

POSTSCRIPT ON INSIGNIFICANCY

INCLUDING

MORE INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS
ON THE RISING TIDE OF INSIGNIFICANCY

FOLLOWED BY

SIX DIALOGUES
FOUR PORTRAITS
and
TWO BOOK REVIEWS

by Cornelius Castoriadis*

translated from the French
and edited anonymously
as a public service

Second Edition

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

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

NOTICE

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Castoriadis, 1 rue de l’Alboni 75016 Paris FRANCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#*A Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology: Autonomy, Critique, Revolution in the Age of Bureaucratic Capitalism* <http://notbored.org/SouBA.pdf> July 2017.

Plus an online video with English-language subtitles

#Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis (outtakes from Chris Marker’s 1989 film *L’Héritage de la chouette* [The Owl’s Legacy]). <http://lsa.umich.edu/modgreek/window-to-greek-culture-history-bio-memoir.html> May 2013.

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N.B.: With the exception of the interviews, years in parentheses generally indicate, here and in footnotes, the first date of publication of a text in English or French, whichever occurred first. See each individual publication note for date of composition.

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

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

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

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.

FT(P&K) *Figures of the Thinkable including Passion and Knowledge*. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: February 2005.

IIS *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Trans. 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.

OPS *On Plato's Statesman*. Trans. 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*

Insignificancy. Followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits, and Two Book Reviews. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. 1st ed. Electronic publication date: March 2011. *Postscript on Insignificancy, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy, followed by Six Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews.* 2nd ed. <http://www.notbored.org/PSRTI.pdf>. Electronic publication date: August 2017.

PSW1 *Political and Social Writings. Volume 1: 1946-1955. From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism.* Trans. 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.* Trans. 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.* Trans. 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>. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: December 4, 2003.

WIF *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination.* Ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997. 507pp.

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

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

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

- CE* *La culture de l'égoïsme.* Avec Christopher Lasch. Traduit de l'anglais par Myrto Gondicas. Postface de Jean-Claude Michéa. Flammarion, Paris, 2012. 105pp.
- CFG1* *Ce qui fait la Grèce.* Tome 1. *D'Homère à Héraclite.* Séminaires 1982-1983. *La Création humaine II.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004. 355pp.
- CFG2* *Ce qui fait la Grèce.* Tome 2. *La Cité et le 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.
- 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.
- DG* *Devant la guerre.* Tome 1: *Les Réalités.* 1^e éd. Paris:

- Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982. 285pp. 2e éd. revue et corrigée, 1983. 317pp.
- DH* *Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe II.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. 460pp.
- 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. 422 pp.
- 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. 578 pp.
- 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. 694 pp.
- 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. 660 pp.
- 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. 638 pp.
- 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.
- FAF* *Fait et à faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe V.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997. 284pp.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- MI* *La Montée de l'insignifiance. Les carrefours du labyrinthe IV.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996. 245pp.
- MM* *Le Monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990. 281pp.
- 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.
- 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.*
- 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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Foreword

With the electronic publication of *Postscript on Insignificancy, Including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy. Followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits, and Two Book Reviews (PSRTI)*, the fourth in a series of Cornelius Castoriadis/Paul Cardan volumes “translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service,” we come to the end of several cycles and can now look forward to commencing new ones. A review of this history as well as a projection of what is to come may serve as a useful introduction to the present volume.

This quite unusual series began in December 2003 with *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep) (RTI(TBS))*, a creative and risky response both to a failure on the part of the Castoriadis heirs and Stanford University Press (SUP) to honor commitments and contracts and to their refusal to bargain in good faith with Castoriadis’s longtime, highly valued translator David Ames Curtis.¹ Proving more effective in encouraging electronic downloads than any translation published during Castoriadis’s lifetime has been able to elicit in sales, *RTI(TBS)* also garnered considerable critical attention—for example, in a long article in a major American academic journal that, by itself alone, probably introduced his work to more people in the English-speaking world than had ever before been exposed to his writings.²

A second tome, *Figures of the Thinkable, Including Passion and Knowledge (FT(P&K))*, which followed in February 2005, finally fulfilled the commitments to Castoriadis that Curtis himself had been unable to respect on account of this still-ongoing labor dispute he nevertheless remains ready to address at any time. That volume relevantly

¹See [“8-Point Agreement Drafted by Zoe Castoriadis and David Ames Curtis”](#) and [“August 5, 2003 Letter to Sparta Castoriadis from David Ames Curtis,”](#) as well as [Castoriadis’s written appreciation of Curtis.](#)

²See [Scott McLemee. “The Strange Afterlife of Cornelius Castoriadis: The Story of a Revered European Thinker, a Literary Legacy, Family Squabbles, and Internet Bootlegging.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50:29 \(March 26, 2004\): A14-16.](#)

included “Passion and Knowledge,” a translation never before published in book form that contains several additional uses of Castoriadis’s “figures of the thinkable” theme left unmentioned in the French Editors’ original volume, *Figures du pensable* (FP). The [FT\(P&K\)](#) Translator’s Foreword also supplied contextual information about that key theme, including examples of other uses of the phrase that had been lost in a 1984 English-language translation of [Les Carrefours du labyrinthe](#) (CL), the first in a series of six volumes of Castoriadis’s collected writings that began in 1978 and that ended posthumously with the publication of FP in 1999.

A remarkable series of events ensued from this nonconformist challenge to a publishing venture gone awry.³ Even before its publication, Castoriadis’s widow and literary heir Zoé had declared that FP would definitely be the last volume in the *Carrefours* series and that no further collections of his nonseminar writings would appear. Two small books (now translated as part of the present tome) had in fact already been published soon after Castoriadis died, but both appeared to be projects initiated outside the small circle of the heirs and the “Association Cornelius Castoriadis” (ACC), the organization the heirs firmly control through absentee proxy votes cast during biennial elections in which the rank-and-file members have no access to their own organization’s membership list.⁴ What seems to have changed their minds was the publication of an Appendix in [RTI\(TBS\)](#) listing “non-*Carrefours* texts considered for possible inclusion,” which announced that “translations of some of these texts may be prepared at a later date for publication in an electronic volume devoted to Castoriadis’s post-S. ou B. [Socialisme ou Barbarie] public interventions.” Faced with

³Before the literary heirs and SUP broke their word and failed to respect signed a contract, Curtis had been able to complete the translation of the first volume in the collection of Castoriadis’s École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales seminars: *On Plato’s Statesman* ([OPS](#), 2002).

⁴These two volumes, *Dialogue* (D) and *Post-Scriptum sur l’insignifiance. Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet* (P-SID) were published by Éditions de l’Aube in 1998. On the ACC’s undemocratic practices, see [this link](#).

the (for them) unsettling prospect of additional Castoriadis texts appearing in book form in English that were still unavailable to French-speaking readers, the heirs and the ACC made a quick about-face. Thus did *Une société à la dérive. Entretiens et débats 1974-1997 (SD)* suddenly appear a mere 15 months after [RTI\(TBS\)](#)'s publication. Indeed, *SD* included many texts listed in that [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix.⁵

Even more unexpected was the quite belated (November 2009) admission by Helen Arnold—the person SUP hired, even though Curtis still has an outstanding contract with that academic press—that she had been wrong all along not to have consulted with Curtis before agreeing to replace him, thereby in effect admitting her role as a scab translator.⁶ Moreover, she denounced in writing SUP's "incompetence and disorganization." Nevertheless, Arnold was unwilling to make any restitution for her self-admittedly unprofessional behavior and instead proceeded to translate another Castoriadis volume for Fordham University Press (FUP), where Helen Tartar, the SUP Editor who refused to honor the contract she had drawn up with Curtis, had migrated after SUP fired her. Like her poorly executed SUP translation of *FP*, Arnold's astoundingly ignorant and incompetent French-to-English translation of *SD* at FUP—full as it is of gross translation errors, misquotations, and inaccurate references—earned the following highly negative appreciation from one longtime Castoriadis translator into a third language: "a probable result will be that a reader relying on this version will blame the author for this sloppiness—and that's the worst thing a translator can perpetrate. One wishes that those who are respons[i]ble will act."

An amusing sideshow was Tartar's February 7, 2010 e-missive to Curtis, sent via the ACC's online discussion list

⁵A full analysis of the overlaps and discrepancies appears in the Foreword to [the online electronic translation of SD](#).

⁶See [Helen Arnold's "Texte provisoire"](#) (in English) and ["Public Statement of Agreement and Resolution: Helen Arnold and David Ames Curtis \(Draft: 28 x 2009\)."](#) which Arnold refused to sign, as well as ["An Open Letter to Helen Arnold: Please Resume Good-Faith Negotiations."](#)

in response to Curtis's detailed criticisms of Arnold's FUP volume:⁷ ["Amazon has been directed to remove and block all \[sic\] posts from you."](#) Of course, Amazon completely ignored such a silly, censorious threat, which nevertheless blackened the previously respected name of that academic publisher.

It was thus within this highly charged context that, in October 2010, a third electronic Castoriadis/Cardan book, *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today* ([ASA\(RPT\)](#)), was translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service.⁸ That new tome, we saw, included translations of *SD* texts forced into the public sphere by [RTI\(TBS\)](#)'s genially menacing Appendix. And, in addition to providing the full version of an interview containing Castoriadis's only discussion in English of Socialisme ou Barbarie (the now-legendary revolutionary group he cofounded in 1946 as a "tendency" within the Trotskyist Fourth International that became an autonomous organization two years later),⁹ [ASA\(RPT\)](#) also included "Revolutionary Perspectives Today," a February 1973 talk, delivered in English to the comrades of S. ou B.'s British sister organization Solidarity that had until then remained in typescript form.

Of more substantive interest than Tartar's idle threat, this series of unauthorized Castoriadis/Cardan translations,

⁷See ["The Astounding Ignorance and Incompetence of 'Translator' Helen Arnold."](#)

⁸See ["Statement of David Ames Curtis concerning the announcement of the PDF electronic publication of Cornelius Castoriadis/Paul Cardan's *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificance, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today*"](#) (October 16, 2010).

⁹This first half of Castoriadis's 1990 interview with *Radical Philosophy*, completely omitted by *SD*'s French Editors and by Arnold, appeared as "Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process: An Introductory Interview" in Part One of [ASA\(RPT\)](#). The second half, "Market, Capitalism, Democracy" appeared in full in Part Two of that same tome, though only partially in both *SD* and Arnold's embarrassing FUP translation.

meticulously prepared and executed by a single “anonymous translator,” has since inspired the creation of a multilingual, international anonymous collective that has undertaken to scan and publish online free of charge as a public service all forty *S. ou B.* issues.¹⁰ And of even greater substantive interest, it has recently been learned through the grapevine—the ACC Council and its Publication Committee (in fact, the same people) hold all their meetings in secret, never announcing beforehand or afterward if, where, and when they have met or what they have discussed—that suddenly, nearly a decade and a half after Castoriadis’s death, his *S. ou B.*-era writings may soon be reprinted. Curtis had been stressing the importance of reissuing those long out-of-print writings ever since the first meeting held in 1998 to consider posthumous publication projects. This possible indication that he might finally have been heard began circulating as a rumor a mere month after the publication of [ASA\(RPT\)](#), whose Translator’s Foreword had criticized once again the lopsidedness of the ACC’s publication plans, skewed as they are toward the academic seminars (and, since the appearance of the [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix, toward some of his later texts) at the expense of his earlier, now often inaccessible writings.¹¹ It would seem that the anonymous translator’s creatively conceived, ongoing contestation of the family’s and the ACC’s publication priorities and decisions has again borne substantial fruit.

¹⁰So far, eight *S. ou B.* issues have appeared online at <http://soubscan.org>. The [ASA\(RPT\)](#) Translator’s Foreword noted that Arnold and her husband Daniel Blanchard had previously sabotaged both “an offer made by the University of Michigan’s Scholarly Publishing Office to scan all *S. ou B.* issues for free and make them available to the public online with no fee” and a project initiated by Curtis to translate selected *S. ou B.* texts into English for a British publisher.

¹¹The Castoriadis literary heirs were criticized in [ASA\(RPT\)](#)’s Translator’s Foreword for having selectively republished texts written especially for the 1970s Éditions 10/18 reprints of his *S. ou B.* writings while failing to make the bulk of those reprints—the actual review articles—available to a contemporary reading public. Some Parisian bookstores even have stocked Curtis’s *Castoriadis Reader* as a way of making at least some of Castoriadis/Cardan’s *S. ou B.* writings available in France.

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Let us recall that “The Rising Tide of Insignificance” is the title Castoriadis gave to the eponymous interview for the fourth volume of the *Carrefours* series, *La Montée de l’insignifiance* (MI, 1996).¹² Along with “A Society Adrift”—the title for a 1993 interview that became the eponymous text for *SD* and *ASA(RPT)*, the French and English tomes the *RTI(TBS)* Appendix conjured into existence—the “rising tide of insignificance” has posthumously become perhaps the most identifiable theme in Castoriadis’s later work. Indeed, it was in this “Rising Tide of Insignificance” interview that Castoriadis, while highlighting the relevance of this theme, briefly summarized its content by alluding to “the burning issues of the day: the decomposition of Western societies, apathy, political cynicism and corruption, the destruction of the environment, the situation of the poor countries of the world.” A very early and consistent critic of Russian “Communism”—which he termed “total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism” to contrast it with the “fragmented bureaucratic capitalism” of the West, of which he was also always a ferocious critic—Castoriadis lamented there that it is precisely those burning issues that today’s contented and uncritical “antitotalitarians . . . pass silently over.”¹³ For him, mere opposition—being “anti-” —was never enough. Instead, he sought to bring out “the positive content of socialism” (later termed the *project of an autonomous society, made up of autonomous individuals*) as the *sine qua non* for understanding, by way of contrast, present-day society, with its inherited and renewed forms of heteronomy, as well as for envisioning and working toward another society, an

¹²This radio interview granted to Olivier Morel, now translated in *RTI(TBS)*, first appeared as “Un monde à venir” (A world to come) in *La République Internationale des Lettres*, 1:4 (June 1994): 4-5.

¹³Michael Scott Christofferson’s *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Movement of the 1970s* (New York and Oxford: Bergham Books, 2004) uncritically lumps Castoriadis in with these “antitotalitarians” in order to score some questionable political points.

autonomous one that posits its own laws, knowing that it is doing so.¹⁴ As noted in [ASA\(RPT\)](#)'s Translator's Foreword:

What mattered for him, in articulating the RTI/ASA theme, was . . . the elucidatory power of the current and continuing conflict between autonomy and heteronomy—the “dual institution,” within modern societies, of the project of autonomy, on the one hand, and the competing capitalist project for the unlimited expansion of (pseudo)rational mastery over nature and humanity, on the other—with the latter project having gained the upper hand in a way that nevertheless was in no way fated and is in no way guaranteed to last. The goal Castoriadis set for himself in analyzing “a society adrift” was to maintain and expand the meaning of a revolutionary orientation while examining the ways in which such a society, which produces irrationality and insignificance, might still face serious challenges, specific to its imaginary institution, and not those theoretical ones tied to Marxism's economic eschatology.

As he explained in *MI's Avertissement* (Notice), dated July 1995, the texts published there, which are “devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics,” include “most of my texts from the past few years” on those topics. Another volume, one dealing instead with “psychoanalysis and philosophy,” would, he promised, follow in a few months.¹⁵

What the [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix revealed and what the heirs' grudging and belated publication of *SD* confirmed, was that Castoriadis had, a year and a half before his death, considerably underestimated the number of his writings,

¹⁴This positive point is forcefully made at the beginning of the second part of “On the Content of Socialism” (1957; now in [PSW2](#)).

¹⁵With an *Avertissement* dated June 1996, the fifth *Carrefours* volume, *Fait et à faire*, was printed in February 1997. The printer's date for *MI* was March 1996.

interviews, and talks on political and social issues that had not yet been gathered into book form. Indeed, in the year preceding his death, Castoriadis had been working closely with Curtis on the projected tables of contents for new volumes, in both French and English, that would have included more social and political texts as well as additional psychoanalytical and philosophical ones.¹⁶ Moreover, the French and English publication histories of Castoriadis's writings have diverged considerably ever since *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy (PPA)* appeared in 1991, and so a number of political and social texts already translated and/or edited by Curtis had been awaiting book publication for a long time.

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With [PSRTI](#), we complete a cycle of three English-language electro-samizdat books devoted to the RTI/ASA theme. Given that the Castoriadis heirs finally relented, publishing *SD* following the felicitous pressure of the [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix, [ASA\(RPT\)](#) generally followed the French Editors' text selections. It simply omitted texts previously published elsewhere in English in book form, provided full versions of texts Castoriadis had composed in English that the French Editors' had abridged, and added "Revolutionary Perspectives Today," which allowed one to hear Castoriadis directly address an audience of British militants. Moreover, inclusion of that "transitional period" text from 1973, which criticized the capitalist assumptions of Marxian economics but also related the limitations of Marxian theory to upheavals in science more generally, made [ASA\(RPT\)](#) a more well-rounded collection overall for English-speaking readers.

And yet, as may now be seen in glancing at the present tome's table of contents, [RTI\(TBS\)](#) and [ASA\(RPT\)](#) had hardly exhausted the available supply of Castoriadis's political and social texts yet to be published in book form. As the Translator's Foreword for the latter tome pointedly noted,

¹⁶This is what, after and on account of his death, became, in the French Editor's hands, *FP* (now translated as [FT\(P&K\)](#)).

“Surprisingly, *SD*’s French Editors completely neglected an additional seven political interviews generally fitting the . . . RTI/ASA theme” that had been listed in the [RTI\(TBS\) Appendix](#). That neglect has now been rectified by the inclusion of all those pieces here.¹⁷

Now, it might be objected that these disparate interviews were not selected for *SD* and not all included in Castoriadis’s projected future volumes for a reason, they being less momentous—or more “occasional”—pieces than other ones and also, at times, somewhat redundant. Yet Castoriadis himself already explained in *MP*’s *Avertissement*:

You will encounter here some repetitions among certain texts. They are inevitable when one has to familiarize different audiences with the author’s presuppositions, which are not obvious to everyone. . . . I hope to count on the reader’s indulgence.

Furthermore, while the Castoriadis heirs have not (yet?) chosen to publish these seven interviews in book form, the two ones conducted by *Le Monde* are now available online to French-speaking readers at <http://www.magmaweb.fr>.¹⁸ So it makes sense for English-speaking readers, too, to have access to those two texts as well as other ones available to French-speaking readers in newspaper and journal archives.

Now, it is not being claimed here that these interviews are among Castoriadis’s absolutely most significant texts in

¹⁷“The Ambiguities of Apoliticism,” “Perish the Church, the State, the Universities, the Media, and the Consensus,” “Giving a Meaning to Our Lives,” “Politics in Crisis,” “A Crisis of the Imaginary?” “The Rebirth of a Democratic Movement,” and “Society Running in Neutral” are the titles we have supplied in translation for these interviews included in Part Two.

¹⁸This website of the French group *Lieux Communs* has, without the Castoriadis heirs’ authorization, posted scanned or transcribed versions of a large number of Castoriadis texts (though not always with the utmost accuracy). Other [PSRTI](#) chapters that have already appeared in French on <http://www.magmaweb.fr> are the Descamps interview, the Lasch discussion, and the final *L’Événement du jeudi* interview; also posted are mp3 files for three additional discussions not transcribed for *Dialogue*.

general or even on the topic of insignificance. But then, Castoriadis never believed in significations being absolute; however far-reaching its import and its scope, meaning is always situated, practiced, pertinent *in relation to* . . . What these and other *PSRTI* chapters offer is *another approach* to his RTI/ASA theme in general as well as to some of the more specific political and social issues he publicly addressed in his later years. And this “other approach” is made possible by our offering texts where Castoriadis approaches such themes and issues in another way—less formal, sometimes less precise, too, but also more engaged in explaining and expounding his basic positions and analyses to a variety of audiences.

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This final Castoriadis/Cardan tome foregrounding “the rising tide of insignificance” begins, quite appropriately, with what has been titled a *postscript* on that very theme. This sort of final “P.S.” from the author—communicated in the form of a November 1996 interview conducted by Daniel Mermet, the host of a *France Inter* radio network alternative call-in program devoted to political and social issues—appeared in book form in August 1998, just eight months after Castoriadis’s death on December 26, 1997. It thus also constitutes his first posthumously published tome. We have translated it here in its entirety as Part One.

In order to provide some context for Castoriadis’s post-S. ou B. political and social writings, Part Two begins retrospectively with a document in English issued following a May 1961 “conference of revolutionary socialists [that] was held in Paris, grouping representatives of ‘Pouvoir Ouvrier’ (France), ‘Unità Proletaria’ (Italy), ‘Socialism Reaffirmed’ (Great Britain), and ‘Pouvoir Ouvrier Belge’ (Belgium),” according to Solidarity’s 1969 Introduction.¹⁹ This is a

¹⁹Solidarity is Socialism Reaffirmed’s revised name, while Pouvoir Ouvrier is the alternate name for the Socialisme ou Barbarie group as well as the title of its monthly newspaper at the time, which offered a less theoretical, more militant-oriented presentation of S. ou B.’s main theses.

collective document, signed neither “Castoriadis” nor “Cardan.” As such, it does not always reflect his views, for example in the surprising statement that “[t]here will be equality of wages and pensions until it proves feasible to abolish money”—whereas, as early as 1957, Castoriadis was clearly explaining that advocacy of “absolute wage equality” did not and could not signify the abolition of all uses of money.²⁰ Yet it also borrows extensively from his writings at the time, as is shown in Translator/Editor (T/E) footnotes. It thus constitutes a fair introduction to his views just as *S. ou B.* was serializing his pivotal text “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (MCR).²¹ MCR’s theses on *depoliticization* and *privatization* form the basis, in social and political analysis, for what would become the RTI/ASA theme—which has also been informed by the group’s later decision to suspend publication of the review²² and his views on the aftermath of the explosion and then subsidence of May ’68 and other movements of the Sixties,²³ as well as by his subsequent reflections on contemporary society that are more explicitly grounded in a philosophical anthropology centered around the creation and destruction of social imaginary significations.

²⁰In “On the Content of Socialism, II” ([PSW2](#), p. 125, slightly correcting now Solidarity’s translation), Castoriadis states: “Many absurdities have been spoken about money and its abolition in a socialist society. It should be clear, however, that the role of money is radically transformed from the moment it no longer can be used as a means of accumulation (no one being able to possess the means of production) or as a means of exerting social pressure (all incomes being equal).” On this issue, see also “Response to Richard Rorty” (1991) and “Market, Capitalism, Democracy” (1990), both in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), pp. 107 and 210ff., respectively.

²¹After considerable internal discussion and dissension within *S. ou B.*, MCR’s first part appeared in the review’s December 1960 issue, while the second part came out in April 1960, a month prior to this international conference. The third and final part was published in December 1961.

²²See the 1967 circular “The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*” ([PSW3](#)).

²³See “The Anticipated Revolution” (1968; now in [ibid.](#)) and “The Movements of the Sixties” (1986; now in [WIF](#)).

Part Two continues with a 1973 interview conducted by fellow former S. ou B. member Christian Descamps for the prestigious semimonthly Parisian literary review *La Quinzaine Littéraire*. Earlier that year, Castoriadis—who had been granted French citizenship in 1970, though merely on a probationary basis for the following two years—had begun reprinting his *S. ou B.* texts under his own name in the Éditions 10/18 series. Though he had already published a few psychoanalytical, philosophical, and scientific texts as “Cornelius Castoriadis” before then,²⁴ the *Quinzaine Littéraire* piece is in fact Castoriadis’s inaugural published interview²⁵ as well as his first chance to speak in his own name about his *S. ou B.* years. “A Thoroughgoing Shakeup of All Forms of Social Life” thus serves a similar purpose here to the roles played by the “introductory interviews” previously published in *CR* and *ASA(RPT)*.²⁶

Part Two immediately switches back, however, to a 1974 “Paul Cardan” text. For, Solidarity had regularly and extensively been translating the writings of “Cardan” since 1960, when this British group was still called Socialism Reaffirmed. “Wot? No Contradictions?” shows Cardan engaging with critics, in particular those who felt uncomfortable with his and Solidarity’s increasing challenges to Marxist dogma. Indeed, in reacting to earlier Cardan pamphlets published by Solidarity, a “Marxist faction” had

²⁴“Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul which has been presented as a Science” (1968), “The Sayable and the Unsayable” (1971), “Modern Science and Philosophical Interrogation” (1973), and “Technique” (1973) were all eventually reprinted in *CL* (1978; English translation, 1984). An excerpted version of “The Question of the History of the Workers’ Movement” (now in *PSW3*)—a text written for another Éditions 10/18 volume (*EMOI*), published the next year—also appeared in 1973, in an issue of *Connexions*.

²⁵Descamps thereby began a personal tradition that continues to this day, as he has since reviewed in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* almost all books that have appeared under Castoriadis’s name, including the posthumous ones.

²⁶“The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into the Water” (1974) and “Autonomy Is an Ongoing Process” (1990), respectively.

left the group just two months after he delivered his 1973 talk, “Revolutionary Perspectives Today,” to Solidarity militants.²⁷

The next piece, a brief Letter to the Editor of *Le Monde* from 1985, shows Castoriadis directly engaged in clarifying his public position concerning a key aspect of the RTI/ASA theme: his contention that modern Western societies are not true democracies (as some “antitotalitarians” would have them be) but “liberal oligarchies” that include some residual freedoms obtained through past struggles and yet are directed by a restricted, self-coopting group of economic, political, social, and cultural powers. Castoriadis was protesting against that newspaper’s misrepresentations of a talk he had delivered, “Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy,” which we already included in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).

Another aspect of Castoriadis’s public persona is showcased in our reprint of the transcription of a 1986 BBC radio discussion led by Michael Ignatieff. Castoriadis is presented there simply as a “psychoanalyst,” while Christopher Lasch is billed as a “cultural critic.” As Lasch was a better-known author in the English-speaking world, the show’s focus was on his book *The Culture of Narcissism*—a topic that still provided Castoriadis ample opportunity to discuss elements of his RTI/ASA theme and relate it to his reflections at the time on social aspects of psychoanalysis.²⁸

“The Ambiguities of Apoliticism”—the first of the seven interviews on political and social matters suggested in the [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix but neglected by *SD*’s French Editors—addresses the issue of the French high-school and college student demonstrations of 1986. These student protests against the neo-Gaullist government’s university

²⁷See [A\[ki\] O\[r\]](#). “Political Consequences of A Philosophical Illusion,” *Solidarity for Workers’ Power*, 7:6 (April 22 1973): 19-20. “Those who left expressed strong disagreement with two pamphlets yet to be published (Cardan’s ‘Revolution Re-affirmed’ and our new pamphlet on Vietnam) and with two older texts (namely ‘History and Revolution’ and ‘Modern Capitalism and Revolution’).”

²⁸See, e.g., “Psychoanalysis and Society I” (1982) and “Psychoanalysis and Society II” (1984), both now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#).

reforms were the biggest since 1968, and perhaps numerically larger than that earlier student rebellion with which S. ou B. remains identified, May '68 student leader Dany Cohn-Bendit having stated that many of his and the other student rebels' ideas were taken from that revolutionary group of which Dany's older brother Gaby was a member. Yet the Paris newspaper *Libération* granted Castoriadis only limited space to talk about this significant, if "ambiguous" event, printing his answers to only a few of the interview questions they posed. As with his analysis of the promises and potential drawbacks of the railway workers' strikes that followed immediately thereafter and of the new working-class organizational form, the *coordinations*, that arose therefrom,²⁹ his take on the 1986 student demonstrations is nuanced, tempering enthusiasm for this counterexample to the waning of political and social conflict, which he had lamented, with a clear-eyed view of how the students have also internalized key aspects of Western society's rising tide of insignificance.

The next chapter, which we have entitled "This Extraordinary Capacity for Self-Organization," allows us to listen to Castoriadis's more extensive intervention on the same topic during a public debate conducted six months after those events. Again, the appreciation is nuanced by his view of the "dual institution of modernity," with its intimate conflict between the project of autonomy, on the one hand, and heteronomy in the form of the capitalist project of unlimited expansion of rational mastery, on the other, which, in modern capitalism, leads to disengagement from the public sphere. Praising the students' organizational creativity and their self-mobilization, Castoriadis also pointedly noted that their demands, by way of contrast, "are of a total insignificance"—an early use of this key term. He also profits from this occasion to polemicize against the inconsistencies of the "republicanism" of "former Leftists or Communists who have converted back to republican or democratic ideals" as well as against analyses, or celebrations, of contemporary "individualism"—which fail to take fully into account the

²⁹See "The Coordinations: A Preface" (1996; in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)).

phenomena of privatization and depoliticization he had been examining since the late 1950s in MCR.

Castoriadis had certainly gained some renown beyond left-wing circles with the publication of his post-Afghanistan-invasion *Libre* article from 1980 about Russian expansionism, which became the book *Devant la guerre* (*DG*, Facing war, 1981). He also began teaching at the prestigious École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales that same year. Reviews of *DG* as well as interviews with or profiles of Castoriadis began appearing more often not only in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* but also in *L'Express*, *Paris Match*, and *Politique Étrangère* (the French equivalents of *Time*, *Life*, and *Foreign Affairs*) as well as in other mass-circulation newspapers and magazines. With regard to his analysis of post-totalitarian, “stratocratic” Russia, it is hard to say who misunderstood him more: the establishment press—which failed to comprehend that Castoriadis saw Russian “Communism” as a particularly virulent form of the system he also opposed in the West—or the established or oppositional Left—which mistakenly believed that Castoriadis had suddenly and inexplicably become a right-wing Cold Warrior at the start of the Reagan-Thatcher years. In any case, both sides ignored the context for *DG*: the fact that, over the previous decade, Castoriadis had finally been able to publish, under his own name in eight Éditions 10/18 volumes, the majority of his S. ou B. writings, which analyze Eastern *and* Western forms of bureaucratic capitalism. In any case, Castoriadis continued to make himself and his writings available to a wide variety of publications.

With Russia on the decline during the second half of the 1980s and on the verge of implosion by 1988, Castoriadis granted an interview to *L'Express*, a newsweekly that had gone from taking mildly left-of-center and anticolonial positions at its inception in the 1950s to becoming a mass-circulation center-right publication.³⁰ Not mincing his

³⁰That same year, he asserted, in a left-libertarian review devoted to opposition movements in Eastern Europe, that Russia was the “prime candidate for a social revolution”; see his interview: “La Russie, premier candidat à la révolution sociale,” *Iztok. Revue libertaire sur les pays de l'Est*, 16 (septembre 1988): 29-34.

words even before the collapse of the “Soviet Union,” he criticized the antitotalitarians head on, connecting their brand of anti-Communism with an ideological revival of “free-market” Liberalism during the Reagan-Thatcher years:

In a well-known swing of the pendulum of History, people are reasoning as if the horrors of the Gulag validated Liberal {i.e., free-marketeer} conservatism: If you try to change something, we are going to sink into totalitarianism—which is a pitiful sophism.

So as to underscore Castoriadis’s relentlessly radical orientation, we translate his full phrase as the title for this second of the seven aforementioned interviews—“Perish the Church, the State, the Universities, the Media, and the Consensus”—whereas *L’Express* primly retained only “Perish the Consensus” in its title. This interview was also an occasion for him to highlight the limitations of a politics based solely on abstract “human rights.” In another articulation of RTI/ASA theme, he stated that a “discourse based on the rights of man or on the ‘democracy’ allegedly achieved here and now masks the black hole at the heart of society, the never named crisis, the ten volcanos upon which we live, the disappearance of the political imagination.”

A brief contribution from the following year, also published in the same newsweekly, is of particularly precious value. As Curtis was preparing *World in Fragments* (*WIF*, a selection of *Carrefours*-series texts) for Stanford University Press in the mid-1990s, SUP Editor Helen Tartar discussed with Castoriadis the possibility of publishing another volume that would bring his analyses of contemporary society up to date. *RTI(TBS)* adopted as its subtitle his proposed title, “The Big Sleep,” in honor of this never-written Castoriadis tome that would have brought the RTI/ASA theme to the fore in book form for an English-speaking audience. We are finally able to present here in translation the April 1989 *L’Express* piece, “The Big Sleep of the Democracies,” where this title first appeared. It is, in fact, one of his most succinct summaries of what was called, in the *RTI(TBS)* Translator’s Foreword, the “figures of contemporary barbarism.”

Castoriadis regularly made himself available for interviews when books of his appeared in print. The willingness on the part of large press outlets to open their columns to his words and ideas afforded Castoriadis an opportunity to express his political and social as well as philosophical views before a broad public audience and to do so in a sometimes more colloquial way than was done in his published writings. Such interviews thus often offer less precise or detailed explanations of his opinions and need not be taken as definitive expressions thereof. Yet they also allow us to listen in on Castoriadis's efforts to get his main points across, answer objections thereto, and expound further on their intricacies and overall import. "Giving a Meaning to Our Lives" is a 1990 interview with *Le Monde*'s Roger-Pol Droit on the occasion of the reprint of the first two volumes in the Éditions 10/18 series³¹ as well as the publication of *Le Monde morcelé* (*MM*), the third volume in the *Carrefours* series. *MM* had begun with a text central to the RTI/ASA theme: his 1989 Boston University lecture that became "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism."³² Indeed, Droit begins his interview by asking Castoriadis to elaborate on the argument he presented in that speech.³³

Four years after the 1986 French student demonstrations, which had testified to an "extraordinary capacity for self-organization" but that had also revealed the persistent pull of political conformism, another set of demonstrations on the part of high-school students broke out in the wake of riots in Vaulx-en-Velin.³⁴ Already in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)'s "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991), we saw

³¹*La Société bureaucratique* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1990).

³²[WIF](#) reprints the subsequent (1991) Melbourne lecture version.

³³Also to be noted is the fact that, a month and a day before publication of this *Le Monde* interview, Castoriadis spoke at a colloquium organized by Droit and sponsored by the latter's newspaper; see "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary" (now in [WIF](#)).

³⁴See n. 1 to "Politics in Crisis" for a brief description of those events.

Castoriadis noting that the French government's response to those riots amounted to little more than "the creation of a few new committees and bureaucratic posts 'to deal with the problem'"—a diagnosis more than confirmed by the failure of successive governments to address problems faced by poor people from immigrant populations and, ultimately, to prevent the French urban youth riots that in 2005 led to the imposition of a three-month state of emergency. In his 1990 interview for *Politis*, an alternative newsweekly of the anti-Stalinist and ecological Left started in 1988, Castoriadis remarks:

The demands of the high-school students are quite reasonable. What is striking is that they in no way challenge the system; with these demands, students are simply asking that it function properly—and that provokes a political crisis. It's absolutely typical that we've reached the point where one has to have the users themselves, the high-school students, rattle the State in order for the State to do its job. That is revelatory of the growing inability of contemporary institutions to face up to the questions that are being posed by social and historical change.

S. ou B. had long argued that (1) bureaucracy is not just "inefficient" but downright *irrational* in its operation, because it plans for others in their absence; and (2) those subject to bureaucratic institutions must participate to fill these gaps in the bureaucratic plan. With the generalization of bureaucracy from the workplace to all social spheres, this dynamic spreads throughout social and political relations in modern-capitalist society, it was argued as early as MCR. The "rising tide" of which Castoriadis spoke is thus also expressed in the insignificance of bureaucratic governmental responses and in the (at least provisional) inability of people at the base to offer a lasting alternative that would break the syndrome of exclusion-participation-exclusion. "Politics" is indeed "in crisis," as the title of this third of the seven interviews asserts.

Also in crisis is the contemporary "imaginary" of Western societies—which, even when there is a temporary

break in the “waning of social and political conflict,”³⁵ find themselves incapable of imagining and implementing alternative outcomes to the pressing problems they face. Just as he had made himself available to the organ of a reformist trade union, the CFDT, in the 1970s, Castoriadis was willing to be interviewed in 1991 by *Vendredi*, the official organ of the main reformist political party on the French Left. While he avoids waxing ironic there about French Socialist Party leaders being like opera singers who do not leave the stage but just sing interminably about their impending exit (as he does in the next chapter), Castoriadis does briefly outline in this fourth interview listed in the [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix what a true revolutionizing of today’s social and political units would involve while also telling his interviewer what “the invention of such forms as well as their implementation presupposes” for one to be able to put an end to this crisis of the imaginary: “a renewal of people’s deep-seated attitudes, a rebirth of the passion for democracy.” And he also renews here his ties with the work of S. ou B., which was subtitled an “organ of critique and revolutionary orientation.” “Intellectuals,” he says in answer to *Vendredi*’s final question,³⁶ must engage in “uncompromising criticism of existing realities and elucidation of the possibilities for transforming them.”

Just as the “Soviet Union” was definitively splitting up in December 1991, Droit gave Castoriadis an opportunity to express his views at length in a wide-ranging *Le Monde* interview, the sixth of the seven listed in the [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix. Many elements of the RTI/ASA theme are touched on there, along with his work in psychoanalysis and philosophy. He addresses further the nature of the “crisis” evoked in previous interviews and makes clear again the need for creative invention to counter the current failure of the political imagination not only in the West but also in the former satellite countries of the East, which had ingeniously

³⁵Variations on this phrase appear ten times in the present tome.

³⁶Castoriadis himself disliked the term *intellectual*. See his 1987 essay “Intellectuals and History” (now in *PPA*).

freed themselves from the Russian yoke two years earlier only to engage in an effort to copy Western consumer society and parliamentary “democracy”: “The rebirth of a democratic movement will have to go by way of the creation of new forms of political organization,” he states. We also find here another instance of Castoriadis’s examination of the figures of “the thinkable,” which provided the title and theme for [FT\(P&K\)](#): “Philosophy has to think all that is thinkable—in other words, everything that is given in our experience and not only the fact that it is given but *how* it is given.”

We have included, before the seventh and final interview listed in the [RTI\(TBS\)](#) Appendix, a previously untranslated and untitled Castoriadis text we call “The ‘End of History’?” in homage to his earlier response, to Richard Rorty, “The ‘End of Philosophy’?” (now in *PPA*). In the Summer 1989 issue of an American neoconservative publication, *The National Interest*, U.S. State Department official Francis Fukuyama wrote an essay entitled [“The End of History?”](#) One might admire Fukuyama’s audacity in staking his intellectual reputation on his projection of a post-Communist future several months before the collapse of the Berlin Wall and in the absence of empirical data about what might come thereafter. Even more striking, however, is that, in May of the *previous* year (see “Perish . . .”), Castoriadis had already anticipated just such an illegitimate projection:

[W]hat sends shivers down one’s spine is seeing very intelligent, highly informed people talking as if we had reached the end of History, as if it had become indecent, criminal even, to have a political project.

Castoriadis was quite familiar with, and critical of, the Hegelian thesis of an “end of history.” Indeed, even before he left Greece in December 1945, he had been organizing seminars on Kant and Hegel with fellow students. And his critique of the (negative) influence of Hegel on Marx’s philosophical conception of history already figured largely in his final, five-part *S. ou B.* essay, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (MRT, 1964-1965), which became the first half of his *magnum opus*, [The Imaginary Institution of](#)

Society (IIS, 1975). Thus, when Castoriadis was given an opportunity to discuss publicly Fukuyama's neo-Kojévian version of that thesis at a May 1991 "Rencontres de Pétrarque" colloquium in Montpellier, France,³⁷ he was quite prepared to address this issue head-on. Of particular interest to the RTI/ASA theme is Castoriadis's argument that Fukuyama had abusively extrapolated, as an ultimate world-historical outcome, what is simply present-day society's tendency toward a waning of social and political conflict.

The title of the last of the seven abovementioned interviews, "Society Running in Neutral," provides one more way of articulating the *futility* contained in the "rising tide of insignificance."³⁸ This interview granted to *L'Événement du jeudi*, a somewhat left-of-center newsweekly, also afforded Castoriadis an opportunity, in answer to a question about Luc Ferry, to address some of the aesthetic issues that relate to the RTI/ASA theme and to his periodizations of modernity, which he roughly dates as extending from 1750 to 1950, and postmodernity, whose "era of generalized conformism" in art as well as in politics is said to have started around 1950.

The theme of *crisis* returns again in "The Crisis of Marxism and the Crisis of Politics." Here, Castoriadis relates his critique of Marxism, developed over many years in such texts as MRT/*IIS*, to the crisis of the political imagination in

³⁷The three questions addressed at this 1991 colloquium were: "Democracy as Violence?" "The End of History?" and "Another Europe to the East?" But with Fukuyama's expansion of his now famous essay into a book published the following year in both English and French (*The End of History and the Last Man*), editor Jean-Luc Boilleau entitled the acts of this Petrarch colloquium simply *De la fin de l'histoire* (On the end of history), with the publisher, Éditions du Félin, marketing that 1992 volume as "Responses to Fukuyama." Other participants were: Kristian Feigelson, Marc Ferro, Pierre Grimal, Michel Henry, Marie-Claude Maurel, Jean-Claude Michéa, Olivier Mongin, Edgar Morin, Dominique Rousseau, Jacques Rupnik, Emmanuel Terray, Michel Valensi, and Emmanuel Wallon.

³⁸Unlike *insignificance*, which contains only the idea of a lack of meaning or signification, *insignificancy*, according to the OED, has also included the idea of *futility*. This is why we have always preferred the latter as the translation of the French word "*insignifiance*," which conveys both ideas.

contemporary societies. Completed in Frankfurt on October 15, 1990, this text was first published in the Spring 1992 issue of the American democratic-socialist and anti-Stalinist journal *Dissent*. Interestingly, *Dissent* had explained, in its Winter 1954 inaugural issue, that it was dissenting “from the bleak atmosphere of conformism that pervades the political and intellectual life of the United States”—this being precisely the term Castoriadis would later apply to all Western countries in his diagnosis of the postmodern condition.³⁹ We have used the version Castoriadis gave to Documenta IX, the 1992 edition of an international arts fair held once every five years in Kassel, Germany. In the last paragraph, he writes:

So we can do nothing else at present but maintain our project of a transformation that will lead to a free society made up of free individuals, in the belief that our critical activity and the exemplification in our acts of the values we stand for will contribute to a revival of an emancipatory movement, one far more lucid and self-reflective than any {one} previously {existing}.

Thus, following talk of “uncompromising criticism . . . and elucidation of . . . possibilities,” he offers us another glimpse into his motivations for pursuing the project of individual and collective autonomy after the suspension of publication of *S. ou B.* and in the face of a “rising tide of insignificance.”⁴⁰

We next present an extraordinary find: an obscure Castoriadis text from 1993, previously untitled, which we call “If There Is to Be a Democratic Europe.” His answers to a

³⁹Jean-François Lyotard, author of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), was a *S. ou B.* member until 1963, when he and other members who could not accept Castoriadis’s increasingly pointed criticisms on Marxism left the group. See, in [PSW3](#), the translation of Castoriadis’s 1974 Postface to “Recommencing the Revolution.”

⁴⁰Castoriadis ends “Suspension” ([ibid.](#), 121) by explaining “We would be the last to fail to appreciate the risks immanent in a theoretical enterprise separated from real activity” yet promises that “we will continue, each in our own area, to reflect and to act in terms of the certainties and the interrogations that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* has permitted us to sift out.”

questionnaire prepared for a Catalan book about potential contributions of stateless nations to an increasingly integrated Europe were apparently written in French and translated into Catalan, English, German, and Spanish for that volume.⁴¹ Castoriadis evidently put much thought into the composition of this until recently forgotten text, as he wrote considerably more extensive responses than a number of the other invited authors had done. He himself is introduced here only as a “Philosopher and Psychoanalyst.” But his wide-ranging examination of the cultural, linguistic, historical, and political heritage of “Europe”⁴² also takes this solicitation as a fresh occasion to present the direct-democratic views he had long been developing and advocating in *S. ou B.*, especially since “On the Content of Socialism, II” (CS II). As in that key 1957 text, Castoriadis is careful here not to leave the impression that he is presenting in advance some kind of blueprint unrelated to what will be created in the actual struggle to institute a “democratic federation of really self-governed political units” in Europe: “This outline is to be taken only as an illustration of one possible concrete manifestation of democratic principles.”⁴³

We close Part Two with one last interview—the ninth when we also count the Descamps interview from 1973. “I Am a Revolutionary” was, in fact, Castoriadis’s final

⁴¹We have retranslated the ostensibly original French for the present tome.

⁴²He expounds and expands here on his previous formulations about the character of “Europe”: “Europe has ceased for a long time to be a geographical or ethnic entity. The word *Europe* connotes the state of a society in which people and communities are free in their thinking and in the positing of their laws and are capable of limiting themselves on their own [*s’auto-limiter*] in and through this freedom.”

⁴³In what appears to be a deliberate effort to ignore the fact that CS II is not to be read as a “blueprint,” see the February 18, 2011 posting on the Socialist Party of Great Britain’s Official Blog, “[Vindicated: Solidarity’s ‘market socialism.’](#)” CS II, however, clearly stated that “[t]here is no question for us here of trying to draw up ‘statutes,’ This endeavor is not ‘utopian,’ for it is but the elaboration and extrapolation of the historical creations of the working class” (*PSW2*, pp. 95 and 97).

interview, published only posthumously in *L'Événement du jeudi*, which had asked him to speak at length about the “sclerosis of all Western societies.” It is controversial in that his widow immediately objected in print to its allegedly unauthorized publication—without her providing, however, any specifics, then or later, about possible inaccuracies.⁴⁴ Indeed, some passages may raise eyebrows, so the entire interview is to be read critically and not as a definitive statement by Castoriadis on any subject. Mermet, however, had already quoted two passages in 1998, both of which were retained nearly a decade later in *P-SID*, the second edition of his short interview volume. Moreover, [this interview has been reprinted online](#) and thus is readily available to the French-speaking public. We therefore translate it here for English-speaking readers. However, we will gladly make any specific alterations Castoriadis’s widow or others may suggest, based on concrete, verifiable information she or they might provide.

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Part Three begins with Castoriadis pursuing even further the RTI/ASA theme already extensively explored in Parts One and Two. He does so in dialogue with his friend Octavio Paz, the Surrealist poet and Nobel Prize winner. Conceding the existence of exceptions to his dim view of contemporary art and artists, Castoriadis had averred in “I Am a Revolutionary” that “[t]here are still some very good novelists, like Milan Kundera” (another friend of his), “and some very good poets, like Octavio Paz in Mexico.”⁴⁵ Yet he

⁴⁴See “Zoé Castoriadis nous écrit,” *L'Événement du jeudi*, 691 (January 29-February 4, 1998): 83.

⁴⁵Earlier, in “Society Running in Neutral” (1992), Castoriadis set Paz at the end of a highly distinguished line of modern artists: “André Breton, Max Ernst, Ezra Pound, and, today, Octavio Paz are infinitely more learned about our cultural tradition and nourished by it than *pompier* painters or members of the Académie Française.” Two years before that interview, Paz had invited Castoriadis to Mexico to reflect on “the experience of freedom” in the twentieth century along with many other

takes Paz, an anti-Stalinist from the 1950s onward, seriously on political matters, too, as they together examine here the convergences and divergences between their respective diagnoses—Castoriadis’s “rising tide of insignificance” and Paz’s “complacent nihilism of modern society”—as well as the overlaps and variances between Castoriadis’s conception of an “autonomous individual” in an “autonomous society” and Paz’s notion of “personhood” as the foundation for a “new ethics” and a “new politics.”

When Castoriadis affirmed, in “Rebirth,” that the exigency of philosophy is to “think all that is thinkable . . . everything that is given in our experience and not only the fact that it is given but *how* it is given,” he went on to list “four domains for this experience”: “the mathematical-logical universe; the physical world; life; and the human, psychical, and social-historical domain, which is constituted by the emergence of the social imaginary and the psychical imagination.” Those ontological domains provide the topics for the four ensuing radio “dialogues”—with a psychoanalyst (Jean-Luc Donnet), a biologist (Francisco Varela), a mathematician (Alain Connes) who also reflects on physics, and a historian (Robert Legros). Three of these transcribed discussions first appeared in *Dialogue* and were reprinted in *P-SID*. To them and the one with Paz has been added one last radio talk, drawn from the Appendix to the acts of a 2007 colloquium devoted to Castoriadis’s work.

While these last four discussions, in widening the topics of conversation, touch only intermittently on the RTI/ASA theme, they continue and deepen another feature of the present tome: Castoriadis’s willingness to engage in rather more informal and colloquial discussions in order to bring out his multifaceted views and to allow those views to be questioned and challenged in the public sphere. Of course,

thinkers (Leszek Kolakowski, Czeslaw Milosz, Jorge Semprún, Hugh Thomas, Daniel Bell, Agnes Heller, Cornelius Castoriadis, Irving Howe, Adam Michnick, Juan Nuño, Ferenc Fehér, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Jean-François Revel, Tatiana Tolstaya, Lucio Colletti, Michael Ignatieff, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Edwards, Carlos Franqui, Alejandro Rossi, José Guilherme Merquior).

other interviews and discussions have appeared in previous Castoriadis tomes, so this is not the reader's first opportunity to witness him engaging in conversations and confrontations; she has already been able to read not just Castoriadis the writer of militant or philosophical texts and the magisterial seminar teacher. But the five dialogues translated here, following after the numerous occasional pieces from the first two parts of the present tome, afford a broader view of a Castoriadis who opened up to others in sustained encounters that were less programed in advance and more subject to the risks and perils of being confronted head-on by contradictory points of view.

One might have wished that the unnamed French Editors had been more careful in their references and less egregious in their errors, which we have had to correct on occasion. We have translated *Dialogue's* brief apparatus mostly as is, merely furnishing references to English-language translations where appropriate—even though one might have wished for additional information about Castoriadis's interlocutors. (Connes, for instance, is the 1982 recipient of the Fields Medal, the most prestigious award in the field of mathematics.) Nevertheless, these “dialogues” are a precious complement to the preceding chapters for the reasons stated above. Inclusion of the first four of them in a second French edition that combined *P-SI* with *Dialogue* justifies their selection here. For, whenever possible, we establish lines of continuity between Castoriadis publications in French and their English-language counterparts in electronic book form.

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Part Four reveals an even more interesting aspect of Castoriadis's *oeuvre*, once again related to this *other approach* to his writings spoken of earlier. This extremely conscientious writer was always careful to date his writings and reprint them verbatim, with the sole exception (beyond the correction of *lapsus calami*) of making clearly-marked and dated additions in introductions, notes, and postfaces. Nevertheless, his constant references to his own previous texts, made much more frequently than references to the

writings of others, have left some with the impression of an extremely self-involved author intensely intent on denying influences and antecedents—even though this self-referential practice also helps the interested reader to check back more easily on his prior formulations and arguments, so that she can make her own judgments as to how his thinking had evolved. Castoriadis was an often highly polemical writer, too, one who could at times be devastatingly critical of others. He nonetheless endeavored time and again to revise in very explicit and public ways his own previous positions, regularly taking himself to task, too, regarding past formulations. And yet, beyond some ritual encomia for writers and artists he admired (e.g., Kundera and Paz, just mentioned), one does not find in Castoriadis’s work many acknowledgments of those instances where key ideas championed by him and/or his group had originated with other thinkers.⁴⁶

The four “portraits” included in this fourth part may go some way toward dispelling negative impressions drawn from this mixed state of affairs. Focused much more on promulgating new conceptions of politics and philosophy that would revolutionize existing society and overthrow “inherited thought” than on noting authors he read who had, through his reflections on them, helped to occasion those new conceptions, Castoriadis did indeed devote little time and thought to recording such attributions of influence. As he declared somewhat flippantly in his appreciation of the late C.L.R. James: “I do not believe in private property in any field (except for toothbrushes) and especially not in the field of ideas.” And yet, when given the opportunity, as in this talk on James and in his obituary portraits of Benno Sternberg-Sarel, Irving Howe, and “Raoul” (Claude Bernard), he proved not only most generous but also quite pertinently revealing regarding his relationships with those figures.

The subjects of all four portraits have, let us note, a Trotskyist past. Sarel was an “underground militant during the German Occupation [who] drew close to Trotskyism” before

⁴⁶One major exception is the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International (CC/AI) Interview: <http://www.agorainternational.org/enccaiint.pdf>.

joining *S. ou B.*, Castoriadis reports. Though the phrasing is a bit inconclusive, Castoriadis seems to be attributing to Sarel a significant role in forging the participation-exclusion dynamic that—after key initial formulations, in the inaugural issue of its review, about workers’ management being the ultimate response to bureaucratic capitalism—*S. ou B.* saw as constitutive of bureaucratic capitalism, both East and West:

[Sarel] formulated clearly the antinomy that runs through the bureaucratic system, not only inasmuch as, in its official ideology and rhetoric, it has to claim to represent a proletariat it oppresses and a socialism it flouts, but, at a still deeper level, inasmuch as it cannot make the production process operate in its concrete everyday course without trying to rely on the managerial capacities and tendencies of the proletariat, capacities and tendencies it is thus obliged both to promote and to combat. This analysis—the essential features of which, let us repeat, had been formulated and published as early as 1950-1951—was amply confirmed by the events of 1953, while those of 1956 showed that its import went far beyond East Germany and that its content concerns all countries subject to the power of the bureaucracy.

A draft version of *La classe ouvrière d’Allemagne orientale*—the book that eventually resulted from these formulations first published in *S. ou B.*—was featured by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a *L’Express* article written in 1955, the same year Merleau-Ponty published *Adventures of the Dialectic*, the book that marked his break with fellow *Les Temps Modernes* editor Jean-Paul Sartre. It was at the very end of *Adventures* that Merleau-Ponty referred to Castoriadis as an unnamed “Marxist friend” who “says that Bolshevism has already ruined the revolution and that it must be replaced

with the masses' unpredictable ingenuity."⁴⁷ An amusing anecdote, the posthumous tribute to Sarel appeared under the mysterious signature "C. C." in a 1971 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, a review that had always deliberately avoided direct mention of Castoriadis and S. ou B.⁴⁸ It has been quipped that someone slipped in this obscure designation at a time when Sartre was already going blind.

