different effects. Now, I would like to articulate these problematics, each in relation to the other. I am bound to Girard's theory on account of its explanatory richness. There is a contrast between the simplicity of the mimetic hypothesis and its capacity for morphogenetic development. Here we have something extremely seductive. But I am also very attached, by conviction, to what Castoriadis says about the possibility for a society to institute itself otherwise than by positing outside of itself the origin of its meaning and of its rules. Didier? ...

Didier Bigo: I am less optimistic than Serge, and I would especially like to know whether René Girard thinks in terms of contingency, and to what extent. In Castoriadis's work, it's obvious.

One can broach the question starting from the logic of the sacred. Girard roots it in mimesis, which engenders at once differences and indifferentiations, and in which cultural differences appear as illusory, even if they are lived as real. They proceed from a misrecognition, that of the mechanism of victimhood, which grounds the logic of the sacred. Between Girard and Castoriadis, I would bring in an absent third party, [Marcel Gauchet](#), who says that primitive societies institute their meaning outside of themselves. In what way do the two of them conceive this logic of the sacred, and how does this logic relate to the way our societies are organized?

René Girard: As concerns contingency, my answer is:

No. I do not think that my system truly would give a thought to contingency. I have been seduced by certain literary, theological, and institutional texts, and I have had the impression that I could draw therefrom the dynamic principles for the genesis of these texts, and, later on, for the genesis of certain societies. I am speaking of *that* genesis; I am not speaking of our society. For me, it's obvious that the best way of thinking my system is to think it in determinist fashion, in the sense that a researcher like Varela said yesterday that he was deterministic.¹ Not for love of determinism, but because that allows my hypothesis to be grafted onto animal theory.

The ethologists know that, in animals, certain forms of agreement and disagreement have a mimetic character. Certain conflicts around females, for example, are resolved by phenomena that are already quite close to the choice of a third party as victim. I therefore have a tendency to say mimetism is instinctive. This is a way of thinking. I'm not saying that it's necessarily the right one; I'm not even sure that it would be the best one. Mimetism is instinctive, and starting from a certain threshold animal social organizations grounded on "dominance patterns"²—that is to say, in fact, on compromise, on the beaten animal's acceptance to be dominated and to

¹T/E: The French editors refer to p. 175 of their own publication. The person mentioned here is the Chilean theorist of biology [Francisco Varela](#), whose 1979 book *Principles of Biological Autonomy* (New York: Elsevier North Holland), coauthored with [Humberto Maturana](#), was reviewed by Castoriadis in the inaugural (May 1980) issue of Pierre Nora and Marcel Gauchet's French monthly journal *Le Débat*. Castoriadis's Varela book review was translated in [PSRTI](#). See also the Agora International interview with Varela: <http://vimeo.com/27745421> conducted during the [1990 Castoriadis Colloquium at Cerisy](#) as well as the 1995 "Interview: Cornelius Castoriadis and Francisco Varela," also now in [PSRTI](#).

²T/E: Girard pronounces the phrase here in its original English.

pass always behind the dominant one—above a certain threshold of mimetism, therefore, these organizations no longer can hold, something breaks, and everything is remade at the level of the victim's death. The death of the victim implies ritual, and ritual implies the repetition of this putting to death, that is to say that one switches victims, one replaces one victim with another. Ritual assumes a substitution principle from which one can draw what [French sociologist Émile] Durkheim named *social transcendence* and what [French psychoanalyst Jacques] Lacan called *the symbolic*. Now, in thinking that mimetism is instinctive, one thinks the system as a prolongation of the theory of evolution.

This way of seeing things seems to me the simplest and easiest, because it avoids both what is trivial in animal evolutionism as applied to man (since there is a rupture) and what is metaphysical in Structuralist Anthropology today, which ultimately says, as was said in the seventeenth century, that man has fallen from the heavens. What I am saying allows one to think man starting from the animal, while thinking him nonetheless as symbolic: it allows one to think the genesis of symbolicness.

Jean-Claude Guillebaud: I don't understand in what sense you can say that there is no contingency in your system.

R.G.: There is no contingency because, at that stage, that of the emissary victim, the first victim, the birth of the social, and of hominization, the system is thinkable at the level of evolutionary theory and because all philosophical hypotheses seem to me useless. I don't see why I wouldn't benefit to the hilt from this possibility of thinking the hominization process starting from the threshold beyond which animality, animal societies in the sense used by ethologists, no longer functions. This threshold is that of sacrifice.

I'm not saying that, necessarily, there is no freedom within the system and that later on one could not put into it all sort of things that will please everyone. [*laughter*] I am saying that there is a possibility here about which we must attempt to have a discussion, not at the level of philosophy, of general ideas, but at the level of what this possibility can do about texts, about institutions, about rituals, about myths, about all cultural phenomena. At *that* level, the arguments in favor of my thesis seem to me extremely powerful. But we're faced with a very large difficulty: either I lay them out and that will last for the rest of the colloquium [*laughter*]...or else....

[*A five-page-long discussion follows, with contributions from Dupuy, Girard, Schlanger, Stengers, Sidoroff, Bigo, and Guillebaud.*]

Yvonne Emsellem: I don't know how to say this, but I'm rather troubled by this discussion. First we talked about contingency, then this became the opposite of contingency, finally transcendence. I don't know what we're talking about. We asked Girard if he believed in contingency; he responded: No. And we keep going on.... Perhaps we could pose another question? [*laughter*]

Henri Atlan: Girard doesn't believe in contingency because he is the internal observer of Girard, whereas we, who are external to Girard, we know that he believes it.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy: That's obvious!

Cornelius Castoriadis: What happens when you communicate this knowledge to René Girard?

H.A.: There's a scapeloop.³

³T/E: Atlan is making a clever play of words here between "scapegoat" (the French phrase, *bouc émissaire*, at the heart of Girard's work) and "(feedback) loop," thus yielding the *boucle émissaire* phrase he employs here to very humorous effect.



Jean-Marie Domenach: I would like to ask Girard a question about the very contingency of his interpretation. Whence the energy of this interpretation? Where do you situate it historically? Do you situate yourself the day after Christ's death, as someone has understood?⁴ Or do you situate yourself in 1981, as someone who is the product of a cultural history that is indeed privileged because marked by a resumption of myths, as [French philosopher Paul] Ricœur said to [French anthropologist Claude] Lévi-Strauss? Yet this resumption of myths must come from somewhere, there must be an invention in this history. You are situated at a certain moment of history, and I have the impression that you don't accept that. That is to say that you situate yourself both in the year 33 and in I don't know what year...in eternity, since in a way you are looping [*boucle*] the interpretation.

R.G.: Absolutely not.... On the contrary, I am as historical as possible. In 1981, with behind us this whole history of which you speak, plus ethnology and the social sciences, I am saying that what's scandalous is that our culture interprets itself and interprets everything without thinking Judeo-Christianity, at a moment when the imbrications between this Judeo-Christianity and our history are becoming more and more visible each day, which is a historical phenomenon.

But I am saying very few things beyond some of the great interpreters of the last hundred years. I am saying very few things beyond the Freud of *Totem and Taboo*, very few things beyond Heidegger, though in a different way, few

⁴T/E: This is perhaps a reference to Serge Sidoroff's mention of "evangelical revelation," not included in the present excerpted translation.

things beyond Durkheim, few things beyond Lacan who speaks of *symbolism*. I am saying only that one can do the history of symbolism, that it is born and that it dies, and that in our society it is dying for quite particular reasons. I am steeped in the history of the last hundred years. I am adding simply this: when we state that the mythic texts are vital for our individual and collective intellectual life, and when we add that Christianity has nothing to do with this life, what we are thinking thereby is necessarily crap [*de la connerie*].

J-M.D.: I maintain that you are giving a sort of achronic consecration to all these thinkers you assemble together behind you. You are placing yourself outside of history by saying to us: Here's the sublime point whence one can see the totality of history. If one situates oneself perfectly within your thought, no novelty is possible any longer, there is no other possible interpretation. There is a recursive junction with revelation, a junction that is performed starting from a summation, from a cultural cumulation, in this sense of a history, but there is nonetheless a cancellation of history.

R.G.: All the great thinkers of history, in particular the greatest, Hegel, say: Everything is history and in a certain way history has ended. No doubt about that.

C.C.: They have always been reproached for this.

R.G.: Yes, they have always been reproached for this.

C.C.: One can always say, quite banally, to Hegel: Sir, you're dead, thank you.

Jacques Schlanger: Please! I would like to take back up Domenach's question. In fact, according to you, there was, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a bad bifurcation; beforehand everything was well....

R.G.: No, not at all!

J.S.: But yes, quite so, since you'd like to rediscover a sort of Middle Ages when myth was fully integrated....

R.G.: It's incredible what people are making me say here!! I am saying none of these things. I firmly maintain that I am absolutely not saying what you have just said. I am certainly not saying that! I am saying things about which I have the impression that they are too simple. But then they are scandalous, inasmuch as I am saying that the Bible belongs to our history, it has never belonged to it more than today.

Either one takes certain texts seriously or one doesn't take them seriously. There is in the Gospels something quite important for the defense of victims, and that is called *the Spirit*. In the Gospel of John, the Spirit has a particular name that, for bizarre reasons, has never been translated. This is why we say: *the Paraclete*. Paraclete comes from the Greek word *paraklētos*, which means advocate for the defense. If you read the great books about John, they will tell you: There has to be therein some legal element, the Son defends the disciples before the Father, etc. But if you look at the texts close up, they all say the same thing: There will be martyrs in the world, but this time it won't work any longer, for the Spirit will take up their defense. What does that mean, "won't work any longer," "the Spirit will take up their defense"? This certainly doesn't mean that there will no longer be martyrs and that a magical force will prevent there from being any; this means that there will always be victims, but that they will be recognized as such. That is to say that some people will always rise to take up their defense; that is to say that the unity of the community will no longer be remade around them. The Revelation of the Gospels brings us into a world in which the system of victim representation no longer functions. It is obvious that we won't stop talking of victims, we are the sole society in the world that would have a problematic of victimization, of oppression. Insofar as we account for it, we are really obliged to tell ourselves that that

has to have more of a connection with this expression, *Paraclete*, than with Oedipus or Dionysus, by Jove [*nom de Zeus*!] It's nonetheless extraordinary that, in a gathering of intellectuals who have read these texts, it would be impossible to say that these texts have a connection with our history, today in 1981, whereas the threat weighing on the world is inscribed in these texts. The fact that one is speaking of them seems laughable.... This laughter is a defense, clearly.

It suffices to compare the myth of Oedipus to the alleged myth of Cain and Abel or to the "myth" of Joseph to see that it's not at all the same thing. The myth of Joseph is always on the side of the victim; it rehabilitates the victim and presents the victim as human. The Bible is the sole religious text that dares to say that a society unanimously against a victim can be wrong. This is, in my opinion, why it is at the origin of all revolutionary thoughts.

X.: I would like to be the advocate of the Greeks. Indeed, there is in them no text that would defend the victims against all....

C.C.: That's not true!

J.S.: Castoriadis, you talk after him.... Please...Castoriadis, Castoriadis, let him, let him finish.... You speak, and then it's Castoriadis's turn.

X.: I'm trying to be brief. There is, however, among the Greeks a defense of freedom, a critique of oppression. That's nonetheless a novelty.

R.G.: Yes, it's true that there are among the Greeks some extraordinary things. It is [French philosopher, mystic and political activist] [Simone Weil](#), in my opinion, who has spoken about it the best, in a book whose English translation

is titled *Intimations of Christianity*,⁵ though she recognizes that it's a willfully anachronistic reading. If we see in Antigone a heroine of the struggle against persecution, this is in some way through the Prophets and Christianity.

C.C.: Shall we come back to the initial topic? No? I said that it is false to say that there would be among the Greeks no denunciation....

R.G.: A final thing, the best example is that of Socrates. But Socrates, in the end, turns back toward the city; he accepts his death and the laws of the city. Jeremiah, several centuries earlier, says: If you continue to act as you are doing, God will leave the temple and it's over. There is here a difference. There never were, among the Greeks, a similar denunciation of society as such.

C.C.: It's quite the opposite, of course, given that in Greece, for the first time—and that's the birth of philosophy and democracy—there is a challenging of the institution of society, an interrogation over the instituted social significations, an interrogation over religion. Xenophanes states that the gods of the tribe cannot be true gods, because they are anthropomorphic, and that, if horses had gods, they would make horses of them.⁶ There is a constitution of a political community that itself gives to itself its own law and does not receive it, on a mountaintop, from a divine figure. I am not here to pass out good historical grades to various cultures. It happens that this rupture took place there, in Ionia,

⁵T/E: Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957; London and New York: Routledge, 1998), which, according to p. [v] of the 1957 English-language edition, is a "collection of Weil's writings on Greek thought...taken partly from *La source grecque* and from *Les intuitions pré-chrétiennes*."

⁶T/E: Xenophanes Fragment 6.

in Greece, and it happens that it didn't take place elsewhere. This rupture is the sole one that interests me, because my problem is the autonomy of society and of individuals. That is to say, the possibility for a society to challenge its institution, which is impossible starting from the moment when this society adheres to an institution posited as being given by God.

As for victims, everything is already in Homer. It has long been noted that, when one reads the poem, it is impossible not to be on the side of those who the enemies of the Greeks, of those who are going to be vanquished. The true hero of the *Iliad* is Hector and not Achilles, the true tragic person is Andromache. When in her farewell to Hector, she says, "When I shall be dragged away as a slave....," no Greek, whatever the practice of slavery may be, and whatever Aristotle might have said in quite ambiguous fashion, no Greek could think that Andromache, in becoming a slave, was a slave by nature.⁷ They knew very well that this was the result of the fact that brute force often, too often, rules human affairs. This is a first historical remark on the topic of Greece.

The second historical remark is rather elementary. While history is not an exact science, it, too, has its rigor. No one is unaware that we live in a world that has been fashioned by Judeo-Christianity just as much as by Hellenism and by its own creations, starting with the Renaissance. Yet one cannot invoke this fact to say that it is because of the Revelation of

⁷T/E: Castoriadis may be thinking of *Iliad* 6:465, where, before going off to war, Andromache's husband Hector projects toward a time when the Trojans' enemies may "drag her captive," to quote Richard Lattimore's translation (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1951; first Phoenix edition, 1961). The "slaves by nature" phrase, which appears in Aristotle *Politics* 1254a15, is commented by Castoriadis in "The Nature and Value of Equality" ([CL2](#), 269)

the Gospels that people have begun to take an interest in victims. For sixteen or seventeen centuries of Christianity, things went on as before. In a memorable speech, [\[Jacques-Bénigne\] Bossuet](#) reaffirms, in still more brutal fashion, the position that was that of Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, that “There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God,”⁸ which plainly means: Hitler comes from God, Brezhnev comes of God. Period.

The Christian current is only one of the confluents that have been formed in Europe. It is only in the seventeenth century that two of its elements were reactivated, and not everywhere, only where something else also happened. I perfectly well recognize the importance of this twofold contribution, from the standpoint where I place myself. First of all, this other statement by Paul, which is also my Credo: There no longer are any women or men, Greeks or Jews, freeman or slaves, we are all equal—with this ambiguity in Paul that we are equal elsewhere, not here.⁹ This is why, in order to be equal here, one had to wait for something other than Christianity. It is much more difficult to speak of the second ingredient, as well as to see its relationship with the previous phrases. This is love. Love for the human being as such, in other cultures, and in ancient times—that didn’t exist. In Greece, a person was loved to the extent that this person was worth something. This is a question of an ethical, political, historical choice, and there I feel that I am a

⁸Transcriber’s note: “Romans 13:1.” [T/E: Castoriadis comments this passage in “Intellectuals and History” (1987), now in [CL3](#), 137-38.]

⁹T/E: Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Castoriadis comments this passage in “Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics” (1990), now in [CL4](#), 159-60.

Christian; this is even the sole point on which I feel myself to be Christian.

Now, Jean-Pierre, it astonishes me that you would have made this comparison with Blackwell and Kendall: you say that the object can be absolutely anything; it's obvious that the object cannot be just anything.¹⁰

J.-P.D.: I'm saying: in Girard's work.

C.C.: I'm saying: *in reality*.

J.-P.D.: Ah! OK, we're not talking about the same thing.

C.C.: Texts are not my forte. The object is not just anything, and the subject and the other are not just anything. There is a history, there is a society, and there is no object that would be able to become the stake in a rivalry if it is not socially instituted—which means that man is not an animal, that woman is not necessarily an object of rivalry, nor money. The object is socially instituted, which makes all the difference. In the discourse you are deploying, there are some men who are from birth fully men, naturally men; they have mimetic desires and they find themselves placed before some objects. I believe that I'm hearing a classical economist describing the genesis of the economy.

Individuals are socially fabricated to desire such and such a thing and not to desire some other thing. If objects become rival stakes, this is because the institution of society

¹⁰T/E: In a part of the Castoriadis-Girard discussion otherwise not translated here (*L'Auto-organisation*, pp. 284-85), Dupuy says, "Please pardon me for the esotericism of the terms, but you realize that this is precisely the example of Blackwell and Kendall's urns. [*Cries of No! No!*]" Dupuy had already discussed this example above in *ibid.*, p. 201. See David Blackwell and David Kendall, "The Martin Boundary for Polya's Urn Scheme and Application to Stochastic Population Growth," *Journal of Applied Probability*, 1:2 (December 1964): 284-96.

in question contains, most of the time informally, a rivalry mechanism. If one ignores this element, one is purely and simply drifting toward a banal sort of psychology.

R.G.: I never give good grades either to some or to others. I am speaking of certain sacred texts. I don't feel at all concerned by what you have just said about instituted society, about history, about the absence or presence of rivalry; to say that the symbolic, transcendence, institutions have a history necessarily comprises all that. You don't comprehend that I am describing the genesis and the degeneration of the social institution. You cannot deny that there would be crises in societies; that's enough for me.

As concerns the religious, the error of modern history is to think everything in terms of beliefs, whereas the first primitive who comes along will tell you that religion *is* certain acts: rituals. In my opinion, not a lot of importance should be attached to Deism or Atheism. On the other hand, the fact that there were seventeen centuries of Christianity during which nothing changes is very important. As a matter of fact, the Christians reproach me for condemning sacrificial Christianity. So, it's better to know what I have written.

We are the sole society that would no longer have sorcery in its institutions. We imagine that it's something natural not to believe a witch [*socière*], even when she says, "I'm guilty, I am a witch," but we are the sole society that would do that. The word *Paraclete* in John comes right after a quotation from the Old Testament that is the negation of magical thought: I am going to die in order that "the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law. *They hated me without a cause.*"¹¹ Judeo-Christianity reveals hate without

¹¹T/E: Used here is the King James Version of John 15:25, but with emphasis on the last sentence as in the original French transcription.

cause, social hatred. It is at *that* moment that the Paraclete has spoken. Phrases like this one are, I believe, absolutely unique in religious texts. For, all religious texts are always on the side of the sacrificers against the victim. In the Greek myths, there is always an element of guilt, whether it be on the side of Dionysus or of Oedipus. The Bible and the Gospels alone remove this element, saying that hatred and fear of God, which are there, are without cause.

C.C.: In Greek myth, there is no guilt, and that's its grandeur. No one is guilty.

R.G.: Oedipus is not a defilement?

C.C.: Everyone knows that Oedipus is not guilty except in an entirely external way. That is one of the knots of the tragedy. The profound meaning of the Greek myths is that there are no sacrificers and no victims. There is universal pity—*eleos*—there are no victims.

R.G.: The notion of destiny is a substitute for the sacred. This chain I am making between plague, parricide, and incest, responsibility at the level of the whole city—do you believe that this conjunction of significations happens and that everywhere it acquits [*innocente*]? How is it that this conjunction seems to us guilty in the Middle Ages, that there we see victims and believe in the guilt of those who lived this system of representations? How can we say that the myth of Oedipus is innocent?

C.C.: How does one believe it in the Middle Ages? One believes it because Judeo-Christianity is a religion of guilt.

R.G.: One didn't cease believing it in Greece, you believe it still for Oedipus, whereas the Western world, at least, you're rid of it.

C.C.: Huh?!

R.G.: Of course, since you believe that the myth of

Oedipus is innocence.

C.C.: You aren't understanding what I am saying; you continue to see Greek myth in terms of victims.

R.G.: I am not continuing, I am the first to see the Oedipus myth in terms of victims. This type of system of representation does not form without there being a genuine victim behind it.

Marie-Claire Boons: You say that we have a problematic of victimization; it seems to me that in our century one does nothing but speak of victims, one fabricates a lot of them.

R.G.: I am not saying that men are better today. I know very well that we are particularly effective victim-manufacturers. But we are the sole world in which, to accuse other men, it must be shown beforehand that they are perpetrators, that they make victims. The victimhood problematic, among us, is always already redoubled. This is characteristic of Western history since the theme of persecution has spread. For me, it's a matter of explaining certain fundamental societal facts. If you look at the Chinese or the Hindus, you'll find nothing of this kind.

Pierre Lantz: Everything that has been said doesn't take into account a key notion, it seems to me, that of sin. Sin plays a double role. "Sin boldly," said [Martin] Luther. This can lead to an extremely cruel and realistic morality. Take Luther's attitude during the peasant revolt; he said to the powerful and to the feudal lords of the time: "Kill them all." As if the destiny of the sinner, because he is a sinner, was to sin till the point of murder. Whence the contradiction between the "Thou shalt not kill" and the fact that this doesn't prevent killing. What is characteristic of our world is, on the one hand, a literature that is that of sin, of the innocent victim, and, on the other hand, a social reality dissociated from this

literature, yet in a certain way grounded upon it. In this sense, it's a terribly dissociated civilization, and an unhappy one, probably for this reason.

R.G.: I'm in agreement with most of the things you are saying. But if one refers to the sacred texts, one sees that they speak little of sin in the sense of the Churches and a lot about victims. If you take the text of Matthew about the Last Judgment, he divides the sheep from the goats.¹² One says, he makes victims, but the sheep are those that did not give water, that did not go see the victims, that did not relieve the suffering, etc. The division for which Christianity is reproached occurs in terms of those who have persecuted the victims and those who, on the contrary, have defended them. To return to the notion of sin, it is evident that we make many victims, and that we know how to work on texts in a way that makes them into instruments of extraordinary guilt. But, in my opinion, they are not guilt-inducing in themselves.

C.C.: You say that you are making the genesis of the social sphere [*du social*]. I am saying that you are making no genesis of the social sphere. You are surreptitiously giving yourself already social individuals and objects, and starting from there that functions. That's all. There is no genesis of society. In order that individuals might be in rivalry, or in whatever else, they must already possess language.

R.G.: I first spoke of animals.

C.C.: Yes, well, there we're in agreement. What was said this afternoon? Corvidae, Psittacidae are mimetic. I do not think that human society would be the prolongation of animal mimeticism. Unlike you, I think that the history of

¹²T/E: Following the KJV translation of Matthew 25:32-33. French biblical translations, and Girard here, speak of billy goats (*boucs*) and ewes (*brebis*).

humanity does not just prolong evolution....

R.G.: I did not say: “does not just....”

C.C.: Well, yes! Because your whole mechanism is grounded upon something that you borrow from the ape. I’m sure that we borrow many things from the ape, a huge number of things, but as is obvious, there is continuity, and also rupture. Where is the rupture? There are, among higher animals, some very important elements of mimetism and, more generally, instinctual behaviors. At the moment when the human species as we know it appears, the instinctual behaviors are, in bulk, broken, torn to pieces by the emergence of something else. This something else the human species has acquired is the psyche as radical imagination. That is to say, radical madness—which signifies that the human species is radically unfit for life and that it would have disappeared had it not created this something else that is the institution of society. How, and why? Neither how nor why. We’re smack dab in the middle of this contingency that is the creation of the institution. It’s an illusion to believe that there could be a derivation of the first fact of the institution of a society. The institution of a society is neither producible nor morphogenetizable nor anything at all. It is creation. It is a form with a matter, an *eidos*, that rises up, and starting from this alone can we understand something and posit for ourselves the enigma of the existence of this form. *That*, of course, is “contingent.” But in truth this is not contingent, it’s metacontingent. That is to say that it’s contingent for us while placing ourselves at the standpoint that, in our society, we cannot avoid adopting. This is a standpoint that consists in pretending that we are placing ourselves outside of society and of history. And contemplating all that from without, we can say: There is no necessity for *homo erectus* to become this or that. Now, it is obvious that we, in our society, cannot

avoid adopting this external standpoint, because we are living within our society, within a society that can *reflect* upon itself and upon all the other ones. But *reflecting* in this way is something quite recent in the history of humanity. There are, on the one hand, 250 centuries wherein this is impossible and, on the other, five or six centuries. We cannot avoid thinking thusly, but at the same time, this is empty. This contingency of the institution of our society is the very condition for the discourse on contingency. There is here a problem of grounding that is insoluble.

Most of the peoples in the history of humanity cannot speak like that. That is to say, once again: Jean-Pierre, the objects cannot be just anything whatsoever. These people are in their cognitive, informational, organizational closure. Their world is necessary; they do not speak in terms of metacontingency, because the self-relativization of their own society has never taken place. There exists for them a guarantee of the validity of the institution of society, an instituted representation of the sanctity of society. There is contingency for us, but not contingency for those who are within. Contingency for us starting from the moment when we can say: *The institutions of the others are not false, perverse, or bad*, but: *The institutions of the others are simply other institutions*. That is to say, starting from the moment when we have already very broadly relativized our own institution.

From this situation flows a major political problem. The fact that we recognize in each population the right to have the institutions it wants, the fact that there would be no absolute metahistorical value judgment in no way frees us from the responsibility to say that there exist certain values that have emerged in our society and that we believe to be universal. A responsibility politically to chose certain values that we affirm universally, *urbi et orbi*; that men must not be

massacred, that men are to be equal, etc.

These are the political preoccupations that animate me, and this is why this tradition that I call *Greco-Western* is dear to me. Because it's the sole one in which I see, in fact everyone has seen it, the challenging of the instituted imaginary of a society, and the birth of a project, certainly quite fragmentary, for the instauration of an autonomous society. A society that knows that it cannot live without laws or without institutions, but that can challenge them lucidly, which does not mean *in transparency* or *in the clarity of Cartesian consciousness*. It is only in an autonomous society that autonomous individuals can exist, and vice versa.

Finally, to return to contingency, the institution of such a society will be contingent in still another sense. For the first time in history, it will have to give itself laws, knowing that they are not given by God, or by nature, or by reason. For individuals, taking on [*assumer*] their existence, their equality, taking on the necessity of law, knowing all the while that the law has no "transcendent" foundation refers back to something else that is, in my opinion, the ultimate problem: taking on the fact that they are mortal, and that after death, there is nothing. For this reason, death has no meaning, and for this reason, life has no meaning. And it is only on this initial soil of absence of meaning that we can construct any meaning at all for ourselves, once again in metacontingency.

Religion, the sacred dimension of the institution of society, has always been the way in which the institution of society gives to the psyche, such as society socializes it, some signification or meaning, and the ultimate signification given by religion has always been given in the form of a denial of

death. "O Death, where is thy victory."¹³ Almost everywhere.... The problem of an autonomous society is ultimately this: Can men accept themselves as mortals, as living in a radical contingency? Can they, starting from this mortality and from this contingency, construct a meaning for themselves so long as they live?

H.A.: I would like simply to make a small, almost formal remark. In this discussion, both Girard and Castoriadis are led to speak of Judeo-Christianity. What I mean is that Judeo-Christianity is a Christian institution that...

C.C.: Judeo-Christian?

H.A.: No, Christian. That's what it's about, if you will. Every association of two things is always an institution of the second one. This is a Christian institution whose essence is to reduce Judaism to a prefiguration of Christianity. In Judeo-Christianity, Judaism is a kind of phantasm that prepares the announcement, Christianity. I have nothing against Judeo-Christianity, simply I wouldn't want that to be confused with Judaism.

As a very revealing example, Girard was just saying that in our society the status of victims has changed, to the point that, in order to be able to victimize someone, one must first show that this is a perpetrator. This, if I've understood things well, is perceived as some sort of progress, a demystification or a desacralization, or at least as a lifting of the misrecognition of victimhood mechanisms. One finds this phenomenon, in an upside down form verging on caricature, not only in directly Judeo-Christian societies, in the sense you

¹³T/E: While some French bibles do contain this phrase as cited by Castoriadis (*O mort, où est ta victoire?*), in English (KJV, 1 Corinthians 15:55) there is the complex exclamatory query, "O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory?"

employ this term, but also in implicitly Christian societies, like Soviet society, where it is forbidden to declare one's opposition to someone without first showing that he's an aggressor. Even if this is evidently false, and if it's quite the opposite. Without wanting to take a too recent political example, there was a peace agreement that was signed not very long ago. Did the people who were against this peace agreement for quite honorable reasons—because, for example, this agreement didn't fit their political aims—therefore have the right to say: "We are against for this or that reason..."? But no, they didn't have the right; they first had to show that this peace agreement is in reality an act of war. It is only once they were able to show *that* that they had the right to state their opposition.

In my opinion, this does not involve a lifting of misrecognition; it's still greater misrecognition, which takes us back to the ambiguous role Christianity has played in this society. Such misrecognition rests on the ignorance of a certain kind of relation to the law, which I find, instead, in Judaism. This relation to the law seems, from the standpoint where you are situating yourself, quite farfetched and improbable: it retains an absolute responsibility in relation to the law and yet evacuates all guilt. It's a way of relating to the law in which individuals have a total responsibility as if it were a matter of their own salvation, knowing all the while that it's not a matter of their salvation, since in reality it's a matter of responsibility in relation to what is not them. The most spectacular example of that is an example from the Talmud, given apropos of the responsibility of a landowner with regard to the damages caused by his ox in the neighbor's field. It is given as the prototype of the individual's relation to the law. It exists not in relation to my own acts but in relation to the acts of my ox. This really implies that I am

responsible since I pay the damages caused by my ox, but this is a responsibility that rules out all guilt, since I am not guilty for what my ox does.

This way of relating to the law not only does not rule out but necessarily implies a relation to the sacred, to divinity, which is wholly different from the one Castoriadis presents to us as going without saying, as an obvious obligation: if the law comes from God, then.... No, it's not like that, the God at issue in Castoriadis's discourse is the one of Christian theology, whereas the God over there is another God. I personally think that there is not a sole God. There are a multitude of them, and each implies a different relation with those who claim to be his followers. This kind of reminder adds nothing to the discussion, either in one direction or the other, perhaps it takes something away from both sides. But...well, there you have it.

Claude Mouchot: Castoriadis, you began by reproaching Girard for giving himself already socialized men, surreptitiously, you said. Then in your own approach you have given yourself a strictly nonsocialized man, mad even. And as that cannot hold, you have socialized him by an original, originary institution, which you have posited as not being conceivable, as unthinkable. This is an insoluble problem, and yet one that withstands only two possible solutions. One solution is given from within, the other from without. You have gone on as if the solution had been furnished from within, whereas, as you have said, the answer cannot be given. A solution coming from outside society is in perfect contradiction with the pseudogenesis you have made, which is not a genesis at all, but, you really had to talk.... So, I don't know whether it's a jest, but at the moment when you have given yourselves these men, these mad psyches, it sufficed to introduce Girard's mimesis to obtain, from within, a solution

to your problem, a social institution.

J.-P.D.: I would like to come back to Claude Mouchot's question. There is a misunderstanding: as I see it, it's the opposite thing for which Castoriadis reproaches Girard, to claim to give oneself nonsocial individuals, evolved apes, if you will, and to pretend to produce the social sphere on the basis of these nonsocial individuals. Whereas what he, Castoriadis, is claiming, which seems banal—though, he says, it's there that we have the whole complexity of the problem—is that one can think society only starting from itself, and only if one considers individuals as each having the whole of society within them. This is ultimately what Girard may also be said to be doing, but despite himself, despite his system.

Whatever both of you say, I don't see any deep-seated incompatibility between you two on the question of contingency. On the other hand, where I begin to see a radical difference between you two, but which on your part, Castoriadis, surprises me, is on the following question. You have opposed creation to morphogenesis. It is true that the Girardian theory is a morphogenetic theory, whereas you have a theory of creation that is not a theory of morphogenesis.

The question I pose you is the following. I know your esteem for and interest in the works of Atlan and Varela, who fit into the framework of purely morphogenetic theories—certainly not of social morphogenesis, but nonetheless. From that point on, how does it happen that you would take an interest in these theories of morphogenesis, and what ties do you see between them and your own works, since you refuse to have a morphogenetic theory?

C.C.: Of course, it's not simple. First, as concerns contingency and to be done with it, I have read Girard and I respect his beliefs. But there is in his work a dual fundamental belief, the belief in God and the belief in Science. How he

reconciles them, I don't know; that's another story. Starting from there, and starting from the moment when he speaks of determinism and evolution, there no longer is any place for contingency or for metacontingency, if not an accidental, contingent place—in the sense of Hegel when, at the bend in a paragraph from the Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, he states that everything that is real is rational, that everything that is rational is real, and, he adds, what is not rational in the real is accident, illusion, error, etc.¹⁴ Now, what is skated over in this addition, in this little phrase, is the totality of history. In this contingent fashion, Girard recognizes contingency.

For me, it's something else entirely. We're living, until further notice, in a universe that perhaps has exited from a "Big Bang" and that is such as it is because, at the outset, especially some matter and very little antimatter, in a proportion of 10^{-40} , have been placed into Blackwell and Kendall's urn. Had things evolved differently, where the proportion would have been in equal amounts, we would not be here this evening. There is all the same a major difference between us.

J.-P.D.: I say, "No," while distinguishing two Girards.

C.C.: That's the multiplication of the loaves!

J.-P.D.: ...the Girard who plays the game of your Grandpa's epistemology, of determinism, etc., and the Girard

¹⁴T/E: See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The translator here uses "actual" (*ibid.*, Preface, p. 22), while Castoriadis here translates the German original, *wirklich*, as "*réel* [real]." And his translation for what Castoriadis summarizes as "accident, illusion, error, etc." reads, more expansively: "Everything other than this actuality is transitory existence [*Dasein*], external contingency, opinion, appearance without essence, untruth, deception, etc." (*ibid.*, §1, p. 25).

who, perhaps despite himself, produces a different epistemology from the one in which he imagines that he is working.

R.G.: No! We are going to end up with the kind of confusion that took place yesterday apropos of Varela. Varela is interested in morphogenesis, but what does that signify for him, rightly, but to say of a field that it can be scientized, rendered scientific? This is necessarily to place a bet on determinate relationships. That's all, period. There is a morphogenetic element in my system, but it does not exclude determinism.

Pierre Livet: I would like to ask Girard what are the relations, what are the mediations he establishes between texts and reality?

R.G.: Contrary to most interpreters today, I think that literary texts and certain documents are capable of truth, even if they are mystified. To take up once again the example from a moment ago, what if we're told in a text that some lepers or some Jews were killed because they are guilty of the plague? We know how to recognize in these texts the true and the false, but the falsity of certain elements assures us of the truth of certain other ones. Because it's a falsity characteristic of a certain type of lie.

P.L.: My question wasn't "Is the text false, true, mystifying," but rather: There are texts and other modes of social realities; what relations and what differences must one see between the two?

R.G.: I am saying of myths that they construct reality. Myth is a magical causality starting from which a worldview is set up. My interest is to show that, if one conceives this mythological construction on the basis of a mechanism of victimhood, one succeeds in explaining in a better way than has been done up to now all sorts of institutions and beliefs

that are common to a quantity of primitive societies. One can show that numerous ritual institutions include variable elements, ambivalent elements of the sacred, of power, of sacrifice. Depending on the society, some elements will become actualized, sacrifice among the Aztecs, royalty in other ones.... These institutions have one and the same genesis, and for reasons of bifurcation analogous to those we were talking about today, they veer either toward sacrifice properly speaking, or toward technical forms, or toward certain forms of political power, but always they are tied to reality-constructions that are myths.

C.C.: You have said that there is no contingency in your system, Jean-Pierre claims the opposite. But he has spoken for you, and perhaps in spite of you?

R.G.: I have long believed in contingency, and three-quarters of my research have been done in this spirit. But the true thing you say about me is that I am Christian, I believe in God and in Science.

C.C.: Therefore, Jean-Pierre is wrong.

R.G.: No, he is perfectly right at the level of morphogenesis. That is to say that the designation of the victim is contingent or arbitrary, if you prefer. I'm saying this in the sense that just anyone could have fit the bill. In this sense, certainly there is contingency, but simultaneously the explanation of the crisis is perfectly deterministic. If I say, "No, there's no contingency," this is in the philosophical sense of the term. The place of contingency in human affairs is a philosophical question, an ultimate question. For scientific and intellectual work, the ultimate questions almost never are, in my opinion, of any interest. They have a personal, moral interest.... And one must speak of morality. But when we speak as we are doing at the present hour, that is to say, in order to avoid certain essential subjects—for,

morality is an essential subject, isn't it?—the ultimate questions are without any interest.

Lucien Scubla: In listening to Castoriadis, I was thinking of a book by Bertrand de Jouvenel on power.¹⁵ He tries to demonstrate that it's starting from the moment when society believes itself to be at the origin of its laws, starting from the moment when these laws become contingent, that one witnesses the birth of an increasingly absolute power....

[*Meanwhile, Girard asks Castoriadis for a cigarette.*]

J.-P.D.: This is [Marcel] Mauss's thesis on reconciliation through economic exchange.

A voice: Exactly!

Maurice Milgram: The fact remains that it's extremely toxic. I have been putting up for two hours with other people's smoke, and it's a real pain.

A voice: Open the window!

[*People leave.*]

¹⁵T/E: A 1945 book by [Bertrand de Jouvenel](#) (1903-1987)—the French antifascist-turned fascist editor-turned cofounder of the [Hayekian Mont Pelerin Society](#) (1947)-turned sympathizer of May '68-turned supporter of the Socialist Party and of François Mitterrand—appeared in a 1948 English-language translation by J.F. Huntington as *Power: The Natural History of its Growth*, with a preface by D.W. Brogan (London and New York: Hutchinson).

“It’s the People Who Are Instituting”: Discussion with Philippe Raynaud on Max Weber^{*}

Alain Finkielkraut: The decline of Marxism has brought with it, among other intellectual consequences, the rediscovery of a certain number of great thinkers who had been obscured or neglected so long as the author of *Capital* constituted what [Jean-Paul] Sartre called “the unsurpassable horizon of our time.”¹ This was the case until a short while ago for [Alexis de] Tocqueville, that key inspirer of contemporary political thought. It is the case today with Max Weber, the great German sociologist who died, I remind you, in 1920. Philippe Raynaud has just devoted to him a profound, learned, and subtle book titled *Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne*.

I have asked Philippe Raynaud—who is a philosopher—as well as Cornelius Castoriadis—who formerly ran the review *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and who has published, among other works, [*Devant la guerre*](#), [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#), and [*Crossroads in the Labyrinth*](#)—to introduce us to Weber’s thought while discussing its potential topicality.

^{*}T/E: Discussion between Cornelius Castoriadis and Philippe Raynaud for Alain Finkielkraut’s *Répliques* program, which was broadcast September 12, 1987 on the France Culture radio network; listen at: <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/si-le-mal-etait-ce-qui-est-refoule-ce-serait-facile-jean-baudrillard-1990-8660185> (last audio link on page). See Castoriadis’s 1988 review of Raynaud’s book (*Max Weber et les dilemmes de la raison moderne* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987]), now available as “Individual, Society, Rationality, History,” in [CL3](#).

¹T/E: For the source of this phrase from Sartre, see [CL4](#), 40, n. 1.

And here is the first hypothesis I submit, trembling before their sagacity. It is to Max Weber that we owe the famous distinction between the “ethic of conviction”—that is to say, the refusal to compromise the ends of action through impure means—and the “ethic of responsibility”—which, as Raymond Aron has written, commands one to situate oneself within a situation, to envisage the consequences of possible decisions, and to introduce into the skein of events an act that will arrive at certain results or will determine certain effects we wish for.

May not the current interest in Max Weber be explained by a reassessment of this ethic of responsibility within the intellectual world, which in times past earned Aron, avid reader of Weber, jeers and gibes from his peers and which today earns him their unanimous admiration?

Philippe Raynaud: I do indeed think that the changed attitude toward the division between conviction and responsibility certainly plays a role in the rediscovery of Weber’s thought, to which I am trying to contribute a little bit. But I believe that the first remark that may be made about how this distinction has been misunderstood lately is that, indeed, the intellectuals of which you are speaking can be seen as people who have placed conviction above all possible responsibility.

Conversely, though, what also is to be noted is that they have served ideologies, movements, and currents that themselves have professed and put into practice and practiced an unprecedented sort of cynicism wherein no conviction was really stable. I think that if one lingers, for example, over the Sartre example, at least starting in ’53, one would see very clearly that a conviction that is affirmed to be superior to responsibility is in fact extremely elusive and exhibits an adaptability to the vagaries of politics that is no longer even

some sort of responsibility, but, as a matter of fact, cynicism.

So, it is precisely for this reason that Weber is interesting. For, he offers not a middle way or an ill-defined compromise, but, first of all, a very, very profound reflection on the way in which this distinction takes on meaning in the contemporary world. As is known, the privileged example is his discussion of pacifism when war broke out in 1914. Now, the pacifism Weber is discussing is not a, let us say, religious type of movement, a rejection of the world in general, but a movement that is a bit at the pivot point between elements coming from a religious background, or a decaying Christian religion, and an element that is, on the contrary, highly political: the rejection of the instituted order of the world.

So, I believe, the first thing that can be said about this distinction in Weber’s work is that it takes on its full meaning at the moment when the relatively hierarchized classical universe has begun to decay. In that universe, as in the system of Indian castes, or as in the Catholic medieval world, one witnessed spheres of activity corresponding to heterogenous interests. Soldiers and priests had different roles to play.

So, I believe that the first thing that must be seen in this matter, and I am going to dwell upon it for the moment, is that the opposition between conviction and responsibility appertains typically to our world, takes on its full meaning in our world, because we are dealing with ideologies or global, universalizing worldviews, ones that make a claim to universality, and that’s why they are in conflict.

And this is why, let us say, it is within that framework, I believe, that the choice takes on a meaning. That is to say that the first lesson of Weber is that we are no longer in the happy era when, as in the *Rigveda*, I believe, the Brahman could say to the warrior: But you don’t have to worry about praying or being nonviolent; you have but to make war. There

you have it.

A.F.: Cornelius Castoriadis, do you also espouse this operative distinction?

Cornelius Castoriadis: I would like to say a few words about this question. But first, I would like, without any flattery, nevertheless to salute Philippe Raynaud's book, which is a beautiful book, rich and dense at the same time as clear, a quite rare occurrence these days, and which broaches a series of subjects that were of capital importance for reflection in society, in history. Apropos, in discussing Max Weber, who himself is a figure that, in a sense, truly dominates sociological thought in the twentieth century, I do not believe that one will find others with the same stature—in our century, I mean. Personally, I am all the happier because, if you will allow me this allusion, apart from Marx, the sole author who is truly taken seriously among the sociologists in [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) is Max Weber. He's the sole one discussed. That said, friendly feelings and respect for authors—I'm speaking of Weber—do not preclude discussion and criticism.

As for me, I have never been comfortable with this distinction between an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility. Indeed, I think that it's much more either a response to a contingent historical situation and even, at the same time, a means of rationalizing contingent historical responses, or else, then, a point of view of judges of inner convictions, if I may say so, rather than a distinction that might be of service to us, if we want to think through the problems of action and ethics. What I mean by this is that, if I have convictions, if I am committed in a great cause, as this is indeed the example taken by Philippe Raynaud following Max Weber, well, I am not truly committed to this cause, or rather I do not do what is necessary if I act without any regard

for the consequences of my acts. This is absolutely obvious.

Conversely, in every action claiming simply that it is responsible and that it sees the consequences of its means, the question of the ultimate end is posed, therefore the question of value. Someone may tell you: “All that, it’s just some nice theories, but *I* am saving human lives,” because, I don’t know, he goes into a hospital. Well, he is not completely aware of what he is saying, because him saving human lives means he has the conviction that saving human lives passes before everything else.

A.F.: Yes, but, Cornelius Castoriadis, I would nevertheless like to add something here, because even if ultracritical intellectual attitudes, the supercritical attitudes of the ’50s and ’60s do not quite match the idea of an ethic of conviction for the reasons Philippe Raynaud just stated, this doesn’t keep there from being a rejection, in this attitude, of any ethic of responsibility, in the sense that one criticized, for example, the mechanisms of representative democracy without asking oneself whether direct democracy could work. One criticized power in general, as if no intellectual could address the question of power. One criticized prisons without asking oneself what one was going to do with these people once the prisons were destroyed. One criticized the asylum without asking oneself how to manage the problem of madness. Was there not a sort of divvying up of tasks between those in positions of responsibility and the intellectuals who didn’t want to dirty their hands with the very question of responsibility?

C.C.: Yes, but that’s precisely what Philippe Raynaud called the ideological attitude in the disparaging sense of the term, that is to say, some incoherent attitudes for which one can invent some rationalizations, but which do not hold. I would say but one thing: I do not think, for my part, that there

is a rigorous dialectic of ends and means. Nowhere are there any rigorous dialectics. There nevertheless are very close relationships between means and ends. When you have a General Secretary of the Communist Party in power who says that he is preparing a bright future while massacring tens of thousands, millions of people, one can say, and it was said to him at the time, and, moreover, Leon Trotsky told it to him, that the end justifies the means. Very well. Still the means must produce the end, right? This elementary bit of reasoning was, at the time, massively occulted by the Stalinists, by the fellow travelers, by Sartre, by whomsoever.

P.R.: That, moreover, is why I believe that the problem with which Weber was not confronted is the problem of this combination of moral purity and cynicism that characterized the intellectual world of the era. But I do believe that, in the examples you are recalling, what is very, very remarkable is that we are dealing with people who at the same time are, as Weber would say, worldly, in the sense that these are militant activists.

These are people who say that society must be changed; they are not people who say either that true life lies elsewhere or that one must take refuge in contemplation and leave the world behind. They are people who want to change society, or who claim to want to change it, without taking any interest in the means for doing so, that is to say, who ensconce themselves in a position that subjectively is very, very difficult to understand, that is to say, someone who is at once within and without, who is at once—how do I put it?—radical and integrated, and who, let's say, claims to be so.

What, moreover, can be noted in passing is that, in fact, the movements you have just recalled have, for better or for worse, ended up inspiring those in positions of responsibility. Public politicians have very broadly been

influenced by those currents, with, moreover, varying and not always felicitous effects, which resulted from the fact that it is extremely difficult to put into practice doctrines whose central premise is precisely a rejection of the question of implementation.

Finally, this is the reason why I believe that what is nonetheless very, very important in Weber’s distinction, and here I am, moreover, completely in agreement with Cornelius Castoriadis in saying that this distinction is quite relative. I would add that Weber himself knew it, that he ended his text by saying that the true politician is he who brings together the point of articulation between...

A.F.: The text we’re talking about is his lecture called...

P.R.: It’s called “Politics as a Vocation,” that is to say, *Politik als Beruf*.

A.F.: Well, it was published by Éditions 10/18 under the title “Le savoir-faire...”²

C.C.: I myself would have preferred “Politics as vocation and as profession.”

P.R.: Yes, that would have been better; it might have sold to more people.

C.C.: Yes, but he was German.

A.F.: Yet this distinction, which is therefore known

²T/E: Weber’s two lectures on vocations or callings, specifically about the scientist and the politician, were published in 1963 as *Le Savant et le politique* by Union Générale d’Éditions in a French translation by Julien Freund, with an introduction by Raymond Aron. “Éditions 10/18” is the paperback collection of the Union Générale d’Éditions publishing house that also brought out, from 1973 to 1979, the eight-volume collection of Castoriadis’s writings from *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (partially translated, so far, in [PSW1](#), [PSW2](#), [PSW3](#), and [MPSW1-2](#)).

and on which you have shed a bit of light, between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction in Weber's work, is further complicated by a question he called that of *the war of the gods*. That is to say that he says, if I have understood well—and this is what Leo Strauss called Weber's *nihilism*: We live in a world where there is, as it were, no determinative reason, no absolutely rational justification for choosing one system of values over against another system of values.

And consequently, well, we are condemned, as it were, in ethics, to a war of the gods, to a polytheism of values. Each has chosen his values, but for reasons he cannot fully justify, and it is here that Weber is the disciple of [Friedrich] Nietzsche, since it is the will to power of the individual that manifests itself in the choice of his values rather than rationality or the reasonable character of the system he is defending.

So, what can one say *today* of this war of the gods? Is this true? Well, I have posed a question kind of like that, a bit stupid: Is this true? Do you think that, really—first of all, what is the right interpretation of Weber? And secondly, are we truly condemned to an inexpiable war of the gods?

P.R.: I believe that this distinction is indeed at the center of a certain number of contemporary debates. For example, it must be recalled, since the works of [the contemporary German philosophers Jürgen] Habermas and [Karl-Otto] Apel are beginning to be known a little bit in France, that, in a way, their entire way of thinking is controlled by that question. So, what I will add is that the way in which the debate has evolved or has developed in contemporary Germany—well, among our contemporaries—has sometimes simplified or obscured a little bit Weber's thought.

I believe that two things must be said, since you posed

the question: Is this really what Weber means? The first thing is that, from polytheism to the war of the gods, the result is not absolutely necessary. That is to say that, as a matter of fact, the premodern world, in Weber’s work—I am going back a bit to that problem—is a world in which it is conceivable to have a polytheism that is not a war of the gods. This is the system of Indian castes, which is ordered around a polytheism in which there is no conflict among the gods [*inaudible*]....

A.F.: A system of castes corresponds to a system of values. A god is a god. A god in the metaphorical sense.

P.R.: That’s it.

A.F.: A system of particular values.

P.R.: That’s it. After all, it is one of Weber’s great intuitions that Catholicism had achieved something of the same kind, though, moreover, much more unstable. And, I believe that it was much more unstable precisely because Christianity, whether Catholic or another kind, introduces a dimension of universality that, so to speak, renders the traditional metaphorical polytheism much more unstable.

This is what one saw with the distinction between the Gospels and the veterotestamentary commandments of the Old Testament. All that becomes really problematic in the world that was born, let’s say, with the Renaissance. It can be dated, for example, ...

A.F.: Do you therefore go from a peaceful polytheism to an inexorable war of the gods?

P.R.: Yes, let’s say: Perhaps before the Renaissance, with the [quarrel of the Two Swords](#) during the Middle Ages. But anyway, let’s say that the gestation of the modern world involves, among other things, the formation of the war of the gods.

So, now, to Weber’s position in this regard. I believe

that people have become accustomed for some time now to saying that—let's say, people have laid stress on the Romantic and Nietzschean pathos that is indeed present in Weber's work and asserted, but by going so far as to act as if Weber thought that the choice is entirely arbitrary, entirely unreasoned, and is a naked affirmation of the will to power, as you have said. So, there are indeed certain Weber texts that head in this direction. But what can be noted along with Aron, who wrote an admirable preface to the two lectures on "The Scientist and the Politician,"³ is that if one interprets Weber like that, then the system or the thinking becomes clearly incoherent, because there is an ungrounded and nevertheless present preference, which is the preference for scientific universality.

So, starting from there, Aron proposed a somewhat different reconstruction. What I believe may be stated in a few words—because I do not want to develop this point at too great a length—is that, in Weber's work, there is indeed something ultimate that we cannot ground. For example, we cannot say that it is better to be a responsible politician than to be a saint, for example.

That's something, indeed, that remains absolutely beyond choice. Or that it is better to be a responsible politician than an artist. But what is certain is that, from the moment when we have made the minimum of choices that allows us to know what path we are going to follow, there we are drawn into, let's say, the consequences of the choice we have made and, on the other hand, that nothing forbids us from thinking of the elements for communicating among the different orders.

I believe simply that it is on the ultimate choice of a

³T/E: See the previous note, on *Le Savant et le politique*.

life that there is an irrationality. But for the politician, for example, it is quite absurd to think that he could arbitrarily choose between conviction and responsibility, for example.

C.C.: I am in complete agreement with Philippe about what he has just said. I nevertheless think that if we reflect on our problems today, we would have to rekindle this question, we would have to render it a bit more acute, right? True, there are societies that are polytheistic within which the gods cohabit.

A.F.: A coexistence.

C.C.: Yes, there is a coexistence. Although, after all, in the *Iliad*, half of the gods are with the Trojans and the other half with the Greeks. And one can undoubtedly give depth to this division of the gods. OK. But there is something else. It is precisely and apparently—and only apparently, paradoxically—that the formal universality that dominates the modern world and that is universality in the logical sense of the term but that is, at the same time, a universal extension in the purely quantitative sense, is what brings out the question in a quite different, and quite agonizing, way.

I mean that we are grabbed by the ear and led before history and forced to choose between values, not: Will I be a musician? Will I be a mathematician? Will I be a plumber? [*laughter*], but—right?—between values, systems—systems claim to adhere to values, the issue is not there—leaving aside the distinction, the hypocrisy, and the truth.

Right. Systems collide, clash, etc., etc. And this question cannot be taken lightly. What I mean thereby is that the problem reaches its full intensity when one reflects not on conflicts that are still within a quasi-rationalist pantheon, because, for example, it can be said that Stalin or the alleged Russian Communism, etc., laid claim to man’s happiness, etc. while in the meantime destroying it, it cannot. . . . Right. That’s

one thing. It laid claim to the same thing, but what is one doing? I myself am seriously insisting on this question. When someone claims to adhere to divine revelation, and we have a few of them who do so quite explicitly, and who happen to find themselves in the ancient empire of Darius [*laughter*] and he calls himself Ayatollah Khomeini, right, and who says, I could care less about your Western science, your Reason, etc. OK, the truth, moreover, which is in my opinion the attitude of the true believer—once again, never mind about the individual Khomeini, whether or not he may be a hypocrite—that doesn't interest me.

Right. Here then, we do indeed have to affirm reason against revelation. And that's the West since the Enlightenment. It's [\[Gotthold Ephraim\] Lessing](#) saying that modern man can no longer accept revelation, and neither Hell nor Providence. OK. We have to affirm reason against revelation. And here, it must be admitted that, independent of every logical argument—for my part, I don't believe that one could—once again...it's a vicious circle...—that one could prove that it is reasonable to be reasonable. Right. You are biting your own tail, that's obvious. But independent of all history, of everything. There is, indeed, a different historical universe, which is the universe of freedom, of reason, of free inquiry, etc., etc., *against* a universe that lays claim to revelation, faith, saintliness.

A.F.: In other words, for you the tragic character of this war of the gods must be taken seriously. The modern world is condemned, as Weber says, to an inextinguishable conflict of values. And values cannot be an object of discussion and argument.

C.C.: On the contrary. I won't say that this world is condemned to an inextinguishable conflict because, I hope, a part of the heritage of the Enlightenment, the part I consider to be

good—well, at first glance, there’s not much to reject—will indeed conquer the planet, in the same way as Madonna, television, machine guns, etc., etc. Right. *[laughter]* Therefore, I don’t think that we are here in an eternal conflict; there undoubtedly will be other ones. History will never be paradise, but it’s not one eternal conflict. But neither do I think that this position is not absolutely justifiable. There is a very fine, very subtle distinction. Starting from the moment when someone has accepted reasonability—well, starting from that moment, things completely change their look. I can say to him: But, look, for example, at the consequences of your acts.

You say: But what you are doing goes against...etc., etc. But starting from the moment when someone tells me: The more people—and here, truly people are extraordinary; they don’t take seriously what religions are—the more people who are killed today in the battle over the Euphrates, the more of the faithful who will this evening be in the arms of Allah in Paradise. *[laughter]* And there nevertheless are those who have believed. And I think that there are some who believe it. So, what does one say to those people? What logical refutation? There is no logical refutation.

P.R.: No. The sole thing perhaps that could be said—here I am in complete agreement with what you have said—but the sole thing perhaps that could be said is that from the point of view, which isn’t however theirs, from the point of view of authenticity, those people are still, whether they like it or not, led to make compromises with contemporary reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, that there is a style that is not the traditional style of religions and that borrows something from modern ideologies.

The fact that we’re talking a lot about Khomeini is because Khomeini made an Islamic Revolution. The idea of

revolution is not a religious idea. And what can thus be said is that there is more or less, and whether one likes it or not, something that corrupts or that perverts the style of values or the worldview to which those people claim to be attached, and it's starting from there, perhaps, that one can string together, if not a discussion with people who reject discussion—as Aristotle said, nothing can be done against that—but at least a critique that, in the view of people for whom that would, for example give them pause, might be convincing.

C.C.: We are in complete agreement about that. Still, on the theoretical plane, your argument is—how to put it?—empirical. It happens—doesn't it?—that we're not faced here with the true birth of an authentic religion; we're facing a kind of resurgence that is trying, somehow or other, to be made in the modern world, etc. For my part, I don't believe that there will be a true resurgence of authentic religion. I mean, on the level of the argument, what you are saying is that in fact the Koran knows nothing about oil, or about eurodollar deposits, and Khomeini is obliged to do something....

P.R.: Let's say that it would be an empirical argument if one didn't start with the idea of rationalization we were discussing.

C.C.: There you have it.

A.F.: To return to this question and to Max Weber, it seems that when he speaks of conflict and of the war of the gods, of the conflict of values, he sometimes looks like he is saying: Well, one cannot choose. That is to say that, at bottom, not only is there an inexpiable war but, at bottom, choices are arbitrary. Do you agree with that? Because this isn't quite the same thing. If, on the one hand, you note, you say to yourself that the Enlightenment is superior, but, alas, this universality is not yet universal, reason hasn't conquered

the world with it. But Weber would seem to be saying more: Well, yes, there are, in way, values among which one cannot choose. That is to say, it gets to the point, sometimes, of a certain kind of nihilism, a certain kind of relativism, a way of saying that, among those who lay claim to revelation and those who lay claim to reason, there is no argument, not even a rational one, to say that one is superior to the other. Can one adopt this type of reasoning?

C.C.: You know, I myself think that there is a whole series of rational arguments against revelation. *[laughter]* But these arguments do not hold in the face of someone who believes in revelation, and not because he doesn’t want to listen. For, ultimately, every belief system of this type—well, I don’t want to insult believers—is a bit like a paranoid system. One can always find another thing. The choice and proof of the election of the Jewish people—well, this is clear.

P.R.: I believe that one can perhaps attack the problem from a different angle. On the one hand, I do indeed believe that there is something therein that cannot be decided rationally. This is the act of faith, on the one hand, and within a world that has faith, the act of placing, for example, the political order above or below the personal quest for saintliness. But what can nevertheless be added—and there again, this is not, if I dare say so, only this empirical world, there is a rational aspect to this affair, which is that within the world we know on an everyday basis—that is to say, in the world of modernity—we know that religion is withering away in a certain number of forms. But it has not totally disappeared.

Now, I believe that one of the interesting aspects of Weber’s thought is showing how, in the context, let’s say, of modern rationalism, there is at once the possibility of a conflict among the gods and the possibility of a much more

assertive autonomization, in a way, of different spheres. That is to say that, after all, it is in our world that the clear, rigorous distinction between aesthetics, religion, politics, etc. takes on its full value. And if one took, for example—I was interested a while back in the history of contemporary theology. One of the major tendencies of contemporary theology is the separation of faith and reason, within which there is a theological universe that is constituted, that obviously has—how would I put it?—some rational features, because one cannot speak without reasoning. I am thinking, for example, of Karl Barth within the Protestant world. He couldn't have written fifty volumes without reasoning. But the general meaning of these fifty volumes is nevertheless that we cannot do what Christian religions did in former times, that is to say, providing an apologetics in which one would start from everyday experience or natural data, as was said in former times, in order to go toward revelation. I believe that, here, one also sees that Weber's tools do not leave us lacking on those questions.

A.F.: Since we have spoken at bit at length about this opposition between reason and revelation and about the issue of Khomeini, I would like to follow up with another today-well-known theme of Weber's thought. This may be recapped under the phrase *the disenchantment of the world*. Weber was, among other things, a tremendous sociologist of religion, and he describes modernity as a process of rationalization, that is to say, of disenchantment. The sacred and the magical disappear in favor of an ever greater rationalization of the universe. So, what does that mean, exactly? And once again, what can one think of this grid for reading the contemporary world?

C.C.: [*sighs*] Well, this is a quite huge and very, very difficult question. Perhaps one must generalize to the plane of

history, let’s say. Right. I’m saying what I myself think. There is undeniably a process—if one wants to call it *rationalization*, let’s call it *rationalization*—that runs throughout human history since the Australopithecii. Right. This process concerns, let’s say, all the technical and instrumental sides of life lived in common, and also, perhaps, the analogous parts of our mental operations. I mean, we know a lot more mathematics than the Egyptians, who knew much more mathematics than I don’t know who, Olduvai man. Alright.

All that concerns more or less—more or less, huh?—what Weber calls *Zweckrationalität*, well, rationality according to means.⁴ This appertains to that domain. More or less. Right. But we have something else. And that’s what we were just now discussing when talking about Reason and Faith, right? And implicit in our discussion was an idea of Reason as questioning, as the challenging of what is simply received—of course, leaning on the faculties of the Understanding, of logic, if you will, even instrumental logic, etc. This is what Philippe Raynaud was saying just now about Karl Barth. But then there would be something else. Now, if one is speaking of that kind of Reason, that’s when things begin to become complicated. And for my part, when one can raise the strongest objections against certain views of Max Weber as well as of certain things worked out by Habermas,

⁴T/E: In “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” ([CL3](#), 46), Castoriadis explains:

Weber’s term, *Zweckrationalität*, which in this one case is rather unfortunate, really means *Mittelrationalität*, “rationality of means used,” which obviously can be adjudged only in relation to an end that an actor has set forth and intended, whereas the literal translations, “end-related rationality” or “rationality according to ends,” create an intolerable ambiguity.

about the potential for rationalization that would be that of religions.

I mean by this that it's one thing to say: There are several levels; it's one thing to say that there is a general course of humanity wherein one passes from vaguely matched up rough-hewn logs to supercomputers. That's certain. Right. It's not uniform; it's not linear; it can be lost. There were hundreds of thousands of years when that stagnated, etc. But, well, it's like that. That's one thing. It's another thing to state that we are inevitably condemned to Reason, in the sense of questioning. That's not true. Nine hundred and ninety nine out of one thousand human societies have never *questioned*. They have accepted their institutions such as they were. Right. We are an exception that, fortunately, has spread out, propagated, but an exception in this ocean of human history.

A.F.: Therefore, in other words, you do not subscribe to this idea of a sort of process that would be a progressive disenchantment of ...?

C.C.: So, disenchantment. Well, there we have another circle. With capitalist society, we have something else, which Weber has described very, very well. Here, he is directly extending Marx, and he is amplifying a great deal what Marx said. Moreover, [Georg] Lukács, as Philippe Raynaud very rightly recalls, was inspired by Weber's analyses, as was, moreover, Heidegger later on. The whole critique of modernity in Heidegger's work is nothing other than a resumption of Max Weber *and* of the German Romantic tradition. *That* must be recalled. Nietzsche, too. But there is this side of rationalization imposed by capitalism, which is a rationalization that appears as *simply* instrumental, right, which invades everything, and which does indeed disenchant the world. Weber's quite lovely expression is quite, quite true. Its meaning is present during the whole of the nineteenth

century. Practically speaking, its meaning is there in Rousseau, in Marx’s [*Economic & Philosophic*] *Manuscripts of 1844*, and fully there, finally, in the *Communist Manifesto*. Right, all that is absolutely obvious.

A.F.: Therefore, there might be, in other words, progress in instrumental reason. But it would not necessarily be accompanied by a progress in Reason as questioning. On the contrary, there could be...

C.C.: I would not say, “On the contrary.”

A.F.: Not necessarily, in any case. Let’s say that the things are connected.

C.C.: I would say that, for example, currently...

P.R.: From one to the other, the consequences aren’t good.

C.C.: From one to the other, the consequences aren’t good. Today, September 12, 1987, we are still witnessing a huge deployment of instrumental reason and not an eclipse of Reason, as someone said,⁵ or the defeat of thought, as someone else has said,⁶ but, well, something else that is certainly not the great eagle of Thought that covers the sky with its wing. That’s not true!

P.R.: I am once again very, very much in agreement with what has been said. I would simply like to add two or three things about the very way in which Weber tackles the

⁵T/E: [*Eclipse of Reason*](#) is the title of a 1947 book written by Frankfurt School philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer that was published by Oxford University Press.

⁶T/E: Castoriadis is most likely referencing Finkielkraut’s own book, *La Défaite de la pensée*, which had just come out from Gallimard the same year as the present radio program and which appeared in English in 1995 as *The Defeat of the Mind* (tr. and intro. Judith Friedlander [New York: Columbia University Press]).

problem. That is to say that what is very original in Weber's approach is that we have here someone who finds himself at the crossroads of two conflicting traditions, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and who, on the other hand, rejects, if it may be said, the hitherto most grandiose way of synthesizing these two traditions, which is the Hegelian way—the Hegelian way, which consists, as you know, in saying that it is precisely irrationality, tragedy, etc. that is the means by which Reason is inscribed within historicity.

So then, I believe that one must go a bit into the details of what Weber has constructed, and in particular into what is called the typology of forms of activity. Weber distinguishes between four types of activities, which are affective activity, traditional activity, value-laden rational activity, and end-oriented rational activity. These are, moreover, distinctions we have just now implicitly or explicitly used. Let's say, without further specification, that what can be noted about this classification is that it is not simply a classification, a typology. It's a typology that has an immediately comprehensible dynamic meaning, if one reflects on it. That is to say that, in fact, what differentiates these types of activities is the degree of reflectiveness that is incorporated into them. That is to say, affective activity—when you react to someone who steps on your toes, this is less elaborated than traditional activity, where you obey because you know (though it's nevertheless you who knows) that tradition must be obeyed because it's always been done like that, etc. And that's less so than value-laden rational activity, where you discuss the order of the world in the name of values you find to be transcendent. But it's for this reason, moreover, that I believe that it is understandable why, in Weber's work (though he was quite hostile to the idea of laws of history, etc.), in this typology, with its dynamic meaning,

there is nevertheless the idea that something is necessary in the development of universal history, which, up to a certain point, is really a *development* in the strong sense.

That said, where things become complicated is precisely when one tries to see what favors the development of activity, that is to say, the exit from passivity. What can be said, on the theoretical level, is that tradition is passivity. Reason is activity. If one remained there, one would have, precisely, the philosophy of the Enlightenment in its most classic form. One could be totally Romantic in saying the opposite: True activity is tradition, intuition, etc. There one would be in the Romantic tradition.

What Weber offers is something that, let us say, is situated within the framework of this debate but tries to exit therefrom by saying that, in a way, we have to ask ourselves to what extent, on the one hand, rationality is not single and unambiguous—as Cornelius Castoriadis has recalled, it isn’t—and, on the other hand, to what extent it’s rationality that always brings us out of passivity.

First of all, we have here something coming from Nietzsche. I recently rediscovered the *Dawn* texts, whence it came.⁷ It is this idea that, in a traditional world, an element of madness is needed to exit from tradition. For, as discussion is by definition forbidden, it’s not discussion that, by itself alone, will allow one to bring out.... What is needed is this element of madness that is charisma. And on the other hand, in the modern world, that is to say, in the world where, for Weber—it is there, moreover, that the problem of the war of

⁷T/E: Raynaud is referring to Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1881 book, *Morgenröthe: Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurtheile*, most recently translated into English as *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

the gods takes on its full urgency—the war of the gods leads quite logically—and one wants to say, in the almost best of cases—to a generalized skepticism wherein all that remains of rationality is instrumental rationality.

So, that's where the problem is posed in Weber's work, with the element of irrationality, of charisma, etc., that will be...

A.F.: So, we have just a few minutes left. And I would like us to attempt to reflect a little bit on Weber's political positions. For, it's this instrumental rationality that wins out and extends outward, perhaps to the detriment of other types of activities, and notably of rational ones; the world becomes bureaucratized. And it is known that Weber is the great sociologist, also, of bureaucracy.

Now, it seems to me that Weber often contrasts to a bureaucratized world the theme of the charismatic leader. And it seems as if it is through charisma, the charisma of a man, that one can exit, precisely, from this bureaucratic rigidity. So, is *that* an acceptable way of thinking today?

C.C.: And I believe that what we have here is nevertheless a big issue, a very weak point. Still, it must be said: Right, Weber had some positions—he didn't take political positions, as is known. It must nevertheless be said, to his credit, that he was an extraordinarily lucid person. I recall a text of his—I don't know any longer whether it's in *Politics as a Vocation*—where he says this admirable phrase: A politician has to be sure that he is present to himself 24 hours a day; as for me, I cannot trust myself, I can make mistakes. Indeed, a politician is someone who is awakened at three in the morning to tell him, "The enemy has crossed the border, what do we do?", and who has the answer. And who doesn't grope around.

Right. He was fantastically lucid. His positions are

tired. You move on to something else. I nevertheless believe that he’s very, very marked by his era and his milieu. At the same time, it is his genius to see what’s going on, to see the iron cage of which he speaks: bureaucratization.

But what I would say is that he does not see the internal contradictions of bureaucratization. And Philippe Raynaud has a few pages on this that are, let us say, very, very welcome, in my opinion—all the other pages, too, but well, those in particular. And at the same time, Weber does not see a kind of creativity that would go beyond the charismatic individual. He doesn’t see that the *people* can be creative and that, ultimately, it’s the people who are instituting.

A.F.: And thank you, we’ll stop on that point. So, one can go beyond this opposition between the charismatic individual and bureaucracy.

The Character of *Lettre Internationale**

Moderator: Independent of East-West, we're going to speak of the South. And, so, Monsieur Cornelius Castoriadis, you're Greek in origin, right? That's the South East.

Cornelius Castoriadis: Yes, of course. But anyway, for my part I don't feel particularly inspired for the moment to speak of the question of the South and of North-South relations. Yes, rather I'd like to speak of *Lettre Internationale*. I think, indeed, that, as Liehm said, but as Edgar Morin was recalling, one must of course try to justify fully the *Lettre Internationale*'s title, which is quite simple and very beautiful.

Internationality isn't to be limited to Europe, and that's already manifestly clear in the review. Yet neither is it to be limited, let's say, to the white man, right? So, here there's an opening that is wholly desirable and which, moreover, undoubtedly will take place. And it perhaps also will not fail to raise some problems, I think, though not from the standpoint of good will, etc.

*T/E: Translation of a transcription of Castoriadis's intervention during a December 13, 1989 evening discussion sponsored by the Centre Pompidou and held in its underground "Petite Salle" as part of this cultural institution's *Revue Parlées* series. The discussion, led by Jean Daniel and Antonin J. Liehm, included, as other participants: Pascal Bruckner, Francois Chaslin, Pierre Mertens, Edgar Morin, Paul Thibaud, Tzvetan Todorov, and Nicole Zand. This recorded session of *Revue Parlées* served to introduce *Lettre internationale*'s latest issue, which had come out in October. Castoriadis's own contribution, "[La révolution devant les théologiens](#)" (*Lettre Internationale*, 23 [Winter 1989-1990]: 70-73), now appears in translation as "The Revolution Before the Theologians: For a Critical/Political Reflection on Our History" in [CL3](#). The original recording is available on the Centre Pompidou website: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/media/iz9juIH> (Castoriadis's contribution runs from 32'25" to 37'51").

I will say straightaway why I think that, in the end, this can bring with it some problems. I don't have much to add to what has been said so well by those who spoke prior to me, in particular Edgar. And I would like to say two things, simply. It's the *Lettre* that is international. Well, for the moment it was European, though more than that.

[This is so] not only through the subjects it treats and not only through the diversity of the origins [of authors], which truly ensure that there be all languages without it becoming a Babel. We understand each other. But [this is so] also because, above all, starting from the moment when sister publications began to appear,¹ one has the impression of a kind of billiard game or a play of resonances occurring among four major languages: Spanish, Italian, French, and German.

The English are missing therefrom. I don't know for how long, but that's the case. You can adore the English, but the English are always particular. There are the countries of the East now that will undoubtedly be opening up. But in my opinion, it's especially this sort of resonance, once again, that occurs through the origins of the articles, the themes treated, the countries where the *Lettre* is published, etc.