During his American sojourn, Trinidadian novelist, cricket expert, and revolutionary leader C.L.R. James, who had participated in discussions with Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1938, met Trotsky's secretary, Raya Dunayevskaya, in James P. Cannon's Socialist Workers Party, where they created the Johnson-Forest Tendency along with Grace Lee (later Boggs).⁴⁹ That Tendency—whose positions closely resembled those of the Chaulieu-Montal (Castoriadis/Claude Lefort) Tendency within the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI), France's branch of the Trotskyist Fourth International—went over to Max Shachtman's

⁴⁷Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 232. In "Proletarian Leadership" (1952; now in [PSWI](#)), Castoriadis had asserted that "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."

⁴⁸Since fellow S. ou B. member Claude Lefort was also Merleau-Ponty's protégé at *Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre did mention Lefort, but not the S. ou B. group, by name in his long polemic, "The Communists and the Peace." Sartre was later heard to say, "Castoriadis was right, but at the wrong time," to which Castoriadis replied that Sartre the fellow traveler had the honor of being wrong at the right time.

⁴⁹In the James portrait and in the [CC/AI Interview](#), Castoriadis neglects to mention the Johnson-Forest Tendency's initial stay within the SWP. Less charitable in this [Interview](#), he waxes ironic there about the Tendency's convoluted reasons for its comings and goings: "That's as good as the mystery of the Holy Trinity!" On Boggs, whom Castoriadis remembers fondly in his James portrait and with whom he maintained good relations until his death, see her autobiography *Living for Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), esp. pp. 65, 110, and 276n26.

Workers Party but then returned to the SWP before creating an independent group, Correspondence, two years after the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency became *S. ou B.* when it broke with the PCI in 1948. Castoriadis's 1992 talk on James is chock full of valuable historical information about the nature and content of these exchanges between the two like-minded tendencies/groups as well as about the continuing collaboration between James and Castoriadis in the 1950s, up until their final falling out in 1958. Yet, much historical work remains to be done about this collaboration. We get a brief glimpse of their close and fertile relations in a 1957 letter from Castoriadis to James, reprinted as an annex to this portrait. It is hoped that, in the future, the Literary Executor of The C. L. R. James Estate, Robert A. Hill, will release more of this correspondence. Additional documentation should confirm in greater depth and detail the debt each of these revolutionary thinkers owes to the other, which Castoriadis repeatedly evokes in his James portrait.⁵⁰

Castoriadis's 1993 obituary portrait of Howe pertains more to perceived shared affinities between those two major figures than to any real influences, reciprocal or otherwise, since his contacts with Howe came rather late in their lives and were mostly centered around editorial matters. Howe had been a member of the Young People's Socialist League before joining the Workers Party and writing for its magazine, *New International*. He, too, broke with Trotskyism (the Independent Socialist League, successor of the Workers Party)—in his case in 1952, two years after James's break and four years after Castoriadis's.⁵¹ In 1979, Howe's magazine *Dissent* had printed a "somewhat abridged" translation of a 1977 Castoriadis piece about the French Communist Party,

⁵⁰In particular, Castoriadis credits contacts with James for providing some of the ideas behind the articles that appeared in *S. ou B.*'s twentieth issue (December 1956), which was devoted to the Hungarian Revolution.

⁵¹Earlier, Howe had polemicized against James in "[On Comrade Johnson's American Resolution—Or Soviets In The Sky.](#)" *Bulletin of the Workers Party*, 1:9 (March 28, 1946): 25-32, in response to James's article, "[The Task Of Building the American Bolshevik Party.](#)" *ibid.*: 11-24.

with a strange title added by the editors.⁵² Yet Howe later rejected another Castoriadis essay, finding it too “highbrow” for *Dissent*’s readership, his refusal indicating that he viewed Castoriadis’s work as belonging to the trendy-jargony world of many French intellectuals, of which Castoriadis himself was nevertheless an equally strong critic. It was through Paz that they finally met in Mexico in 1990 and discovered commonalities of history and outlook, especially around elements of the RTI/ASA theme, which Howe found sympathetically close to his own views. For, neither one took the occasion of the then-impending collapse of the Russian empire as an excuse to wed antitotalitarianism with a revival of free-marketeer dogma. As with Tartar’s book offer a few years later, Howe encouraged Castoriadis to write down his ideas for publication. “The Crisis of Marxism and the Crisis of Politics,” included here in Part Two, was completed in October 1990, just a month after the Paz event, and it eventually appeared in *Dissent* a year and a half later.

The final portrait—of the French Trotskyist Claude Bernard, known as “Raoul”—closes out Part Four. Less an acknowledgment of influences, one way or the other, what Castoriadis’s text provides is an account of an unsuccessful meeting of minds and aims. Raoul was reportedly quite sympathetic to the ideas of the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency but could not quite bring himself to leave the Trotskyist movement. Castoriadis provides valuable information about several missed opportunities for post-Trotskyist collaboration between S. ou B. and the group of comrades around Raoul. We receive here a glimpse of Castoriadis’s ongoing efforts to open up his group to outside influences and to build a broader organization and movement for the overthrow of bureaucratic-capitalist society. The image thus conveyed runs directly counter to a view of Castoriadis and his group as sectarian dogmatists completely and deliberately isolated from surrounding political and intellectual milieux.

⁵²*Dissent* editors can leave a translator with the impression that they are more interested in making an author’s words fit into the journal’s mold than they are in exposing their readers to those author’s actual words.

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Part Five offers a last, and dual, prospect on Castoriadis's lifelong efforts to reach out to, and communicate with, a broad range of people and ideas. In *RTI(TBS)*, we included "The Coordinations," a 1996 preface Castoriadis composed for a study of the new working-class organizational forms created during mass strikes that took place in France. This was, along with a contribution to a 1983 book of images published for Polish artists in exile following the December 1981 crackdown on Solidarnosc,⁵³ the only known preface he composed. It turns out that Castoriadis also wrote two book reviews during his lifetime, which we have included here.

The first book review appeared in the inaugural issue of *Le Débat*, which was created in May 1980 by the historian Pierre Nora along with Marcel Gauchet, an assiduous reader of *S. ou B.* who collaborated with Castoriadis and Lefort in the review *Libre* during the 1970s. *Débat's* editors had asked "a few personalities" to "indicate to us, from among recently published *foreign* works, those that would be worth bringing to the attention of the French public." Castoriadis chose to review Francisco Varela's book *Principles of Biological Autonomy*, which he had read soon after it came out in 1979. Of particular note, his decision to highlight the work of this Chilean biologist on *autopoiesis*—a concept that overlaps in part with Castoriadis's own political and philosophical work on autonomy—came a full year *before* the now-famous June 1981 colloquium on "self-organization" in which Castoriadis participated.⁵⁴ The review of Varela's tome may be usefully read in conjunction with Castoriadis's dialogue with him a decade and a half later, which is now translated in Part Three.

⁵³"Pologne, notre défaite" (1982), first published as the Preface for *Banque d'images pour la Pologne* (Paris: L'image 2, 1983), pp. 7-13, was reprinted in *Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe II* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), pp. 65-68.

⁵⁴*L'Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*, ed. Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983).

Part Five and [PSRTI](#) as a whole end with one final text relevant to Castoriadis's RTI/ASA theme. In 1995, Castoriadis published in *Le Monde des Livres* (the equivalent of *The New York Times Book Review*) a review of a book written by that *Le Monde's* own philosophy book editor, Roger-Pol Droit. The book in question, written in French, was translated into English as *Philosophy and Democracy in the World* and also translated into Spanish. It is a UNESCO-sponsored study of the teaching and practice of philosophy in the world that follows up on a first such UNESCO study conducted in the early 1950s. Droit, we have seen, regularly interviewed Castoriadis in *Le Monde* and reviewed his books in the columns of *Le Monde des Livres*. A Bourdieu-inspired sociologist might highlight the apparently cushy nature of such mutual admiration or joint backscratching. Yet such an interpretation would forget that Droit, well connected in his prestigious post, could easily have found a trendier reviewer than Castoriadis. It would also miss the *content* of what Castoriadis has to say, when he actually agreed to review a book—a rather rare occurrence, we have seen, and not a regular practice of self-promotion or “social-capital” building. For, what we have here is nothing less than a serious meditation on the role of and challenges to philosophy in contemporary society—a society increasingly threatened by a rising tide of insignificance. Castoriadis's original social-historical take on the conditions for the exercise and transmission of philosophy thus fully finds its place here as a fitting conclusion to the present tome.

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It will not come as a surprise, for those who have followed the cycle of [RTI\(TBS\)](#), [FT\(P&K\)](#), [ASA\(RPT\)](#), and now [PSRTI](#) in relation to prior reactions and belated responses from the Castoriadis literary heirs, their “Association Cornelius Castoriadis,” and their various associates of questionable moral fiber, that the rising tide of insignificance and a society adrift—in their actual contemporary instantiations, and not just as themes Castoriadis wrote about—would again make their appearance. For, as has been

seen time and again, the heirs, their closely controlled undemocratic organization, and those who tolerate or condone or assist them are not exempt from the negative societal and political trends Castoriadis analyzed in such a clear-sighted way. Yet, instead of dwelling on these latest exemplifications of dishonesty and deceit, hypocrisy and broken commitments, the reader is simply referred to David Ames Curtis's recent statement about the latest examples of a family-heir publishing project gone seriously awry.⁵⁵

Rather, let us now look forward. We make our own what Castoriadis wrote at the end of "The Crisis of Marxism and the Crisis of Politics," already quoted above:

So we can do nothing else at present but maintain our project of a transformation that will lead to a free society made up of free individuals, in the belief that our critical activity and the exemplification in our acts of the values we stand for will contribute to a revival of an emancipatory movement, one far more lucid and self-reflective than any {one} previously {existing}.

In that spirit, we include at the end of the present tome a new Appendix, similar to the one in [RTI\(TBS\)](#) that convinced the French Editors to publish *SD*, thereby setting the stage for its electronic translation, [ASA\(RPT\)](#), as well as, now, electronic translations of those seven abovementioned interviews on political and social issues. This new [PSRTI](#) Appendix lists a large number of Castoriadis texts for inclusion in eight "Potential Future Translation Projects." Two of those projected volumes concern "Science, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy" and "War and Revolution." These titles, highly provisional, are employed simply to designate the character of the material to be translated/edited; they will certainly be altered as these projects take clearer shape. While the second

⁵⁵David Ames Curtis, "[Gabriel Rockhill and Continuum Books: A New Exemplification of 'The Rising Tide of Insignificance'; Or, How a Philosopher Chose the Path of Deception and Failed to Honor His Word in Order to Gain the Dubious Distinction of Publishing a Scab Translation of the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis](#)" (March 2011).

of these book projects would principally include his post-S. ou B. interventions about Russia (including a few last texts yet to be translated from the first part of the second *Carrefours* volume, *Domaines de l'homme*), the first one would, in contrast to the RTI/ASA-themed tomes, continue publishing Castoriadis texts along the lines of the contents of the fifth *Carrefours* volume, *Fait et à faire*—described in *MI* as concentrating on “psychoanalysis and philosophy”—and, to a large extent, those of [FT\(P&K\)](#). For, in publishing online the three Castoriadis/Cardan tomes mainly composed of his later political and social writings, we were simply trying to counterbalance (in a highly effective and successful way, as it turned out) the biases evident in the ACC Publication Committee’s editorial choices and emphases. There has never been a bias on our part against Castoriadis’s psychoanalytic and philosophical (or, for that matter, aesthetic) writings—far from it, as the electro-Samizdat publication of [FT\(P&K\)](#) clearly testifies. In that spirit, the new Appendix also lists a half dozen “Book-Length Translation Projects,” including four volumes from his posthumous “Human Creation” series of École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales seminars;⁵⁶ a volume on aesthetics (including two written texts, a talk, a radio interview, a lecture, and a seminar); and a volume of posthumously published philosophical manuscripts that were composed between 1945 and 1967.

At the end of [ASA\(RPT\)](#)’s Translator’s Foreword, we wrote: “It is unknown what landscape will emerge from this new act of nonconformity.” As we noted above, it appears that an initial result is that the Castoriadis literary heirs may have finally decided to bring his S. ou B.-era writings back into the public sphere. With eight new announced projects, we remain ever open and ever curious to see how “our critical activity and the exemplification in our acts of the values we stand for” may make some further modest contributions through our self-responsible emancipatory thought and action.

March 2011

⁵⁶We saw (n. 3 above) that Curtis was able to publish one seminar volume, [OPS](#), before the proverbial shit hit the fan in 2003.

Translator's Postscript to the *Postscript on Insignificancy* Translation

It's a wild time!
I see people all around me changing faces!
It's a wild time!
I'm doing things that haven't got a name yet;
I need love, your love.
It don't matter if it's rain or shine.
It's a wild time!
I'm here for you any old time
Stay here, play here.
Make a place for yourself here.
I want to be with you, no matter what I do,
What doesn't change is the what I feel for you today.
Times just seem so good.
I do know that I should be here with you this way,
And it's new, and it's new, and it's oh so new.
I see changes, changes, all around me are changes.
It's a wild time!

—Jefferson Airplane, [“Wild Tyme,”](#) Track 4,
After Bathing at Baxter's (August 1967)

The March 2011 Translator's Foreword to the *Postscript on Insignificancy, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews (PSRTI)* stated, we now see prematurely: “With *PSRTI*, we complete a cycle of three English-language electro-samizdat books devoted to the [Rising Tide of Insignificancy/A Society Adrift (RTI/ASA)] theme.” Five years later, to the month, Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, the publishing arm of the institution where Castoriadis taught for a decade and a half, published *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social*. Edited by the Paul Ricœur specialist

Johann Michel,¹ the publication of this transcription of a March 9, 1985 France Culture discussion with Castoriadis on Ricœur's radio program, *Le bon plaisir*, has led us to prepare and publish a second edition of *Postscript on Insignificance* that now includes a translation of that exchange. A bit of explanation and elucidation is in order.

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We include here now this (sixth) dialogue, with Castoriadis's former thesis advisor,² because it fits well with the other *Postscript on Insignificance* "dialogues." As we stated in our Foreword:

When Castoriadis affirmed . . . that the exigency of philosophy is to "think all that is thinkable . . . everything that is given in our experience and not only the fact that it is given but *how* it is given," he went on to list "four domains for this experience": "the mathematical-logical universe; the physical world; life; and the human, psychical, and social-historical domain, which is constituted by the emergence of the social imaginary and the psychical imagination." Those ontological domains provide the topics for the four ensuing radio "dialogues."

The Castoriadis-Ricœur radio dialogue does indeed proceed along similar thematic lines—though, as Castoriadis says with

¹Michel had published *Ricoeur et ses contemporains—Bourdieu, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Castoriadis* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France) in 2013, devoting a chapter to Castoriadis. Two years later appeared Scott Davidson's translation: *Ricoeur and the Post-Structuralists: Bourdieu, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Castoriadis* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015).

²Castoriadis solicited Ricœur, then teaching at Nanterre University, to direct his thesis. Eventually, Castoriadis went ahead and published some of his post-Socialisme ou Barbarie work as the second half of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) in French in 1975.

regret, "I have the impression that we are dialoguing, as one says in English, 'at cross purposes'" because of Ricœur's failure to make these and other social-historical, political, and ontological distinctions Castoriadis considered crucial. We also stated in that Foreword:

While these last four discussions, in widening the topics of conversation, touch only intermittently on the RTI/ASA theme, they continue and deepen another feature of the present tome: Castoriadis's willingness to engage in rather more informal and colloquial discussions in order to bring out his multifaceted views and to allow those views to be questioned and challenged in the public sphere.

This recently published, previously untranslated radio dialogue offers English-language readers another opportunity to witness Castoriadis discussing in a less formal setting with a respected fellow thinker, as he had done with Octavio Paz, Jean-Luc Donnet, Francisco Varela, and Alain Connes.

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We do not feel obliged, however, to translate Michel's Preface. Not that we would be subscribing to the principle that "Castoriadis needs no introduction." That principle, as enunciated by the Castoriadis family's [undemocratic "Association Cornelius Castoriadis"](#) (ACC) and in particular by Castoriadis's widow, has been applied only to David Ames Curtis as a way of excluding him and his Translator's Forewords, and it was blithely violated by them when it came to the ACC-authorized scab translations by [Helen Arnold](#) and [Gabriel Rockhill](#) as well as elsewhere—including, precisely, Michel's Preface to the authorized French edition. We have no objection, of course, to someone translating Michel's Preface or publishing other commentary and discussions about Castoriadis. Indeed, the [Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website's bibliographies and webographies](#) regularly list, now in 20 languages, all nonscab texts by and about Castoriadis and/or Socialisme ou Barbarie (S. ou B.).

Rather, we had no interest or desire³ to include a full translation here of Michel's text, whose interpretations, like other hermeneutically-informed efforts, offer harmonizing distortions not conducive to critical reflection. For example, Michel states (our quick translation of *Dialogue*, p. 19):

Beyond this divergence [between Ricœur's optimistic hope for a "socialism with a human face" and Castoriadis's view that bureaucratic-capitalist regimes were irreformable, even after de-Stalinization], there is an analysis Ricœur and Castoriadis share: the refusal to reduce the political to the economic and to index the former to the latter.⁴ When Ricœur shows that the elimination of private property has in no way modified political alienation in the USSR and when he affirms that there is an evil [*sic*] proper to the political [*sic*] (which consists in the abuse of power), he fundamentally meets up with Castoriadis in his analysis of the autonomization of the Soviet bureaucratic class.

Given that this *Dialogue* ends with the Aristotelean-informed

³A translator's choices, both those pursued and those left aside or never taken up, serve to make up an *oeuvre* in its own right. Or, as David Ames Curtis observed (our translation [from the French](#)): "I am convinced, on the basis of my own experience as a translator (and first of all on account of my constant hesitations as much as the embarrassment I sometimes feel when faced with so-called definitive choices), that a true translation work [*oeuvre*] is an art in its own right (which could never be reduced to a computer algorithm) and that, qua artist, the translator—either in his effectively actual and reflective choices or by default—constructs, for better or worse and come what may, his own *oeuvre*." One might criticize Curtis, though, for his choice here of the word *constructs* when discussing what he asserts is an *artistic creation*.

⁴Things are actually more complicated, at least on Castoriadis's side. While rejecting economistic tendencies of Marxian analysis that ignore political features of economic facts, Castoriadis also objected to Hannah Arendt's advocacy of an autonomization of politics in relation to economics, as was revealed in her negative assessments of the French Revolution.

Atheist Castoriadis challenging the Protestant thinker Ricœur's use of the term "evil [*le mal*]"—Castoriadis: "You call it *evil*, I call it *the monstrous*"—one wonders what the hermeneuticist Michel has truly understood of the transcribed discussion he has edited. To speak of an "evil" proper to/belonging to/characteristic of (in French: *propre à*) "the political"⁵ is reminiscent, rather, of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim, explicitly rejected by Castoriadis as follows: "one could not . . . do away with questions properly belonging to [*propres à*] the revolution by talking about the 'evil spell of living with other people.'"⁶ The "revolution" of which Castoriadis spoke there is precisely the one that took place in Russia. That revolution was "ruined,"⁷ to be sure, by a "bureaucratic class"—which Castoriadis nevertheless always refused to dignify with the grassroots label *Soviet*—and it would have to be renewed and expanded and transformed from below for that "bureaucratic class" to be dislodged and for the revolution to succeed in a

⁵The somewhat pretentious term "the political" (*le politique* in French) was readily employed by Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and Claude Lefort, among others, whereas Castoriadis spoke of *politics*—*la politique*—when examining specific regimes engaged in societal self-transformation, reserving "the political" to designate the political sphere of power generally in any society. As such, it could not be "evil," and any variation on Lord Acton's dictum—that power, whether relative or "absolute," invariably "corrupts"—is alien to Castoriadis's project of establishing a real democracy, that is, the power (*kratos*) of the people. Democracy is, for Castoriadis, a "tragic" regime, not one cursed, like "original sin," by an essential or intrinsic "evil."

⁶"Curtain on the Metaphysics of the Trials" (1956; now in [PSW2](#), p. 50). Castoriadis is quoting here Merleau-Ponty's phrase *maléfice de la vie à plusieurs* from *Humanism and Terror* (1947), trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); see p. xxxviii ("a sort of evil in collective life").

⁷Merleau-Ponty in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 232: "One of my Marxist friends says that Bolshevism has already ruined the revolution and that it must be replaced with the masses' unpredictable ingenuity"—a clear reference to formulations in the first paragraph of Castoriadis's "Proletarian Leadership" (1952; now in [PSWI](#)).

lasting way. Were there somehow “an evil proper to the political,” there would be no point in ever attempting to engage in any revolution other than a spiritual one.

Other efforts by Michel to create dubious parallels between Castoriadis and Ricœur equally go off the rails. The “most fecund” parts of their dialogue are said to proceed from the supposed fact that that dialogue would “rest largely on one and the same anthropological root” (p. 21). Beyond mixed metaphors, the puzzling qualification “largely” in an organic metaphor, and the overstated “one and the same” claim that is suited, rather, to a unitary ontology, Michel’s reconciliatory comparisons between the two authors contain multiple false equivalences and misleading approximations as well as downright falsehoods:

While, for Marx, man is first *Homo faber* and *Homo laborans*, he is, for Castoriadis and Ricœur, *Homo loquax*. Not only man of speech [*parole*] but man who exchanges, imagines, invents, and transmits signs, meaning, symbols, texts, narratives [*récits*]. Ricœur first learned of [*sic*] this anthropological root from the hermeneutic tradition centered around symbols and myths, before it was enriched notably by his passing through Freudian psychoanalysis, which he relates precisely to the hermeneutic sciences. Castoriadis inherits [*sic*] this anthropological root directly from the psychoanalysis he theorized and practiced, *a fortiori* when, influenced by Jacques Lacan, he considered the Unconscious to be structured like a language.

Castoriadis’s work, however, does not take a simple *linguistic turn* (toward “*Homo loquax*”). In *IIS* (p. 238), social man has *two* distinguishing, though not entirely distinct, mutually implicating dimensions: “*Legein* is the ensemblist-ensemblizing dimension of social representing/saying, just as *teuk[h]ein* (assembling-adjusting-making-constructing) is the ensemblist-ensemblizing dimension of social doing.” Thus, his social-historical existence is not reducible to a textual “narrative,” as fashion

would have it. Nor, according to Castoriadis, is man's psychical core or his Unconscious linguistic; language is, as Castoriadis stated dozens if not hundreds of times, *social*, so it could not have been produced by the singular psyche. As Castoriadis explained in "Done and To Be Done" ([CR](#), p. 376):

The psyche is not socializable without remainder—nor is the Unconscious translatable, without remainder, into language. The reduction of the Unconscious to language (where Lacan and Habermas curiously meet in agreement) is alien to the thing itself (and obviously also to Freud's thought: "in the Unconscious there are only representations of things, not representations of words").

The supposed Lacanian influence on Castoriadis here is Michel's invention.⁸

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Another hypocritical violation of the ACC's unequally applied principle that "Castoriadis needs no introduction" will occur—this time in spades—when Rowman and Littlefield International publishes *Ricoeur and Castoriadis in*

⁸In "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (1964-1965; now in [IIS](#), p. 102), he does quote Lacan to the effect that "The [U]nconscious is the discourse of the Other" without fully endorsing the linguistic characterization implicit in "discourse." The Unconscious, Castoriadis goes on to explain, "is to a great extent the depository of intentions, desires, investments, demands, expectations—significations to which the individual has been exposed from the moment of conception and even before, as these stem from those who engendered and raised him or her. Autonomy then appears as: my discourse must take the place of the discourse of the Other, of a foreign discourse that is in me, ruling over me: speaking through myself." But for Castoriadis, "[t]his clarification" of Lacan's phrase "immediately indicates the *social* dimension of the problem." Even in these early formulations, before he distinguished between *radical imagination* and *social imaginary*, it is "the subject," that is "ruled by this [heteronomous] discourse," not the Unconscious ([ibid.](#), p. 103).

Discussion: On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary in September 2017. Edited by Suzi Adams (who fully knows what she is doing) and translated this time by Michel's translator Scott Davidson (who may or may not know that he has been brought into an [unresolved labor dispute](#) on the employers' side), this new scab translation presumably authorized by the ACC and Castoriadis's widow "also includes," [according to Adams](#), not only a translation of the harmonizing hermeneuticism found in Michel's Preface but also Adams's "Editor's Foreword" as well as "a Preface written especially for this edition by the eminent Castoriadis scholar Johann P. Arnason"—to which are added "supplementary essays by [four] Ricoeur and Castoriadis scholars," George Taylor, Johann P. Arnason, Jean-Luc Amalric, and Suzi Adams, along with a "final essay by François Dosse." The present pirate translation, available in the second edition of *PSRTI*, makes it possible for all English-speaking people to read Castoriadis's radio dialogue with Ricoeur without being obliged to have recourse to a scab translation, which itself should be boycotted by all if the publishers do indeed bring it out next month. The six academic contributors listed above are urged to make their texts available online (e.g., on academia.edu, [as Adams has already done](#)) so that no one will be forced to buy a scab translation simply to participate in the free exchange of ideas.

Arnason—the mentor of Adams, whose own academic "research elaborates a philosophical anthropology of modernity from a cultural hermeneutic and phenomenological perspective"¹⁰—is said by Adams to have had a "sustained

⁹Dosse, author of an Castoriadis biography authorized by Castoriadis's widow, excluded Curtis from those interviewed for this book after Curtis questioned his "intellectual-history" approach (see [David Ames Curtis, "Quelques remarques concernant François Dosse, Castoriadis: Une vie" \(September 30, 2014\)](#)).

¹⁰"Notes on Contributors," in *Cornelius Castoriadis: Key Concepts*, ed. Suzi Adams (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. ix. In 2011, Bloomsbury acquired Continuum, the publisher of [Gabriel Rockhill](#)'s scab translation of Castoriadis.

encounter with phenomenological-hermeneutical sources, primarily Merleau-Ponty and Castoriadis, in the first instance, but also Ricœur.”¹¹ All this talk of “eminent scholars” (to the exclusion of the many others interested in Castoriadis’s revolutionary work)¹² fits well into the ACC’s narrow-minded and wrong-headed effort to make Castoriadis respectable in academia. Only a cultural hermeneuticist, however, could offer an “interpretation” of Castoriadis as some kind of “phenomenological-hermeneutical source.”

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Not that Castoriadis would have denigrated “interpretation” in and of itself. The penultimate paragraph of his final *S. ou B.* article, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (now in *IIS*, p. 164) questions Marx’s dichotomous denigration of “interpretation” as against “change” in the Eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

And yet, what appears to speculative reason as an insurmountable antinomy undergoes a change of sense when we bring the consideration of history back into *our* project of the theoretical elucidation of the world, and in particular of the human world, when we see in it a part of our effort to interpret the world *in order to* change it—not by subordinating truth to the party line but by explicitly establishing the articulated unity between elucidation and action, between theory and practice, in order to give our life its full reality as autonomous activity, that is as lucid, creative activity.

¹¹Suzi Adams, *Castoriadis's Ontology: Being and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 113. Fordham is the publisher of [Helen Arnold's scab translation](#).

¹²Only academics have been invited to speak at an ACC-sponsored colloquium organized for October 2017 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Castoriadis’s death. And contrary to normal university practice, this colloquium was organized in secret by the ACC, with no open Call for Papers.

For then the ultimate point of junction of these two projects—understanding and changing—can in every instance be found only in the living present of history which would not be an historical present if it did not supersede itself in the direction of a future that *is to be made by us*. The fact that we can understand the other times and other places of humanity only in terms of our own categories—a fact which, in turn, bounces back upon these categories, relativizes them, and helps us to surmount our enslavement to our own forms of the imaginary and even of rationality—does not simply express the conditions for all historical knowledge and its rooting, but manifests that any elucidation we may attempt is finally an *interested* one, it is *for us* in the strong sense, for we are not here to say what is but to make be what is not (saying what is belongs to this as one of its moments).

Castoriadis thus embraces both “interpretation” and “change”—as part of the creative project of societal elucidation and self-transformation and not simply for the sake of understanding *in abstracto*.¹³

In this same five-part *S. ou B.* article from 1964-1965, Castoriadis also examined the psychoanalytic “interpretations” of Sigmund Freud, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) helped usher in the twentieth century. However, instead of turning “interpretation” into a general hermeneutic method or approach applicable to all linguistic phenomena—which are thereby hypertrophied, thus occulting nonlinguistic practice (*teukhein*/social doing)—in the second

¹³Castoriadis’s placement of any project of interpretation/understanding within the “interested” purview of the project of autonomy may be read in light of his later endorsement of Hannah Arendt’s view that “impartiality enters this world with Homer. This is not just ‘affective’ impartiality. It is the impartiality of knowledge and understanding. The keen interest in the other starts with the Greeks. This interest is but another side of the critical examination and interrogation of their own institutions. That is to say, it is a component of the democratic and philosophical movement created by the Greeks” (*CR*, p. 268).

half of [IIS](#) (p. 278) Castoriadis elucidated psychoanalysis as a “specific enterprise, . . . a singular practico-poetic context”:

One wonders, first how and why the being of dreams, or, more generally, of unconscious representation, could be eliminated by its being-interpreted (or being interpretable). Would the being of madness as madness be *eliminated* if it could be interpreted, even if it were interpreted completely? (By eliminated, of course, I do not mean actually eliminated by curing the madness—but eliminated ontologically). . . . This alleged reduction, however, is an incoherent fiction.

And as he added a page later: “Meanings are interminable, as is their interpretation, as the analysis [of a psychoanalytic patient] would be if it were *only* a question of interpretation.”¹⁴

Similarly, it would be inaccurate to describe Castoriadis, who read and responded to Merleau-Ponty’s work, as a “phenomenological . . . source.” While respectful of his philosophy¹⁵ if not always his politics,¹⁶ Castoriadis’s serious-minded critical examinations of Merleau-Ponty’s work were not conducted as part of the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Indeed, in “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary” (1994; now in [CR](#), p. 324), Castoriadis attacks head on “the phenomenological fallacy,” viz.:

¹⁴In his late summary text, “Psychoanalysis and Philosophy” (1997; [CR](#), p. 353), Castoriadis decisively concluded: “It is clear, . . . contrary to every ‘deterministic’ exegesis of Freud, that for him (a) not all dreams are interpretable and (b) no dream is completely interpretable.”

¹⁵See “The Sayable and the Unsayable” (1971; now in [CL](#)) and “Merleau-Ponty and the Weight of the Ontological Tradition” (1986; now in [WIF](#)).

¹⁶See “Curtain on the Metaphysics of the Trials,” referenced above.

that the “first-person” or “intentional” stance presents to, or for, me “the things as they are.” This is the curious realistic delusion of phenomenology, paradoxically coexisting with fatal solipsistic consequences: How do I know that something exists for the next person, or, indeed, that a next person exists at all if I am confined to my “first-person stance”? From the strict phenomenological point of view I have *no access* to the experience of “other persons”; they and their “experiences” exist just as *phenomena* for me. The simple *naming* of the problem in Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* (or in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*) is no solution.¹⁷

¹⁷Castoriadis continues his critique of phenomenology as follows (ibid.):

The “first-person stance” is bluntly contradictory, even if we leave aside the “other person.” It tells me, for example, that to move an object, or to move myself, I need *force*. But if I am in a car and the driver brakes abruptly, I am projected through the windscreen without deploying any force. The “privilege” or “authenticity” of the “first-person stance” looks philosophically very funny if this stance leads, as lead it must, to contradictions or incoherences in the very “experience” it keeps celebrating. Husserl’s “The Earth, as *Ur-arkh*, does not move” forces me, for instance, to dismiss as absurd or illusory phenomena of equally compelling immediacy (e.g., Foucault’s pendulum, or the yearly parallax of the fixed stars). Neither does the escape of the later Husserl towards the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*) redeem phenomenology. Certainly, the immediate “first-person stance” presents things as they “appear” in the life-world. But this only means that it presents them as they have been shaped by the generic biological (species) imagination *and* the social imaginary I am sharing with my fellow human *socii*. Now philosophy starts when we begin trying to *break the closure* of this life-world in both its biological and social-historical dimensions. Of course, we can never break it to such a degree as to be able to fly outside any closure, to have a “view from nowhere.” But break it we do, and there is no point in pretending that we do not know that there is no “red” except for, in, and through a living body—or, for that matter, that there are no nymphs in the springs and gods in the rivers, which were a perfectly legitimate part of the life-world of the ancient Greeks.

Castoriadis was cognizant (see [WIF](#), p. 275) of Merleau-Ponty's exploration of Husserl's idea of *Stiftung* (institution) as a way of going beyond such solipsism and the "realistic delusion" of phenomenology's "first-person" intentionalism. But in this 1986 critique of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, Castoriadis pinpointed "the continued phenomenological illusion that makes the philosopher believe that he might be able to find in perception a 'pure lived experience' of perception. . . . The Cartesian-Husserlian tangent is here presented as the fatal trajectory of thought—at the same time that one sees the defense against this illusory fatality overdetermine Merleau-Ponty's philosophical decisions" ([WIF](#), p. 302). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's resurrection of the Husserlian phrase "transcendental subjectivity is intersubjectivity" remains stuck in phenomenological presuppositions. Instead, this is what it truly signifies:

"transcendental subjectivity" is sociality-historicity, the "place" in which a thought can intend the true and in which the idea of the true emerges is an indefinite and anonymous collectivity in and through its social-historical institution—therefore: "transcendental subjectivity" is non-subjectivity and non-transcendental. The phrase appears mysterious because it signifies the negation of what it says.

Castoriadis ends his examination of this posthumously-published volume Merleau-Ponty was preparing at the time of his untimely death with the following reaffirmation of his non-unitary-ontology approach: Merleau-Pontean "flesh procreates of the flesh: it does not create. We, however, have to think creation, a time that is not cyclical, a birth that is not re-birth. We have to think an ontological genesis—an ontology of genesis."

~

Adding a hyphenated "(cultural) hermeneutics" into the phrase "phenomenological . . . source" cannot salvage

Adams's inaccurate depiction of Castoriadis. For, as we saw, Castoriadis increasingly questioned the purview, limits, and finality of "interpretation" while never dismissing it per se. Instead, as we shall see, the drawbacks of Adams's false characterization return us to the RTI/ASA theme that in other respects appears less explicitly and less frequently in Castoriadis's various radio dialogues.

The term *hermeneutics*, it may be noted, did not appear at all in *IIS* (1964-1965, 1975) and only once in passing in a 1968 Castoriadis psychoanalytic text reprinted in the first *Carrefours du labyrinthe* tome (1978).¹⁸ As early as 1982 ("The Crisis of Western Societies"; now in *CR*, pp. 260-61), though, Castoriadis was beginning to note how the intellectual fad of hermeneutic meaning-interpretation was furthering the destruction of philosophy's capacity to create new meaning:

Past culture no longer is alive within a living tradition, but instead is the object of a museum-oriented knowledge and of trendy, tourist-curiosities ruled by fashions. On this level, and as banal as it may be, the label of "Alexandrianism" is becoming applicable (and even is beginning to be insulting to Alexandria)—all the more so as, in the domain of reflection itself, history, commentary, and interpretation are progressively becoming substitutes for creative thought.

"The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism," Castoriadis's key talk sounding the RTI/ASA theme that was first presented in 1989, is even more succinct and explicit: "In philosophy, historical and textual commentary on and interpretation of past authors have become the substitute for thinking" (*WIF*, p. 40). "The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain," a 1981 talk first published three years later, had already indicated

¹⁸See note 37 on p. 45 of *CL*, which cites another authors's article title from a 1966 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*.

([WIF](#), p. 9) his skepticism toward *interpretation* by placing the word between quotation marks—an increasingly common practice on his part going forward:¹⁹

It would even be superficial and insufficient to say that each society “contains” a system of interpretation of the world. Each society *is* a system of interpretation of the world, and again, the term “interpretation” is here flat and inappropriate. Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world, of its own world.

Castoriadis elaborated on this ontological view of social-world creation in his 1989 response to critics, “Done and To Be Done” ([CR](#), pp. 363-64), while tying his skepticism about “interpretation” directly to his reservations about hermeneutics:

The world lends itself to (is compatible with) all these S.I.S. [i.e., social imaginary significations] and privileges none. That means: The world *tout court* is senseless, devoid of signification (save that of lending itself to . . . ; but that is not what we call a

¹⁹Similarly, the word *narrative* often appears within quotation marks in Castoriadis’s writings, in order to express his reservations, or is simply attacked head on. However, the explicit target here is not Ricœur, author of *Time and Narrative*, but Postmodernists who draw from Hegelian and/or phenomenological-hermeneutical sources. In his “Response to Rorty” ([ASA](#), pp. 98-99), Castoriadis states:

I absolutely do not share the idea that philosophy would be a succession of narratives. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is not a narrative any more than the *Critique of Pure Reason* would be. . . . I am completely opposed to the way in which Rorty reduces the history of humanity over the past twenty-five centuries to the narrative of the history of philosophy. The history of humanity is not the history of the mistakes of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Kant, and so on. And that’s where we find the Hegelo-Heideggero-Habermasian vice—the three-H vice, if you will, or four with Husserl when he spoke of European humanity—which replaces effectively actual history with the history of ideas.

signification). The result is that, *at this level*, all “hermeneutical” discussion, every attempt to see in the creation of S.I.S. “interpretations” of the world, has no ground to stand on.

What precedes, then, the possibility of any phenomenological descriptions and hermeneutical interpretations is a meaninglessness of the world, which each society, whether it knows it or not, must confront and somehow integrate into *its* world—usually through a heteronomous (and most often religious) occultation of this groundlessness, as achieved via a closure of signification. By way of contrast, Castoriadis asserts in his 1990 talk, “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary” ([WIF](#), p. 87):

the rupture of this closure is the opening up of unlimited interrogation, another name for the creation of a genuine philosophy; the latter wholly differs from an unending interpretation of sacred texts, for example, which can be extremely intelligent and subtle but which halts before an ultimate given that is taken to be beyond all discussion: “The Text must be true, since it is of divine origin.” Philosophical interrogation, on the contrary, does not halt before any postulate presented as ultimate and unchallengeable.

Castoriadis’s reticence regarding Ricœur’s hermeneuticism and its Christian theological background lies just below the surface throughout their 1985 radio dialogue. Four years later, in “Done and To Be Done” ([WIF](#), p. 387), he reprised, rather sarcastically, his argument made there about the Aztecs:

Did the Aztecs practice human sacrifices? Such is the *nomos* of the Aztecs, such is their “interpretation” (their hermeneutic) of the world, such is their “narrative,” such is the fashion in which Being was dispensed to them. One can, as one pleases, choose the vocabulary of Critias, Nietzsche, Heidegger, or

their Franco-American epigones.²⁰

Already in 1988 ("Power, Politics, Autonomy," *PPA*, p. 153), he noted:

In more agitated historical worlds, supplementary lines of defense are established. The denial of the alteration of society, or the covering up of the new by means of its attribution to mythical origins, may

²⁰In "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991; *RTI(TBS)*, p. 102), Castoriadis employed this reference to the challenge posed to us by the Aztec institution of society in order to connect his criticism of the postmodernist inflation of "narrative" with his overall RTI/ASA theme. "If all 'narratives,'" he pointedly asked, "or, to be vulgar about it, piece[s] of gossip,"

are of equal value, in the name of what would one condemn the "narrative" of the Aztecs, with their human sacrifices, or the Hitlerite "narrative" and everything it implies? And how is it that the proclamation of "the end of grand narratives" is not itself a narrative? The clearest image of this situation is provided by the "theories of postmodernism," which are the plainest—I would say the most cynical—expression of the refusal (or the inability) to call the present-day situation into question.

The unnamed target here seems to be Jean-François Lyotard, author of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) and Castoriadis's fellow former S. ou B. member (for the decade between 1954 and 1964). Two pages later, he took on directly what he elsewhere called "the French Ideology," connecting it to, among other things, Postmodernism's inflation of narrative:

I see in [Deconstructionism and the "thinking of finitude"] just one more manifestation of the sterility of our epoch. And it is not an accident that this goes hand in hand with those ridiculous proclamations about "the end of philosophy," the confused conjectures about "the end of grand narratives," and so on. Nor is it surprising that those who represent these tendencies themselves prove incapable of producing anything other than commentaries upon the writings of the past and studiously avoid any mention of the questions science, society, history, and politics actually are raising today. This sterility is not an individual phenomenon. It expresses, as a matter of fact, the social-historical situation.

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

And seven years after that, in “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary” ([CR](#), p. 363-64), Castoriadis zeroed in on Christian interpretational practice:

In the other cases, the “reception” of past and tradition is, partly at least, conscious—but this “reception” is, in fact, re-creation (present-day parlance would call it “re-interpretation”). . . . The history of Christianity is but the history of continuous “re-interpretations” of the same sacred texts, with amazingly differing outcomes.

And yet, rather than being the form of exegetical salvation hermeneutics claims itself to be in its self-interpretation,²¹ meaning-interpretation may be viewed generally as society’s original scotomizing defense mechanism when faced with “the *a-meaning* of the world” as well as with its own and the others’ radical imaginations and social instituting imaginaries:

All these factors threaten society’s stability and self-perpetuation. And against all of them, the institution of society establishes in advance and contains defenses and protections. Principal among these is the virtual omnipotence, the capacity of universal covering, of its magma of significations. Any irruption of the raw world becomes for it *sign of* something, is interpreted away and thereby exorcised (*PPA*, p. 153).

²¹Or, in Dick Cavett’s humorous play on the Christian soteriological slogan *Jesus Saves*: “Exegesis saves.”

By way of contrast, “Greek thought” is said to be “not a commentary on or an interpretation of sacred texts, it amounts *ipso facto* to the putting into question of the most important dimension of the institution of society: the representations and the norms of the tribe, and the very notion of *truth*” (“Power, Politics, Autonomy”; now in *PPA*, pp. 159-60).

In sum: As it became a fad, Castoriadis, from the standpoint of the ongoing project of autonomy, came to view hermeneutical interpretation as necessarily limited in scope, and yet interminable when disconnected from a self-limiting project, but also overinflated in its conceptions of language and narrative as well as overreaching in its claims to understanding. Such claims, moreover, bring contradictory results whose (often violent) contending justifications are based on a closure of inquiry that originates in its religious attitude toward texts deemed inviolable.

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Of course, none of the foregoing background information goes to prove anything for or against anything said by either party in the Castoriadis-Ricœur radio dialogue. Yet as a service provided by the translator, such introductory information may offer useful context for the reader’s own efforts to make of this dialogue what she will. Indeed, further context can and should be provided concerning Castoriadis’s attitudes toward and relations with his former thesis advisor.²²

²²We are presenting *publicly available* information here. Access to and use of Castoriadis’s archives (and thus to potential Castoriadis correspondence with Ricœur) at the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine (IMEC) can require approval from both the Castoriadis family and IMEC. One IMEC official, François Bordes, seized material prepared by Curtis for the 2013 General Assembly of the family’s Association Cornelius Castoriadis in order to prevent its distribution, even though Curtis is an ACC member. Some of this correspondence as well as other useful information is discussed in François Dosse’s *Castoriadis. Une vie* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2014). Dosse, however, does not even have a firm grasp of Castoriadis’s distinct terms *radical imagination* (of the psyche, which Dosse incorrectly attributes to “the individual”) and *social imaginary* (on the collective level), which he instead calls “radical imaginary” and “social

Castoriadis evinced barely any interest at all²³ in the work of hermeneuticians like Hans-Georg Gadamer, though he engaged critically and at length with the work of Gadamer's teacher Martin Heidegger on many philosophical issues. The first known mention²⁴ of the phenomenological hermeneuticist Paul Ricœur appears merely in passing, in a 1965 footnote to "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (*IIS*, p. 390, n. 39) devoted to Claude Lévi-Strauss's discussion with Ricœur in *Esprit* (November 1963). Castoriadis welcomed "Ricœur's important book," *Time and Narrative* (1983-1985). Indeed, he discussed it at length in his 1987-1988 École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) seminar, though in critical terms.²⁵ And he expressed, in his own "Time and Creation" talk from 1988 (*WIF*, p. 377), his "admiration for the richness and solidity of [Ricœur's] critical analysis of the main inherited philosophical conceptions regarding time"²⁶ while noting his "obvious and central differences with" Ricœur's 3-volume work and regretting that this study of time makes only "passing mentions" of Plato's and Kant's conceptions of temporality (*ibid.*, p. 438)—conceptions which Castoriadis had already studied in depth (especially Plato's) a decade earlier in the second half of *IIS*. Indeed, Castoriadis had communicated in writing to his thesis advisor his "disappointment" that he received so little

imagination" (see p. 267).

²³*Ibid.*, p. 268: "Castoriadis always kept his distance from the hermeneutical tradition, placing it on the side of inherited thought, which misses what is essential to human creation."

²⁴French editions of Castoriadis's writings contain no indexes. We are limiting ourselves here to indexed and electronic English-language editions.

²⁵Dosse, p. 322.

²⁶Castoriadis's key operative word here is *inherited*.

feedback on the published texts he was sending Ricœur.²⁷ Besides an otherwise undiscussed bibliographical reference to Ricœur's 1965 *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* in the "Other works" section at the end of his "Freud, Society, History" article (*RTI(TBS)*, p. 256) and a passing 1986 EHESS-seminar mention of Ricœur's idea of "suspicion" (*OPS*, p. 6), Castoriadis's only other allusion to Ricœur in published form is his reply, in "Done and To Be Done" (*CR*, p. 377), to Joel Whitebook's attempt to "climb back down and fall back upon a 'potentiality toward language' that would be imminent to the psyche. . . . Obviously," Castoriadis dryly observes, "everything depends upon the infinitely elastic term *potentiality*. [Whitebook] invokes Ricœur and 'a signifying power that is operative prior to language.' Here again, we must agree on what we are talking about," he says, echoing, in this 1989 *Festschrift* reply, his earlier frustration with Ricœur, when he stated in their radio dialogue: "Once again, this discussion has no meaning unless we distinguish some levels."²⁸

²⁷Ibid., pp. 264-65. Ricœur replied (letter of August 7, 1978) that his lack of response did not indicate a lack of interest, that he was indeed reading and following Castoriadis's work, and that he had taught *IIS* at Nanterre.

²⁸The rest of Castoriadis's response to Whitebook as regards the invocation of a Freudian-Ricœurian "signifying power" prior to language (so much for Michel's Ricœurian *Homo loquax!*) again shows how wrong Michel was to link Castoriadis to Lacan on the question of the Unconscious allegedly being "structured like a language":

There is not one "signifying power" but (at least) two dimensions of the psyche that render it capable of language and, more generally, of socialization. Both have to do with the radical imagination. From the outset, the psyche is in *meaning*: everything must make sense, on the mode of making sense for the psyche. And almost immediately afterward, the psyche is in the *quid quo pro* (which led Lacan astray); it can see in a thing another thing, this being the subjective correlate of the signitive relation. But that does not mean that there is a language of the psyche whose functioning would be disturbed by the "barrier of repression," nor even that there is a "heterogeneity" between something linguistic that would appertain to the Unconscious and conscious language. There is ontological alterity between (1) a

Despite meager mentions of Ricœur in Castoriadis's published work, and beyond their discreetly expressed mutual admiration,²⁹ certain elements of shared political sensibility drew them together. Ricœur, who was teaching at Nanterre University, resigned his post on May 17, 1968 in support of the S. ou B.-influenced students there who were spearheading the uprising. It was "shortly after 1968," as Castoriadis says at the start of the radio program, that he asked Ricœur to supervise his proposed thesis.

Where a politically-informed mutual affinity ended—or, rather, never began—was in an episode earlier in Ricœur's life that was not revealed until well after the 1985 radio dialogue, and in fact only three years before Castoriadis's death. In 1994, it became known that Ricœur, traditionally presented as a studious prisoner of war who was preparing for a Vichy-accredited degree while translating Husserl's *Ideen* in a Pomeranian camp,³⁰ had spent part of 1940 and 1941 as a lecturer in a "Marshal Pétain circle" organized there. Robert Lévy, who revealed this episode after finding texts published under Ricœur's name in the Vichy review *Unité Française*, says that he thought that "any biography of Ricœur would necessarily include at least an indication of the existence of

universe that at the outset is monadic, then differentiated, but always tending to close upon itself and in which a representation can be posited as standing [*valant*] for another representation and (2) a diurnal universe of signs, which in good part obeys ensidic logic and bears/conveys *public*, somehow or other shared, significations.

²⁹Ricœur wrote a letter of support for Castoriadis's candidacy at EHESS in 1979 and Castoriadis communicated with *Le Monde* in November 1985 to complain that Ricœur's work was getting short shrift in comparison with that of less deserving intellectual stars like "A. Finkielkraut and B. Lévy" (see Dosse, pp. 310 and 267-68). Dosse's index (p. 524) would seem to confuse "B[enny] Lévy" here with Castoriadis's *bête noire*, Bernard-Henri Lévy. Neither is to be confused with Robert Lévy (see below).

³⁰This story still appears as is in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Ric%C5%93ur, but French Wikipedia http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Ric%C5%93ur also contains a short section on Ricœur's *Pétainisme*.

this *Pétainiste* episode.”³¹ Yet, no mention thereof in Michel’s “Biographical Benchmarks” (“Repères biographiques,” *Dialogue*, p. 73). Lévy also extensively questions Dosse’s reliance, in his Ricœur biography,³² on Ricœur’s belated recognition of this episode, presented by Ricœur as just a brief period of “disarray.” Lévy writes: “In sum, before 1994, not a word [from Ricœur] about this *Pétainiste* episode; from 1995 to 2000, a brief tribute paid to the truth; and then, a resumption of silence? Things are perhaps not so simple.” For, he goes on to show that this episode was maybe not as brief as Ricœur admitted, that an early 1939 text (i.e., prior to the War and his internment) indicates more ambiguity in the attitudes of this revolutionary socialist who had tried to combine Communism with his Protestant Christianity, and that there is a strange disconnect between Ricœur’s principled refusal, from the late 1930s onward, to visit Spain before Franco’s death and his attendance of summer university German classes in Hitler’s Munich just a month before the outbreak of the Second World War. It is important for those interested in Castoriadis’s work to acknowledge this disturbing episode in the life of his thesis advisor and later academic colleague,³³ along with its still not fully clarified aspects, but also to know the actual chronology, so as to be able to deal with any silly and/or invidious criticisms of Castoriadis. In a bit of belated sectarian polemicism, the Trotskyist “World Socialist Web Site” claimed that

³¹See now Robert Levy’s critical summary text, “Sur la passade pétainiste de Paul Ricœur: un bref épisode?” <http://www.sens-public.org/article537.html?lang=fr> (March 26, 2008). It remains unclear what role, if any, Ricœur as a prisoner of war played in these texts’ publication in *Unité Française*’s “Paroles de prisonniers” (words of prisoners).

³²Dosse’s *Paul Ricœur, les sens d’une vie* (1997) preceded his Castoriadis biography (2014). The latter book discusses Castoriadis relationship with Ricœur on over 20 different pages but never makes mention of Ricœur’s *Pétainiste* episode.

³³Castoriadis’s *IIS* was translated into English in 1987 by Ricœur’s longtime translator Kathleen Blamey (previously known as Kathleen McLaughlin).

Castoriadis (1922-1997) and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1948-1967), among other people, publications and organizations, “favored the rise” of new French President Emmanuel Macron via, among other people, publications, and organizations, Paul Ricœur, who was assisted by Macron from 1999 to 2001 at the time Ricœur was preparing his phenomenological-hermeneutic volume *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000).³⁴

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Their radio dialogue begins, rather disappointingly, with Ricœur assuring Castoriadis that he has “several times referred to the ‘imaginary production of society.’ For, I believe that our shared interest really lies in this issue of the imaginary seat of social relations and social production.” Such a harmonizing affirmation of “sharing,” so characteristic of the hermeneutical approach, is also a falsification, since, of course, Castoriadis’s *magnum opus* is entitled, rather, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Whether conscious or habitual, this terminological slippage serves to set in place from the outset Ricœur’s stance against human creation—“Self-creation, no. Successive reconfigurations, yes,” and “we are never in a situation that you would call *creation*,” he later says³⁵—while altering the ground of the discussion. Even within this narrowed and displaced realm of mere “production,” Ricœur’s phenomenological stance leads to further denials of creation: when Castoriadis characteristically declares, “What institutes the *polis* as *polis* is a signification that it creates and by means of which it creates itself as

³⁴Anthony Torres and Francis Dubois, “Quelles personnalités politiques ont favorisé l’ascension d’Emmanuel Macron?” <http://www.wsws.org/fr/articles/2017/jui2017/parc-j20.shtml> (June 20, 2017). Much more could be said about this very loosely argued guilt-by-association article published by the “International Committee of the Fourth International.”

³⁵And yet, note 4 of this radio dialogue reminds us that the English-language title for his 1975 volume is *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*.

polis”—a statement proponents of the “hermeneutic circle” might otherwise have enthusiastically embraced—Ricœur immediately objects, “But we never experience production in this form!”³⁶ In other words: If something does not fit phenomenology’s first-person stance, it must not exist or is deemed not worth thinking or, allegedly, cannot be thought.

What, then, to make of phenomena that nevertheless really do exist but that go beyond phenomenology’s self-restricting purview—not only “Foucault’s pendulum” and “the yearly parallax of the fixed stars,” which Castoriadis mentioned elsewhere,³⁷ but also “cultural” phenomena hermeneutics as meaning-interpretation is supposed to consider? Ricœur’s unequivocal reply again evinces his underlying antipathy to human creation: “The idea of absolute novelty is unthinkable.” What, as a Christian, one makes of absolute or divine creation is, of course, another story, as the unthinkable suddenly becomes permissible, even necessary, there.³⁸ For Castoriadis, however, the point is to unite an effort at understanding this-here world with a will to change it. And this project of elucidation passes not exclusively by way of “interpretation” of the existent but also via the creation of new “figures of the thinkable” in order that one might think what had hitherto been deemed “unthinkable”: after all, nothing was thinkable before some figures of the thinkable were created by humanity (except, perhaps, Aristotle’s God as “thought thinking itself”), and nothing new becomes

³⁶And from that restricted standpoint, what is one to make of the quintessentially Sixties Jefferson Airplane lyric from “[Wild Tyme](#)” (*After Bathing at Baxter’s*, 1967) about creative, self-transformational social doing during the Digger-inspired and LSD-infused Summer of Love, where a direct challenge to commercial arrangements for shelter and food distribution was combined with the use of mind-expanding drugs: “I’m doing things that haven’t got a name yet”?