And the second point I wanted to say a word about is the character of *Lettre International* from our point of view. I believe that if *Lettre International* is truly achieving something exceptional—as Edgar was just saying it's the antijournal, it's the antireview, and it is, in addition, something else. And *that*, I believe, is the work [*oeuvre*]

¹T/E: *Lettre International* (the generic name for the sister publications that grew out of the original French one, which began in 1984) “came out in twelve different versions at once, but some editions eventually ceased publication due to financial constraints and other circumstances” ([English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)). The translation always assumes the title, when Castoriadis uses it, as the generic one, without a final French “e.”

why not say it?—the masterwork [*chef d'œuvre*] of Antontin Liehm. It's that this publication does not have a line, but it has a well-defined figure.

It really is the *Lettre Internationale* and it's not something else. And if it's the international letter, this is not because there's a program but because there is an orientation that is defined, etc. No, it's like a living being: it's got a mug of its own [*gueule*], it's got its own look [*allure*]. One sees some things that might perhaps appear therein, and one sees some things that couldn't appear, as one says, I don't know, So-and-so would never do that, right? There's stuff not seen in it, which, perhaps without any censorship, is excluded by the force field the review itself creates, the result being that certain things quite simply don't occur, aren't presented. And it's very good like that. And this figure is without a line—this is perhaps, too, independent of the positive content, the critical aspect that is always present. I don't know whether I am perhaps drawing it too much to my side, but it's perhaps the look the review has of being something that is not against conformism as such, but that has no conformism, and that among all the collaborators, one sees—right?—that none obey any kind of conformism, be it the conformism of anticonformism or the form of conformism *par excellence* that is Postmodernism, and so on and so forth. There is a kind of nonconformist attitude in it that is wholly characteristic.

And when I was just saying that an extension to the South is wholly desirable and necessary and politically urgent, though it could perhaps create some problems—on this point, perhaps, I am a bit pessimistic, as one sees fewer collaborations heading in this direction that are coming from the countries of the South. They may be seen in forms that are highly singular, isolated, etc. But perhaps I am being optimistic [*correcting himself*] *pessimistic*.

POLIS

Discussion on *The Passing of an Illusion* with François Furet*

Alain Finkielkraut: Once upon a time, there was Communism. The declension of the Communist idea is henceforth to be formed in the past tense. One may even ask, in contradictory fashion, how such an idea was able to exert such dominion over people's minds and how it could have disappeared so completely and so quickly. In any case, the time has come to take stock. To take stock of Communism but also of our century. And the question is also posed as to whether it is time for the revolutionary idea itself to be put into receivership. We shall reflect on this question and we shall draw up our own report. We shall do so along with Cornelius Castoriadis—who, although this was very much frowned upon by the prevailing ways of thinking, was one of the first in France to offer an overall analysis of the phenomenon of totalitarianism—and with François Furet—who has just published *Le passé d'une illusion*, on the Communist idea in the twentieth century, a lavish,

*T/E: Translation of a revised version of “Sur ‘Le passé d'une illusion’ de F. Furet,” a [Lieux Communs transcription](#) by “L. L. [Laurent Leylaverne?]” of a discussion between Cornelius Castoriadis and François Furet for Alain Finkielkraut's *Répliques* program, which was broadcast February 4, 1995 on the France Culture radio network; listen at: <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/les-nuits-de-france-culture/repliques-l-idee-communiste-au-xx0-siecle-avec-francois-furet-et-cornelius-castoriadis-1ere-diffusion-04-02-1995-7964119>. Furet's book, *Le Passé d'une illusion. Essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle*, had just been published the previous month. In English, Deborah Furet's translation, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, appeared in 1999 from University of Chicago Press.

melancholic, merciless book that nonetheless remains miraculously untainted by an accusatory mindset—whereby the past would be subjected to the judgments of the present and the living would condemn the dead to death—in which our *fin de siècle*, intoxicated with itself, so sure of its rights of man and forgetful of its own finitude, takes such delight.

How to begin? Well, let's start at the beginning. And the beginning, in this particular case, is World War I.

François Furet, you attribute to this terrible and enigmatic event the role of matrix. Do you mean to say that from the Great War proceeds not only the awakening of revolutionary passion in Europe but the totalitarian form the twentieth century gave thereto?

François Furet: Yes, it seems to me that the World War that began in 1914 has an absolutely fundamental importance for the twentieth century, an importance as great as the French Revolution for the history of the nineteenth. It is the event out of which comes the peculiar character of the century and its tragedies. Why? Because there are three new elements in World War I. It is the first “democratic” war, in the sense that “everyone goes,” that it affects the social fabric more deeply than any other war of the past, including the wars of the [French] Revolution and of the [Napoleonic] Empire. And it is the first industrial, technical war, wherein may be observed the multiplier effect modern technology has on war itself, on the character of the massacre. And it is the first war that is so interminable, in the sense that it cannot be ended by a compromise. Starting with the [first battle of the] Marne, the armies have dug in; one can no longer gain more than two or three hundred meters at the price of terrible losses and, moreover, the French Republic is as indifferent to the massacres of its sons, in a sense, as the German Empire. And the longer it lasts, the more interminable it is; the longer it

lasts, the more the sacrifices it brings about render a compromise peace unjustifiable. And by way of consequence, there is in this war something extraordinary; it takes on an ideologically interminable character, though it did not begin that way. It began as a war of rival powers and it endures as a war without any other possible end but the extermination of one's adversary. So, there you have it: when you take these three characteristics together, you have a gigantic event.

A.F.: But in your opinion out of this gigantic event came our century, yet not only our century but the revolutionary passion it took on. Why?

F.F.: Yes, because the War itself is a training ground for extreme passions, that is to say, it's the ground, *par excellence*, for the friend/enemy distinction; politics is reduced to its simplest level, that is to say, "kill the enemy." And then, in another aspect, which was indeed explored at the time, in particular by [\[French philosopher and historian\] Elie Halévy](#), war is an instrument for the deification of this modern monster that is the State.

Cornelius Castoriadis: Yes, this is indeed one of the points that must be grasped to address the question. But before that, I would like to say a few words about François Furet's book. You yourself say in your Acknowledgments that you are a "newcomer to twentieth-century history" and to the history of Communism. When reading your work, one would not say so. I myself—who, since '42, have spent my nights and my days with my eyes glued to our century's history as it has been unfolding and in particular to its Communist side—have found that all the information you convey is right on the button, and quite sound, especially, are most of your judgments and this art of synthesis and portraiture, whose mastery you have already demonstrated in your history of the French Revolution. Here again we come across some utterly

memorable vignettes. Beyond this are questions of interpretation, but that's where discussions begin that enlist our whole philosophy, our philosophy of history.

So, first, about the question of origins: it is incontestable—and you say so like almost everyone else, and this is one of the merits of [Aleksandr] Solzhenitsyn to have made this the beginning of *The Red Wheel*—that there is one wholly crucial moment, an accelerative node in the War. And, to the three elements you mentioned, I would add a fourth, which goes without saying in what you say; it's total war—what German grammar calls *totale Mobilmachung*:¹ it's price controls, control of transportation, it's censorship like it had never been practiced in this case, and it's the total mobilization of public opinion. Some of the most monstrous and ridiculous phenomena of the Stalinist era—they had them during the Great War, too. You had the bulk of the French intelligentsia declaring that all German culture is barbarous, and *vice versa*, with the bulk of the German intelligentsia writing off France, “Romanity,” as they say.

Now, beyond the War, there is nevertheless, I believe, something else, and you say so, but it is upon this point that I would like to discuss things a bit. It is obvious—and I don't believe that this would be in your work but the obsession of the professional [historian] of the French Revolution—that your book is also and especially marked by the French Revolution. And you trace back many things, if not everything, without, I believe, disregarding the novelties in the phenomena. Nevertheless, in good part you boil down the phenomenon to a full extension of certain aspects of the [French] Revolution.

¹T/E: Ernst Jünger's text “Die totale Mobilmachung” appeared in *Krieg und Krieger*, a 1930 anthology of essays he edited.

So, on this point I would like some specifications, because for me the [French] Revolution itself is a moment in Modern Times and this Revolution is itself ambiguous. It is ambiguous not only because there are '89 and '93, the Rights of Man, the Republic, etc., then the Terror. It is ambiguous for another reason. For, in the [French] Revolution may be seen the process of emancipation—which I myself call *the imaginary signification of autonomy*—but one may see, too, a manifestation of the capitalist spirit—not in the sense the Marxists give to this term, not that the bourgeoisie is pulling the strings—but one sees the rationalism in what it will become later on, what is already becoming, with capitalism, the tendency or the imaginary signification of an unlimited expansion of rational mastery. And that may be seen in the work of the [French] Revolution....

F.F.: Yes, of course.

C.C.: It's the [territorial administrative units called] *départements*, it's the metric system, the changes in education, it's the rationalization of administration, it's the [law] codes, etc. Now, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the two things coexist; they coexist in Marxism, they coexist in the workers' movement; it's a mixture that may appear illegitimate to us, though it did not seem so at the time. And I think that the Russian Revolution and Leninism—because the genuine founder of totalitarianism, if one is seeking a name, is Lenin!—were imbued with this project and with this aspect, this expansion of rational mastery that, ultimately, becomes expansion pure and simple of mastery....

A.F.: ...to the detriment of the project of emancipation, you would say....

C.C.: There you have it: to the total detriment of the project of emancipation, all the while presenting itself as its

spokesperson, but, following Marx here, postponing true emancipation to the end of a long period of purgatory, industrialization, etc.

F.F.: Yes, but I believe that one can hardly dissociate these two aspects, the aspect of the imagination of autonomy and the aspect of the rational domination of nature, because the French Revolution does indeed bring out in all its contradictions the character of modern politics. What is most striking in the French Revolution is its extraordinary complexity, its extraordinarily contradictory character. One cannot really dissociate, within the French Revolution, these two aspects. And what is interesting in what reappears of the French Revolution in the twentieth century is the idea of a revolutionary outbidding [*surenchère*] over the Revolution. Revolution appears as a privileged mode of change, and as some kind of court of appeal for the misfortunes and maledictions of capitalist society. And in the imagination of the men of this time—who feel very close to us, that is to say, who are our grandparents after all; it's quite close to us—the revolutionary idea has reappeared in its novelty as a conjuring away of the misfortunes of the bourgeois world, in other words as a necessary doubling down on what the French Revolution had already shown.

And I add—for, this is a discussion that can be had, and which is highly important—that, for me, Fascism constitutes the cooptation of the revolutionary idea for the benefit of the Right. What had, at bottom, hobbled the European Right in the nineteenth century was that it was counterrevolutionary. And the counterrevolutionary idea is a contradiction in itself, since it consists in wanting to return to an *Ancien Régime* that was the matrix for the Revolution. And the historical invention of Fascism, and furthermore its seductive side, which was going to constitute the fascination

it held, is to coopt the idea of revolution, that is to say, of the State-community, of the end of egotistical individualism, to the benefit of the Right, so that from the Great War will be born an escalatory overbidding [*surenchère*] on the part of the Far Left about the French Revolution and an escalatory overbidding on the part of the Far Right.

A.F.: Yes, let me add a word on that, a piece I simply want to bring to the discussion. I read a while back an American book by Jeffrey Herf on reactionary modernism,² as a matter of fact on the changes the War imprinted upon the reactionary critique of bourgeois Liberalism....

F.F.: An excellent book!

A.F.: It's a very interesting book because it shows, as a matter of fact, that war is the moment, the occasion for reconciling this reactionary thought with modernity. The ideal community is no longer the preindustrial landscape; it's the field of battle, the *kriegerlebnis* [experience or adventure of all-out war], the *fronterlebnis*, the community at the front, which in some way delivers this way of thinking from the nostalgia in which it was immersed and which reconciles it, too, through an apology for the elemental, with technics. While it is not at all a matter of a revolution that appeals to the same motives, to the same principles as the Bolshevik Revolution—and yet one may wonder just now about the reasons for their convergences—but it was a matter of a revolution, that is to say, one exits through war from the space of counterrevolution. Would you agree with this analysis?

C.C.: Yes, completely. I have not read Herf's book, but what you are saying there brings to mind a name, it's [\[Ernst\] Jünger](#).

²T/E: Herf's [Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich](#) (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

A.F.: That's clear, and how!

C.C.: I am completely in agreement; I believe that we can consider ourselves done for the time being with that. But I think that there is nevertheless something that, if one is focused solely on the *revolution* aspect, resumption of the Revolution, etc., is lacking in this matter, and this is what happens afterward. That is to say, it's the nature of the regime in itself! ...

F.F.: One's missing the newness, the new....

C.C.: The newness is missing.... What is missing is what must be called, even if that makes people's hair stand on end, *historical creation*, monstrous creation, yet it's a creation nevertheless. What happens a bit in Germany, but much more on the Russian plains is, all the same, at once a *tabula rasa*—a sort of *tabula rasa*, for there is, in the ideological and administrative mishmash [*bric-à-brac*], a huge amount of things taken back up from the past—but also a creation of a type of regime that we had not known in history, which drives all that to the limit. I myself have said that the Ford factories of Detroit in 1920 are already totalitarian microsocieties because there was not only the assembly-line regime in the factory; there were Ford's private detectives who surveilled the private lives of the workers—those who had a common-law wife were kicked out and those who were not right-thinking people, didn't go to church on Sundays, were kicked out.³ We had similar petty things in our industrial villages in the Lorraine region and in the steel industry. But there, as Lenin himself said, quantity has a quality of its own! [*laughter*] To do that over a swath of 150 or 200 million

³T/E: See "The Idea of Revolution" (1989 interview), now in [CL3](#), 215, and "The Crisis of the Identification Process" (May 1989 lecture published in 1990), now in [CL4](#), 171.

people and with, as penalties, not firing but death or Siberia, and generally both, that's something else. So there we have as a matter of fact perhaps another thread to be pulled, which is the idea of totalitarianism and the content of this idea.

F.F.: But, in my opinion, in order to go through to the end of this analysis with which I am fully in agreement, one of the mysterious things of our century is its unprecedented character, its character as the birth of something that is not registered in the inventory of regimes anywhere, not in Aristotle, not in Montesquieu, not in Max Weber.

C.C.: Absolutely.

F.F.: And there is an aspect Cornelius Castoriadis underscores quite well, which is the aspect of technical rationality in the hands of the State. But there is the other aspect that is the fascination with ideologies, the character of consent in these regimes. These are not regimes that are imposed like in the Ford factory, where the unlucky proletarian is obliged to work in order to live. There is something that is at once horrible and grandiose for the imagination of one's contemporaries, which is that they rushed into these ideologies. In other words, there is something that spoke to their imagination, that pleased them. These are not simply regimes of technical control; they are regimes of lived ideologies.

A.F.: This is, moreover, why you call your book *Le passé d'une illusion*, which is nevertheless a rather explicit reference to Freud, to *The Future of an Illusion*.⁴ And Freud speaks, in *The Future of an Illusion*, of religion, where he

⁴T/E: Furet's translator, his wife Deborah, chose as the book's title *The Passing of an Illusion*—as opposed to the more straightforward and literal "The Past of an Illusion," which would have more clearly tracked as the playful opposite of Freud's 1927 volume, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*.

distinguishes illusion from error, saying: "Thus we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation."⁵ So, you take up this definition as your own, but is that to say—and I am posing the question to both of you—that to understand the nature of this charm, of this fascination with the Communist idea, the thread of religion must pass through it? Is this a secular religion? Is this an avatar of religion? Or, once again, are we in the realm of the never-before-seen or in something else?

F.F.: No, I believe that the analogy with religion has to be handled with some prudence because these totalitarian ideologies are bodies of ideas whose basis is nevertheless earthly redemption for man, which rules out transcendence, which are nevertheless grounded upon history, and history is not a divinity under the same heading as the God of Christianity. Consequently, I am always a bit unhappy to employ these terms—*religion*, *religious*—after Raymond Aron because they touch as a matter of fact on something that is flawed in the analogy. And yet there is a sort of force and absolutism to the belief in history that is reminiscent of something like religion in the sense that nothing is subject to observation.

C.C.: Nothing is subject—at bottom, that's what is extraordinary—to rational discussion. One would have to temper that about science and technics, to which we will surely come back when we talk further about totalitarianism. But I believe that there are two points about the analogy with religion. First, it's the Church: Lenin is the historical creator

⁵T/E: Used here is the English translation (*Standard Edition*, vol. 21, p. 30) of Freud's original German phrase "*Wir heißen also einen Glauben eine Illusion...*" (*Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 14, p. 352). Finkelkraut's spoken quotation incorrectly inverted the two terms, *illusion* and *belief*.

of a Party, which is a Party-State, which is a Party-Army, which is a bit a Party-Factory because there is a division of labor and so on, and which is a single Party....

F.F.: That's also something entirely new....

C.C.: Completely new in relation to the vague parties of yesteryear; that's the connection with this merger of four historical forms that had already existed....

F.F.: Absolutely.

C.C.: Once again, despite the quantity, that's what the Bolshevik Party is, even when its meetings are held in a taxi carriage, as the Trotskyists said; when they were four, they were already the Church, the Army, the State, and a tiny Factory. Right. There's that, on the one hand, and there is, on another hand, the second characteristic, which is blind faith [*foi du charbonnier*]. Despite all and no matter what happens, that's it, you don't want to budge therefrom, either through factual observation or through reasoning. And grafted onto it is a side that can be called, without an abuse of language I believe, the *paranoiac side* of this ideology.

F.F.: In Freudian terms, you'd say that it's a warding off of anxiety.

C.C.: It's more than a warding off of anxiety because warding off anxiety is done by building up, at various levels and according to the clientele, not a rational system but one of rationalization that, once posited as a postulate—what's the postulate? it's that Russia is the absolute Good, that capitalism is absolute Evil, that capitalism allows itself everything, etc.—therefore you can explain everything: bad harvests, this or that by invoking conspiracies; the fact that people don't have any clothing is a result of a conspiracy. And it's a system of rationalization that explains absolutely everything: Stalin's about-face in 1939, which is a combination of cunning and also, in my opinion, of fear,

immediately becomes the most brilliant maneuver that ever was in the history of politics, and so on.

A.F.: In this regard, what you, Cornelius Castoriadis, are saying reminds me of an extraordinary phrase from [G.K.] Chesterton, of which the totalitarian system is an illustration. He says at one point, I believe in *Orthodoxy*, “The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.”⁶

C.C.: Absolutely!

A.F.: I believe that that’s the madness one has. But still one more word, perhaps, on the religious model, reference, or metaphor. It has been used a lot more since Raymond Aron and in a sense that personally bothers me a bit, because certainly there are Church-like phenomena, but among many people that involves, in a way, exempting modernity from the revolutionary project, which was born in Modern Times—it’s a way of saying that, at bottom, it is a matter, through totalitarianism, of escaping from the indeterminacy of modern life, of regaining the security of heteronomy, the world in which everyone thought alike. And this is what drives certain analysts today to describe the totalitarian project as *counterrevolutionary*, saying in appearance it’s a revolution, in reality it’s a counterrevolution and it’s an antimodern project. It seems to me, personally, that it’s nevertheless a resumption, no doubt a pathological one, no doubt a teratological one, of the modern project. And this is the way in which one can perhaps explain the nature of the illusion. Those who adhered to Communism—you need only read [Arthur] Koestler’s texts—it’s those who thought, after all, that the reign of man was thus going to be definitively

⁶T/E: [Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* \(New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908\)](#), p. 10.

assured, a man not only freed from his chains but attaining in a way an unconditioned freedom; it's the revolt of freedom against the human condition. And this is what, in some way, the totalitarian project claims to quench, whereas, when one speaks of religion, it seems to me that one is describing perhaps the phenomenon, but one is not really accounting for the illusion and for its persistence.

F.F.: For my part, I feel that I agree with your analysis. I believe that totalitarianism is modern and that it is tied to the idea of *revolution* in the sense I employ this term, of the New Man, of construction; it is tied to the fact that in modern societies there is constant struggle against nature in the name of technics. But you will never keep a certain number of people, precisely in order to save the idea of revolution from the disasters to which its use has given rise in the twentieth century, from thinking that Communism is something else entirely, and therefore that it must be called something else, and that, by way of consequence, at bottom this historical experience in no way overlaps with the modern adventure. Now, it is at the center of the modern adventure.

A.F.: There are people who want to save modernity [*laughter*], not the revolution, and who offer the same type of analysis.

C.C.: But I myself want to save modernity, in a certain sense. I persist in believing, as I was just saying, that there are nevertheless in modernity two contradictory and communicating flaps: there is emancipation, autonomy—you can't get out of that; it's fundamental, even if today its wings are weighed down. One had to take other means in order to put lead in its wings; one had to take what is currently happening, conformism, the media, etc. But there is, at the same time, the idea of being master and possessor of nature, master and possessor of society itself. That begins with the

educational project of the French Revolution, in certain rationalistic aspects of the work of Freud—it's amazing but that is how it is—and through Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, too. And I believe that the horrible paradox—and here we are reaching major philosophical depths; it's true that reason with a capital R, Reason well conceived, I dare say, is a moment of human autonomy, only this Reason became apportionment of the territory into 90 or 91 *départements*. This is what critics of the [French] Revolution have reproached it for, saying: You are cutting up the provinces that were organic units and you are making artificial things. Yet, this still was peanuts compared to what happened later on, right? ...OK, now there we have a kind of reason that degenerates and that becomes rationalism and that ultimately, in Communism, becomes pseudorationalism. And here perhaps is one of the things on which, François Furet, I would criticize you, where I would not agree with you. First, you use the term *ideocracy*, which I myself detest, because I believe that neither Communism nor Nazism is the power of an idea; it's the idea of power, which is something else entirely, because there are no ideas. And that, I believe, may be seen in the brazen usage, as is made especially by Communism, of ideology. You state this, moreover. It's an absolutely extraordinary collection of odds and ends [*bric-à-brac*]; one supports at the same time black and white, one says white is white because it is black. That's the sort of reasoning one does all the time.

F.F.: Yes, but it's a bunch of odds and ends that has a power of appeal over people's imaginations.

C.C.: Certainly.

F.F.: Politics is not made up of pure ideas even if the philosopher or the historian may later try to render them intelligible through the pure idea. But if you are seeking to understand what has pleased—the word is weak—what has

rendered the fascination with Communism so powerful over the course of the century, it certainly isn't just the idea of technical reason or of the domination of nature; it's the idea of autonomy.

C.C.: Of course!

F.F.: It's the idea of emancipation.

C.C.: Of course!

A.F.: It's still the idea of working-class brotherhood [*fraternité ouvrière*]....

F.F.: ...brotherhood....

C.C.: Of course!

F.F.: It seems to me that what is mindboggling in these odds and ends and in this flea market is that it nevertheless is capable of overlapping with a certain number of quite varying intellectual traditions, not only Jacobinism but also the Fabians, the aesthetic Nietzscheanism of [Georg] Lukács, the Catholicism of Pierre Pascal....⁷ You have an ideological flea market that becomes an intellectual product with an extraordinarily powerful hold over people's imaginations. And Communism would not have been what it was—here I stick to the word *ideocracy*—had it not had an idea of the future and of man's autonomy.

C.C.: There are three things. This idea is indefinitely postponed. And, what's extraordinary is that it is modulated for fifty different orchestral instruments and plays it for all audiences....

F.F.: It is expressed negatively....

C.C.: It's Talmudic for the economists who are

⁷T/E: French historian and essayist [Pierre Pascal](#) (1890-1983) was a Slavic and Russian specialist who, as a "Catholic Bolshevik," collaborated with Lenin at the time of the Russian Revolution but who broke with Communism at the time of the Stalinist purges of the mid-1930s.

searching for the fall in the average rate of profit; it is a social-historical vulgate for petty sociologists or for students; it is, as I was saying, blind faith or simple hatred of the rich among people, and so on. That's the first thing. And the second thing starting with 1917, there's something else that appears and that, in my opinion is quite obvious, and which most analysts have neglected—you say it a bit when you speak of the weakness of Russia's strength [*force*]⁸—it's the ignoble fascination...

F.F.: ...with force...

C.C.: ...with brute force!⁸

F.F.: Of course!

C.C.: There you have Russia! And that's clear in the work of [Jean-Paul] Sartre, for example; it's disgusting. And when Russia is no longer able to whip up this mixture, this alloy of so-called ideological purity and forceful brutality, it is moved elsewhere; it is carried over to the Yugoslavians, the Chinese, the Cubans, etc. And the third thing concerning this idea: I think that one must look at Lenin's attitude. As early as October 1917, the sole thing that really mattered to him is power. This man had just written *The State and Revolution*, which is a hymn to a sort of Council democracy in which all cooks are to govern, etc.⁹ And the next day, he does exactly

⁸*DG*'s final chapter, "La Force brute pour la Force brute" (Brute force for the sake of brute force), includes two key sections: "The Destruction of Significations and the Ruination of Language" and "Ugliness and the Affirmative Hatred of the Beautiful," the latter now appearing in *WoC*.

⁹T/E: This short phrase brings to mind C.L.R. James's *June 1956 Correspondence* (2:2) essay "[Every Cook Can Govern.](#)" well known by Castoriadis, though it makes no mention of Lenin and concerns rather, as its 1992 Bewick (Detroit) book subtitle states, "A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece, Its Meaning for Today." Castoriadis's phrase, *toutes les*

the opposite, he thinks only of power, there is a single

cuisinières doivent gouverner, correctly treats these “cooks” as female (another English-language translation would be “kitchen maids,” in line with Lenin’s original). However, contrary to what Castoriadis states, no variation thereof can be found in Lenin’s [*The State and Revolution*](#) (composed in the Summer of 1917). The phrase appears instead, in more nuanced—not to say contrary—form, in his less-well-known text [“Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?”](#) (*Prosveshcheniye*, 1-2 [October 14, 1917]), which was completed October 1, therefore also before the Bolshevik seizure of power October 25: “We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled laborer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration.” Lenin’s phrase therefore does not have the unambiguous affirmative force James’s titular paraphrase attributes to it, and Castoriadis rightly says “are to” or “have to” (*doivent*) instead of “can.” Castoriadis’s misattribution to *The State and Revolution* (not made by James, since he is silent on the matter) perhaps can be traced back to a passage in Alexandra Kollontai’s *The Workers Opposition*—a 1921 Russian text translated as *Solidarity Pamphlet*, 7 (1961), which [Socialisme ou Barbarie](#) then translated into French in [no. 35 \(January-March 1964\)](#), accompanied by Castoriadis’s article “The Role of Bolshevik Ideology in the Birth of the Bureaucracy” (now in [PSW3](#)). Quoted here is [Solidarity’s 1968 2nd ed.](#) (p. 49): “‘It was all very well,’ [Nikolai] Bukharin pointed out, ‘to say as Lenin had (in *State and Revolution*) that “each cook should learn to manage the State.” But what happened when each cook had a commissar appointed to order him about?’” Kollontai provides no precise source for Bukharin’s (mistaken) reference, but she is writing (pp. 48ff.) about a 1918 controversy between Leninists and [Left Communists](#) (gathered around the *Kommunist* paper) over who, managers or workers, are to rule in the workplace. After Lenin’s death, the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky’s 1924 poem “Vladimir Ilyich Lenin” (see *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Poems*, tr. Dorian Rottenberg [Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1972], 227) featured and popularized the phrase as “We’ll train every cook/so she might/manage the country/to the workers’ gain.” A Soviet literacy-campaign poster from 1925 then proclaimed: “Every female cook should learn to govern the State. —Lenin”: <https://www.sovietposters.com/posters/every-cook-must-learn-1925#gallery>—with the “should” indicating that these kitchen maids were not yet ready for self-governance and that they required ongoing Russian Communist Party leadership, guidance, and education.

obsession for Lenin. And there is a text where he writes, “If there is a Thermidor in Russia, we’re the ones who will make it.”¹⁰ This means that “he wipes his ass” with programs; what really matters to him is to be in power and to control events. And I believe that this is absolutely fundamental.

A.F.: It seems to me, to come back to the first thing you said, that, in the attraction to Communism, one mustn’t indeed neglect this negative power, that is to say, the fear intellectuals have of being a “noble soul,” this Hegelian fear never to be a noble soul.¹¹ At that moment, there is a fascination with force and, sometimes even for the intellectual himself, with the insensitivity one is able to show. Insensitivity is testimony to one’s character: there are dead people, there’s blood, too bad; one takes it well, especially when these are others....

C.C.: And he partakes of a kind of virility....

A.F.: And then perhaps, too, a show of perspicacity, that is to say, he sees beyond emotion. But what I note today

¹⁰T/E: In his relating of this anecdote, Castoriadis has confused here a passing phrase from Lenin, as quoted on page 131 of Victor Serge’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: Oxford, 1967), with a nonexistent “text” that would have been written by Lenin. See [CL3](#), 242, n. 13 for how Castoriadis became aware of this reported statement. The actual quotation reads, in [Peter Sedgwick](#)’s English-language *Memoirs* translation: “This is Thermidor. But we shan’t let ourselves be guillotined. We shall make a Thermidor ourselves.”

¹¹T/E: In subsection “(c) The Concrete Development of Dramatic Poetry and its Genres” of [pt 3 of sect. 3 of ch. 3 of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*](#), Hegel speaks of the “noble soul” of Shakespeare’s Hamlet not being “made for this kind of energetic activity; and, full of disgust with the world and life, what with decision, proof, arrangements for carrying out his resolve, and being bandied from pillar to post, he eventually perishes owing to his own hesitation and a complication of external circumstances.”

is that one finds again this kind of discussion at another level—and I have seen this a lot during discussions over the war in ex-Yugoslavia—Communism no longer exists, but there are experts and many fake experts who do indeed continue to testify to this insensitivity, and who at bottom treat as “noble souls” intellectuals who are moved. Therefore, in a way, this power of attraction has left Communism behind, but it manifests itself elsewhere. Well, to return to our discussion, I believe that this is one of the key elements.

F.F.: Of course, the twentieth century has been invaded philosophically by nihilism, that is to say, by a taste for pure force, which was masked philosophically in Hegelianism, Marxism, history as the tribunal of truth. This was very clearly seen in 1945. Nothing will be understood about the tremendous seductiveness of Communism in 1945 if one forgets the War, the Red Army, the fact that the Soviet Union was at this time a superpower. There is even, in the complicated combination of passions that lead people to Communism, something of a glad consent to one’s servitude.

A.F.: Forty-five was not so much force; it was especially victory, that is to say, victory over fascism, the interception of victory....

F.F.: ...victory is seen as a tribunal...

C.C.: [*inaudible approval of what Furet is saying*]

A.F.: It was seen, too, as what saved us from fascism.

F.F.: That, too.

A.F.: It’s true that you show the importance and logic of Communism’s confiscation of antifascism.

C.C.: *That’s* important.

F. F. Take a look at something that is quite striking: in ’45, no one spoke any longer of ’39-’41. History had settled the matter and suddenly it was forgotten that the Soviet Union had been Hitler’s ally or accomplice.

C.C.: But '45 sees immense Russian armies swarming over Europe. This is Russia receiving approval by the facts on the ground, the superiority of socialism, of industry, of planning, of *Homo Sovieticus*, of Stalin's brilliant leadership. All that is confirmed, and so on. ... But we must go back over something else, at the risk that we remain onesided. There is still another element, and here it's the most tragic one—for, after all, the intellectuals, who cares about them, huh? Right! Another element in this history that is much tougher is that during an entire period, and in particular the period from 1917 to 1940, Communism presented itself as the heir of the workers' movement and it offered Marxist theory, simplified. Now, what happened during this period? The situation of the working class was not what it is today or, rather, what it was yesterday (because it is in the process of going back to what it was at the time [*laughter*]...): there was unemployment, there was the Great Depression of '29, there were all the aberrations of the capitalist system, there was colonialism, there was the absurd war from '14 to '18 from which people had just exited, the massacre.... Now, for all that, Marxist theory, and even in the very simplified form of ideology—that's a part of its illusion for working-class strata—seems to provide an explanation: Here's why there's a crisis, here's why you are unemployed, and here's why that can be changed. Yet at the same time, and this must not be forgotten, the Communists are there; they are more or less on the side of the workers, which is something I myself lived through after '45. In '45, the Stalinist party was a party that was absolutely wretched on the ideological level, and yet it was at the height of its might, not only based on its victory but it was there in the factories. There was the CGT [Communist-allied Confédération Générale du Travail ([General Confederation of Labor](#))]. There were the CGT's labor

delegates. They opposed the strikes of '47 head on. But immediately afterward, [the CGT] resumed its Cold War role. And for the workers, [the Communists] were the sole ones helping them in their struggle against capitalism—which was done, of course, with monstrous duplicity on the side of the Stalinists, who saw in them only stepping stones on their march toward power in these struggles. But on the workers' side, it wasn't the same, and that, too, is very important and this is the most tragic aspect of the affair.

F.F.: Here we have a deep-seated lived experience of classes, I'd say of Communism in countries like France and Italy...

C.C.: ...not in the United States, not in England...

F.F.: ...or a bit in England. But in countries like France and Italy, Communism had a peculiar character: the grafting of Communism onto the workers' movement and onto the Left in general was much deeper than in other countries.... Still, what is interesting is that there was a universal fascination for Communism not only on the Left but on the Right on account of its might. If you take the example of European diplomats, from Western Europe, it's quite striking: the foreign policies of our countries, whether France or England, were completely duped by the Soviet Union for reasons that were largely due to a straightforward recognition of the relation of forces.

A.F.: But here I'd like to pose another question. Would there not be something of the Communist illusion as it has been transmitted to us from which we have now been delivered? What I mean by that is the illusion of total discontinuity, of a *tabula rasa*. Communist Russia was very quickly perceived, in particular in Eastern Europe, by the Poles, by the Czechs—think of the texts by [Milan] Kundera, think of the texts by [Czesław] Miłosz—as Communist

Russia, but especially as Russia; it was a “kidnapped West,” to quote Kundera,¹² and Miłosz says nearly the same thing. Therefore, they have seen a continuity that the partisans of Communism and the enemies of totalitarianism didn’t see. Therefore, when Communism collapsed, people again said: Well, there’s a discontinuity. Today, what is happening? For the Chechens, is there a discontinuity? Not at all! Grozny was crushed with methods that, in a way, haven’t changed much. And, indeed, among Western diplomats, to take up again what you said, there is the same type of fascination with might or, in any case, the same type of attitude toward might. So, oughtn’t all that encourage us to push further our reflection on the encounter between Communism and Russia?

C.C.: Listen, I myself wrote in *Devant la guerre*¹³ that the sole thing remaining in ’80 for the Russian leadership in its headlong flight toward overarming, etc., was to invoke ideology, nationalist mythology, the Russian Nation. In 1980, Brezhnev *was* the Russian Empire, etc. That is incontestable, and one could push things much further. We arrive at another enigma of modern history: the Nation. Why the Nation-State? No one knows. That seems completely natural. Political philosophy has volume upon volume, whole libraries; there isn’t one philosophical account of what the nation is, nor, moreover, is there anything from the standpoint of the philosophy of law. Sovereignty belongs to the Nation. So, what’s the Nation? Why does sovereignty belong to the

¹²T/E: Kundera’s article, “Un Occident kidnappé, la tragédie de l’Europe centrale,” first appeared in *Le Débat*, 27 (November 1983). In 2023, the year of his death, *A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe* was published by Harper in the United States and Faber & Faber in England.

¹³T/E: See an excerpt from *DG* in a revised English-language translation: “Facing the War,” *Solidarity (new series)* 1:2 (1982): [4]-[16].

Nation? One says the Rights of Man, the sovereign citizen: the citizen! Not the Frenchman! An old antinomy, but it remains there still. And we see that with totalitarianism since the cult of personality; in Russia, it's Stalin, in Yugoslavia, it's Tito, in China, it's Mao, and then in the little people's democracies, there are little fathers of peoples who are there under the wings of the grandfathers of peoples. But each nation has its national people's father. There is the Nation, which is a law that is a very hard to break—that's absolutely obvious. There are people we know, who are friends, who say that it must be broken... *[laughter]*.

A.F.: Oh, really? I don't see who you want to talk about....

C.C.: Yes, yes, they're wrong, uh...they're not wrong, I mean....

A.F.: Oh, really! ...

C.C.: They are absolutely not wrong. I myself am internationalist, cosmopolitan, etc., but one must not underestimate—though we're not here to speak about that—this fantastic civilizational matrix the European nations have been. But on the other hand, I think that when many people say, like de Gaulle, “There is no communism, there is only the eternal Russia,” “Communism will pass, Russia will remain,” in a sense that's true, but here something is missed, which is, precisely, the novelty of the phenomenon. When reading the nineteenth-century French nobleman [\[the Marquis de Custine\]](#), one is struck by the fact that the psychiatric hospitals for dissidents were there, the Czar locked up a dissident nobleman at his home, saying he was mad.¹⁴ And yet, it's not

¹⁴T/E: Castoriadis may be thinking of the Russian nobleman and philosopher [Pyotr Yakovlevich Chaadayev](#), who was indeed declared legally insane by the Czar and confined to his own home. Without

the same thing. There is a radical novelty, there is an excess of monstrosity. There is this absurdity, this aberrancy. We were just speaking of industrial rationality, but this isn't true. The concentration camps are an absurdity, the Terror, from the political standpoint, is an absurdity. Furet should know; there is a text by [\[Jean-Paul\] Marat](#) that says: The Revolution will not truly be grounded [*assise*] until 25,860 people are guillotined. Why 25,860? That's one for every thousand in the French population. Now, Stalin killed one in ten! This is not rational political Terror, it's something that has gone completely off like in no other regime.

F.F.: Modern societies are living in a curious situation today, pulled between the national and the universal. It's always been like that since the French Revolution. Modern man is at once prisoner of a universalist dream—he is an autonomous man and every man has the same right as he does to autonomy—and at the same time his form of existence, which is collective, his historical form, is the Nation. And today we are living in wealthy societies, the democratic societies of the West, which are caught in a sort of universalism that is utopian and that, at bottom, has no impact on reality, and post-Communist countries that take refuge, for lack of having anything else to live on, in an exacerbation of national passions.

A.F.: Well, I would like simply to add one small specification on what I wanted to say. A while back a major article by Samuel Huntington appeared in the United States

mentioning his name and emphasizing Chaadayev's supposed Catholicism instead of his opposition to Russian Orthodoxy, the [Marquis de Custine](#) speaks of a "martyr to the truth," interned by Nicholas I, in the thirty-sixth letter of his book [La Russie en 1839](#), where he also "coined the description of Russia as the prison of the peoples" ([English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)).

and then in France...¹⁵

C.C.: ...paradigm change...

A.F.: ...explaining that conflicts had changed paradigms; we had passed from the war of ideologies to the war of cultures. Now, as a matter of fact, what people like Miłosz and Kundera were telling us is that there was an entanglement beforehand, that is to say, we were in ideology and also in the cultural sphere, and I believe that it is perhaps this intertwining of the two that we must know how to think through. Yet in order to continue the discussion and to finish it, I would now like to pose to you a question about today. That is to say, Communism has fallen, it's over, it has fallen as a force and as an idea. One can do a history of it, and you do so, François Furet. Is this to say that we have returned "to normal"? Is this to say that a parenthesis is closing, a parenthesis opened by the Great War, and that today we are living in a democratic situation of normality? Here's another way of formulating the question: Should the mourning of Communism be accompanied by a definitive mourning of all idea of revolution?

C.C.: Furet first!

A.F.: Furet first, if you wish....

F.F.: I myself would have a tendency to respond, "Yes," insofar as revolution is taken in its, let's say, Jacobin or Leninist sense, that is to say, seizure of the State in order to transform man, in order to carry out the struggle against nature, in order to tear man from his nature and transform him. I believe that *that* idea is dead, at the same time as the

¹⁵T/E: Samuel P. Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?" was first published in *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, and expanded in book form, without the question mark, as *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

idea of the working class as humanity's emancipator also belongs to the inventory of the past, of the Party-State, too, I believe. By way of consequence, what remains of the revolutionary idea in its, let us say, French sense, well, in one of its French senses, which is the Jacobin sense? In my opinion: no longer much. And I would say, "So much the better," because it's an idea that brings on catastrophes. Does that mean that we are to live without any emancipatory horizon? No. But for the moment, in the world in which we live, no one sees the emancipatory horizon, we are condemned to live in the world in which we live.

C.C.: Yes, this is what you say in a quite fine phrase, and your book includes many, a lot of them; at the end of your book, you say...

A.F.: Yes, "Here we are, condemned to live in the world as it is."¹⁶

C.C.: "We are condemned to live in the world as it is." It's No Exit!¹⁷ [laughter] So, "Yes" and "No"... I mean that it is incontestable that revolution in the sense in which you are saying it is condemned historically, as a coup d'État ultimately, because that's what's at issue. I think that things do not go the same way in the abstract, in the principle of the thing, rather, as regards the other meaning of the idea of revolution, that is to say, the meaning of regime transformation. Because that's what's being contested today, right? We're being told: Here we have it, the finally found form of human society; it's liberal capitalism, that is to say, the market in quotation marks, with human rights, with at least half of the Left and half of the Right, in quotation marks

¹⁶T/E: *The Passing of an Illusion*, p. 502.

¹⁷T/E: *Huit clos* is the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 existentialist play.

[*laughter*], right? Because the rights of man still remain to be seen! But I believe that there are two things that must be seen: it is that this end of the goddess History, this much-talked-about meaning of History that is eliminated, challenges not only Marxism; it challenges the liberal vision....¹⁸

F.F.: Of course!

C.C.: ...one has only to read [John] Stuart Mill or even Tocqueville. The Millian or Tocquevillean vision of history is being challenged....

F.F.: But from this is born our discomfort [*embarras*]!

C.C.: There is no definite, gradual progress, be it only millimetric, toward some sort of freedom, some state of abundance. We are living in a world that is as chaotic as any other phase of universal history, with what is happening in Europe, elsewhere in Chechnya, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, etc. So, there's that.

And what is over, in my opinion, is all the revolutionary messianism. But what seems to be challenged, what is challenged in reality—one need only look at the lamentable political situation of France and the presidential elections hanging over us¹⁹—is the very idea of genuine political action. For, who among all the people who present themselves today in society puts himself forward as promoter,

¹⁸T/E: As he usually does, Castoriadis is speaking of *liberal* here in the Continental sense of conservative free-market ideology.

¹⁹T/E: Three months after the Furet-Castoriadis discussion, neo-Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac defeated the Socialist Party's Lionel Jospin on May 7, 1995. Two weeks before that (April 23), a first-round election had been held that included also the neo-Gaullist Prime Minister of the time, Édouard Balladur, along with French Communist, Trotskyist, Green, and two far-right candidates, as well as a candidate for a French Lyndon LaRouche party.

as author proposing genuine, nontrivial political action? So, there's a generalized political apathy, and I believe that, in there, that's what we need to grapple with. For my part, I think that, without making nonelectoral speeches, the validity of the project of autonomy, of emancipation is unassailable, because it's rooted not only in our past but in what we are; it's in terms of this project that we are having a discussion here—in other words, neither materially nor intellectually would that have been possible. And at the same time, the collapse of Communism has paradoxically been the seemingly temporary (at least, let's hope so) *coup de grâce* for people's capacities to mobilize in Western societies.

A.F.: Well, then, François Furet, do you have anything to add?

F.F.: No, no.

A.F.: So, unfortunately the discussion is closing. I myself would have liked to say many things. Simply a word on Tocqueville. I do not believe that he would be a thinker of progress, but, rather, the brilliant herald of this apathy you describe so well, Cornelius Castoriadis, a brilliant and melancholic herald. [*Castoriadis sighs*] And he, too, had another idea of democracy than the apathy in which it is falling.

C.C.: Certainly.

A.F.: This is a little parenthesis on Tocqueville.

C.C.: I was speaking of the interpretation of the [*inaudible*]....

A.F.: But that being said, in any case discussion on autonomy in our societies remains more open than ever. ...

Anarchy and Radical Democracy: A Discussion with Radio Libertaire*

Jacques Bouché: You are on Radio Libertaire, 89.4 megahertz, the voice of the Anarchist Federation, the voice without God or master. This is a special transmission of Chronique Hebdo [daily chronicle] that we are going to offer to you today. Jacques and Gérard are, as always, here, and they have a guest who perhaps has not come often to Radio Libertaire but who is very well known and you have read an enormous number of his books. We're talking about Cornelius Castoriadis. Hello Cornelius Castoriadis.

Cornelius Castoriadis: Hello.

J.B.: This improvised encounter on Radio Libertaire was suggested to us by the book you have published, which is titled *[The Rising Tide of Insignificancy](#)*. The first question that comes to my mind, since perhaps Radio Libertaire's listeners do not know you so well and since, generally speaking, anarchists have always had, to say the least, some feelings of reticence toward a certain number of Marxist acts, thoughts, and philosophies, is perhaps, in order to best introduce you, to ask you to recount succinctly your path. For me, for example, your path has always been to be a very

*T/E: Translation of a revised version of "Anarchie et démocratie radicale: accords et désaccords" ([1/3](#), [2/3](#), [3/3](#)), a three-part [Lieux Communs](#) transcription of Cornelius Castoriadis's participation in a May 30, 1996 "Chronique Hebdo" program broadcast on Radio Libertaire (Paris) and hosted by Jacques Bouché and Gérard Jan, who sought to explore with him the "points of convergence" and of "divergence" between radical democracy, as Castoriadis conceived it, and anarchy. An audio recording is available here: <http://docanar.free.fr/spip.php?article76> (four .mp3s) or here in its entirety: <http://josie.pin.free.fr/2006.2007/61-30%20Mai%201996%20%20Castoriadis%20chez%20C%20H.wav>

critical Marxist, someone ever more critical toward Marxists.

C.C.: No, for now going on thirty-five years, I am not a Marxist. I was Marxist, and I was even Leninist for two or three years, not even that long, under the Occupation. Then I was a Trotskyist, I criticized the Leninism in Trotskyism, then the Trotskyism in Trotskyism. I came out of there with other comrades and we founded Socialisme ou Barbarie in '49. That lasted roughly twenty years, and in the course of Socialisme ou Barbarie, the stages for me have been the criticisms and successive abandonments of various sections of Marxism, down to its core. I began in 1953 already by criticizing Marx's economic system, in '57 criticizing his conception of labor and production, in '59 criticizing his idea of the nature of the crisis of capitalism, and already in '60, I had begun the work that was published as the first part of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#). This first part is called "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory," the first chapter is called "Marxism: A Provisional Assessment,"¹ and it ends with the conclusion that one must choose between remaining Marxist or remaining revolutionary. The answer is clear. Therefore, since 1961 and 1964-1965, when the text that later was reprinted in [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) was [first] published, I no longer had anything to do with Marxism. For me, Marx is a great thinker, of course, but he is like Montesquieu, like Max Weber, like Aristotle, like Hobbes; he is in the gallery of major thinkers from the history of humanity. And at the same time, that means that there is a

¹T/E: Speaking here extemporaneously, Castoriadis incorrectly identifies the title as "*Bilan critique*"—i.e., a "critical assessment" or "critical results" (*bilan* being the French translation for the various "Reports" that have appeared in Trotskyist literature, starting with Leon Trotsky's 1906 article "[Results and Prospects](#)")—whereas the full and correct original French title for this first [IIS](#) chapter is: "Le marxisme: bilan provisoire."

heap of things from him that are today for us unacceptable, outdated, and others, it is true, that still make us reflect.

J.B.: Perhaps we can speak about the book, which brings together talks you've given over the past few years. In one of these contributions—it seems to me that it's in the one you have titled “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism”...

C.C.: Yes, that's right. It's an article that was published in *Le Monde*, when Gorbachev proposed that the Communist Party be dissolved, or something like that.²

J.B.: I believe that it's in that one that you are already underscoring that, in Marx's thought, there is something like a worm in the fruit. Many people today, who were born in the '20s and '30s, who sucked the Marxist milk in high school, in Philosophy classes,³ clung desperately to Marxism by saying that Marx's thought had been badly interpreted, badly applied...and even today they continue to reference it.

C.C.: There is even a tiny neo-Marxist current with, among others, [\[Daniel\] Bensaïd](#), the Trotskyist. There are one or two others who have published books on Marx; there's a review called [Actuel Marx](#). [Jacques] Derrida now proclaims himself to be, more or less...well, not Marxist but writes about Marx.⁴ It's comical.

J.B.: And then there's another side, which is more

²T/E: On March 14, 1990, i.e., five weeks before the “Pulverization” interview was conducted, “the provision on the CPSU monopoly on power was removed from Article 6 of the Constitution of the USSR” ([“Mikhail Gorbachev,” English Wikipedia, s.v.](#)).

³T/E: In France, Philosophy is first taught at the high-school level.

⁴T/E: A 1993 Jacques Derrida book appeared in English the following year as *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge).

tragic still. It's the renegade who does not want to assume responsibility for his renunciation; this is [French historian François] Furet or the team around him.

C.C.: These are the neo-Tocquevilleans, who were all on the Left in various capacities (including Communist ones, in the French CP) but who, having discovered the horrors of totalitarianism, have completely tipped over to the other side, becoming champions of existing democracy.

J.B.: That's it. On the one hand, they have discovered very late the horrors of totalitarianism spread by Marx, but they didn't have to take the path of glorifying hardline [conservative, "free-market," Continental-style] Liberalism.

C.C.: Of course. But here we have a kind of sophism that has become a sort of ideological blackmail and that nevertheless plays a role, it must be said, even if it's a sophism: "If you want to transform society radically, you will end up with the Gulag." That's what they're telling people, aren't they? And it's true, too, that, after the experience of the Soviet Union, in my opinion many people have drawn this conclusion. In my view, it is incontestable that one of the most major reasons for present-day apathy, for the atonia of the workers' movement and of the revolutionary movement in general, for its near decay is this tragic experience. It's tragic for those who believed in it, but even for others, because there nevertheless were 70 million deaths and an unprecedented prostitution of all the ideas in which one believed, and which continues to weigh very heavily. Stalin didn't just kill some revolutionaries. He killed almost the very idea of revolution.

J.B.: Yes, he killed this idea. And within the former Soviet Union itself—though, if we remain on this subject, we could ask ourselves whether Marxism's messianic side, its Manichaeic side, its end-of-history side, ultimately its

religious side, with also its symbol of Stalin as Little Father of Peoples has not, contrary to what might be thought, hammered home for the whole of society the idea that there was a supreme savior?⁵ And that this is a paralyzing element?

C.C.: Of course, I also said it, furthermore, in this text you have just mentioned,⁶ and I have written it since '61 in "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory."⁷ There is a messianic element that has come to replace religious faith that is on the decline or disappearing. The messianic element corresponds to something very deep in human beings: there is a hope. This is Marx's grand maneuver, which succeeded beyond all expectation: giving a so-called scientific underpinning to this messianic side. Not only would there be redemption, but this redemption is guaranteed by Science, by the Laws of History: I am showing you how the Laws of History operate and are ineluctably going to bring on a socialist, communist, etc. stage. Here, too, there is something very strange. For, if the

⁵T/E: The third stanza of [Eugène Pottier](#)'s original French lyrics for the song [L'Internationale](#) begins with the line *Il n'est pas de sauveurs suprêmes*, which translates literally as: "There are no supreme saviors."

⁶T/E: "The project of emancipation, of freedom as activity, of the people as author of its own history, was inverted into a messianic imaginary of a Promised Land" ([CL4](#), 42-43).

⁷T/E: In saying "1961" here, Castoriadis may have misspoken about the year—the publication of "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" dates from 1964-1965—though he may be referring to the fact that this text, which constitutes a series published in the final five issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, began "as a 'Note on the Marxist Philosophy of History' [that] circulated within the group in 1959" (Foreword to [PSW3](#), xv; see General Introduction, [PSW1](#), 26) when he was drafting and sharing for discussion "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (now in [PSW2](#)), which itself was finally published in 1960-1961 as a three-part *S. ou B.* series.

Laws of History guarantee that...

J.B.: ...there would be nothing to be done!

C.C.: You could go to bed and wait for the Laws of History to bring us to the good society. But that hasn't prevented people from saying: We shall win, not because we are the strongest but because History is with us. And even in Marx (even before Lenin and the theory of the Party), that went along with this idea of the hegemonic role of the proletariat. That, too, was an illusion and a mystification. Because there is no class, however important it might be, to which the salvation of humanity is to be entrusted.

J.B.: Why have you chosen this title, *[The Rising Tide of Insignificancy](#)*? It might seem a bit lightweight to choose a formalistic question, but for me the word *insignificancy* has in its accepted sense several significations. It could mean that a sense of futility has seeped into society, that things are not fundamentally important. I know very well that you are going to tell me that this is not at all the meaning you have given...

C.C.: Actually yes, in particular...

Gérard Jan: There is perhaps that sense, too, that is to say, blandness, inconsistency, things that don't have any importance, futility...

C.C.: It's not that things have no importance. Rather, it's that they go by, as if they had no signification. One cannot say that massacres in Burundi and Rwanda have no importance, that what has just happened in Israel, with the possible victory of the Likud Party, has no importance.⁸ It

⁸T/E: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by right-wing extremist Yigal Amir seven months earlier, on November 4, 1995. On the day before the present radio program, May 29, 1996, Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu stood for election against Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres of the Labor Party. Netanyahu assumed office June 18, 1996.

cannot be said that the four million unemployed workers in Germany and 3,200,000 “officially” unemployed in France have no importance. That’s not it. But what it is is that present-day society, on a slope that is highly characteristic of contemporary capitalism, is succeeding in depriving all these events of any signification. There are unemployed people? Well, this is the price to pay for the liberalization and globalization of the economy.

G.J.: The discourse on these types of events is, rather, the kind of discourse that comes from [conservative, “free market,” Continental-style] Liberalism....

C.C.: [*inaudible*]

J.B.: What I simply wanted to underscore is that you have spoken several times of *responsibility*. Now, one has the impression that the way in which this unimportance of things is presented involves a bit just anyone, that is to say, it no longer situates responsibilities. I believe that there is, on the contrary, a very profound signification, and perhaps it even has grown more and more, become stronger, and is oriented in a certain direction. But *this* signification is not just in the air like that. It does not come from millions of people listening to the radio and watching television. It is orchestrated. One would like to make people think that this isn’t important or, at least, that its importance is relative.

C.C.: Of course, But that, too, is what I call *insignificancy*. For example, let’s take the economic level. There is the pitiful discourse of Neoliberalism, which is ridiculous. It’s not [just] that we are against it: it’s intrinsically ridiculous. It had been refuted by bourgeois economists, by [John Maynard] Keynes and others [since the Thirties or Forties]. And we have come back to old wives’ cures, to economic stuff that is pure and simple superstition. Probably, those benefitting therefrom don’t believe it. What

they do believe in is their bottom line, profits, power for [\[French Prime Minister Alain\] Juppé](#), for example, and so on. Juppé talks rubbish [*n'importe quoi*]. He's telling people that, for growth to start back up, you have to lower state expenditures, that is to say, you have to reduce effective demand for the goods and services produced by society. This is grotesque. It's as if I were saying that, in order to bring down someone's fever, I'll give him a pill that increases his fever. That's the kind of guy he is. They're mountebanks.

Obviously, what's happening in reality is not insignificant at all. But it's all this commentary, this whole discourse that may be found in the inability of the system's spokespersons to have a consistent and coherent ideology. In the nineteenth century, Liberalism was a fairly consistent ideology. It consisted in saying: "There are more and more machines. And the more machines there are, the more happiness there will be." That was false; there was the illusion of progress, but anyway...

J.B.: And then there was a cards-on-the-table debate with the socialist thinkers of the time...

C.C.: ...critical! And there nevertheless was a movement of relative democratization of society; *Ancien Régimes* were left behind, there were unions, etc.

G.J.: Aren't we being sold high tech, science, when we're told: "Look at this technology, it's the proof that we're right. And the same goes for the economy"? One would be coming back around to the proof of the Laws of History. One would be relying on a scientific doctrine in order to lift doubts among grassroots citizens, in order to justify capitalist ideology, the ideology of [conservative, "free market," Continental-style] Liberalism.

C.C.: Yes, certainly, one is trying to do that. But I believe that this discourse has become ever hollower and that

fewer and fewer people believe in it—I'm speaking of large masses, not intellectuals. There already was the *Zero Growth* report of the Club of Rome in 1972.⁹ It was said: It isn't possible to go on like that. What happened? One went on.

It's true that growth is less great because there is an economic crisis for capitalism—a bizarre crisis, but anyway, there is nevertheless a crisis.

J.B.: That is to say, it's developing in certain zones of the economy.

C.C.: This crisis is developing especially in the old industrialized countries and in highly underdeveloped, very undeveloped countries, if you will. On the contrary, there are the Asian countries, which are fully blossoming as capitalist economies. But what I am trying to say is that people no longer believe in it. On the one hand, the idea of technological progress has become dissociated from the idea of happiness, people's power, etc. And on the other, everyone glimpses that even if very strong growth were to happen anew—which, in my opinion, is practically ruled out—the price to be paid would be very heavy. Potentially, it would involve Earth's destruction at the end of two, six, or seven decades. No one can escape awareness of this.

J.B.: Even “mainstream [*non-contestataires*]” economists, who quite often toe the line, recognize that the growth of the industrial countries is proportional to the degrowth of humanity as a whole. That is to say that there is a general impoverishment of three-quarters of humanity.

C.C.: There's that side of it, which is the underdevelopment side, but there is also the side of the

⁹T/E: The title of the original English-language version of this report is *The Limits to Growth*. The first French translation appeared the same year as *Halte à la croissance?* (Should growth be stopped?).

destruction of natural resources. Indeed, this also goes, let it be said parathetically, against Marxism. For, that's an aspect Marx didn't take into account. Marx, too, thought—and here, he partook of the capitalist imaginary—that there was unlimited growth, that man will become afterward master and possessor of nature.

J.B.: So, as for me, I haven't read Marx, but...

C.C.: You have to read him. You're wrong! [*laughter*]

J.B.: I have simply read some excerpts; therefore, I won't speak about him. But some people were already reflecting on this at the time, in 1840, 1850, 1860. While reading some texts by [\[French revolutionary Socialist Louis\] August Blanqui](#) (*Le Révolté, Le Prisonnier*), I happened upon some rather ferocious criticisms about the fact that some animal species were being destroyed and, especially, some species of men, too, apropos of colonization and of the way countries of the time that were already capitalist were behaving toward indigenous races.

C.C.: Yes. But Blanqui is not Marx. There's something else—I don't know whether we have two minutes to make an amusing parenthetical remark. You will remember that, in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean carries a very wounded Marius through the sewers of Paris in order to save him from the soldiers who had broken through the barricades. And he plunges into the shit, practically up to his neck, while holding Marius above his head. And here, Hugo indulges in one of his beloved digressions (as he does apropos of Waterloo, etc.) about the fact that Paris casts into the sea each year 500 million gold francs via its sewers. I don't know where he got this figure. Probably, the great chemists of the age, notably the Germans ([\[Justus von\] Liebig](#), etc.) had to have made some calculations of this kind. But Hugo adds, and it's marvelous: But the Chinese peasants manure the land

with their excrement. That's why, says Hugo, China's earth is as fertile as the first day of Creation.¹⁰ [*laughter*] Therefore, there was an awareness of these problems. And the case of Marx is all the more serious, if you will, as he never paid any attention to this aspect of the thing, carried away once again as he was by his adherence to the imaginary of the growth of the capitalist forces of production.

J.B.: Of capital, yes, Moreover, his work *Capital* means...

C.C.: That's something else. So there you have it for insignificancy, right? It's the insignificancy of the discourse, it's the insignificancy of how things are evolving culturally, it's the crisis of culture.¹¹ It's the fact that we no longer have practically any great creators. But it's also the fact that people put up with that. There is subway-workday-television-sleep away [*métro-boulot-télé-dodo*], and television, that's what?¹² It's insignificancy.

J.B.: Yes, indeed in your book, you talk about people "caught in the glue of consumer society."¹³ One could speak

¹⁰T/E: See "Reflections on 'Development' and 'Rationality'" (1976), now in [CL2](#), 138-39, and "The Revolutionary Force of Ecology" (1993), now in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), 114-15.

¹¹T/E: See his 1986 University of Minnesota Center for Humanistic Studies lecture, *The Crisis of Culture and the State*, now in [PPA](#).

¹²In "The Project of Autonomy Is Not a Utopia," his 1992 interview published the next year by *Propos* and translated in [ASA\(RTP\)](#), Castoriadis explained: "The subway-workday-sleep away [*métro-boulot-dodo*] triad criticized in 1968 has become car-job-TV."

¹³T/E: See the last sentence of a 1989 talk by Castoriadis, which appeared the next year in *Connexions* and which is now available in translation as "The Crisis of the Identification Process" ([CL4](#)).

of the “big blanket [*grand édredon*].” But what must be emphasized is to what extent this is an increasingly sophisticated power tool of States and of the whole organization [of society], which is determined at all cost to have just consumers, passive people...

C.C.: Absolutely. And sleepy spectators.

J.B.: Yes. There’s something very interesting that [Max] Stirner said in a lecture he gave before writing his one and only book, on education. He said that the issue is not to know what are the means, the programs, etc.; the problem is very simple: Do we want to make creators or creatures?

C.C.: A wonderful formula. We’re in a society of creatures, that’s for sure.

J.B.: Those are a bit the conclusions you are drawing from this general apathy...

C.C.: ...which I call *privatization*.

J.B.: That’s it. And if I have understood well, the lesson, if lesson there be, would be a pedagogical one. Of being informed, of a clearing, a demystification, of this space.

C.C.: Especially a demystification, a denunciation of the current state of affairs, and a wake-up call.

J.B.: That’s it. What they want us to take for insignificance isn’t.

G.J.: I’d like to come back to your work, *Mai 68: la brèche* [suivi de] *Vingt Ans après*, which you wrote in 1988 with [Claude] Lefort and Edgar Morin. Soon it will be the thirtieth anniversary,¹⁴ and one could...

¹⁴T/E: *Mai 68: la brèche* suivi de *Vingt Ans après* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1988) was the twentieth anniversary edition of Lefort’s, Morin’s, and (under the pseudonym Jean-Marc Coudray) Castoriadis’s *Mai 68: la brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard), the first book published (in June 1968) following the events of May ’68 in France. A new version of the 1988

C.C.: ...republish the book, hoping that it might have some success, yes....

G.J.: I took a look at this work, in particular your contribution. It could be said that, since '88, there has been—since you use this expression—an acceleration of History.¹⁵ Eight years later, things have deteriorated further in impressive, spectacular fashion. We should try to understand this phenomenon of acceleration. And if that continues in this direction, in how much time will we reach the implosion point?

C.C.: You are quite right to make this remark. There is something that may seem like an event that is due to circumstances [*événement conjoncturel*], like a tiny historical

expanded edition, mentioned above, appeared posthumously from Fayard in time for the fortieth anniversary, in 2008. Castoriadis's 1968 text is now available in translation as "The Anticipated Revolution" in [PSW3](#), while his twentieth-anniversary contribution, "The Movements of the Sixties," can now be found in [CL4](#).

¹⁵T/E: The only use of the word "acceleration" and its cognates in this text appears in its first line:

The "interpretation" of May '68 in terms of a preparation (or an acceleration) of contemporary "individualism" constitutes one of the most extreme efforts I know of—the good faith of the authors remaining unquestionable—to rewrite, despite all appearances to the contrary, a history through which most of us have lived, to distort the meaning of events that are still, if I may say so, almost "hot" ([CL4](#), 25).

The only appearance in "The Anticipated Revolution" is in the sentence: "This attempt could only fail, and it led the movement to the very brink of isolation and an acceleration of its tendency merely to revolve around itself" ([PSW3](#), 139).

accident, but that isn't one. There was the oil crisis in '74.¹⁶ This was the first moment when the ruling classes began to blackmail workers, laboring people, unions, wage earners [*salariés*] in general, saying: The situation is serious; one can no longer go on like this, one has to tighten one's belt. Nineteen-Seventy-Eight was the first year, to my knowledge, when American trade unions signed collective bargaining agreements with the bosses that accepted wage reductions. This had never happened since the beginning of capitalism. Workers accepted wage reductions when the knife was put to their throat, but they never signed agreements to this effect. And immediately afterward, [Margaret] Thatcher came to power in England, [Ronald] Reagan in the United States, and then there was the offensive of Neoliberalism, employing, moreover, practically the same arguments: You've had your fun; now you have to become serious again and tighten your belts. Only the toughest and most capable will survive. Ultimately, that's the idea, right? And in France, obviously, the glorious representation of Neoliberalism by the French Socialists and [\[Socialist French President François\] Monsieur Mitterrand](#), the so-called "Florentine"—he's a freshwater Florentine, but let's move on—has succeeded in imposing, within France, things that [\[former French President Valéry\] Giscard \[d'Estaing\]](#) would never have been able to pass. That goes hand in hand with the total liberalization of the economy, that is to say, leaving the field completely open to capital, to the multinationals, to the onminationals, or to the

¹⁶T/E: The [first "oil crisis" emanating from the Middle East](#) began in October 1973 and ended in January 1974. Castoriadis discusses the Arab Oil Embargo in "The Yom Kippur 'Accident'" section of his "Author's Introduction to the 1974 English Edition" of *Modern Capitalism and Revolution*; see: [PSW2](#), 340-41.

nonnationals—because that's what it's about now—to do what they want. Globalization, as it's called—that is to say, the fact that it is infinitely preferable, from the capitalist standpoint, to invest in Vietnam or in South China than in France or in Germany. An engineer in France or in Germany is paid the international equivalent of thirty dollars an hour. In Poland or in Brazil, he's paid eight to ten dollars; in Vietnam or China, he's paid two dollars. That's a difference of one to fifteen.

J.B.: Or in China, he's sometimes not even paid.

G.J.: He works in a camp.

J.B.: There's forced labor.

G.J.: Laborers are men in the Gulag.

C.C.: Of course. There's all that.... With the pressure that is being exerted. And at the same time—and that's what, for us, is of great interest—there is the question of the prospects for possible struggles. Now, what's happening at present? The capitalist State is in the process of getting rid of the more or less effective means for regulating the economy.

J.B.: But don't you believe that, parallel to this apparent disinterest in economic arbitration...

C.C.: It's not a disinterest; it's a systematic effort.

J.B.: Yes, they'd be presenting that as not being its role, but parallel to that and in compensation for that, it has considerably increased its sovereign powers [*pouvoirs régaliens*]....

C.C.: There, perhaps, we will have a divergence of opinion. I ask myself whether there is not, behind that, some different ideological conceptions. In a sense, you are committed to thinking in terms of a strong and ever stronger State. As for myself, if I saw a future, it would be, rather, the dislocation of States and their replacement in power by capitalist mafias. See what I mean? Private armies, almost.

J.B.: A bit like in Russia?

C.C.: Absolutely. There again, it's quite curious, because Russia, which is very backward, is offering, in its present-day dilapidation, a kind of avant-garde image. But the French State is in the process of becoming dislocated. Well, that's always been a bit the case, yet there was a period when the State succeeded in being the guarantor of the general interests of the system. This is no longer the case. Now, it's completely beneath the heel of some capitalist group or other.

J.B.: We must agree on the meaning of the phrase "reinforcement of the State," because that is not at all the nineteenth-century vision I have. This was a reinforcement, but under another form, that is to say, at bottom it was not at all preoccupied with moral considerations. As [\[Pierre-Joseph Proudhon\]](#) said when speaking of the State: "it is a stranger to right, indifferent to all moral ideas; it is an instrument of force."¹⁷ This instrument of force can take on different forms; it can very well join in with mafias.

C.C.: Absolutely. To return to the main thread of the argument, this further regression that has occurred since '88 is the conjunction of all these factors, with, at the same time, an acceleration—which, in my opinion, is enormous—of the rot, of the ideological and cultural degradation. You have in France a man like Guy Sorman,¹⁸ who is a completely ridiculous individual, who doesn't know what he is talking about, and who is an advisor to the President of the Republic. It's rather unprecedented, isn't it? Or you have mountebanks

¹⁷T/E: [Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Of Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, vol. 2, a working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur from the New Edition, Revised, Corrected and Expanded, Originally Published in 1860 \(Corvus Editions, 2023\)](#), p. 9.

¹⁸On Guy Sorman, see [CL6](#), 222, n. 24, and [ASA\(RPT\)](#), 105, n. 10.

like Bernard-Henri Lévy, who's on the top rung, on television and elsewhere.¹⁹ Yet that's entirely characteristic. These are not anecdotes. This is the spirit of the situation.

J.B.: In institutions made up this way, there is perhaps a moral degradation, but there is always an army, a police force, and an ability to harm that is one thousand times greater than one hundred or fifty years ago. Here, we have a kind of prolongation in the degradation already going on.

C.C.: Well, for my part, I think as a former economist on a more specific plane, by which I don't mean *technical*. You have what was called after the War *the Long Boom*, right? The traditional theories, in any case the Marxist ones—but even the other ones—said: capitalism, crisis, overproduction, unemployment, etc. There were thirty years during which it wasn't like that. Why? Because, on the one hand, laboring people had succeeded in imposing a certain kind of wage policy, reduced working hours, etc., at the end of a century of struggles. On the other hand, the capitalist State had understood that the economy had to be managed, not in the interest of the people but in the interest of the system, and that one had to avoid economic fluctuations. What is called *Keynesian policy* had been developed. Now, what is happening at present is that, on the one hand, there no longer are struggles on the part of laboring people, or very few of them. There is this kind of apathy of which we have spoken, discouragement, disillusionment, etc. at the same time as a sort of disintegration of the big battalions of the working class, of the proletariat, etc. And there's, on the other hand, the neoliberal offensive: within the bourgeoisie—or the dominant layers, if you wish—it's the defeat of the layers that

¹⁹T/E: On Bernard-Henri Lévy, see "The Diversionists" (1977), now in [PSW3](#), esp. 274-77, and "The Vacuum Industry" (1979), now in [CL2](#).

wanted a somewhat rationalized form of management, in the well-understood interests of the system, to the benefit of other ones who say, under the pretext of globalization, of free enterprise, etc.: Now, we have to go to it, we have to eat up what can be eaten up. The second group is the one that has won out and that is in the process of dismantling the whole instrumentation by which the State had succeeded, during the years from 1945 to 1975, in more or less regulating the economy. And in rendering this evolution nearly irreversible! And that's why I am speaking of struggles. Suppose, now, that you have some demands from the workers to increase wages in France. Leave aside the fact that there is the threat of unemployment and that people are scared to get moving. But one is going to say: But if we increase wages, you'll be unemployed in two months, because we are totally open to international competition...

J.B.: And that in Vietnam.... Absolutely.

C.C.: In Vietnam, wages haven't been increased; in Singapore, wages haven't been increased. Therefore, there will be an enormous foreign-trade deficit; therefore, companies will close; therefore, you'll be unemployed. So, shut up. And there's some reality in that. For my part, this is a harrowing issue, because you can't mobilize people while telling them: "All or nothing. We must put an end to this system." It must be said. It must not be hidden. But in the past people have always had a kind of training ground, if you will, for solidarity, for struggle, for inventing forms of collective organization, etc., which were these partial struggles that weren't utopian. Wages could be increased under capitalism. The working week, which was 72 hours in 1840 and which had become 40 hours in 1940, was able to be reduced. Since then, it hasn't been lowered. Now, at present, what is one to say? For example, you see what happened in November-

December [1995] in France.²⁰

J.B.: Yes, and it's true that one doesn't have an explanation.

C.C.: It's not that one doesn't have an explanation. As for me, I have an explanation. This is why I have condemned all at once the neo-Tocquevilleans, the people of the *Esprit* journal, etc., who line up on the side of [neo-Gaullist French President Jacques] Chirac, ...there was a magazine...

G.J.: Yes, there was an article in *L'Événement du Jeudi*. And you set yourself apart from [French sociologist Pierre] Bourdieu, too.

C.C.: Yes, I set myself apart from Bourdieu.²¹ And it wasn't Bourdieu, moreover. Bourdieu succeeded in putting himself in the limelight, advertising himself. Well, this doesn't matter much. The paper took back up the old-fashioned language on class struggle, this, that, and the other. Now, it was neither one nor the other. It is obvious that the

²⁰T/E: On the November-December 1995 French strikes, see Max Blechman's April 1996 interview with Castoriadis, "A Rising Tide of Significance? A Follow-Up Interview with *Drunken Boat*" and Castoriadis's "The Coordinations: A Preface" (1996), both now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).