³⁷See note 16, above.

³⁸Ricœur continues: “There can be something new only in a break [*rupture*] with the old: there is something pre-settled before us, which we unsettle in order to settle it otherwise. Yet no situation exists where there is, as it were, . . . the first day of creation.”

thinkable until figures thereof are created.³⁹

One may regret that, in this informal radio dialogue where he endeavors not to be “polemical” with his respected former thesis advisor, Castoriadis did not bring up certain arguments he raised elsewhere. In relation to Ricœur’s views on continuity and discontinuity that almost always seem to end in harmonizing conclusions, one might have liked Castoriadis to develop in reply, for example, his mind-blowing and world-shaking thoughts on how the continuum may be said to be “uncountably ‘holey’; it is but a succession of uncountably infinite holes held together by a succession of countable points” (see the undated manuscript text, “Remarks on Space and Number,” in [FT\(P&K\)](#), p. 406). And precisely on this alleged impossibility of so-called absolute novelty, one can regret that Castoriadis did not introduce his key distinction on the matter—viz., “creation is *ex nihilo*, but it is not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*,” as he succinctly put it in his 1993 article, “Complexity, Magmas, History: The Example of the Medieval Town” ([RTI\(TBS\)](#), p. 367). In “Done and To Be Done” ([CR](#), p. 404, emphasis added), Castoriadis had already confronted this issue head on:

Let us consider now from the de facto (*faktisch*) standpoint the instituting imaginary and the radical imagination. Their creation is certainly not “absolute” (what meaning is one to give to this term, if not again by referring to the God of Duns Scotus?), *save in a quite precise sense*: the created form is, as such, irreducible to the already-there; it cannot be composed, ensidically, starting from what is already there. (To speak of “new aspects,” as [Bernhard] Waldenfels does, only eludes the hard core of the question: When is an “aspect” *new*? What is the new?) In this sense, creation is *ex nihilo*.

³⁹See the Translator’s Foreword to [Figures of the Thinkable](#) for a summary of Castoriadis’s developments of this theme. The connection here with the dictum Castoriadis enunciated in the very first issue of *S. ou B.* (“Presentation,” in [CR](#), p. 37) is patent: “Without *development* of revolutionary theory, no development of revolutionary action.”

“But,” he goes on to assert in this same 1989 text, “as I have already written, it is certainly not *in nihilo*, nor is it *cum nihilo*”—with Castoriadis citing here “innumerable passages from *IIS* [that] show this,” and stating that “I have specified it again recently” in “Power, Politics, Autonomy” and “Individual, Society, Rationality, History” (two 1988 articles now in *PPA*). The problem here is that, like the undated, posthumously published manuscript that examines the ontologically unavoidable and overridingly preponderant “holes” in the continuum (“Remarks,” [FT\(P&K\)](#), p. 406: “I propose to consider [the set of real numbers] as a metaphor of the Chaos”), it is unclear whether the distinction between *ex nihilo* and *in/cum nihilo* really predates his 1985 dialogue with Ricœur: *IIS* certainly affirms and elucidates worldly *ex nihilo* creation (see pp. 2-3 of the 1974 Preface and pp. 153 and 361 in the second part, first published in 1975),⁴⁰ but the key subsidiary acknowledgment—viz., that creation does not occur either *in* or *cum nihilo*—never appears there in those precise terms. Interestingly, one of the first, if not *the* first, published uses of this *ex* vs. *in/cum* clarification was made in “Time and Creation” ([WIF](#), p. 392)—the 1988 talk where Castoriadis explicitly praised Ricœur’s *Time and Narrative* (1983-1985): “The new *eidos*, the new form, is created *ex nihilo* as 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*.”⁴¹

⁴⁰Castoriadis already spoke of “*ex nihilo* creation . . . in history” in Christian Descamps’s 1973 interview with him while he was preparing *IIS* (see *PSRTI*, p. 60). His first published mention of this phrase may be in “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul Which Has Been Presented as a Science” (1968, *CL*, p.25). The phrase also appeared in his 1971 discussion of Merleau-Ponty, “The Sayable and the Unsayable” (*CL*, p. 121).

⁴¹Castoriadis elaborates his anti-determinist position on the *conditions* for *ex nihilo* human creation as follows ([WIF](#), pp. 392-93):

So, for instance, humans create the world of meaning and signification, or institution, upon certain conditions, viz., that they are already living beings, that there is no constantly and

The furthest Ricœur will go is to grant a supposed phenomenological datum: “We have the experience of making continuity through strokes of discontinuities and retroactive reprises.” The connection between the emergence of discontinuity, perhaps far surpassing in its infinities the infinities of continuity, and the fact of time as creation (Castoriadis’s position)⁴² is never made. Nor does Ricœur ever consider saying here that we are always making (creating) discontinuities—which he does grant are “ruptures,” but whose scope he carefully wants to circumscribe⁴³—and perhaps also new expansive and

bodily present God to tell them what is the meaning of the world and of their life, etc. But there is no way we can derive either this level of being—the social-historical—or its particular contents in each case from these conditions. The Greek *polis* is created under certain conditions and “with” certain means, in a definite environment, with given human beings, a tremendous past embodied *inter alia* in Greek mythology and language, and so on, endlessly. But it is not caused or determined by these. The existing, or part of it, conditions the new form; it does not cause or determine it.

This 1988 talk, first published in 1991, is a “reworked” version of his June 1983 Cerisy-la-Salle Colloquium presentation, “Temps et devenir” (Time and becoming); see [ibid.](#), p. 437. Further documentary investigation is required to determine whether Castoriadis’s *ex vs. in/cum* distinction precedes the 1985 dialogue with Ricœur or is posterior to it. Later uses appear in “The Idea of Revolution” (1989, [RTI\(TBS\)](#)), “Window on the Chaos” (1992, [WoC](#)), “False and True Chaos” (1993, [FT\(P&K\)](#)), “Interview: Castoriadis and Donnet” and “Interview: Castoriadis and Varela” (1995, both in the present volume), and “Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads” (1997, [FT\(P&K\)](#)), as well as in the undated “Remarks on Space and Number” ([FT\(P&K\)](#)) mentioned above. This list is certainly not exhaustive.

⁴²Before being the title of Castoriadis stand-alone piece from 1988, “Time and Creation” was the heading for Section v in Chapter 4 of Part II of [IIS](#) (1975).

⁴³Ricœur: “I wanted to limit the pretension—in the English-language sense of *claim* in *truth claim*: pretension to truth, to rightness—involved in the notion of a discontinuity in the creation of institutions.” Ruptures seem to be admissible so long as one does not grant the “truth” of their existence.

inclusive figures of the thinkable to elucidate them amid mere strokes of continuity, and that if this were otherwise, it would be on account of a relatively "cold" level of temporal creation and, perhaps too, on account of our (instituted) failure to recognize how disruptive things really are, given how predisposed we are (have become) to cover over, via closed significations of interpretation, the riotous tumult within and around us.

Curiously, this curtailed outlook leads Ricœur, in his contribution to the radio dialogue,⁴⁴ to affirm the banally traditional *asymptotic* conception of interpretational truth. When, in reply to a question from Ricœur, Castoriadis affirms, "Where I radically separate myself from [Michel] Foucault is that, for me, there is a Greece, there is an Old Testament, and all the interpretations we give of it are based/lean on a signification that serves as referent for these successive creations that are interpretations," Ricœur asks him in response: "What does that signify, if not that the multiplicity of interpretations and the reinterpretations of interpretations are other approximations of the same thing?"

Similar to Ricœur the phenomenologist's denial that one can experience the "production" (in fact, the self-creation) of the Greek *polis*, Ricœur can only reply lamely when Castoriadis catches him in a contradiction concerning his varied affirmations about the origin of language: "I have no access to this first moment of language," as if that settled the matter. Ricœur the hermeneuticist then states, "We are always speaking in a setting where language has already been spoken"—a perfect illustration, it would seem, of the hermeneutic circle. Yet he somehow switches back to a prelinguistic moment—illusorily presocial, Castoriadis might say, since it does not seem to concern what he calls *the psychical monadic*—whose conception, in Ricœur, is consonant with a certain phenomenological tradition: "Before the institution," Ricœur says, "there is a living-together that

⁴⁴Here, we are examining the effectively actual give-and-take discussion, limited by France Culture's programming schedule, not final or subsequent or best positions.

has a certain continuity, that can be instituted, can reinstitute itself, can constitute itself through rupture upon the background of transmitted, received legacies." While we would have no access to or experience of the "first moment of language," Ricœur seems to believe that we all have access together to an entire preinstitutional realm of "living-together" that would *only subsequently* become instituted. How one can "live together" without or "before the institution" remains a mystery, and in fact it is just an incoherency, even from the psychoanalytic viewpoint, Castoriadis insists: "that's not living-together but 'killing one another' or 'having incest with each other.'"⁴⁵

But where Ricœur's hermeneutically harmonizing act of privileging continuities perhaps best reveals itself as a failure or refusal to recognize social creations is in the continuation and completion of his previous statement: such legacies, he says, "provid[e], if I may put it thus, the *basso continuo*," that is, the harmony underlying Baroque musical performances. In early July 1997, for one of his very last public interventions before his hospitalization and death, Castoriadis spoke at a last-minute colloquium improvised by the great jazz and classical composer Ornette Coleman during a La Villette Jazz Festival series organized in Coleman's honor.⁴⁶ Castoriadis chose to speak about musical creation, reminding the audience in particular of an extemporaneous

⁴⁵A better way of examining the problem than a simple affirmation or denial of "the hermeneutic circle" would perhaps be to recognize that Ricœur is always *trying and failing to square the phenomenological-hermeneutic circle*. When phenomenological description falls short, he has recourse to a cultural-hermeneutic interpretation, and when cultural hermeneutics poses a problem, he returns to phenomenology's insistence on direct experience in order to rule out cultural creations deemed beyond its scope. The only way out would then be to become effectively aware of the vicious cycle in which one is engaged by forming the desire to break the repetition of this to-and-fro movement.

⁴⁶Curtis's two Castoriadis volumes published in English that year, *CR* and *WIF*, included cover art provided by Coleman. Castoriadis had attended an earlier Parisian concert by Coleman at the invitation of Coleman's longtime collaborator, the dancer-choreographer Clara Gibson Maxwell.

element in early modern music: the *basso continuo* was an improvisational, often collective or at least multiple, musical form and feature (practiced by the instrumentalists of the “continuo group”) that was instituted prior to the full rationalization of written composition in classical Western music.⁴⁷ If an improvisatory practice like the *basso continuo* sounds to Ricœur as some sort of drone element requiring acknowledgment and perhaps interpretation but no further reflections on its distinctively creative and improvisational, historical mode of being, one ultimately wonders whether Ricœur has the ears to hear and the wherewithal to think creation *as it happens*. He may have been—according to Michel’s borrowing, in his “Repères biographiques,” of a phrase that served as the title for a collection of Raymond Aron interviews⁴⁸—simply an “engaged spectator” at a *spectacle*, unaware of or indifferent to what is truly involved in a risky collective effort at harmonization.⁴⁹ By way of contrast, Castoriadis, constantly frustrated by Ricœur’s blithe assurances that they both share the same ideas (so long as the word *creation* is not admitted into the conversation), finally blurts out what should have been evident to every reader of *IIS*, including Ricœur, since 1975: “As for me, I am trying to think a social imaginary, that is to say, a creativity of the

⁴⁷Concerted efforts to revive such improvisational elements in “serious music” began in the twentieth century, especially in the “Third Stream” movement, and also in the work of composer Coleman, who combined the “free jazz” forms he invented in the Fifties with classical compositional features he taught himself (with instructional help from the inventor of the term *Third Stream*, Gunther Schuller). A Lincoln Center Festival celebrating Coleman’s life (1930-2015) and work took place in July 2017.

⁴⁸Michel also describes Ricœur there (p. 74) as part of the “antitotalitarian left,” a sweet-smelling yet wholly negative whiff of a praiseful phrase that ranks him among the likes of Bernard-Henri Lévy—but not Castoriadis, who insisted on the need to bring out “the *positive* content of socialism” beyond any critique of totalitarianism.

⁴⁹Coleman’s musical theory, *Harmolodics*, accords equal value to *harmony*, *motion* (or *rhythm*), and *melody* while allowing all instrumentalists to intervene at any time to move the music in new directions.

social-historical field, of the social-historical collectivity as such.”

At the start of “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” ([IIS](#), p. 14), Castoriadis had declared that “we have arrived at the point where we have to choose between remaining Marxist and remaining revolutionaries.” Later in that same concluding *S. ou B.* article, when exploring autonomy’s relation to the Freudian psychoanalytic project, he made a key distinction ([IIS](#), pp. 104-105) that applies even to “those who have made the most radical attempts to pursue the interrogation and the critique of tacit presuppositions to the end—whether this be Plato, Descartes, Kant, Marx or Freud himself.” Recognizing a tendency toward a return to a heteronomous attitude, Castoriadis also noted that “there are indeed those who—like Plato and Freud—never *gave up* this pursuit, and there are those who stopped.” Keeping in mind the (far from exhaustive) background information we have provided here, the reader of our translation of this radio dialogue may begin to consider on which side she would place Ricœur.

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As we explained in the [first Anonymous Translator’s foreword](#), each of [Curtis’s Forewords](#)

set the book in perspective, provided information the reader might not otherwise have available to her, anticipated common questions and criticisms, presented the translator himself and his motivations so as not to hide these essential aspects of the process of presenting the work of another in the International Republic of Letters, and yet carefully avoided taking advantage of the translator’s position as the first reader in a foreign language of the writings being presented so that the labor of autonomous interpretation and creative reception of the author’s ideas would remain within the [reader’s] purview.

In turn, each of the Forewords composed by the Anonymous

Translator⁵⁰ has endeavored to follow along this path while attempting, in various ways, to expand it and blaze new trails.

In light of the foregoing, we may now wonder why, even though it was preceded by “labor of” and qualified by “autonomous” as well as immediately supplemented by “creative reception,” the word *interpretation* appeared in that [first Anonymous Translator's foreword](#).⁵¹ Curtis himself had explained the above-mentioned obligation of the translator to provide an account of his work experience (so that the reader may be well informed when judging not only his translation work but also the character of his labor) as follows in his [Translator's Foreword](#) to Claude Lefort's *Writing: The Political Test*: “If I, as first reader in English of a foreign author's writings, had indeed been moved by his work (and what would my translation be worth if I hadn't been?), I should also be able to express in my introductory remarks some of that moving experience, to face up to that risky *épreuve* [test], as Lefort himself might say.” In other words, self-reflection on his self-transformation should, each time, be integral to the translator's own account of his self-activity. In this respect, it may be asked whether phenomenology and hermeneutics might foster self-understanding on the translator's part and whether the translator, who is said to trans-fer (“carry across”) meaning from one language to another, must himself be regarded as a hermeneutician of sorts whose accounts of his experiences of meaning-displacement (if that is indeed what is involved) would necessarily be phenomenological in character. After all, a translator—for example, one of those people wearing headphones while whispering into a microphone at the United Nations—is called an *interpreter*.

⁵⁰See the updated list, above, p. ii.

⁵¹In a [later Foreword](#) where we quoted this [first Anonymous Translator's Foreword](#), we deliberately added the following footnote (pp. xxxv-xxxvi, n. 55) when quoting Castoriadis's “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” about linking “an elucidation . . . and a transformation of the world”: “The elided phrase, ‘a comprehension (but I prefer the term elucidation),’ is there to indicate the limitations of a merely interpretive understanding.”

Might we draw upon Ricœur as “phenomenological-hermeneutical source” here in order to answer or at least investigate this twofold question? When Ricœur talks about translation in his radio dialogue with Castoriadis, however, the well suddenly dries up. Certainly, he introduces “absolute alterity” as another foil, as he had done with “absolute novelty”—thus “overdeterm[ing],” as Castoriadis had said about Merleau-Ponty, his “philosophical decisions” via the maintenance of an illusory (in fact, theological) standard for the understanding of social-historical creation: “What language reveals to us, what is manifested in language more exactly, is not only that translation has been possible but also that it has been successful. We will never be faced with a tongue [*langue*] that would be absolutely untranslatable.” Castoriadis swiftly responds, in characteristic fashion: “No more than being faced with an absolutely translatable text, except if it’s a series of mathematical formulae.” But instead of continuing along his phenomenological-hermeneutic line that involves for him an explicit denial of human creation, here Ricœur erects, as an obstacle to further concrete communication, a Habermasian communication-theory version of Kantian Idealism. What he says next has little to do, it seems, with either phenomenological description or hermeneutic interpretation: “To speak of the limits of translation,” he replies, “supposes that one would have at least been able to begin and, to a certain extent, to succeed in this operation.” This yields but a bare tautology—the *translator translates*—that offers no understanding of the experience or process of any effectively actual translator faced with choices of meaning and confronted with possibilities of misunderstanding. There is instead said to be a “translatability in principle” that *itself* (!) “makes there be one humanity.” What about flesh-and-blood translators and their instituting activity in all this? Their social doing via social saying is alienated to an abstract principle.

Curiously, here Ricœur finally pronounces the word *creation*, at least in the form of “recreat[ion].” It is this “translatability in principle”—not the work of any particular translator, but, in mathematical terms, the mere proposition of nonnull success (> 0)—that allegedly “recreates the

continuity of meaning within the discontinuity of the productions and strokes of configuration.” Later, evoking Donald Davidson’s “very idea of conceptual schemes,” which he (mis)translates as *schèmes organisateurs* (“organizing schemes”—yes, the abstract principle of nonnull success in actual fact guarantees very little when it presumes to replace human activity), Ricœur elaborates on his formal view of minimum translation achievement, arguing that if such schemes

were radically other, we would not even know them; we know that they are other only because we have encountered the limits of translation—but a translation that, as a consequence, has, as we have already said, succeeded. We must really place at that moment one’s relation with what is different, doing so in terms of the idea of humanity as the model for successful communication.

Ricœur admits that such a “model” is “an idea, in the Kantian sense of the word, that is to say, a regulative idea.” He reaffirms this alienating Idealism when he claims that “[i]t is this regulative idea that makes humanity hold together, that gives it the signifying coexistence of not being several humanities but, rather, a single humanity.” No explanation, of course, how that might really work, on the experiential or interpretational level. It may be doubted, moreover, that the Nazi racial designation of Jews as *subhumans* concerned primarily or principally a problem of Yiddish-German/German-Yiddish translation, or that increased understanding through better translation ($> 0 + x$, where x is a positive rational number) would have prevented the Final Solution. Or as Castoriadis, bringing in Aztecs, Greeks, Nazis, and Russian totalitarians one last time, put it in reply to Ricœur’s subsequent Kantian evocation of “a practical Reason”:

No, there is a human making/doing [*un faire human*], a reflective making/doing, which raises itself to the

level of the political⁵² and that, as such, absolutely has to incorporate ethics, the ethical moment. Thinking the unity of humanity? Yes, but the human sacrifices committed by the Aztecs, the massacre of the Melians by my ancestors, the Athenians, Auschwitz, the Gulag—I don't see the translation that could bring me close to *that* humanity. The monstrous is too easily evacuated; Hannah Arendt, in her book on totalitarianism, said that the phenomenon of totalitarianism collapses the traditional categories for understanding history. And she was right.

Those “traditional categories for understanding history” that have “collapse[d]” under the weight of the monstrousness of totalitarianism are what Castoriadis considered the “inherited thought” present in what Michel pompously called “the hermeneutic sciences.”

There is, however, another sense in French of the word *interprète* than “interpreter” as practical (as opposed to practicing) translator ever enjoying, by definition, short-term success: an *interprète* can also be a performer, a kind of artist, theatrical, musical, or otherwise. Ricœur hints at this in the sentence he speaks right after his overly optimistic assertion of a “single humanity” whose very existence would be assured by nothing more nor other than a regulative Idea: “True, this is a task, but at least we know that we are not working for nothing when we make the effort.” How is “making effort”—the reflexive verb *s'efforcer*—related to *task*? In eschewing mere “end-gaining” (to borrow F. M. Alexander's term), reflection on *how* one does a task and on what the task in question is can reflect back on the execution thereof while expanding pertinent communication with others. There is an artistic (world-altering and world-creating) element to translation as well as to writing an account thereof. As Castoriadis wrote of art, in a non-Kantian vein (“Social Transformation and Cultural Creation,” 1979; now in [PSW3](#),

⁵²One wonders if *le politique* (“the political”) here is a transcription error for *la politique* (politics).

p. 308): “Not: presentation in representation of the discursively unrepresentable Ideas of Reason, as Kant would have it; but rather creation of a meaning that is neither Idea nor Reason, that is organized without being ‘logical’ and that creates its own referent as more ‘real’ than anything ‘real’ that could be ‘re-presented.’” And replying to Ricœur’s deduction of one humanity from translation’s bare success, Castoriadis proposes “another way of seeing that. Roman Jakobson taught us that every successful translation in the domain of poetry is not strictly cognitive, that it is in fact a new creation. I believe that the entire problem lies there.”

Ricœur later seems to have come to recognize that such disembodied “translatability in principle” represented an impasse. In *On Translation* (2004),⁵³ a collection of three talks and texts from 1997, 1998, and 1999, he declared:

I suggest that we need to get beyond these theoretical alternatives, translatable *versus* untranslatable, and to replace them with new practical alternatives, stemming from the very exercise of translation, the faithfulness *versus* betrayal alternatives, even if this means admitting that the practice of translation remains a risky operation which is always in search of its theory.⁵⁴ At the end, we will see that the difficulties of intralinguistic translation confirm this embarrassing admission.

⁵³Trans. Eileen Brennan with an introduction by Richard Kearney (London: Routledge, 2006). It is beyond the purview of the present Translator’s Foreword to examine Ricœur’s *On Translation* in its own right.

⁵⁴As 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.)”

Ricœur offered this revision during an October 1998 lecture, “The Paradigm of Translation,” that was first published in *Esprit* in June 1999. In a striking coincidence,⁵⁵ Curtis declared in his [Translator's Foreword](#) to Lefort's *Writing: The Political Test* (2000), dated “April-May 1999”:

That old adage, *traduttore, traditore* (the translator as traitor), is manifestly true, yet it speaks to the translator's experience only to the extent that the translator has also adopted the apparently contradictory, yet truly complementary, project of rendering a “faithful” translation—which is an infinite and impossible yet unavoidably necessary as well as positively desirable task.

Indeed, both “embarrassment” and “risk” figure in Curtis's reflections on translating Lefort, as they do in this near-simultaneous passage from Ricœur's *On Translation*. As for our project of providing electro-samizdat Castoriadis/Cardan translations as a public service accompanied by self-reflective translator's forewords, we, too, have not ceased trying to think further and more deeply about “the practice of translation,” its “very exercise,” while *remaining attuned to creation and destruction as they happen in all their forms*, fifty years after Paul Kantner wrote: “I see changes, changes, all around me are changes. It's a wild time!”

—August 2017

⁵⁵It may be assumed that neither Ricœur nor Curtis was following closely the other's thoughts on translation, which appeared in print almost simultaneously.

On the Translation

It is greatly fortunate that, under current circumstances, the present volume has been able to benefit from the eye of a professional copy editor, as had also been the case with Castoriadis volumes published by commercial and academic presses. The copy editor is to be thanked for his/her invaluable assistance in copyediting, in proofreading, and in making a considerable number of highly useful editorial suggestions. The reader's indulgence, and her suggestions for improvements in subsequent editions, would nevertheless be most appreciated, as some errors may, of course, still be extant. For questions of terminology, the reader is referred to David Ames Curtis's Appendix I: Glossary in [PSW1](#) and Appendix C: Glossary in [PSW3](#), as well as to his "On the Translation" in [WIF](#).⁵⁶

We note here simply a list of the various English-language words and phrases Castoriadis or his interviewers employed in the original French-language versions: self building and body building (both presented as two words), teenager market (in quotation marks), self-reference (though with accents as in *référence*), lobbies, and fast foods.

⁵⁶Curtis may be contacted at curtis@msh-paris.fr. It may be possible to persuade him to publish a list of errata, which could then form the basis for a second edition; the same procedure could be used for [RTI\(TBS\)](#), [FT\(P&K\)](#), and [ASA\(RPT\)](#).

**POSTSCRIPT ON
INSIGNIFICANCY**

INCLUDING

**MORE INTERVIEWS AND
DISCUSSIONS ON
THE RISING TIDE OF
INSIGNIFICANCY**

FOLLOWED BY

**SIX DIALOGUES
FOUR PORTRAITS
and
TWO BOOK REVIEWS**



PART ONE
POSTSCRIPT ON INSIGNIFICANCY



Corneille, Key Dissident*

We miss the voice of Cornelius Castoriadis, the jubilation in his voice that keeps on repeating “We who are desirous or we who are delirious?” We miss seeing through his window the Bir Hakeim bridge and the elevated *Métro* line, as well as the light on the Seine that morning in November 1996.

What he was saying when he dismissed both “antirevolutionary communism” and Neoliberalism with its “singular thought [*pensée unique*],” its “nonthought,” comes at just the right moment for us in these times of “Balladurian Trotskyists.”¹

There was no question of giving in or giving up. He sank neither into aesthetic renunciation nor into Mitterrandian cynicism nor into the kind of well-fed apathy that says, “It’s all the same; we’ve seen it all, and all is in vain.”

He saw this tide of insignificance rising {not just} in a political elite that has been reduced to implementing Neoliberal fundamentalism but also—by way of consequence—in the “citizen” who has withdrawn from the life of the City because of rising unemployment and a general sense of job insecurity. Unemployment brings with it social exclusion; job insecurity brings with it submissiveness. Whence the

*Daniel Mermet, “Corneille, dissident essentiel,” *P-SI*, pp. 7-9. Reprinted in *P-SID*, pp. 11-13. The following epigraph by Mermet appeared on p. 9 (p. 7 of the new edition): “In memory of Cornelius Castoriadis, who passed away on December 26, 1997, we rebroadcast the interview he granted us a year earlier. Sometimes one wants to go back over words, retracing ideas with ‘fresh ears.’ When I offered to send you the transcript of this interview, I did not expect, from all quarters, from every horizon, and from all circles such a level of interest for one of the most fecund and lucid thoughts of our time. Through the breach one senses that all is not lost! —Daniel Mermet, *Là-bas*, *si j’y suis* radio show on the France Inter radio network.” [“Corneille” is an affectionate name for Cornelius used by some of Castoriadis’s French-speaking friends. —T/E]

¹After the neo-Gaullists won legislative elections in 1993, Édouard Balladur was appointed France’s Prime Minister by French Socialist President François Mitterrand. Balladur continued in the post until the 1995 presidential election of his rival on the right, Jacques Chirac. —T/E

dismantling of the sense of a shared fate. Silently, we have consented, we have “collaborated” in this tremendous regression, which is a form of nonthinking that produces this nonsociety, this rising tide of insignificance, this social racism. “The major problem is not unemployment; it is from the start and still profit,” Corneille kept on saying.²

Opposite those who cloud the issues and complicate things unnecessarily, Castoriadis, placing all his hopes in the social imaginary, sought till the end a radical path. “I am a revolutionary who is in favor of radical changes,” he said a few weeks before his death.³ “I don’t think that one could make the French capitalist system, such as it is, operate in a free, egalitarian, and just manner.” A revolutionary, he kept on saying throughout his life, “We do not philosophize . . . in order to save the revolution . . . but in order to save our thought, and our coherency.”⁴

Yet Castoriadis’s voice cannot be limited to just one register. A philosopher and sociologist, he was also an economist and psychoanalyst, “a titan of thought, enormous,

²This may be a paraphrase of a passage from “I Am a Revolutionary” (see below, in the present tome). —T/E

³Castoriadis died December 26, 1997. Born in Greece [actually he was born in what was then known as Constantinople, moving to Athens with his family at the age of a few months—T/E], he settled in 1945 in Paris, where he created the today mythical review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. In 1968, along with Edgar Morin and Claude Lefort, he published *Mai 68: la brèche* [see “The Anticipated Revolution,” (now in *PSW3*) —T/E]. In 1975, he published *L’Institution imaginaire de la société* (*The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. 1987), his most important work. In 1978, he began the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* (Crossroads in the labyrinth) series. It was following the publication of the fourth volume in this series, entitled *La Montée de l’insignifiance* (The Rising tide of insignificance) that he received us in November 1996 for the present interview. [The English-language version of this tome, *RTI(TBS)*, includes several of these texts; others had already appeared in *WIF* and *CR*. The quotation appearing in the body of the text, before and after the present footnote, is from “I Am a Revolutionary,” though with the order of the two parts reversed there. —T/E]

⁴“Done and To Be Done” (1989; *CR*, p. 361). —T/E

beyond the norm,” as Edgar Morin said.⁵ His thought was encyclopedic, a jubilation of living and struggling, and this struggle was carnal, spiritual, infinite, yet always in motion, leaving behind grist for our mill and bread on the board.

Daniel Mermet, February 7, 1998

⁵Edgar Morin, “Castoriadis, un titan de l’esprit” (obituary), *Le Monde*, December 30, 1997: 1, 10. The encyclopedic nature of Castoriadis’s thought, mentioned by Mermet in the next sentence, also is mentioned in this obituary.—T/E

Neither God, Nor Caesar, Nor Tribune*

Daniel Mermet: Why did you choose this title, *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*? Is that what characterizes the present era?

C.C.: What characterizes the contemporary world is, of course, its crises, its contradictions, its oppositions, its fractures, and so on, but what strikes me above all is precisely its *insignificance*. Take the quarrel between Right and Left. It has now lost its meaning—not because there would be nothing to fuel a political quarrel, and even a very great political quarrel, but because both sides are saying the same thing. Since 1983, the French Socialists have implemented a policy, then Édouard Balladur came in and he implemented the same policy, then the Socialists returned and they implemented with Pierre Bérégovoy the same policy, Balladur returned and he implemented the same policy, Jacques Chirac won the {1995 presidential} elections saying “I am going to do something else” and he implemented the same policy. This distinction is meaningless.

D.M.: What are the mechanisms by which this political class is reduced to impotence? That’s the big word today, *impotence*.

C.C.: It’s not a big word, and they are impotent, that’s for sure. The only thing they can do is go with the current, that is to say, apply the ultraliberal policy {in the Continental European sense of conservative ideological advocacy of “free market” policies} that is in fashion. The Socialists haven’t done anything else, and I don’t think that they would do anything else if they returned to power. They aren’t statesmen [*politiques*], in my opinion, but politicians—in the sense of micropoliticians. They’re people who chase after votes by any means whatsoever.

*Daniel Mermet and Cornelius Castoriadis, published as “Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun! . . .,” *P-SI*, pp. 11-37. Reprinted in *P-SID*, pp. 15-41. Excerpts from this interview appeared in the form of a written text, minus the questions, as “[Contre le conformisme généralisé. Stopper la montée de l’insignifiance.](#)” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1998: 22-23 and was reprinted, also without the questions, in *Le Monde Diplomatique. Manière de voir*, 52 (*Penser le XXIe Siècle*), July-August 2000: 18-21.

D.M.: Political marketing, for example?

C.C.: Yes, marketing. They have no program. Their goal is to remain in power or return to power, and for that end they are capable of anything. Bill Clinton conducted his electoral campaign solely by following the polls: “If I say this, will it go down well?”—opting each time for what suits public opinion. As another guy said, “I’m their leader, *therefore* I follow them.”¹ What is fascinating in this era—as in every era, moreover—is how things conspire with one another. There is an intrinsic tie between this sort of nullity of politics, this becoming-null of politics, and this insignificancy in other fields, in the arts, in philosophy, or in literature. That’s the spirit of the times: without any conspiracy on the part of any specific power one could point to, everything conspires together, in the sense of respiring, of breathing, of heading in the same direction, thereby yielding the same result, that is to say, insignificancy.

D.M.: How is one to do politics?

C.C.: Politics is a bizarre craft. Even this kind of politics. Why? Because it presupposes two abilities that have no intrinsic relation. The first is acceding to power. If one does not accede to power, one can have the best ideas in the world, but that’s of no use; there is, therefore, an art of acceding to power. The second ability, once one is in power, is to do something with it, that is to say, govern. Napoleon knew how to govern. Georges Clemenceau knew how to govern. Winston Churchill knew how to govern. Those were people who aren’t in my line of politics, but I am describing here a historical type. Nothing guarantees that someone who knows how to govern would know, for all that, how to accede to power. In absolute monarchy, what was involved in acceding to power? It was to flatter the king; it was to be in the good graces of Madame de Pompadour. Today, in our pseudodemocracy, acceding to power means being telegenic, sniffing out public opinion. Once in power, what does one

¹Paraphrase of a quotation attributed, perhaps apocryphally, to Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin, a French political figure who was active in the events leading up to the French Revolution of February 1848 and who participated in the Provisional Government. —T/E

do? What Mr. Chirac is doing today {in 1996}: nothing. One goes along with the current. If need be, one switches positions because one glimpses that, in order to accede to power, one had to tell a bunch of stories and that these stories are inapplicable.

D.M.: You say *pseudodemocracy* . . .

C.C.: I have always thought that so-called representative democracy is not true democracy. Its representatives hardly represent at all the people who elect them. First of all, they represent themselves or represent special interests, lobbies, and so on. And even if that weren't the case, to say that someone is going to represent me for five years {as in France} without being subject to recall boils down to saying that I am stripped of my sovereignty as a people. Jean-Jacques Rousseau already said this: The English believe that they are free because they elect representatives every five years, but they are free only one day every five years, on election day.²

And even that isn't true: the election is rigged. Not that the ballot boxes would be stuffed; it's rigged because the choices are defined in advance. No one asked the people what they want to vote on. They are told, for example: "Vote for or against the Maastricht Treaty." But who drew up that treaty? It wasn't us. There is that marvelous phrase from Aristotle in answer to the question of who is a citizen. "A citizen is someone who is capable of governing and being governed."³ Are there forty million citizens in France at this time? Why wouldn't they be capable of governing? Because all of political life aims precisely at making them forget what they've learned about governing. It is aimed at convincing them that there are experts to whom affairs should be entrusted. There is, therefore, political countereducation. While people ought to become accustomed to exercising all

²*The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (Book 3, chapter 15). —T/E

³Paraphrase of Aristotle *Politics* 1283b40-1284a1. Aristotle had stated earlier (1275a1) that "we must begin by asking, Who is the citizen, and what is the meaning of the term?" (Barnes translation). —T/E

sorts of responsibilities and taking initiatives, they are accustomed to following the choices others present to them or voting for such choices. And as people are far from being idiots, the result is that they believe in it less and less and they become cynical, falling into a sort of political apathy.

D.M.: As far as citizen responsibility and the exercise of democracy are concerned, do you think that things were better in the past? Or that elsewhere, today, it's better than in France?

C.C.: No, it's certainly not better elsewhere today; it can even be worse. Once again, the American elections show that. But in the past, it was better from two standpoints.

In modern societies—let's say, starting from the American and French Revolutions until around World War II—there still was some lively social and political conflict. People rose up in opposition. People demonstrated. They did not demonstrate in favor of this or that line of the national railroad company [*de la SNCF*]*—I'm not saying that that's contemptible, at least it's an objective—but in the past workers demonstrated or went on strike for political causes and not just for tiny corporatist interests. There were big issues that concerned all wage earners. Those struggles have left their mark on the past two centuries. Now, what one observes at present is a drop in activity on people's part. And here we have a vicious circle. The more people withdraw from activity, the more a few bureaucrats, politicians, and so-called responsible officials take over. They have a good justification: "I am taking the initiative because people aren't doing anything."* And the more those people dominate the situation, the more other people say to themselves, "There's no point in joining in; there are enough who are involved; and, in any case, nothing can be done." That's the first standpoint.

The second standpoint, which is connected with the first one, involves the breakdown of the great political ideologies. I'm talking about either revolutionary ideologies or truly reformist ideologies, the ones that really wanted to change things in society. For a thousand and one reasons, those ideologies have been discredited; they have ceased to correspond to the era, to people's aspirations, to the societal

situation, and to historical experience. There was this huge event that is the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communism. Can you point out to me a single person, among the politicians—not to mention the political wheeler-dealers [*politicards*—on the Left who would have truly reflected on what happened and on the reasons why it happened, and who, as is stupidly said, has drawn some lessons from it? And yet a development of this sort, in its initial phase—the rise of this monstrosity, totalitarianism, the Gulag, etc.—and then in its collapse, merited some very in-depth reflection, as well as a conclusion, about what a movement aimed at changing society can do, is to do, is not to do, and cannot do. No reflection at all! How then do you want what is called the people, the masses, to arrive at its own conclusions when it is not truly enlightened?

You were talking to me about the role of intellectuals. What are these intellectuals doing? What did they do with Ronald Reagan, with Margaret Thatcher, and with French Socialism? What they did was trot back out the hardline Liberalism {in the Continental sense} of the early nineteenth century, the kind that had been combated for one hundred and fifty years and that would have led society to catastrophe, since, ultimately, old Marx wasn't entirely wrong. If capitalism had been left to its own devices, it would have collapsed one hundred times over. There would have been a crisis of overproduction every year. Why didn't it collapse? Because laboring people struggled. They forced wage increases, thus creating huge markets for domestic consumption. They forced reductions in working time, which absorbed all the unemployment created by technological changes. People are surprised that there is unemployment now. But since 1940, working time has not appreciably diminished. Today, one quibbles over "thirty-nine hours," "thirty-eight-and-a-half hours," "thirty-seven-and-three-quarter hours"—it's grotesque! So, there was this return to Liberalism, and I don't see how Europe will be able to get out of this crisis. "We should trust the market," the Liberals tell us. But what these Neoliberals are saying today was refuted by academic economists themselves in the 1930s. They showed that there can be no equilibrium in capitalist societies.

These economists were not revolutionaries, nor were they Marxists! They showed that everything the Liberals are telling us about the virtues of that market, which is said to guarantee the best possible allocation and to guarantee resources, the fairest possible income distribution, is a bunch of nonsense! All that was demonstrated and has never been refuted. But there is this great political-economic offensive on the part of the dominant governing strata, which may be symbolized by the names of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and even, moreover, by François Mitterrand! He said, “OK, you’ve had your fun. Now, we’re going to lay you off, *cut the fat* from industry”—we’re going to eliminate the “bad fat,” as Mr. Alain Juppé says⁴—“and then you’ll see that, in the long run, the market will guarantee your well-being.” In the long run. While we’re waiting, there’s 12.5 percent official unemployment in France!

D.M.: Why is there no opposition to that sort of Liberalism?

C.C.: I don’t know; it’s extraordinary. People have spoken about a sort of terrorism of “singular thought” [*la pensée unique*], that is to say, a kind of nonthought. It is singular in the sense that it’s the first form of thought that would be complete nonthought. No one dares oppose Liberal {free-marketeer} singular thought. At present, there is a sort of triumphant discourse on the Right that is not a discourse; it’s empty affirmations, an empty discourse. And behind this discourse is something else, which is the weightiest thing.

What was Liberal ideology in its heyday? Around 1850, it was a great ideology because people believed in progress. “*Enrichissez-vous!*”⁵ Those Liberals thought that progress would bring about a rise in economic well-being. But

⁴Alain Juppé was France’s neo-Gaullist Prime Minister under President Jacques Chirac from 1995 to 1997. It was in 1995 that he spoke of eliminating the “bad fat” from public-sector jobs. Juppé was later (2004) convicted for his role in a no-show government jobs scandal. —T/E

⁵Literally, “enrich yourself” or “get rich,” an exhortation attributed to the July Monarchy political leader François Guizot in the 1840s as the necessary prelude to having enough money to merit the suffrage. —T/E

even when one didn't get rich oneself, among the exploited classes things were heading in the direction of less labor, less arduous labor, and being less exhausted and besotted by industry. That was the great theme of the age. Benjamin Constant says it: "The workers cannot vote, because they are exhausted and besotted by industry" (he says it straight out; people were honest back then), "therefore an income-based suffrage is necessary."⁶ But later on, working time decreased, literacy increased, education spread, and there was enlightenment, which was no longer the subversive Enlightenment of the eighteenth century but enlightenment all the same, and it spread within society. Science develops, humanity is humanized, societies become civilized, and little by little, asymptotically, one arrives at a society in which there is practically no more exploitation: this representative democracy will tend to become a true democracy.

D.M.: Not bad, huh?

C.C.: Not bad. Except that it didn't work, and it didn't work like that. The rest was achieved, but people were not humanized, society was not civilized for all that, the capitalists didn't mellow out—we see that now. It's not people's fault; it's the system. The result of this is that, inside, people no longer believe in that idea. The mood, the general disposition is that of resignation. Today, what rules is resignation, even among the representatives of Liberalism. What is the great argument at this time? "Maybe things are bad, but the other side of the alternative is worse." Everything may be summed up in that. True, this has had a chilling effect

⁶This may be a paraphrase of a passage from "[The Natural Division of the Inhabitants of the Same Territory into Two Classes](#)" (chapter 2 of book 10 in Benjamin Constant's *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*, ed. Étienne Hofmann, trans. Dennis O'Keeffe, intro. Nicholas Capaldi [Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2003], p. 201): "In our present societies, birth in the country and the age of majority are not enough to confer on men the qualities proper to the exercise of citizenship rights. Those whom poverty holds in endless dependence and condemns from childhood to laboring work, are neither more informed than children as to public affairs, nor have a greater stake than foreigners in a national prosperity, with whose elements they are not familiar and whose benefits they share only indirectly." —T/E

on a lot of people. They tell themselves, “If things change too much, we’re heading toward a new Gulag.” That’s what’s behind this ideological exhaustion of our era, and I believe that we will exit from it only through the resurgence of a powerful critique of the system and a renaissance in people’s activity, in their participation in common affairs. It’s a tautology to say that, but one must wait, one must hope, and one must work in that direction.

D.M.: Here we have some of the causes and some of the symptoms of this rising tide of insignificance: a political elite reduced to being the flunkey for the World Company,⁷ intellectual types playing the role of guard dogs, with the media having betrayed their role as a countervailing force.

C.C.: Yet at this time one senses a flicker of fresh civic activity. Here and there, people are nonetheless beginning to understand that “crisis” is not the fate of modernity to which one would have to submit, “to adapt oneself,” for fear of being treated as archaic. Then arises the problem of what role citizens are to play and that of each person’s competency in exercising her democratic rights and duties, with the goal—a sweet and lovely utopia—of exiting from the generalized conformism.⁸

D.M.: Your colleague and comrade Edgar Morin speaks of the generalist and the specialist. Politics requires both—the generalist who knows nearly nothing about a bit of everything and the specialist who knows everything about a single thing but not about the rest. How is one to make a good citizen?

C.C.: That dilemma has been posed since Plato’s time. Plato said that the philosophers, those who are above the specialists, are to rule. In Plato’s theory, they have a view of everything. The other side of the alternative was the Athenian

⁷The World Company is a fictional US-based multinational corporation (all of whose staff members are clones of Sylvester Stallone in suit-and-tie) that appears on the Canal+ French network’s puppet show *Les Guignols de l’info*, an ongoing spoof of the evening news. —T/E

⁸See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

democracy. What did those Athenians do? Here we have something interesting. The Greeks invented elections. That's a historically attested fact. Perhaps they were wrong to have done so, but they invented elections! Who did one elect in Athens? One didn't elect magistrates. Magistrates were designated by lot or by rotation. Remember that for Aristotle, a citizen is he who is capable of governing and being governed. Everyone is capable of governing, so one draws lots. Why? Because politics is not an affair for specialists. There is no science of politics. There is opinion, the *doxa* of the Greeks; there is no *epist m*.⁹ I point out to you, moreover, that the idea that there are no specialists in politics and that opinions are equally good is the sole reasonable justification for majority rule. Therefore, among the Greeks, the people decide and magistrates are drawn by lot or designated by rotation. There are specialized activities. For, the Athenians weren't crazy; they did some rather significant things: they made the Parthenon, and so on. For such specialized activities—setting up shipyards, building temples, conducting war—specialists are required. Therefore, those people were elected. That's what elections are. For, *election* means election of the best. And on what does one base oneself for electing the best? Well, here the people's education comes in, for it is led to choose. One has a first election; one makes mistakes; one notices that Pericles, for example, is a terrible general. Well, he isn't reelected, or he's even recalled. But the postulate that this *doxa*, this opinion, is shared equally is, of course, a wholly theoretical postulate. To flesh it out a bit, such *doxa* has to be cultivated. And how can a *doxa* about governance be cultivated? Well, by governing. Therefore, democracy—this is what's important—is a matter of citizens' education, which is nonexistent today.

Recently, a magazine published some statistics indicating that 60 percent of the deputies in the French parliament admit that they don't understand anything about economics. These are French deputies who make decisions, who decide all the time! They vote on the budget, they raise

⁹Theoretically grounded knowledge, science.

or lower taxes, etc. In truth, like governmental ministers, these deputies are slaves to their technical experts. They have their experts, but those experts, too, have prejudices or preferences. And if you follow closely the operation of a government, of a large bureaucracy—as I did under other circumstances¹⁰—you’ll see that those who run things trust the experts who share their opinions. You will always find an economist to tell you, “Yes, yes, this has to be done.” Or a military expert who will tell you, “Yes, we need nuclear weapons” or “We don’t need nuclear weapons.” Everything and its opposite. This is a completely stupid game, and this is how we are governed at present. So, that’s Morin’s and Plato’s dilemma: specialists or generalists. Specialists in the service of people—that’s the issue. Not in the service of a few politicians. And people learning to govern by governing.

D.M.: You spoke of education. And you said, “That’s not the case today.” More generally, what mode of education do you envision? In what way is one to share knowledge?

C.C.: There are a lot of things that would have to change before one could speak of genuine educative action on the political level. The principal form of education in politics is active participation in affairs, which implies a transformation of institutions so that they would prompt such participation and render such participation possible—whereas present-day institutions rebuff, remove, and dissuade people from participating in affairs. But that isn’t enough. People have to be educated, and educated for society’s governance. They must be educated in public affairs. Present-day education has nothing to do with that. One learns specialized things. Certainly, one learns to read and to write. That’s very good; everyone has to know how to read and write. Indeed, among the Athenians, there were no illiterates; pretty much everyone knew how to read, and that’s why the laws were inscribed on marble. Everyone could read, and thus the famous saying, “Ignorance of the law is no excuse” made

¹⁰Castoriadis worked at the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development from 1948 to 1970; see the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview: <http://www.agorainternational.org/enccaiint.pdf>.
—T/E

sense. Today, you can be sentenced because you committed an offense, whereas you cannot know the law and yet you are still told, “You are not supposed to be ignorant of the law.” So, education would have to be centered much more around common affairs. One would have to make the mechanisms of the economy, the mechanisms of society, and the mechanisms of politics understood. One is incapable of teaching history. History as it is taught to children bores them stiff, whereas it could become their passion. A genuine anatomy of contemporary society would have to be taught: how it is, how it operates.

D.M.: You have spoken and written a lot about the May '68 movement, which, along with Morin and Claude Lefort, you have called “the breach.”¹¹ Today, this period is a golden age for the young who regret not having lived through it. If one thinks back to that time, one is struck by its blindness, those revolutionary, romantic, absolute, doctrinaire, baseless acts of behavior undertaken in complete ignorance. When people tell me today, “You’re lucky, you lived through '68,” I respond, “Wait a minute, guys, the cultural level, the level of knowledge, was much lower than it is today.” Am I right?

C.C.: Yes, you’re right from a certain standpoint that is quite important. But I believe that it isn’t so much a question of levels of knowledge. It was the enormous domination of ideology in the strict and, I would say, bad sense of the term. It cannot be said that the Maoists didn’t know; they had been indoctrinated or they had indoctrinated themselves. Why did they accept indoctrination? Why did they indoctrinate themselves? Because they had a need to be indoctrinated. They had a need to believe. And that has been the great scourge of the revolutionary movement from the start.

D.M.: But man is a religious animal.

C.C.: Man is a religious animal, and that’s not at all a

¹¹Morin, Lefort, and Castoriadis (under the pseudonym Jean-Marc Coudray) published *Mai 68: la brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements* in June 1968 (Paris: Fayard). Castoriadis’s contribution, “The Anticipated Revolution,” is now available in translation in [PSW3](#). —T/E

compliment. Aristotle, whom I don't stop quoting and whom I revere, said one time something that is truly a gross . . . well, one cannot say *blunder* when it comes to Aristotle, but even still. When he says, "Man is an animal that desires knowledge,"¹² that's wrong. Man is not an animal that desires knowledge. Man is an animal that desires belief, desires the certainty of a belief, whence the grip of religions, whence the grip of political ideologies. In the workers' movement at the outset, one encountered a very critical attitude. When you take those two lines from *The Internationale*, which was the song of the Paris Commune, take the second stanza {of the original French version}: There is no supreme savior/Neither God—*exit* religion—nor Caesar—*exit* Napoleon III—nor tribune—*exit* Lenin, right?¹³ People had this need for belief. They fulfilled it as they could, some with Maoism, others with Trotskyism and even with Stalinism. For, one of the paradoxical results of May '68 was not only to have put some flesh on the Maoist or Trotskyist skeleton but to have increased recruitment once again for the French Communist Party, and this despite the CP's absolutely abominable attitude during the May events and at the time of the Grenelle Accords.¹⁴ In what way are we wiser today than in May 1968? I believe that perhaps the result of both the aftereffects of May '68 and developments in the Eastern countries as well as of general changes in society has been to make people become

¹²Paraphrase of Aristotle *Metaphysics* 980a21. Castoriadis provides a proper quotation—"All human beings, by their nature, desire knowledge."—in "Passion and Knowledge" (1992), [FT\(P&K\)](#), p. 255. See also [ASA\(RPT\)](#), p. 258. —T/E

¹³In the original French lyrics, "supreme savoir" is in the plural. —T/E

¹⁴In "The Anticipated Revolution" (now in [PSW3](#); see especially pp. 143-44), Castoriadis analyzes "the unbelievable swindle of the Grenelle Accords"—an agreement between government officials and the trade-union bureaucracies (including the Confédération Générale du Travail, the trade-union federation close to the French CP) that attempted to displace the May '68 movement onto a narrowly economic terrain but that was "rejected en masse" by the workers as inadequate even on that level. —T/E

much more critical. That is very important. Of course, there is a fringe that still seeks faith instead in Scientology, religious cults—or fundamentalism, but that’s in other countries and not so much among us in France. Yet people have become much more critical, much more skeptical—which also inhibits their actions, of course. In the Funeral Oration delivered to the Athenians, Pericles said, “We are the only ones for whom reflection does not inhibit action.” That’s wonderful! He adds, “As for the others, either they do not reflect and they are rash, committing blunders, or, in reflecting, they do nothing because they tell themselves: ‘There is this discourse and there is the opposite one.’”¹⁵ Now, we too, as a matter of fact, are going through a phase of inhibition at the present time; that’s for sure. Once bitten, twice shy. People have had a taste of all that and say to themselves, “Enough of the big speeches and all the rest!” Indeed, what is needed are not big speeches but true speeches. That’s what isn’t being projected on the social level, if I may put it that way.

D.M.: Alongside whom do you want to struggle? And against whom and against what?

C.C.: I want to struggle alongside practically everyone. With the entire population, or almost everyone, and against the system, and therefore against the 3 to 5 percent of people who are truly the system’s unremitting and uneducable defenders. That, in my view, is the way things are divided. I believe that, at present, everyone in society—apart from 3 or 5 percent—has a personal and fundamental interest in things changing.

D.M.: But what would you say to the younger generations?

C.C.: If you posed this as an organizational question, I would say that there is no answer. At present, that, too, is the question. One of my buddies from the review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Daniel Mothé—who is still my buddy—had written the following extraordinary phrase: “Even the Roman Empire,

¹⁵A loose paraphrase from Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.40. —T/E

when it disappeared, left behind it ruins; the workers' movement is leaving behind only refuse."¹⁶ How does one get oneself organized now? The question is: "How can one get oneself organized?" This question runs up against the same obstacle, that is to say, that people are not active enough at present to do something like that. In order to take on an organization of that type, one must be ready to sacrifice more than an hour one Saturday evening. It involves a significant amount of work, and very few people are disposed to do that at present. That's why, since 1960, I have described the era as an era of privatization.¹⁷ People have fallen back on their little circle, the nuclear family, not even their extended family. In May '68, one said "subway-workday-sleep away [*métro-boulot-dodo*]" ; now it's "subway-workday-TV-sleep away."

D.M.: And not work? Can one erase work?

C.C.: Subway-workday-TV-sleep away and the Unemployment Office [*ANPE*].

D.M.: And being scared stiff of losing one's job! There's general panic. It's "I no longer have one or I am no longer going to have one."

C.C.: Yes, absolutely.

D.M.: What also makes your thinking so rich is your psychoanalytic outlook on the world. It is not so often that one has several lights to shine like that. Raoul Vaneigem published a book whose title is *Nous qui désirons sans fin* (We who are endlessly desirous).¹⁸

C.C.: We who are delirious? Oh that, yes! We who are delirious! (*Laughter*)

D.M.: What do you think of this irreducible desire that makes history go on?