²¹T/E: See "No to Resignation, No to Archaism" (now in [ASA\(RTP\)](#)), a translation of Castoriadis's December 21, 1995 *L'Événement du Jeudi* interview attacking the positions of both *Esprit*, which favored the French social security reform plan of French Prime Minister Alain Juppé, and the "Appel de soutien aux grévistes" (Call to support the strikers). The latter was a modified version, penned by Bourdieu, of an original text appearing in the December 6, 1995 issue of the Communist daily, *L'Humanité*, soon after these strikes, led by French railroad workers, had broken out. Bourdieu's adaptation was published in *Le Monde* on December 13, 1995. For additional information, see also T/E's notes 1-3 of [this same Castoriadis interview](#).

demands of the railroad workers and of others were corporatist demands. One must have the courage to say it. These were demands to maintain relative privileges as compared to those of other categories of workers. Retirement at fifty-five years old! Yet behind this, there was a kernel of very deep-seated revolt; people were fed up—which explains the support from the rest of the population.

G.J.: Of course, yes. Simply, words always betray—the word *privilege*.

J.B.: It's "privileges" in quotation marks; it was, on the contrary, as you say, the whole basis for what risks happening to us. These form, moreover, the premises for a completely disorganized society in which there are no more rules, no contract based on a minimum of balance and equality, and where it's really the law of the jungle. And if there's a lesson—perhaps one that is a bit difficult to discern, a bit fleeting—to be drawn from these events, it's really that there are people in the population who felt that what are called *privileges* of this or that occupational category were ultimately their reason for existence and the reason for existence of their children.

C.C.: Yes. And that, behind his so-called reform of social security, there was an attempt by Juppé and the State in general to say: Now shut up; we're the ones to settle things by decree, etc. That is to say, as you say, the abolition of what could pass more or less for a contractual system.

J.B.: Absolutely.

G.J.: A Radio Libertaire listener asks us what relations—friendly, as I was saying, conflictual, or critical—you have with the anarchist movement. Jacques, you wanted to continue exploring this issue through reference to [*The Rising Tide of Insignificancy*](#)?

J.B.: Yes, this concerns a statement in an article called

“Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime,” which is worth our while to talk about at length. There’s a phrase in which Castoriadis writes: “a society without explicit institutions of power is an absurdity into which both Marx and anarchism lapsed.” I’d like to step in afterward about this short phrase, which never should be removed from its context.

C.C.: Yes.

G.J.: I would like to make reference to your book, *Mai 68: la brèche*, where you are obviously talking about [May ’68 student leader Daniel] Cohn-Bendit. For Cohn-Bendit, Edgar Morin employs the term *libertarian Marxist*.²² Do these two terms go well together? Perhaps at the time, this was understandable. And it would merit an explanation, too, because you wrote another book with him, *De l’écologie à l’autonomie*.²³ Would you also like to talk to us about him, since in these works the anarchist, libertarian position of Cohen-Bendit is mentioned?

C.C.: First of all, I do indeed believe that, from the historical point of view, the term *libertarian Marxist* is paradoxical. It’s a bold juxtaposition [*alliance de mots*], as professors of French said, an oxymoron, as a pedant would

²²T/E: In the following paragraphs, the American reader should keep in mind that, unlike in the United States, *libertarian* often has a left-wing connotation in Europe. Indeed, Socialisme ou Barbarie’s sister organization in the Britain, Solidarity, called itself *libertarian socialist*—a head scratcher for many American “libertarians”—and the French distinguish between *libertaires* (the term employed in the original of this interview) and *libertariens*, more comparable to American libertarians, who rarely, if ever, think in collective, democratic terms.

²³T/E: A large portion of Castoriadis contribution to this 1980 joint talk with Cohn-Bendit for a gathering of ecologists in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium can be found now in [CR](#) as “From Ecology to Autonomy.”

say. It is nevertheless justified, since, starting from the moment when there began to be some people coming from around the Marxist movement, but who criticized the statist side of Marxism, and especially degenerated Marxism, their voice became a libertarian voice, and that is so in reality. For example, if you take Cohn-Bendit's book from immediately after '68, *Le stalinisme, maladie sénile du communisme*,²⁴ he mentions two sources of inspiration. On the one hand, it's Socialisme ou Barbarie, a tiny movement that came from Marxism and that had denounced Leninism, Trotskyism, the statist side, capitalism, and other things in Marx, in order to arrive at a vision I would describe as *libertarian*—because autonomy, ultimately it's that—and, on the other hand, *Noir et Rouge*, an anarchist review that was a bit influenced by Marxism, but not, as a matter of fact, in the sense of Leninism, or of the State, or of the dictatorship of the proletariat, or of things of this kind. Therefore, it's less absurd than it seems. My relations with the anarchist movement on the practical plane have always been relatively quite good. I have often been invited to speak at meetings, etc. There have even been some things that sometimes—rarely, but nevertheless—have been undertaken together. I have a lot of sympathy for the libertarian movement. There are some things that sometimes make me cringe, for example a part of the libertarian movement now that is discovering Marxism—this is undoubtedly *not* the [Fédération Anarchiste](#)—and that is

²⁴The correct title for this book, written by Cohn-Bendit with his older brother Gabriel (who had himself attended meetings of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and passed copies of back issues along to Dany) is *Le Gauchisme: remède à la maladie sénile du communisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1968). The title of Arnold Pomerans's English language translation is *Obsolete Communism. The Left-Wing Alternative* (London: André Deutsch Ltd., 1968; London: Penguin Books, 1969).

speaking in an almost Leninist, Trotskyist language...

J.B.: Really?

C.C.: The Ligue des Travailleurs [Laborers' League], something like that? Well, I don't know....

J.B.: Yes, there are a certain number of bodies [*organismes*] or small formations that appear under the anarchist label. There is no label. I don't know them. Yes, it's true that that seems entirely antinomic.

C.C.: There is one thing with which I am in completely solidarity with the libertarian movement, let's say, it's the struggle against the present state of affairs, against oppression, against all division of society between directors and executants.

J.B.: Yes, in reading your book, about the analysis of the situation and about all that can be said in relation to those in economic and political power, there is no divergence.

C.C.: No, of course. And there's another point, I bring it up—with a smile, because one was just talking about a program with [Monsignor \[and Archbishop of Paris Jean-Marie\] Lustiger](#)—it's that I am in complete solidarity with anarchists in their intransigent anticlericalism: Neither God, nor master, neither God nor Caesar nor tribune.²⁵

However, there are two points to which I never really committed myself on the anarchist side. The first is what has seemed to me to be a relative laxness on the level of theoretical thought. I don't mean by that that "there is no theoretical anarchist dogma." I am against dogma; I am for open thoughts. Yet there is a bit of random nonsense

²⁵T/E: In the [original French](#), the line in [L'Internationale](#) after the one mentioned in n. 5 above about there being no supreme saviors reads *Ni Dieu, ni César, ni Tribun*, the literal English translation of which is: "Neither God, nor Caesar, nor tribune."

[*n'importe quoi*] in the theoretical, let's say, arsenal or books, etc. And then the second point was, a bit, a, let's say, idyllic vision of human beings that in my view extends—you'll correct me if I'm wrong—to this idea that the anarchists, at least the main part, weren't aiming simply at the abolition of the State (which, in my opinion, is a completely just and achievable objective) but the abolition of all power. And that went hand in hand with this idyllic vision of human beings....

Now, there one meets up with Marx. Marx thought, for example, that all the ills of humanity came from exploitative and alienating regimes. In the much-talked-about youthful manuscripts, this communist man of the future, who would be a farmer in the morning, a musician in the afternoon and I don't know what, a movie actor, in the evening—this wasn't the case back then, but, well—at the same time would need no external constraints (social ones, not by the police) in order to be kind, to be good, not to oppress his fellow man, not to kill, not to slap people, etc. Now there, I myself don't agree in the least, both from a philosophical view, I'd say, of society, and also from a point of view of the structure of the human being—I'm also a psychoanalyst. For my part, I don't think that man, at bottom, is idyllic. I think that man, at bottom, is a passion, with immense aggressiveness, and that what hominizes man is society.

J.B.: Of course, absolutely. But when you say that, your whole discourse, "what hominizes man is society," I myself think I'm hearing Proudhon. You say that there is no interesting theoretical grounding. Even if this is above all a man of controversy and political combat and if his writings are often confused, very much a jumble, to the point even that he has not always been understood by those who were very predisposed toward him, there nevertheless are, within this considerable mass of what he wrote, answers to the questions

you are raising. The naivety—it can be said that Proudhon never considered.... But I think that the same goes for [Mikhail] Bakunin or other anarchist thinkers or those who have claimed to adhere to Anarchy, like [Élisée Reclus](#) or many others, around 1900. True, it cannot be said that, recently, there has been a theoretical continuation of anarchist reflection, in France in any case. This is true. But on the various points you emphasize, on naivety, on the “man is neither good nor bad” side, it’s society that forms and educates him, that hominizes him, as you say; I believe that this point is quite clear in Proudhon’s work.

Now, also on the notion of naivety, to the extent that it would be thought that a society can live without institutions based on power, it’s the same thing. When one says *Anarchy*, *Anarchism*, *libertarian movement*, one must not forget that, not its underpinnings, but its excrescence or, in any case, its shell, which can be filled up in various ways, is Proudhonian federalism, which is based on a vision of social relationships grounded upon contract, and these ideas that did indeed flip out all the bourgeois deputies in 1848, when he gave his speech on Mutualism and on mutuality, and on the fact that it was even in the interest of the bourgeois of the time to give up...well, that, perhaps, was indeed a bit naive.

C.C.: Well, yes, it was nevertheless so naive, yes....

J.B.: But that doesn’t prevent the whole way in which societies have evolved since the rise of capitalism. We were just talking about the State, which, in certain moments, when social movements were rather strong, respected its role as economic arbiter. Even this arbitration effort—which has always tilted a bit to one side, that is to say, that of the strongest, of the State—really does rest upon the idea of an unequal contract. And it really rests upon this idea that one must try to restore some balance. And even when a world

trade organization is created, it quite evidently is in the hands of the...[*ten-second loss of sound*]...an idea that it is a matter of economic balancing, such that there would not be, on the one hand, the exploited, on the other, the exploiters.

C.C.: This is a point of detail, but there, I wouldn't agree, because the World Trade Organization is nevertheless one of the weapons of [conservative, "free-market"] Liberalism being wielded at the present time in order to dismantle protec[tions]...[*another ten-second loss of sound*]

J.B.: ...economic relations would define values. It can very well be imagined that this organization would not be based on the law of the strongest.

C.C.: From the historical standpoint, that could no doubt be revisited, but I don't know whether that is of interest, today in general, and to our listeners in particular. I believe, for example, that in [Peter] Kropotkin's work, there are downright tirades describing a society in which there would be no power, where men love one another, are reconciled, each with all and each with himself. First of all, man will never be reconciled with himself.

J.B.: That's true, yes, but this isn't at all Proudhon's vision. For him, conflict is a determining factor of social life—something one finds again even in some works that have stirred up big polemics, like [Proudhon's] *War and Peace*.²⁶ The problem therefore is to know how it is settled, whether by war or by other means.

C.C.: Perhaps we can leave aside the history of ideas, once again, which is not for us today that fundamental. In my

²⁶T/E: Not to be confused with Leon Tolstoy's book of the same name, Proudhon's *La Guerre et la Paix: Recherches sur le principe et la constitution du droit des gens* was published in two volumes in 1861, by [E. Dentu \(Paris\)](#) and by [Michel Lévy Frères \(Paris\)](#), respectively.

opinion, the key question is the following: If one speaks of democracy—not in the bourgeois sense of the term, right? Let's say in the sense of the ancient Athenians. Or in the sense of the [Paris] Commune. What does that mean? That means that there is a power. Democracy means the *kratos* of the *dēmos*, the power of the people, of everyone, huh? Therefore, there is a power. Only, there is not this division between those who hold power, by divine right or under the pretext that they are mandated by the people, as happens at present with representative pseudodemocracy.

J.B.: It's always by divine right!

C.C.: No, it no longer claims to be by divine right. It says: God is the people, we've been voted in, in 1993, in 1995, therefore we have the right to be there.

J.B.: Yes, but the very notion of popular sovereignty has a sacralizing side....

C.C.: It has a sacralizing side. Yet there is nevertheless one thing, which is that the collectivity is, in the final analysis, the sovereign for settling a certain number of matters. Delimiting these matters is a delicate issue, and it is in itself a political problem. If you will, I myself divide things into three domains: the private domain, where one must leave it to individuals to sort out their own lives as they see fit; a private/public domain, which is the *agora*, in which individuals are no longer private, that is to say, they go out onto the marketplace, onto the public place, discuss with one another, do various things. They publish books, make private contracts, etc. And a public/public domain, where one must promulgate laws—the term is perhaps going to startle you—that are valid for all. Valid for everyone and sanctioned. In fact, there are no sacred laws, if you will.

J.B.: The difference is that, indeed, in the Fédération Anarchiste, there isn't this third part. It is included within the

second one. That is to say that it's at the same time that the contracts are defined at the level of groups and associations that institutions can be created, and at the same time laws these institutions give themselves on the local level, that is to say, starting obviously from the base toward the summit, while possibly creating authorities [*instances*]....

C.C.: No, the "local level" is not the same thing as "starting from the base toward the summit." I am in complete agreement that it's "starting from the base toward the summit." But this is not the local level. Take, for example, the problem of the environment: it is, immediately, planetwide. Immediately. If there are oil tankers, one must say whether the oil tankers have or don't have the right to clean out their holds while passing before the islands of the Aegean Sea, for example, or off the coast of Brittany. I'm originally Greek; it grieves me each time I go to Greece to see the filth and dirty oil washing up on the beaches, but in Brittany it's the same with Amoco Cadiz and other tankers. Well, that will be a planetwide law. And there'd have to be penalties [*sanctions*]. That is to say, if there are guys who go around cleaning up their dirty oil on the high seas, their ship will have to be boarded and inspected and, one way or another, they will have to be punished [*sanctionnés*]. There you have it.

J.B.: Yes, absolutely, but there's no obstacle there.

C.C.: How it's going to be done is another question. There has to be direct democracy in all domains where this is possible. All power that is delegated—that is to say, election of delegates (I don't like the term *representatives*, because this is false; therefore: delegates)—these delegates have to be, like in the [Paris] Commune, not only elected but revocable at any moment.

G.J.: There you have it. An imperative mandate.

C.C.: No, not imperative. It isn't the same. Revocable.

A delegate may change his mind; he may come back before his constituents and tell them: Listen, we had said that....

G.J.: When I say *imperative*, that doesn't mean *closed*. He has to be delegated and stick to his delegacy. He's recalled if...

C.C.: ...There are also institutions that date back to ancient Greece, that are fundamental, in my opinion, and that the workers' movement rediscovered at the outset. Drawing of lots for designating union officials [*responsables*]. The English unions, at the outset, were drawn by lot. Or rotation of responsibilities. Institutions that are quite basic. Why?

J.B.: In order to avoid bureaucratization...

C.C.: ...on the one hand, and because they are eminently educative. Because, if like at Athens, I am nearly certain that I would be designated by lot drawing or by rotation to fulfill one or another magistracy in my life...

J.B.: ...I try to prepare myself for it.

C.C.: And I no longer can fall victim to the so-called experts who tell you: "But you don't know what they were talking about." We, too, are in the government....

J.B.: Absolutely. Yes, it's dramatic how powerful the experts are.

C.C.: People will be able to answer them: "We, too, are in the government! I was in it, I know what's what, it's not like that, and you are mystifiers." Therefore, I believe that it is on the basics that we must come to an agreement around those points.

G.J.: A listener, a friend named Floréal who writes in [*Le Monde Libertaire*](#), has just called in. He is reacting to what you said about anarchism: "Yet there is a bit of random nonsense in the theoretical, let's say, arsenal or books." I'd prefer for Philippe, who is handling the technical side and who thus is the one who received Floréal's message, to

communicate his reaction to what you have just said about anarchism.

Philippe: Floréal said: If anarchy is random nonsense, so is Marxism, quoting Marx himself, “If that’s Marxism, I am not a Marxist,”²⁷ which he had said upon seeing his disciples. Therefore, Floréal in fact finds it rather intolerable that Cornelius Castoriadis had said that, since, from [\[former French Minister for Defense and Socialist Party politician\] Charles Hernu \[who instigated the sinking of Greenpeace’s Rainbow Warrior ship in New Zealand\]](#) to Che Guevara, there’s also a lot of random nonsense in Marxism.

C.C.: Once again, I’m not Marxist. Therefore, there’s no point in telling me: In Marxism, there’s also that. I come back to this statement by Marx, which has been extraordinarily abused by poor [Maximilien Rubel](#).²⁸ When Marx said, I myself am not Marxist, he wasn’t saying it like that. He was shown a text that claimed to be following him. And I believe, moreover, that it was by one of his sons-in-law. [\[Paul\] Lafargue](#), perhaps.

G.J.: Ah, [The Right to Be Lazy](#).

C.C.: I don’t know if it’s that one. And Marx said: If that’s Marxism, then I myself am not Marxist. Pardon my lack of modesty; I myself could say, when faced with a text that

²⁷The actual reported quotation, “*ce qu’il y a de certain c’est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste* [what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist],” comes from a [November 2-3, 1882 letter from Friedrich Engels to Eduard Bernstein in Zurich](#) explaining that Marx had made this remark to his son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, in order to distance himself from the French “Marxism” of Lafargue and [Jules Guesde](#).

²⁸T/E: The Austrian-born “Marxologist” and Council Communist Maximilien Rubel, who became a naturalized French citizen, had died just three months prior to the present radio broadcast.

claims to be following my ideas but that is appalling: If that's what Castoriadism is, I'm not Castoriadist (or Castoriadian, if you wish), you understand? It's not at all the same. Marx was Marxist, and Marx's crime—here, the great anarchists are nevertheless in a better position before history—is that he brought into the workers' movement the monstrous idea of *orthodoxy*. He who speaks of orthodoxy speaks of the guardians of orthodoxy. There is no orthodoxy without guardians of orthodoxy. He who speaks of the guardians of orthodoxy, whether it's the Church or the Communist Party, speaks of a bureaucracy, which is its authentic interpreter, which can declare who is a heretic, and which can sanction heretics, as has happened with the Church as well as with the Communist parties. And this is one of the gravest things Marx ever introduced into the revolutionary movement.

J.B.: Yes, and even in one's behavior, one had to be orthodox. Marx had suggested to Proudhon that Proudhon be his correspondent in Europe, beginning his letter to Proudhon by speaking ill of his friend [\[German journalist, philosopher, political theorist and socialist politician Karl Theodor Ferdinand\] Grün](#), who was in Paris, and proposing to Proudhon that Proudhon be his delegated person to spread what was perhaps not yet Marxist thought but which in any case were Marx's ideas. And this with an already quite closed system. To this, Proudhon gently responded: I don't see why you are speaking ill of your friend Grün; he serves me well, explaining Hegel to me. As for setting up a new system when we are fighting against all systematization, and against dogmatism, it's out of the question. Therefore, there already was this worm in the fruit you were just speaking about. Not to mention, of course, too, his letters at the time of the Paris Commune. It was still rather damning to say: When it comes down to it, the French workers deserve a lesson; it's our ideas

that will prevail over those of Monsieur Proudhon. At the time, Proudhon was already dead.

C.C.: I repeat that I myself, not being Marx, am not Marxist.

J.B.: I don't want to offer an interpretation of Floréal's thinking, but I think that it's perhaps because you said that there was a bit too much naivety, or a bit of anything and everything in anarchist thought and philosophy. This is perhaps what flipped him out. I think, indeed, that this should call for some further specifications.

G.J.: We are perhaps going to come back to your book, [*The Rising Tide of Insignificancy*](#), published [in French] by Le Seuil. Apropos of the rising tide of insignificancy, we just mentioned the press, in particular last Friday's issue of *Libération*, which mentioned the murder of the monks by the GIA [Groupe islamique armé, [Armed Islamic Group of Algeria](#)]. And then a pileup, since this issue of *Libération* was perfumed with Carrera-brand fragrances. [[Libération cofounder and editor](#)] [Serge July](#) had to have seen that there was some kind of problem with this clash between advertising [*publicité*] and news, particularly, then, with the assassination of the monks. He forked out for a small note to readers that explained to them that this was truly regrettable, but that he couldn't postpone the advertising campaign to another date and that he regretted the situation all the more as the impact both on the advertising and on the news would be lessened as a result. This is relatively serious, because one has the impression, in his note, that it was the impact on the advertising that counted much more.

J.B.: In a certain way, he's right. In [\[the French satirical weekly\] *Le Canard Enchaîné*](#) this morning, it was emphasized that Lustiger had demanded that [one or the other of the two main television networks] [TF1](#) or [Antenne 2](#) go

“live” to show that he was going to blow out seven candles, even though it wasn’t yet certain that the monks had died. So, it’s a publicity matter for the Church.

C.C.: Yes, but the key thing is that one advertises.

G.J.: I’d simply like to say to *Libération* that it could have had the idea to perfume its newspaper with incense.

[*J.B. and C.C. laugh*]

C.C.: What is astonishing is that these were the same people who were protesting against the Benetton ads, right? But ultimately, it’s the same principle, with concentration camps, Benetton, etc.

G.J.: Therefore, in the rising tide of insignificance, or of nonsense and a form of knavery [*crapulerie*]... where is the knavery? Is it intentional?

C.C.: I am almost surprised that July would have realized at the last minute that something had gone wrong. For, people have reached the point where they consider all that as going without saying.

J.B.: This is one of the major effects of this flood of images, which contributes to what was just being said about this kind of flat encephalogram.²⁹ On the same plane are placed tragic events, which may have considerable repercussions for numerous people and for the future, with completely superficial phenomena. Therefore, there’s a kind

²⁹T/E: During his main talk for the 1990 week-long Cerisy Colloquium organized around his work, which was published only posthumously, Castoriadis quoted Marcel Gauchet’s text, “Pacification démocratique, désertion civique” (*Le Débat*, 60 [May-August 1990]: 87-98), where (p. 87) Gauchet spoke of “the flat electroencephalogram of the party in power,” i.e., at the time, the Socialists. Castoriadis quotes this phrase in this talk, “What Democracy?” and then declares: “We have to ask ourselves why this encephalogram is flat” for both the Socialists and the neo-Gaullist party (*ibid.*, 210-11).

of leveling of news.

C.C.: A flattening.

G.J.: We're left with the impression that this omnipresence of advertising is what counts above all. It's not television shows interrupted by ads but ads, more and more ads, interrupted by bits of news.

C.C.: Or interrupted by a film. I saw that for the first time when I was in Australia, in '90 or '91, to give some lectures. In the place I was living, there was a television. One evening, I went home a bit tired from a lecture around eleven-thirty. I sat down to watch the program and it was said that it was going to be *Cabaret*, the film with Barbra Streisand,³⁰ starting at midnight. As I had missed *Cabaret* when it came out, I said to myself: So, I'm going to see it from midnight, or half past midnight, until two in the morning. I'll go to sleep at two. Well, the film didn't begin before one, and it ended at four-thirty in the morning, because there were three minutes of film and six minutes of ads. The proportions were really alarming. And in addition, the ads were particularly moronic. But that's the general case. And... Take, for example, [\[the French television network executive Jean-Pierre\] Elkabbach](#)'s contract. It's producers that drive up the ratings, which therefore allows an increase in television ad rates.

J.B.: Yes, absolutely. There you could talk about the rising tide of stupidity.

G.J.: But precisely, the intention among these producers and around these types of shows, for example [\[television presenter and producer Jean-Luc\] Delarue](#), is to see fake debates, fake societal issues, to make a travesty—we were just talking about democracy—of a democratic form of debate. And once again, insignificancy, there, would not be so

³⁰T/E: *Cabaret* starred Liza Minnelli, not Barbra Streisand.

much in the subject matter as in a will to pervert, a will, too—as was being said—to put people to sleep, to turn those watching into idiots.

C.C.: And to render them complicit. All these shows with people who appear, etc., or game shows, or the spectators eliminated.... We have arrived at the point of stupidity where it is being said that we were in a direct democracy because polling plays such a role.

J.B.: Absolutely, one might soon even be able to replace elections—which, moreover, would not necessarily be a worse solution. [*laughter*]

C.C.: No.

G.J.: But then, with accelerated polling, one could end up having, within an hour, everything and its opposite. So-and-so would be acclaimed, then three hours later, he would be deposed.

C.C.: But that's what we're seeing in reality! We are seeing, for example, someone like [President] Bill Clinton in the United States who switches his positions according to the latest polls. These are absolutely alarming signs. What does that look like? Because, at bottom, nothing changes, right? Therefore, they change or they don't change; it's still decoration. But these politicians still have no program, whether we're talking about the Right or the Left. What's at issue is to secure a tiny advantage in public opinion in order to be sure to get reelected, whereas they all do the same thing, ultimately. They're selling the image, they're peddling the wind.

J.B.: Yes, but they're peddling the wind in order to keep power. And such power is being exercised in an increasingly violent way, even if it is through insidious forms.

C.C.: Of course. But let's do a freeze frame on the word *power*. Ultimately, the true power is at present

completely anonymous. And that's the issue. It cannot be grasped. Chirac isn't directing anything. Clinton isn't directing anything. There's a kind of historical current, which is the autonomization of technoscience, the spread of capitalist technics, of Western pseudoculture. People sing the same songs in Java as in Paris as well as in Montevideo. It's absolutely alarming. And it's like a kind of enormous river.

J.B.: An infernal machine that has been launched and in which there no longer is any pilot.

C.C.: The alleged pilots are there in order to get people to put on a different smile. That's really the image today. And that, too, encapsulates the gravity of the situation.

G.J.: Yes, but let's not forget, too, that there is behind that a reality of power, the power of multinational businesses.

C.C.: These are not persons; that's what I mean. These are institutions and mechanisms.

G.J.: These are mechanisms, institutions, but there is nevertheless a reality in relation to the stockholders, to those who have money, who decide....

C.C.: It's not even the stockholders, you know. That's another aspect of the question. It's also why I spoke of bureaucratic capitalism: ultimately, the big firms are directed by managerial bureaucracies. These bureaucracies are not even accountable to their stockholders.

J.B.: Yes, there's no longer any responsibility.

C.C.: Look at what is happening at present in the United States. We have to exit from our tiny hexagonal province. There's a showcase of world capitalism. It's the United States. Now, in January, AT&T, the big telegraph and telephone firm, fired 40,000 people just like that, right away. They have three or four hundred thousand people. Their weight isn't so great, but 400,000 people, it's huge. And at the same time, it was announced that the head of the company

will get 40 million dollars as a bonus for AT&T's success in '95, a success that led to the firing of 40,000 people.³¹

G.J.: *That's a reality.*

C.C.: The stockholders say nothing. For, if there were stockholders, they would have said: Sir, here's a million dollar bonus, but the other 39 million dollars are dividends for us. No. Forty million dollars right away.

J.B.: And the 40,000 people don't count, of course.

C.C.: And the 40,000 people, well no one looks after them. There nevertheless were one or two columnists, including [Art] Buchwald in the *Herald Tribune*, or the other one, Russell Baker, who expressed their amazement that one could have the nerve to announce at the same time the firing of 40,000 people and a bonus of 40 million dollars for the head of the company.

J.B.: The solution would therefore be for the billions of individuals who are on board this infernal machine to revolt, not by saying, "We must change bosses!"—since, at bottom, there no longer even is a boss, according to what you are saying—but by saying, "We're going to have to stop the machine and reverse its direction, because, if we don't do so, it's a catastrophe."

C.C.: We must change the system. We must change machines, in fact; that's the question.

J.B.: In your book, two words caught my attention: responsibility and justice. These are words often employed by anarchist thinkers, and in particular Proudhon. Quoting Aristotle, you emphasize that, for him, the cardinal

³¹T/E: The year 1995 was also the year when the AT&T Corporation announced "that it would split into three companies: a manufacturing/R&D company, a computer company, and a services company" ([English-language Wikipedia, s.v.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AT&T_Corporation)).

virtue—justice—is an essentially political virtue.³² I wanted to connect this with the idea from Proudhon's great book, *Of Justice in the Revolution and in the Church*, which is the philosophical foundation for his conception of global federalism, for anarchist federalism, in order to underscore to what extent the political sphere [*le politique*], which still seems to be for you the foundation of social organization, is subordinated, in Proudhon's work, to morality, to ethics. That is to say, at bottom, there cannot be a political sphere, of whatever kind, that would not have its foundation in a moral vision and in social action. And by moral, I don't mean a purely theoretical, supernatural, or even transcendental view. That's not at all the conception Proudhon could have. Indeed, he considers justice to be something that is fundamentally anchored, that belongs to this humanness or to this fabrication of the hominization of the individual and that this morality is to be the inspiration for all the mechanisms of social relationships. It is in the name of this sort of justice that he criticizes, as well, democracy in the formal sense, including the mechanisms by which sovereignty is delegated, the ideas of popular sovereignty. He criticizes Jean-Jacques Rousseau a great deal around that idea. But he tries to imagine, at the same time, another machine—since we were talking about *machines* just now—an economic and social machine that would be grounded upon equality, upon liberty, first of all—which he privileges in every way—and in which powers would at least always be balanced, but would no longer be—in any case, political power would no longer be—determinative for action in society.

C.C.: Yes, uh.... There's a lot to discuss here. I don't know whether the subject is becoming too abstract for

³²T/E: See "The Ethicists' New Clothes" (1993), now in [CL4](#), 296.

ourselves and for the listeners.

J.B.: No, it's because in some of our lectures, you have evoked that point.

C.C.: When I quote Aristotle in my lecture, on the question of the cardinal virtue, that means: It's the virtue, the ethical virtue if you will, that stands over and above all others (he says that in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the book on morality, on ethics).³³ But this ethical value that stands over and above all the other ones is not an ethic of individual behavior alone. It's a political virtue. For, justice is not only that I might be just in my behavior. It's that the ordering of society might be just.

J.B.: Yes, absolutely.

C.C.: An abyssal question. What is a just ordering of society? [These are] political questions to the extent, precisely, you see.... That is to say, I am not speaking of the sovereignty of the political sphere, I am speaking of the ineliminable side of the political sphere, as dimension of the institution of society. (For me, the central idea in society, as you know, is its imaginary institution. Well, that's something else.) We therefore arrive at the following conclusion: There has to be a general decision, and also very often in particular cases, that cannot but be a decision on the part of the collectivity, of the autonomous community. Is such and such a sharing out [*répartition*] just? It will be said, for example, that the just distribution [*répartition*] is an egalitarian one. And for my part, I'll say so. But there will right away be someone who will say: Sir, this distribution is unjust. Because I myself work more. Or because my labor is worth more. And there begins a discussion. I myself, as a philosopher and economist, will undertake to demonstrate that his labor is not

³³T/E: See *ibid.*, [CL4](#), 287.

worth more. That doesn't make sense. This is the object of a text from [the first volume of the *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*](#) series, "Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us," where I try to show that, on this problem, Aristotle is much deeper than Marx because Marx goes no further than an economic conception of value. For example, he sticks with pay differentials [*différenciation des rémunérations*] in what he calls *the lower phase of communism*. I myself advocate income and wage equality, because I think that there is no reasonable foundation for such differentiations and that there is every reason for these remunerations to be equal.³⁴ Now, if someone works more than others, I'll tell him: "No one is asking you to work more. If you work more, that's because it's your passion to work more." That's all. [Albert] Einstein never demanded a higher salary for the nights he spent trying to find the equations for the general theory of relativity. He did so because that was his passion. Otherwise, you have a minimum of obligations to society, and then that's all. And you have an equal income, an equal access to social products as such. The question of justice is therefore a question that concerns the overall social arrangement, right? It is in this sense that I would not call it simply an ethical question. I would call it a political question. This is also the reason why I am not in agreement with Proudhon and the positions of his that you were evoking. In "The Ethicists' New Clothes," I am trying to show that there can be no ethic independent of a politics [*une politique*], because when you go beyond trivial questions, you run up right away against problems that concern society and how it evolves.

J.B.: But the political [*le politique*], it too being a form

³⁴T/E: See "Hierarchy of Salaries and Incomes" (1974), now in [PSW3](#).

of contract...

C.C.: Unh, if you wish, well...

J.B.: Well, yes, on the contrary. It's really the organization of a series of contracts between individuals. And between groups.

C.C.: Here again, I don't agree. For, you are saying, "contracts between individuals"....

J.B.: There is nothing completely political [*Il n'y a pas un politique, complètement*]. There is nothing political that is external, in a way, to individual relations and to group relationships.

C.C.: There is nothing political external to common, social relationships. But the risk is that you will be heard as speaking of the individual as if this were an ultimate anchorage.

J.B.: No, it's not an ultimate anchorage, but...

C.C.: Because the individual is what society makes of it. And there, we encounter the question of education, of *paideia*, as the Greeks said. That is to say: What kind of individuals do we want in our society?

J.B.: Yes, but there, be careful, the autonomy of the individual and his liberty is nevertheless the foundation, well, the point...

C.C.: No, it's one of the goals, as much as is the autonomy of the collectivity. That's why I am always speaking of *individual and collective autonomy*.

J.B.: For me, the autonomy of the collectivity has meaning only if the autonomy of the individual is set as the point of departure.

C.C.: And as objective.

J.B.: In other words, the collectivity can become autonomized only if it has autonomous individuals.

C.C.: This is literally what I am writing: There is an

autonomous society only if there are autonomous individuals, but there are autonomous individuals, too, only if society is autonomous.

J.B.: The difficulty, since you were talking about education, is that *educare* means leading toward something.³⁵ Now, the risk is to lead toward making creatures. We were talking about it at the start of this program. And this is what we don't want. Now, in order for the individual to be a creator, there has to be, in some way, at least an interaction.

C.C.: One has to have an education. An education toward creation.

J.B.: As for me, I'd say, like [\[the Marquis de Condorcet\]](#): I prefer the word *instruction* to *education*.

C.C.: Ah, now, for my part...no matter. ...Instruction is a sum of forms of knowledge [*de savoirs*].

J.B.: Education means: Who? Who is going to educate? That's the question.

C.C.: And instruction, too.

J.B.: If Condorcet was contrasting the two words, it wasn't just over a question of terminology. It was simply that he wanted those who were going to educate (whether that be an assembly of scientists—since he imagined things like that—or even the state power) to have to be capable of challenging his own educational methods.

C.C.: Ah, but that's obvious! But if one wants to be clear in one's usage of words, that's quite the opposite of instruction, because instruction involves transmitting a body of knowledge forms that is incontestable. Now, that's not

³⁵T/E: The original French transcriber rightly points out: "Rather: leading out of something." Amid all the confusions Castoriadis wished to dispel in the moment, he did not linger over the correct interpretation of this Latin verb when trying to bring out the significance of the Greek noun.

possible, it's not true, it's false.

J.B.: Read Condorcet's *Cinq mémoires*;³⁶ you'll see that his definition is exactly the opposite of the one you give.

C.C.: Well, then, let's not use this terminology, because it creates confusion. A Greek poet, Simonides, said—I'm coming back to it; it's important—*polis andra disaskei*, "it's the city that educates the man."³⁷ That is to say, it's not only the professional educators. And if today this role is placed on the school, it's ridiculous. Because children are at school for only a few hours, but they are in front of the television for many more hours.

J.B.: Of course, unfortunately.

C.C.: And they are for many more hours in the city. It's the entire city that educates people. This is why I speak of *education*, and this education concerns the totality of the social institution. Not only the schools. And this is why, too, political institutions have to be educational institutions, that is to say, institutions that lead people to take responsibilities, namely to exercise them and to develop some political judgment, political prudence.

J.B.: OK. It's ten minutes before noon. I believe that we have commented at length on this book, [*The Rising Tide of Insignificance*](#), by Cornelius Castoriadis. I remind you that this book is made up of a series of articles, lectures, texts, which have all been published, I think, between 1990 and 1993. That's right?

³⁶T/E: [*Cinq mémoires sur l'instruction publique*](#) (1791; Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1994).

³⁷T/E: Simonides, quoted in Plutarch *Moralia* 784b = Bergk, *Poet. Lyr. Graec.*, vol. 3, p. 418, no. 67 (109). See "Intellectuals and History" (1987), now in [CL3](#), 135.

C.C.: Oh, the oldest is from 1982.

J.B.: So, since Cornelius Castoriadis is Greek in origin, he has taken the pleasure to offer three subtitles, whose translation he will be so kind to provide, because, apart from “Polis,” which to me seems to be the city, “Kairos” and “Koinōnia” are a bit opaque.

C.C.: *Kairos* is a quite beautiful Greek work that means *instant* or *occasion*. It’s what happens. Hippocrates said, “Time is that in which there is *kairos*, and *kairos* is that in which there is not much time.”³⁸ It’s there now; one must act here and now. *Kairos* is the moment for the surgeon to intervene, for example; a half hour later, it’s too late. Or, for politics, to make a decision for the community. It’s current events, huh? It’s current events as opportunity to intervene and to reflect.

J.B.: Would that mean that the six texts that are in the “Kairos” section—“The Crisis of Societies,” “The Movements of the Sixties,” “Marxism-Leninism”³⁹—it’s solely about the instant?

C.C.: It’s essentially about current events. Of course, you cannot detach current events from the rest. And *koinōnia* is society. *Polis* is political society [*la société de politique*]. But *koinōnia* is society, it’s the community, it’s what grounds the political [*le politique*], that of which the political is a

³⁸T/E: This is the very first sentence of Part 1 of [Hippocrates’ Praeceptiones](#); translating here Castoriadis’s French translation into English.

³⁹T/E: The full titles for the six Kairos texts in [this fourth Crossroads volume](#) are: “The Crisis of Western Societies,” “The Movements of the Sixties,” “The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism,” “Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth,” “The Dilapidation of the West,” and “The Rising Tide of Insignificance.”

dimension.

J.B.: So there you have, it, fourteen texts in this book, one of which, “The Rising Tide of Insignificancy,” yields the title. It is published by Éditions du Seuil.

C.C.: And it costs 130 francs.⁴⁰

G.J.: We still have ten minutes before we conclude. I looked up your biography in *Who's Who*. There's something I found amusing, a small connection with the anarchists: I saw that you had used several pseudonyms. In particular: Pierre Chaulieu, Paul Cardan, and Jean-Marc Coudray. The biography continues by saying that you were a writer—I'd say *political thinker*—a psychoanalyst, and a philosopher. Why these pseudonyms? And at what moments in your life did you use them? When you were in the opposition? When you fought?

C.C.: I entered political life under the [Ioannis] Metaxas dictatorship in Greece, and so people necessarily used pseudonyms. It was clandestine. And then that continued under the Occupation. So, these pseudonyms were inherited by me during what followed, when the Occupation ended, etc. But then I came to France, at the end of '45. In France, I was a foreigner. And as a foreigner, the glorious laws of the Republic earned my father, already, an expulsion from France with twenty-four hours' notice. Every foreigner was liable to expulsion with twenty-four hours' notice by a simple administrative decision not subject to any legal recourse. The police came to your house and said: Monsieur, you have twenty-four hours to leave the territory of the Republic. A nice formula, huh? I was therefore already obliged for this reason, even before I had a paying job, to have a pseudonym,

⁴⁰T/E: Approximately US\$25.00 at then-current exchange rates.

which I kept as long as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* existed.⁴¹ I didn't publish under my name until I was naturalized as a Frenchman in 1970.⁴² I even waited for a year and a half, two years, because, according to a clause in the law on naturalization, naturalization can be rescinded if it proves to be the case that the student had made false statements. I myself hadn't made any false statement, but I had failed to report that I was one of the protagonists of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and, as such, the Republic should have thanked me, because I had enriched its political life, right? [laughter]. Starting in 1970, I wrote under my own name. "Jean-Marc Coudray" was the pseudonym I used in '68, when I was not yet naturalized, for my contribution in *Mai 68: la brèche*. So, during these twenty-five years, I was obliged to write under a pseudonym in order to avoid being expelled from the country, which was what happened to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, moreover, in the midst of '68. He was expelled overnight. And it wasn't illegal, because he wasn't a French citizen. Those laws were changed starting in '73-'74. They added an administrative commission before which the foreigner could appeal, etc. But

⁴¹T/E: Actually, Castoriadis used *several* pseudonyms while *S. ou B.* was being published (1949-1965). He changed from "Pierre Chaulieu" to "Paul Cardan" when "there was a small alert in '58: the cops had gone to my ex-wife's place, then to the home of a comrade from the group to ask who this Chaulieu guy is. That's how I ended up changing pseudonyms (that couldn't fool anyone, but it was the least I could do)" (see [the online "Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview: Cerisy Colloquium \(1990\)."](#) p. 9 of the English-language translation). He also signed or cosigned some *S. ou B.* texts "Jean Delvaux" or "Marc Noiraud."

⁴²T/E: In fact, Castoriadis had already, back in October 1968, published a text under his own name in the eighth volume of a psychoanalytic journal, *L'Inconscient* (see "Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science," now translated in [CLI](#)).

before then, it was a simple police decision. Ministry of the Interior, simply the police.

J.B.: Still, that has to be similar to the holding areas, with the mechanisms in place today. Unfortunately, there mustn't be much difference in the way one...well....

C.C.: There was just a little bit more protection. Now, things are being whittled down, obviously, for political types and refugees as well as for simple immigrants, of course.

G.J.: You were just talking about Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Where's he at? Are you in contact with him?

C.C.: Yes, I saw him recently because we did a program on [\[the\] France Culture \[public radio network\]](#) called *Le bon plaisir*. It was supposed to be My Good Pleasure, but in fact it wasn't how I wanted it to be. Well, no matter.

J.B.: Oh, yeah? We're curious to know. *Le bon plaisir* is ultimately the pleasure of France Culture or... *[laughter]*.

C.C.: No, but I regretted it because I was weak, I gave too much of a free rein to the person asking me the questions, and ultimately, the program as it took place was not at all the one I had wanted.

J.B.: Was there some Thelonious Monk, in *Le bon plaisir*? Not even that?

C.C.: Uh, no, that is to say.... They didn't even let me choose the music. It was really pitiful. But, well, I asked Dany to come, and he came. I knew, the views he has now have moved away, he thinks that there are no revolutionary prospects, that one must struggle to reform the system insofar as it is reformable, etc. He remains, I believe, someone who has complete integrity on the personal level. But I am sure that, if there were some major events, we'd find Dany again.

J.B.: Yes, there it's a question of temperament. *[laughter]*

C.C.: Yes, that's it. He's a political animal and he's

like my other great friend, Daniel Mothé,⁴³ who cannot *not* do something. So, when one cannot do things in a truly revolutionary direction, one is obliged to fall back toward actions within the framework of the system, right? It's not because one has become....

J.B.: On the one hand. Or else continue to write, to speak out, to expose....

C.C.: But not everyone has this recourse. And as for me, I am not going to reproach them because I myself have an unmerited privilege from this standpoint; it's that I can continue to do some things. But after, one cannot act. Because I can always write, and not everyone can do that. Mothé writes admirably, Dany, too, moreover, but that doesn't interest them.

J.B.: Cornelius Castoriadis, it's three minutes before noon. Well, thanks for coming. And so, until the next time?

C.C.: Thanks for having welcomed me. And thanks for the wholly libertarian, anarchic, and a bit disheveled atmosphere of this program.

G.J.: And you have been able to hear some jazz, since you appreciate jazz music in particular. Well, we had a little bit of it.

C.C.: We didn't hear Thelonious Monk, unfortunately.

G.J.: But perhaps the next time we invite you, you'll choose the music.

J.B.: Next Thursday, you'll have some Monk, even if you aren't there.

C.C.: There you have it: Monk and Miles Davis.

⁴³T/E: "Daniel Mothé" is the pen name for Jacques Gautrat, a former Renault autoworker and member of/contributor to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* who later became a sociologist.

PSYCHE

Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics*

I am not going to talk about psychoanalysis as such. I have to presuppose that, at least roughly, classical Freudian theory is more or less familiar to everybody here. Nor am I going to take very much into account post-Freudian theorizations, mostly because they are parasitic of particular fragments of Freud's thought, not very productive, and only too often expressions of fashions and fads.¹

*[Pathsandbridges](http://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/ICA-talks/024M-C0095X0960XX-0100V0)' note: "A talk given in English by Cornelius Castoriadis at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, on December 7, 1992. This has been written up, imperfectly, from the audio: <http://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/ICA-talks/024M-C0095X0960XX-0100V0>, to give this important and sometimes amusing talk another airing." [T/E: The transcription, "Cornelius Castoriadis on 'Psychoanalysis and the Origins of Society,'" originally posted on October 27, 2018 here: <http://pathsandbridges.wordpress.com/2018/10/27/536/> has now been revised with the following Pathsandbridges explanation: "The original P&B transcription has been reread and edited by David Ames Curtis, Castoriadis's preferred translator. We are grateful to David for making our rough transcription, provided for information, into an altogether more elegant and accurate text." The title presented here is one of two Castoriadis had suggested to replace the announced ICA title: "Psychoanalysis and the Origins of Society." All footnotes, including the present publication note, were created for the *Paths & Bridges* transcription. The British Library Sound Archive's digitized version of this talk, whose URL is referenced above, is offline indefinitely, following an October 2023 cyberattack at the British Library. A German translation, "Psychoanalyse, Gesellschaft, Politik," appeared in vol. 4 (2020) of *Im Labyrinth: Hefte für Autonomie*.]

¹T/E: See Castoriadis's 1997 prepared talk, "Psychoanalysis: Situation and Limits," whose draft, completed in September 1997, shortly before his final surgery, was read at a William Alanson White Institute conference in New York by Joel Whitebook in November, and posthumously published in [CL6](#).

Now, the title, I think, of this talk has been announced as “Psychoanalysis and the Origins of Society.” Perhaps this title is misleading. It should rather be “Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics” or “Possibilities and Limits of a Contribution of Psychoanalysis to our Understanding of Society.”

Ideally speaking, we have four main themes here:

1. What does psychoanalysis have to say about the origins of human society? And this is more or less identical—I draw your attention to that—to the question: What does psychoanalysis have to say, as psychoanalysis, about the humanization of the great apes?
2. Now, second, what about history? Is history, psychoanalytically speaking, just an epiphenomenon? Or else what, or why not?
3. What does psychoanalysis have to say about the content and structure of social and political institutions? In particular, here, domination and power, gender domination, labor, and knowledge.
4. What does psychoanalysis have to say as to the possibilities, and the desirability, of the transformation of existing institutions, or about the proper institutions of society, that is, politics in the genuine sense of the word?

All that follows will be outrageously sketchy, of course. I will be rather brief on Freud himself, because of the postulate of common knowledge on Freud; I take it that you are all experts on Freud’s thought. Nothing about his epigones. And I will concentrate on the aporias, critiques, and, egoistically, on my own views.



Now, as to the first question, that is, the origins of human society, or humanization of the apes. There is a curious complexity or confusion in Freud's attempts to give an account of the origins of society. Of course, the main text here is *Totem and Taboo*, which is the most psychoanalytical, and, after thirty years, the main strands of thought, more or less, you can find again in *Moses and Monotheism*. Now, in between, at the end of the 1920s, you have two other books, *The Future of an Illusion*, about religion, and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, as it has been translated into English, which present a quite different picture, though it is by no means contradictory or incompatible with the previous one.

Totem and Taboo recites an individual history. *Totem and Taboo* contains a myth, you all know: there is a horde or a Cyclopean family; there is an omnipotent father, omnipotent in the physical sense, who forbids any access to the available women under his power to all his sons, castrates them perhaps, except for the last one who succeeds him. Someday, perhaps, says Freud, because of some invention, technical or otherwise, the up-to-then helpless brothers gather, decide to murder the father, after which they are seized by deep guilt feelings, they erect the father as a totem, and this totem is the origin of the institutions. They perform an oath, among themselves, an oath ceremony whereby they swear that nobody will attempt any longer to have all the women to himself or kill or castrate the others, etc., etc.

That's the classical picture. It's a myth; it's obvious. It's a very important myth, in a sense. An aside: in a certain way, it is of course a repetition of the Greek myth of Ouranos, Cronus, and Gaia. I am torn here between my Freudianism

and my cultural chauvinism, but I think that the Greek myth is, in a certain sense, more complete. Why? Because there is a question with the myth of *Totem and Taboo*—why the hell is the father castrating the male children? And the only answer to this is that this primeval father has read *Totem and Taboo* [laughter]. And knows what awaits. But when Cronus in the Greek myth starts eating up his children or, rather, swallowing them, he knows very well why he is doing it, because he has already castrated his own father, Ouranos, at the incitation of his mother Gaia, the Earth, who was really tired of the incessant lovemaking of Ouranos. So, never mind. As in all myths, the myth is a totality and its beginning presupposes the end; otherwise, no sense can be made of it. But this is not an objection against the myth.

Now, the Freud of *Civilization and Its Discontents* or of *The Future of an Illusion* is much closer, in many respects, to the run-of-the-mill, so to speak, sociological conceptions. Civilization, says there Freud, is essentially a repression of drives. The civilizing process is *exclusively* the work of minorities, which of course benefit from it as they go by ensuring privileges for themselves, and are or seem the only ones capable, after a while at least, of higher pleasures like sublimation, whilst the masses hate civilization, are hostile to civilization, because it forces them to repress their drives. Now, Freud is very equitable in this respect; he says that the masses are absolutely right in hating civilization. He has a sentence about a great experiment going on in some big Eastern country at that time but nobody knows what the outcome will be or if the results will be worth the cost, and we know there were no results but many costs. As the Communists used to say, to justify their murders, *You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs*, to which I used to reply: *But we can't break eggs and make no omelette*, right?

So they have broken lots of eggs and didn't make any omelette. Anyhow, Freud was *very* sympathetic to these attitudes of the masses, though you know very well how cultured a man he was and how he loved art and so on. He justifies them. There are many anarchistic accents, in some parts of the book, many *Threepenny Opera* aspects of the book. The only thing that helps the masses a bit to remain within civilization are some slight elements of identification with the higher classes. Parenthetically, from the theoretical point of view, one should indicate here that this fundamental concept of *identification*, slowly elaborated from 1910 onward, has been very significantly and fruitfully put to use in another work of Freud's, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* of 1920, despite the flaws of this work, which I won't dwell on here, but one should retain this idea that this aspect of *identification*—whereby perhaps, I don't know, the poorest English housewife somehow or other feels she participates in Queen Elizabeth—has always played a tremendous role in the cohesion of divided and dominated societies.

Now, in both cases—that is, *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*—there is a view of human beings as exclusively directed and motivated by their drives, *triebe* he says in German; the otherwise excellent *Standard Edition* has monstrously translated *triebe* as *instincts*—something we ought to keep for animals. Drives (*triebe*)—*pushes*, if you wish—are essentially or exclusively, as you know, sexual. Anyhow, they have to do with a pleasure principle, which reigns without limits in the first stages of psychical development. Now, here arises a first aporia: animals, starting with bacteria, but we don't need to go there, dogs, apes, lions have, of course, very strong drives or instincts and, in a sense, they are the same as humans'—sex

and hunger. Why isn't there a proliferation of animal societies? Why are humans humanized? Why do oxen, or lions, not have totems or taboos?

On this, there is an implicit answer in Freud, which in fact doesn't explain anything. And that implicit possibility of an answer has remained unexplored up to today, which I am presently going to take up. The implicit answer is that humans possess consciousness, in contrast to lions, oxen, and bacteria. Freud states repeatedly that this is the main enigma of psychology. What is consciousness? He would like very much—of course, he is under a delusion—to explain, psychoanalytically, how consciousness can arise; of course, he never succeeds in doing so and nobody could. Anyhow, this element will not do to differentiate us from animals or from higher apes. Consciousness *as such* does not add anything to anything. More precisely, consciousness adds to what happens a *passive* quality; this happens and I happen to be conscious of what happens and that's that. In order to make a difference, consciousness must at least be *active*, a sort of operating rationality, as perhaps Hegel would say. But we know that these two things are widely different. All of us know that animals, despite our silly talk about ourselves as humans, are much more *rational* than humans. I mean, animals never do stupid things; they do the things they have to do, right? They are instrumentally efficient and we couldn't say that they are conscious in the usual sense of the term. And humans are conscious and, at the same time, monstrously irrational. All of human history is there, from the beginning to this very day. Most importantly, if the drives or instincts are the only forces, this consciousness, rational or not, would always produce the same, save perhaps for minute adaptations to changing circumstances. And this is not what we know; we know there is a human history in a very, very, very strong

sense of the word. This is the black hole of history in the midst of psychoanalysis about which, unfortunately given the constraints of time, I can't say anything more here.

Now, the unexplored possibility of an answer, in Freud, about the difference between humans and animals is in the very important and very profound 1915 text about *Triebe und Triebschicksale*—*Drives and Their Vicissitudes*, as the *Standard Edition* translates it.² Freud does not elaborate the answer, but one can draw it from the text, and it boils down, with some extension, to the following: Drives have their source in the body (this is Freud), soma, whether we talk about animals or humans. They aim at the satisfaction of some need or, more generally, procuring pleasure, discharge, and then tranquility. The action leading to satisfaction is necessarily mediated by the psyche, even animal psyche or human. If you prefer, if you are an adamant biological positivist, whatever goes on in the central nervous system in order to trigger the action that will bring about the satisfaction, the psyche has to be influenced, of course, by the somatic push, the drive, the instinct if you talk about animals.

Now, these two realms, that is, the soma and the psyche, are heterogenous. Freud is adamant about this and rightly so, despite the many difficulties of the problem. In the one, in the soma, we have physical movements, charges, and whatnot. In the other, we have, as he said already from 1896 in a letter to Wilhelm Fließ, qualities and, mostly, representations (*Vorstellungen*); mind you, in German, in

²T/E: The “correct” *Standard Edition* title is *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*. Clearly, Castoriadis has trouble bringing himself to using what he said above was the *Standard Edition*’s incorrect translation of *Triebe* as “instincts” (instead of “drives” or his suggestion, “pushes [*poussées* in French]”).

philosophy, *Vorstellung* doesn't mean "representation" in the sense you have an object which is fully formed in a signed photograph that you keep near your heart—the *Vorstellung* is that you create an image out of an X that is out there and about which nothing more can be said except by means of *another* image which again you create—through an electronic microscope or whatever. OK. There is *something*, but all you know are the successive *Vorstellungen*, which you create about this something.

You have, then, these representations. Now, the somatic push can trigger the psychical world only by producing in it, or inducing in it, the appropriate image. This image is what Freud calls the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz des Triebes*, that is, the representation, in the parliamentary sense, through representation, in the philosophical sense, of the drive in the soul (psyche). The somatic drive sends an ambassador, or makes emerge an ambassador, to the psyche because the drive can't speak the language of the psyche. The language of the psyche is *Vorstellungen*, is representations. So the somatic drive has to have a representation, which represents it; it is the M.P. of the drive with the psyche and has a psychical existence.

Here we get to the difference between animals and humans, which Freud at that time doesn't mention—he is not interested. The difference is very simple. In animals, this representation is fixed, canonical, and biologically functional, e.g., excuse me, for the he-dog the image and the smell of the she-dog is the canonical representation of the sexual object and that is that. The same is true for food, shelter, and so on. In humans it is not. It's not, because, as we know, we have the so-called "normal" people, we have fetishists, we have sadomasochists, we have homosexuals, and you can go on. And even the same person in different periods of his life may

like small men, tall men, large-breasted women, thin women, whatever you want. There is no canonical representation of the sexual object. Of course, there is a minimal canonicity, if I may say so; otherwise, the human species would have disappeared. But this is not what is essential about sexual life. The essential thing about the sexual life of humanity is not that, from time to time, couples have copulated, in the missionary position or I don't know how, and the female got pregnant. OK. Everybody knows it, what else is new? The essential thing is all the other things, and these other things are what is typically human [*sounds in room*]. I hope I haven't shocked you [*laughter*].

How does this difference emerge? There is only one possible answer in this. It is because, in the human psyche, you have a terrible, monstrous, almost cancerous outgrowth of a function, which has a functionality with animals, which stops having *this* sort of functionality with humans, and this is *radical imagination*.

So, humans are defined essentially by an imagination with the following traits: first of all, there is a free or unmotivated flux of representations—you stay there, I'm talking, your attention is distracted, then suddenly you think of your gas bill, for instance; that has nothing to do with what happens around you; secondly, and most importantly, the domination of organ pleasure by representational pleasure, which means that imagination is defunctionalized and pleasure itself is defunctionalized. Sexual pleasure for a dog—for a he-dog or a she-dog—is linked to the reproductive function; in humans, sexual pleasure is linked to the reproductive function—what? once in 10,000 times. Right? This settles the problem. That boils down to saying that humans are *mad* animals and fundamentally unfit for life if left to themselves. Not because they would indulge in

unlimited physical or organic pleasure—that would be the point of *Civilization and Its Discontents*—but because they would remain enclosed in what is the pristine form of their existence, that is, a self-enclosed, representationally autarkic psychical monad indulging in the limitless pleasure of representation, and that is the hallucination of the newborn. We positively know that this is the natural state of the newborns, and we know—but with difficulty we confess to ourselves—that this is the normal state of grownups, because most of our time we are daydreaming and when we sleep we dream as soon as we can separate ourselves from “reality” within quotation marks.

One more word on this: This monadic initial state of the psyche supplies that which will remain for all the life of the subject, and even for philosophy, the matrix of meaning. If you want to have an idea of what is “full” meaning for a human being, you have to think of an autarkic representational state of self-pleasure where the subject is omnipotent because it can form *at will* his or her representations so that they conform to pleasure and so that there is nothing that escapes the subject. *That* is omnipotence of thought—Freud calls it *magical omnipotence of thought*;³ in a certain sense, he was not very strict because it is not magical, it is *real* omnipotence of thought. Why is it real? Because it is omnipotent in the psychical reality. It is not omnipotent in relation to the ape. But psychoanalysis does not talk about apes. It talks about psychical reality, and there thought is omnipotent. And it is this meaning, this sense, that is the recovery of such a type of state, which is the constant

³T/E: See the third chapter, “Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts,” of *Totem and Taboo*, in vol. 13 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: SE).

quest of the human psyche all of its life long, and which you find as well in religion, ecstatic states, *Tristan and Isolde*, and whatever you want.

Now, obviously this is a state that fully contradicts the requirements of the human being *qua* biological being. You cannot feed on hallucinations; you hallucinate the absent breast, then you suck your thumb, and *after* a certain time the somatic processes make the baby scream. Not always—we have anorectic babies who would rather die than accept the breast. But there you have the total prevalence of representation. Happily, in most cases this somatic need imposes itself, and you are never born alone. There is an other present, generally the mother; and this somatic need, on the one hand, and the other, the mother, violently break this monadic state and force the infant to enter into a process of socialization that is of a humanization in a second and more current sense.

Now, of course, a socialized mother must obviously already be socialized herself; for instance, she must talk. Can we derive language psychoanalytically? Obviously not. In brief, there is not and cannot be a psychoanalytical answer to the question of the *origin of society* because society must be there for human subjects to live and construct it. There is nothing in the human Unconscious capable of producing what are the defining characteristics of society, that is, institutions and social imaginary significations. Institutions: language, law, religion, or whatever you want. Social imaginary significations: gods, God, virtue, commodity, capital, interest, falling rate of profit, General Secretary of the Party, national honor, the Queen, and whatever you want. Or, a commodity. A commodity is a social imaginary signification. A car is a physical object; it is not a commodity, it is a car. It is a commodity because social relationships exist which make out

of it a commodity. This boils down to saying that the psyche is irreducible to society, though the socialized individual—you and me—is virtually nothing but successive deposits, strata of socialization. Psyche irreducible to society and society irreducible to the psyche because, again, nothing in the Unconscious can produce institutions. Nothing in the Unconscious can produce, create language.

One fundamental restriction to this: There is and always has to be a minimal correspondence between the requirements of the psyche and those of society, and this boils down to the following: institutions and social significations must provide the socialized psyche or the social individual with meaning. That is, they must create a diurnal world—a day-to-day world, not a dreaming world—where things and people more or less hold together and where, for the individual, life and death have meaning. That is, each society creates its own world; this world *has to* hold together, not according to the criteria of today's science but according to its own criteria; and for the individuals, this is the true world and in this world everything is more or less in its place, and if something is not in its place you do something about it—you call the sorcerer, you call the priest, or you expiate, you kill the firstborns of families, and so on and so forth. You redress the order and the meaning of the universe.

So, where does society come from? The only possible answer is that society is a *collective creation*, a creation of the *collective anonymous* or of the *social instituting imaginary*. This imaginary, which you have to imagine, to represent to yourself, as a sort of creative faculty of *vis formandi* inhabiting every human collectivity, has to reckon, up to a point of course, with the underlying physical and biological reality, and this it always does—almost always. But this is not the important aspect—that's why we cannot explain

society by saying, e.g., that all societies always have to provide for production and reproduction of material life or for the sexual reproduction of humans. These are perfectly true statements, but they are perfectly tautological, and they do not explain anything either about the fantastic variety of social forms—all societies have to eat, OK; what does this explain?—or about their self-alteration. We have to grant the original creativity of the social-historical field *qua* radical instituting imaginary. To insist, to be tiresome: If *Totem and Taboo* was enough, one can't understand why there has been history. And if *Civilization and Its Discontents* had been enough, why has there been what Freud inaccurately characterizes more or less as a progress in rationality?

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Now, the point about the structure and content of social and political institutions. First, religion—here, Freud is clear, and I think basically correct, though one could and should supplement this with some very important points. He sees—and in this he is not original because this starts with Plato and through Voltaire goes to Ivan Karamazov—the essential role in religion in the repression of drives. “If God did not exist, you would have to invent him,”⁴ said Voltaire, in order to keep the people quiet, and any prefect of police would say the same thing. But Freud goes much further because he says that religion—though he doesn't say it in

⁴T/E: Voltaire (1768), from “Epître à l’auteur du livre des Trois imposteurs” (*Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland [Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885], tome 10, pp. 402-405; English translation: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him” [<http://www.whitman.edu/VSA/trois.imposteurs.html>]).

these words; these are my words—supplies meaning. Freud says rightly, *Illusion is an erroneous belief supported by desire*. Not just an error. It is an erroneous belief, which is supported by desire.

What is desire here? Desire to know, desire to make sense, desire to protect the feeling of self that is threatened by the unfathomable vastness of the world. Desire for consolation, desire for a semblance of a solution to the most terrifying enigma, the enigma of death. And also, says Freud very correctly, giving meaning to the world. What is it for humans to give meaning to the world? Of course, it is to give to the world a human meaning. A meaning which makes sense, makes meaning for what humans mean by meaning. We could have an excursus on Heidegger, and *Sinn von sein*,⁵ here, but that's not our point.

Freud says very beautifully: With religion, *man...fühlt sich heimisch im Unheimlichen*,⁶ “one feels at home with this

⁵T/E: The “question of the meaning of Being” appears on the very first page of Martin Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, 1927). In “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary” (1990; now in [CL4](#), 235), Castoriadis says:

Once again, it was Plato who created this ontology, with its monstrous equation, also laid out by Plato, wherein Being equals the Good equals Wisdom equals the Beautiful—which later led someone like Martin Heidegger to repeat that the task of philosophy is to seek the meaning of Being, without him ever once asking himself the question whether Being has or can have a meaning and whether this very question has any meaning (it has none).

⁶T/E: Correcting again Castoriadis’s paraphrase, as was done in [CL4](#), 197 (see “Appendix: Potential Errata” in [ibid.](#): 335). The source of the quotation is to be found in Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *SE* 21: 17, where the standard English translation yields: “we...can feel at home in the uncanny.”

extreme strangeness”—when the extreme strangeness of the world becomes home, becomes *Heimisch* because it is, I don't know, the Word of God or the ire of Zeus or anything. How does it do this? Of course, generally by the anthropomorphization of the universe, mostly relying—and that's true of infantile projection, especially, says Freud—on the paternal *imago*; that's the Christian-Hebraic ancestry, but of course the same would be true, and has been true, for the projection of a maternal *imago*.

Freud thinks that religion can be superseded because, he says, humanity cannot remain eternally in the infantile stage; it must one day go out to the vast world. But he is very sparing as to the “How?” this will happen. And this question is still with us, not only because of the persistence of religious creeds, but because behind this superseding of religion looms an enormous unknown. To put it very starkly, this unknown is this: Can human beings ever face *frontally* their limitation and their mortality? History has yet to answer this question. Theory cannot answer it. Historical experience shows one clear example and two half-examples where they have more or less been able. The clear example, to my mind, is the Greek one, the proper Greek one, up to 400 [B.C.E.]—not Plato, huh? Plato is not Greek [*laughter*]. Because up to 400 [B.C.E.] there is no idea of a positive immortality in the Greek creeds. Either nothing is after death, or what is after death is *worse* than what is here on Earth. That's that. So, here we are here, we do what we can do, and then after: nothing—and that's why nobody is happy before they are dead.⁷ And certainly there was no political role for religion,

⁷T/E: In [ibid.](#), p. 98, Castoriadis references “Herodotus's story about Solon and Croesus” (*Histories*, 1:30-33): “[W]hen Croesus complained to Solon that the latter had not mentioned him among the happy men Solon

properly speaking. The half examples are the initial Buddhistic creed, but this boils down to acosmism, that is, retreat from the world, and it also did not last but became an ordinarily instituted religion with holy men, monasteries, and things like that. And Modern Times, of course, modern Western-European times, including North America, where nevertheless one has mostly seen a secular religion of progress, both in Liberalism and Marxism which are absolutely *identical* in this respect: there is a promised land, asymptotically for the Liberals or, precisely, would-be defined for the Marxists, with the known catastrophic conclusions and results. Or otherwise, this demise of religion has offered only the meaninglessness of life for the “normal” (in quotation marks) individual in today’s society and the ludicrous compensations for this meaninglessness it finds in supermarkets and TV masturbation [*laughter*].

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Now, gender domination. As is well known, there have been attempts to give a psychoanalytical answer to the question: Why the inequality of genders and what makes genders what they are—beyond anatomy, of course? This has been done either to justify the existing male domination—and here, certainly, the first culprit is Freud himself—or, more paradoxically in the recent period, especially among some American feminists, through some attempts to invert the Freudian scheme. But surely there is no reason why

has known, Solon responded to him, among other things: But you are still alive, it cannot be said of you that you are happy; one could say that only after your death.”

psychoanalysis could *explain* gender domination and the patriarchal organization of society more than, say, the general asymmetric and antagonistic division of society between dominant and dominated strata. I mean, I have never seen a psychoanalysis trying to *explain* the birth of slavery by psychoanalytical considerations about, I don't know what, the penis of the slaves or whatever. Anatomy, or destiny, says Freud. Freud makes a pastiche of Napoleon. Napoleon used to say, quite correctly: *Geography is destiny*; the place of France or the place of Germany is destiny. And Freud transforms it into saying "Anatomy is destiny."⁸

It is true. You are born a boy or a girl; okay, in a sense. Now, this anatomy or destiny can explain, or rather give support, to an instituted difference of sexes, but *not* to the domination of the one sex over the other. I mean, there are lots of hidden postulates, which are—how to say?—taken in under the carpet in order to consolidate the argument. Can we have a *psychical* derivation of this domination? The explanations that Freud gives, or which one can derive from him, beg the question—the little boy retreats before the father in fear of castration and in the hope that one day he will take his place; the little girl expects from the father, or later the father substitute, the gift of a child as a penis substitute. All this implies both the *already instituted dominant position of the father* and the exorbitant valorization of the penis—*phallus*, as the Lacanians would say—instead, e.g., of the swollen pregnant woman. Why not?

Freud rightly insists at times, rather inconsistently with what has just been said, about the inherent psychical bisexuality of humans. I think that this is fully confirmed by

⁸T/E: Sigmund Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924), tr. J. Riviere, *SE* 19: 178.

clinical experience. It's a *psychical* bisexuality because certainly it is not a biological datum; it is true that there are elements of hormonal bisexuality in humans, but in this there is generally a normally canonical, gender-defined resolution. I mean: male hormones or female hormones prevail. But the psychical bisexuality is true and it is very important, and it corresponds also to the well-known perverse polymorphism of children and, also, the onmisexuality of sexual fantasies—I mean any psychoanalyst worth his or her salt knows that in a sexual fantasy the subject is in all the positions at the same time, and the same is true, for instance, for sadomasochistic relations—*acted out*, I mean. Thus, active as well as passive attitudes are there *from the beginning in both sexes*. That they become generally opposed and irreconcilable traits of genders, posited antinomically, is, again, an effect of socialization, which has been posited by these significations as antinomic. Either you are passive or you are active. And women are passive—why? And men are active—why? There is a very nice sentence, a bit dirty, from Suetonius, I think, about Caesar, who, as you well know, was a quite important warrior and statesman and whatever, and who was known to be perfectly bisexual. And Suetonius reports that the Romans of the time were saying about Caesar—whilst putting him in triumph, and so on and so forth—that he was *omnium mulierum vir* and *omnium virorum mulier*, he was the husband of all the wives of Rome and wife of all the husbands of Rome.⁹ So, where is passivity and where is activity?

To sum up, we can't find any structural necessity for the patriarchal organization of society. The only structural necessity is that the dual, face-to-face, almost fusional child/mother relationship has to be broken at some point. This

⁹T/E: [*Suetonius Divus Iulus*](#) 52.

certainly entails the entry on the scene of a qualitatively different figure, but certainly not of a *dominant* figure, of a dominant figure supplied with a penis. Now, given the fact that the institution of society *must* introduce some regulated relations of sexual reproduction, it must also certainly institute the social significations of man/woman as inseparable polarities, asymmetrical, but not necessarily unequal, one way or the other. And why this asymmetrical relationship has also been unequal is the *explicandum* in history that is not explained by psychoanalysis, by all the discourses. Male domination is, in the end, an arbitrary historical creation, which doesn't make it less real, but does mean that it can equally well be done away with.

Now, domination proper. I think that the same is true about domination proper. I don't mean by *domination* the division of society in general. There will certainly always be an articulation of society in various ways. I mean by *domination* the asymmetrical and antagonistic division, with monopoly of power and wealth on the one hand, obedience and poverty on the other. I will not enter into the criticism of the Marxian attempts to explain the birth of this, which, to my mind, fail miserably. The same is true of Freud's attempt in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where he postulates that there is a sort of enlightened minority that imposes oppression on the ignorant masses and, in the process, draws most of the benefits of the oppression. Where does this minority come from? And why do the masses accept this situation? Because, as we know at least since [\[Étienne de\] La Boétie](#) and Hobbes, of course the masses are physically much more powerful. The strongest man is extremely weak against ten weak men, or even five weak women. And here you have a sophism that very often you find both in anarchistic thinking and in feminist thinking in another way: Human nature is good but

has been perverted by the dominant classes. Now, do the dominant classes not participate in human nature? From where did the dominant classes draw their own perversion, to pervert the others? So, this is nonsensical. The same is true here: you have a minority which is enlightened. Why is this minority enlightened? Why don't they also indulge in—I don't know what—limitless satisfaction of their drives? The fact of the matter is that domination cannot exist without the imposition of a system, or rather a magma, of social significations of a *hierarchical* character, and the emergence of these significations is a historical creation of which no explanation can be given. As I have written, it's much easier to understand that, once you vanquish the enemy, you kill him, or you eat him (it's very normal, zoologically speaking); it's a totally perverse idea that you chain him up and you make him work for you—apart from the technical prerequisites. *There* is the true invention, a true creation, which *cannot* be explained. Normally, you should eat your enemy, that's all. Now, to enslave him and make him work of course is more profitable in the long run but entails, requires the transformation of the imaginary signification from *This is an alien, hostile monstrous human being* to the signification *This can become my property*. This cannot be derived from any development in the productive forces or all this nonsense; all these are external conditions.

Now, the persistence and conservation of domination—that's another point that is very important—presuppose the internalization, by the dominated, of the existing relationships of domination. And, of course, this internalization presupposes that this relationship is *already* imaginarily and really instituted. This is the circle of creation. You cannot have domination unless the dominated have internalized domination. They can't internalize domination unless there is

domination. These two things go together. The attempt to explain one from the other is to introduce physicalistic or mechanistic attempts at explanation in history. All this is not to say that we can't find in the psyche elements equivalent to or homologous with the social significations. We did so already, for instance, relative to the projection of omnipotence onto the godly figures. Or indeed, much more profoundly, in the psychical requirement that the institution and the social significations provide meaning for the psyche. But in the same way that this universal requirement does not tell us anything as to why *this* meaning of life and world is so different among, let's say, Confucian, Hebraic, Greek, modern worlds, not to speak about the Azande or the Nambikwara. It doesn't tell us anything, either, about the institution of the social or gender domination. To wit, what the psyche and its socialization carry together into the world is, first, meaning as closure, self-sufficiency, omnipotence; second—this is the growing up of the infant—somebody else—an other—on whom—and this is the mother—meaning, self-sufficiency, omnipotence are almost inevitably projected and who becomes the guarantor that there exists meaning, self-sufficiency, omnipotency, etc. So far, so good. Or, so bad.