C.C.: Well, there is, in any case, a desire that is

¹⁶Daniel Mothé, "Les ouvriers et la culture," *S. ou B.*, 30 (April 1960): 37, quoted by Castoriadis in "Recommencing the Revolution" (1964; now in [PSW3](#), p. 43 and [CR](#), p. 124). —T/E

¹⁷See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)). —T/E

¹⁸Paris: Cherche Midi, 1996. —T/E

irreducible. Really, . . . That's a huge chapter. Moreover, that hasn't always been true; it's a relatively modern phenomenon. If you take archaic societies or traditional societies, there is no irreducible desire. We're not talking here about desire from the psychoanalytic standpoint. We're talking about desire as it is transformed via people's socialization. Those societies are repetitive societies. Now, it is precisely during the modern age that there is a liberation, in all senses of the term, from the constraints of individuals' socialization. One is told, for example, "You will take a wife from such and such a clan or such and such a family. You will have one woman in your life. If you have two of them, or two men, it will be done on the sly; it will be a transgression. You will have one social status; it will be this and not something else." There's a marvelous thing in Marcel Proust, in the world of Combray. In Proust's family, someone—from a very good bourgeois background, the family he is describing—who had married a duchess or a princess had fallen. Even if he had money, even if he became someone who left his caste to rise higher, he became a gigolo. And to rise higher was to fall. But today, we have entered an age of limitlessness in all fields and we have a desire for infinity. Now, this liberation is, in a sense, a great conquest. There is no question of returning to societies based on repetition. But one must also learn—and that's one of my very great themes—learn to limit oneself on one's own [*s'autolimiter*], individually and collectively. And capitalist society today is a society that is, in my view, rushing headlong into the abyss from every standpoint because it's a society that does not know how to limit itself on its own. And a truly free society, an *autonomous society*, as I call it, has to know how to limit itself on its own.

D.M.: To limit is to prohibit. How is one to prohibit?

C.C.: No, not prohibiting in the repressive sense. Rather, knowing that there are things that one cannot do or that one must not even try to do or that one must not desire. Take, for example, the environment. We live in a free society on this marvelous planet we are in the process of destroying, and when I make this statement I am thinking about the marvels of this planet. I am thinking, for example, of the Aegean Sea, snow-covered mountains. I am thinking of the

view of the Pacific from the edge of Australia. I am thinking of Bali, the Indies, the French countryside that is in the process of being demolished and becoming depopulated. These are so many marvels that are being demolished. I think that we ought to be the gardeners of this planet. One would have to cultivate it—cultivating it as it is and for its own sake. And finding our life, our place, in relation to that. That's a huge task. And all that could take up a large part of people's leisure time, if they were liberated from work that is stupid, productive, repetitive, etc. Now, that is obviously very far not only from the present-day system but from what is, at present, the dominant imagination. The imaginary of our era is the imaginary of unlimited expansion; it's the accumulation of junk: a TV in every room, a personal computer in every room . . . that's what must be destroyed. The system leans on this imaginary that is there and that functions.

D.M.: What you are continually talking about here is freedom?

C.C.: Yes.

D.M.: Difficult freedom?¹⁹

C.C.: Oh, yes! Freedom is very difficult.

D.M.: Difficult democracy?

C.C.: Difficult democracy, on account of freedom, and difficult freedom on account of democracy; yes, absolutely. For, it is very easy to just let things go; man is a lazy animal, as has been said.²⁰ Here again, I return to my ancestors. There's a marvelous phrase in Thucydides, "One must choose: to rest or to be free." I believe that it is Pericles who says that to the Athenians: "If you want to be free, you have

¹⁹Mermet may or may not be referring to Emmanuel Levinas's 1963 book, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (trans. Seán Hand [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990]), and Castoriadis may or may not be aware of this unspoken reference to an author he often criticized. —T/E

²⁰[Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* \(1920\)](#) provides the following translation: "One may even say that man is a fairly lazy animal." —T/E

to work.”²¹ You cannot rest. You cannot sit in front of the TV. You think you’re free while channel surfing like some imbecile. You are not free; that’s a false freedom. Freedom is not only Buridan’s ass choosing between two stacks of hay. Freedom is activity. And it’s an activity that, at the same time, limits itself on its own, that is to say, knows that it can do everything but that *it is not to do everything*. That, for me, is the great problem of democracy and individualism.

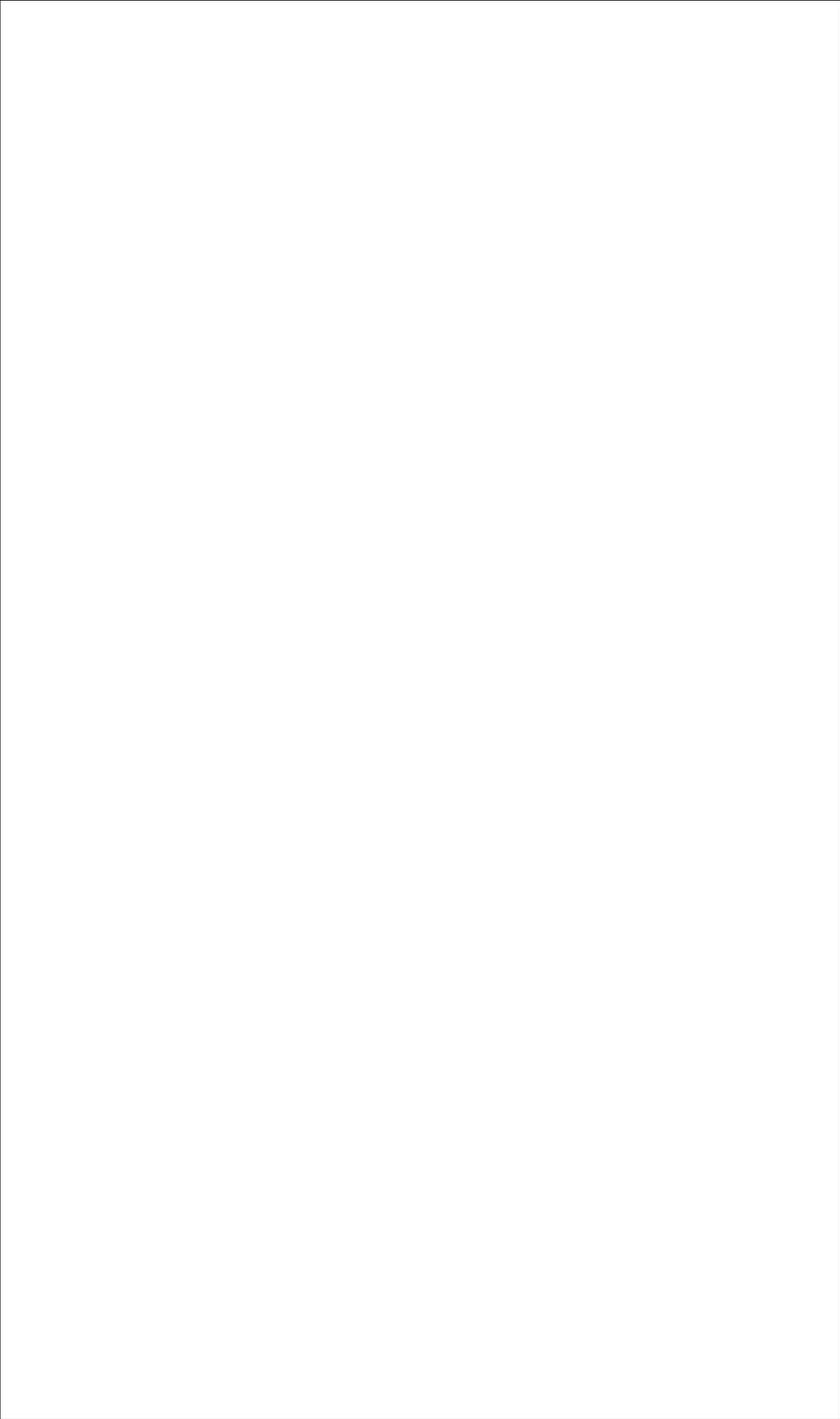
D.M.: Freedom is limits? Philosophizing is establishing limits?

C.C.: No, freedom is activity, and it’s activity that knows how to set its own limits. Philosophizing is thought. It’s the kind of thought that knows how to recognize that there are things we don’t know and that we will never know.

November 1996

²¹Perhaps Castoriadis is thinking of the passage in the Funeral Oration (2.43) where Pericles says (in the Rex Warner translation), “Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous. Let there be no relaxation in the face of the perils of war.” —T/E

PART TWO
MORE INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS
ON THE RISING TIDE OF INSIGNIFICANCY



Socialism or Barbarism*

London Solidarity's 1969 Introduction

In May 1961 a conference of revolutionary socialists was held in Paris, grouping representatives of "Pouvoir Ouvrier" (France), "Unità Proletaria" (Italy), "Socialism Reaffirmed" (Great Britain), and "Pouvoir Ouvrier Belge" (Belgium). This document is based on a text agreed upon by these groups.

The text is an attempt to redefine socialist objectives and methods of struggle in the light of the events of the last 40 years. Much has happened in these decades. Profound changes have occurred in the structure of capitalism. The promise of the October Revolution has not materialized. Instead, a monstrous bureaucracy has assumed power over large areas of the world. In the West, the traditional organizations of the working class have proved an enormous obstacle to working-class struggles and to the fulfillment of the wishes of ordinary people.

But there have been positive aspects, too, to this experience: the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (with its demands for workers' management of production, for the equalization of wages, for a Workers' Council Government)—the undiminished strength and combativeness of the working class at job level, their repeated attempts to control their conditions of work, the influence of the Shop Stewards' Movement, etc.—and, finally, the growth, in this country at least, of a mass movement against nuclear weapons, slowly moving toward a radical challenge to established society.

The "Left" meanwhile is floundering. It cannot even understand the changing world around it, let alone come to grips with it and mold it in the image of socialism. The very notion of what socialism is all about has become utterly bureaucratized. Ideas and slogans that were partially correct fifty years ago are repeated, parrot-wise, today. They evoke no echo for they are largely irrelevant to the problems now confronting us. It is hardly surprising that young people should shun the traditional organizations. Quite correctly, they see in them the mirror images of everything they reject.

**Socialism or Barbarism* is a statement, originally written in English, for a May 1961 international "conference of revolutionary socialists" held in Paris (London: Socialism Reaffirmed, no date). Reissued as Solidarity Pamphlet 11 (London: Solidarity, no date, with an Introduction dated May 1968, and London: Solidarity, no date, with an Introduction dated May 1969). In both the 1968 and 1969 reprints, the Introduction appears on pp. 1-2, the text on pp. 3-21, and, in the version we are using with the 1969 Introduction, a list of writings by "C. Castoriadis (P. Cardan)" appears on p. 22. That version has been lightly edited for consistency and clarity, with an Americanization of spellings.

28 MORE INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS

We do not publish this text as an abstract attempt at sociological analysis. We publish it because we believe it might serve as a basis first for a regrouping and later for a rebuilding of the revolutionary Left. The movement must be rebuilt from rock bottom.

In the words of our introduction of 1961, the task of theoretical reconstruction must

find a solid basis in the everyday experience of ordinary people. It presupposes a radical break with all present organizations, their ideology, their mentality, their methods of work, their actions. Everything that has existed and exists in the workers' movement (ideology, parties, unions, etc.) is irrevocably and irretrievably finished, rotten, integrated into exploiting society. There can be no miraculous solution. . . . Everything must be begun anew, but starting from the immense experience of a century of workers' struggles, and with a proletariat closer today to real solutions than it has ever been before.

The French events of May 1968 highlight both the correctness of this analysis and the urgency of the tasks ahead.

Of the various groups participating in the Paris Conference, Solidarity (previously "Socialism Reaffirmed") alone survives. Some of the original groups were organizationally premature. Others, after a long pioneering battle under the difficult conditions of a movement ahead of its time, have handed on the torch. Others yet have reverted to a more traditional type of political thinking. But the ideas have made their way. They are argued about today wherever revolutionaries meet to discuss politics. In one form or another they have now become part of contemporary revolutionary thought. (It is difficult to realize that ten years ago terms like "privatization," "depoliticization," the "consumer society"—or that concepts like the "traditional organizations," "self-activity," and "self-management"—were used only by infinitesimal minorities.)

On the scale of history the increasingly widespread acceptance of this kind of thinking far transcends in significance the perpetuation of this or that organization. Today dozens of small groups base themselves on these ideas; even larger organizations are being subverted by them. In France, in May 1968, the validity of these conceptions emerged through the real actions of men. (Daniel Cohn-Bendit, for instance, was specifically to state how profoundly they had molded his own political thinking.)

We are reprinting this text after an interval of several years. During this period the libertarian movement has grown in size, but it is still in a state of considerable confusion. We hope that the ideas outlined in this text will help equip it with a coherent and relevant guide to revolutionary action in the period that lies ahead.

May 1969

Socialism or Barbarism

1. Class Society Today

I. The Nature of Class Society

1. Capitalism remains a class society despite the great changes it has undergone in the course of the last century. The same struggle between the classes dominates social life. The same alternatives confront the working class: to submit to ever-increasing exploitation, alienation, and enslavement—or to eliminate the exploiting classes, to destroy their social system, and to establish working-class power. Only then will it be possible to reorganize society on a new basis and to give a new purpose to human life.

2. The relations of production remain the basis of the class structure of any society. In all countries of the world these relations are capitalist relations because they are based on wage labor. The wage earners, both as individuals and as a social group, are expropriated from the means of labor, from the products of labor, and from the control of their own activity. They are concentrated in enterprises of various sizes where they are subjected to the ruthless will of capital, personified in the bureaucratic managerial apparatus.

3. Society remains basically divided into two classes. One class disposes of the means of production (either in law or in fact—either individually or collectively). It manages both production and society in its own interests. It determines the distribution of the total social product and enforces it through its control of the State machine. The other class consists of wage earners whose means of life is the sale of their labor power, and who in the course of work merely execute orders imposed from above.

4. To an increasing degree, every sphere of productive life has been “proletarianized.” Capitalism has invaded all sectors of the economy. Even in the offices, the dominant social form has become the enterprise based on wage labor and organized on an industrial pattern.

Within industry there has been an increase of

“nonproductive” personnel, who in their turn are becoming “proletarianized.” Office staff, other “white-collar” workers in industry or commerce, and certain categories of government employees are henceforth just as much proletarians as are manual workers. They too are wage slaves. They too are submitted to a ruthless division of labor and perform mere tasks of execution, carefully measured and controlled from above. Because of the numerical increase of jobs of this type, they too are deprived of any real prospect of a change in their conditions of life.

Despite the illusions some may retain concerning the “status” they once enjoyed, these strata belong to the proletariat. This is shown quite clearly by the methods of organization and struggle they are increasingly compelled to resort to, in the defense of their most elementary interests.

II. The Working Class

5. The evolution of capitalism has not altered the essential features of working-class status in modern society.

In the field of production, the extraordinary increase in technical knowledge and the increased productivity of machines have resulted in an increased subjugation of the worker to capital. The utterly absurd nature of work under capitalism is being shown up more and more.

The struggle at the point of production dominates the whole organization of work. It even affects the evolution of technology. Because of working-class resistance to the bureaucratic organization of work, the capitalists have to impose ever increasing control in the factory over every aspect of working-class activity, whether individual or collective. This takes the form of an increasing division of labor, time-and-motion study, and a perpetual tendency to speed-up.

6. The division of tasks in modern industry is carried out to an absurd degree. The purpose is to convert the yield of the individual worker into something increasingly easy to measure, and therefore to control. The purpose is also to assist the imposition upon workers of methods of production against which they constantly rebel. The tempo of living labor is

increasingly subordinated to that of the machine.

The situation is only very superficially different in the automated sector of production. Here the sustained nervous tension, the loneliness, and the monotony of supervisory functions create the same sense of destruction of the worker as a human being. The same process takes place in office work and in other sectors of the economy.

Capitalist production is characterized by the total alienation of labor. The worker is reduced to the role of a simple "executant" of infinitely divided tasks. He is robbed of the control of his own activities. These have been rigidly drawn up, defined, and organized in the offices. He is converted into a mere instrument in the hands of those who manage production, into a mere appendage of the machine.

7. Despite a slowly increasing level of consumption, the status of the workers as workers has not fundamentally been altered. The working class remains exploited. It remains robbed of roughly half the product of its labor, which goes to the parasitic consumption of the exploiting class, to the expenditure of the exploiters' State, and into investments over which the workers have no control. The nature and objective of these investments are determined by the class nature of society, by the interests of its ruling class. A given pattern of investment serves to reinforce and reproduce a given type of social structure.

8. The fate of the workers in political and social life has not changed either. The workers remain a subordinated class. The whole orientation of modern society (of its economy, its State, its housing, its education, the objects it will consume and the news it will get, the questions of war and peace themselves) remains decided by a self-perpetuating minority. The mass of the population has no power whatsoever over this minority, be the society "democratic" or "totalitarian."

III. Contemporary Capitalism

9. The transformations undergone by capitalism during the last century show themselves primarily in the increasing concentration of both capital and managerial

functions.

In the countries of “private capitalism,” this concentration has taken certain well-known forms (monopolies, giant enterprises, trusts and holding companies, the creation of “satellite” companies around the big enterprises, cartels, agreements, professional associations of capitalists, etc.). But it also is shown more specifically by the new role played by the State.

The State has become the main economic factor in contemporary society. The modern capitalist State *absorbs* about 25 per cent of the total social product, *handles* (directly or indirectly) about 50 percent of this product, *owns* a substantial proportion of the total capital (often concentrated in key sectors such as coal and railways), and, finally, *acts* as a central agency for the regulation of the economy as a whole, in the interests of the capitalist class.

10. The concentration of capital and the increasing intervention of the capitalist State have resulted in certain changes in the capitalist economy itself. Some old problems have been solved, many new ones created. The failure to recognize these changes accounts for the sterility of much that passes as “Marxist analysis” today.

The ruling classes have succeeded in controlling the level of economic activity and in preventing major crises or depressions. This is a result both of the changing structure of the economy and of the conscious intervention of the State to stabilize economic activity and to guarantee its expansion. Unemployment has enormously diminished. The increase of wages is both more rapid and, especially, more regular than previously. This is a result both of working-class struggle and of a new policy on the part of the employers, aimed at buying discipline at the point of production in exchange for certain wage concessions. Wage increases now approximately follow increases in the productivity of labor. This means that the proportion of the total social product going to workers and to capitalists remains approximately constant.

An increase in mass consumption has become indispensable to the smooth functioning of the modern capitalist economy. It has in fact become an irreversible aspect of it. The old “image” of capitalism as characterized by

economic slumps, increasing unemployment, and stagnation—if not lowering—of living standards must be discarded. The reality of contemporary capitalism is the expansion of both production and consumption, interrupted by minor fluctuations. This expansion is obtained at the cost of an ever increasing exploitation and alienation of the producers in the course of their labor.

IV. Changing Structure of the Ruling Class

11. The concentration of capital through those various mechanisms has resulted in certain changes in the classical social structure. These relate to the social composition of the ruling class and to the means whereby individuals may accede to this class.

As the “rationalization” and organization from outside of all human activities becomes the dominant feature of capitalist society, bureaucratization spreads to all spheres of social life. In the process, inherited individual wealth becomes relatively less important as a means of access to the commanding positions of the economy and the State.

12. The “traditional” ruling class (based on heavy industry, manufacture, shipping, banking, insurance, etc.) is being forced to share, on an increasing scale, the functions of administration and management (both of the economy and of society at large) with a growing bureaucratic stratum.

This stratum is becoming an integral part of modern capitalist societies, indispensable to their “efficient” functioning, and reflecting deep and irreversible changes in the structure of their economies.

13. The bureaucracy has some of its roots in production. The concentration of capital and the “rationalization” of production from outside create the necessity for a bureaucratic apparatus in the factory. The function of this apparatus is to “manage” the labor process and the labor force and to coordinate the relations of the enterprise with the rest of the economy.

The bureaucracy also finds roots in the increasing number of individuals involved in the higher reaches of state activity (nationalized industries, government economic

agencies, etc.). This is a result of the profound changes that have taken place in the economic role of the State.

The bureaucracy finally finds its roots in the political and trade-union organizations of the working class itself. To straightjacket the workers, to integrate them more and more into the existing social order requires a specific apparatus. This apparatus participates to an increasing degree in the day-to-day management of capitalist society, of which it is an integral part.

The bureaucracy is not a homogeneous social formation. It has developed to varying degrees in various countries. Its economic basis is the final stage in the concentration of capital, namely, the tendency of monopoly capitalism to fuse completely with the State. In the countries of classical capitalism, the managerial bureaucracy is not based on any fundamentally new mode of production or new pattern of circulation of commodities. It is based on changes in the economic basis of capitalism itself.

14. The growth of the bureaucracy has profoundly altered the internal structure of the ruling class. New elements have had to be incorporated and the diffusion of privileges extended. New hierarchical relationships emerge.

The process has been a very uneven one, the resistance of the old ruling classes to fuse with the new strata varying considerably from place to place. It has varied according to the economic problems confronting the capitalists, according to the pressures of the working class for more radical solutions, and according to the degree of historical insight the rulers have achieved.

V. Persisting Contradictions in Capitalism

15. These modifications of capitalism have done nothing to lessen the contradictions of the system that lie in the field of production and work. These are the contradictions contained in the alienation of the worker.

Capitalism attempts by all possible means to transform the workers into mere executants of tasks decided by others, into mere cogs of its industrial machine. But if it succeeded in this attempt, capitalism would cease to function.

Capitalism constantly attempts to exclude the workers from the management of their own activities—but is at the same time constantly obliged to seek their participation.

This contradiction dominates every capitalist enterprise. It provides the framework within which the class struggle is constantly regenerated, whatever the level of wages.

16. Attempts by the capitalists to solve this contradiction by the “rationalization” of their enterprises, by Taylorism, by work-study methods, by the use of industrial sociologists and psychologists, by talk of the “importance of human relations” have all miserably failed. They have done nothing to lessen the intensity of the class struggle that today opposes workers and management, in every country in the world, in disputes concerning conditions and tempo of work and the control of human activity in the process of production.

17. Under a different form, the same contradiction is also to be found in every aspect of collective life. For instance, political life is organized in such a manner as to exclude the vast majority of the population from any effective management of their own affairs. The corollary is indifference and apathy. These in turn make it difficult for capitalist political institutions even to function according to the requirements of the capitalist class itself. A minimum of genuine participation is required to prevent these organizations from being shown up for the complete sham that they are.

18. The development and bureaucratization of capitalism have not lessened its irrationality and its fundamental anarchy. Both at the level of the factory and at the level of society as a whole, bureaucratic-capitalist management is a mixture of despotism and confusion that produces a fantastic human and material wastage.

The ruling classes and their bureaucratic apparatus constitute a small minority of society. They are separated both from the immense majority of mankind and from social reality itself. Because of this they are incapable of effectively managing even their own system, in their own interests. They are even less capable of solving the immense problems confronting humanity today.

Because of this, and despite the elimination of economic crises of the classical type, capitalism cannot and will never be able to avoid crises of another kind: moments when the irrationality of the whole system explodes in one way or another, bringing with it periodic breakdowns of the “normal” functioning of society.

19. The crisis of all capitalist institutions is deeper than ever. Day after day, capitalism demonstrates its incapacity to solve the problem of relations between men in the process of production. It also demonstrates its inability to solve any of the other major problems of social life in the twentieth century.

Its political institutions are an object of contempt for the general population, which is increasingly losing interest in “traditional” politics. There is a general decay of all its values: moral, political, social, and cultural. The crisis in the traditional conception of the family and the increasingly bureaucratic, artificial, and absurd nature of “education” in modern society have provoked, in all industrial countries, an immense revolt of youth. Youth today tries to live its life both outside and against established society. This has immense revolutionary implications.

20. The only objective the ruling class is still capable of proposing to humanity is the carrot of “a rising standard of living.” All that they mean by this is an increase in the consumption of material goods. But this increase is constantly outpaced by the increase in “needs” capitalist society automatically generates or quite artificially creates. The struggle for status and the acquisition of wealth are far more intense in an advanced industrial community than in a primitive African village.

The slow but regular increase in living standards, which is a feature of contemporary capitalism, is counteracted by the increasing fatigue and alienation at work. It does not lessen the smouldering dissatisfaction of millions of individuals with their conditions of life, nor does it lessen the underlying social tensions. We have only to look, for confirmation of this assertion, at the sustained nature of the class struggle in precisely those countries where working-class wages are highest.

VI. Russia, Eastern Europe, Etc.

21. The situation is fundamentally similar east of the Iron Curtain. In these countries, a bureaucracy has taken over the functions of management of the economy and the State previously performed by private capitalists. This bureaucracy manages production and decides in a sovereign manner, through its control of the State machine, on the distribution of the social product.

This bureaucracy was born either of the degeneration of the proletarian revolution (as in Russia) or through the incorporation of various countries into the sphere of Russian domination (as in Eastern Europe). In certain “backward” countries, the bureaucracy stepped into the political vacuum created by the complete disintegration of all established social relations. In countries such as China, for instance, it assumed its dominant position through the “leadership” it provided to the masses in revolt. The rise to power of the bureaucracy in these countries is assisted by the absence or relative weakness of a class-conscious proletariat capable of imposing *its own* solutions to the crisis of modern society.

22. In these countries, the bureaucracy has often revolutionized property relations, either expropriating or fusing with the traditional ruling classes. Nowhere, however, has it altered the relations of production, the contradiction between rulers and ruled in the production process.

These societies remain class societies. The class struggle continues within them. Its objectives are not merely a redistribution of the surplus value. It is also to determine which class (bureaucracy or proletariat) shall dominate production and society.

23. The centralization of economic life and a merciless dictatorship have allowed the bureaucracy in these countries to proceed with an extremely rapid accumulation of capital, based on an intense exploitation of labor. The bureaucracy has been able to industrialize the countries it dominates far more rapidly than private capitalism was ever able to do.

But industrialization is not socialism. Neither “nationalization” nor “planning” eliminates classes and the struggle between them. Whether they be in private hands or

“nationalized,” the means of production will never be genuinely collective property as long as the workers do not, *in fact*, dispose of them, in other words as long as the workers do not directly and totally manage production, determining both its methods and its objectives.

24. In these countries, the bureaucracy manages production in an absolute manner. It does so both at the level of the individual enterprise (where organization, methods of work, and patterns of remuneration do not differ in any respect from what pertains in a capitalist factory) and at the level of the economy as a whole. “Planning” is not subject to any kind of control by the masses. It is the instrument whereby the bureaucracy guides the whole of production in its own interests and fulfils its long-term objectives. The political dictatorship of the “Communist” Parties and their absolute control over all aspects of life are the indispensable means whereby the bureaucracy ensures its privileges and maintains its total domination over society.

2. The Socialist Program

25. *All* historical experience has shown that no reforms can alter the fate of the worker in capitalist society or solve the crisis confronting society. The program of yesterday’s reformists has been realized today in a whole series of countries. In the process, it has proved its own futility!

Historical experience has also shown that no stratum, category, or organization can achieve socialism “on behalf of” the proletariat and in its place. Socialism will be built only through the radical destruction of the present social system. To the extent that present society is more and more dominated by the bureaucracy, this means that socialism will be built only through the destruction of *all* bureaucracies (including those presenting themselves as the “leadership of the proletariat”).

This means that socialism will be achieved only through the autonomous and self-conscious activity of the working masses. “The emancipation of the working class is

the task of the working class itself.”²

26. Socialism does not only mean the abolition of private capitalism. It means the abolition of all dominating and privileged strata in society. It therefore implies the abolition of any social group claiming to manage production or the State “on behalf of the proletariat.”

27. The socialist revolution must proclaim and realize the expropriation of the capitalists and the suppression of the bureaucracy in the workshops, in the State, and in society at large. It must give the management of production in the factories to the workers (manual workers, employees, and technicians) who operate them.

The organs of this management will be assemblies of workers, shop assemblies, departmental assemblies, factory assemblies, and factory councils composed of elected representatives, revocable at all times.

Production will be planned according to human needs. A variety of alternative plans will be drawn up, electronic equipment being used to an increasing degree to work out the interrelated needs of various sectors of the economy. This is the purely *technical* aspect of planning. The implications of the various plans (in relation to such basic human questions as hours of work, level of consumption, level of investment) will then be presented to the people. A meaningful and genuine choice will become possible. This is the *political* aspect of planning.

All revenue derived from the exploitation of labor will be abolished. There will be equality of wages and pensions until it proves feasible to abolish money.

28. The State is the pivot of all systems of exploitation and oppression in contemporary society. The socialist revolution will have to destroy the State as an instrument of coercion, independent and separate from the bulk of the

²While this version of the formula is to be found in various places (including [Engels's Preface to the 1890 German Edition of Communist Manifesto](#)), Marx's 1864 draft for the "[General Rules of the International Working Men's Association](#)" and subsequent editions begins as follows: "Considering, That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves, . . ." —T/E

population.

The administration of production and the forms of social organization will be radically different from the present ones. The new institutions will be managed by those who work in them. The standing army and the police force will be abolished. The “armed people” themselves will defend the revolutionary power against attempts at counterrevolution. The main threats to the new society will come not only from the deposed ruling class. It will also come from bureaucratic tendencies within the working class itself, particularly those advocating the delegation of industrial management or political power to “specialized” minorities.

The functions of government will be in the hands of assemblies of elected and permanently revocable representatives of the factory committees and of other sections of the working population.

29. The socialist revolution will give a new purpose to man’s life. The elimination of bureaucratic anarchy and waste, combined with the changed attitude of workers toward the production machine over which they have real mastery, will permit society to develop production and consumption to unsuspected degrees. But this development will *not* be the fundamental preoccupation of the socialist revolution.

From the very onset, the revolution will have consciously to turn toward the transformation of man. It will devote great efforts to changing the very nature of work (from subjection to the machine, which it is today, into an endeavor where creative faculties will be allowed to flourish to the full). It will have to create a universal education of a totally new kind. It will have to abolish the barriers between education and work, between intellectual and manual training, between school and real life. It will have to abolish the division between town and country and seek to create integrated human communities.

30. These objectives must not be relegated to an unforeseeable “communist” future. If they are, people will feel that things have not really changed in the areas that concern them most. The activity of the masses will wane. For the sake of “efficiency,” “specialists” will step in and start making the decisions themselves. They may do so at first with

the best of revolutionary intentions, but the revolution will soon begin to degenerate.

The socialist revolution only stands a chance of being victorious (as a *socialist* revolution) if from the very first day it is capable of showing mankind a *new* way forward and a *new* pattern of life in all fields of human activity.

3. Degeneration of Working-Class Organizations

31. In the countries of modern capitalism, the class struggle shows contradictory aspects.

In production, the struggle shows an intensity never witnessed hitherto. It takes place in the field of purely economic demands but also, and, on an increasing scale, around questions concerning conditions of work and life in the factory. The “wildcat” strikes in the USA and the “unofficial” strikes in Britain provide repeated examples of this tendency.³

But outside the factory, the class struggle does not manifest itself as it used to. Or it only manifests itself in an abortive way, deformed by the bureaucratic working-class organizations. Occasionally, these mobilize particular categories of workers and bring them out in “disciplined” and bureaucratically managed strikes. Or else the “struggle” finds expression in purely electoral support for the so-called workers’ parties.

In the field of politics, the present period is characterized by an almost total absence of proletarian participation. This phenomenon (which has been called apathy or depoliticization) goes much deeper than any previous or temporary fluctuation in the level of working-class political activity.

32. In today’s society, the proletariat does not appear to have objectives of its own. It does not mobilize itself—except in an electoral sense—to support the parties that claim to represent it. The active members of these parties

³See “Wildcat Strikes in the American Automobile Industry” and “Automation Strikes in England” (1956; now in [PSW2](#)). —T/E

are rarely workers.

Looked at from the outside, the proletariat appears utterly dominated by its political and trade-union machines. But this domination is an increasingly hollow one. It masks a total absence of working-class participation. The support is purely passive.

The roots of this situation are to be found in two intimately interrelated processes: the evolution of modern capitalism and the bureaucratization of working-class organizations.

33. The degeneration of working-class organizations is not due to "bad leaders" who "betray." The problem has much deeper roots. It is due primarily to the pressures and influences of capitalist society on the proletarian movement. Originally created to overthrow bourgeois society, the political and trade-union organizations of the working class have increasingly adopted the objectives, methods, philosophy, and patterns of organization of the very society they were striving to supersede. There has developed within their ranks an increasing division between leaders and led, order-givers and order-takers. This has culminated in the development of a working-class bureaucracy that can be neither removed nor controlled. This bureaucracy pursues objectives of its own.

34. The traditional organizations come forward with claims to "lead" the working class. In reality, they see the class as a mass to be maneuvered, according to the preconceived ideas of those who dominate the particular Party machine. They all see the objective of working-class emancipation as an increased degree of working-class participation in general "prosperity."

The reformists claim that this can be achieved by a better organization of traditional capitalism. The Stalinists and Trotskyists claim that what is needed is a change in the formal ownership of the means of production and planning from above. Their *common philosophy* boils down to an increase in production and consumption guaranteed by the rule of an elite of managers, seated at the summit of a new hierarchy based on "ability," "experience," "devotion to the cause," etc. . . . This objective is no different from the

essential objectives of contemporary capitalism itself.

35. The degeneration is not due to the intrinsic evils of organization (as some anarchists would claim). Nor is it due to the fact that reformists and Stalinists have “wrong ideas” and provide “bad leadership” (as sundry Trotskyists and Leninists still maintain). Still less is it due to the bad influence of particular individuals (Gaitskell, Stalin, etc. . . .).

What it really reflects is the fact that, even when struggling to overthrow the capitalist system, the working class remains a partial prisoner of the system, and this in a much more subtle way than is usually understood. It remains a prisoner because it continues to conceive of *its* liberation as a task to be entrusted to the leaders of certain organizations to whom the class can confidently delegate its historical role.

36. The bureaucratized working-class organizations, parties, and unions have long ceased to express the historical interests of the workers. The reformist bureaucracy aims at securing a place for itself in the management of the capitalist system as it is. The Stalinist bureaucracy aims at instituting in various countries a regime of the Russian type where it would itself become the dominant social group. In the meantime, the Stalinist bureaucracy aims at using the working class in the West as pawns for the foreign policy of the Russian bloc.

37. Despite their periodic conflicts with the ruling class, both reformist and Stalinist parties and unions have as their ultimate objective the integration of the proletariat into class society. They are the vehicles through which capitalist ideas, attitudes, and mentality seep into the proletariat. They seek to canalize and control all manifestations of working-class revolt against the existing social order. They seek to limit the more extreme excesses of the system, the better to maintain exploitation within “tolerable” limits. They give the workers the idea that they are genuinely represented and that they “participate” in the management of society. Finally, and above all, they repeatedly negotiate wage concessions in exchange for an increased subjugation of the working class in the process of production itself.

38. The political and trade-union organizations of the working class are confronted with an insoluble dilemma. On the one hand, they are institutions belonging to established

society. On the other hand, they aim at maintaining within their framework a class whose conditions of life and work drive it to destroy that very society.

The individual participation of revolutionaries in these organizations should be determined by prevailing conditions (degree of working-class composition and participation, national traditions, nature of the organizations, etc.). But it is out of the question for revolutionaries to take over important posts in these parties or unions or for the revolutionary organizations to set themselves the target of “reforming” or “capturing” them. Working-class illusions about the possibility of “democratizing” or changing these outfits must not be encouraged and must in fact be exposed.

The organizations the working class needs must base themselves on a totally different ideology and structure and use entirely different methods of struggle.

39. Apathy and depoliticization result from bureaucratic degeneration. The working-class organizations have become indistinguishable from bourgeois political institutions. They bemoan the lack of working-class participation, but each time the workers attempt massively to participate they shout that the struggle is “unofficial” or against the “best interests” of the union or of the Party.

The bureaucratic organizations prevent the active intervention of workers. They prostitute the very idea of socialism, which they see as a mere external modification of existing society, not requiring the active participation of the masses.

40. Apathy and depoliticization also result from the transformations undergone by capitalist society. Economic expansion, full employment, and the gradual increase in wage rates mean that for a whole period (which has not yet come to an end) the illusion of progress still affects the working class. A higher standard of living appears possible and becomes one of the main preoccupations. This attitude is deliberately and very skillfully fostered and manipulated by capitalism, for its own ends.

4. The Way Forward

41. The working class is undergoing a profound experience of modern capitalist society. Possibilities are steadily increasing for workers to achieve the deepest possible insight into their real condition and to understand the real problems they will have to face in order to free themselves in production.

The steady increase of consumption of a capitalist type creates its own problems. Goods in increasing quantity are bought at the cost of increasing exhaustion at work (this often makes the enjoyment of the goods quite impossible!). “Needs” appear to be never ending. The absurd rat race after a ceaselessly increasing standard of living generates its own resistances. These help loosen the grip the ruling class exerts on this method of manipulating the masses.

Workers will increasingly see the key problem confronting them as that of their condition, as human beings, within production and at work. This problem is quite insoluble within capitalist society, whatever the level of wages. The problem confronting workers will become more and more explicitly that of transforming production itself; in other words, that of workers’ management.

42. In parallel with this development is the growth of working-class experience of its own bureaucratic organizations. This will help it understand that the only valid solution to its problems is through autonomous action, through taking its fate into its own hands.

43. There is factual evidence that the working class is going through precisely such an experience. Increasing numbers of strikes in Britain and in the USA relate to conditions in the factory. This problem is gradually becoming the central one confronting the working class. Even if only implicitly and to a small degree, it is the question of management of the enterprise and of production that is raised every time the workers challenge managerial rights.⁴

The increasing number of “wildcat” strikes in the

⁴See “Workers Confront the Bureaucracy” (1956; now in [PSW2](#)). —T/E

USA and of “unofficial” strikes in Britain show clearly that many sections of the working class are beginning to understand the real nature of the trade-union bureaucracy.

The same problems, in all their breadth, were at the center of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. During this great uprising the workers sought both to destroy the bureaucracy as such and to impose their own rule over production, through their workers’ councils, the organs of their own power.

44. To rise above its present situation, the working class must build its revolutionary organizations. It is more than ever obvious that such organizations are needed to assist workers in the class struggle today. This was shown very clearly by the recent experience of the Belgian General Strike.⁵

5. The Revolutionary Organization

45. The formation of a new revolutionary organization will be meaningless (and indeed impossible) unless it bases its ideas, its program, its structure, and its methods of action on the historical experience of the working class, particularly that of the last 40 years. This means it must draw the full lessons of the period of bureaucratization and that it must break with all that is mere ritual or hangover from the past. Only in this way will it be able to provide answers to the real and often new problems that will be posed to the working class in the period to come.

46. Both the conception of the crisis of modern society and the critique of capitalism must be radically changed. The critique of production and work under capitalism must be at the center of the preoccupations of the revolutionary organization. We must give up the idea that capitalism creates rational factories and rational machines and that it organizes work “efficiently” although somewhat brutally and for the wrong ends. Instead, we must express what every worker in every country sees very clearly: that work has become absurd,

⁵See “The Signification of the Belgian Strikes” (1961; now in [PSW3](#)).
—T/E

that it means the constant oppression and mutilation of workers, and that the bureaucratic organization of work means endless confusion and waste.

Material poverty must, of course, be exposed, where it exists. But the content of consumption under capitalism must also be exposed. It is not enough to criticize the smallness of the education budgets: we must denounce the content of capitalist education. We must denounce the concept of the school as an activity apart from life and society. It is not enough to demand more subsidies for housing: we must denounce the idea of barrack-towns and the way of life they entail.

It is not enough to denounce the present government as representing the interests of a privileged class. We must also denounce the whole form and content of contemporary politics as a business for “specialists,” concerned merely with a small number of circumscribed questions. A revolutionary organization must break with traditional politics. It must show that revolutionary politics are not confined to talk of wages, government, and international affairs, but that they deal with everything that concerns man and his social life.

47.⁶ The confusion about the socialist program created by the degenerated organizations (whether reformist, Stalinist, or Trotskyist) must be radically exposed. The idea that socialism means only the nationalization of the means of production and planning—and that its essential aim is an increase in production and consumption—must pitilessly be denounced. The identity of these views with the profound orientation of capitalism itself must constantly be shown.

Socialism is workers’ management of production and of society and the power of the workers’ councils. This must be boldly proclaimed and illustrated from historical experience. The essential content of socialism is the

⁶Points 47 to 53 involve a rewriting, with some passages retained verbatim, of the concluding notes 2 to 13 from “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)). On the close similarities between that final section of “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” and a later text, “Recommending the Revolution” (written in 1963 and published the next year), see [PSW3](#), p. 55 n. 23. —T/E

restitution to men of the domination over their own life, the transformation of labor from an absurd means of bread-winning into the free and creative action of individuals and groups, the constitution of integrated human communities, and the union of the culture and the life of men.

This content of socialism should not be shamefully hidden as some kind of abstract speculation concerning an indeterminate future. It should be put forward as the only answer to the problems that torture and stifle society today. The socialist program should be presented for what it is: a program for the humanization of labor and of society. Socialism is not a backyard of leisure attached to the industrial prison. It is not transistors for the prisoners. It is the destruction of the industrial prison itself.

48. The traditional organizations base themselves on the idea that economic demands are the central problem for the workers and that capitalism is incapable of satisfying them. This idea must be repudiated, for it no longer accurately corresponds to reality.

The activity of the revolutionary organization in the unions should not be based on outbidding other tendencies on economic demands. These are often supported by the unions and are eventually realizable by the capitalist system without major difficulty.

The ability of the system to grant such wage increases is in fact the basis of the permanent reformism of the unions. Contemporary capitalism can live only by granting increases in wages, and for that the bureaucratized and reformist unions are indispensable to it.

This does not mean that revolutionaries should quit the unions or cease to fight for economic demands. It means, however, that neither of these points has the central importance that was formerly given to it.

49. Exploitation in contemporary society takes on more and more the form of a hierarchical relationship. The "need" for such a hierarchical organization is defended by both the capitalists and the workers' organizations. It has in fact become the last ideological support for the whole system.

The revolutionary movement must organize a systematic struggle against the ideology of hierarchy in all its

manifestations, including the hierarchy of salaries and jobs in the factory and in the workers' own organizations.

50. In all struggles, the way in which the result is obtained is at least as important as what is obtained. Even from the point of view of efficiency, actions organized and led by the workers themselves are superior to actions decided and led bureaucratically. They alone create the conditions of progress, for they alone teach the workers to run their own affairs.

The first rule guiding the activity of the revolutionary movement should be that its interventions aim not at replacing but at developing the initiative and the autonomy of the workers.

51. Even when the struggles in production reach a great intensity, it is difficult for workers to pass from their own experience to an understanding of the problems of society as a whole. In this field, the revolutionary organization has a most important task to fulfil.

This task must not be confused with sterile agitation or speculation concerning incidents in the political life of the capitalist or degenerated workers' parties. It means showing that the system *always* functions against the workers and that they cannot solve their problems without abolishing both capitalism and bureaucracy and without completely reconstructing society. It means pointing out to workers that there is a profound and intimate analogy between their fate as producers and their fate as men in society. Neither the one nor the other can be modified without abolishing the division of society into a class that makes the decisions and a class that merely executes orders. Only through long and patient work in this direction will it be possible to pose anew—and in correct terms—the problem of mobilizing the workers on general questions.

52.⁷ The revolt of youth in modern society and the break between the generations are without common measure with the previous conflicts of generations. Youth today no

⁷Compare the strong similarities between point 52 here and point 43 in "Recommencing the Revolution" ([PSW3](#), pp. 52-53). —T/E

longer opposes adults with a view to taking their place in an established and accepted system. They refuse this system. They no longer recognize its value. Contemporary society is losing its hold on the generations it produces. The rupture is particularly brutal in politics.

The vast majority of politically active workers and supporters of traditional “left” organizations, whatever their good faith and good will, cannot make their reconversion. They remain trapped in the ideology of a previous period. They repeat mechanically the lessons and phrases learnt long ago, phrases that are now empty of all revolutionary content. They remain attached to forms of action and organization that have collapsed. The traditional organizations of the Left succeed less and less in recruiting youth. In the eyes of young people, nothing separates these organizations from the moth-eaten and rotten parties of privilege they meet on coming into the political world.

The revolutionary movement will be able to give a positive meaning to the immense revolt of contemporary youth and make of it the ferment of social revolution if it can express what youth is looking for and if it can show youth effective methods of struggle against the world it is rejecting.

53. Ideas must be changed on the relation between the proletariat and the revolutionary organization. The organization is not, and cannot be, the “leadership” of the proletariat. It should be seen as an instrument of the proletarian struggle.

The role of the organization is to help workers in struggle and to contribute toward clarifying and generalizing their experiences. The organization pursues these aims by the use of all methods consistent with its final objectives: the development by the proletariat of a lasting consciousness and ability to manage its own affairs.

54. The revolutionary organization will not be able to fight the tendency toward bureaucracy (constantly engendered under capitalist conditions) unless it functions itself according to the principles of proletarian democracy and in a consciously antibureaucratic manner. This implies a total rejection of “democratic centralism” and all other forms of organization that encourage bureaucratization.

Genuinely revolutionary organization implies (a) the widest autonomy of all the local groups, (b) direct democracy rather than delegation of decision-taking to be applied wherever possible, and (c) centralization, where necessary, to be achieved through delegates elected and revocable at any time by their local groups.

More than constitutional guarantees are required, however, to defeat the tendency toward bureaucracy. This will be overcome only to the extent that a genuinely collective participation of all members can be achieved, both in relation to activities and in relation to the formulation of policy.

55. Revolutionary consciousness cannot be generated by propaganda alone. The revolutionary organization must participate in the struggles of workers and other sections of the population, both assisting them and learning from them.

While unconditionally defending the struggles of workers for their immediate interests, the organization should put forward suggestions for linking these immediate struggles with the historical objectives of the proletarian movement (demands against wage differentials, demands opposing the alienation of workers in production). The organization should support all methods that make possible collective action and control by the workers of their own struggles (elected and revocable strike committees, mass meetings of workers before important decisions are made, etc.). It should denounce bureaucratic forms of organization and propagate the idea of more representative institutions (such as the shop stewards' movement). It should, finally, seek to achieve the widest possible solidarity with workers engaged in struggle, seek to disseminate accurate information about these struggles, and point out the lessons to be drawn from them.

56. The revolutionary organization should also seek to bring closer together the proletarian struggle and the struggle of other sections of the population, equally deprived of any effective say in the management of the affairs that concern them most. The antiwar movement is particularly important in this respect. Both provide radical challenges to established society. Both necessitate a type of action only possible outside of the traditional organizations. Both command the enthusiasm of youth. Both are capable of generating new

forms of struggle and of organization profoundly relevant to the socialist future.

Part of the propaganda and activities of the revolutionary organization should be directed toward new layers of wage earners (white-collar workers, office workers, students, and intellectuals). The similarity between their objectives and those of the working class should repeatedly be pointed out, as should be the only possible solution to both: the complete democratization of society through the socialist revolution.

57. Revolutionary propaganda must go even further, however. It must generalize the experiences of the working class in order to raise its struggle from the level of the factory to that of society as a whole. This implies a critique of capitalist society in all its aspects, along the general lines we have here outlined. It also means bringing back to the working class the real program of socialism: collective management of a genuinely human society.

A Thoroughgoing Shakeup of All Forms of Social Life: An Introductory Interview*

CHRISTIAN DESCAMPS: You reject the Trotskyist notion of a *degenerated workers' State* as well as that of the bourgeois State or state capitalism, and you are trying to construct, while using Marxist methodology, the notion of a new socioeconomic class, the bureaucracy.

C.C.: The concept of bureaucracy is, as one knows, rather old. And the idea of a new class, as one now knows, had been put forward by opponents in the USSR even as early as the 1920s. It was, in a sense, an inevitable conclusion for a Marxist as soon as he noted that exploitation and oppression had been restored. Trotsky hardly spoke of those things. He always preferred (as did Pierre Naville, too, after him) to refer to a mysterious Bruno Rizzi. When I was finally able to get my hands on a copy of the latter's book, it fell out of them all on its own.¹ It is such a bunch of platitudes and inconsistencies that it makes one suspect that Trotsky used it in order to discredit opinions that were contrary to his own.

As for the conception I have tried to work out, the key thing, in my view, is, first of all, that the bureaucracy is to be considered neither as "an accident" nor as a parasitical political stratum but, rather, as a social category that has deep roots in modern production as well as in state control [*étatisation*] of society and within the workers' movement itself. Next (and precisely for this reason), it fits into the historical evolution of capitalism and proceeds therefrom (in this regard, the "accidental" aspect comes precisely from the

*Interview with Christian Descamps, published as "Les masses doivent prendre en main la gestion de leur vie," *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 176 (December 1-15, 1973): 27, 29. With the title "Le desir et la capacite des hommes de prendre en main leur propre existence sociale," this text is available online at <http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/spip.php?article52> and http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/IMG/pdf_Entretiens73-96_Castoriadis_.pdf

¹*The Bureaucratization of the World* (1939), trans. with an introduction by Adam Westoby, 1st American ed. (New York: Free Press, 1985). —T/E

fact that it appeared in its first fully achieved form through the *degeneration* of a proletarian revolution). In the contemporary era, bureaucratization is a total social process—whence the term *bureaucratic capitalism*, which encompasses countries from the East as well as countries from the West. As for those who speak of *state capitalism*, they are confused, for they claim that “the economic laws of capitalism” continue to hold, in the USSR for example, which is absurd, and they leave aside the sociological and political aspect of the question. The term *state capitalism* says nothing about the social category for whose benefit the system operates. The revolution has to name its enemy.

DESCAMPS: The problem, then, is no longer that of degeneration. It’s a matter of understanding how the Bolshevik party made the revolution possible, but equally allowed the creation of a situation that no longer has anything to do with socialism.

C.C.: It isn’t entirely accurate to say that the problem is no longer that of degeneration. There was in Russia, in 1917, a revolution and a creation of autonomous organs of the masses. And there was, at the end of an evolution, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and an exploitative and oppressive totalitarian regime. Understanding what happened, and why, is of capital importance. The harmfulness of Trotskyism’s role is that it invokes accidental factors (backwardness, isolation, etc.) in order to hide what happened: in brief, the Bolshevik party’s expropriation, for that party’s own benefit, of the embryonic power of the masses. That refers us back to some deep-seated, ongoing factors that are full of meaning for us and for everyone today. If the masses don’t understand that they have to take into their own hands the management of their life in all its aspects, or if they’re unable to do so (which is pretty much the same thing), degeneration of the revolution is inevitable. In Russia, they tried to do so between 1917 and 1921, but they found an obstacle on their path, the Party—in which, at the same time, they had “placed their confidence.” Now, the power of the Party is practically already the power of the bureaucracy—and all the more so as everything in the Bolshevik party (its organizational structure as much as its deep-seated ideology) prepared it to play this role.

Marx and His Basic Axiom

DESCAMPS: And yet you long remained a classical Marxist.

C.C.: From 1950 until 1953, I tried to give a rigorous form to the substance of the ideas of *Capital*. I finally noticed that that's impossible. The system's main variable, the rate of exploitation, is indeterminate and indeterminable. And there's a good reason for that. It expresses the struggle between capitalists and proletarians, which, as such, is absent from *Capital* and which, more profoundly speaking, cannot be grasped in and through a quantifiable theory. The complete transformation of labor power into a commodity is certainly the objective contradictorily aimed at by capitalism, but its realization is radically impossible (it would mean the immediate collapse of the system). Now, Marx makes of that the basic axiom of his economic system. Ultimately, Marx does indeed aim at producing an economic "science"—which is a pipe dream, and an offspring of capitalist ideology. On the other hand, I have never been able to share the "too bad for reality" attitude that is the unavowed motto of all kinds of "Marxists" today. Those who invite us to "read" *Capital*² have probably never seen that Marx himself read statistics from time to time. From the beginning of the 1950s, it was becoming clear that the effectively actual operation of capitalism no longer had any relation to what Marx thought about it. And the unprecedented expansion of the system in the following twenty-five years has massively confirmed that.

DESCAMPS: Starting from a reflection on the bureaucracy and on collective management of production, you begin to speak about *the content of socialism*³ and to extend your critique to the whole of human activities, everyday life,

²As noted in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), p. 144 n.2, this is "an obvious reference to French Communist Party (PCF) theoretician Louis Althusser and his famous 1965 book *Lire le Capital* (*Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster [London: New Left Books, 1970; London and New York: Verso, 1997])." —T/E

³The first part of "On the Content of Socialism" (1955) is now in [PSW1](#); the second and third parts (1957, 1958) are now in [PSW2](#). —T/E

culture, etc. What is the logic of that development?

C.C.: When one resumes analysis not of the economy but of capitalist production, what one discovers is that the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is to be found in the simultaneous need to exclude workers from the management of their labor and to get them to participate in it. And that necessity conditions a constant struggle on the part of the workers not only for higher wages but against the way the contemporary business enterprise is organized. The same type of contradiction and struggle is to be found again, *mutatis mutandis*, in the other spheres of life. The examples of politics and education are obvious and come immediately to mind. How could one aim at eliminating alienation in one domain while leaving it intact in the other ones? To speak of collective management implies a continuous development of people's capacity to manage their affairs collectively, which would be impossible if the oppressive essence and form of capitalist education, family life, and culture were maintained (or simply painted over red). Just as it is absurd to think, as Lenin more or less did, that the workers can be productive slaves six days a week and political masters on Soviet Sundays, so is it absurd to believe that a new way of organizing labor, the economy, and power would be possible without a thoroughgoing shakeup of all forms of social life or could even hold on for just a slightly long period of time without such an upheaval.

DESCAMPS: On methodology, what is your position on the importation of epistemological concepts? I am thinking of Louis Althusser's use of Gaston Bachelard.⁴

C.C.: Use or abuse? Bachelard knew the science of his time and he was aware of the immense philosophical problems it raised. The Althusserians talk about "science" like an old peasant woman talks about the Madonna. The sole possible explanation is that they don't know about it. Taken

⁴Bachelard's concept of an *epistemological break* was borrowed by Althusser; see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaston_Bachelard. When he arrived in France after the War, Castoriadis "audited a few courses by Bachelard" (see p. 4 of the 1990 Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview: <http://www.agorainternational.org/enccaiint.pdf>). —T/E

as “theory” (and not just as making do with what is at hand [*bricolage*]), contemporary “science” is a heap of contradictions and insoluble aporias. The idea of an “epistemological break,” conceived as the passage from a “prescientific” philosophical state to an essentially guaranteed and already attained “scientificity,” is an aberration that dates back to the “vulgar” materialism of the nineteenth century (and to Friedrich Engels). I wrote in 1964 that the development of contemporary physics is comparable to a Western.⁵ Today, that statement seems too weak to me.