But we know that further developments *are* possible. And they have existed. They have entailed a historical break and a new creation. Such as, for instance, the social imaginary signification that nobody embodies meaning, self-sufficiency, omnipotency and that such meaning, self-sufficiency, omnipotency as may exist are the creation of the collective, of the brothers and sisters; the latter, as we already said, have been historically repressed.



So, very briefly, I'll finish with the last point. Does psychoanalysis have anything to say about a proper form of human society and social institutions, that is, about proper politics? To this, one has to answer by asking another question: Does psychoanalysis have anything to say about what is a proper form of a human being? In other terms, does psychoanalysis know what its proper aims, its proper finalities, are? This question is much less idiotic than it may seem, given all the quarrels about the end of the analysis and the concept of normality or normalcy. I can only sketch briefly my own answer to this.

The aim of psychoanalysis, of course, is not knowledge *per se*. It's knowledge insofar as it leads to a transformation of the analysand. This is why I call analysis a *practico-poietic activity*. Now, what is this transformation aiming at, or what ought it to be aiming at? I will not dwell on the repeated returns to Freud on the question of the end and the ends of analysis. There is only one answer that holds water. And this is: Psychoanalysis aims at the autonomy of the analysand. The *meaning* of this autonomy is not to eliminate the Unconscious, which is impossible and would be monstrous anyhow, nor even the domination of the Conscious over the Unconscious, but the instauration of another, new, different relationship between Conscious and Unconscious. This new relationship can be defined as one in which the subject is, as far as possible, aware of his or her unconscious drives; does not, strictly speaking, *repress* them; recognizes them but *can* reflect upon them; and, through this reflection, deliberately decide if and how it will act them out. The motto of psychoanalysis ought to be: I know that this is my desire—to kill you, for instance; I desire it, but, all things well

considered, I will not, or I will, I have come to realize. This means, *inter alia*, that the subject is capable of positing his or her own laws of conduct and of thinking. But no man or woman is an island. We are all social beings; therefore, our autonomy is necessarily *limited* and can even be a delusion if it ignores our participation in a society and therefore the fact that we are coming under collective laws. This would appear and be a fully *heteronomous* condition, because the laws are the laws of the others. Save in one case. If the subject can justifiably and reasonably say that these social laws are also his or her own laws, not because they have been imposed on him or her but because he or she has fully participated, on an equal footing with all the others, in their institution. In other terms, real autonomous individuals can exist only in an autonomous, fully democratic society; and, vice versa, you can't have a democratic society with a nation of sheep.

In this sense, psychoanalysis can be consonant only with a democratic polity and an explicitly, lucidly self-instituting society. And to be fair to the deepest strands of Freud's thought and attitudes, and despite his frequent pessimism, this is the meaning of his pronouncements about "our god Logos"¹⁰ and the need to get out of the infantile situation of humanity, out in the wide world. And this is also the meaning of the *other* half of the myth of *Totem and Taboo*, the half usually omitted, neglected, or suppressed: the *oath* of the brothers following the murder of the father, according to which nobody will any longer seek totality of power or of its perquisites for himself alone. What is unfinished in this myth, though certainly historically accurate on a metaphorical level, is that the brothers—obviously Freud

¹⁰T/E: *The Future of an Illusion*, in SE 21: 54, with "Logos" spelled there in Greek characters.

ignores the sisters, but we don't have to ignore them—in their oath link the rules with the transformation of the dead father into a totem, into something transcending society and transcending their own power. That is, they totemize their institution. What is in front of *us*, what the ancient Athenians in their way, the Westerners in another way, have more or less attempted, without fully and finally succeeding, is the full *detotemization* of the institutions, the recognition that there can be no human society without institutions, but that these institutions are and always have been our own creation under the given constraints, that we have to recognize this fact and stop the search for transcendent, extrasocial guarantees of meaning, knowing that meaning can be found and created only in and through our own free and lucid activity. Thank you.

LOGOS

The Imaginary as Such^{*}

We encounter in history the imaginary as continued origin, ever-actual foundation, central component wherein are engendered both what holds every society together and what produces historical change. This component that is, properly speaking, constitutive of the social-historical is misrecognized in the most radical way by theoretical reflection as well as by common consciousness, and for a good reason: for both, to face up to the imaginary in its radical role [*fonction*] would be to deprive oneself of all natural, rational, or transcendent reassurance, to consider man as finite and indefinite, or unlimited, creativity, as raw freedom of which no incorporated element guarantees its proper usage, as fully responsible for an existence it has not willed or wanted as such, even though it has produced that existence and which, for and despite that, is profoundly its own. This primary reality is occulted when human history is reduced to the effects of a natural conditioning, to a gradual adaptation by means of tools and of thought conceived as biological extensions [*prolongations*], to a *Bildungsroman* of reason, or to the combinatory play between allegedly inalterable structural elements.

The determination of the imaginary emerges straight away when one poses to oneself the following central question: What are the most general conditions of existence of an individual subject and of a collectivity of subjects? These conditions can be summarized in two terms: the datum of a reality, namely, of a resistant, coherent, and inexhaustible

^{*}*L'imaginaire comme tel*, text prepared, annotated, and introduced by Arnaud Tomès (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2008). [T/E: Castoriadis's March 1968 text appears on pp. 145-58.]

ground [*so*!]; the datum of an other of reality, not (real) negation of the real, but areality; the latter originates in and is supported by this essential determination of subjects that is the capacity to ignore the real, to detach themselves therefrom, to set it at a distance, to take another view of it than the one that “imposes” itself, to give it an unreal extension, to think of something else, to represent to oneself and to do what is not given, to make the possible exist. This essential determination, which is constitutive of human existence, is what I call *imaginary* (or *imagination*, when the accent is placed on the moment of the correlative subjective activity).¹

I shall not insist here upon the justification for such conditions. Indirectly, this justification will be furnished, I hope, by this book as a whole.² These conditions are, in my view, the sole ones that furnish a response to the question, which [must be] repeated tirelessly to all those—philosophers, sociologists, historians, psychoanalysts—who hold forth on man from any angle whatsoever: What defines the boundary between animality and humanity, the takeoff of history relative to nature? And yet, as ultimate conditions, they cannot be justified directly, if by *direct justification* one means any sort of proof. They are on the order of fact and as such are ungroundable, elucidatable but nondeducible. Upon them can be seen the limit of knowledge in one of its accepted meanings: as effort to ground. It may seem that these conditions might be groundable negatively, through the

¹T/E: Displacing the end parenthesis from after “*imagination*” to the end of the sentence, so as to make the meaning clear.

²French Editor: *Fondement imaginaire du social-historique* (Imaginary foundation of the social-historical) is the book Castoriadis projected to write and from which is drawn “The Imaginary as Such.”

impossibility of thinking the opposite. And indeed, a subject flattened upon the world in which this subject lives, with no vertical dimension, is inconceivable (since that subject would not be other than this world, and since even the repetition or rigorous reproduction the subject might be able to furnish thereof would not allow one to distinguish the subject therefrom), just as something real [*un réel*] with neither coherence nor resistance would be indistinguishable from the subject or else would not permit the subject's existence. Yet this negative deduction is deceptive; it is mere tautology. Everything it says already presupposes *de facto* and *de jure*, empirically and logically, these ineliminable datums: the reality of the real and the subjectivity of the subject.

This elucidation of imaginary determination can be done and is to be done along two tracks. It can be done positively, and concretely, through the description and analysis of what, in the social-historical, originates in the imaginary. That will be done at length in what follows. It can also be done negatively and abstractly, by indicating how it is impossible to grasp, by means of classical determinations, the specificity of the social-historical; this is what will be attempted here.



The elements within which the (collective and individual) social-historical exists are given immediately as appertaining to a representing and a making/doing [*faire*] that are indissociably linked. This representing and this making/doing do not allow themselves to be reduced to natural or logical determinations.

(A) The imaginary conditions for the representable will be discussed at length in what follows. Here, it suffices

to point out that the represented in general is reducible neither to something perceived nor to something reflected [*ni un perçu ni un réfléchi*]. In their mode of being, something perceived or something reflected presuppose, first of all, the represented, for they are only modalities thereof or, more exactly, some possible accomplishments (*Erfüllungen*)³ among others; among these latter, the existence of the concrete imagined already sufficiently supports what I want to show. But perceived and reflected (as also the concrete imagined) presuppose the represented as permanent originary activity. This represented—as [a] represented concretely lived by the subject, which is at first a making-exist for the singular subject *hic et nunc*, under the specific, indescribable, and underivable mode of representation, any object whatsoever—creates and sustains an originary region within which every other one first has to be given. Modern refutations of empiricism and rationalism are correct, but superfluous, when the originary character of representing has been understood; for, empiricism and rationalism appear then immediately for what they are, namely, attempts at reduction of the condition to one of its conditioned [states]—as would be a reduction of space to color or to sound. One can easily show the insurmountable aporias of every theory of perception as reflection [*reflet*]—still more of thought as [a] reflection, and also of all rationalism of perception and, even (as remains to be done), of thought. Yet that up against which at the outset and principally all empiricism and all rationalism stumbles is [the fact] that every discussion about the origin of the content of perception or of thought presupposes that both of them exist as representation for a subject and that it is unclear what

³French Editor: German term signifying *fulfillment*, borrowed from [Edmund] Husserl's phenomenology.

“explaining”—this first fact for any physical or logical process whatsoever—really could mean.

Yet, beyond this formal standpoint, it is easy to show that representing is not only *ineliminable fundamental modality* of all that can be given to the subject [but] *partially unmotivated activity* and that it is as such that it constitutively intervenes for there to be, materially, determinate perception and thought. Perception and thought are certainly the defining characteristic [*le propre*] of man, but they are so not only inasmuch as they exist for man in the element of the represented in general but also inasmuch as, in the constitution of their concrete content, there intervenes a component that has no analogue in any otherwise known model, whether physical or logical (which ultimately boils down to the same thing), and even in any imaginable model. This component, the unmotivated or imaginary moment of the represented, is that which renders perception irreducible to a reflection, to a rational grasping of a sensible, or to any mixture at all of the two. It is also this that makes of human thought a thought in the full sense and distinguishes it from some mechanical activity that can be reproduced in exhaustive fashion by a computer. That which in human thought remains irreducible to the thinking machine is the possibility of giving rise to [*faire surgir*] elements or relationships that are not predetermined, not defined in advance, and not known [*ignorés*] by the memory, the program, and the operating rules of the supposed machine.

(B) The imaginary conditions for the doable will also be analyzed below. What must be underscored right now is the irreducibility of the categories of making/doing and of the doable to anything else whatsoever, and in particular to physical or logical processes or models. Human making/doing would not be human making/doing and an element in the

existence of the social-historical were it simply a logicomachanical automatism or animal reflex activity. And certainly, animal activity is already irreducible to reflexology, but what contemporary research has established is the animal's capacity, within certain limits, to give different responses to different situations (to grasp as a "global meaning [*sens global*]" of the situation and to furnish a biologically "sensible/meaningful [*sensée*]"—that is, adequate—response). What is at issue, with man, is, on the one hand, the capacity to furnish, even outside of "catastrophic" situations, *inadequate* responses; the possibility of this deficiency, even if it were exceptional, shows that a sense of biological purpose [*finalité*] is not exclusive here, nor even always dominant. But above all, this involves man's capacity to give different responses to the *same* situations.

The naturalization of history—whether it takes on a Marxian or a Freudian hue—has always leaned, implicitly or explicitly, on the self-evidence of the human being's biological reality, which is manifest, *par excellence*, in need, and has wanted to interpret its making/doing as a response to such need. I shall show below that need *qua* human is indefinable upon exclusively biological presuppositions, and that the object of need, *qua* rare and useful object, is socially constituted. It suffices to point out for the moment that "natural" need, the lack it hollows out in the biological being, the activity through which this being tends to fill the need, which are incontestable presuppositions for history, are not yet history. Need is the passage from the biological to the historical. An animal that lacks food seeks *its* nourishment; if it does not find this nourishment, it wastes away and, ultimately, dies. A man who lacks food wastes away, too. But, before dying, he seeks another nourishment, makes [*fabrique*] a stick, invents a trap, makes a war, or tells himself a story.

Impossibility of reducing making/doing to a logicomechanical automatism.

It therefore is not possible to conceive making/doing as “application” of a thought. It is not even possible to conceive it as ensuing from a prior representation. One must endeavor to grasp the relation between making/doing and representing—which is assuredly one of the most difficult relations to think—in the mode of an identity within the most radical distinction, of a bifurcation, starting from an unthinkable common root, of two trunks, each of which continues to belong in some way to the other. It can be said that representing and making/doing are *equioriginary*, on the condition that one understands thereby not only that there is between them no possible relation of logical or real priority but that they *are* origin, one and the same [origin] in its differentiation. I do not intend thereby the mere formal reciprocity that could be expressed by saying: Representing is still making/doing and there is no making/doing that is nonsimultaneously represented. I mean first of all this, that representing and making/doing embody in undivided fashion this essential modality of the human that is: evoking into existence, giving rise to, being able to be only by giving itself another term that is at once self and nonself, being able to be only by making be. *That* is the finite creative imagination (which a recent terminology imperfectly aims at beneath the word *transcendence*, thus producing an unnecessary confusion)—as opposed to the fiction of an infinite creativity that could signify only the absolute independence of the creator in relation to the created (the *nili indiget ad existentiam*,⁴ which

⁴French Editor: It lacks nothing in order to exist: reference to Descartes’s definition of substance and of God (*Principles of Philosophy*, I, 51; *Premières Réponses*, Adam and Tannery ed., vol. 7, p. 109).

is unthinkable for men) *and* the capacity to give rise to the absolute nonself (one of the multiple pitfalls of “rational” theology). Representing is not only to make/do in the sense of an activity on the part of the subject, it is to bring into existence [*faire exister*] and it is to make *itself* (be)—the subject, outside of what it represents to itself [*se représenter*], being only pure virtuality. Conversely, making/doing is always representing, not in the sense of the subject representing itself [*se représentant*] in the process of making/doing but of presenting, rendering present, actualizing what is not. As much as representing, making/doing is therefore creative imagination in action [*en acte*], not realization of a prior arbitrary representation but emergence of something that does not necessarily preexist it; it does not depend on an image that would be represented as such and independently; it is, rather, directly realizing imagination, presentation of an image instrumented in the modification of the real.

The *sui generis* relation between making/doing and the represented, the specific modality under which the imagination is immanent in making/doing without needing to be rendered explicit, may easily be seen already at the level of individual making/doing. In the way one’s hand takes hold for the first time of an object and connects it [*le met en rapport*] with another one, while one’s gaze is coupled with an anticipation that hollows out from the existent and normally foreseen arrangement of things a tunnel to the future in which a new image takes shape as a prolongation and transformation of the one the effectively actual movement already is realizing, the imagination manifests itself as embodied or corporeal and its product as real modification actualizing an absolutely virtual image (configuration). (The relation between the categories of the virtual and the actual, on the one hand, and those of the represented act and of the effectuated act, on the other

hand, will be examined, beyond formal tautologies, below.)

Yet this relation manifests itself just as much at the level of social making/doing. One has a tendency to think social making/doing as dependent on a social representation to which it gives material form, to subordinate the conditions for the doable to the conditions of the representable. Insofar as that does not result from a confusion between the social dimension constitutive of all individual making/doing and social making/doing properly speaking, this noted observation concerns only a moment of social making/doing. But the latter offers [*présente*], as such, another ineliminable moment, namely, the constitution or creation of achieved [*réalisées*] configurations (images). Such configurations are absolutely not accounted for by any relation to prior social representations (or to the sum thereof) and their coming out into the [realm of the] socially represented will be possible only as a function of and owing to this making/doing. Salamis or Waterloo, 1789 or 1917, Los Alamos or the journey of the [*Rocket*](#) between Stockton and Darlington,⁵ Columbus's voyage or *Hamlet* as signifying configurations in actuality [*en acte*], and not only as effectively actual [*effectives*] social representations and as sources for possible representations, go indefinitely beyond the prior representations of the participants and actors. Still more, this holds for the first and most profound manifestation of social making/doing—institutive making/doing—which certainly is partially related to prior representations but goes indefinitely beyond them as they lay down the conditions for the representable and the doable. *Instituting* signifies instaurating among men (and social things) anatural and arational relations (one has never

⁵French Editor: Allusion to the famous locomotive, which made the initial trip on the first English railroad line.

felt the need to promulgate laws about gravity or Pythagoras' theorem) that, far from reflecting or sublimating "real" relations, are the presupposition thereof (real relations can neither exist nor be conceived except as instituted) and that, as conditions for the representable, are not necessarily (are not even ever exhaustively) represented in a [conscious and] explicit fashion by the participants—as is proved by the fact that the essentials thereof are unveiled only in analysis.

(C) It should be clear that what is being described here as imaginary or imagination is much more and essentially other than mere distancing [*mise à distance*] from the real through representation or its nihilation by consciousness.⁶ The imaginary is emergence of something positive [*un positif*] that is other than the real, or areal; it is only from the reflective and comparative standpoint (in the sense of Kant or of Lask)⁷ that the imagination can appear as nihilation. The imaginary can appear as nihilation only to theoretical consciousness, constituted as a function of a real correlate; here we have a formal, partial, and derivative perspective. But at the originary level, the constitution of something fully real, and already its mere concept, is but one of the two sides produced by a primal and perpetually renewed scission, the one by which a

⁶T/E: Most likely, a reference to Sartre's [*Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*](#) (1943). Sartre's English-language translator, Hazel E. Barnes, renders *néantisation* as "nihilation."

⁷French Editor: [Emil Lask](#) (1875-1915), a German philosopher who was part of the neo-Kantian movement, is the author of *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre: Eine Studie über den Herrschaftsbereich der logischen Form* (1911) [T/E: published in Tübingen by J.C.B. Mohr (P. Siebeck). In "Done and To Be Done" ([CLS](#), 19), Castoriadis explains that he began reading Lask, among many other philosophers including Marx, Hegel, and Weber, in his early teens.]

subject in the world and a world for the subject come into being. Something humanly real does not exist before and independently of the imaginary, that is to say, independently of representing and making/doing. Real and areal can be neither posited nor conceived separately from each other. But the areal would be nothing, and could not function within this polarity, were it simply nihilation and abstract negation, an empty "that could not be." It is always a concrete, full, or accomplished areal, another determination that appears as negative only to the reflective point of view. The subject does not constitute itself and does not constitute the world by contrasting something real in general to something possible in general—expressions that are devoid of meaning. The constitution of concrete possibilities, be it in the form of pure representation, is positive creation. Something humanly real, a mixture of possible and impossible, and indefinable outside these categories in their concrete usage, presupposes the possible—and the possible presupposes representing and making/doing. Certainly, to the speculative consciousness of the individual, making/doing may appear as mere realization of preconstituted possibilities. But the true relationship is the opposite. It is representing and making/doing that, at the originary level, posit the possible and relativize the real. It is because they posit a concrete other of the real that the possible and the real emerge simultaneously as conjugated dimensions and that the world is constituted as human world, space of mobility and family of virtual trajectories, on the one hand point of support, obstacle, resistance, and limit, on the other.

(D) Whence, every making/doing offers a symbolic component. Whence, already, at the elementary level, any act whatsoever on the part of the subject can appear to others only as a signifier, to which a signified is to be attached; or from [the fact] that the institution gives itself out as being

borne and conveyed by a symbolic network, one sometimes wishes to conclude that the social *is* only on the order of the symbolic, or that the symbolic is ultimate. There we have a confusion that rests implicitly on the identification of the social/individual opposition with the symbolic/“real” lived meaning opposition. Certainly, the symbol is by definition transsubjective; even the “private” symbol is a symbol only insofar as it appertains to distinct subjective lived experiences that it does communicate. And every effectively lived meaning is necessarily *de facto* individual; its site of existence is the region of individual representing-aiming at-being affected. Yet, as a matter of fact, a symbol ceases to be a personal symbol only insofar as it makes significations effectively lived by an indefinite number of individuals correspond or communicate as participable. These significations as such define the social; without them social symbols would be but pure materiality. *Participable* here has to be taken in an initially pragmatic or operative sense: the absolute singularity of individual lived experience corresponding to any social symbol does not prevent a thousand persons from responding in the same way to “Present Arms” and, more generally, from reacting in a practically and effectively identical fashion, almost all the time and in almost all circumstances, to the immense quantity of social symbols that are constantly soliciting them.

The confusion rests, too, on an insufficient elucidation of the concept of symbolism. In the case of society, one has nothing to do with any sort of symbolism in general, but instead with a specific symbolism, and this specificity of social symbolism stems from the fact that the latter rests on the imaginary. This element has been recognized by linguists, who have spoken, precisely, of the unmotivated character of the linguistic sign, but only in part. For, it is not a matter here

simply of the “arbitrary” character of the sign, of the conventional connection between signifier and signified as general presupposition of language, but of the continuous functioning of the relatively unmotivated, that is to say, of the imaginary, in the constitution of language and, within the latter, in its use. That which distinguishes human society from every “animal society” is not language *qua* symbolic system in general, code of signs having fixed correspondences with significations, since there is no doubt that several animal species possess such a code. What makes of human language a language in the strong sense, and of the symbolic system *tout court* a social symbolism, is that the significations are not fixed therein. If they were so, language would pertain exclusively to reflexology or to a strict cybernetics. But this is what, from the standpoint of information theory, is arbitrary, pure nonsense, or deficiency of the message and increase in the entropy (that is to say, in the indetermination) of the communication: “her mouth is a flower,”⁸ “waves of the sea/countless laughter,”⁹ “what we have taken we no

⁸T/E: Probably referring here to “Sa bouche est une fleur à quelque Éden ravie,” a line from [Sully Prudhomme’s poem “Contraste,”](#) in his posthumously published (1908) collection of poems, *Épaves*. Castoriadis had already mentioned Sully Prudhomme’s *Le vase brisé* in “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” ([CLI](#), 235). The same exact phrase, “sa bouche est une fleur” also had appeared as the second half of a line in [Alfred de Musset’s poem “Idylle,”](#) which was published in his collection *Poésies nouvelles* (1850).

⁹T/E: Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* 89-90; the French Editor identifies this passage as lines “106-107” and also includes in the quotation what appears to be a typo. On p. 5 of the Preface to [CLI](#), however, Castoriadis had already said that, as soon as Aristotle asks what we see when we see Cleon’s son and when we ask ourselves “What is this very question, and what is questioning?”, “the infinite laughter of the Greek sea has become

longer have, and what we have not taken we have still,”¹⁰ “the identity of identity or of nonidentity”¹¹—this is exactly what constitutes human language as mobility and perpetual passage, as determinate and indeterminate bringing into relation, as act of opening at the very moment one posits.

[Human] symbolic capacity differs from a simple symbolic code as the relationships that constitute it and wherein this capacity expresses itself are not only of the type “ $a = b$ ” or “ $a = b$ and, in the assemblage, $x \text{ a } y$, $a = c$ ”¹² but a

inaudible.” And (in a slightly different English-language translation) Castoriadis examines the waves’ “countless laughter” in his posthumous text “Notes on a Few Poetic Means” ([CL6](#), 40-41), where the correct lines are given. The lines were also correctly identified by Pierre Vidal-Naquet in his introductory text for *CFG1*, “Castoriadis et la Grèce ancienne” (see the footnote on p. 33).

¹⁰French Editor: Heraclitus *Fragments* [T/E: DK 22B56]: a reference to a mysterious phrase that some fisherman are said to have said to Homer (they were speaking of their lice).

¹¹French Editor: A Hegelian formula designating the third moment of the dialectic: the overcoming of the contradiction between “identity” (in itself) and nonidentity (for itself). [T/E: As the French Editor perhaps inadvertently makes clear in this note (“and”), the phrase “the identity of identity *or* of nonidentity” in the body of the text may be a mistake on Castoriadis’s part or, more likely, a transcription error or typo in the printed French text. The correct phrase, with “and” instead of “or,” may be found in [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, tr. H.S. Harris and W. Cerf \(1801; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977\)](#), p. 156.]

¹²T/E: It is unclear whether “ $x \text{ a } y$ ” is an expression of some sort of generalized nonstandard notation, a misprint, or an inaccurate transcription.

= b & a = c & a = d &... (Aristotle's *pollachos legomenon*:¹³ polysemy in the narrow sense) and "if a+b+c+... = A, then a = A" (metonymy) and "if a+b+c+... = A and c+d+e+... = B, then A = B" (metaphor) and "if a+b+c+... = A, then non-a = A" (antonomasia¹⁴ and irony) and "if a+b+... = A, then a = b" (displacement and syncrisis),¹⁵ the essential in all that being not the possibility of its formalization but the impossibility of the latter as indicated by the ellipses, and the joint utilization of some or all of these relationships without any fixed-in-advance rule, and yet without anomie. That these relationships go to make up [*composent*] a rational element is certain, but that does not mean that they may be reduced thereto; the critique of the attempts to derive language from "natural" relationships no longer needs to be done, and as for today's vague desires to boil language down to the operation of a combinatory, they seem to forget that no combinatory could explain the specificity of a tongue as such. Whatever definition one adopts of the "elementary term" of a tongue, the number of combinations it can form is immense; it permits all possible tongues but permits none of them in particular. Something else has to intervene in order for a

¹³French Editor: Expression that is taken in several senses. [T/E: In the original English-language version of "Time and Creation" (first published in French in 1990 and now in [CL3](#)), Castoriadis translates this Aristotelian phrase as "a term used in many different ways" (see p. 281, n. 56 in [CL1](#)).]

¹⁴T/E: In the printed French text, "*antinomasie*" seems to be a misspelling of *antonomasie*, now corrected in English.

¹⁵T/E: The printed French text has "*syncr  sie*," whereas the normal French form would be *syncr  se* or, more usually, *syncrise*. In English, "syncrisis" is a "figure of speech in which opposite things or persons are compared" ([English Wiktionary, s.v.](#)).

tongue to emerge, in order for, among the infinity of possible combinations, a determinate, though not closed, sampling to be performed and a concrete language to be instaurated. This sampling, at once unmotivated and conditioned, exemplifies the imaginary's mode of operation.

For, it is neither at the material level nor at the rational level that language exists as language, and the mixing of these two levels that is phonology sifts out, despite the confusions now in vogue, the conditions for the existence of a *seme*, not of a *signifier*. The phonematic combinatory appertains to language only as a moment of its conditions; without fusion with the properly semantic elements, it is transposable to punch cards. Characteristic here is [the fact] that "structuralist" methods have never had any rigorous application except to that which, in language, is not, properly speaking, language. Characteristic, too, is [the fact] that one remains silent about the inexistence and even the impossibility of a structuralist *semantics*. Characteristic, finally, is [the fact] that an exactly opposite image of the real relations is systematically presented, while making believe that phonology is linguistics as a function, precisely, of that which, in it, is almost not pertinent for genuine linguistics, but at the very most for a semiotics in the most abstract sense, and correlatively, while conjuring away that which, in a genuine linguistics, is forever irreducible to "structure," namely, the essence of tongue, namely, again, its relation to signification.

When phonology sifts out the conditions for there to be a *seme*, while working at the most reduced level possible, that of the abstract materiality of language, it aims at sifting out the laws that ensure the adequate perception of language, which therefore *suppresses* equivocality and ambiguity. For there to be a *seme*, *all* uncertainty about the material-abstract being-thus of connected speech has to be eliminated,

abolished. Yet it is the strict opposite that it true, when one passes to the semantic level: there is a *semanteme*, there is a *tongue* only inasmuch as tongue is opposed to the *code*, only insofar as there is something other than univocality. It is not only that “equivocality,” “ambiguity”—in short, polysemy in the broadest sense—are ineliminable therefrom; they are not defects or scoria; they are positively constitutive of tongue as tongue. In them, the mystery of the twofold function of tongue (as setting [*milieu*] or element both of the imaginary and of the rational, of poetry and of truth, as well as—this is not the same articulation—of the subject and of the real) is instrumented, embodied, and, I dare say, partially cleared up. For, polysemy is not only the blood of poetry¹⁶ but also what renders possible the presence within language of true, that is to say, nonalgorithmic significations, that is to say, ones that always refer to something else, starting from something. It is in and through polysemy that meaning can circulate within language. Yet it is also as a function of polysemy that a subject can support and put up with a language. For, polysemy is that which, in language, expresses the impossibility of ever reducing the subject to a Turing machine,¹⁷ “computing computable functions.” It is also what corresponds to the prime world of the subject, to the

¹⁶T/E: Perhaps a reference to [Jean Cocteau](#)’s 1932 oneiric, avant-garde film, [The Blood of a Poet](#), starring [Enrique Riveros](#) and [Lee Miller](#).

¹⁷French Editor: Alan Turing (1912-1954), an English mathematician and logician, creator of the much-talked-about *Turing machines*, which can be considered to be the first computers. [T/E: Castoriadis’s or, more likely, the French Editor’s added umlaut over the “u” in “Turing” has not been retained.]

*unconscious conglomerate*¹⁸ in which language finds one of its origins. In short, tongue has need of monosemy at the phonematic level only in order to be able to instaurate polysemy at the semantic level, the level that is, *par excellence*, its own.

¹⁸T/E: In “The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy,” a 1981 talk first published in French in 1983, Castoriadis explains: “After various terminological peregrinations—cluster [*amas*], conglomerate, and others—for this mode of being, as well as the logico-ontological organization it bears, I have ended up with the term *magma*” ([CL2](#), 367-68).

Self-Organization: From the Physical to the Political*

Gérard Ponthieu: Cornelius Castoriadis came to France at the end of 1945, having left his native Greece, where he was involved in far-left political activity. Founder of the review *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1949, he endeavored from that point onward to analyze the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the Marxist vulgate. Philosopher, psychoanalyst, he has ceaselessly pursued his investigations on what he calls the “domestication of the masses’ autonomous organizations” and on the institution of the social sphere [*le social*], indeed its self-institution. He was also one of the first, around 1947/1948, to formulate the idea of self-management, designated at the time by the phrase *collective self-management of production* and then extended beyond the economic sphere to all domains of social activity.

Whence this first question I posed to Castoriadis: In what way does the term *self-organization*—which has been presented to us as a novelty, at the very least from the scientific angle—in what way does that term differ from and offer something more, and, precisely, something positive, to these conceptions that I wouldn’t dare call *old*, but, well, that have a certain historical date, for example, *self-management*.

Cornelius Castoriadis: The question is rather complex. It first must be asked to what does the term *organization* and

*T/E: [Radio France](#) interview with Gérard Ponthieu, transcribed as “L’auto-organisation, du physique au politique” and published in *Création et désordre. Recherches et pensées contemporaines*, preface Michel Cazenave (Paris: L’Originel/Radio France, 1987), pp. 13-52. Other interviewees: Henri Atlan, Jean-Marie Domenach, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, René Girard, Edgar Morin, Isabelle Stengers, Jean-Claude Tabary, and Francisco Varela. Translated here are pp. 39-46.

self-organization refer when it appears in the works of certain biologists who are pioneers as compared to established or academic biology, like [\[Henri\] Atlan](#) or [\[Francisco\] Varela](#)?¹ It refers to the idea that one cannot see a living organism as a mere mechanical effect of conditions. A living organism self-organizes itself [*s'auto-organise*] in a very deep sense of the term, that is to say, it constitutes an internal unity that itself organizes its world. In still other terms, in this *X* that is the world we would call *external* relative to the organism, the latter samples certain elements, certain perturbations, and in fact elements of *its* own world [*son monde à lui*] by translating them or, still more precisely, by transforming them into events that enter into what henceforth is constituted for it as its own [*propre*] informational system. What is thus sampled in the external world is transformed, cognitively metabolized, and belongs henceforth to the internal organization of this living being; this becomes, for it, *information* in the rigorous sense of the term, and as such, it enters into what can be called *the world*: what makes sense for the living being under consideration, and which is organized according to “classes” of objects, “properties” of these objects, etc.

In order to understand the organism, one must try to situate oneself within its interior, to regard it as something that is *for itself*, that constitutes its world, that fabricates information and elaborates this information in such a way that it might constantly adapt itself, somehow or other, to what

¹T/E: Castoriadis mentions Henri Atlan several times; see: [CL1](#), 241, n. 38; [CL2](#), 157, 400, and 428, n. 11; [CL5](#), 285 and 303 (publication note); [CL6](#), 281 and 365. On Castoriadis's relationship and dialogues with Francisco Varela, see the first note in “Contingency in Human Affairs: Debate with René Girard,” above in the present volume.

happens and pursue this immense, uninterrupted labor—which otherwise is enigmatic and meaningless—that is to continue its life, to continue the life of its species, to continue the life of the biosystem on planet Earth, etc.

Yet, one can also certainly see this organization from an entirely different standpoint. One can see it as the effect of certain deterministic sequencings. In this way of looking at things—which is more classical, more mechanistic, too, and which was basically the way [\[Nobel Prize-winning French biochemist\] Jacques Monod](#), for example, looked at things—one's interest is focused especially on deterministic sequencings, it is thought that one could understand or explain how they lead to the appearance of organized forms, and the self-organization of the living being becomes mere appearance or, at best, epiphenomenon. The two points of view are debatable in the good sense of the term, namely, they call for discussion and can sustain this discussion.

As for me, I think that the self-organization of the living being is not an epiphenomenon but, rather, a central and irreducible fact. With the sudden appearance [*surgissement*] of life on earth, we have a great creation, a self-creation—I'm obviously not talking about a divine creation—self-creation of life once and for all and, next, continued self-creation, coinage of the great initial creation all along what is called *evolution*. Then, we have another great creation, of the same order of importance as to the rupture it creates within Being: the emergence of the human species with its own, singular characteristics. Yet, quite evidently, this self-organization of life is not conscious; it is blind. That is therefore one meaning of self-organization....

G.P.: Does that mean that one can no longer consider as grounded scientific investigations that lay a claim to objectivity?

C.C.: No, they are grounded. But one has to consider such investigations as being essentially *incomplete*. It is much less incomplete in the domain of physics properly speaking, but it nevertheless is so, too. I think that even at the level of inanimate nature, Being manifests itself through a creation, through a perpetual self-creation—no doubt of another type and with an infinitely slower rhythm than the one we note, than I think can be noted, in the emergence of the living being and of its successive forms, which are much slower still than the rhythm of the creation that I think can be noted in the history of human societies. But even there, even in inanimate nature, there is creation, there are ruptures. Being is creation; this is what traditional ontology has always refused to see—and, following it, science, too, which for a large part remains enslaved to traditional metaphysics. Most of the time, scientists profess to scorn philosophy, without realizing that what seems to them commonsense self-evident facts are metaphysical theses of philosophers from 200, 500, or 2,500 years ago.

G.P.: The social individual seems to have a great deal of difficulty situating itself between the automaton and the animal.

C.C.: People are accustomed to thinking in terms of the individual, believing that the individual is something substantial, independent, autarchic. In fact, the individual is a second-order phenomenon, and there are two other elements that are primary, the psyche on the one hand, society on the other. Psyche (let's say, to proceed quickly): the psyche whose in-depth exploration began with Freud and the idea of the Unconscious. The social: the institution of society, and the social imaginary significations it bears and conveys. These two elements, psyche and society, are at once indissociable and mutually irreducible. What we are as *individual* is each

time the result of the process of fabrication of the social individual by the society under consideration, a fabrication starting from the psyche of the newborn. This psyche at the outset is certainly “deficient” in our view, for it does not have language, it does not have articulated thought, etc. But, like the living being and every living being, it, too, has its self-organization. This organization of the initial kernel of the psyche, which subsists in us all until the end of our days, is characterized by the strongest possible self-reference, that is to say, “egocentrism,” limitless narcissism, the nonknowledge (quickly transformed into nonacceptance) of reality, of the existence of the other, of things’ resistance to our wishes and to our desires. That’s the initial state, and in a sense, [that’s what it is] in the externally insurmountable depths of the psyche. It is obvious that a being that would function exclusively in this mode would not survive for long in the real world. Whence a first observation to note: the human species, *qua* biological species, is radically unfit for life. And, as second observation to note: it becomes fit for life only by giving rise [*faire surgir*] at the same time as arose this psyche, with this radical, absolutely limitless, and in a sense untamable imagination, to the social institution that limits this psyche. The social institution—already, the family—subjects the human being to a schooling that obliges it to leave, somehow or other, this monadic world, solely centered on itself, of the initial psyche, and compels it to recognize, to accept, to interiorize the social institution and its parts that are pertinent for its social destiny. This institution obliges it not only to become a social individual in general; it obliges it to become a free man or slave, lord or serf, French or Chinese, man or woman, too, moreover, with the corresponding roles, the objects of desire, and the corresponding needs, the corresponding norms and values, and so on. And what we are,

if we look at ourselves lucidly and sincerely, 99 percent of what we are, is not us. When we truly want to take a good look at our habits, our ideas, the ties in our thought, the ties of our reactions to an everyday or political or intellectual event, we will, if we are sincere, almost always find that it is not from us that that comes, it is not we who have created it.