DESCAMPS: I am thinking, too, of the practical critique of established values and of economic exchange value now being conducted by broad strata through the curbing of production, boycotts, squatting, the practical critique of prisons and asylums—in short, deconfinement.⁶

C.C.: Obviously, the rejection of Marxist economics goes hand in hand, for me, with the critique of the established forms of life and, especially, of capitalist rationality (which is basically preserved in Marxism). But there are two elements that are not to be forgotten. First, there exists a stark antinomy between the whole set of phenomena of which you are speaking, and to which I myself have also long attributed a great importance, and the at-once effectively actual, psychical, and ideological attitude of the majority of the population, all classes combined, toward capitalist values, in particular economic ones, which are still accepted. That is, moreover, a tautology; without such acceptance, the system would collapse. There is a gradual erosion of this acceptance, but there is also privatization. On the other hand, there are some incoherent utopias: one cannot just shrug off the problem of

⁵In “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (now in *IIS*, p. 74), this “sort of Western” is one “where one surprising event after another creates an accelerating pace, astounding even the actors themselves who first set off the series of actions.” —T/E

⁶The year this interview was conducted, Robert Castel published a chapter entitled “Le grand désenfermement” (the great deconfinement—a play on Foucault’s famous phrase, “the Great Confinement”), in *Le psychanalysme* (Paris: Librairie François Maspéro, 1973). —T/E

production any more than one can do so with the problem of the coordination of collective activities. One sometimes has the impression that we are at present witnessing a renewal of the mythology of the noble savage, of a return to “natural” states, which are behaviors of flight and impotence.

Traditional Politics is Dead

DESCAMPS: For *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, traditional politics is dead.⁷ A separated form of activity when it is not a pure mystification, it doesn't even leave behind beautiful ruins.⁸ You think that the critique of specialization, of hierarchy, ought to lead individuals to relearn how to live life collectively. This is the problematic that exploded on the scene in May '68—and today one talks a lot about self-management [*autogestion*].

C.C.: May '68 dazzlingly posed the whole set of problems we are discussing. But it also brought out the enormous difficulties people encounter when taking charge, in a collective and nonbureaucratized way, of their own activities. In a sense, May '68 ended the stage of being a revolutionary festival only to enter into the breakdown stage. That observation leads to the most serious question of all today, the one about people's desire and ability to take their social existence into their own hands.

As for self-management, it must be stated clearly that, whatever might be the intentions of those who are today taking back up this idea, it becomes an absurdity and a mystification when it is separated from the rest. Self-management of the factory that would be only self-management of the factory would not even be self-management of the factory. Likewise, it is impossible to

⁷A statement first articulated in point 10 of “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#), p. 306). —T/E

⁸Applied to the workers' movement, and not just to politics under capitalism, this idea that not even ruins (but just “refuse”) are being left behind was first articulated by Daniel Mothé in 1960; see n. 16 of “Postscript on Insignificance” in the present tome. —T/E

speak seriously about self-management if hierarchy is maintained; whoever says *self-management* also has to say—as I have been writing {since the mid-Fifties}—*absolute equality of all incomes*.⁹ But one hears nothing at all of that—and for a reason.

DESCAMPS: You write that “vision deludes itself about itself when it takes itself for a vision, since it is essentially a making/doing [*faire*].”¹⁰ What is “making/doing”?

C.C.: What is “being”? Our area of history has been dominated by the idea of thought, which is itself interpreted as *theoria*, contemplation of a given being. The young Marx said that its “active side” was developed, in opposition to materialism, by idealism, but “in an abstract fashion.” Marx himself quickly fell back into abstraction, that is to say, into a traditional type of theorizing. Even in the opposition between theory and practice, he ultimately remains in the Aristotelean grip of *theoria/praxis/poiesis*, which is ultimately what is at issue. Clearly dependent on a determinate ontology and an interpretation of *ousia* as subsisting substance, which is to be found again up to and including in what Marx includes in “production” and what he excludes therefrom, this division is of a “second” order. There exists no *theoria* as an independent and sovereign instance of authority. What exists is a creative human making/doing, a making-be, and a specific mode of this making/doing, theoretical making/doing, which includes criteria that, in a sense, it itself produces, and that, moreover, it is constantly shaking up.

DESCAMPS: You seem today to be thinking history as production of a “radical imaginary” that is no more Reason at work (as in Hegel and Marx) than it is the mere arbitrariness of the Structuralists—in short, you are thinking history on the model of invention, as perpetual and explicit self-institution.

⁹See “On the Content of Socialism, II” (1957; now in [PSW2](#), pp. 126-27. —T/E

¹⁰General Introduction (1972; [PSW1](#), p. 29). —T/E

C.C.: As a matter of fact, I refuse to think history, and society, on the basis of any “model” whatsoever. That expression perfectly sums up all the impossibilities of inherited (and contemporary) thought. How does one not see the absurdity that exists in thinking history as “discourse,” “education,” a “fall” or “deterioration” [*déchéance*]*—*or society as a “contract,” a “war,” a “machine,” or a “combinatory system,” when all these entities, these objects, and these notions are but products of society and history? One can think the social-historical only on the basis of itself. The most elementary categories of inherited thought collapse upon contact with it. It follows immediately that society doesn’t fall into categories like part/whole, one/several, etc., save “nominally and in an empty way,” as Aristotle, as a matter of fact, said.

A question has always obsessed me: What produces the “new” in history? I am speaking, of course, of the absolutely new—for, in my view, it is clear that in history there is *ex nihilo* creation (on both the individual and collective levels). Now, that is something inherited thought is incapable, not of “explaining” (any attempt at explanation would obviously be contradictory), but even of taking into consideration; it always has just purely and simply refused to “see” it. This refusal is, for it, essential and inevitable. If thinking is but *logon didonai*, giving an account and a reason for, then it is necessarily a matter of a “reduction,” a “boiling down” to . . . to something that was already there, in fact or ideally (therefore, ultimately, since a timeless *aei* {always}). Whence the perpetual obsession with the (both historical and logical or ontological) origin, the “grounding.” But what is to be thought in history is precisely what doesn’t allow itself to be reduced to, to boil down to . . . —this is the *Grundlos* {Groundless}, perpetually recommenced orientation. To think it, there are no available categories, no available language; one must try to forge them. History is therefore essentially society’s self-institution. But it has been “explicit” self-institution only in rare moments and only in certain regards. Today, the revolutionary project can have no other content than the “explicit” and “permanent” self-institution of society by the entire society.

Wot? No Contradictions?*

When you say, “it is true that the present economic system is a barrier to adequate production, in spite of its expansion in the last 25 years (arms production, production for waste, etc.)” you are, I am afraid, victim of a current confusion.

What is “adequate” production? Adequate for whom, for what purpose, from what point of view? We are talking about capitalism and the (imaginary) “incapacity” of the system to generate the conditions for its own continued expansion, *qua* capitalism. We are not speaking about the “adequacy” of this production with regard to human needs or values. Production is adequate from the point of view of the capitalist system if it goes on expanding at 5 percent per annum, producing junk, atom bombs, or soap bubbles,¹ thereby expanding the market for the same commodities. This is the true meaning of the term “commodity” in *Das Kapital* and in political economy in general: use value is not discussed—it is just assumed.

There is no *internal economic barrier* to capitalism’s functioning. That humanity may at the same time be starving,

*Originally published as “Wot? No Contradictions?” in *Solidarity for Workers’ Power*, 7:11 (July 1974): 28-30, this brief, excerpted text was preceded by the following introductory note:

In August 1971, Solidarity (London) published *History and Revolution*. This was a translation of part of a text by Paul Cardan (“Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire” {now in the first part of *IIS*}), which had appeared several years earlier in the French journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

Our publication was preceded by an extensive and prolonged discussion within the group, in the course of which an Aberdeen comrade took issue with some of Cardan’s basic ideas, namely, the notion that there was no insuperable internal economic obstacle to capitalism’s development of production. We here publish excerpts of Cardan’s reply, which, in our opinion, raise a number of interesting theoretical points.

The present version has been lightly edited to Americanize the transcription and make other minor stylistic alterations.

¹Or—as Keynes seriously suggested—digging holes in the ground and filling them in again.

living like wild beasts, be persuaded to buy soap bubbles, etc., is totally irrelevant from this point of view. That a starving humanity might explode and destroy the system would be the result of sociopolitical human actions and reactions, *not* the effect of “intrinsic economic contradictions.” The logic of capitalism—and here I am only quoting Marx—is production for the sake of production.² Not production of something definite. Just production. Of anything. Of shit. It would even be wrong to say (“ultraleft moralistic confusionism”) that the nearer production is to shit, the more capitalism approximates to its own essence. Shit or books, bombs or penicillin, pollutants or antipollutants—they are all gold. The point is: Can they be produced and sold for a profit? This is the *only* point as far as capitalism and its economic functioning is concerned.

Sure, for them to be sold there must be a “market” for them. This means two things: first, money (the incomes of those who would buy them). This capitalist expansion generates *ipso facto*; secondly, “social want,” i.e., the belief of the potential buyers that they “need” or “desire” the commodities offered (this has nothing to do with “natural,” “genuine,” “normal” wants and desires!). Capitalism ensures that these “needs” exist through various mechanisms that do not need to be described again.

There is a theoretical-historical movement here that is—to my mind—the essence of the matter. I do not know whether I will be able to convey it clearly without being too long. In the first place—in the first “moment,” as Marx would say when flirting with Hegel—capitalism embodies the absolute divorce between use value and exchange value. This is both its foundation and the foundation of the Marxist analysis. What is produced does not matter in the least. To forget this is the usual sin of present day “Marxists.” This separation manifests itself in at least two ways:

²This phrase, found once in section 3 of Chapter 2 of Marx’s 1859 text “[A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.](#)” appears a number of times in his 1863 text, “[Theories of Surplus Value.](#)” Of note, a 1943 text by C.L.R. James is entitled “[Production for the Sake of Production: A Reply to Carter.](#)” —T/E

- production is for profit, not for human needs. If production of soap bubbles is more profitable than production of food, soap bubbles and not food will be produced;

- production is for sale, not for human needs. If millions of tons of food, clothes, etc. are accumulated in the warehouses and cannot be sold, they will not be given away to the millions of unemployed, the starving, etc.

It is the *second* aspect with which Marx was mostly concerned in his economic analysis proper. It is here he thought he found an “internal contradiction” in the mechanics of the capitalist economy. He believed it would be organically impossible for capitalism to generate the necessary purchasing power for its goods to be sold. This I have shown to be wrong.³

As for the first aspect, Marx of course knew of it and mentioned it on several occasions. At times (especially in his earlier works), he emphasized it very strongly. But this is not an “internal contradiction” of the economy. Rather should it be seen as a (very profound) criticism leveled against the economy as such (more precisely against capitalism as the historical system that has tended to subordinate, and finally reduce, all human activities to “economic” activities). Awareness of this is one of the reasons for the title *A Critique of Political Economy*, which remained a subtitle of *Das Kapital*.

In a sense, Marx, the great politician, is against the economic universe as such, because this universe only exists (strictly speaking since before capitalism) on the basis of the *separation* between production and wants—a separation created by the fact that exchange values necessarily interpose themselves between use values. In a sense, for Marx, the only type of “nonalienated” human work is the work of the savage, producing a tool or a weapon to fit his own body and skills and ways of doing things. It is Siegfried forging Nothung, or Ulysses and his bow—which nobody else can handle. It is this sort of relation, on another level, between the working collectivity, its work, and its products that Marx envisages as

³See “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” [1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)].

the “superior phase of communism”⁴ (about which I allowed myself to add, in the *Meaning of Socialism*, that it necessarily entails the destruction of capitalist technology and the conscious creation of a new technology; present-day technology is precisely the embodiment of this estrangement of man from his own working activity).⁵

Of course, in relation to the first and more profound aspect, the separation cannot be taken “absolutely.” But then nothing ever can. Some food would have to be produced under any conditions. Machines have to be manageable by bipeds, even at the price of monstrous contortions of their bodies, etc. But all this is, in the economic sense, peripheral and secondary. And this is precisely the monstrosity.

Now all this, the absolute separation of use value and exchange value—what I called the “first moment,” with its two aforementioned aspects—is truly only a first moment. It is the first moment both logically-theoretically and really-historically. It is an abstraction. Not only cannot the separation be absolute; it has to be very relative indeed. Because the goods have to be sold, and because 60 or 70 per cent of final demand is “consumer demand,” the goods must have a use value (in that proportion) for the population at large. This would not be a problem if society were at subsistence level (though this expression is hardly meaningful). But an ever-expanding economy ceases, after a while, to be at subsistence level. Thus, the separation between exchange values and “use” values has to be overcome.

⁴Marx makes a distinction between a “first phase” and a “higher phase of communist society” in the first chapter of “[The Critique of the Gotha Program](#).” The word *supérieure* appears in the French version of this 1875 text. —T/E

⁵Under the pseudonym Paul Cardan, Castoriadis published “[Socialism and Capitalism](#)” in *International Socialism*, 4 (Spring 1961): 20-27. This text, originally written in English, appeared in slightly altered form as *The Meaning of Socialism*, which was published as Solidarity Pamphlet 6 (London: Solidarity, 1966) and was reprinted several times by London Solidarity and Philadelphia Solidarity. On p. 16, he writes, “The conscious transformation of technology will be one of the crucial tasks confronting socialist society.” —T/E

Modern capitalism seeks to achieve this precisely through the manipulation of “use” values, i.e., by creating consumption to fit the needs of production and of the disposal of the product.

It follows that in contemporary economies one cannot speak about the separation of “use” and exchange values *sans phrase*. But then the question arises: What are “use” values? This question, ignored by Marx and the classical economists, cannot be handled within political economy. It requires another type of analysis and leads to the concept of the social imaginary, which I tried to define in the final part of “Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire” (*Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 40 [June-August 1965] {now in the first part of [IIS](#)}).

Liberal Oligarchies*

At the “Third-Worldism in Question” colloquium (see *Le Monde*, January 26, {1985}), I never said, and I never would have said, that I find the notion of democracy “unbearable.” What to me is unbearable is the (rarely innocent) confusion created between the notion and project of democracy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the regimes of Western countries in their effective actuality, which are liberal oligarchies. I also said that neither capitalism nor democracy is a fated inevitability that would be immanent to the nature of things or the nature of man—and that, therefore, their universal spread, or exportation (a postulate shared by Liberalism and Marxism), has no necessity to it. I added that, here again, a certain sort of “realism” was the height of utopianism, viz., wanting to “advise,” and “influence” in the right direction, Western governments that never hesitate to support the most monstrous tyrannies as soon as their real or supposed interests demand it (as is daily demonstrated in the policies of the United States as well as those of France under President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing or President François Mitterrand).

*Letter to the Editor from “Cornélius [*sic*] Castoriadis,” published as “Les oligarchies libérales,” in *Le Monde*, February 9, 1985: 2. See Castoriadis’s talk, “Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy” (1985; in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)).

Beating the Retreat Into Private Life^{*}

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF: Perhaps the most painful cost of modernity is the loss of community and neighborhood. In a world of strangers, we seem to withdraw more and more to the family and home, our haven from a heartless world.¹ Yet our oldest political traditions tell us that a sense of community is a human necessity, that we can only become full human beings when we belong to each other as citizens and neighbors. Without such a public life, our selves begin to shrink to a hollow private core. What is modernity doing to our identities? Are we becoming more selfish, less capable of political commitment, readier to pull up the drawbridge on our neighbors? Cornelius, how would you describe the change in our public lives?

C.C.: For me, the problem arose for the first time at the end of the 1950s with the crumbling of the working-class movement and the revolutionary project that had been linked with this movement. I was forced to observe a change in capitalist society, which was at the same time a change in the type of individuals this society was more and more producing. The change in individuals was caused by the bankruptcy of traditional working-class organizations—trade unions, parties, and so on—by disgust with what was happening, but also by the ability, during this period of capitalism, to grant a rising standard of living and to enter the period of consumerism.

^{*}Published in *The Listener*, March 27, 1986: 20-22. (A scanned version of the photocopy Castoriadis gave to David Ames Curtis is now available online at http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/IMG/pdf_CC-Lasch-BBC.pdf.) A brief introductory paragraph printed in this BBC publication reads: "Michael Ignatieff discusses 'The Culture of Narcissism' with psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis and cultural critic Christopher Lasch." At the end of this two-page text is the following note: "An edited extract from 'Voices' (C4, Thursdays). Next week: Daniel Bell, Emma Rothschild, and Ulrich Briefs." The present version has been lightly edited to Americanize the original publication of the transcription and to make other minor stylistic alterations.

¹See Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). —T/E

People were turning their back, so to speak, on common interests, common activities, public activities—refusing to take responsibility. In effect, they were retrenching—retreating into a sort of, in quotation marks, “private” world, that is, family and a very few relations. I say *within quotation marks* because we ought to avoid misunderstandings there.

IGNATIEFF: What misunderstandings?

C.C.: Well, nothing is ever fully private. Even when you dream, you have words, and these words you have borrowed from the English language. And what we call *the individual* is in a certain sense a social construct.

IGNATIEFF: A skeptic would say that the critique of selfishness and individualism in capitalist society is just as old as capitalist society itself. So what do you say to that skeptic? How do you convince them that the modern self, the modern postwar self of consumer capitalist society, is a different kind of self, that there’s a new kind of individualism, a new kind of selfishness even?

CHRISTOPHER LASCH: What we have is not so much old-fashioned self-aggrandizement and acquisitive individualism, which, as you say, has been subject to criticism from the moment this new kind of individualist personality came into being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But this kind of individualism seems to have given way to the retrenchment Cornelius spoke of a minute ago. I’ve talked of a minimal self.² Or again, of a narcissistic self, as a self that’s increasingly emptied of any kind of content and that has to find the goals of life in the narrowest possible terms.³ I think, increasingly, in terms of raw survival, daily survival, as if daily life were so problematic, as if the world were so threatening and uncertain that the best you could hope to do was simply to get by. To live one day at a time. And indeed, this is the therapeutic advice, in the worst sense, that people are given in our world.

²*The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984). —T/E

³*The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979). —T/E

IGNATIEFF: But “survival,” Christopher—aren’t you going a little far there? I mean, some people might not recognize that; they might think survival applies to the victims of some terrible tragedy. But you’re talking about daily life in the richest society in the world. Why survival?

LASCH: That’s one way of defining what’s new, I think. While survival has always been a preoccupation, an overriding preoccupation for most people, it’s only in our time that it seems to have acquired almost a kind of moral status. If one were to go back to the Greeks, I think one could see very clearly the difference for the Greeks, for Aristotle in particular. The precondition of moral life, of a fully lived life, is freedom from material necessity. Which, moreover, the Greeks associated with the private realm, with the household, the realm that is subject to biological and material constraints. It’s only when you get beyond that that you can really, in any sense, talk about a sense of self, a personal identity or civic life. A moral life is a life that’s lived in public.

IGNATIEFF: So we don’t have life lived in a public domain. We have a life stripped down to bare essentials, to survival. Now, Cornelius, you’re a practicing analyst. Does this portrait of the modern self ring a bell to you as a man who meets the modern self on the couch Monday through Friday?

C.C.: I think that what is implied in all this is various things. “One day at a time,” if I take this very nice expression, is what I call the lack of a project—in both the individual and society itself. Thirty years ago, sixty years ago, people on the Left would talk to you about the glorious night of the revolution, and people on the Right would talk to you about indefinite progress and so and so forth. And now nobody dares express a grandiose or even moderately reasonable project that goes beyond the budget or the next elections. So there is a time horizon. Now, in this respect “survival” is an expression you may criticize, because, of course, everybody thinks about his retirement pension and thinks also about his children’s education. But this time horizon is private. Nobody participates in a public time horizon, in the same way that nobody participates in a public space. I mean, we always participate in public space, but take the Place de la Concorde or Piccadilly Circus during rush hour. There you have one

million people who are drowned in an ocean of social things, who are social beings, and they are absolutely isolated. They hate each other, and if they could clear their way by neutralizing the cars in front of them, they would. Public space today is what? It is within every home with TV. But what is this public space?

IGNATIEFF: It's empty.

C.C.: It's empty, or worse. It's public space mostly for publicity, for pornography—and I don't mean only straightforward pornography, I mean there are philosophers who are in fact pornographers.

IGNATIEFF: Is this a cause or a consequence of the breakdown of the public realm? What's the relationship here between the self and the public realm in its crisis?

LASCH: It strikes me that we don't live in a solid world. It's often said that consumer society surrounds us with things and encourages us to pay too much attention to things, but in a way I think that's also misleading. We live in a world that seems to be extremely unstable, to consist of fleeting images. A world that increasingly, thanks in part, I think, to the technology of mass communications, seems to acquire a kind of hallucinatory character. A kind of fantastic world of images, as opposed to a world of solid objects that can be expected to outlast one's own lifetime. What has waned, perhaps, is the sense of living in a world that existed before one's self and will outlast one's self. That sense of historical continuity, which is provided by, among other things, simply a solid sense of palpable material things, seems to be increasingly mediated by this onslaught of images, often ones that appeal by design to our fantasies. Even science, I think, which was assumed in an earlier period to be one of the principal means of promoting a more rational and commonsensical view of the world, appears to us in daily life as a succession of technological miracles that make everything possible. In a world where everything is possible, in a sense nothing is possible.

IGNATIEFF: What I hear you saying there is almost a definition of the public realm. One of the things you're saying is that the public realm is the domain of historical continuity. In fact, in our culture it's very much the domain

now of the media. The media give us the public domain, a world of hallucinating images whose time frames are very short. They come and go. Their correspondence to reality is very problematic, and public life looks like a kind of fantasy, a kind of dreamworld. But that doesn't get to the question I asked, which has to do with this business of causes and consequences.

C.C.: I think it is not proper to search for a cause and a consequence. I think that the two things go together. Development or changes in society are ipso facto changes in the structure of individuals, the way they act, the way they behave. After all, everything is social. But society as such has no address. I mean, you can't meet it. It's in you, in me, in the language, in the books, and so on. But I would say there is one thing that one ought to stress in this respect and that is the disappearance of social and political conflict and struggle.

IGNATIEFF: Why disappearance? That would strike me as wrong.

C.C.: I don't see any. I see what happened in the States, where, to take the classical example, young Blacks in the 1960s would enter the center of the cities and burn the stores and so on. But then at the end of the 1970s, the beginning of the Reagan era, you have 10 percent general unemployment, which means 20 percent for the Blacks and 48 per cent for young Blacks, and these young Blacks stay quiet. You have the situation in France now that when people are thrown out of their job, they stay quiet. In Britain, you have the tragedy of the miners—the last flame of something that is obviously dying. And it is not difficult to understand, I think, because people feel, and rightly so, that political ideas that are in the political market as it exists now are not worth fighting for. And they also think that trade unions are more or less self-serving bureaucracies or lobby organizations. It's as if people were drawing the conclusion that nothing is to be done, therefore we retrench ourselves. And this corresponds to the intrinsic movement of capitalism—expanding markets, consumerism, built-in obsolescence and so on, and, more generally, the expansion of control over people, not only as producers, but also as consumers.

LASCH: Under these conditions, politics becomes

increasingly a question of interest groups, each presenting its rival claims to a share in the Welfare State, defining its interests in the narrowest possible terms and deliberately eschewing any larger claims, the attempt to state the claims of a group in universal terms. One of the examples that you mentioned earlier, Cornelius, the Black struggle in the United States, offers a good example of this, and also an example of the way in which often seemingly radical, militant, revolutionary ideologies in our recent times have actually contributed to this process. The Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s was in many ways a throwback to an earlier conception of democracy. It articulated the goals of Blacks in a way that appealed to everybody. It attacked racism. Not just white racism, but racism. The Black Power movement, starting in the mid-1960s, which seemed to be much more militant and attacked Martin Luther King and other leaders of the early stage of this movement as bourgeois reactionaries, actually redefined the goals of the Black movement, Black Power, as an attack on white racism, as if racism was only a white phenomenon, in ways that made it much easier in the long run to redefine Blacks in America as essentially another interest group claiming its share in the pie and not making any larger claims at all. I think that's one reason for the decline of militancy among American Blacks.

IGNATIEFF: Christopher has been expressing the feeling that politics has fractured into interest groups, and if we're talking about a crisis of the public realm, that's what we mean. Why is this happening?

LASCH: Well, it has something to do with the waning of any kind of public language. Part of this, I think, has to do with the kind of moral elevation of the victim and the increasing tendency to appeal to victimization as the only recognizable standard of justice. If you can prove that you've been victimized, discriminated against—the longer the better—that becomes the basis of claims made by very specific groups that assume that their own history is highly specific, has little reference to that of other groups or to the society as a whole, which doesn't figure in this language at all, and which, furthermore, cannot even be understood by other groups. Again, the illustration of the Black movement

is instructive, because, not to date this too precisely, beginning in the mid-1960s, Blacks and their spokesmen in America began to insist as a kind of article of faith that nobody else could even understand their history.

C.C.: Feminists, too.

LASCH: Yes, that's a fairly exact parallel, it seems to me. And when this happens, the possibility of a language that is understood by everybody and constitutes the basis of public life and political conversation is almost by definition ruled out.

C.C.: Aristotle in his *Politics* mentions a wonderful, to my mind, Athenian law, which was that whenever the discussion in the Assembly was about questions that could entail war with a neighboring city, the inhabitants of the respective frontier zone were excluded from the vote.⁴ Now, this is the Greek conception of politics, and this I still stand for, in principle.

IGNATIEFF: One of the consequences of the kind of debates that have been going on, at least since the early 1960s, is a very intense discussion about how far freedom to choose yourself, to make yourself, to choose your own values can go, at what point that has to give way to a sense of collective social obligations, to a sense of what it is that human beings ought to have.

C.C.: Freedom is not an easy thing and not an easy concept. If you are speaking about true freedom, it is, I would say, a tragic concept. As democracy is a tragic system. Because there are no external limits and there are no mathematical theorems that tell you where to stop. Democracy is a system where we say: "We make our own laws on the basis of our own mind, our common morality." But this morality, even if it were to coincide with the laws of Moses, or with the Gospel, does not exist because it is in the laws of the Gospel; it exists because we, as a polity, accept it, endorse it, and say: *Thou shalt not kill*. Even if 90 percent of the society are believers and believe that the authority of the

⁴Aristotle *Politics* 1330a20, which mentions that "there is a law" of this sort "in some places." —T/E

commandment comes from God, for the political society the authority does not come from God. It comes from the decision of the citizens. The British Parliament could decide tomorrow that blond people have no right to vote. Nothing to stop them from doing that. There are no external limits, and that's why democracy can perish and has perished at times in history, like a tragic hero. A tragic hero in Greek tragedy does not perish because there was a limit and he transgressed it. This is sin. This is Christian sin. The tragic hero perishes out of hubris. That is, because he transgresses in a field where there are no foreknown limits. And that's our plight.

The Ambiguities of Apoliticism*

LIBÉRATION: What has impressed you the most these last two weeks in the movement of college and high-school students?¹

C.C.: In two weeks, the college and high-school students have broken with the passivity that for years has characterized French and even all of Western society. And the self-organization of which they have proved capable is absolutely exemplary. Not only have they reinvented delegation but also the recall of delegates in general assembly. More than distrustful of the world of politicians and groupuscules, they have proved capable of great wisdom and a fantastic amount of creativity. Such creativity may be contrasted, in a completely symmetrical way, with the sterility of the established powers.

LIBÉRATION: Many observers have insisted on the “moral” dimension of the movement. What do you think about that?

C.C.: Certainly, the refusal to be coopted politically as well as the fact that they say, “There are things that are unacceptable and nothing will be able to make them acceptable” testify to a sure moral sense. Yet I wonder. In particular, I ask myself about these “young fogies” who congratulate themselves on the absence of any overall project in the movement these past two weeks and who see therein a superiority of 1986 over 1968. In '68, there was an overall

*Interview with Jean-Marcel Bouguereau and Antoine de Gaudemar, published as “Les ambiguïtés de l’apolitisme,” *Libération*, December 11, 1986: 14. [At the time, Castoriadis complained that only a small portion of his remarks were retained in the published version. —T/E]

¹The interviewer is referring to the late Fall 1986 high-school and college student protests against the university reforms being proposed by Gaullist Ministers René Monory and Alain Devaquet. Castoriadis had already expressed criticism of “the future ‘Monory reform’” before these protests began (in “The Movements of the Sixties” [1986], in *WIF*, p. 50). See, in addition to the next chapter in the present tome (“This Extraordinary Capacity for Self-Organization”), “The *Coordinations*: A Preface” (1996; in *RTI(TBS)*) concerning the railway workers’ strikes that followed. —T/E

critique of society, with its trail of aberrations, extremism, and illusions. The '86 movement accepts existing society, whence perhaps its claim to be apolitical. If one thinks that our society is the finally-found form in which to live, give or take a few reforms, one can only admire the way in which this movement has acted. The high-school and college students have been attacked, and they have responded magnificently to this aggression. But does that mean that they are for the status quo? That is to say, for a catastrophic law called the Savary Act?² What I am saying here is not a criticism of the movement but rather an incitement to see further, and there are, among the college and high-school students, some people who are asking themselves those sorts of questions.

LIBÉRATION: Why?

C.C.: For at least three reasons. First, the working class has left the stage, or practically so. Second, there has been, since the War, a massification of the high-school and college population. Third, the culture, the capitalist imaginary, is in crisis, and youth has taken over from the working class the role of being the main force of contestation. But today, as opposed to '68, society as a whole and the dominant culture are not being called into question, especially if what is at issue is only the right to a diploma. I'm not sure that the student movement is fighting for more than that, that is to say, for the right to a job or, still more, for the right to knowledge.

LIBÉRATION: The college and high-school students have made something like a new usage of the word *democracy*, and one senses in them, as opposed to their predecessors, a positive adherence to a whole set of values?³

²Named after French Minister of Education Alain Savary, this law reforming higher education in France was enacted in 1984 under Socialist President François Mitterrand. It is not to be confused with the Savary Bill, which Mitterrand withdrew later that same year following pressure from protesters who objected to its proposed limitations on state financing of private school (including parochial school) education. —T/E

³We retain, in deference to the interviewers, their question mark at the end of this otherwise straightforwardly declarative sentence. —T/E

C.C.: Absolutely. And they have not just raised their consciousness about democratic values but also put such values into action, perhaps in a more explicit way than in '68. The question is why what is good for the students would not be so for society as a whole, why the system of general assemblies with delegates who can be recalled at any time would be reserved only for college auditoriums. No one wants to see *that* political import of the student movement, for it contradicts the principle that legislators cannot be recalled for the life of the legislature.

LIBÉRATION: And yet the students seem to have acted as much as students as they have as citizens, and their movement is also a civic movement, isn't it?

C.C.: Yes, and yet one cannot reasonably be pleased about the student victory while at the same time supporting the system as a whole. For, parliamentary democracy says that the law is made by the elected representatives of the people and not dictated by the street. One has a tendency to be satisfied with a rather disturbing mental patchwork [*un bricolage mental assez inquiétant*]. According to the logic of the great Liberal thinkers, national representation {in France} involves fifty million persons, while the students are one million, so it's up to the nation to decide and not those being educated. It can be said that the *Parlement* is a mockery of representation. It doesn't function. The true powers-that-be are party apparatuses and, within them, those who are particularly adept at maneuvering.

This Extraordinary Capacity for Self-Organization*

First of all, a few remarks on the way in which I saw, and the way in which I see, the {November-December 1986} movement.

Someone raised the question of authority {during this colloquium}.¹ There is no question of authority here: I am speaking in my own name, as everyone always speaks in his or her own name, and I hope that we'll remain on that ground, that is to say that everyone speaks in his or her own name, which means: as a responsible citizen in a democracy.

In a somewhat scholarly fashion, I shall begin by mutually contrasting some traits of what has been called *the high-school and college student movement* that I find antinomic. I shall group together the traits I find to be positive, by which I mean the ones of which I approve, and the traits I find to be negative, that is to say, those of which I disapprove.

*Cornelius Castoriadis, [Patrick Champagne](#), Luc Ferry, [Bernard Lacroix](#), [Jacques Lagroye](#), and [Didier Lapeyronnie](#), “La construction intellectuelle, médiatique et politique du mouvement étudiant de l’automne 1986 (The intellectual, media-related, and political construction of the student movement of Autumn 1986).” These “Acts of the May 1987 Sorbonne colloquium organized by the Association of Political Science Students at the University of Paris-I” appeared in *Politix*, 1 (Winter 1988): 8-31. Castoriadis’s remarks, translated here in separate, untitled sections, appeared on pp. [16-18](#), [22-23](#), and [27](#). Castoriadis’s brief interjections on pp. [23](#) and [24](#) have not been translated. Unlike the other speakers, Ferry allowed only a brief summary of his remarks to be published (p. 14), and he did not allow even that summary to appear in the online version. Instead (see *ibid.*), Ferry insisted that the reader refer to his and Alain Renaut’s book *68-86. Itinéraires de l’individu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). See the Translator’s Note to Castoriadis’s 1986 text “The Movements of the Sixties” ([WIF](#), pp. 416-17), which provides information about this volume Ferry/Renaut expressly dedicated to Castoriadis, wherein they selectively misquote Castoriadis in order to make him into a champion of Ferry/Renaut-style “individualism.” —T/E

¹Castoriadis is referring to Bernard Lacroix and the “preliminary remark” that began [his talk](#). —T/E

The positive traits. First of all, in my view and in the way I conceive things, when people try to take their fate into their own hands, that's an eminently positive trait. The high-school students and the college students were worried about the fate that was in store for them, the sauce in which they were going to be cooked; they wanted to react and they did so. That's very important, especially when faced with this vague muddle that is called *the climate of individualism*, to which I shall return in a minute.

The second point, which is just as important, involves, as has already been mentioned {during this colloquium}, the traits of collective self-organization, the organization of assemblies, as well as the great intelligence, already seen in '68, the great tactical intelligence of the movement.²

Because it is nonviolent, use of the protest demonstration, again perhaps more cleverly than in '68, forces others to be violent, which thereby discredits them.³ I say this not because I think that all violence is to be condemned, everywhere and always, but because, when one arrives at one's ends by nonviolent means, that is preferable and proves to be much more effective.

Going hand in hand with this capacity for self-organization is a distrust felt, at least at the outset, toward politicians and parties, which nonetheless has, as a positive trait, served to temper what I consider to be the movement's staggering naivete regarding politics, both as a reality and as an idea.

Finally, a third point. The movement was indeed a revelator. I don't like the word *analyzer*. An analyzer is, after

²See also "The *Coordinations: A Preface*" (1996; in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)). —T/E

³In a horrific incident that led to the resignation of Alain Devaquet—the Minister of State for Research and Higher Education, who was the author of the proposed reform against which the student were protesting—Malik Oussekiné, a young student of frail health not involved in the demonstrations, was clubbed to death the night of December 6, 1986, by two special motorcycle-mounted antiriot policemen who had chased Oussekiné into the entranceway of a Latin Quarter apartment building where he had taken refuge. Four days later, hundreds of thousands turned out across France to demonstrate in protest against his death.—T/E

all, someone whose activity is analytical. The movement was revelatory of a certain number of things. It was revelatory of the weakness of the government (which isn't just the weakness of this particular government; the exact same thing happened with the Socialist government during the demonstration about private schools)⁴ and of its ineptitude, as well. This point must be underscored, for people are fascinated by the alleged wisdom, technical skill, intelligence, and so on of those who exercise power.

In my view, it was also revelatory of what I shall call the *inconsistency of the new republicans*—that is to say, former Leftists or Communists who have converted back to republican or democratic ideals and who, as soon as the movement appeared, began applauding wildly without asking themselves a single second whether, in a republic or a democracy, it is conceivable that a particular section of the population might impose its will against those who pass for representing the nation as a whole and even against the Constitution. To put it in the language of the Right, which has howled in horror, “the street doesn't make the law,” etc. Yet, it's not because the Right is howling like that—that's its role—that I'll find the “republicans” who say “Bravo” to be any less incoherent. As you know, in the republican Constitution, there are not deputies from Paris or from Mayence, but deputies of the Nation.

Now, as for the negative side, first of all, there's the purely corporatist, special-interest, and sectoral character of the movement. Yet at the same time, this corporatism differs in a disagreeable way from the corporatism of the railway workers' strike that began a few days later. In the case of the students, it is disagreeable for two reasons: on the one hand, because one was speaking out against elitism while looking toward the elite, that is to say, with a kind of schizophrenia or total lack of awareness. Elitism was being criticized while ignoring the fact that, for a large portion of the higher-

⁴See n. 2 of “The Ambiguities of Apoliticism” (1986, this tome) concerning the 1984 French protests against the Savary Bill, which was intended to limit funding for private (and parochial) schools. —T/E

learning establishments in France, there is already a well-certified ultraelitist situation and that the college and high-school students themselves enjoy quite a lot of advantages in French society and are relatively well protected.⁵ That was completely passed over in silence. In the second place, and tied up with that, the demands are of a total insignificance. There is an antinomy at a fantastic level. As Luc Ferry said, it is true that this is the largest college and high-school student movement that has ever existed, but what did they demand? That college entrance fees not be raised to 800 francs or that certain powers not be devolved to academics. The demand was of a complete insignificance.

That being said, allow me to say a few words about the questions raised, doing so in the order of their importance. Can one speak of a movement? This isn't a very good question; the problem does not lie there. Did the movement change the view politicians, and social actors in general, might have of the young? I don't think so. It has simply reminded one of the importance of this sector of the population, for a variety of reasons. What repercussions has the movement had on intellectual discussions? I think that it has had very little of that, precisely because of its basic *inconsistency*. How is one to explain the development of some collective action in a society that is described as individualistic? I would like to insist on this point, for the wording of this question shows the degree of confusion we have attained. Even if we had a society that was (if one may speak metaphorically) a million times more "individualistic" than present-day society, that individualism would be a *social* phenomenon. The alleged individuals who would wallow in the most absolute individualism would be just as caught up in the social imaginary as any others—as is, indeed, the case today. What is called *individualism* consists in the following: that, at 8:30 p.m. in millions of French households, everyone pushes the same button to watch the same show. That's

⁵The proposed Devaquet reform was to allow each university to select which students it wanted to matriculate. Opposition to such *sélection* became the rallying point for the student protests. —T/E

individualism. And that's why jogging is an eminently democratic form of mobilization, as someone could write without laughing: people who do jogging choose their path, their means of going jogging, so, obviously, it's a political and democratic phenomenon. But as Aristotle already said, "man is a political animal,"⁶ that is to say, a social one; no one invented jogging; it's a *social* mode, practiced in isolation.

That society might be described as individualistic means simply that there is a form of the social imaginary, a social imaginary signification, that is imposed on everyone and that breaks with the key condition for democracy, the participation of all in common affairs. I would like to insist on two aspects of Ferry's talk: if one is a bit serious, one has to leave aside jogging, and the rock star's "individualistic" side, for example. I do not think that the contrast can be made around the question of how one relates to the law, as Ferry said. There have indeed been in history some societies in which the law has been laid down as given by a source that is external to society or by a source that eludes people's concrete activity. Those are societies I call *heteronomous*, not because their law is truly given by someone else—that's not true, it's that they think so—but because the representation that the source of the law is something other than society is an integral part of the institution of society. A marvelous, classical example: Moses, the Tables of the Law, and Mount Sinai.

In contrast to that, we have societies that can be called *societies that tend toward autonomy*; doubtless, most Western European societies are to be included here. These are societies in which, for the first time in the history of humanity, the following very improbable phenomenon occurs: society, the political collectivity, says: "There is no other law than the one we lay down *qua* political collectivity." Such societies thereby grant an extreme importance to the development of individual autonomy, that is to say, everyone's capacity to think for oneself, for it is only to the extent that everyone thinks to

⁶Aristotle *Politics* 1253a3. —T/E

think for oneself that an assembly of the people truly thinks it is an assembly of the people, and not the plaything of demagogues.

That is how the true problem is posed. From this standpoint, there is no question of individualism as a political question. There is a question of autonomy. Such autonomy cannot be simply the autonomy of individuals; it is rather, at its root, the possibility for a society to lay down its own laws while knowing that it is doing so. In this regard, I believe that the distinctions made by Louis Dumont, who is a respectable and learned colleague, are not always very clear, for, in Dumont's explanations, there is often a slippage between the real situation of society and the representation of society. Was nineteenth-century capitalist society really individualistic? For whom was it individualistic? One can truly take up again here the crudest sort of Marxist discourse: it was individualistic only for 5 percent of individuals, but not for the others. There exists a confusion between social reality and the discourse society maintains about itself. I am a supporter of a society in which there is an effectively actual autonomy on the part of the individual, in which that autonomy would be pushed as far as possible. Now, that has nothing to do with what is today called *individualism*. On the other hand, the second side of the issue Ferry singles out is everything that is chalked up to withdrawal into the private sphere. All that falls under a category that has been around {since the early Sixties}, which I call the category of *privatization*.⁷

Here again, in order to understand what this is about it suffices to take up again the example I just gave: television. Even in one's intimate, domestic moments, "private life" is almost completely determined by a social factor. In your "private" life, you use cars, televisions; it's therefore a social life. Also, you certainly have a sphere of freedom and autonomy. But privatization, it's not that individuals truly become private—that is to say, nonsocial—individuals; it's

⁷See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)). The transcription has "for 35 years" (*depuis 35 ans*), which might be a mistake, since that would mean the early Fifties, not the early Sixties, as we have interpolated here. —T/E

that they withdraw from spheres of collective activity, spaces of collective activity that had been able to exist, and they withdraw into their families, their cars, falling back on their televisions, jogging, etc.

And as we live in a wealthy, developed society, one dominated by the media, all this becomes at the same time a cultural form and an industrial form; it's self building, but it's also body building. Ultimately, what we are facing is a historical process that, from the social and political standpoint, culminates not in individualism, however it may be described, but in a sort of social prostration on the part of individuals. They remain completely apathetic in the face of what is happening in the political and social sphere.

Whence, once again—and I end with my point of departure—the importance of the first good point of the student movement: the students have gotten out of their state of prostration and, in their incoherency or through their ill-expressed demands, they have acted collectively in order to say, “We want our fate to be thus, and not otherwise.”

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First of all, I am in complete agreement with Luc Ferry, and I suggest that we be wary of methodological reminders.⁸ Of course, one must always be conscious of one's methods. However much one is conscious of them, it's obvious that the shadow of May '68 is cast over this discussion—its shadow or its light, but there is no light without shadow. . . .

As you know, everyone has his own French Revolution. For some it's '89, for others it's Robespierre, for still others, it's I don't know what.⁹ Here too, here again, one has one's own May '68, depending on what one lived through

⁸See the discussion-period remarks made by Stéphane Montclair (p. 20). —T/E

⁹See “The Revolution Before the Theologians: For a Critical/Political Reflection on Our History” (1989; in *WIF*). —T/E

at the time and how one lived through it. What separates Philippe Raynaud and me a bit is a great difference as to which May '68 each of us is referring.¹⁰ For me, May '68 is the period that goes from March 22 to the first days of June, a period during which the role of the groupuscules was minuscule. For you, it's essentially the period after that, and especially post-May; that is to say, the period when the groupuscules became dominant as the movement ebbed.

There is something that is a bit analogous with '86, as in what Luc said¹¹ and what our friend said who was just speaking when he stated that, in the '86 movement, there were no ideas. Luc says that that's normal because there has been a collapse of vanguards: for there to be political ideas, there would have to be a political doctrine. That would mean that only vanguards produce ideas. That's Ferry's May '68, where there were only Trotskyists and Maoists. For me, it's the May '68 where there were very few Trotskyists and Maoists, where there were masses and masses of students who grouped together and did things. There was not one Trotskyist, not one Maoist.

The implicit presupposition of our friend who was just speaking is the following: *They have hidden their ideas because, if they hadn't, they wouldn't have inherited the movement.* In other words, there could have been Trotskyist ideas. Well, then, I say: You would have replaced inconsistency with the deadly darkness.

What amazes me, in a sense, is that you have this fantastic gathering of people in '86 and not the production of a single new idea. To sum that up in the fact that you didn't have creativity is just an explanation of what happened. I am not asking that the movement's Maoists say, "The movement must become Maoist"; we've been familiar with those stories for decades. For me, the democratic character of the movement is not so much the formal issues, which have not

¹⁰See the discussion-period remarks made by Philippe Raynaud concerning the participation of Maoists and Trotskyists in May '68 (p. 21). —T/E

¹¹Ferry's additional remarks, from the discussion period, appear in the published, though not the internet, version, on p. 22. —T/E

been negligible; democracy has perhaps been respected more, though in a hypocritical way, with everyone hiding away their ideas. For me, that isn't the movement's important element. It's the movement's self-organization; it's the self-mobilization. It's the fact that a collectivity, without waiting for a slogan, without receiving instructions from any vanguard, without a political doctrine, said, "There are some things to do; we're going to decide to do them." It wasn't a pure collectivity, lacking in any element of influence. There were Trotskyists; there were a few people from the UNEF {national student union}. But for the most part, what has been revealed is this extraordinary capacity for self-organization. And that is, in my opinion, the most important thing.

~

Jacques Lagroye spoke just a moment ago about the movement's lack of self-knowledge. I completely agree with this formulation; it's what I tried to show when I said that the movement didn't seem to be aware of itself or to ask questions about what it was really demanding, about what it meant. All that is clear.

People have also wanted to imprison it in this lack of knowledge by producing interpretations, judgments (which are not, moreover, even judgments) that come close to being a dreadful and tiresome sort of demagoguery. Some have spoken of "mental AIDS";¹² others got down on their knees and said, "Aren't these young people extraordinary!" All that is demagoguery. Now, what is characteristic of this panel, beyond all our differences, is an attempt to reflect; it's not a criticism.

What you, the students, are reflecting back to us is your refusal to listen to a critical discourse about your activity—a critical discourse in the good sense of the term, a discourse that would question the meaning of your actions! Why do you say that there is only criticism? I believe that that

¹²Right-wing editorial writer Louis Pauwels coined this phrase apropos of the protesting students in the December 6, 1986 issue of *Le Figaro*. —T/E

is another result of this demagoguery that has now become characteristic of politicians but began with industry, industry in the most vulgar sense of the term. It's the "teenager market"! The young are always right as consumers because the consumer is always right! But now the young are no longer just consumers; they are also voters. They reach their majority at 18, they are right, and one bows down before them.¹³ But as far as I am concerned, I bow down before no one! No more before people who are 18 than before people who are 98. If I think that, on certain points, you are wrong, I'll tell you so, and you can tell me that I have understood nothing of your arguments. However, you cannot protest by refusing to be criticized! But why wouldn't you be criticized?

...

¹³The voting age for French citizens was lowered to 18 in 1974. —T/E

Perish the Church, the State, the Universities, the Media, and the Consensus*

QUESTION: What is an intellectual?

C.C.: The intellectual we are talking about is someone who goes beyond her speciality and endeavors to play a critical role with regard to her society's representations and the way her society is organized. She is therefore, whether she knows it or not, on the side of philosophy, for true philosophy involves freedom of thought and is therefore critical. This type of individual was able to appear only with a break—the calling into question of society by itself—the one ancient Greece and then Western Europe introduced into History. Are our institutions just—and what is justice? Is our image of the world true—and what is truth? The Greek philosophers—Socrates offers the most striking illustration—and people like Montaigne, René Descartes, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and Immanuel Kant arose at such moments. This calling into question, this unending interrogation, could not be the work of an isolated individual, were it only because that individual would be completely stifled. It has always gone hand in hand with a movement on the part of society that is critical toward the established order, the powers-that-be, and the dominant ideas. At present, we are sinking into conformism, the adoration of what is, the sanctification of the *fait accompli*, a fetishistic attitude toward “reality.” At the gates of the temple of thought, one has hung: “Let's hug [*Embrassons-nous, Folleville*].” It is in no way surprising that, in the molasses of general reconciliation, critical intellectuals have become extremely rare and those who are still around are preaching in the desert.

Q.: You're putting things quite harshly. We're not going to lament the death of ideologies.

C.C.: But the era is wholly dominated by an ideology, that of reconciliation, of “don't rock the boat,” of “everyone

*Interview with Sylvaine Paquier, published as “Castoriadis: périsse le consensus,” *L'Express*, May 27, 1988: 112 and 114.

in his place.” This airy ideology is more powerful than ever, and it succeeds, as much as repression does, in rendering critical thought and critical voices inaudible. Jesus said to his apostles, “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?”¹ Socrates compared himself to the gadfly that is there to rouse the great horse that is the city.² The gadfly stings badly; salt cauterizes wounds. Today, criticizing is taken as a form of aggression. Go remind someone who is saying “black” that the day before yesterday he was saying “white,” and you’ll be treated as a member of the thought police. The empire of emptiness is extolled, and one bows down before “reality.” And what’s that? Last night’s TV program? For some decades now, the theoretical cover for such attitudes has been furnished by Martin Heidegger, who proclaimed “the end of philosophy.”³ His epigones glorify *pensiero debole* (weak thought, *sic*)⁴ or Postmodernism,⁵ namely, generalized parasitism of the past, all eras thrown together. Yet the end of philosophy would mean the end of freedom. That I philosophize means that I have decided to think on my own and to think freely. I seek what is or seems to me to be true—and perish the Church, the State, the universities, the media, and the consensus.

Q.: Other people, too, have made such criticisms, you can’t deny it.

C.C.: Undoubtedly so—except that, most of the time, what they denounce are the fruits, not the tree and its roots. Why? Because, even for those who aren’t familiar with them, Hegel and his great diktats still reign: “Everything that is real

¹Matthew 5.13. —T/E

²Plato *Apology* 30e. —T/E

³See “The ‘End of Philosophy’?” (1989; now in *PPA*). —T/E

⁴See *Il pensiero debole*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovati (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988). —T/E

⁵See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992; now in *WIF*). —T/E

is rational”⁶ and “You will not be better than the age.”⁷ So, take us to Germany or the USSR circa 1933-1934 and see what that’s about. Poor Heidegger was Hegelian, in this regard: he was not better than his age.

Q.: The same goes for the Left, which not so long ago chose “to be wrong with Sartre.”

C.C.: They, and Sartre first, preferred above all to be wrong with Stalin: “r-r-revolutionary” law and order; what a dream! When I began my work in France after the war, the dominant ideology in left-wing circles was a Marxist-inspired Communism, with diverse variants. Opposite that stood the ideologically inconsistent conservatism of the Liberal republic, the critique of which no longer needed to be performed. I oriented myself toward a critique of Stalinism because it represented a terrible threat, because it was rigging everything, because it was diverting toward a totalitarian project the forces that could have worked in favor of another kind of society. When this period is turned into a duel between Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron, that’s just a made-up mythology. As if it were unthinkable that one might have been right against Sartre and against Aron! What is forgotten is that each of them was the champion of an established order, even though one of these orders may seem “less bad” than the other. After Prague, the spreading of the truth about the Gulag, about Cambodia, the public at large ended up recognizing what, from 1946 to 1968, a handful of us had kept on repeating in the face of all opposition. In a well-known swing of the pendulum of History, people are reasoning as if the horrors of the Gulag validated Liberal {or

⁶In the [Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*](#). While one does find translations, in English and French, with *everything/tout*, [the German original](#) begins more simply with *was* (what/that which): “Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig.” —T/E

⁷This is from the last line of a poem Hegel composed during his Jena period. Quoted in Georg Lukács’s *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics* (1938), trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1975), the last two lines read: “Strive for, aspire to more than today and yesterday/Then you will be not better than the age, but the age at its best” (p. 105). —T/E

ideological, “free-market”} conservatism: If you try to change something, we are going to sink into totalitarianism—which is a pitiful sophism. That the average citizen, caught up in the circle of job-gadgets-TV, somehow or other puts up with the existing situation is already something serious. But what sends shivers down one’s spine is seeing very intelligent, highly informed people talking as if we had reached the end of History,⁸ as if it had become indecent, criminal even, to have a political project. The Liberal republic would be “the finally-found form,” if not the best of all possible worlds, and, in any case, the least bad of humanly possible worlds: humanity couldn’t offer anything more. Politics has become mere management of affairs, and “political philosophy” is said to be reduced to the defense of the rights of man.

Q.: Human rights represent, nevertheless, the principles of democracy.

C.C.: Those are incontestable principles, certainly, but they are incomplete, insufficient, and they open up crucial questions over which a veil of modesty has been thrown. What does political equality between Monsieur Bouygues⁹ and a municipal street sweeper mean? Where is the economic and political equality of women? What does my freedom mean when a host of decisions that are of capital importance to me is made without my participation and without my knowledge—including ones bearing on war and peace? France is governed by an irremovable oligarchy (replaced on an individual basis) made up of two to three thousand persons, which amounts to 0.01 percent of the citizenry. Elections decide between the different factions of this oligarchy in terms of the demagoguery we are served up. In

⁸[Francis Fukuyama’s essay “The End of History?”](#) did not appear in the *The National Interest* until the Summer of the following year. See now below in the present tome “The ‘End of History’?” —T/E

⁹The French industrialist Francis Bouygues is the founder of a postwar Paris-area construction company that has diversified into a large and powerful multinational corporation. The previous year (1987), the Bouygues Group purchased the recently privatized French flagship television network TF1. —T/E

any case, human rights cannot be a substitute for a political project. A discourse based on the rights of man or on the “democracy” allegedly achieved here and now masks the black hole at the heart of society, the never named crisis, the ten volcanos upon which we live, the disappearance of the political imagination.

Q.: What, according to you, is to be done?

C.C.: This situation is not the result of some sort of manipulation, of a conspiracy aimed at stupefying entire populations. The fact is that they want to be stupefied. Well, they must be told that. So, too, must one denounce the huge drop in quality, in rigor, in all fields of endeavor. Pockets of resistance must be created against corruption and cowardice, against the rubbish [*le n'importe quoi*] that is being printed and broadcast, against the errors that are being presented as the truth, loss of memory and forgetfulness having become structural traits of contemporary society. One must point one's finger at the forgers, the opportunists, the turncoats. That's decisive, even if, in the whole world, only ten young people are to be found who will listen to this, one in Caracas, another in Tokyo, Certainly, the price of intransigence is relative isolation. But as the Duchess of Guermantes would say, the quality of a man is defined not by the salons he frequents but by those he refuses to frequent.

The Big Sleep of the Democracies*

The blindness of humanity in the face of the catastrophic problems it has to confront is unprecedented. The nullity of the speeches of politicians finds its match in the insignificance of the preoccupations of intellectuals, political scientists, and philosophers. The civilization, wealth, and “democracy” about which those people endlessly hold forth are the privilege and prerogative of at most one eighth of humanity. The remaining seven-eighths live in poverty or famine and under tyranny. This wealth and this “democracy” are conditioned by international strategic and economic balances that are patently precarious. They are, in truth, purchased by irreversible destruction perpetrated against the Earth. So that some might continue to be filled to bursting and the others don’t die of hunger right away, forests are eliminated, living species are exterminated by the tens of thousands, the composition of the atmosphere, the climate, and the temperature are being threatened with lethal changes, and pollution has become a general phenomenon.

In the wealthy countries, psychical and moral impoverishment has replaced material poverty. Not that the latter has disappeared: one has simply succeeded in concentrating it on 10 to 20 percent of the population. The rest can thus continue to abandon themselves to consumerist and televisual onanism. Apathy, cynicism, irresponsibility, privatization, and indifference to common affairs are the characteristics of contemporary “zapanthropus,”¹ who is both glorified product of and condition for the reign of “liberal individualism,” a newly proliferating type of human being.

“Democratic” societies, it is said. In truth, they are liberal oligarchies. They are liberal because they preserve the

*“Le grand sommeil des démocraties,” *L’Express international*, April 14, 1989: 54-55. The recent publication of *DH* is noted at the end of this contribution to the magazine’s “Ideas” section.

¹As noted in “Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics” (1990; now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#), p. 207, n. 2), “‘Zapanthropus’ is formed from *zapping* (channel surfing) and *anthr pos* (man in the generic sense).” —T/E

institutional results of past social and democratic struggles. They are oligarchies, for the number of people who participate in effectively actual (economic, political, and “cultural”-media) power is minuscule. Of 37 million {adult} citizens in France, there are not 37,000 persons (one in 1,000) who would truly be taking part in any sort of power. The number would be closer to 3,700 (one in 10,000)—which is a number that would turn the Roman oligarchy green with envy. Petty political grousing and divergences in interests among clans ill mask the ultimate solidarity of the various groups that do business together while periodically buying, through this or that measure, the vote or the tolerance of a population fragmented into corporatist bodies and into lobbies whose every member fiercely defends what he believes are his interests. The whole forms, of course, a system. Individuals’ privatization feeds the oligarchies, which in turn actively foment such privatization.

There is no conspiracy here. This development is possible only because these factors are together of a piece. Under these conditions, it is naive to ask oneself why there is a split between the people and the “political class.” The “ideas” of the politicians are invisible to the naked eye; their differences, quite observable, are sordid. The regime itself—the “representative” regime—is set up to drive people away from public affairs. Genuine social-historical time—the time of uncertainty and of a project—is occulted. In advertising time, “Tomorrow is already today,” according Philips’ wonderful slogan.²

There is a triumph of the “liberal” and “individualistic” imaginary. “The aim of the Moderns is the enjoyment of security in private pleasures; and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these enjoyments [*jouissances*],” Benjamin Constant wrote

²This multinational consumer electronics company’s actual advertising slogan in France was “Philips, c’est déjà demain” (Philips, it’s already tomorrow). —T/E

approvingly in 1819.³ We're finally there. But for how long will you have these guarantees, these enjoyments? The system functions because there are still workers who tighten screws, teachers who teach, judges who judge—whereas nothing in the dominant mentality and “morality” should motivate them to do so. The system survives because it exploits human behaviors produced by prior history, which it renders laughable and which it is incapable of reproducing. In the long run, not even the capitalist economy can function when money is made more easily in speculation or in the promotion of Madonna than through the creation of business enterprises.

Should it continue, the frenzied sleep of humanity will be able to produce only monsters.

³Benjamin Constant, [“The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns”](#) (speech delivered to the Royal Athenaeum of Paris; translation slightly altered). —T/E

Giving a Meaning to Our Lives*

QUESTION: You have some very harsh words to say about the era through which we are going. You say that “it manifests the pathetic inability of the epoch to conceive of itself as something positive—or as something *tout court*.”¹ How do you explain this sort of breakdown of the imaginary?

C.C.: In my view, it’s a matter of the victory of a specific imaginary. From 1750 to 1950, the modern era was characterized by the struggle and mutual contamination between two great opposing imaginary significations. One is the project of social, individual, and political autonomy, which enlivened all forms of struggle against the established order of things, in all domains. The other is the imaginary of the unlimited expansion of rational mastery: making us “masters and possessors of nature,” as Descartes says.² Marx also participates in this capitalist imaginary (in a broader sense than its economic meaning) when he dreams of “taming the powers of nature.”³

This capitalist imaginary has triumphed since the 1950s, which opens the era of generalized conformism. The project of autonomy is gradually disappearing from the

*Interview with Roger-Pol Droit, published as “Donner une signification à nos vies,” *Le Monde*, November 30, 1990: 28. On the same page appeared Droit’s review of *SB(n.é.)* and *MM*.

¹“The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992; now in *WIF*, p. 32). This original English-language version of Castoriadis’s talk is even slightly harsher than his subsequent translation, which appeared in *MM*. —T/E

²In part 6 of *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, by René Descartes. —T/E

³Castoriadis may be thinking of the following passage from the end of the [Preface](#) to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: “All mythology subdues, controls, and fashions the forces of nature in the imagination and through imagination; it disappears therefore when real control over these forces is established.” One finds more explicit references to man’s having allegedly “subdued the forces of nature” in Friedrich Engels’s [On Authority](#) and [Dialectics of Nature](#). —T/E

horizon. Henceforth, it is a matter only of pursuing this automatic expansion no one has decided on or directs. The effects of such expansion are not illusory: the stores are well stocked, the standard of living rises, at least in this small part of humanity that is superindustrialized. But it's a sad conquest, for no one believes any longer that a paradisiacal life awaits us at the end of this expansion. It's merely a matter of continuing growth indefinitely, with no other end than itself.

We are in a world that is at once oversocialized and desocialized, a sort of "overpopulated desert." . . . Traffic jams offer a lovely illustration of that: individuals find themselves in an ocean of social objects wherein each individual is isolated and detests everyone else, because they are keeping him from moving forward. The same goes, in a sense, with the thousands of books, records, museums, and exhibitions that, each day, are increasingly at our disposal.

Their existence, of course, offers important advantages and yet is accompanied by a superficial way of looking at things, a form of generalized channel-surfing [*zapping*] where little pleasures follow one after the other in a haphazard way and where nothing is central any longer. We are living in the time of the destruction of every kind of hierarchization of works and tasks. Now, how can there be a meaningful world without a hierarchization of things?

Q.: Can we exit from such a situation? What are the conceivable outcomes?

C.C.: I don't at all think that the present-day situation would, as Martin Heidegger believed, be part of a metaphysical fate of humanity in the face which we would have to await serenely the return of the gods. But what makes it difficult to respond is that there no longer is, at present, a social-historical guarantor [*répondant*] for any political project. For my part, I think that the whole of the population of the industrialized countries would have an interest in a radical transformation of society, regardless of class or social group—in this regard, there is no political privilege of the poor as such. I think that almost everyone could—and should—want such a radical transformation.

Now, that's not what people want—for the moment,

but this moment is lasting a while. The only thing that remains for me to do, therefore, is to continue my work, thinking that this imaginary of expansion will wear down and that the demand [*l'exigence*] to give a meaning to our lives will be rediscovered.

Q.: What you have just said concerns, in fact, only a small fraction of humanity, the inhabitants of the wealthy countries. And what about all the others?

C.C.: If one wants to extend democracy to the entire world, there will necessarily be some crucial problems to be settled on the demographic and economic levels. At any rate, the energy limits of the Earth will make it necessary to make radical changes in our ways of living.

To these well-known problems are added some other ones. We are faced with Islam and Hinduism, blocs of the imaginary for which a religious structuring of the world is of fundamental importance. They don't really allow themselves to be corroded by the Western imaginary of equality, liberty, and justice. How, without destroying them, is one to carry out within these cultures the secularization of the public domain that is necessary for political autonomy?

I think that the West still has a huge role to play here. We have spread all over the place our Jeeps, our machine guns, and our televisions, but we have not yet succeeded in rendering universal this demand for autonomy that is grounded on a radical separation between political laws and decisions and religious considerations.

Q.: What can the task of a philosopher be today?

C.C.: The fundamental task is to succeed in thinking the imaginary as creator of forms and creation-destruction as the essential dimension of being. A whole philosophical tradition since Plato has been devoted to eliminating the imagination, to limiting or subordinating its role, and to considering absolute creation as an absurdity. Now, the whole of human history from Pharaonic society to Nazism obliges us to think through the irreducible, creative, instituting character of the imaginary, which can be accounted for neither by historical materialism nor even by psychoanalysis, which remains confined to the domain of the soul and cannot think the institution as such.

We must think History as creation, for better and for worse. Faced with such creation, we have to choose, doing so responsibly and reasonably. But on this vital question, there is an appalling abdication on the part of contemporary philosophical as well as political thought.

Politics in Crisis*

QUESTION: Do you, along with Edgar Morin, think that the high-school student movement¹ is symptomatic of the moral and political dilapidation of French society and, more generally, of the so-called developed Western societies?

C.C.: Certainly, I myself have been saying these things since 1960-1963.² There is a very deep-seated process of decomposition of culture and of Western society.³ As concerns education, one always leaves aside three points that to me seem quite fundamental.

The first is the meaning pupils and parents give to the act of being educated. In Greece, where I come from, parents' traditional answer to children's question, "Why are you sending me to school?" was: "So that you might become *anthropos*," a human being. Today, the signification of school, to the extent that it exists at all, is purely instrumental in character, something that children and adolescents find impossible to accept. The function of schooling is to produce papers that can be used to obtain a job, something that has become an increasingly hit-or-miss proposition.

The second point, quite symmetrical to the first, is the

*Interview with Louis Romeo and Thierry Cazals, published as "La politique en crise," *Politis*, December 6, 1990: 64-66. An endnote announces the recent publication of *MM* and *SB(n.é.)*.

¹A month after riots in the poor, racially-mixed Lyon-area suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin that were sparked by the death of a young handicapped passenger thrown from a motorcycle passing near a police roadblock, French high-school students mobilized in November 1990 to protest the lack of adequate school supplies and to demand the hiring of more teachers, along with reductions in class size. For Castoriadis's comments on the French government's inadequate response to these riots involving socially-disenfranchised urban youth, many of whom come from immigrant populations, see "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991; now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)). —T/E

²See Castoriadis's "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)) as well as his 1963 text "Student Youth" ([PSW3](#)). —T/E

³See, e.g., "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982; now in [CR](#)) and, later, "The Dilapidation of the West." —T/E

decline in teachers' investment in education. Teaching is not a trade like other ones. It is not a matter merely of earning one's living, or of inculcating some dead knowledge, but of awakening young minds by getting them to accede to reflective autonomy. That is increasingly being lost.

The third point is the loss of interest [*désinvestissement*], on the part of society as a whole, in relation to the values that held, or were supposed to hold, it together. The constant reforming of the curricula has become a joke. The only thing one does is chase after what seems to be some innovations. {Back in the late Sixties/early Seventies} it was the New Math. Then the President of the Republic {in France} discovered that History wasn't being taught enough. Of course, but how, and what History? What is the meaning of History for children when, for society, such History no longer has any meaning, when the past is ignored or made either into an object of erudition or into a object for tourism (historical sites are visited like one visits Disneyland)? There can be no significant relationship to the past if there is not a project for the future. Such a project for the future necessarily informs education, that is to say, gives it a form, an orientation. The demands of the high-school students are quite reasonable. What is striking is that they in no way challenge the system; with these demands, students are simply asking that it function properly—and that provokes a political crisis. It's absolutely typical that we've reached the point where one has to have the users themselves, the high-school students, rattle the State in order for the State to do its job. That is revelatory of the growing inability of contemporary institutions to face up to the questions that are being posed by social and historical change.

We live in a society that is lived as alien and hostile to itself. The individual sees in society—which the individual generally confuses with the State—both a sort of enemy the individual would like to be able to do without and an instance of authority to which demands for things can still be made. While the political imagination is at zero, and while the people who govern us are incapable of having any idea whatsoever, it is not the case that they would represent particularly degenerate specimens of the human race from the

genetic standpoint; they reflect a general state of society, which I have called, since 1960, the *depoliticization* and thoroughgoing *privatization* of individuals.⁴ Society has the politicians it merits, the ones it is able to produce. In times past, it was able to produce Pericles, Georges Clemenceau, Léon Gambetta, the Communards, the people who gave us June '36 {in France}, and so on.

The high-schools student movement today, like that of 1986,⁵ has manifested a magnificent ability to get itself organized spontaneously on its own. But these movements remain within the framework of established society; they absolutely do not call back into question anything whatsoever about the existing structure of institutions, ideas, or values. The high-school students are demanding that the system function—whereas the system is not dysfunctional, as the sociologists say, but is riven by a deep-seated bureaucratic irrationality. Modern capitalist societies have become societies in which the only thing that counts is maximizing production and consumption, one's enjoyments, as Benjamin Constant said.⁶ In the long run, however, that endangers their own reproduction. In a society where everyone busies oneself only with making the most money, it is unclear why a teacher would teach.

Q.: How is one to get beyond this breakdown of politics?

C.C.: There is a thoroughgoing depoliticization of the population. Nothing is to be expected from the professional political strata, which are made up of bureaucratic groupings that try to penetrate the state apparatus in order to use it for their own ends and to perpetuate themselves in power.

⁴Again, see “Modern Capitalism and Revolution.” —T/E

⁵See above in this tome, “The Ambiguities of Apoliticism” (1986) and “This Extraordinary Capacity for Self-Organization” (1987). —T/E

⁶[“The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns”](#) (speech delivered in 1819 to the Royal Athenaeum of Paris). —T/E

We are living in an era of generalized conformism.⁷ Even disputes enter into a preset framework, never going beyond the boundaries, or else they are just the silly antics of clowns—see Jean-Edern Hallier.⁸ The people who resist or who put forward something else are outside the current. They can count only on their own reflective thinking, their individual imaginations, instead of being able to be inspired, enriched, by great collective creations or collective movements.

A change won't be able to come without a movement within society that would challenge the central values of this system. For the moment, no such movement is visible. It is characteristic that in the countries of the East, in Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, even Hungary, the popular movements that were magnificently audacious, with both a tactical and a strategic subtlety, are disappearing immediately after they succeeded in eliminating totalitarian tyranny and are giving way to a general longing for consumption. Without, moreover, consumption. . . . They were unable, and certainly unwilling, to create new forms of collective, autonomous, democratic organization. And for a very good reason. In order to live like the West, there is no need to create councils, soviets, Parisian *sections*, an Athenian *ekklisia*, or anything like them. . . . One only has to elect a Parliament, call on capitalists to take over the factories, and make the alleged market operate. Here again we see the crisis of the values of autonomy and what I call the *waning of social and political conflict*. There can be no reasonable discussion about how much time that is going to last.

⁷“The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992; now in [WIF](#), p. 32). —T/E

⁸As noted in n. 7 of “War, Religion, and Politics” (1991; in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), p. 241), Jean-Edern Hallier was a “novelist, writer, and editor [who] went from being a Maoist to having close connections with François Mitterrand, with whom [he then] had a falling out, to flirting with far-right positions.” Perhaps Castoriadis is referring in the present (December 1990) interview to Hallier’s “moonlight conversations” with Fidel Castro, published that same year as *Fidel Castro, conversations au clair de lune*. —T/E

Other weighty questions are closely bound up with how contemporary capitalist society is structured: the ecological question, or the North-South problem—which is, in its way, the result of capitalism. What the poor countries of the world are borrowing from the West is not *habeas corpus* or the idea of political responsibility but, rather, machine guns, Kalashnikovs, Jeeps, and the TVs with which the latest sergeant to have carried out a “socialist” revolution—surrounded by forty quotation marks—can fool the population of his country.

It’s obvious that the problems have become planetary in scope. And from that standpoint, what is at issue is the very structure of the Nation-State. In the USSR, we are witnessing a fantastic reawakening of various nationalisms, which is in part justified by centuries of oppression by the Russian State. “The prison of peoples,” as was said in the nineteenth century, is Russia. Russia is the last colonial power, along with China in Tibet. From this standpoint, one obviously cannot condemn those movements. But on the other hand, most of the time those movements remain within this narrowly nationalist phase. I do not believe that something would be able to come out of them that will help people to outstrip the idea of the Nation-State. Moreover, one can see the difficulties that exist even in Western Europe, in the Economic Community, for such an outstripping to occur.

Q.: Can the current of the Greens [*les Verts*] help to flesh out again a project of autonomy, a project of authentically participatory democracy?

C.C.: At the outset, I had a lot of sympathy for the ecological current properly speaking, a current with which I share some criticisms of contemporary technique. But this current has never been capable of putting forward another vision of society, an overall political conception. A set of specific and limited [*ponctuelles*] battles is not a replacement for a political project.

One can, as my friend Philippe Courrège has done, try to develop a mathematical model for federated microsocieties that are balanced, in energy equilibrium, using alternative energies. Yet it must not be forgotten that the nature of modern society is such that one cannot dodge the problem of

their gigantic size. By their very nature, a host of activities involve very large organizations. How are New York-Tokyo or Melbourne-Paris flights to be managed by small self-managed units?

We are always being told that humanity is capable of true democracy only on the scale of 10,000 persons and that, as soon as one goes beyond that figure, one ends up with bureaucracy, the abuse of power. We have to prove in practice that a democracy on the scale of 55 million, 300 million, or five billion individuals is possible. Not in the form of an *ekklisia* in which the five billion inhabitants of the Earth would gather together in the Sahara. Other means are required: extreme decentralization, full and effectively actual self-governance on the part of grassroots units, appropriate forms of federation, a central power effectively subject to the people's ongoing control, another way of using radio and television,

A Crisis of the Imaginary?*

QUESTION: The contemporary period appears to you to be regressive. In what kind of world are we living?

C.C.: The wealthy and industrialized Western societies are dominated by a sort of generalized conformism.¹ For three centuries, the West had been built upon two antagonistic elements. One of them is the individual and collective project of autonomy: we create our own laws; they are not given to us by a transcendent source. This movement, heir to the creation of democracy and philosophy in ancient Greece, yielded the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the revolutions of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the socialist workers' movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The other, capitalism, is not to be defined by exploitation (which has existed for millennia) but by a social imaginary signification: the unlimited expansion of rational mastery. In fact, what this is is pseudorational pseudomastery. No one masters the Niagara of technoscience, neither the capitalists nor the technicians nor the scientists. And this folly of expansion is irrational in its goals, its means, and its effects. The system is in the process of sawing down the tree on which it grew up.

These irrationalities were limited, over two centuries' time, by people's struggle against the system. In particular, working-class struggles have allowed the economy to operate by enlarging domestic consumer markets and by limiting the absurdities of the capitalist organization of production.

Q.: Why have these working-class struggles dwindled down?

C.C.: The workers' movement has been breaking down for decades. Diverted first by Marxism, then by the

*Interview with Bernard Chaouat, published as "L'invité de *Vendredi*. Cornelius Castoriadis," *Vendredi. L'hebdomadaire des socialistes*, 85 (January 11, 1991): 23. *Vendredi* (Friday) was a weekly publication of the French Socialist Party that is now known simply as *L'hebdo des socialistes*.

¹"The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1992; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

catastrophic change imprinted on it by Marxism-Leninism, which created totalitarian bureaucratic-capitalist regimes, it has been forced by events in East Berlin (1953), Hungary and Poland (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968) to become aware of the true nature of Communism. The result has been complete ideological disorientation, which goes hand in hand with a sociological destruction of the working class. The working-class community of times past has been wiped out by technological change, and what remains of the proletariat has one way or other been integrated into consumer society. The waning of political and social conflict is accompanied by people's depoliticization and privatization, which have been manifest since the late 1950s.² Each person pursues his own pleasures and worries solely about his little individual sphere. Capitalism is flexible enough to avoid major economic crises and give the majority bread and spectacles. It has succeeded for ten years now {that is, since the early 1980s} in compressing society's misery onto 10 to 15 percent of the population, the unemployed, marginal people, immigrants, who cannot struggle collectively and effectively. The others are indifferent or hostile to them.

Western society is in a deep crisis.³ The regime stays alive by destroying everything that allows it to operate: a domestic opposition that would correct its absurdities, all the values handed down from the past being replaced by the hunt for money; the human types that embody those values; nature ransacked in order to allow the increased production of illusions called *commodities*.

Q.: Are you saying that this crisis is especially a crisis of the imaginary?

C.C.: Yes, for the old values are dead and society no longer believes in anything. To believe solely in money is self-destructive. For the moment, people seem incapable of

²See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (originally drafted in 1959 and first published in *S. ou B.* in 1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)). —T/E

³See "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982; now in [CR](#)) and, in December of the same year as the present interview, "The Dilapidation of the West" (now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)). —T/E

creating new values, new forms of social and political life. Men and women seem to have given up on the project of genuine equality, genuine freedom, being content with negative and defensive liberties.

There will be no exit without a reawakening of peoples presently plunged into a deep sleep. That isn't something that can be decreed. But it can be prepared and helped along by revealing how the present-day system really operates and by denouncing the inanity of the objectives it proposes and achieves. Let's stop describing as *democracies* regimes that are in fact liberal oligarchies. If one counts up in France all the major business leaders, those who lead parties, the top administrative officials, and the cultural managers, that's hardly one thousandth of the 37 million voters. What kind of democracy can there be with the enormous concentration of economic power in the hands of a few? And what is the philosophy of the system, the lofty modern ideal of Liberalism {in the Continental sense of a conservative "free-market" ideology}? Increase your alleged enjoyments [*jouissances*]! Look into the mirror some night and ask yourself: Did I come on Earth and am I going to die in order to have a new car and a new TV?

Democracy signifies: self-governance at all levels. "Participation" is just a hackneyed expression [*une tarte à la crème*]. No one participates and no one ever will participate if one is not convinced that one's participation will make a difference, that is to say, if one does not participate in making decisions about legislation, production, etc. That can be done directly on the scale of the business enterprise, the local collectivity. The problem is certainly more complex on the scale of larger units, but here again solutions can be found, some of which are already known (recall of elected officials, referenda, and so on). But the invention of such forms as well as their implementation presupposes a renewal of people's deep-seated attitudes, a rebirth of the passion for democracy. As long as such passion is absent, humanity cannot be saved from itself, except by playing dictator, with known results.

Q.: What can the role of the intellectual be?

C.C.: Uncompromising criticism of existing realities and elucidation of the possibilities for transforming them.

The Rebirth of a Democratic Movement*

QUESTION: In 1985, you considered “the marginalization of all political parties” to be a process that was going to accompany and allow the rebirth of an authentic political passion for a democratic life on everyone’s part. Today, such a marginalization seems to be under way. But apathy, rather than reawakening, predominates. How do you explain that?

C.C.: In order to avoid misunderstandings, I would like to restore the context for the phrase you are quoting. “A genuine liberation of energies . . . goes by way of the marginalization of all existing political parties, the creation by the people of new forms of political organization based on democracy, the participation of all, and the responsibility of each in common affairs—in short, it goes by way of the rebirth of genuine political thought and passion that would at the same time be lucid about the results of the history of the last two centuries.”¹

The role and power of parties are among the factors that create the huge gap between the “democratic” pretensions of our regimes and their reality. This role, which has been known and analyzed for a century, remains loftily ignored by contemporary “political philosophy” as well as by constitutions (except for a merely verbal mention in the French Constitution). Effectively actual political power is held by parties, bureaucratic bodies dominated by self-

*Interview with Roger-Pol Droit, first published as “Un entretien avec Cornélius [*sic*] Castoriadis. La renaissance démocratique passe par la création de nouvelles formes d’organisation politique” (An interview with Cornelius Castoriadis: democratic rebirth goes by way of the creation of new forms of political organization), *Le Monde*, December 10, 1991: 2. (The front-page headline that day announced, “The Slavic Republics Proclaim the End of the USSR.”) Reprinted as “Un entretien” in *Les Grands Entretiens du Monde. Penser la fin du communisme, l’Europe, l’État, la politique, l’histoire* (Paris: Le Monde Éditions, 1994), pp. 208-14, and in excerpted form as “Mettre en cause un mode de vie” (Challenging a way of life), *Le Monde*, December 28-29, 1997: 17, to accompany *Le Monde*’s obituary of Castoriadis.

¹“La ‘gauche’ en 1985” (The ‘Left’ in 1985; now in *DH*, p. 116).

coopting apparatuses. The “people’s representatives” are representatives of the parties, chosen by them and imposed on voters. Whence the joke of the alleged separation of powers: the majority party executes and legislates; it also meddles in the judiciary when it comes to affairs that matter to it.

These are not French vices; the same goes everywhere (the relative exception of the United States is due to the fact that the presidential majority and the congressional majority do not always coincide). This bureaucratic structure of parties refers us back to the general process of bureaucratization of contemporary capitalist society. And every organization is obliged, by the way the system is arranged, to conform to that system if it wants to exist therein (take the case of the ecologists). The rebirth of a democratic movement will have to go by way of the creation of new forms of political organization.

Q.: And yet one is hardly able to discern any signs of the appearance of such a movement.

C.C.: No, what predominates is apathy—what I have called for thirty years {or since the late Fifties/early Sixties} *privatization*.² Parties also play a role of their own here: they reinforce apathy, which reinforces parties. Each withdraws into his private sphere, thus leaving the field even freer for the political apparatuses. The risk is that the discouragement and disgust toward political personnel, which are becoming more and more manifest, might give rise to an infatuation for a savior. That risk is real, for society perceives itself to be in crisis.

Q.: Do you mean that it believes that it is in crisis, whereas it isn’t?

C.C.: No, it is. Only, one mustn’t look for the crisis in the traditional way, in “objective facts.” Certainly, the situation in numerous sectors is intolerable, but the “objective” situation of France, like that of the other wealthy countries, isn’t catastrophic. Yet people have the feeling that everything is blocked and, more deeply, that everything is

²See “Modern Capitalism and Revolution” (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)).
—T/E

vain. That's what counts. The feeling of being in crisis constitutes the crisis itself.

Q.: What's the reason for this feeling?

C.C.: There is a host of factors that are situated at different depths. In France, there is the enormous disillusion toward Socialist policy, which, it is being discovered, is an orthodox way of managing liberal capitalism. People voted for the Socialists in 1981 and then in 1988, so that something would change in society. What has changed? Nothing. That is officially recognized. The Socialist leaders beat their breasts (see the books by Laurent Fabius, Lionel Jospin, etc.), crying out: If you don't like us any longer, it's our fault. We have to invent something else. And, as in Italian operas, one goes on endlessly singing, "Let us part, let us part," while remaining on the stage.

The Socialists repeat in unison: Let's invent something, let's invent something—and they invent nothing. In England and in the United States, Reaganism and Thatcherism have enriched the rich, kept the poor poor, and hastened the disintegration of society. For better or worse, postwar capitalism had operated as an interventionist (Keynesian) form of capitalism. With its turn toward Liberalism {in the Continental sense of a conservative "free-market" ideology}, it has plunged back into the disequilibria that once again render a great depression possible.

And yet at a deeper level, other, much weightier factors are at work. According to its explicit ideology, this society has no collective project, and it is not to have one. Individuals are supposed to forge a meaning for their own lives independent of every framework and every collective project—which is a total absurdity. Is each newborn to invent its own tongue? And is one's tongue merely a "means of communication," a computer code, or else does it carry with it all the significations by means of which a world exists for society and society exists for itself?

Obviously, in contemporary society individuals in fact do not forge anything at all; they are completely drenched by the imaginary significations that socialize them. To indulge in the joy of "individualistic narcissism" is simply to ape what

fifty or five hundred million others are doing at the same moment. The concrete content of contemporary individualism is strictly social in character. It is the individual side of the capitalist project: the limitless increase of production and consumption. So, despite what the idle gossip of the prevailing discourse says, there really is a social project, one that is neither the mere resultant of individual projects nor something deliberately chosen by individuals, but one that predetermines individual choices and projects as strongly as, but in another way than, in any heteronomous society.

Now, this project is both absurd and unworthy, and I believe that its hold is beginning to wear off. People glimpse that the central objective of human life cannot be to change cars every three years rather than every six. But up till now they have not been able to find within themselves the resources to go beyond. The imaginary significations of capitalism are eroding without society being able to make other ones emerge. In a sense, there is nothing too surprising about that. For, it is not only a matter of creating new political conceptions. It is a matter of challenging an entire way of living and conceiving another one, since in consumer society the reign of bureaucratic parties, the power of money and the media, and a superficialization of culture are intimately tied together and of a piece.

Q.: The policy of the French Socialists is most certainly not alone at issue. Don't you think that the collapse of Communism also contributes in a major way to the creation of this feeling of absence of a project?

C.C.: We are living in an era that is enduring, in a cumulative and condensed way, the results of the muffled or resounding collapse of the two forms the project of social and individual autonomy has taken on in modern times: High Liberalism, as ultimately embodied in the capitalist Republic, and Socialism, which was monstrously disfigured by Communist totalitarianism or dulled down and emptied of its substance in Social Democracy.

The first "disenchantment of the world," which resulted from the retreat of religion, had been conditioned, but also compensated, by these projects that had retained a "religious" side to them since they explicitly invoked an

overall meaning, immanent to human history and independent of people's action (or the automatic result thereof), viz., progress. At present, society is going through a second disenchantment as it takes note that Liberal (capitalist) "progress" is meaningless and that Communist "progress" represented a descent into Hell.

The long series of shocks (the Moscow Trials, the German-Soviet Pact, the enslavement of Eastern Europe, a new round of trials, repression of revolts in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, etc.) that were silently perceived even by Communist militants (individuals who for a long time have been psychically split and turned into ventriloquists) has now culminated in the pulverization of the Communist regimes and brought to light irrefutable revelations of their monstrosity.³ And naturally, this is exploited by the spokespeople for established society. People have it drummed into their heads all day long that the proof of the excellency of capitalism has already been established and that they don't have to imagine anything other than what exists—capitalism and consumption—for, humanity has reached its final destination. If you propose something else, you are at best a mild and inoffensive utopian, at worst a budding Pol Pot. No genuine future; no historical exit. This is a constraint that paralyzes the political imagination and political activity. Apathy and withdrawal into one's private sphere are reinforced. They in turn consolidate the deadlock. Under such conditions, regressive outcomes are again rendered possible—like the withdrawal into nationalism.

Q.: Might ecology allow society to rediscover a project of some sort?

C.C.: On the condition that the ecological movement cure itself [*se défasse*] of its political blindness.

A change in attitude toward nature is indispensable. We have to rid ourselves [*nous défaire*] of the phantasms of unlimited mastery and unlimited expansion, stop the

³See, in addition to "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" (1990; now in [WIE](#)), "Curtain on the Metaphysics of the Trials" and "The Proletarian Revolution against the Bureaucracy" (1956; in [PSW2](#)). —T/E

unbounded exploitation of our planet, and lovingly cohabit with it, like a gardener with an English garden. But that requires, and also implies, another attitude toward the overall orientation of social life and toward human beings in society; responsibility on everyone's part regarding the environment is inseparable from responsibility on everyone's part in relation to public affairs. Under contemporary conditions, ecology and a radicalization of democracy are indissociable. The ecologists don't see that because they don't want to "do politics"—which does not prevent them from doing the most traditional kind of micropolitics as performed by petty politicians.

Q.: How does contemporary society's loss of a horizon manifest itself in the cultural sphere?

C.C.: It finds its exact expression in a host of phenomena. More and more, the public is interested only in the instantaneous consumption of "cultural products": this evening's broadcast is forgotten the next day, driven out by the following night's broadcast. Nothing is planned, nothing is excavated, nothing is built. Memory has totally crumbled and the ideological regression is unprecedented: contemporary economists have "forgotten" both the classics and the great economists of the 1930s, like the thinkers of democracy have "forgotten" about the critiques of representation or the socioeconomic and anthropological dimension of every political regime. "Creative people" have become cogs in this huge mechanism that disseminates works without criticism, selling them to a public that is increasingly incapable of selection [*tri*] and discernment. Competition among scientists is often dishonest (see the "Gallo Affair").⁴ There is a general intellectual flabbiness regarding criteria.

Q.: What should the task of philosophy be today?

C.C.: Another symptom of the contemporary breakdown is that one is proclaiming the end of philosophy, the closure of metaphysics, and the virtues of *pensiero debole*

⁴Castoriadis is referring to the 1980s controversy between the teams of Robert Gallo and Luc Montagnier concerning the discovery of HIV and its role in causing AIDS, which led to a French/U.S. government patent dispute, subsequently settled. —T/E

(weak thought)⁵—whereas the tasks of philosophy are more important and more difficult than ever for the following simple reason: the “material,” what is to be thought, is multiplying and constantly becoming more complex at the same time that the inherited structures of thought have fallen to the ground all in a jumble.

Philosophy has to think all that is thinkable—in other words, everything that is given in our experience and not only the fact that it is given but *how* it is given. Four domains for this experience are: the mathematical-logical universe; the physical world; life; and the human, psychical, and social-historical domain, which is constituted by the emergence of the social imaginary and the psychical imagination. There is a multiplicity of levels of being and a multiplicity of meanings of the term *being*: a Hilbert space, a quantum particle, an immune system, a neurotic structure, and a religion do not exist in the same fashion and cannot be thought in accordance with the same categories. This already shows that in being there is a power or potential to form other levels, a self-deployment that operates as dehiscence, separation, fragmentation, through which an enigmatic unity nonetheless subsists. In each of these domains, we see being as *chaos*, bottomless abyss—unending, inexhaustible, unfathomable creation—and at the same time as *cosmos*—relative order and a somehow or other organized multiplicity without which we would be able neither to speak nor to exist.

And the relationship between chaos and the physical cosmos is clearly not the same as that between chaos and the social-historical cosmos. Elucidating all that requires the creation of new philosophical significations (not “concepts”)⁶

⁵See “The ‘End of Philosophy?’” (1989; now in *PPA*). The specific reference is to *Il pensiero debole*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovati (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988). —T/E

⁶The same year as the present interview (1991), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari published *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (*What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994]), in which these authors argued that philosophy involves the creation of concepts. —T/E

—something that is obviously impossible if one confines philosophy to a hermeneutics or “deconstruction” of past philosophers, accompanied by a crass ignorance of the current state of experience and contemporary science.

Q.: You practice psychoanalysis. How do you situate psychoanalysis in relation to the sciences?

C.C.: Psychoanalysis is not a “positive science” since quantification, experimentation, and unlimited reproducibility of observations have no meaning there. That takes nothing away from its major importance. We are psychological beings; our socialization involves repression; our psychism is therefore, in the main, unconscious. Unconscious meaning (and a-meaning) heavily conditions our acts and our thoughts. Through its elucidation, psychoanalysis aims at helping the subject to achieve her autonomy, to develop a subjectivity that is at once open to her Unconscious and capable of reflection and deliberation.

Q.: What, for you, is the connection between this individual autonomy and social autonomy, or, more precisely, between psychoanalysis and democracy?

C.C.: There is no direct connection, still less an operational one, but there exists a close relationship in spirit and in objectives. Both aim at the liberation of the human being’s creative imagination, the social imaginary or the singular being’s imagination. The imaginary is the source of human creation—but its works do not themselves necessarily have positive value: poems and delusions, cathedrals and concentration camps equally proceed therefrom. Autonomy—freedom—is not just the abolition of external constraints or psychological compulsions; it is also the establishment of another type of relation between deep-seated individual or collective pushes [*poussées*] and agencies [*instances*] capable of sorting them out [*faire le tri*], giving them form or preventing them from manifesting themselves in reality. That is the role of reflective and deliberative subjectivity on the individual level, of democratic institutions on the collective level. For, democracy is the regime of collective reflectiveness and self-limited freedom. The psychoanalytic project and the democratic political project meet up on this level.

The “End of History”?*

I think that the way the problem is posed has been summarized very well and I find that the formulation of the three questions is right on the mark.¹ It was also very good to be reminded of Hegel’s famous phrase.² A certain attitude prevails today that wants to erase the contradictions that may exist within the work of a great philosopher. If you perceive such contradictions, you are said to be an ignoramus or you are said not to understand anything about them, and you are said to be failing in the true task, which consists in retrieving the deep truth of a philosophy beyond some merely apparent contradictions, in its hidden unity. This attitude is to be denounced—it comes from Hegel himself—for, it disarms the critical mind and makes each philosophy into a moment of the Absolute. Now, there really and truly is, in the Hegelian system, a raw and intractable contradiction that cannot be worked out. This contradiction becomes evident when one considers the idea of the end of history and its necessity within this system. Let us recall that Hegelian philosophy claims to be, and effectively is, the summit, the outcome, the culmination of the main current in Greco-Western philosophy, the rationalist current. Why is this contradiction

*Untitled text in Jean-Luc Boilleau, Cornelius Castoriadis, et al, *De la fin de l’histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Félin 1992), pp. 62-71. The excerpted section of the Discussion, translated below, appeared in *ibid.*, pp. 89-91. This book published the Acts of the May 15-17, 1991 “Rencontres de Pétrarque” in Montpellier, France.

¹See the Introduction by Jean-Claude Michéa, *ibid.*, pp. 57-61. —T/E

²On *ibid.*, p. 61, Michéa had quoted Hegel:

I am nearly 50 years old, and have lived 30 of those years in these eternally restless times of fear and hope; I had hoped that there would come an end to this fear and hope. [Now] I must observe their continuation—even, I think in dark moments, their aggravation (translated by Adriaan Th. Peperzak, in *Philosophy and Politics: A Commentary on the Preface to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* [Dordrecht and Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1987], pp. 22-23, quoting Hegel’s October 30, 1819 letter to Creuzer, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, vol. 2, p. 219).

—T/E

necessary? Because Hegel can conceive philosophy only as science and as system of knowledge and because this knowledge can be scientific (in Hegel's sense) only if it is absolute. But if this knowledge, *qua* absolute, is to become effectively actual at a moment in history and in its history, nothing can happen afterward; nothing can come to modify it, complete it, amend it. This amounts to saying that the time that comes "after" is no longer true time, since it is no longer a time of the unfolding of Spirit realizing itself in the world; it can be only an empty time, a time of pure repetition. One has just spoken of Alexandre Kojève's interpretation. You can certainly have many reservations about this interpretation, but it was right to recall it, both because it is from there that Francis Fukuyama begins and because, more importantly, this interpretation is "correct" and honest on the point of interest to us here, the end of history. While the orthodox and respectable Neo-Hegelians try, through a series of stratagems and sophisms, to avoid the question or skirt it, Kojève has the courage to face it head-on and to take Hegel seriously. (It is amusing to note that the harmonizing, respectful "interpretations" proceed by smoothing things over and treating their subject as at once an unparalleled genius and a moron who, in this or that passage from his writings, didn't know what he was writing. That goes not only in the case of Hegel.) Now, if one takes Hegel seriously, *the end of history* is not a phrase that is to be found here and there in his writings; it's at once Hegel's main intention and the cornerstone without which the *entire* system crumbles into dust, *qua* system: the system can exist only as Absolute Knowledge, and knowledge can be absolute only if it closes the history of knowledge. This necessity is manifest and explicit in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, *The Science of Logic*, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, and *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, as well as in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. In all these fields, the *meaning* of all the developments hangs on the existence of an end, a genuine *completion*, a definitive closure. And in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel himself shows that he is aware of the problem and, in a certain manner, he faces up to it:

certainly, he pretty much says, there will always remain some empirical work to be done. In other words, the entomologists will still be able to discover new species of insects, crystallographers new varieties of crystals, philologists will still be able to correct a bit better the ancient manuscripts—but all that won’t change anything basic, which has already been recorded in Hegelian philosophy.

The unacceptable character of this idea is strikingly obvious, first of all for reasons that could, wrongly, be called *external*. It is impossible to say that everything that has happened between 1830 and 1990 would pertain solely to “empirical work,” that all that would be just a bunch of essentially repetitive events. There is hardly any point in insisting on this: modern logic and mathematics, physics, biology, psychoanalysis, ethnology, sociology, history, artistic creation from 1830 to 1950, Stalinism and Nazism—all that would pertain to some additional “empirical work”? Social-historical creation has continued in all fields—and such creation calls for an immense effort of philosophical reflection, which, inevitably, leads to taking a new look at all the prior history of humanity in general and of philosophy itself in particular.

I spoke, however, about a necessary internal contradiction and not about what might be considered—wrongly—as an attempt to refute a philosophy by “the facts.” The contradiction is found in this, that, whereas Hegelian philosophy posits that being is signification and whereas signification, which is the very element of the life of the mind (therefore, the only kind of effective actuality), has to develop, deploy itself, “dialectically,” this philosophy *has to* affirm at the same time that there will henceforth be, indefinitely (and even infinitely), an effective actuality without signification or with a signification that permanently remains identical—which therefore, “dialectically,” makes no sense.

Quite obviously, at a deeper level, it’s the very idea of philosophy as Absolute Knowledge, as closed system, that makes no sense. Closure is heteronomy, or theology—that is, the absolute contrary of philosophy.

To come now to Fukuyama, his thoughts, which are

much more down to earth and linked to the cycle of present circumstances, are wholly ideological. History is over, finished, because the “major conflict” has drawn to a close with the collapse of Communism. In the view of an American State Department official, the “major conflict” is obviously the conflict between the Western bloc and the Eastern bloc; there is no other one. This conflict having been settled, we are entering, according to Fukuyama, into the era of the triumph of capitalism and “democracy” (that is to say, liberal oligarchy), which will seize hold of the whole planet, putting an end to wars, rifts, and the tragic side to history. Certainly, Fukuyama says, “it will be less interesting and rather boring”—but you can’t have everything: if you want peace, you must resign yourselves to boredom. As Hegel said, “happy peoples have no history”; “universal history is not the place of happiness, periods of happiness are blank pages.”³ If you want happiness, you must henceforth resign yourself to leafing through blank pages. You will have more and more cars and your children will have more and more electronic toys and you will find all that more and more insipid—but that’s how it is.

In this case, too, one could easily set against Fukuyama the vulgar reality that makes his statements laughable: hardly had the inked dried on his article when we witnessed the onset of the {First} Gulf War and observed that the collapse of the Eastern bloc was in no way followed by the blossoming of capitalism and the Liberal republic and that the peoples of the Third World were continuing to be subjected to tyranny, hunger, and so on.

It also must be seen, however, that Fukuyama’s positions are an attempt to “theorize,” to give ideological expression to, a very important vector of contemporary reality in wealthy liberal societies. There is, indeed, a waning of

³In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction, Reason in History*, trans. from the German edition of Johannes Hoffmeister from Hegel papers assembled by H. B. Nisbet (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1975), this passage is translated as follows: “history is not the soil in which happiness grows. The periods of happiness in it are the blank pages of history” (p. 79). —T/E

social and political conflict *within* these societies. There is no point in talking about official "politics." Who can distinguish, on the basis of their "programs," the Socialists and the Right in France, the Republicans and the Democrats in the United States? All parties are agreed in thinking that "politics" consists in managing the existing system. Yet, of greater seriousness, the population itself (and this is the condition for the previous phenomenon) has withdrawn from all collective activity; it is plunged into apathy and cynicism, into what I have called since 1960 *privatization*.⁴ In this sense, we have indeed been witnessing, for now going on nearly forty years {or since the early Fifties}, not the "end of history"—an absurd expression, unless humanity were to exterminate itself, by nuclear means or ecologically—but rather the end of a period of the history of the West, the period of great emancipatory struggles that began toward the end of the eighteenth century and culminated in certain results from which we still benefit today and that have then been diverted from their objective by Social Democracy and Leninism-Stalinism, and we are entering finally into a low-ebb period after World War II, such that, in the wealthy countries (and *only* in those countries), it could be assumed that one has entered into a period of "historical tranquillity," the capitalist economic engine furnishing enough goods to keep people tranquil and the political system having to deal only with minor managerial issues.

This period may last for a long time or it may give way to a new phase of political and social activity on the part of peoples that would be oriented toward individual and collective autonomy. It may also be followed by a subsidence, a slow-motion implosion, the harbingers of which can, I think, already be perceived today. In any case, what is ruled out is that this period might last indefinitely, thereby marking an "end of history," not because nothing is eternal, but because this society is becoming increasingly incapable of reproducing itself.

⁴See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961; now in [PSW2](#)).
—T/E

Society is becoming incapable of reproducing itself not on the economic level, as Marx believed, but on the anthropological level, which is much more serious. The individuals produced by the present-day system are increasingly being trained and brought up in accordance with what is now *explicitly* the supreme law of the system: making as much money as possible, without regard to any other consideration. Now, if everyone behaves according to that principle, the system will no longer be able to operate. Judges *are to* put their decisions up for auction; officials *are to* grant building permits to the highest bidders; teachers *are to* cheat on their teaching duties; workers *are to* shirk their job as far as possible and bungle their work, and so on. It will be said: But there are penalties, or there is the fear of penalties. That's a childish objection. Who said that those who are to apply the penalties are incorruptible, and why would they be so?

Let's add a parenthesis about teaching. One prattles on and on about the teaching crisis. Each Minister {of Education in France} produces his reform proposal, while leaving aside, and for a very good reason, what is essential. As Plato already said two thousand five hundred years ago: At the basis of all acquisition and all transmission of knowledge, there is *eros*: passionate love for the object being taught, which necessarily goes by way of a specific affective relationship between teacher and the one being taught. In other words, there must be a strong emotional investment, an affective cathexis, in the subject matter being taught, which, generally speaking, is mediated in the person of the teacher. That's what the present crisis of teaching is about: teaching is invested, is cathected, as such neither by the teachers nor by the pupils nor by their families. For the latter, it's the means for the child to obtain a "piece of paper" that will allow him to earn some money. For the teachers, it's more and more a bread-winning chore. Obviously, that cannot be said, because the teachers' unions would scream if one attacked honest wage workers, etc. But obviously, what is being talked about is not those workers as such; what is being talked about is the spirit of contemporary society.

The human types that have made capitalism operate are no longer being reproduced. Capitalism has exhausted the

anthropological deposits produced by prior centuries and millennia. The result is here, around us. You can take note of it every day: the spreading corruption, which has ceased to be merely anecdotal and a criminal exception and which has become the system’s main mode of operation.

At the same time, capitalism is exhausting the natural deposits of the biosphere that have accumulated over three billion years. Capitalism needed less than two centuries to bring to the edge of destruction, and in any case to damage irreversibly, this ecosystem whose complexity and richness we cannot conceive, and which required more than three billion years to create. Now, in order that history might continue to “end” in Fukuyama’s sense, this destruction of the environment must not only go on but must *accelerate* to a considerable degree.

Indeed, and this is the third point, everything Fukuyama and his like-minded fellows are going around telling us concerns at best one seventh of humanity. The other six-sevenths live in poverty and under tyranny. The “end of history” would require that one raise their standard of living to the point where it would become roughly comparable to that of today’s wealthy countries. Can one imagine the additional pollution, the destruction of nonrenewable resources, and the irreversible damage inflicted on the environment that that would entail? And that is only one of the aspects of the question. Liberal capitalism has proved to be, up till now, practically incapable of “industrializing” the Third World. But it has revealed itself to be even more incapable of exporting its “liberal” and “democratic” values. Non-Western societies are still dominated by a hefty heritage of heteronomous imaginary significations that are basically religious in character, though not only so. The case of Islam is the most flagrant, but it is far from being the only one: India, Africa, and even Latin America offer some striking manifestations of this. All those societies easily assimilate certain techniques that come from the West—those of war, televisual manipulation, police torture—but hardly at all the other creations of the West: human rights, liberties—even though they may be partial—reflection and critical thought, philosophy. The West has succeeded, in part, in shaking up

there the traditional social (though to a much lesser extent mental) structures; it has brought in there some of those techniques but not at all the emancipatory dimension of its history. Most of those societies are in a highly unstable state, both breaking down and in turmoil, and the Western States are incapable of “managing,” as is now said, their relations with those societies—except when “managing” them as was done with the {First} Gulf War.

I would like to go back over the exceptional signification that is constituted by the waning of social and political conflict in the wealthy countries. I have been able to explain at length for decades (since “Modern Capitalism and Revolution”)⁵ that capitalism was able to develop, and even just to endure, not in spite of but thanks to domestic conflicts. Marx believed that domestic conflict, the struggle of the workers against the capitalist system, couldn’t change anything about it, save through revolution, and that the workers would never be able to improve in a lasting way their standard of living, whereby he deduced capitalism’s inevitable economic collapse. Indeed, left to itself, the capitalist system would have collapsed from overproduction fifteen times in one hundred and fifty years. That didn’t occur because workers’ struggles forced an enormous enlargement of domestic markets and a considerable reduction in working time, which absorbed the effects of the rise in labor productivity. Ultimately, after the Great Depression of 1929-1933 and World War II, the capitalist system took in the lesson, and wage increases became almost automatic during {the “Long Boom,” or, as we say in French, “the thirty glorious years,”} *les trente glorieuses*. But, with the “Liberal” (Thatcher-Reagan) counteroffensive, this has been called back into question {since the late 1970s}. During the last great recession in the United States, at the beginning of the Reagan Era, the unions even accepted wage cuts—that’s the first time something like that has been seen. And a good proportion of present-day unemployment in the wealthy countries is to be explained by the fact that, since 1940, there have no longer

⁵See the previous note in the present chapter. —T/E

been any significant reductions in working time.

The system is finding it increasingly difficult to operate. It is running up against the ecological barrier. There is the insoluble problem of the Third World. All this points not toward an “end of history” that would indefinitely repeat the present while “dilating” it. Unless there would be a reawakening, a renewal of autonomous political and social activity on the part of peoples, unless the project of individual and collective autonomy would assert itself in new forms that take account of the experience of the past two centuries, the likely way in which things will evolve is not, as Kojève believed, toward a “Japanese snobbery,”⁶ but, while awaiting some ecological catastrophe, toward a generalized conformism (in which, moreover, we already find ourselves),⁷ toward a new electronic Middle Ages. Already today, there are no longer any genuine discussions, even on the intellectual level. And those that are begun vanish amid general indifference or remain confined within narrow circles of specialists. That’s the “end of history”: it’s the end of *this here* history, of the modern history that made the West what it is.

A last word about the third question that was posed, the one about the philosophy of history and “progress.” I think that there always has been, in this regard, an enormous confusion. Two levels that have no plain and immediate connections have been confused. The first is that of the dimension I call *ensemblistic-identitary* (or *ensidic* for short), the “technical-arithmetic” or instrumental level. On this level, if one considers the history of humanity in its broad outlines, since hominization, there has been huge progress: we’ve passed from 1,2,3... to contemporary mathematics, and from

⁶See Kojève’s famous “Note to the Second Edition” of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, assembled by Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York, Basic Books, 1969), pp. 158-162. The evocation of the spread of “Japanese snobbery” appears on pp. 161-62. —T/E

⁷See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

flints to H-bombs. The other level is that of the creation of imaginary significations and, in particular, political and emancipatory significations. Here, one does not detect, and in my opinion nothing renders *a priori* likely, uniform movements of history. All cultures have created, outside of the ensemblistic-identitarian, some magnificent works, but as far as human freedom is concerned, there have been only two cultures, like two great flowers sprouting on this bloody field of battles, in which something decisive has been created: ancient Greece and Western Europe. This second flower is perhaps in the process of wilting; perhaps it depends upon us that it might not wilt for good—but ultimately, there is no guarantee that, should it wilt, a third flower would shoot up later on, with more beautiful colors.

Discussion

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE: Is the end of history related to the end of philosophy? What is the relationship between the thesis of the end of history and the thesis of the end of philosophy, in particular some contemporary Italians' thesis of *pensiero debole* (weak thought)?⁸ Is this “weak thought” related to the Heideggerian statement that “we are to do nothing but wait”?⁹

C.C.: I said that, barring humanity's self-destruction, the idea of an “end of history” is an absurdity. An “end of history” as interminable repetition of the identical is impossible. On the other hand, an end of *this here* history, of modernity as it is organically tied up with the project of autonomy, is quite possible. Such a development would certainly bring about an “end of philosophy” *qua* project of autonomy for thought and for the breaking of closure.

⁸*Il pensiero debole*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovati (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988). —T/E

⁹From “Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking,” in Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, tr. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 62. —T/E

Now, the idea of the “end of philosophy” was, as you know, one of the theses of Heidegger, in whom it takes on two consecutive features. The first is the idea of the end of what he calls *Western metaphysics*, the metaphysics of “presence,” and the transition to the “thinking of Being.” But this “thinking of Being” is nowhere to be found in the writings of the late Heidegger. The other aspect is the statement that philosophy is over, finished, because it has been completely absorbed in the technicized sciences (that’s his literal expression).¹⁰ This idea is absurd. The demand for philosophy [*L’exigence philosophique*] constantly reemerges within modern science itself because the latter is pulverizing its own foundations. Now, that is a question Heidegger doesn’t envisage for an instant. He naively believes in “scientific progress.” He believes that there is a philosophical question, “What is a Thing?”¹¹—but the representation he has of the “thing” is the same as the one that Aristotle, for example, could have of it. He doesn’t know that a “thing” is not a “thing”—or else he doesn’t want to take any account of that.