G.P.: Which says a lot about freedom....

C.C.: Which says a lot about freedom, and which leads us, as a matter of fact, to the problem of self-organization in a more radical sense, namely, that of the autonomy of the subject and the autonomy of society. We have the project of freedom, that is to say, of autonomy. If we want to achieve [*réaliser*] this autonomy, of individuals and of society, we cannot speak simply of self-organization; the term can become misleading. This autonomy would, in order to be achieved, require the transformation, not to say the overturning, of the contemporary technological universe; undoubtedly also, a transformation of the urban system, which has become this inhuman monstrosity with which we are familiar; transformation, too, of education, and then, a question of the transformation (or not) of family relationships. So, to speak of *self-organization* would risk creating the misunderstanding that it would be a matter simply of a rearrangement that leaves intact the most important structures. Therefore, self-management: self-organization: *self-institution*, if we want to realize the autonomy of individuals and of collectivities.

But if, starting from there, one retraces the elapsed history of humanity, one notes that, truly, *all* societies have been self-instituted (and we find again what we were just saying about the self-organization of the living being). For, quite obviously, it's not God who instituted societies, any more than they were simple natural products that would have

grown on the soil as the effect of I don't know what sort of geographical or biological determinism. They therefore have self-instituted themselves and here again, as was being said for the living being, without knowing what they were doing, blindly. But what I call the *self-institution of a new society*, of an autonomous society, is explicit and lucid self-institution. *Lucid* means neither omniscient nor transparent; I'm not referring to a Cartesian type of consciousness, I am referring simply to this lucidity we all endeavor to have—or that we should endeavor to have—when in a truly serious way we want to do things or when we confront a truly serious situation in our lives. And *explicit* signifies that society recognizes, fully for the first time, that it is, itself, the source and the creator of its institutions, of its laws, and that it therefore can change them, upon the condition that it knows why it wants to do so and what it is in the process of doing.

G.P.: Which recognizes that it has a right to depose itself [*un droit d'auto-destitution*], too.

C.C.: Certainly. If you ask me: "What can one do to prevent society from destroying itself or committing suicide (or going 'mad')?", I'll answer you, as I have often done elsewhere: No one can prevent humanity from committing suicide or destroying itself or descending into madness.²

But this explicit self-institution implies, too, that one recognize that the institution of society and the significations it bears and conveys have no source external to society, any more than some guarantee external to society. In other words, there is in this regard no transcendence in relation to society. And this recognition implies that one is cutting off definitively social and political life's relationship to any order of sacredness whatsoever. So long as there is something

²T/E: See, e.g., [CL2](#), 249, [ASA\(RPT\)](#), 134 and 169, and [DR](#), 49.

sacred, the idea that there exists another source, another criterion, and another possible guarantee of social laws survives. One may ask oneself: Why, then, was there, and is there still, something sacred? The answer, briefly speaking, is that the sacred, religion in general, represents the attempt to give the strongest and most all-embracing [*la plus globale*] signification possible to the whole of the world of existent things [*existants*] and to human life. And what not only threatens the signification of human life but, in a sense, has destroyed it already before it begins? It is that at the end of human life there is death. And the source of social heteronomy, if one goes to the bottom of things, has been, until now, the incapacity of humans to accept themselves in their mortality. Knowing that there is nothing else but what we are living here. This may be seen when one tries to understand the roots of the grandeur of ancient Greece: the Greeks were those who knew that there is nothing to hope for elsewhere—whereby they were free to do things here.

G.P.: One cannot fail to contrast you here with the thought of René Girard, right?

C.C.: Contrast me; I'll be the last to object.³

³T/E: Again, see “Contingency in Human Affairs: Debate with René Girard” (first published in 1983), above in the present volume.

Social Imaginary and Scientific Change: Discussion^{*}

Questioner: I would have liked some clarification concerning the connection you establish between ensemblistic-identitary logic and the social imaginary. Do you or do you not consider ensemblistic-identitary logic to be socially constructed?

Cornelius Castoriadis: Ensemblistic-identitary logic is socially constructed. But I think that it encounters something independent of every social construction. The fact is that, whatever its different forms and its limitations in different societies, this logic “works”: these societies survive. In my opinion, this fact shows that what I call *the first natural stratum* includes a dimension that “corresponds” to ensidic [i.e., ensemblistic-identitary] logic or to that which this logic *is suited* [convient]. Certainly, it is taken up again, constructed, by each society in that society’s own way. One may find some archaic tribes whose tongue and mind go no further than “1, 2, 3, 4...many” and we have, at the other end, for example, Nicolas Bourbaki’s *Elements of Mathematics*.¹

^{*}T/E: Discussion following Castoriadis’s May 23, 1985 talk, “Imaginaire social et changement scientifique.” The lecture itself, on “Social Imaginary and Scientific Change,” delivered to the Action Locale Bellevue group, was published in *Sens et place des connaissances dans la société* (Paris: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), pp. 161-78, while a fuller version, first published the next year in [DH](#), has been translated as “The Ontological Import of the History of Science” in [CL2](#). Translated here is the exchange with the Action Locale Bellevue audience, the original transcription of which appeared on pp. 178-83 of *Sens and place*.

¹T/E: Nicolas Bourbaki, *Elements of Mathematics: Theory of Sets* (Paris: Hermann, and Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1968). “Nicolas Bourbaki” is the collective pseudonym for a group of French mathematicians.

The fact that Greco-Western science was able to undergo the development it did is due, in my opinion, to two factors. On the one hand, to this: that one of the central imaginary significations in these societies has become unlimited rational interrogation, in the vastest sense of these terms. But also, on the other hand, it is due to the fact that *what is*, it too includes everywhere “locally” an ensidic dimension. The “scientific revolution” is to be described as the successive creation of new imaginary schemata that allow access to new ensemblizable strata of what is—that *suit* new strata.

Q.: It seems to me that these factors that trigger great social movements and scientific revolutions perhaps depend just as much on materiality as on the imaginary. I also believe that this usage of the expression *social imaginary* can lead to a confusion with other forms of the imaginary with which we are more accustomed: the individual imaginary of revery, of representing things, of calculation, of representation through anticipation.... Can you indicate to us the reasons why you hold to the term *imaginary*?

C.C.: Risks of confusion always exist, and one cannot try to avoid them by creating each time new terms. But the confusion with the notions you mention isn't really to be feared, since in all these cases we are speaking of *imagination*. In the traditional terminology, the imaginary was the *product* (a characterization of the product) of this imagination. I didn't want to invent a completely new word; I have used and I do use the term *imaginary*—radical imaginary, social imaginary—in order to designate the instituting activity of an anonymous collective field, the social-historical field, in which I cannot speak of a “subject.” There is a socialization prior to what we call *the individual*. There is, therefore, a field of creation that socializes the

human being, that makes of this human being a speaking individual capable of living. What am I to say of this field? That it reflects reality? *What* reality? One that is determined by material conditions? But, at best, it is so only in certain, quite trivial aspects. And these material conditions take on each time their importance, the signification that is theirs, only as a function of the institution of society. (What signification does the shortage or abundance of the mineral gold have for an archaic tribe?)

The institution of society and the significations it embodies are a creation—and this creation can be related to no singular person; it can be related only to the existence of a collectivity. This is why I speak of *social* imaginary, because with this term we have understood for a long time in the Western tradition that which deals with creation, the positing of what was not there. Once all that is understood, no confusion is to be feared.

In order for me to be better understood than it seems I have been, let us reconsider the example we all more or less know of the classical Hebrews. Even if one supposes that the creation of Hebrew monotheism is related to the Egyptian monotheism of Akhenaten, I believe that the best way of considering what happened is to see it pretty much as it is told in the Old Testament, obviously while setting aside the intervention of transcendent factors. One Bedouin tribe among others is wandering in the desert—and then “one day,” as one says to children, these people invented a God who is up above and who gives them their laws and promises them a host of things. Quite obviously, every attempt to derive the Pentateuch and its content from any “real” or “rational” conditions whatsoever is doomed to failure. For, for every “explanation”—whether Marxist, Freudian, or otherwise—you will always have the following basic

objection, whose force the men of the “social sciences [*sciences humaines*]” always seem to ignore: Why did that not happen elsewhere in the same way, since the conditions were essentially similar? Whom can you persuade that this enormous difference is due to a “real” epsilon [something negligible or insignificant] present among the Hebrews and absent among all the neighboring Arab tribes? The “real conditions” are nearly the same for dozens of tribes wandering for millennia between Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley. But *a single one* among them invented Moses, the law, and so on.

The same situation holds for ancient Greece. The Mediterranean was full of cities—Phoenician, Etruscan, Italic. Slavery existed everywhere, commerce too. But where were democracy and philosophy? Only in Ionia, in Greece. The Romans are an extraordinary people; they conquered the known world and administrated it marvelously for five centuries; they had a mightily logical imaginary, since they had worked out the richest and finest system of law known to man. Can you cite for me the name of a single Roman mathematician who may be said to have produced one minor, quite secondary result? They were not inferior to the Greeks, whom they beat. But there is no Roman mathematician. The Roman imaginary was not turned toward this form of creation. This shows, moreover, that mathematics is not a question of logic but a question of the “arbitrary” intuition of forms that, after the fact, make sense and come to fit into the already existent system of settled relationships or blow it up so as to constitute another, vaster one. The Greeks had this type of intuition, the Romans didn’t. The French had it and still have it to the highest degree, the Germans too—and some others much less. This is not a matter of some “racial” or even “ethnic” differences—it is a matter of the specificities of each social imaginary, which obviously changes with time. Yet

neither this specificity nor the creations to which it has given rise are reducible to functional factors, and one cannot even see what such a reduction might mean. In what sense, for example, did the “state of the forces of production” favor the development of mathematical genius in Greece between the sixth and third centuries—and put it at a disadvantage at Rome for a thousand years? This kind of research is downright absurd.

Q.: May one not think that the factors distorting scientific research efforts ultimately pertain just as much to rituals, to symbolic objects, as to imaginary representations?

C.C.: But what do the terms *rituals* and *symbolic objects* mean? For there to be a symbol, the imaginary is needed. How can one speak of a symbol if there is no constitutive capacity for the symbol, to see A in non-A? And whence comes *what* is symbolized?

Q.: The symbolic is something that I don’t imagine, that is given to me like language and that makes me imagine.

C.C.: Language is given to you, as an individual. But where does language come from? Is it Prometheus? Is it God? Even the Hebrews knew it: the *capacity* for language was given to Adam, but Adam began by *naming* the animals and the rest: he *invented* their names. But even with you, as an individual, the capacity to receive a language presupposes the imagination. And language presupposes the social imaginary as its source.

It is worth opening a parenthesis here about [Noam] Chomsky. It is certain that there is, genetically—a *priori*, Chomsky says—a capacity for the human being to speak. How far does this capacity go? Chomsky claims that it includes substantive, quite nontrivial elements, which he calls *deep syntactic structures*. Without being able to go here into the details of the discussion, I will say that such a genetic

predetermination could concern, in view of what we know of history, only the ensemblistic-identitary elements (more exactly: those ensemblistic-identitary elements that belong to the intersection of the ensemblistic-identitarian of all cultures). If one goes further, one is obliged to grant that the totality of human history was already contained in the genome of the first humans: for, that would mean either that all the *significations* that were going to emerge in history were already there (slavery, the Hebrew God, the Bolshevik revolution) or—which boils down to the same thing—that they are all strictly deducible from ensemblistic-identitary elements belonging to our “linguistic” genetic inheritance. Yet both these positions are untenable. What can and should be imputed to the genetic patrimony of the human species is obviously the imagination, including the imagination that supports the signitive relation²—therefore, the “symbolic imagination,” the capacity to see in a word the representative of a referent and also, certainly, certain components of animal ensidic logic, more exactly, the debris of this logic (upon which, during the social fabrication of the individual, the latter’s appropriation of socially constructed ensidic logic will lean). Thus, not only would I willingly grant, but my conception requires, that such forms as “Noun/Attribute” (banana good to eat) or “Noun/Transitive Verb/Noun” (René beats Paul) would be possessed genetically. Also they are—with great difficulty, it is true—teachable to chimpanzees. But this leaves aside what is essential in human history—the side whereby this history is precisely not a chimpanzee history. In what sense can a phrase like “I have seated Beauty on my knees, I found her bitter and insulted

²T/E: On the “signitive relation,” see [IIS](#); 245-49, 252-53.

her”³ be inscribed within the genome? What is inscribed within the genome is the capacity, the faculty, the *dunamis*, as Aristotle would say, of poetry—namely, the imagination, folly.

Q.: You have shown, apropos of the Greeks, how the change in political organization could go hand in hand with the end of a prescientific way of thinking. Don’t you think that, in the contemporary period, the relation between these two dimensions might be reversed and that political and social thought today is impregnated—belatedly—more and more with scientific thought?

C.C.: Some major commentaries are to be made, first of all, on the way in which you are formulating the question. One cannot, as you do, posit some kind of “scientific thought” without any interrogation into its foundations and finalities and, especially, into its insertion within society. The contemporary West is dominated by the myth of “rationality.” It really must be seen that the way in which “rationality” is understood today is well and truly a myth—an imaginary signification that, as a first approximation and, I insist on this point, in its social usage today, plays the role of the Hebrews’ Yahweh. Everything happens as if there were the *revelation* that the world is thoroughly [*de part en part*] rational. But no one has found in any desert the tablets of divine origin that guarantee that it’s like that. One has only to look at the history of humanity or the current world situation to be persuaded that what is *is not* thoroughly rational. And the history of humanity does indeed belong to what is.

Now, when you speak of the application of scientific

³T/E: Castoriadis’s paraphrase of a line from Arthur Rimbaud’s Prologue to his *A Season in Hell* (1873) also appears in “The Imaginary: Creation in Social-Historical Domain” (1984), now in [CL2](#), 162.

thought in the political and social domain, I fear that many intermediate stages might have been leapt over and many implicit postulates had been introduced. Is there some “scientific thought”—under the heading wherein physics, for example, corresponds to this term—that concerns the social and political domain? I think not. One can have a quasi-scientific knowledge of certain aspects of social phenomena, but, if such knowledge is not completely trivial, neither is it very interesting. We *cannot* know the truly interesting sides of social and political phenomena scientifically—in the sense that this term has in the domain of the so-called exact sciences.

That said, there are indeed attempts to “apply science to society,” but one must see to what that corresponds. That corresponds precisely to the fact that the dominant imaginary of the age has become the imaginary of rationality, in fact pseudorationality. One must also see its results—in education, for example.

Q.: Isn’t the dominant imaginary in the process of changing? Isn’t there at present an interrogation into scientistic rationalism? Isn’t an echo of your interrogation into the modern social imaginary to be found when people are beginning to speak, like now, of a “return of the subject,” a “return of consciousness,” a “return of the cultural in the economic,” when people are speaking also of the critique of “Eurocentrism,” of “Occidentalism”?

C.C.: There are incontestably some tendencies heading in this direction, but the heavy, massive sociological image is unfortunately the one I have described.

Q.: I would say that you are “holistic” and, from the standpoint of the history of science, quite probably nondiffusionist. I am saying that because you spoke of the Greeks, you have alluded to the Romans; all in all, science

was spread [*se diffuse*] by the Arabs but was taken back up by the Latin West. What commentary would you make about the quite extraordinary development of *technics* in this same world, which in a sense did not accept science? Technics has been developed to a considerable extent in the West, whereas one had to wait centuries for science to take hold. What is the imaginary that develops technics but not science, that is to say, that does not take hold among the Arabs, who spread Greek scientific thought, which could have taken hold there? It took hold only centuries later—whereas a quite major sort of technics was developed.

C.C.: You are right to raise this question and I am not in a position to answer it in a few words. I believe that it must be noted simply that the development of technics and of what we call *science* are in general—and with the exception of the modern period—two rather dissociated processes. This may be seen first in the evolution of primitive and traditional societies: after all, the whole duration of time since “Lucy” (-3,000,000 years) to Miletus (-600) is covered by an immense development of technics and “knowledge [*savoir*]”—without one being able to speak of science, explicit interrogation, attempts to give an account of and a reason for. This may next be seen precisely in the case of Greek Antiquity—where, contrary to Modern Times, the creation and development of scientific knowledge were in no way used to advance technics.

“The History of Knowledge has Grabbed Us By the Scruff of the Neck and Thrown Us into the Middle of the Pacific Ocean of Being While Telling Us: ‘Now, Swim!’”*

Dominique Bouchet: I’d like to ask you what, according to you, is religion’s place in society.

Cornelius Castoriadis: In traditional societies, religion is an absolutely central piece of the overall institution of society; it’s religion that defines, precisely, the magma¹ of imaginary significations that is most important for society.

D.B.: And in modern Western society, what takes the place of the central definition of the imaginary magma once religion no longer holds this place, after what Max Weber calls “the disenchantment of the world” has taken place? In modern society, religion is to be chosen individually and so to

*“L’histoire du savoir nous a pris par la peau du cou et nous a jetés au milieu de l’Océan Pacifique de l’Être en nous disant: ‘Maintenant nagez!’” (“February 18, 1987 interview conducted by Dominique Bouchet”), *Lettre Science Culture*, 28 (October 1987): 1-2. [T/E: The *Lettre Science Culture* was a monthly newsletter published by the [Groupe de Reflexion Inter- et Transdisciplinaire \(GRIT, the Inter- and transdisciplinary reflection group\)](#); the group itself was dissolved in 2009. The interview appeared simultaneously in Danish as “En samtale med Cornelius Castoriadis 18.2.1987” in *Paradigma*, 2:1 (December 1987): 29-34, preceded (pp. 15-28) by a Danish translation of his 1984 English-language talk, “The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain” (now in [CL2](#)).]

¹GRIT note: “Magma: ‘A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations’ ([IIS](#): 343).”

speak *à la carte*, which is radically different from what happened in traditional society, [where] religion, as a linking [*reliant*], was necessarily collective.

C.C.: I believe that there are two states to be distinguished. In the first period of capitalist society, until World War II and a bit afterward, what takes the place of religious significations are the central significations of capitalism itself, and notably the signification of unlimited expansion of rational mastery, a pseudorational mastery, of course, which never truly is a mastery. That is what at once holds society together and coordinates people's actions, gives objectives to what they do, to what they believe is valid, etc. That can take all sorts of forms: the form of an unlimited expansion of knowledge, of technological power, and, of course, of the forces of production, of wealth as Marx had already seen, of perpetual rationalization, etc.

D.B.: Cannot one then speak of a *religion of rationality*?

C.C.: In a sense, yes.... But let's come to the subsequent phase of capitalism—a late one, as could be said in relation to us. This signification is in the process of undergoing a decomposition or, at least, a quite strong attenuation. I think that, at present, it is no longer sufficiently alive, that it is no longer sufficiently cathected [*investie*] by people to allow capitalist society truly to function effectively as such. This is seen in the crisis of motivations, in the transformation, for example, of the big state bureaucrats into wheelerdealers who try to profit from everything. This is seen in the very fact that the activities that bring in the most money are not even productive activities but either speculative activities on the stock market or activities related to stardom or those in the media. All that is at the center, I believe, of

what is called *the crisis of Western society*.²

D.B.: Those examples are related to the mode of capitalist production. Now, the new magma includes something that, as a matter of fact, no longer is directly related to production, to rationality and calculation, as previously was the case.

C.C.: Absolutely!

D.B.: At present, the old magma is rapidly decomposing. A new magma will perhaps be able to exit from this decomposition, but what must be noted, on this matter, are the tendencies heading toward a return of the irrational, toward a return of the religious, such as it was organized in the traditional magma—in the strong sense of the word *tradition*. Can this return of the religious in a traditional direction lean on [*s'appuyer sur*] the way contemporary science is evolving and find a justification therein?

C.C.: No, certainly not. There may be a support [*appui*] in anything whatsoever because people make mistakes and model things according to their desires, their wishes. There is an attempt to see in contemporary science some sorts of support for a religious revival, a mystical revival. There again, a fine distinction must indeed be made because it is obvious that modern science implies a rejection, a critique of traditional positivistic rationalism, a rejection of the images of science one had during the nineteenth century and even up to and during a part of the twentieth, a rejection of the images quite a lot of scientists still have, as witnessed by the survival of this positivistic rationalism in the scientific vulgate. Those sorts of images are today the contrivances of the major sectors of contemporary science.

That, I believe, may lead to what I believe is a new

²T/E: See “The Crisis of Western Societies” (1982), now in [CL4](#).

philosophy. The very idea of “magma” is connected therein with this reality. But then there are people who profit from that in order to rest [*appuyer*] their desires upon the crisis. In their disarray, in their anguish, they aspire to return toward religious forms that, in my opinion, have been historically emptied of their content. One cannot bring a religion back to life with the push of a button. This fallacious utilization of religion began a long time ago. There are important people who have fallen into simple traps: when quantum indeterminacy was established, there were renowned scientists who said: “Right, since it has been shown that there is indeterminism at the inframicroscopic level, nothing forbids us from postulating free will for the human being.” That’s a *non sequitur* (a false implication). For my part, I deeply believe in effectively actual freedom....

D.B.: A sort of responsibility?

C.C.: Not only responsibility, which is a requirement [*exigence*], which leans on a freedom on the part of the human being.

That said, it wouldn’t occur to me to rest the concept of effectively actual freedom on such a fallacious, not to say derisory bit of reasoning, because, after all, if the human being’s acts were determined, such determination would have its seat in the central nervous system. Now, the central nervous system is not a quantum system; it’s a macroscopic system. Consequently, if it were like that, there would have to be some determinism there. Therefore, one can draw nothing from quantum physics and the Heisenberg principle as concerns the human being’s freedom. Such freedom must be, if not grounded, elucidated, have light shed upon it, on the basis of other considerations. That shows how very penetrating and very profound minds have been carried away by their desire to return to some form of belief that satisfies

them. Not to speak of the Islamic countries, for example, where there are phenomena like what we know about in Iran with Khomeini, and so on. I think that, in the so-called Western countries, one cannot expect a revival of the religious phenomenon. And if ever there were to be a revival of the religious phenomenon, it would certainly not be in the form of a resurgence of the religions that have already existed, such as, for example, Christianity.

D.B.: It would be, rather, a flight toward a still more pronounced form of individualism...

C.C.: That is quite possible.

D.B.: This is to say that, instead of using the possibilities for going beyond [*dépassement*] most of the imaginary significations of capitalism into other more conscious significations, one would close consciousness back up while abandoning a large part of our freedom and granting still more autonomy to uncontrollable forms, up to an including language itself: the forms, the signs would themselves follow one after another without human consciousness needing to filter them.

What interests me is to understand how that is possible, when modern thought has as a matter of fact joined in the task of denouncing myth. Scientific thought is antimythical as a matter of principle, but after a while it glimpses that it cannot go beyond the mythical dimension. There is always a myth somewhere in social relations, in relations with the universe. Instead of continuing to denounce the religious content that still remained within science, one has gotten a glimpse that positivistic rationalism looked a lot like the religious way of thinking. Instead of going beyond that, some scientists close back up by refusing to work on the absence of foundations and attempting to combine together the old schemes for shunting away anxiety with this fast-

developing contemporary individualism. Can you explain why the human mind is not, at the present time, up to the task of going beyond this type of problem but prefers to return to traditional patterns? The revival of Liberalism [in the Continental sense of conservative free-market ideology] is another example; it is very easy to show the stupidity of the new Liberalism. Now, the new Liberals are going back to the sources, rereading them in a much more impoverished way than were the sources themselves, whereas the present should be enriching their reading of the past. The traditional Liberals were profound and rich. Similarly, in science there are people who are doing serious work, who can see what remained of religion in science: instead of trying to be creative and push things further in order to try to see how one can open up some windows, to plug a few holes there, and to replace the annihilating and ridiculous side of religious thought, they open again the door to this religious thought.

C.C.: I can't explain it because I believe that we have an irreducible, originary, historical phenomenon. We have the fact that, starting at a certain moment, everything happens as if, at least for the time being, the creativity of the modern world had exhausted itself. That's also the case, in another domain, with so-called *postmodernism*. People can no longer make a new philosophy; therefore, they begin to proclaim the end of philosophy³ and, then, it's their own end. Or else, it's the artists that no longer are capable of creating new works of art; therefore, they lapse into "unprincipled eclecticism," and

³T/E: See "The 'End of Philosophy'?" (1989), now in [CL3](#).

they call that *postmodernism*.⁴ That, too, is what we are witnessing on the political level when it comes to so-called “left-wing” currents or so-called “right-wing” currents. We also have here, more than poverty, the total rigidification of the Left, of subversives of various persuasions, and so on. I have absolutely no interest or foundation to say that it’s definitive or going to go on for an indefinite period of time, but, for the moment, it must really be noted that there is an exhaustion of creativity in the modern world. I wrote, in “Social Transformation and Cultural Creation” [1979, now in [PSW3](#)], that, ultimately, we are still living upon the great creations of the 1900-1930 era, and this is the case in all domains, that is to say, of the true modern era. Bauhaus, the novel, well, [Marcel] Proust, [James] Joyce, [Franz] Kafka, atonal music is from 1906, [Arnold] Schoenberg’s sketches, etc., the physics occurring mainly between 1900 and 1905, [Max] Planck, [Albert] Einstein, 1927-1928, [Werner] Heisenberg, [Erwin] Schrödinger, and [Paul] Dirac. Afterward, there are refinements, additions; there are no great original ideas. On the political plane, of course, it’s the same thing, and in this situation people try to hang onto something. Modern science does indeed demonstrate that it is impossible to cling to the classic rationalist standpoint: some scientists believe that they can make the most unlikely connections—the most ridiculous ones, too, it must be said—between quanta and Buddhism, and things of that kind. Grafted thereon is some sort of deviated, diverted [*détourné*] political

⁴T/E: See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992), now in [CL3](#). Castoriadis supplies no reference for the phrase “unprincipled eclecticism,” but this particular epithet appears several times in Lenin’s “Where to Begin?” (*Iskra*, 4 [May 1901]), which may (or may not) be the direct source for Castoriadis’s quotation.

component: a nostalgia for some precapitalist human attitudes and some precapitalist human ways of living that are, with and without quotation marks, *more authentic*. Yet they are unachievable in this way, and what we have are simply some personal quirks and nothing more.

D.B.: Explain why one cannot lump together [*faire un amalgame*] quantum theory and Buddhism.

C.C.: The fundamental postulate of Buddhism has nothing to with the postulate of Western—and even Greco-Western—physics. The essential will of Buddhism, in the domain of knowledge, is to show that everything we have before us is but the veil of appearances. One persists in showing that, repetitively. One also persists elsewhere, in another way, in repeating that, ultimately, apart from a very limited number of consequences, our thought cannot lead to much (see *koans*, etc.).

Now, the fundamental postulate of the Greco-Western world is not that at all. It is that the phenomenal stratum in itself has a certain coherency and consistency and that, each time one discovers something behind this first phenomenal stratum, one discovers again a coherency and a consistency. What Western physics has brought out since its origins is absolutely not a series of veils of illusions but a series of strata, each one of which has a certain consistency and each one of which is at the same time lacunary, fragmentary, incomplete, and refers back to something other than itself. This is a worldview, demonstrated step by step to have no relation to the Buddhist attitude. It is a worldview that, moreover, goes hand in hand with a practical and pragmatic attitude that, it too, has nothing to do with the Buddhist attitude.

D.B.: One might think that in the Buddhist attitude there is a negation of curiosity.

C.C.: Absolutely.

D.B.: A negation that is to be found again at the point of departure of Judeo-Christian thought in the Tree of Knowledge. But, in Judeo-Christian thought, the Tree of Knowledge is a temptation. That is to say that *that* becomes interesting, that it's ambiguous.

C.C.: Yes, I will say nevertheless that the Hebrew myth of the Tree of Knowledge—though the Hebrews would still be a different story; it's rather the myth of limitation than a myth of disinterest. Therefore, as, moreover, other myths—that of the Tower of Babel or of analogous myths among the Greeks—indicate, there are limits that must not be transgressed. That's the idea. And, indeed, we are in the process of transgressing them; whereby, perhaps in five, ten, twenty, thirty years, there will no longer be either any humanity or no longer any ecosystems, and perhaps even no longer any biosphere, but that's another matter. We are not discussing here the question of whether it would have been preferable to all be Buddhists from the start but about this fact that the Greco-Western way has nothing to do with the Buddhist way, and this for the best and for the worst.

D.B.: We again find this attempt at an amalgamation of different thoughts, different approaches, precisely along the line of writings about the paradigm shifts that have taken place in the sciences (in the work of [\[Ilya\] Prigogine](#), for example).⁵ Given that it has been glimpsed that one must listen to nature, which is to be respected and which should no longer be considered something that would be at our sole disposal, there are numerous intellectuals who are falling into a very pronounced form of relativism, saying that any and

⁵T/E: For Castoriadis's mention of Prigogine, see the note 38 he added in 1984 to "Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation" ([CLI](#), 241).

every type of approach is justifiable. Some claim that, with the crisis of Reason, of Truth—with a capital “R” and a capital “T”—there no longer is any possibility of organizing our forms of knowledge and methods of approach.

C.C.: Here again, this appears to me to be a sort of weakness in the point of view of people who see things like that. The grandeur of the contemporary era is that everything is happening as if the history of knowledge, both positive and philosophical, had grabbed us by the scruff of the neck and thrown us into the middle of the Pacific Ocean of Being while telling us: “Now, Swim!”

So there you have it. There are people who don’t want to swim, who are afraid, and who cling on to—I don’t know what...to their own hair...while trying to say: There’s faith and there’s Zen, there’s this and that. They will drown. If one doesn’t swim, one will drown. As for me, I think that one can swim.

D.B.: Isn’t there, at present in Western society, a tendency precisely not to develop among newcomers—that is to say, from generation to generation—the aptitudes that would allow one to swim? Because, for example, one does not seek to develop creative and social capacities. For, the passive contemplation of televised images, ill-digested and never meditated upon, the cult of seeming and of the instant, the abandonment of adult ideals—all that develops rather a passive personality little inclined to take responsibilities, to defend one’s freedom, to make commitments, to take an interest in public affairs.... What is developed, rather, is confusion, indifference, an inaptitude to work with information, to be creative....

C.C.: Absolutely! That’s an integral part of the crisis of the modern world.

D.B.: These factors that are developing a weak,

incurious, irresponsible, noncreative personality, one characterized by anxiety and flight—is this an attitude connected not with scientific discoveries but with the mode of socialization?

C.C.: It is connected with the crisis of socialization,⁶ the crisis of the traditional mode of family life, the crisis of the traditional school,⁷ the crisis of traditional social communities,⁸ and so on. We are living right in the middle of a general crisis.

D.B.: But the crisis of the modern world began a long time ago.

C.C.: Yes, but not in this form.

D.B.: One can therefore speak of a twofold aspect of the crisis. There is a crisis due to the fact that doubt has seeped in [*s'est instauré*] and because the system is therefore not closed upon itself. One comes to accept one's freedom. Here we have the positive aspect of the crisis. And there is a negative side, which is this anguished refusal that harms social-historical creation and provokes a withdrawal into oneself.

C.C.: Instead of liberating a creation, it nourishes only what I have long called *privatization*, that is to say, withdrawal into oneself, disinvestment from various activities, various human communities, and so on. Here we have a phenomenon of considerable importance.

⁶T/E: See "The Crisis of the Identification Process" (1990), now in [CL4](#).

⁷T/E: See "Family Relationships" and "Education," the fifth and sixth sections of "The Crisis of Modern Society" (1965), now in [PSW3](#).

⁸T/E: Castoriadis spoke of "the dislocation of organic and integrated human communities" in *Modern Capitalism and Revolution* (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#), 276).

Learn to Discern*

Question: Why this demand [for philosophy]? Can one speak, at this moment in time, of a *need for philosophy*? And where does it come from?

Cornelius Castoriadis: Yes, there is a philosophical demand. Recent bookstore successes show this, even if the quality of the published works is open to debate. This is hardly surprising. There is in France a tradition, in particular since 1945, of philosophy-related authors whose works have resonated with the public. But there is especially something else: the disorientation of individuals in Western societies. There no longer is any “guidance,” no more priests and professors to whom one might wish to address oneself, no more knowledge and wisdom [*lumières*] to seek out from political parties or instances of authority toward which people might turn. All that creates a void and liberates an intellectual curiosity. Nonetheless, one cannot explain the present situation negatively, solely by default: the age is anxiety-inducing, therefore questions shoot out from all quarters (political questions, obviously, but also, to give a simple example of the breadth and diversity of the interrogations underway, questions tied to the ravages of technoscience).

All these interrogations are bombarding contemporary man. He reacts most often through flight or willful stupefaction, in front of the television, for example. Yet there is a quite important and growing fringe of the population that is turning toward reflection, that is seeking not dogmas but means that allow it to reflect.

*“Conseils à un débutant: apprendre à discerner” (interview with Nicolas Truong), *Le Monde de l'Éducation, de la culture et de la formation*, 244 (January 1997): 48-49.

To a certain extent, the unequalled success of the book *Sophie's Misfortunes* testifies to...

Q.: Do you mean...*Sophie's World*?¹

C.C.: Here we have an interesting slip of the tongue.... For, it is perhaps nevertheless a matter of that. More seriously, I believe that there is, in a large part of the population, feelings of irritation toward the situation of society, a critical awakening, and a philosophical demand that are a clear sign that French society is alive, in the strong sense of the term.

Q.: By contrast, the philosophical supply is often decried as too simplistic. How is one to respond to this demand without giving up the requisites of philosophy?

C.C.: This question brings us back to two fundamental problems: the philosophical education of the public and education in general. Just a word on the second point: the secondary-school system is drifting dangerously toward "technics." An example: in mathematics, one no longer teaches the proofs of theorems. Theorems are givens, crib notes, results pupils have to believe in in order to do their exercises. That is maddening. For, within secondary education, the interest of mathematics is above all to show what it means to prove something. In philosophy, there is nothing but one sorry year during the last year in high school, whereas it would be appropriate to initiate them during sophomore year; otherwise, such teaching becomes something cosmetic and ornamental. For the general public, I wonder

¹T/E: [*Sophie's Misfortunes*](#) is the English-language title of an 1858 French children's book written by the [*Countess of Ségur*](#). [*Sophie's World*](#) is the English-language title of a 1995 translation of a 1991 philosophical novel about a Norwegian teenager written by [*Jostein Gaarder*](#), which has been translated into approximately five dozen languages, including French in 1995 as [*Le Monde de Sophie*](#).

whether private initiatives should not make up for what is lacking in the matter. The idea would be for five or six philosophers, with a sense not of how to popularize but of how to provide clarity, to find the means to give each week, in the evening, a lecture on philosophy to an interested public against a small financial contribution.

[Q.: What is your advice to a student?]

C.C.: I would advise her first and foremost to read, principally the classics. What comes to mind are Plato's "Socratic" dialogues, which are simple because they have nothing of a technical nature to them and few difficult terms (even the *Meno*). One can read the *Discourse on the Method* by [René] Descartes, [Baruch] Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and his *Tractatus Politicus*, Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, and [Henri] Bergson's *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, and I would also perhaps make reference here to good old [Émile] Bréhier (*Histoire de la philosophie*).²

The key thing, in order to enter into philosophy, is not the method, nor is it the contents, but the acquisition of criteria: discerning what pertains to philosophy and what is just a motley mixture [*mayonnaise*] and imposture. And *that* can be acquired only by rubbing shoulders with the great ones.

²T/E: When looking back on his own "personal itinerary," Castoriadis briefly mentions Bréhier in "Done and To Be Done" (1989), now in *CLS*; see: 19.