The idea of “weak thought” (one is tempted to transliterate the Italian phrase and speak of debilitating, feeble, moronic [*débile*] thought) is a typically Postmodernist idea. Philosophy would have ended; therefore, we would need soft-minded [*molle*] thought, collage, and eclecticism, something that might be able to go over well on television and that would be adapted to the media society (that’s literally

¹⁰In the translation “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” Heidegger speaks of “the dissolution of philosophy in the technologized sciences” (*Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell [New York: Harper and Row, 1977], p. 377). As usual, Castoriadis maintains here, in his translation or quotation of Heidegger, his key distinction between *technique* in general and *technology* as a specific social-historical selection of a particular spectrum of extant techniques. —T/E

¹¹Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* (1935-1936; first published in German in 1962), trans. W. B. Barton, Jr. and Vera Deutsch, with an analysis by Eugene T. Gendlin (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1967). —T/E

what Gianni Vattimo says).¹² All this is laughable in itself, but it's very important as a symptom. It's not by accident that we now have philosophers who proclaim, "Philosophy has ended," "the sole task of philosophers is to deconstruct past philosophers," and others who are merely commentators. Likewise, it's not an accident that some architects proclaim, "Fortunately, Postmodernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style."¹³ This is a monstrosity. Such people experience style as a kind of tyranny. Now they are freed from this tyranny so that they can stick together three Dorian columns, the tip of a pagoda, a Gothic arch, and a *tourte*¹⁴—and that's a postmodern monument, admired as such. All that expresses the obvious crisis of contemporary society's creativity. If one compares what happened in Western Europe since the Gothic, since the twelfth century, until around 1950, particularly the volcano of creativity during the period from 1750 to 1950, to what has happened since 1950—collage, eclecticism, imitation, little *montages*—the difference is blindingly obvious.

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE: People chant

¹²Castoriadis may be thinking of the following passage from the first page of Vattimo's *The Transparent Society* (1989), trans. David Webb (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992): "It is my belief, however, that the term 'postmodern' has meaning, and that this meaning is linked to the fact that the society in which we live is a society of generalized communication. It is a society of the mass media." —T/E

¹³In *WIF* (p. 415n1) and *RTI(TBS)* (p. 223), this quotation appears as "At last, postmodernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style." Without "At last," the same statement also appears in translation in *FT(P&K)* (p. 143). In *ASA(RPT)* (p. 179), Castoriadis's paraphrase reads in translation, "At last, we are delivered from the tyranny of style." It was, however, not "some architects" in the plural, as here, but only "a well-known architect" (at an April 1986 lecture in New York, as Castoriadis reports in *WIF*) who made this statement; that person was further specified as "one of the spokesmen for postmodernism" in *ASA(RPT)*. —T/E

¹⁴Assuming that the word is spelled correctly, Castoriadis would indeed be saying *tourte*, a kind of vegetable, meat, or fish pie, though this could also involve a play on the noun *tour* (tower), for, as an adjective, *tourte* can also describe a person of limited intelligence. —T/E

the funeral rites for technical, industrial, and other kinds of progress, and I agree that history also includes that dimension. Yet there is another aspect to history that has not been talked about very much: history as conducted by collective actors. The question I ask myself is the following: While there are some people who are in movement on the Left or on the Right in all countries of the world, is it still possible, in a media-saturated society like our own, for there to be collective agents of history?

C.C.: The fact that is noted is that, for the moment, there no longer are any such agents. That’s what I meant when I spoke of the waning of social and political conflict. We are obviously talking about collective actors who act explicitly outside the established order or against that order. No one can say if that is permanent or passing. One can and has to do what one can to wake people up. But one has to note that, for the moment, there is a general plunge into conformism, in the most profound sense of the term.

Society Running in Neutral*

QUESTION: You are clearly a thinker who goes against the current. From the time of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, from 1946 to 1966, you were one of the few left-wing intellectuals to stand up against the Russian bureaucracy. Now, you lay into the Socialists and Liberalism {in the Continental sense of a conservative “free-market” ideology} nonstop. You even wrote in *Le Monde morcelé* that we are living in the era of generalized conformism.¹ Isn't that extreme?

C.C.: It's an assessment, one that can be discussed. But the depletion of creative work, whether it be on the political, spiritual {i.e., mental}, or artistic level, doesn't seem to me to be of any doubt. Compared to the social, political, artistic, and philosophical turbulence of the period from 1750 to 1950 and the creative works that arose therefrom, our era cuts a sorry figure. Nineteen-fifty is obviously just a benchmark date. Yet it has been for forty years {or since the beginning of the 1950s} that what one sees in almost all forms of art is the spread of collage, the proliferation of parasitism of old works, and the glorification of pastiche. Politically speaking, since the collapse of pseudorevolutionary ideologies there has been a complete void. We are witnessing the waning of social and political conflict; we are living in a society of lobbies, wherein each group is concerned only with its own demands, and may the rest perish. The alleged representative democracy we have is criticized by no one, whereas its sad reality is each day more manifest. There is a total emptiness in Liberal discourse, as well as in “Socialist” discourse, on all basic questions. With no collective project, each is concerned with his private life and “pleasures.”

Q.: In an article from 1979, published in *Le Nouvel*

*Interview with “Ph[ilippe] P[etit],” published as “Depuis quarante ans, la société tourne à vide,” *L'Événement du jeudi*, 386 (March 26-April 1, 1992): 128.

¹See “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

Observateur and republished in your previous work, *Domaines de l'homme*, you wrote that, in the Republic of Letters, “there were, before the rise of the impostors . . . some mores, some rules, and some standards.” You stick to your guns about the impostors in question.²

C.C.: More than ever. Of course, there are in all fields some very honest people who do top-quality work, the implications of which often go beyond their speciality. They remain relatively unknown to the public at large, the front of the stage being occupied by the gesticulations of entertaining acrobats and charlatans. In the field of general ideas, of world views, and in philosophy itself, when it's not an imposture, the best one finds are some commentaries and glosses on past philosophers.

Q.: Luc Ferry, who appreciates your work but who does not share your conclusions about the malaise of contemporary culture, wrote in his latest book: “The erosion of common traditions and values perhaps does not come, as Castoriadis believes, from some sort of disaffection from politics that is connected with Liberalism, but from a demand for autonomy that could hardly, as far as we can see, be the remedy for a crisis of culture it itself has so powerfully contributed to bringing about.”³ What do you think about that?

C.C.: Luc Ferry is offering the same assessment as I am. But in my view, his analysis of the causes of the phenomenon runs up against several decisive objections. The demand for genuine autonomy is in no way synonymous with a disappearance of “common . . . values”—unless one gives

²In this July 9, 1979 text, “The Vacuum Industry” (now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#); see p. 4 for the quotation above), Castoriadis's target was the “New Philosopher” Bernard-Henri Lévy in particular and “the French Ideology” in general. —T/E

³Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age* (1990), trans. Robert de Loiza (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 245. Ferry is criticizing here, in particular, Castoriadis's essay “Social Transformation and Cultural Creation” (1979; now in [PSW3](#)). —T/E

to autonomy the perverse meaning of total individual arbitrariness. The existence of social individuals—and society—necessarily entails some values, some orientations, some shared significations. Now, some such “values” and orientations really and truly do exist today—but these are the “values” and orientations of the unlimited growth of consumption, production, and brute strength. In the face of those ones, contemporary individuals are not “autonomous”; what they exhibit is a thoroughgoing and appalling conformism. And the two periods in the history of humanity when the project of autonomy emerged and developed, Greece from the eighth to the fifth century and Europe from the first Renaissance to 1950, experienced a dazzling development of creative works, a flowering that went hand in hand with a genuine individualization of individuals, not with conformism.

Q.: Are you not, in your way, a sort of guardian of tradition?

C.C.: For my part, I try to maintain an at-once living and critical relationship with tradition that seems as constitutive of autonomy as being open to the future. André Breton, Max Ernst, Ezra Pound, and, today, Octavio Paz are infinitely more learned about our cultural tradition and nourished by it than *pompier* painters⁴ or members of the Académie Française.

Q.: What, in this context, is the role of philosophy?

C.C.: Philosophy is first of all critical reflection, a calling into question of what is merely inherited or what is there. That’s why today, for example, it also has to be critical reflection about science, about its presuppositions, methods, and results. It is, at the same time, creative of significations that attempt to elucidate (not to explain, not to “understand”)

⁴As noted in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), p. 178n. 2, “*l’art pompier* [. . . is] literally and quite pejoratively, ‘fireman art,’ the conventional state-sponsored academic art of the nineteenth century ridiculed for its historical-painting depictions of shiny helmets resembling those of French firemen. . . . Castoriadis also mentions *pompier* art in his 1986 talk, ‘The Crisis of Culture and the State’ (now in *PPA*, see p. 231), and in ‘The Dilapidation of the West’ (1991; now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#), see p. 100).” —T/E

the world. We are living, and we are thinking, in a world that is, each time, a singular social-historical creation. But this instituted creation, which allows us to live, to think, is, at the same time, a kind of closure. Philosophy tries, each time, to break this closure. One cannot deduce a philosophy from politics. But genuine politics is also, at another level, a calling into question of the existing institutions. That is why there is an indivisible bond between these two activities.

The Crisis of Marxism and the Crisis of Politics*

I must begin by apologizing for the title of this essay, as I am not interested in addressing the crisis of Marxism, but in addressing the crisis of politics. I mean the crisis of *emancipatory* politics. What should not be called the “crisis” of Marxism but the wholesale *collapse* of Marxism has been obvious to me for more than thirty years.¹ The events of the last five, even the last two, years, immensely important and significant as they are in some respects, have taught us next to nothing as far as the theoretical body of Marx’s work is concerned. But this collapse has opened up for us the true political question, which is this: Once the oxymoronic idea that the goal or meaning of politics is dictated by some sort of “historical necessity” is abandoned, and assuming that we do not identify politics as the management of the existing order of things or as the introduction of “improvements” to this order, how can we discover the meaning of politics and identify the reasons (*logon didonai*) for our political choices and actions?

Before dealing with this question, however, I will briefly summarize some of the numerous points that in my view have made, and have made for quite some time, Marx’s conception untenable. This is necessary even though it follows the foundering of the so-called “Marxist-Leninist” regimes, whose invocations of Marx were, of course, cruel kinds of hoaxes. But even if they were not, to conclude that this collapse of Marxism nullifies Marx’s work is tantamount

*“The Crisis of Marxism, the Crisis of Politics” first appeared in *Dissent*, Spring 1992: 221-25 and was reprinted in *Society and Nature*, 1:2 (September-December 1992): 203-11. We have used the version Castoriadis dated “Frankfurt: 15 October 1990,” which was published in *Documenta IX* (June 13-September 20, 1992), vol. 3, pp. 85-89. We have edited lightly, for consistency and style, this last version.

¹See the opening chapter of my book [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, and Oxford: Polity Press, 1987), first published in 1964, and my *Political and Social Writings*, 3 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988 and 1992).

to accepting the Hegelian *Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht* (“world history is the Last Judgement”),² which means, paradoxically, to remain a Marxist.

Almost all the above points are related to the fact that Marx was deeply immersed in capitalism’s ethos and assumptions, the full implications of which he never questioned. Marx believed in the centrality of economic production. He shared in the mythology of “progress.” He was completely absorbed in the collective fantasy concerning man’s rational mastery over nature, and man’s mastery of himself. Marx never dissociated himself from the rationalistic scientism of his (and our own) epoch. He believed he had produced a watertight “scientific” theory that embraced society, history, and economics. This unswerving conviction mars even his best work: thus, his writings on economics, which are of lasting value as a broad sociological enquiry into the mechanisms of nineteenth-century capitalism, are untenable as economics proper, the main reason for which being that Marx transformed into a theoretical axiom that which is the (unattainable and self-contradictory) practical objective of capitalism: that labor power is (has to become) a commodity just like any other. Marx never criticized capitalist technology, nor did he criticize the ways in which capitalist work, production, and factory life were organized; he only criticized their uses for capitalism’s selfish ends. In addition, he was blind to the phenomenon of bureaucratic systems, and this was not accidental, for bureaucracy is not an “economic” structure as such; it actually pertains to the structure of power.

All this was to have serious, indeed catastrophic, consequences for the workers’ movement. To mention but two points: if there really is one true theory, then all dissenters from it are either wrong, or wicked, or perhaps both. The notion that there is one true theory leads, in turn, to the politically monstrous idea of orthodoxy. And, of course,

²As noted in n. 5 on p. 174 of [ASA\(RPT\)](#), “The phrase *Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht*, which is found in G. W. F. Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, §340, is often quoted by Castoriadis, e.g., in “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory” (1964-65; now in [IIS](#), pp. 11 and 374n4) and in the 1972 General Introduction (now in [PSWI](#), p. 27).” —T/E

orthodoxy requires its own guardians, that is, a Church or a Party machine. A Church committed to orthodoxy will always need an Inquisition, and, in turn, heretics will be burned—or, in the case of a Party, sent to the Gulag. And if the “development of productive forces” is the supreme criterion, then Russia’s “industrialization” redeems Stalin’s crimes, and the human cost in terms of its, or Stalin’s, victims, can be explained away as the overhead costs of historical development.

Now, what remains if one subtracts from Marx his economics, his “materialist” conception of history and belief in “historical laws,” and his messianic fantasy of a future society that is fully transparent to itself and spontaneously self-regulated? Apart from some acute and profound social-historical descriptions—*The Eighteenth Brumaire*, for example, or the chapter on primitive accumulation in *Capital*³—what remains is what I call “the other element” in Marx, the element that stresses human activity, affirms that people make their own history under particular conditions—generally without realizing it—and asserts that we have to find in actual historical reality the factors that can be used to transform this same reality.

I do not wish to dwell on the lopsided specification this other element received at Marx’s own hands (for whom human activity essentially meant *productive* activity), except to note that this element is, in itself, ambiguous. That people make their own history ends up meaning—or rather, means from the outset, as *The German Ideology* makes clear—that people make tools, and by so doing they inescapably bring about everything else. That people make their own history first and foremost by creating meanings and institutions, that tools themselves are institutions as well as embodiments of meaning—of significations—is something that Marx never saw. Equally, the idea that history is always made under particular conditions may mean one of two things. The first is

³Full title: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852). In English, the eighth and final part of the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* (1867) is entitled “Primitive Accumulation,” the first chapter of which (no. 26) is entitled “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation.” —T/E

that any historical activity always takes place in a given world, in given circumstances etc., or, more concisely, under *necessary* conditions that at the same time limit it (which is obvious to the point of banality); the second is that these particular, or determinate, conditions are also *determinant*, that is to say, not only necessary but *sufficient*, which is clearly Marx's assumption and which, if true, makes nonsense of the idea that people make their own history, implies that history itself is an immense deterministic concatenation, and that ideas of truth, value, choice, and responsibility are pure illusions, since their effects and ends are unknown, indeed unknowable, to those who hold them.

I prefer, therefore, to concentrate on the *political*, the "realistic," aspect of the idea. Marx sought to break with "Utopian" thinking, and believed that he found in actual historical reality the factor that would transform this reality. As is well known, this factor is actually the proletariat, and, of course, there can be no doubt about the historical importance of the workers' movement or about the *grosso modo* legitimacy of its initial aims (I leave aside the debate with die-hard "Liberals" {in the Continental sense of ideological believers in "free markets"}). But this position raises some very important questions, questions that were either avoided or laughed out of court by Marx and by the best Marxist writers who followed him. To say that a political project that involved transforming reality is worthless *unless* it can find the factors making its realization possible in social-historical reality itself is obvious, even trivial. But Marx meant much more than that. He thought that he had found in reality all that he needed, and that there was no problem in terms of the project or in terms of the choice. Communism, he said, is not a political program, but the actual movement that transforms social reality. If we assume this to be true, we are then left with this question: *Why* should we value positively, and well in advance, whatever it is that transforms reality? Why should we value positively something on the grounds that this is the dominant social-historical trend?

Marx was able to avoid these questions because it just so happened (or happens) that the workers' movement aspired (or aspires) toward freedom, equality, justice; and who would

dare even to think to question the value or the legitimacy of those aims (though Marx, of course, scorned the idea of value or legitimation)? But *we* cannot escape in the same way, either on empirical or on theoretical grounds. The briefest of reflections can only lead us to reject Marx's stand on this point, which is, after all, the primary point in any political position.

That we cannot, ought not, and have not to *support* a movement just because it is "real," or because it is the dominant social-historical trend, hardly needs discussion. Empirically, if this were the case, we would have had to support Stalinism, or Nazism; or, today, we would have to support the frantic course of technoscience and the "development of productive forces" that are destroying our planet. And if someone were to insist that there are conflicting trends in reality, and thus that one is able to make choices from among them, the question would still arise—Choose on what grounds?—and it is clear that the answer could not be found in reality itself.

Both logically and philosophically, the idea that "an actual movement that suppresses the existing social reality"⁴ is good in and of itself, *and/or* that we have to support it, presupposes a (strictly speaking, silly) postulate that is at the center of a progressionist metaphysics of history: whatever comes after is better than what was there before. Behind this, if we remove all notions of a Divine Plan, lies the assumption that history, and Being in general, is a *cumulative* process. It is immaterial whether this cumulation is taken to be "linear" or "dialectic." In either case, the future has to be "superior" to the past, and the "best" of the past is conserved in the present. And in both cases, the ultimate Platonic fallacy that Being (or, here, Becoming) is in and of itself Good, is entailed.

This is of course a teleology (and a theology) of history, and this teleology is clearly present in Marx (as it is in bourgeois Liberalism). But any teleology of history not

⁴A paraphrase or translation from the subsection entitled "[History: Fundamental Conditions](#)" in the first chapter of Marx's *The German Ideology* (1845). —T/E

only makes politics meaningless, it contains an internal contradiction. On the one hand, it forbids judgment of any and all specific events or instances of reality, since they all form necessary elements of the Grand Design. At the same time, however, it allows itself to pass an uninhibited, positive, judgment on the totality of the process, which is, and can only be, good. This, of course, can only be a religious, not a self-reflective, stance.

To insist, then: The unspoken assumptions that lie behind Marx's position are equivalent to a *sancta realitas* principle, or a belief in the rationality of the real. To be sure, the *real* is here construed to be that which in the real itself negates the real. But this only means that the real movement of negation is more real than the reality it negates. If the "immanent critique" is strictly immanent, it is not a critique of reality, but part of it.

The progressionist metaphysics of history is untenable for the very same reasons that make a global teleology of history untenable. And for the reasons I have hinted at above, a total determinism is also untenable, for this is but another way of asserting that whatever is real is rational.⁵ (Deterministic scientism is only the absolute idealism of the philosophically illiterate.)

History, as well as Being, means creation as well as destruction: the creation of forms, and the destruction of forms. Therefore, any idea of cumulation or progress on a total and universal level is, strictly speaking, meaningless. And creation, in and of itself, is not equivalent to value. We create history—forms of society, *oeuvres*, etc.—and we have to choose from among our creations. And this very potential for choosing, for making nontrivial choices, is itself a historical creation. It does not exist for the true faithful, indeed for any individual in a "traditional" society. The potential for choice, when it is brought to bear on forms of institution, is politics properly understood. And for the reasons mentioned above, it is this potential for choice—and

⁵A reference to Hegel's statement in his [Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*](#). —T/E

thus, for kinds of politics—that Marx denies.

Why, then, discuss Marx in relation to the crisis of politics today? First of all, of course, because this very conception of Marx's, and its subsequent degeneracy and final collapse, is one of the factors that have precipitated the crisis of politics. But there is another reason. Whatever one might say of its other aspects, the work of Marx is part of the social-historical project of autonomy {that} reemerged in Western Europe in the twelfth century. It is true, as I have already said, that this work is contaminated to a lethal degree by the ethos and assumptions of capitalism. It is also true that it played a catastrophic role through its influence on both workers and intellectuals. But, equally true, it embodies one of the most radical attempts, even if it failed, to mount a critique of the existing social order. And, finally, for many countries and for many decades, it has been inextricably linked with the workers' movement, which, even if that failed in its chief aims, brought about transformations of capitalist society without which that society would probably not have survived to become what it is today. And now we find ourselves thus: we still adhere, and, in my view, adhere more than ever, to the project of social and individual autonomy, or, if you prefer, the project of human emancipation. We reject the Marxian insistence on "grounding" it in the "laws of history," or attributing it to the workers' movement if only, simply, because this movement is no more than one of the many interest groups that are fighting within rich capitalist societies. And we are left with two questions, the first of which, in my view, is easy to answer on a theoretical level, while the second has today an agonizing acuity.

The first question is this: Why (in the sense of "for what *reasons*") does one support the project of autonomy? The answer is easy on the theoretical level because the fact that this question can be posed forces, so to speak, its own answer. If someone asks for reasons—for reasonable reasons—he or she has already entered the field of *logon didonai*, of rendering account and reason, which in itself entails the recognition of the value of autonomy within the sphere of thinking. And it is easy to show—it is, in fact, a tautology—that autonomy within the sphere of thinking is

synonymous with reason itself. It is equally easy to show that this autonomy is not an “individual” affair, but something that is decisively conditioned by the institution of society. I do not mean this in the sense of the absence of “external” repression, but in the sense of the internalization of institutions by the social individual making possible free and unfettered thinking. And autonomous thinking is both a precondition and a concomitant of the effective autonomy of the individual as well as of people collectively.

Clearly, this is not an argument that is directed against a true believer of any one particular religion or dogma. But, of course, a true believer should never argue: he should only show his Book. We choose to think—and therefore, also, to argue. Free thinking, the kernel of the project of autonomy, is a creation of our history. It is not the only one, of course: the Inquisition, Stalinism, and Nazism are all creations of our history, too. But we *choose* autonomy against heteronomy. This choice is made *possible* by our history, but, as experience amply shows, it is not *dictated* by it. It is a choice, and as such it entails a category easily forgotten in philosophical and political discussions today: it entails *will*. Not “voluntarism,” but the capacity for self-reflective deliberation and decision, without which even thinking itself is impossible. So, we *will* autonomy—for ourselves and for all. And this is a *political* will and project, whereby we link ourselves with one of the essential strands whose origin is derived from ancient Greece.

But here arises the second, and much more difficult, question. As I have said, it is obvious that no political project can ignore the question of the factors that may bring about its realization. For a time, one could think—as I myself thought—that the workers’ movement was this factor. This idea can no longer be maintained. Marcuse thought that youth, students, and marginal groups of one sort or another would replace the workers’ movement. I consider this, like Third Worldism,⁶ to be a most awkward attempt to preserve

⁶See “Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy” (1985; in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)).
—T/E

the Marxian framework by simply substituting new social categories for the old ones. True, many new and important movements did emerge during the 1960s: ethnic minorities, youth and students, women, ecological groups. They have had a profound impact on society. But each has waned; none has managed to create a new, global, political vision. At any rate, one has to go beyond these categories, beyond “class thinking”: *de jure*, the project of autonomy concerns the whole of society. *De facto*, 90 percent of the population could be expected to support it.

But the present social-historical reality is different. For forty years now {or since the Fifties}, with the exception of those minority or sectional struggles I have just mentioned, there has been an unmistakable decline in social and political conflict. We have in front of us, in the rich countries, societies dominated by privatization, apathy, cynicism, and the naked pursuit of consumption for its own sake. The psychosocial structure of society today is more and more *exclusively* shaped by the ethos and assumptions of capitalism: the unlimited expansion of (pseudo-) rational (pseudo-) mastery. And it would, of course, be foolish to try to find in the “objective contradictions” of the established system a guarantee, even an assurance, that the situation will change in this respect. Objective conditions, by themselves, mean little. Even an ecological catastrophe, in our present atmosphere of apathy and privatization, would be just as likely to bring about a new kind of fascism as to wake people up. As for the people in the poor countries, which make up 85 per cent of the world’s population, they have, up till now, proved incapable of breaking with their traditional theocratic religious creeds, and have frequently been easy prey for military or “socialist” tyrannies.

The project of autonomy, or emancipatory politics, is not a political endeavor that is like any other. It can only be realized through the autonomous activity of the people. And it is precisely this activity that, at present, is disturbingly absent. Certainly, no one can yet pass final judgment on the present social-historical era. On the one hand, there is the apparent triumph of the capitalist ethos; while on the other, we certainly do not yet live in a world that is like fourth-

century Rome or Constantinople. Islands of resistance to the prevailing order of things can be found almost everywhere.

So we can do nothing else at present but maintain our project of a transformation that will lead to a free society made up of free individuals, in the belief that our critical activity and the exemplification in our acts of the values we stand for will contribute to a revival of an emancipatory movement, one far more lucid and self-reflective than any {one} previously {existing}. Beyond that, one old expression at least will always retain its validity: *Hier stehen wir, wir können nicht anders* (Here we stand, we have no choice).⁷

—Frankfurt, October 15, 1990

⁷“Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen” is, of course, the Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther’s April 18, 1521 reported reply to the Pope and the Emperor at the Diet of Worms, when he was asked to renounce his writings and teachings, which had been deemed heretical. —T/E

If There Is to Be a Democratic Europe*

Before answering the questions posed by ACTA, it seems to me to be indispensable to elucidate three themes that order or should order all political reflections on present-day Europe. Within the limits allowed, this can be done only in a brief, therefore dogmatic, way.¹

A. Almost all human societies have always been instituted in heteronomy or, what is the same thing, the closure of signification. The institution of society (the law in the most general sense of the term) is posited there as intangible, since originating in a source that transcends the living society: God, gods, founding heros, the ancestors—but also, as a modern version, the laws of Nature, of Reason, and of History. At the same time, the magma of social imaginary significations, which through its institution holds society together and creates a world for itself, is closed there: it furnishes an answer to all the questions that can be posed within its framework but cannot itself be called into question. And individuals are raised and educated there through these laws and these significations in such a way that challenging one or the other is, for those individuals, unthinkable—psychically and intellectually almost impossible.

*“This previously untitled text appeared in *Europes: els intel·lectuals i la qüestió europea* (Barcelona: ACTA, Fundació per a les idees i les arts, 1993), pp. 343-48. Translations of this contribution by “Cornelius Castoriadis, Philosopher and Psychoanalyst” also appeared in Catalan, Spanish, English, and German on pp. 35-40, 137-42, 242-47, and 449-55, respectively (each translation remains unsigned, but the book’s publication information page lists Martine Joulia, Sandra Stocking, Mercedes Estaban, Mary Fons, Johannes Weiss, Wolfgang Wegscheider, Mercè Romero, Beatriz Magri, Virginia Skrobisch, Marinette Luria, Susie Pickard, Julie Funnell, Beatriu Krayenbühl, and Núria Vilador as the translators). The original French has been retranslated here with occasional consultation of the English. Since ACTA’s questions do not appear in Castoriadis’s original response in French, we have retained, with a light editing, the questions as they were formulated in the English-language version.

¹In his sole endnote, Castoriadis refers the English-speaking “interested reader” to *CL*, [*IIS*](#), [*PSW1*](#), [*PSW2*](#), [*PSW3*](#), and *PPA*. —T/E

In known history, this state of affairs has been truly ruptured only in Europe, and this has happened twice: first in ancient Greece and then in Western Europe. It is only in those two societies that one observes the birth, and the re-birth [*renaissance*], of democratic political activity as a challenge to established institutions under the aegis of the question *What is just?* of philosophy as a calling into question of the inherited significations under the aegis of the question *What is true?* and, finally and especially, the conjunction and mutual fertilization of these two activities, even if it has almost always remained indirect. It is in those two societies that the project of individual and collective autonomy is born, each being inconceivable without the other.

In this sense, Europe has ceased for a long time to be a geographical or ethnic entity. The word *Europe* connotes the state of a society in which people and communities are free in their thinking and in the positing of their laws and are capable of limiting themselves on their own [*s'auto-limiter*] in and through this freedom.

B. Yet the project of autonomy has been broken down in Europe—and in the whole “Western” zone of the world—for several decades. Europe has also been the society that has given birth to capitalism, a demented but efficient project of unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery to be exercised over nature and human beings. Contestation of capitalism and, more generally, of an institution of society characterized by the domination and exploitation of some by others, was broached by the workers’ movement, but such contestation was confiscated by Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism so as to culminate in the most monstrous forms of totalitarianism, which is also a European creation. The collapse of Communist totalitarianism in the countries of Eastern Europe, which has deceptively appeared as a triumph and justification of capitalism, reinforces for the time being the apathy and privatization of populations, which are already, as a function of the degeneration of the workers’ movement, settled into a life of consumerism and televisual stupefaction. Contemporary Western Europe, like all of the West, is characterized by the waning of political and social conflict, the decomposition of political society which has

been fragmented into lobbies and dominated by bureaucratized parties, the spread of irresponsibility, the accelerated destruction of Nature, of cities, and of a human *ethos*, generalized conformism, the disappearance of the imagination and of cultural and political creativity, the reign in all domains of ephemeral fashions, intellectual fast foods, and universal rubbish. Behind the facade of “democratic” institutions, which are so only in name, European societies are liberal-oligarchic societies in which the ruling strata prove themselves increasingly incapable of managing their own system in their own well-understood interest.

C. The constitution of the European Economic Community was undertaken, and remains dominated up till now, by political and administrative bureaucracies lacking any popular participation. So long as that is the case, the “Europe” that will result therefrom will be a mere agglomeration of national capitalist societies overshadowed by politico-bureaucratic machinery, even further removed from peoples, that will become even more ponderous and irresponsible than it is today. Only the emergence of a large democratic and radical popular movement that would also challenge the existing structures in particular States would be able to give another content to “European construction” and make it into a democratic federation of really [*effectivement*] self-governed political units. My answers below to the questions posed are formulated under the hypothesis—as impossible as it might seem today—that such a movement will exist and will be victorious. Outside that hypothesis, the issue is, in my view, only of sociological interest and not of a political interest.

Questions 1 and 4: If the process toward European integration is reinforced and strengthened, toward what pattern of integration should it head? What should be the predominant dimensions (cultural, political, economic, social . . .)?

What should be the fundamental units of political representation? The current States? The nations, with or without the State? Cultural communities? Regions? . . .

If there is to be a democratic Europe, it can be founded only on self-government. With the dimensions of the social

and political units of modern times, and in particular with a Europe of 350 million inhabitants, self-government requires the greatest possible decentralization and the institution of grassroots political units on a scale where direct democracy could actually function in an effective way. Direct democracy does not signify democracy conducted by polling or over the telephone lines of television stations, as the recent perversion of the term in France tries to make it mean, but, rather, the participation of all citizens in the making of all important decisions, and implementation of those decisions, as well as the treatment of current affairs by committees of popularly elected delegates who can always be recalled. The possibility of recalling delegates dissolves the false alternative between “representative democracy”—where “representatives” in fact dispossess of all power those whom they “represent”—and “imperative mandates”—where the delegates could be replaced by vote-counting machines. The size of these grassroots political units should be of the order of, at most, 100,000 inhabitants (the dimension of an average city, a Paris ward, or an agricultural region of around twenty villages). Twenty or thirty of these units would be grouped together in second-level units (pretty much the size of present-day regions in Spain, Italy, or France). Those units could, in turn, be grouped together in “national” units, so long as the “Nation” retains its relevance, which would ultimately be united within a European Federation. At all those levels, the principle of direct democracy would have to reign: all decisions principally affecting populations at a certain level would have to be made by direct vote of the interested populations, after information {is circulated} and after deliberation. So, for example, the federal laws would have to be adopted by federal referendum. And at all levels, the committees of popularly elected delegates who can be recalled at any time would have only subsidiary powers pertaining to the execution of popularly-made decisions and to current affairs. At all levels, the ruling maxim should be no execution of decisions without participation in the making of

decisions.²

It is clear that if a popular movement sufficiently powerful and radical to impose a democratic European Federation were to develop, it would create much richer and much newer forms of political coexistence and cooperation than those I am trying to outline here. This outline is to be taken only as an illustration of one possible concrete manifestation of democratic principles.

It is also clear that, contrary to what is happening now, the political dimension will have to be the central dimension of any effort at European integration. Without that dimension, “Europe” will be, at best, only a zone of economic unification leaving the instituted structures intact. Finally, it is also obvious that such a political change will not be able to take place unless it swiftly embraces the other dimensions of the institution of society: the economy, social solidarity, education, culture, and so on.

Question 2: Do you think that there is a European culture? To put it in other terms, does the cultural diversity existing in today’s Europe advance Europeanization or hinder it?

The unity of European culture since the Middle Ages is beyond doubt. But there has also been for centuries, as one knows, a development of national (or regional) cultures, going hand in hand with the triumph of vernacular languages over Latin and the establishment of more or less “national” States. That has not prevented this developing diversity from being a tremendous source of mutual enrichment as early as at least the fourteenth century (to go no further back than Petrarch), and it has remained so, despite the rivalries, wars, and monstrosities perpetrated by some on others that have, up till now, caused only brief eclipses. On the level of philosophy

²As noted in [ASA\(RPT\)](#), p. 279 n. 2, where this same maxim—there called “one of the principal political watchwords”—appears with the same wording, “This statement appears in ‘Socialism and Autonomous Society’ (1979), [PSW3](#), p. 321, as the first of ‘two fundamental laws’ of ‘freedom in an autonomous society,’ but with the adjective ‘egalitarian’ modifying ‘participation.’ The second such law is, according to Castoriadis, ‘No law without egalitarian participation in the positing of the law.’” —T/E

and the sciences, there is but one European culture (even if, in philosophy, there is something like “national styles”). On the level of literature and the arts, one would have to assume that the reader is illiterate if one were to indulge in making an (in fact impossible) list of the cross-fertilizations without which no national culture in Europe would be what it is, and perhaps wouldn’t even exist. Just two points seem to me to merit particular emphasis.

The mutual fertilization of which I spoke is neither a sum of “influences” passively undergone nor an agricultural product of the European soil, nor the mechanical result of spatial proximity. Such proximity is but one external condition, which is in no way sufficient. Cross-fertilization has resulted basically from the active opening up of each culture and of each individual creative person to the other cultures and the other works produced in this zone, from a permanent awakening to beauty and truth created elsewhere. This opening is the key characteristic of European culture, and it goes far beyond the each time given spatial and temporal borders, as is shown at once by Europe’s unique relationship to its (Greek, Roman, medieval) past, which, through its continuous creative reinterpretation starting in the Renaissance has remained ever present, and by its also unique relationship with its spatially outer world. Of all the great civilizations known in human history, European civilization—and this is so already since Herodotus—is the sole one that has almost constantly (save for the interruption of the Christian High Middle Ages) shown a passionate interest in the existence and the creations of others. In contrast to the other great civilizations—India, China, Japan, Islam—it has been the sole one not to have closed upon itself and the sole one of which it might be said that it has really wished that nothing that is human remain foreign to it. It is in this respect that one recognizes, beyond the very content of its political and philosophical creations, its universalist character.

On the other hand, it is clear that the development of Nation-States has gone hand in hand with a cultural closure at the level that depended on the State, that of general education, a level whose importance is decisive in any case and especially so because it is indirectly but powerfully orders

peoples' political future. In each country, such education is centered almost exclusively around the country's culture and, more particularly, its "national" literature. It is characteristic, and distressing, that one can at present complete one's secondary-school and even university education in France (and I believe that the situation is basically identical in all European countries, not to mention the other ones) without having read a single line of Cervantes, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Kafka, or Dostoyevsky (whose names one will have, at best, simply come across in history classes). As for the Greek and Latin classics, there is no point in even talking about them. It is almost a tautology to say that a culture can exist only by being rooted in a living language and that the privileged vehicle of this language is literature. But it is absurd to proceed as if knowledge of this literature had to be accompanied by the exclusion of all the other ones (and the same thing could be said for the great extra-European works).

In conclusion, the cultural diversity of present-day Europe could stand in the way of the development of a European identity only if, unfaithful to the very spirit of European civilization, one continued to close educational curricula to everything that is not "national."

Question 3: Will national communities without a State—as is the case with Catalonia, but many others as well—become diluted, or will they be reaffirmed within a process of unification? What would the desirable evolution be, and in what ways could they participate in unification?

No one can respond to this question of whether stateless national communities (or even ones with a State) are going to be diluted or reaffirmed within a process of unification. But a democratic Federation, like the one whose features were sketched out a bit above, would most certainly involve a huge amount of facilitation, for these communities, to help them get organized with all the autonomy they would wish within the Federation. That said, the question of the desirable evolution of the existing national entities (with or without a State) brings up an inextricable knot of antinomies. The principle of individual and collective autonomy implies that every community that so desires in full knowledge of the relevant facts is to be able to organize itself in accordance

with the political form it wishes to have (therefore also the Nation-State). But in another connection, this same political project of autonomy, which is addressed to every human being and every human collectivity, implies, through the universalism that is consubstantial with it, going beyond the imaginary of the Nation-State and reabsorbing the Nation into a vaster community that, ultimately, encompasses humanity in its entirety. At the same time, in effectively actual historical reality, the imaginary of the Nation and of the Nation-State is far from receding and even seems, as is shown by the recent events in Eastern Europe but also all across the globe, to be reviving and reinforcing itself as the sole refuge for individuals who are atomized by contemporary capitalist society and disoriented by the collapse of the significations and values that characterize that society. Finally, we do not know, and we cannot even conceive, of a culture without roots in a concrete language that would be a living, everyday language and not just a commercial or administrative *lingua franca*. The Hellenization of the eastern Mediterranean that began with Alexander, the Latinization of the western Mediterranean under Roman rule, and the Arabization of Islamized peoples after the seventh century offer some examples. (And the Swiss counterexample is not really a counterexample since, while Switzerland has politically been able to safeguard its unity for many centuries, culturally its three main parts have always been turned toward and nourished by the surrounding German, French, and Italian cultures.)

While English (or rather Anglo-American) is increasingly playing at the present time the role of the aforesaid *lingua franca*, it seems difficult to envisage an “anglicization” of Europe and impossible to accept the disappearance, as cultural languages, of such beautiful, rich and history-laden languages as are practically all the European languages extant today. While waiting for history to do its work, whose orientation and whose effects it would be childish to want to lay down or even to foresee, I would be a supporter of a solution that, still from the perspective of a democratic Europe, would frankly adopt as *lingua franca* of the European Federation, rather than some artificial language,

a living one (and English seems, for several reasons, the best placed to play this role), whereas particular cultural linguistic communities would continue to develop.

Yet one could not conclude these few reflections without underscoring—on the occasion, as a matter of fact, of this last question—the importance of a major obstacle in the path of a European Federation: the tremendous persistence of the imaginary of the Nation-State, which makes it seem that the peoples already constituted in States are in no way inclined to abandon “national sovereignty,” while the other ones are especially preoccupied with the idea of achieving an “independent” state form, whatever its cost and whatever its content.

So long as that is the way things are, “Europe” will be reduced to a bureaucratic structure somehow or other heading up and overseeing the national States, and it will be futile to speak of “European integration.”

I Am a Revolutionary*

QUESTION: How do you explain the sclerosis of all Western societies?

C.C.: It is the consequence of three factors. First, the bitter discovery that all reform of society is impossible. At a given moment in their history, Western societies imagined that they would succeed in improving, ameliorating, and humanizing themselves. That was a failure. The last hope—the establishment of a socialist regime in Russia after the revolution of February 1917—also got bogged down because of the Bolshevik coup d'État of October 1917, which transformed the empire of the Czars into a totalitarian regime. USSR: four letters, four lies. It was not a *union* but, rather, the subordination of other peoples to the Russian nation. These were not *republics* but, rather, dictatorships. It was not a *socialist* regime but, rather, a system based on exploitation. It was not even a *soviet* organization, for the soviets didn't have any power.¹ This mystification lasted for around fifty years and then collapsed under the weight of its contradictions. This granite monolith suddenly appeared in its true light: it was woven of dreadful horrors, lies, and absurdities. At the same time, these Bolsheviks—for whom there was “no impregnable fortress”—are fading away and the broad cloud of “Marxism-

*Interview with Isabelle Girard, published as “La dernière interview de Cornélius [*sic*] Castoriadis. ‘Pourquoi je suis révolutionnaire,’” *L'Événement du jeudi*, 688 (January 8-14, 1998): 80-81. We urge the reader to remain cognizant of the controversial nature of this published interview's transcription. See the letter of protest written by Castoriadis's widow, published as “Zoé Castoriadis nous écrit,” *L'Événement du jeudi*, 691 (January 29-February 4, 1998): 83. Her letter claimed that Castoriadis himself was dissatisfied with the transcription, but she offered no specifics, and none have been forthcoming from her since that time. If a recording of this interview is made public, we will gladly update the present translation. Without mention of this letter of protest, the interview is available online at <http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/spip.php?article50> (under the title: “Nous sommes dans l'ère de l'imitation, du rafistolage, du syncretisme, du contre-plaque”) and as part of a series of interviews: http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/IMG/pdf_Entretiens73-96_Castoriadis_.pdf

¹The seemingly backwards nature of this list, after *union*, comes from the fact that, in French, the abbreviation for USSR is *URSS*. —T/E

Leninism”—which had played the role of dominant ideology for nearly a half century—is dissipating.

Today, what remains of that utopia? China? It has become a capitalist dictatorship. The consequence of this failure is a huge disenchantment that has simultaneously allowed a fantastic reinforcement of the entire right-wing set of arguments. “You want to change society?” its devotees ask. “Well, you’ll get the Gulag,” they answer. “After all, you are living in wealthy countries that are at peace. What are you complaining about? Don’t do anything, and little by little, if you vote correctly (for Jacques Chirac, Édouard Balladur, or Lionel Jospin),² your situation will be ameliorated.” That’s the prevailing discourse that is putting us to sleep, paralyzing us, and succeeding in convincing us that it is unreasonable to imagine that a better society might be built and that a collective project might be set in place. That’s the first reason for this sclerosis.

Q.: No more hope, then. And the other reasons?

C.C.: There is an obvious one: we have given birth to an invasive consumer society. One might have thought that, after World War II, the Western countries were going to manage their economy correctly by accepting a redistribution of wealth (as the unions were suggesting) and laboring people’s participation in economic progress. Not at all. On the contrary, we have witnessed the unbridled development of a society in which the individual is reduced to the state of being a consumer. To make that happen, one had to have major domestic markets. One therefore started to facilitate access to consumer credit in order to satisfy the desire that had been aroused to purchase television sets, cars, vacations, trips to the country, going away on weekends, and so on. That is how man was privatized—which, for me, is the opposite of civic-mindedness. There is no longer any interest in the *res publica*, public affairs. The only thing that counts any longer are “my”

²Chirac and Balladur are rival right-wing French politicians, the latter of whom lost out to the former in the first round of presidential voting in 1995. The French Socialist politician Jospin, defeated by Chirac in the second round that year, had just been named Prime Minister by Chirac in June 1997, after the defeat of Chirac’s party in legislative elections. —T/E

affairs, those of my wife and my children. That is what conditions the pervasive lethargy.

There is, finally, another reason. It is the implementation, in 1980, of one of the greatest Liberal {in the Continental sense of a conservative “free-market” ideological} counteroffensives in history, jointly conducted by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, as well as by French President François Mitterrand, who relentlessly introduced such Liberalism into the French economy at the time of the much-talked-about turning point of 1983. Mitterrand was able to impose on French society what French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing would never have been able to dare to do. A whole arsenal was deployed in this direction: free movement of capital, fiscal measures favorable to big capitalist investors, the ability to fire people—in short, they activated the tools that, it is said, had been made necessary by globalization, tools that allow companies to exercise foul blackmail: If you ask for too many things, the bosses are saying in substance, I’ll take my factory and move to Malaysia or somewhere else. That’s the reality of globalization: relocation.

Q.: But can anything be done to counter this reality?

C.C.: Of course. But governments convinced themselves on their own that there was nothing to be done. On their own initiative, they gave up the means they had at their disposal to regulate the economy: control of the exchange rate, of foreign trade, of domestic demand. . . . The State has thus released itself from its obligations in order to place itself under the control of the financial markets. And those markets are pitiless: if a Keynesian policy of large public works is launched, if the word *socialism* is uttered, one knows that the franc is going to be battered abroad and that it will be devalued. . . . Do you realize how heavily that weighs on wage earners? They have been conditioned by being told that if they don’t keep still, they will go on lengthening the unemployment lines. To sum things up, the absence of any political perspective, the installment of a frenzied form of consumerism, and the disappearance of interest in public affairs go to ensure that France and Europe no longer move. Nothing more is left but cynical attitudes toward voting. One

elects the least bad candidates because modern-day humanity has trouble getting politicized, trouble deciding to take care of its collective affairs.

Q.: Your diagnosis is severe. Might you not have a bit of leniency for someone like Jospin who is nonetheless trying to do something?

C.C.: He's sitting on the fence. He spares the middle classes and the small and medium-sized businesses on the pretext that these are the main creators of jobs, but he taxes the big companies.³ He avoids social movements. But he clearly isn't avoiding capital flight. Whatever he might say and whatever one might say about it, it is nevertheless big capital that governs and the basic question, in our societies, remains that of profit and not that of unemployment. As everyone can note, each time a big firm has announced layoffs, stock markets have gone up. Formerly, one would have considered that the sign of ill health on the part of the economy and businesses. Today, it's the opposite. This is the victory of multinationals that have succeeded in imposing a policy whose sole objective is to increase their profits.

Q.: That seems to revolt you. . . .

C.C.: I don't think that one could make the French capitalist system, such as it is, operate in a free, egalitarian, and just manner. I am a revolutionary who is in favor of radical changes.

Q.: But how is one to give people back hope and a taste for combat?

C.C.: I have no answer. I am neither Jesus nor Mohammed. All this fits into a general movement whose consequences are the crisis and dilapidation of Western societies.⁴ All fields have been torn up, not just the field of politics. There is also the domain of culture. I believe that great creative work stopped in the 1960s. For the rest, it's either a rehash of what has already been done or a commercial

³This sentence in particular seems a bit confused. See the publication note to the present chapter. —T/E

⁴See "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982; now in [CR](#)) and "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991; now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)). —T/E

phenomenon. There are still some very good novelists, like Milan Kundera, and some very good poets, like Octavio Paz in Mexico. But it's not that boiling cauldron from which sprang such geniuses as Cervantes and Palestrina. Now there's rap. But what's rap?

Q.: Perhaps popular culture?

C.C.: That's what {former French Minister of Culture} Jack Lang imagined when he wanted to show that he believed in the people. Rap and all these fashionable styles are phenomena not of creation but of consumption. Here again, I repeat, culture has been devastated. Even philosophy.

Q.: You are hard on your colleagues. . . .

C.C.: There are two categories. The giants of Structuralism—Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida—with whom I have never been in agreement but who invented something, tried to make an *oeuvre*. And then there's the generation of fortysomethings, where the best of them, at best, do some serious work. Philosophy is understanding and accounting for human experience. Why are Bach, Mozart, and Debussy very great musicians and why is Saint-Saëns just a minor musician? Philosophy is understanding the essence of a great work. Today, we are in the era of imitation, patch-up jobs, syncretism, and plywood structures. There are some excellent historians of philosophy, but no philosophers.

Q.: Why, in your opinion?

C.C.: Undoubtedly, it's that the lure of easy notoriety has led some astray. For a number of them, there's nothing to regret: they would not, in any case, have been able to do much better. I think that human history is creation and that creation is, at the same time, destruction. There are phases—of ascension, expansion, highly dense creation—explosions, and then, inexplicably, the current reverses or peters out. Take French poetry. There were the poets of the Pléiade. Then there were Corneille and Racine. Then, not much. It was thought that French genius had worn out and then, miraculously, there were Chateaubriand, the Romantics, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé. Now, once again, one has the impression that poetic language has run dry. Just like the novelistic vein. As it was impossible to redo Marcel Proust and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the *Nouveau roman* was invented. If

I were a novelist, it seems to me, nevertheless, that I would not have been discouraged to have come after the greats. I would have tried. That's what I am doing with philosophy. I think that I am doing philosophy and that what I write is new. This statement may seem very pretentious, but if I didn't think so I would stop writing. I would do textual analysis or philosophical biography. Yes, I say "I" and I lay claim to it.

**PART THREE
SIX DIALOGUES**



French Editors' Foreword to *Dialogue**

These four “Dialogues”—with Alain Connes (mathematician), Jean-Luc Donnet (psychoanalyst), Octavio Paz (poet), and Francisco Varela (biologist)—offer modest testimony not so much to Cornelius Castoriadis’s passionate curiosity for all fields of knowledge but especially to his philosophical determination to think all that is thinkable. The present testimony is nonetheless original, since these conversations were originally radio shows, with the constraints and limitations that that implies, though they are also filled with enthusiasm, polemical vigor, a sense of closeness, and friendship. The thinking sometimes wanders along steep and adventurous roads that, in a way, are tested by the speaker. A few notes have been added that will perhaps help the reader to expand her own path. Yet transcription of the recordings has been limited to a simple formatting of what was said, without ever seeking to smooth out the rough edges, the approximate formulations, and still less the provocations.

It was Alain Finkielkraut who, for his July 6, 1996 France Culture radio show *Répliques* (Retorts), had invited Octavio Paz and Cornelius Castoriadis (who, moreover, were long-standing friends) to engage in a dialogue around the theme “Facing Modernity.” As for the three other conversations, they were drawn from *Le Bon Plaisir de . . . Cornelius Castoriadis* (The fancies of . . . Cornelius Castoriadis), which was broadcast April 20 on France Culture. A few months earlier, Katharina von Bulow had asked Castoriadis to choose the people with whom he would like to share three hours of radio broadcast time. In addition to the three interlocutors present here, Castoriadis expressed his desire to meet with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jacques Lacarrière, Michaël Lévinas, and Théodor Monod.¹ All these

*“Avant-propos” (unsigned), *D*, pp. 5-7. Reprinted in *P-SID*, pp. 45-47.

¹Partial mp3 files exist for the first three additional dialogues mentioned: http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/IMG/mp3/BONPLAISIRcon_bendit.mp3, <http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/IMG/mp3/BONPLAISIRlacarriere.mp3>, and <http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/IMG/mp3/BONPLAISIRlevinas.mp3>.

conversations, prepared by von Bulow, were recorded in November-December 1995. Only three have been retained here, for reasons of space as well as internal coherence. But the entire show has already been rebroadcast, and one need only write to France Culture to obtain copies of the cassettes.

We warmly thank Ms. Von Bulow and Alain Finkielkraut, first for their initiative and also for their generosity in allowing us to use their work, as well as Pascal Vernay, without whom this edition would not have seen the light of day.

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Octavio Paz (1914-1998), the most important poet of Mexico in the contemporary era, was one of the great Hispanic-American writers and the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990.² {Author of} *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash, new ed. (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1990), *A Tree Within*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1988), and *Itinerary: An Intellectual Journey*, trans. Jason Wilson (New York: Harcourt, 1999).

Francisco Varela {1946-2001}, a biologist, has written a dozen works, including *Principles of Biological Autonomy* (New York: Elsevier North Holland, 1979)³ and *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

Alain Connes {b. 1947}, a professor at the Collège de France, has published *Matière à pensée* {with Jean-Pierre Changeux} (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1992) and *Noncommutative Geometry* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1994).

²Correcting the French Editors' impossible date (1999). —T/E

³See Castoriadis own review of this book below in Part Five of the present tome. —T/E

Jean-Luc Donnet, a psychoanalyst, has published *L'Enfant de ça: psychanalyse d'un entretien, la psychose blanche* {with André Green} (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973, 1991) and *Surmoi I: Le concept freudien et la règle fondamentale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995). {A Donnet volume exists in English translation: [*The Analyzing Situation*, trans. Andrew Weller \(London: Karnac, 2009\).](#)}

Répliques
“Facing Modernity,” with
Octavio Paz and Cornelius Castoriadis*

ALAIN FINKIELKRAUT: Octavio Paz is a poet who comes from Latin America, a continent where Europe has left its mark though it is not just European. Cornelius Castoriadis is a philosopher who was born in Greece,¹ the cradle of Europe and of philosophy. Through the Spanish Civil War, for Paz, and the Greek resistance, for Castoriadis, the two of them have shared in the great experiences and great hopes of the twentieth century. They both also raised questions very early on. Their stay in what Paz calls the learned darkness of authoritarian socialism was not long, and they have today this ultimate point in common, viz., that they do not accompany their passionate denunciations of totalitarian politics with clear-cut praise for modern democracies. Castoriadis’s latest book is thus entitled *La Montée de l’insignifiance* (The rising tide of insignificance),² a lovely title that pulls no punches. And the one Paz is publishing today, *Itinerary: An Intellectual Journey*, ends with a disturbing description of the nihilism of our democracies. Insignificance, nihilism; we shall start off, if you don’t mind, with this shared concern and, more precisely, with a thought from Baudelaire, whom you, Octavio, quote in another text:

The world is coming to an end. . . . I do not say that the world will be reduced to the expedients and the comic disorder of the South American Republics, that perhaps we shall return to the savage state, No;

*“Répliques: ‘Face à la modernité’ avec Octavio Paz et Cornelius Castoriadis,” *D*, pp. 9-36. Reprinted in *P-SID*, pp. 49-76.

¹Actually, Castoriadis was born in Constantinople in 1922, before this city became known as Istanbul; he and his family moved to Athens when he was a few months old. —T/E

²Translations from which have appeared in [CR](#), [WIF](#), and [RTI\(TBS\)](#). —T/E

. . . The mechanical will so have Americanized us, progress will so have atrophied all our spiritual side, that naught, in the sanguine, sacrilegious or unnatural dreams of the Utopians can be compared to the actual outcome. . . . But it is not particularly in political institutions that there will be manifest the universal ruin, or the universal progress; for the name matters little. It will be in the debasement of the heart.³

Now that we are finally clear here of the struggle against totalitarian superstition and are able to reflect more freely about the world in which we live, is it the poet Baudelaire rather than all the philosophers of the great Advent that we must vindicate?

OCTAVIO PAZ: I think that Baudelaire wasn't mistaken. I would not say that he was a prophet (I hate for this substantive to be applied to poets), but he saw our situation with clarity. Democracy is founded on the plurality of opinions. At the same time, this plurality depends on the plurality of values. Advertising and the market are destroying those forms of plurality by reducing all values to price. In my opinion, that's the complacent nihilism of modern society. In this sense, Baudelaire was right: we are living in a complacent form of nihilism, not in the tragic nihilism Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Friedrich Nietzsche thought about.

A.F.: Complacent nihilism and tragic nihilism. Cornelius, it's somewhat the same question I'd like to ask you, but starting from an expression you use as the title of an article and of your latest book: *the rising tide of*

³[Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry](#), ed. T. R. Smith (New York: Boni and Liveright, Inc., 1919), pp. 222-223. We have added ellipses to indicate that this is only a partial quotation of a passage at the start of Section XXVI of “Rockets,” itself part of the *Intimate Papers from the Unpublished Works of Baudelaire*, trans. Joseph T. Shipley, reprinted in Smith's edition. Neither Finkelkraut nor the anonymous French Editors indicate which Paz volume included this quotation from Baudelaire's writings. —T/E

insignificancy.⁴ What does that signify?

C.C.: It means, first of all, that insignificancy is not simply a state that has taken hold but is like a kind of desert that is advancing in the contemporary world. To borrow an expression from the book, as a matter of fact, the desert is growing; just like insignificancy, because, as Octavio says, it's a sort of nihilism, but laughable, pathetic, derisory. Moreover, I was very glad to see, in his book, the frequent use of an expression I myself had employed as a title of one of the texts in *Le Monde morcelé: conformism*.⁵ It is astounding to think that there have been ideologues and writers who speak of the contemporary era as an era of individualism while, as a matter of fact, what must especially be deplored at present is the disappearance of genuine individuals in the face of this kind of generalized conformism.

A.F.: Apropos of this generalized conformism, you quote Nietzsche, "The desert is growing."⁶ "Woe unto him who harbors deserts," he adds. To continue along with the quotation, are there people, are there men, forces . . . what is it that harbors the desert, according to you?

O.P. It is difficult to answer you. What is it that harbors the desert? Almost all institutions, I think, and especially the mechanism of modern societies. I spoke of the market. The market reduces values to a single price, to the price; in this sense, it substitutes for the plurality of values a single value, and this value is based not on a metahistorical or

⁴"La montée de l'insignifiance" is the title Castoriadis gave, in his volume of the same name, to a *radio interview* (not an "article") he granted to Olivier Morel that first appeared as "Un monde à venir" (A world to come) in *La République internationale des lettres*, 1:4 (June 1994): 4-5 (now translated in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)). —T/E

⁵"The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1992; now in [WIF](#)). —T/E

⁶*Itinerary*, p. 28, "the desert expands and covers the whole earth." See Zarathustra's song, "Deserts grow; woe unto him who harbours deserts" (in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollington [London: Penguin, 1961, 1969], p. 315). In [OPS](#), p. 78, this paraphrase had remained unreferenced. †—T/E

ethical notion but on utility. This is a moment in the degradation of the West that is contemporaneous with the development of science and technology. In my opinion, one of the most disturbing paradoxes of the modern world is this coincidence among the achievements of science, the development of technology (which one can criticize or not, but it's a fact, which we're going to discuss), and a thoroughgoing nihilism, the thoroughgoing degradation of all values subjected to the laws of economic exchange, commercial exchange, consumption. Modern society has changed citizens into consumers.

A.F.: You describe this change as starting, therefore, from the market and technology, from their concomitant development, their unfortunate coincidence. Yet this seems a bit like a faceless power. So, when I ask what is it that harbors the desert, it's difficult to assign, just like that, responsibilities or identify guilty parties. . . .

C.C.: Yes, I think that this expression of Nietzsche's has to be modified. For my part, I quoted Nietzsche because it's a lovely phrase; I'm not at all a Nietzschean. But it's not *Who harbors the desert?*; it's *Who is making the desert spread?*—right? That's the question. And I believe that what we have here, as a matter of fact, is a situation that offers a refutation of all hitherto known theories of history, and especially the history of the most recent period. There is no conspiracy on the part of Big Capital; there are no special bad guys—even if there are bad guys in abundance; you see them every day, indeed still recently in France.

O.P.: Everywhere!

C.C.: Everywhere, right. But what we have is a sort of historical Niagara. There is no conspiracy, but everything conspires in the sense that everything respire, breathes together, everything breathes in the same direction: corruption has become systemic; the autonomization of the development of technoscience is controlled by no one; of course, the market, the trend of the economy is such that one no longer worries whether what is being produced serves any purpose whatsoever but solely whether it's sellable and not even that, because if it's produced, it will be made sellable through advertising—all these phenomena with which we are familiar.

That is to say, we have at once a kind of inhuman, faceless power, a splintering of the bearers of institutions, and even a subservience on the part of those who are the bearers of institutions to this historical trend.

O.P.: I would like to add something. Yes, there is no one responsible. It's not a class, as Marxism had it; it's not a group; it's not a tyrant. These are impersonal forces. We therefore find ourselves faced with impersonal forces, nearly autonomous mechanisms, and at the same time, opposite that, there's a general passivity. So, in my opinion the disturbing problem is not that of technology (ultimately, I am not so much against technology, why would I be?). No, I think that the disturbing thing, the phenomenon that has to concern us, is the phenomenon of general passivity. And here I see—Cornelius is perhaps in agreement with me—that one of the factors, perhaps the decisive factor, has been the great revolutionary failure of the twentieth century. At the end of the century, after the failure of Communism, we find ourselves in a sort of historical pause, a sort of void. There is no historical project. And at the same time, there is acceptance of this situation, which, on the one hand, destroys values and, on the other, transforms society into consumer society.

A.F.: Well, Cornelius, you are in agreement with this assessment . . . ?

C.C.: Yes, of course.

A.F.: It's historical failure that explains this passivity?

C.C.: No, I believe that it's more than that, in a sense. I believe that what Octavio mentions is one fundamental factor. There is this disappointment; this fantastic disillusionment in the face of the transformation of the hopes of a great part of humanity, the intellectuals, the workers, people of modest means . . . —a transformation into a totalitarian machine for extermination and oppression; or else we have, in the West, with Social Democracy, a transformation into a mere agency for accommodation of the existing order, little reforms, etc. Right, that's one thing. The second thing is that there nonetheless was an extraordinary adaptation on the part of the regime—let us say, of capitalism—to a new situation that has been expressed, for example,

precisely by consumer society: that is to say that, starting at a certain moment, it was understood what had to be done. Octavio quotes Charles Fourier, who said that one would have to manufacture indestructible products for people's consumption (I am not talking about vegetables or fabrics; this holds for other products). Now, what as a matter of fact characterizes modern production is what economists have called *planned* or *built-in obsolescence*. That is to say that products are manufactured in order to wear out very quickly; all consumers know that. And what is the logic of that? One of my friends, an automobile sales worker, said, back in 1954 that a Rolls Royce turns out to be less expensive than {an economy car like} a Renault 4CV. Everyone laughed, but he was right: a Rolls Royce lasts almost indefinitely, and it is much more serviceable because it doesn't need to be repaired, whereas the Renault 4CV had to be thrown away after three or five years. But this goes hand in hand with the fact that, under present social and economic conditions, Renault 4CVs can indeed be sold on credit, with monthly payments. The price is low, so they get sold, whereas Rolls Royces wouldn't get off the lot.

O.P. I ask myself whether passivity isn't to be explained by the amelioration of society's material living conditions. In this sense, capitalism has won the match because it has been able to offer the masses better, less expensive products.

A.F.: In this regard, I would just like to illustrate what you are saying with a joke that was going around Poland during the period of totalitarianism. A client goes into a store and asks for a steak. He's told, "Oh no, sir; here, there's no fish; there's no meat on the opposite side of the street." So, we have a joke about shortages that has indeed allowed the capitalist system to present itself, and to be, comparatively speaking—opposite a system where nothing operates—a system in which things do operate and, opposite a world of shortages, a world of abundance. So, should this or should this not be chalked up to its credit, and if so to what extent?

C.C.: That's not the problem, to be to its credit or not. It must be said, first or all, that this has played that much greater a role as Marxist ideology had spread the idea that

capitalism cannot but condemn people to poverty. Now, that has been refuted day after day by the facts. Capitalism has not evolved spontaneously. There were workers' struggles. There were unions. There were pressures, strikes, and so on. But, starting at a certain moment, it accommodated itself to all that. I would like to add one thing. Here one must nonetheless be attentive, though without making prophecies and reviving apocalyptic forecasts. Perhaps this period of capitalism is already starting to be behind us. What one is seeing at present in the industrialized countries, and particularly in Europe, though less so in the United States, is a crisis of a new type, with the creation of exclusion, with an extraordinary amount of unemployment, with this globalization that obliges the old industrial countries to enter into phases where there no longer are jobs for people: and all that is nonetheless still the future—well, it's not the future; it's the present, but I don't want to make forecasts.

O.P.: But perhaps we mustn't waste our time lingering over these theoretical questions—technical ones, rather. It is clear that the economy of the totalitarian countries was an economy of shortages and that the economy of capitalism is an economy of abundance.

C.C.: Relative abundance, yes.

O.P. Abundance for the majority—for the majority in the developed countries. If you're talking about my country, it's the opposite; the majority is poor and sometimes even destitute. But we are speaking at this moment of the fate of the most developed countries, the most advanced ones. So, the question that is posed is how abundance (Marx was thinking in terms of abundance) produced some fruits that are negative, from the spiritual standpoint, for the population of the Western countries and are harmful fruits, materially speaking, for the underdeveloped countries. And that is, for me, one of the great contemporary historical mysteries: how, in producing conformity, abundance has castrated individuals and transformed persons into masses, into satisfied masses, with no will and no direction.

C.C.: It has transformed them into private or privatized individuals, as I have been saying for a long time

(this is one of the themes of my reflections since 1960).⁷ But I don't believe that abundance as such is to be blamed. I believe that what is to be blamed is the mentality that makes the economy the center of everything. In Marx, it was the center of everything because the capitalist economy wasn't going to be able to give people what they were waiting for: communism alone would be able to deliver it, communism as he thought of it. For the people of present-day society, the idea is the same: what really matters is the economy, consumption. Now, the crisis of present-day society is in fact the crisis of the significations that hold this society together; it's what are called *values*—which could also be called *norms*. And that is, in a certain way, parallel; it's not due to the spread of material abundance. There is a crisis, but what does it come from? On the one hand, it comes from what you mentioned, the downfall of revolutionary ideologies; on the other, the very deep-seated crisis of the ideology of progress. In the nineteenth century, for people, the great Liberals or the Progressivists, progress was not only a question of accumulating wealth: John Stuart Mill thought that progress was going to give people liberty, democracy, happiness, a better morality. Now, today, no one, not even the devotees of the present-day system, dares to say that one only has to let progress do its work and everyone will be happy and better. It's not true; everyone knows that they perhaps will have a better television set, and that's all.

O.P.: Yes, that is to say that we are faced with a historical project that has proved its worth; it's progress. But Castoriadis says things that are slightly different. The first thing, which deeply touched me, is that we have reduced (modern society has reduced) the meaning of all values to economic value. So, in order to replenish society, a critique will have to be carried out: the remedies are not solely economic in character; their character is deeper, *moral* or *spiritual*, as I'd like to call it.

⁷Castoriadis is referring to “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” first published in three issues of *S. ou B.* in 1960-1961 and now available in translation in [PSW2](#). —T/E

A.F.: I would now like to pose a question that is symmetrical to the one I just posed. I asked you: How is one to localize this phenomenon of insignificance or nihilism; are there guilty parties or people who are responsible; who is behind it? And you, Cornelius, said: There is no “who”; everything conspires. Octavio, you were heading in the same direction. So, I can pose the other question: You advocate, you wish for, you dream of an exit from nihilism, a reawakening—that’s a word you employ on several occasions, Cornelius; you say: We are living through a moment of lethargy; that may stop, it has to stop. But is there a “who” who might be able to be the bearer of this reawakening now that one no longer has the myth of the proletariat, of a class or a redemptive people? Upon what and upon whom can one count in order to escape insignificance?

C.C.: That, as a matter of fact, is one of the great difficulties of political thought today, but also, above all, of political activity, because, as you said, we’ve exited from the era of {historically} privileged classes; historically, the proletariat has become a minority (there are very few true proletarians at present), and there is no privileged social class from the standpoint of a political project. I think that what indicates the depth of the present-day crisis and perhaps the depths of the hopes one can have—this may appear funny, but that’s how it is—is this disappearance of a privileged bearer. That is to say that the phenomenon affects all of society, all social strata, save perhaps for a tiny percentage of people who are at the summit. I am thinking, for example, of May ’68 (which is past, of course), where it was seen that those who were extraordinarily active in the movement, those who were producing ideas and significations, were not so much workers; it was technical staff, people in the liberal professions, intellectuals, if you will, the students. . . .

O.P.: The students first of all.

C.C.: The students, of course, and young people first of all. And that’s very important, even if it creates great difficulties for action.

O.P.: Yes, ’68 was a flare-up that illuminated us for a very short period but that showed us a certain direction. One thing struck me in this universal revolt: it came from many

countries, France, the United States, Germany, my country.

C.C.: Mexico.

O.P.: Yes. Well, the demands were not economic or even social in character, but rather moral. And the forerunners, the prophets (vague prophets) of this movement were, rather, some poets. Sometimes, in listening to our students or in reading the writings on the walls, I thought of William Blake, André Breton, and many poets of the nineteenth century—the Romantics—and the twentieth century who revolted, as Baudelaire had done: their denunciations were made not in the name of a class or some kind of economy. What was at stake was something quite different—I would say: *the position, the place of the human person in society*; I think that modern society has eliminated values, the very center of creativity that is the human person. Castoriadis has spoken of the individual; I would like to substitute for the word *individual* the word *person*.

A.F.: I'd like to remain for a second precisely on May '68 and on the concern whether the movement might be the bearer of this reawakening or the exit from nihilism. For, this movement itself should remain for us ambiguous, or ambivalent. Of course, an attempt was made to exit from economism; there was a harsh and beautiful critique of consumerist values. Nevertheless, one of the gravest symptoms of the spiritual crisis both of you are describing is the crisis of education, the crisis of transmission—about which, moreover, you, Cornelius, have spoken in your book. And here, the '68 movement nonetheless bears a certain responsibility in the way it presented the mastery of teaching as a form of oppressive mastery—the teaching headmaster [*le maître*] who teaches and the master who oppresses were considered to be somewhat identical; and it's true that, today, the disappearance of culture or the humanities in education in the name of profitability happens that much more easily as this culture was previously delegitimized in the name of revolution. Even this movement, therefore, cannot be applauded or commemorated solely in an empathetic way.

C.C.: No, but allow me not to be in complete agreement with this analysis. I believe that the contemporary crisis of production (which, moreover, is universal and not

limited to countries that have gone through a phase like that of May '68) has, as a matter of fact, much deeper roots; it has roots in the crisis of values. Let's take those ridiculous changes in school curricula. In France, each Minister of National Education introduces a new system by introducing new curricula. Why? Precisely because one doesn't know what to transmit; one no longer wants (which is grotesque!) to transmit the traditional culture, the inherited culture, which is nonetheless an absolute basis. One wants to "technicize," to instrumentalize education so that those who come out of school might find a job—and of course that fails ridiculously because, between the moment when the Minister and his experts have perfected the curricula supposedly suited to the demands of industry and the moment when people go out on the job market, industry's demands have changed. . . . But there is something more to this: it's that, in our present-day societies' crisis of significations, no one positively cathects [*investit*] education any longer. The parents are no longer invested in school; students and schoolchildren are no longer invested in school. Perhaps it can be said that even the teachers no longer have an investment in school. And that's what's very serious in this matter.

O.P.: You are talking about education and especially about education in France. These are topics that are completely alien to me. But since we're talking . . .

C.C.: Excuse me, but I do think that this is general; in the United States, it's absolutely . . .

O.P.: Yes, everywhere. You are talking about France in particular, but I was speaking, first of all, in general; it's an important subject, but a difficult one. All historical phenomena have, you could say, two sides to them. You spoke of the youth revolt in May '68 against the professors, against the teachers [*maîtres*], and ultimately against classical values. That's true, at least in part. But I think that there is another indication of the ambiguity of every historical phenomenon: it's that from some of the holdovers from May '68 came terrorist groups. But I don't think that the most important thing is to talk about the causes of the present-day crisis.

A.F.: Excuse me. I meant that, in my opinion, this

youth worship is interesting, and it really goes beyond the case of France. Youth affirmed itself very strongly in '68 with a sort of potential for revolt. Yet this conformism, about which you both happen to agree, is illustrated in fact by the worship of youth.

C.C.: That's one of its manifestations.

A.F.: Another manifestation that seems to me to be interesting is this way of, as Charles Péguy said, covering all the bases. That is to say that, the closer one is to the center, the more one is within normal bounds, present-day normal bounds, the norm of current-affairs news and the media, the more one presents oneself as marginal, as subversive. Gay Pride can be described in this way: you know, this big demonstration that took place a few days ago. It was celebrated by all the newspapers; it took on the appearance of some kind of radical subversion. . . . It seems to me that it's one of the modes of contemporary conformism.

C.C.: That's certain, but here there are several things. There is the fact that, since the moment when the system's producers and salesmen discovered that there was, as is said, a huge *market* for youth, it ceased being simply a subversive value or a revolutionary value. And then, on the other hand, there is a fact that classical revolutionaries, reformers, or democrats hadn't truly understood, realized, or foreseen: it's this fantastic capacity of contemporary society to reabsorb everything, that is to say that everything becomes a means for the system. If there were today, for example, an Antonin Artaud—there no longer is, but if there were one—he would be an exciting curiosity who would get financing. So, either he'd commit suicide, he'd return on his own to the psychiatric hospital, or he, too, would become someone who goes on television. . . .

O.P.: A television star! I think that we are in agreement in saying that we are living—I would not say a crisis (“*Krisis*”), because that's a very exaggerated word—but that we are living in a sort of empty space in which the great hope of the classical forms of Liberalism, with the idea of progress, and the hopes of Marxism are defined as a serious historical failure. The important thing, in my opinion, will be to see how one can remake human society. On this topic,

Castoriadis says something that I believe is important. He has spoken of heteronomous societies and autonomous societies. This is a debatable idea, but a very fecund one. He would therefore want (as I would want, as everyone would want) this thing he calls *an autonomous society*, that is to say, a society founded on itself and conscious that the founder is itself, and not an external agent, a god, an idea. . . .

C.C.: or the laws of history. . . .

A.F.: . . . the latest form of heteronomy.

O.P.: Yes. But all societies, even autonomous societies, have to be founded on certain principles. Well, for some time I've been saying (this is something I've written in this little book, *Itinerary*, and in other ones, especially a book about love that I had published shortly beforehand)⁸ that what will yield the possibility of founding Western society and perhaps world society anew will be a rediscovery of the notion of *personhood*. In the past, the notion of *personhood* still involved a duality between soul and body: in all civilizations, we have these dualities, these dialogues, these struggles sometimes between body and soul. But there is something important in the world today: these are the advances, the discoveries of science; more and more, we think that what we call *spirit* is a dimension of the body.

A.F.: Therefore, there would be something like an eclipse of the notion of *personhood*.

O.P.: I think that the old attributes of the person have now taken refuge in another conception of the spirit, of the *mind*, as the Americans say. A neuroscientist whom I admire, Gerald Edelman, has said something that, in my opinion, is very important. For him, the human species (and, in particular, the human mind) is a moment in overall evolution. And he added that one cannot speak of the system of neurons, of the nervous system, as if it were identical in all individuals: it is different in each individual. Consequently, it is very difficult to formulate generalizable laws while also

⁸*An Erotic Beyond: Sade* (1993), trans. from the Spanish by Eliot Weinberger (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998). [The French Editors' footnote here may be incorrect. See n. 17 in the present chapter. —T/E]

succeeding in recognizing, as one should (he is not talking about some person; he’s talking about mankind, but it’s the same thing), that each individual is a unique being. That is to say that even the most materialistic modern science, let’s say biology, grants that each person is unique, exceptional. And I think that every politics, every new form of political thinking, has to be founded on the recognition of this fact that the person—each person—is unique.

C.C.: That’s why I do not limit myself to talking about an autonomous society; I say: *an autonomous society in which there are autonomous individuals*. And I insist on the fact that the two are inseparable, because those whom you call *persons*—well, in France the word *personne* would perhaps not have a great amount of success, because of the Christian connotations—Personalists,⁹ I know very well that you are not using it in that sense, but . . .

O.P.: No, but I’m not afraid of . . .

C.C.: You’re right; neither am I.

O.P.: Because Christianity is part of my heritage.

C.C.: Of course, of course. But in the end I prefer to speak of autonomous *individuals* (or, if you wish, *personalities*). And what, as a matter of fact, contemporary society can be reproached for—but here we’re getting back to what we were just saying—is killing the personality, the individuals, the genuine individuality of people. Now, if you want to pass over to something else—for me, that’s the problem that is bothering me, and here we are facing the abyss—what, at bottom, does that require? That requires a new historical creation, with some new significations, new values, a new type of human being, all that having more or less to happen at the same time and going, by definition, beyond any possibility of forecasting or planning.

A.F.: A new historical creation that would be a radical alternative.

C.C.: Absolutely.

⁹In France, Personalism was developed by Emmanuel Mounier, founder of the review *Esprit* (“mind” or “spirit”), which in a later incarnation, so to speak, published several texts written by Castoriadis as well as interviews with him. —T/E

A.F.: Must it be thought of in terms of a radical alternative?

O.P.: If one is thinking in terms of a radical alternative, one is thinking in terms of creation. . . .

C.C.: Yes.

O.P.: But here I am a bit undecided about the term *creation*. If the word *person* has Christian echoes, the word *creation* has still more theological overtones (*laughter*). We are thereby confronted with the idea of a God, a creator who takes the world and makes it arise from nothing. Historical creation has to be based on already existing data. One cannot do something purely unprecedented. At each period in history, historical creations are not only combinations but also transformations of preexisting elements. That's why the theory of evolution seems to me to be particularly fecund: thanks to it, we can, without betraying the rationality of the universe, arrive at this strange being, this strange apparition in the history of the universe, that is the human mind.

C.C.: Here there would be a whole philosophical discussion I shall abstain from broaching now because it would lead us too far afield. In any case, I am in agreement with you in saying that there is indeed a theological past behind the word *creation*; but we are not obliged to take that on as our own, any more than you take on the theological past that is behind the word *person*. I would simply say that when the *polis*, the Greek city, arose, when modernity arose, etc., there was no God behind it; that's a creation of men. And it's not a mere resumption of elements that existed. There is a new form that is not limited to combination. When you write a poem, you use the words of your tongue, but what you do is not a combination of those words; it's a new form that you impose on them, through their enchantment, through a spirit running through a poem: there we have your creative side as a poet.

O.P.: Yes, but you are already speaking of a philosophical definition of the word *creation* when you are saying that it's not like a combination (but if it's not a combination, what is it?). But that's not what is important. The interesting idea, in my opinion, is that creation is to be understood only as transformation—a transformation that can

be radical, like the transition from animal to man. . . .

C.C.: . . . for example.

A.F.: But perhaps another objection can be made to the use of this term *creation*, precisely for our period of time. Both of you have spoken of the failure of a certain kind of expectant hope [*espérance*] and of the consequences this failure could have in terms of passivity. But is there not, mustn't one take into account a failure or a critique of the “principle of hope” altogether?¹⁰ And here I refer to Hans Jonas's book on the *principle of responsibility*:¹¹ at bottom, the modern program (or paradigm) was always founded on going beyond the given toward something better, and creation, too, is presented as an overcoming, and sometimes as an abolition, of the given. So, I'd like to quote for you a few sentences from Jonas that seem to me to define very well our present-day situation, where we live under the threat of an increasingly powerful technology:

That which has always been the most elementary of givens, taken for granted as the background of all acting and never requiring action itself—that there are men, that there is life, that there is a world for both—this suddenly stands forth, as if lit up by lightning, in its stark peril through human deed. In this very light{,} the new responsibility appears. Born of danger, its first urging is necessarily an ethics of preservation and prevention, not of progress and perfection (p. 139).

This is a sort of revolution or existential conversion that obliges us to preserve, to conserve, to safeguard the planet, to

¹⁰Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1938-1947), trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986). [Castoriadis criticizes Bloch's brand of utopianism at the start of “The Project of Autonomy Is Not a Utopia” (1993; in [ASA\(RPT\)](#)). —T/E]

¹¹*The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (1979), trans. Hans Jonas, with the collaboration of David Herr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

manage it—as you yourself, Cornelius, indeed also say—as a good *pater familias*.¹² Doesn't all that have to lead us, as a matter of fact, to exit from an almost overly heroic paradigm of creation?

C.C.: No. I believe that there is a misunderstanding because we are situating ourselves at different levels and at levels that are heterogeneous. When I speak of *creation*, I am speaking *qua* philosopher. Let's take the "principle of hope," must one hope, etc. One of the most considerable creations I know of in history, one that still enlightens us today (I think that everyone here would agree) is that of the ancient Greeks. The ancient Greeks hoped for nothing, nothing, nothing, and that's why, in my opinion, they were so free in their creation. The tragedies always tell us: "You will die." The famous chorus from *Oedipus* says that the best thing is not to be born and that the second best is, once born, to die as quickly as possible—that's not expectant hope.¹³

O.P.: The Ancients weren't familiar with the notion of progress. That's a notion that comes from the Bible. It's prior to the adoption of Christianity; one cannot imagine it beforehand. It's true that the Greeks didn't hope; it's clear that that's why they invented tragedy. But you spoke, in the quotation you gave, of the world we have before our eyes. I would like to talk about the notion of *personhood* while endeavoring to integrate it into the new conceptions of modern thought and modern science. And here (since any new ethics, any new politics, has to be founded thereupon), I am also talking about the discovery of others, of our fellows. On this topic, it does indeed seem, in the first place, that in children self-awareness would come only after awareness of others: that is to say that solidarity is an innate given. In the second place, I believe that, more than philosophical thought, modern scientific theories, physics on the one hand, biology

¹²See "The Revolutionary Force of Ecology" (1993; now in *RTI(TBS)*, p. 111), where Castoriadis speaks of the attitude of the *diligens pater familias* who proceeds cautiously and with prudence in the face of problems like the greenhouse effect or the hole in the ozone layer. —T/E

¹³Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1225. —T/E

on the other, combining with this modern reality, the destruction of the material world, the atmosphere, etc., have shown us that we are products of nature—we are sons of the cosmos, we are brothers not only of living beings, from the simplest to the most complex, but brothers, too, of elementary particles and at the same time of the stars and the sun. I think that one can find here the basis on which to construct a new society.

C.C.: Yes. I would nonetheless like to take up a few points from the discussion that tend a bit to jut out on all sides. If today a historical social movement were going forward and, if you'll pardon me the expression, were creating a new society, why would there be a radical break? Precisely because it could create that new society only by breaking with this idea that God has created the world and given it to man (Genesis, etc.). God did not create the world; in any case, He didn't give it to man. As for Descartes' idea that we advance in our knowledge in order to become masters and possessors of nature,¹⁴ that's the greatest absurdity a philosopher ever could have uttered (though it is explicable in historical terms). We will never be masters and possessors of nature: we will never be able to reverse the rotation of the galaxy, that's for sure; so, we can't be that. The same goes for Marx's idea that mythology is based on human ignorance.¹⁵ No, mythology is an attempt to give meaning to the world; it doesn't result simply from ignorance. There is a need to break with all these principles of dominating nature, of rationality transformed from a tool of man or from tools of thought into an ultimate domineering principle. And there is a value to be substituted for all that. I am in agreement with what Octavio says; I'd formulate it a bit differently. What could an autonomous society propose to itself as its objective? Freedom for all and justice. (Not happiness, because happiness is not a political

¹⁴In part 6 of *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, by René Descartes. —T/E

¹⁵Again (see n. 3 in “Giving a Meaning to Our Lives,” above in the present tome), Castoriadis may be thinking of a passage from the end of the [Preface](#) to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. —T/E

question but, rather, an individual one.) But beyond that, in terms of substance? Well, I think that what an autonomous society would propose to itself as its objective is to help human beings become as autonomous and creative as possible: in parallel, if I may say, to cultivating our natural garden as good fathers should, it is also raising new generations in a spirit of developing their capacities, respecting others, respecting nature.

A.F.: Octavio, are you in agreement with this program?

O.P.: Agreed. But I think that it must be formulated in a slightly different way. I would say that this program, this historical project (and that's why I don't think that it would be a creation, a radical break) is rooted in the past, and that the first requirement is to recover, to recreate the notion of *personhood* or, if you wish, of *individual*.

C.C.: Yes, quite right.

O.P.: And I am also saying that, in this notion of *personhood*, there has always been, in an implicit way, the notion of *the other* and that, by way of consequence, the second datum we have to mention is the notion of *fraternity*, a fraternity that is not founded on the idea that we are sons of God, but on the awareness that we are products of nature, of the universe. I also think that this project has to take into consideration many other things we cannot talk about now—for example, the purely quantitative problem: number, this difficulty of modern societies. Our listeners are a mass. Cornelius has spoken of Greek democracy. But Greek democracy was made for small countries, for cities, and at present we are dealing with huge nations, with millions and millions of inhabitants. . . .

C.C.: . . . and even the entire planet.

A.F.: Whence the need to resolve, too, the terrible issue of number.

C.C.: Of course. I think, as I have written in the past, that humans can measure up to this issue. Humanity can do better; one is not obliged always to be swinging between small self-governed cities and empires subject to alienating and oppressive powers; one can invent, create forms of collective government at much greater scales than those

known up till now.

A.F.: Well, then, let me put in a word too, in order to reconcile, in particular, poetry and philosophy—since I have had the chance to listen to a philosopher and a poet. This word, I find it once again in Hans Jonas, who notes that we are led not simply to manage the planet as good fathers should but to become stewards, he says, of nature, something we weren’t prepared for. And he adds, “a silent plea for sparing its integrity seems to issue from the threatened plenitude of the living world.”¹⁶ It seems to me that poetry, from Ronsard to Octavio Paz and passing by way of Yves Bonnefoy, René Char, and so on, has long made this silent plea audible and has prepared us for this role of stewardship. So there, having ended, I would like to thank you for this discussion and to make reference with some solemnity to your works, because I believe that these are important books and that they must be read and must be taken on vacation since that’s the period. Octavio Paz, well, you have published *Itinéraires* at Gallimard and, also at Gallimard, another book to which you made reference during our conversation, *La flamme double, Amour et Érotisme*.¹⁷ And Cornelius Castoriadis, your latest work is entitled *La Montée de l’insignifiance*, and it is published by Éditions du Seuil.

¹⁶*The Imperative of Responsibility*, p. 8. —T/E

¹⁷*The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism* (1993), trans. from the Spanish by Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995). The prior bibliographical reference to Paz’s book on Sade, supplied by the French Editors (see n. 8, above), thus becomes somewhat questionable. —T/E

Interview: Cornelius Castoriadis and Jean-Luc Donnet*

KATHERINE VON BULOW: I would like to ask Jean-Luc Donnet what memories he retains from his encounter with Cornelius Castoriadis, who at the time was known especially as a political thinker, back when Jacques Lacan and Lacanianism were beginning to take up a lot of room in analytic circles.

JEAN-LUC DONNET: What strikes me when I think back on how I met Cornelius Castoriadis is that he appeared in the psychiatric and psychoanalytic circles I then frequented as someone who had come from elsewhere. It was a shocking effect, a dazzling effect, too, to see the range he could cover in his experience as a man, in his political experience, as well as through his encyclopedic knowledge. For me, what was undoubtedly the most striking thing as I first read some of his texts is precisely this freedom, this acuity he had that gave him his bearings, his epistemological knowledge, and also this distance he had in how he looked at analysis; it was an outsider's gaze—at the time, I didn't exactly know what his position was as a practicing analyst—but also one that was very deeply informed and one that situates psychoanalysis straight off within a whole series of scientific fields and, of course, philosophical ones. . . . He stood beyond a fetishistic attitude toward science, beyond narrow specifics, and this was obviously something tremendous. As for the political dimension, it is especially, of course, through the crisis of May '68 and the tumult it stirred up in psychoanalytic institutions that Cornelius's political position interested me, that is to say, the investigation into the institution.

C.C.: Perhaps a word should be said about the reasons that brought me to psychoanalysis. I have always been interested in Freud's work, but at the outset it was as one work among others. And this interest was transformed into

*"Entretien Cornelius Castoriadis—Jean-Luc Donnet," *D*, pp. 37-57. Reprinted in *P-SID*, pp. 77-97.

passionate and privileged study at a moment when two processes came together: I am talking about a personal analysis, which I had begun as early as 1960, and, on the other hand—and the one is not alien to the other, in whatever way that might be taken—the thoroughgoing effort I had undertaken to call back into question Marx’s theoretical edifice, and in particular some of its aspects that at the time seemed to me to be unacceptable, such as Marx’s determinism and his rationalism. And the connection was made for me with my discovery, or rather my rediscovery, of the imagination and of the imaginary: the imagination on the level of the singular human being—what I call *the radical imagination*—and the imaginary on the social and historical level as that which founds, creates social institutions. And obviously the incompatibility of that with any Marxist or Marxian or Marxist-leaning [*marxisante*] position can be seen straightaway. That’s why I immersed myself in Freud’s work, I began frequenting some Parisian psychoanalytic circles, including Lacan’s seminar. . . . And one thing leading to another, I married Piera Aulagnier,¹ as you know, and lived with her for fifteen years. Then, I began to work as a psychoanalyst—which I still do. . . . And this interest in Freud has persisted, has continued, and has deepened since then; these past three years, my seminars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales have been devoted exclusively to the problem of the psyche.² This was an attempt, an ongoing

¹As Piera Castoriadis-Aulagnier, she published *La Violence de l’interprétation* (*The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement*, trans. Alan Sheridan [East Sussex, England and Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2001]) in 1975. In “The Construction of the World in Psychosis” (1993; now in [WIF](#)), Castoriadis offers an assessment of the work of his former and late wife, a cofounder of the French-Language Psychoanalytic Organization. This “Fourth Group” is distinct from both internationally recognized French psychoanalytic associations as well as from the Lacanian *École Freudienne de Paris*, from which Aulagnier and others separated in 1968-1969. —T/E

²Castoriadis began teaching at EHESS in November 1980; the “last three years” about which he speaks are 1992-1993, 1993-1994, and 1994-1995, after which he temporarily suspended his seminars [which were never

attempt—I'm in the process of writing it up—to reopen and reconstruct—these words are no doubt too pretentious—to offer as radical as possible a reexamination of the Freudian edifice, and in particular a reexamination of the imagination and the imaginary within it.

So, why did this wonderment continue? First of all because, in itself, the psyche “fills one with wonder.” As Heraclitus had already said, “You will not find the limits of the psyche, even if you travel all its paths. . . .”³ It is this side of psychical creativity that still dazzles me, this extraordinary poeticality as it appears in dreams, for example. That's a commonplace, yet one really has to keep close company with them, in the first person, if I may put it thus, in order to see the treasures of inventiveness and creativity dreams contain. Or even what are commonly perceived as much rarer psychical phenomena, but which are seen in analytic practice, particularly in psychosis: as creations, psychotic delusions are something fantastic. And indeed, you and André Green have spoken about it in your book on psychosis, since the very title, as you recall, is a phrase from a psychotic who said that he was “the child of the Id.”⁴ There is also, of course, the other side of the human psyche, that of repetition, without which there is no psychical life or any life at all and without which there is no analysis, of course.

So, there you have it. One could go on, because once one enters into it, one enters into the whole theory of the human being. . . . For, left to itself, could this psyche yield anything other than a feral child? Freud attempted an answer,

resumed before his death in 1997 —T/E].

³Heraclitus fragment 45 in Kathleen Freeman's *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 27; here, a literal translation of Castoridis's French has been provided. Selected by his friend Pierre Vidal-Naquet, this Heraclitean fragment appears in full in Greek and French (in a slightly different translated version) on a stele planted at his grave site; see: <http://simone-le-baron.blogspot.com/2010/03/en-plein-coeur-de-paris-un-olivier.html>. —T/E

⁴*L'Enfant de ça: psychanalyse d'un entretien, la psychose blanche* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973, 1991).

in *Totem and Taboo* and what followed. In my view at least, the unsatisfactory character of this attempt at a response perhaps comes especially from a will or desire on Freud's part to reduce to the psychical that which, in the very existence of the institution, is irreducible. And then there are other aspects, like, for example, what the psyche is from the philosophical standpoint. In fact, it was never spoken about; in philosophy, one doesn't know what the psyche is, or else one speaks about it all the time and, at the same time, one doesn't know what it is. And with Freud, obviously, there is an initial broad view of what I call his *discovery* of an ontological domain, a domain of being. Freud didn't label it that way, because he had a kind of extraordinary sense of prudery or fear when it came to philosophy, or an abhorrence of it, I don't know which, but he lets us see, with the psyche, a level of being that didn't exist before him: the psyche is not a thing and it's not a concept. And one has to give this sentence its full weight. What is it then?

J.-L.D.: My own discovery of psychoanalysis occurred as a psychiatrist, therefore from a much narrower perspective than yours, but what you have just said reminds me again why your texts on the radical imaginary so touched me at the time without me understanding all the implications thereof. For, what I was putting a finger on, with Freud and in the clinic, is indeed this inherent consistency of psychical reality. Yet at the time, I was broaching this psychical reality only as a psychiatric doctor and through Freud's work, examining it from the angle of its determinacy, since what this initial approach brought out, as a matter of fact, was meaning, sequences of meaning, where there might otherwise have been only disorder, in free association. But I then found myself stuck when faced with something aporetic (the juxtaposition between the inherent consistency of psychical reality and the emergence of a meaning). And the reversal you performed—referring to a kind of causality that goes against all Western metaphysics, against the “inherited philosophy”—with being as creation, therefore indeterminacy, allowed me to get beyond the aporia I had found myself facing. I note that now, even “classical” psychoanalysis conceives transference in terms of repetition, determinism, and at the same time in

terms of creation, sudden appearance [*surgissement*], emergence. And that's there in the depths of Freud's work, when he speaks of the "spontaneity of transference";⁵ it is certainly determined, but the institution of the treatment and the framework allow the phenomenon to arise [*surgisse*], emerge in its radically creative *ex nihilo*, as you say, and not *cum nihilo*, dimension.

K.v.B.: After this initial exchange, a layperson like myself would like to ask you a perhaps provocative question: Might one not suspect that there is a vague danger, for a poet, a writer, a musician, someone therefore living in a disordered imaginary world, someone living in permanent suffering and transgression, to be healed by analytic treatment to the point of seeing such creativity disappear? Isn't analysis a form of castration of the disordered imaginary?

C.C.: I will respond to this provocation with a super-provocation, if I may say so. For, I believe that, on the contrary, the task of analysis is to liberate the imagination. Not that the subject would do just anything whatsoever, that he would ignore every law, every limit, etc. Moreover, autonomy means: I impose a law on myself; *nomos* is law and autonomy is the law that comes from myself. Well, the social extension of that is another story. But what, ultimately, is psychical illness—and I'm not talking of psychosis now, or of neurosis, basically . . . ?

K.v.B.: . . . what used to be called *hysteria*. . . .

C.C.: Not only that, obsessional neurosis and then the new forms of psychical pathology we encounter today⁶—well, that's the blockage of the imagination; it's basically that. But yes it is! That is to say that there is an imaginary construct that is there and that is stopping everything else. That's how it is: woman or man, it's that and not something else; what

⁵In "Observations on Transference-Love (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis III)" (1915), *Standard Edition*, vol. 12, p. 162, Freud speaks of "the phenomenon of the element of spontaneity." —T/E

⁶On these "new forms of psychical pathology," see, e.g., "Psychoanalysis and Society II" (1984; now in [RTI\(TBS\)](#)). —T/E

must be done, it's just that and not something else. . . .

K.v.B.: Nonetheless, that challenges all artistic creation before psychoanalysis!

C.C.: But why would that be?

K.v.B.: In a way, the imaginary, which has played a role in art with the arrival of psychoanalysis, was not disturbed or limited or annihilated by the absence of psychoanalysis.

C.C.: Of course, but that's not what I mean. That's the exceptional case and the privilege of artists, of creative people great or small, etc. Now, what psychoanalysis also aims at is to restore to the subject another relation with his Unconscious. Permit me to express my thoughts in a formula and allow me to ask Jean-Luc what he thinks about it: What has been society's procedure for dealing with drives it couldn't accept or control? It has not been just to say (and that, moreover, is what, among other things, the Superego is): *Thou shalt not do that*; but it cannot say, for example: *Thou shalt never intentionally think about the death of your neighbor*. . . . Let's be honest about it: neurotic or not, we all think ten times a year, and with secret hopes, about the death of someone. And generally, the common, everyday individual feels guilty about that. I'm taking a very simple example. Now, I must know that that is what my psychical life is—that is to say, all at once libidinal drives, destructive drives, self-destructive drives, I must know that I cannot eradicate that, I cannot eliminate it, and that I must even let it come to the surface—which is what one tries to do in the course of treatment. But I must also know, of course, that between desiring something and doing it, between wishing something and acting so that it might come about, there is a distance, which is the distance from the diurnal world, the social world, the world of activity that is relatively conscious, reflective, and so on.

J.-L.D.: This is indeed a classic question you pose, and in a sense it's a false question. It's difficult to respond to it in a rapid and economical way, but the treatment itself appertains, in a certain way, to a practico-poietic form of activity, that is to say that it includes, properly speaking, an, if not artistic, in any case creative, dimension. When you

mention this problem, it's as if you were suggesting that artistic creation or any other creation could not have a form. Now, the whole problem of artistic creation is obviously that the creative movement would be bound up with and caught in a form that has to, in addition, be socially mediated. In a way, the same thing goes for free association on the couch. It's not some sort of disorganization or a "You have to think this" or "You desire that." It's a well-ordered kind of disorganization; it's organized, performed therefore with a view to having a freer, more autonomous, more creative type of reorganization. So, obviously, and this is classic, it's that there are quite a few people, creative people, for whom the capacity for artistic creation turns out to be connected with a certain equilibrium in the way they function and who naturally, when a point of inhibition has been touched, dread the repercussions of that, the redistribution of their psychical economy. But I have never seen someone's creative capacities disappear when they do their analysis.

K.v.B.: I am going to formulate the question in another way in order to start you off again, this time around the word *desire*.

C.C.: One could have spoken of Rainer Maria Rilke, who was repeatedly tempted by psychoanalysis but who feared losing thereby his sincerity.

K.v.B.: Jean-Paul Sartre is another famous case of someone who had an extremely disturbed relation with psychoanalysis.

C.C.: I would say that, at any rate, Sartre wouldn't have lost anything. . . .

K.v.B.: Between transference and taboos, won't the freedom of the subject, the subject's autonomy, be faced with frustration, with a sort of castration?

C.C.: I will say a few words, and Jean-Luc, who has a much more considerable amount of clinical experience than I do, will answer you at greater length. What fascinates me in the story of taboos, which go hand in hand with transference, is that what we have here, as a matter of fact, is a totally gratuitous taboo. It can be said that there are social reasons, though not biological ones (that would be an absurdity), for children not to sleep with their parents or brothers with

sisters. . . . In a sense, the same couldn't be said of psychoanalysis. If, during the analytic treatment, there is sexual acting out, the treatment is dead. No problem about that; the experiences are there {to confirm it} and the repercussions for the patient are very serious, that's for sure. And that can no longer be a psychoanalytic treatment.

K.v.B.: Could you explain why in more detail?

C.C.: It's precisely because the analyst is a distant, if not impersonal, instance of authority [*instance*] that she represents a projection surface onto which the patient can project all his phantasms, the good ones as well as the bad ones. She is the all-powerful object. To quote a phrase from Lacan that is worth retaining, she's "the subject-supposed-to-know"! And that can be seen in patients. But at the same time, perhaps, inasmuch as she deprives the patient of certain satisfactions, notably erotic ones, she can be a very bad figure, someone who is frustrating. In that sense, in both cases there is in transference a certain repetition of the child's relationship. But there is also, of course, something else. What happens, once the treatment is over? What one notices is that the completion of the treatment goes by way of a resolution of transference, that is to say that the subject drops the analyst, and he does so to a point that is almost inhuman.

J.-L.D.: I have a comparison in mind. A long time ago, I did some research on painless delivery, and I went around, at night, observing deliveries. I found myself caught up in the drama that could occur there, in that crisis situation. And the women turned toward me. I found myself in the position of helping them out psychologically, and sometimes an extremely intense bond was created. Well, once the baby was out, it was as if I no longer existed. Obstetricians are quite familiar with that. Obviously, analytic treatment, which Freud sometimes compared to a pregnancy, poses some problems that are certainly more complex. Cornelius has really insisted on the fact that what ruins every project of treatment when there is sexual acting out is precisely the fact that the transference is no longer analyzable. And the feat of treatment comes from the transference being analyzed and, in being analyzed, dissolving "sufficiently as to need"—I'm quoting

him here,⁷ and that's a phrase that counts a lot for me, because it allows one to exit from theoretical schemata. And this is expressed by the fact that, when one meets up again with patients, for example in psychoanalytic societies, one avoids establishing immediate relations with them; one respects, as it were, the waiting period so as to allow the transference to disappear little by little in life.

C.C.: If I might add a word, what we have here is a problem of particular importance, but it's one that doesn't have a particular importance for the analysis of subjects in general. For, either the analysis is performed and the transference is analyzed somehow or other, sufficiently as to need, or one doesn't succeed in analyzing it and one ends up with those interminable treatments, because the patient cannot bear being released from this bond and because the analyst is unable to help him extricate himself from it. But the point where this does indeed become serious, and it is one of the problems of psychoanalytic institutions, is that this distancing becomes much more difficult if the patient does an analysis in order to become an analyst himself, in which case the cathexis of the analyst as subject-supposed-to-know takes on a twofold background: these are not just emotional bonds but it's the one that has allowed me to become an analyst. . . .

K.v.B.: We come back to the delivery. . . .

C.C.: Yes, my being an analyst depends on her, therefore a bond is created. And if the analyst who has been the analyst of this patient doesn't know what to do about it, quite intolerable situations can be created that unsettle the life of analytic societies.

K.v.B.: Doesn't the subject always need a tutelary reference point outside himself? Can one, on one's own, impose a law on oneself?

J.-L.D.: That's really the basic ambiguity Freud detected in the agency [*l'instance*] he was led to sift out as the (ideal) Superego. The differentiation between Ego and Superego within the Ego expresses, first of all and together, the genesis of the Superego from the outside, through

⁷Actually, Castoriadis himself borrows this phrase from Aristotle. —T/E

internalization of parental authority, and the perpetuation of the conditions (dependency, need for love, threat of losing it) of this infantile origin, through the very process of internalization.

It's the work inherent to the psychical space of this differentiation, however, that allows the Ego to become autonomized ("to escape from the Superego's authority," according to Freud) by impersonalizing it. Yet the impulsive feeding of the Superego (particularly in aggression) ensures that it will constantly seek regression and retroprojection. So, what one sees, for example, is a sick person concealing from his doctor an aggravation of his condition because that person fears the doctor's displeasure more than his illness. That's what Freud has in mind when he emphasizes that few people are capable of completely desexualizing the figure of fate: religious projection is still attractive in one form or another. This brief digression is intended to give echo to your question about analytic institutions. The risk you underscore is quite real, and it sometimes happens that the analytic institution fails to recognize it. But hasn't such an institution then reproduced the institutional forms of its times? In what way would an extrainstitutional analyst be freer with regard to the heritage handed down by tradition? It seems to me that the conflict between subject and institution—in an institution's collective features, that is—is the only thing that is capable of sustaining a genuine process of autonomization. Autonomy as you conceive it has nothing to do with the abstract freedom of an abstract subject; instead, it's a permanent process of differentiation, which presupposes resemblance.

C.C.: I'm completely in agreement with what Jean-Luc has just said. And I'd say that your question is perhaps the most important one of those discussed so far, because it ties in with the problem of individual analysis and the political problem. To put it in Freudian language: Will humanity ever be able to exist without a need for a totem? That's what's at issue. Totems take on different forms. Historical accuracy about totemism matters little here. From this standpoint, Jehovah is a totem. Freud partially clears Jehovah on this score precisely because he thinks that Judaic law is one of the most impersonal kinds of law.

K.v.B.: A point on which he was gravely mistaken.

C.C.: That's another story. In my opinion, one of the flaws of the psychoanalytic way of conceiving this question, which is also related to the problem of interminable analyses, is that one looks solely at the libidinal side of the matter, that is to say, the fear of disapproval or of not being loved (God won't love you if you do this thing) by a figure that is a substitute for the father or mother figure (moreover, very often the mother figure), and one doesn't see the other side. The other side is death and mortality. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud links the roots of religion to the feeling of impotence in the face of a vast world. Science is replaced by psychology, since fate, the forces of nature, and so on are anthropomorphized. God loves me or doesn't love me; I will act so that he loves me as if he were a woman, a man, or a lover or a mistress. That's the response to the most important enigma of all, the enigma of death. Now, the ultimate castration, if one wishes to use that term, is understanding that there is no answer to this question, which is the question of death. That is to say that this involves a radical acceptance, by the subject, of his mortality *qua* personal figure and even *qua* historical figure. And that is what is very difficult for the individual patient in analysis, as well as for societies, to accept. A part of the disarray of contemporary society is this attempt, after the downfall of religion (I'm speaking now of the West), to replace this religious mythology with an immanent mythology, that of indefinite progress.

J.-L.D.: The religion of history. . . .

C.C.: The religion of history, whether it be in its Liberal form or its Marxist form. Instead, that is, of seeing that these are mythological constructs that don't rationally hold up. Why the devil must one increase the forces of production indefinitely? Thus, there is at present, with the collapse of both the ideology of progress and Marxist ideology, an enormous void, and that's what the void of meaning is, because humanity is giving up the meaning of death that was given by Christian religion for Western humanity, and it still is unable and perhaps won't ever be able—but that is, in my opinion, the most profound question of politics—to accept that we are mortal *qua* individuals as

well as *qua* civilization and that that doesn't abolish the meaning of our lives.

J.-L.D.: That doesn't abolish the meaning of our lives because, as B. Thom says, "Life is love of life,"⁸ and because that is enough and makes sense of it. That could be enough, but, as I recalled, rare are those who are capable of completely desexualizing the figure of fate. It was the same Sigmund Freud who asked Max Schur to give him one last injection because "it . . . makes no sense anymore."⁹ Desexualizing the figures of fate is not to desexualize life; it's no longer needing to confer a purpose abstractly upon it "through" the other's desire. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud wrote that one has to have the presumptuousness of man to believe that human life is supposed to have a purpose and that religion alone is in a position to underwrite it.¹⁰

That said, it's true that, starting from the moment when he is in a posture to make a list of all the methods by which man tries to make life bearable, Freud encounters the navel of the illusion in the inescapable character of value judgments "that always derive from our needs for happiness and are therefore in the service of our illusions."¹¹ Recognition of the structural connection between the pleasure principle and value judgments does indeed lead to positing the necessity of having recourse to illusion, which leads Freud into a complex and almost embarrassed dialogue with himself

⁸It is unclear who B. Thom might be in this context, but Emmanuel Lévinas says "Life is love of life" on p. 112 of *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961), 3rd printing (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991). —T/E

⁹Max Schur, *Freud: Living and Dying* (New York: International Universities Press, 1972), p. 529. —T/E

¹⁰*Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), *Standard Edition*, vol. 21, pp. 75-76. —T/E

¹¹In *ibid.*, p. 145, the English translation reads: "One thing only do I know for certain and that is that man's judgments of value follow directly his wishes for happiness—that, accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments." —T/E

in *The Future of an Illusion*, where the unconscious truth of the religious sphere proves comparable to the awful truth included in infantile sexual theories. In short, Freud encounters the side of his rationalism that leads to an impasse as regards its positivistic aspects. It opens up the dialectic of illusion/disillusionment, which, as Donald Winnicott will later show, conditions the impulsive (aggressive-erotic) introjection that validates one's relation to reality. It would be tempting to compare these developments with those involved in the conception of the radical imaginary, which I would like to connect to the concept of the "Id," despite the nonrepresentational character of the Freudian "Id."

K.v.B.: That's not the immanence of the law, but it's quite simply transmission via the child.

C.C.: What has always raised my hackles in Christianity is the idea of this God who would be able to love me, specifically me. What is this infinite Being that worries whether I've eaten my soup or not eaten my soup, whether I've masturbated or not masturbated, whether I've desired my mother or haven't desired my mother, who prohibits sodomy, and this, that, and the other thing? Are those objects worthy of a God? No. Why does He have all those attributes? Because He is there as a substitute precisely for the instance of authority that prohibits, but with the added bonus: "If you do this, He, God, will love you." And there we have the resexualization. Of course, this is unsublimated, though idealized, sexualization. That is to say that one isn't going to make love with God, but one will be in His bosom.

J.-L.D.: Nuns make love with God. . . .

C.C.: Let's leave aside the extreme cases and say that one will be in His bosom. Who has a bosom? That's mommy, right? So, I don't accept that idea. And I would like to say something more: it's true that in reality this is a very tough problem. As Jean-Luc said, this is the activity of meaning-creation, and for me, moreover, a whole reinterpretation of the philosophical idea of truth enters into it. For, truth is not correspondence; it's not adequation. It's the constant effort to break the closure within which we exist and to think something else and to think, not more, quantitatively speaking, but more profoundly, to think better. That

movement is truth. That's why there are some great philosophies that are true, even when they are false, and other philosophies that can be correct and that are of no interest.

J.-L.D.: That's rebinding bonds.

C.C.: It is indeed rebinding bonds. What's Freud's phrase to Schur when he asked him to deliver the fatal injection? "It . . . makes no sense anymore." So, until then, for Freud, life had a meaning. Why? Because he could work and think. And when constant pain takes over, he's in a disabled state and he says, "it makes no sense anymore."

But, to conclude, does one have to lean on a radical, ultimate, or positivist nationalism in order to grant the possibility of some kind of autonomy for individuals? I'll take a case that isn't crystal clear but that makes one think, all the same: it's that of ancient Greece, and in particular the democratic city. In the democratic city, there was a religion, but this religion was a civil matter. It's civil religion, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau would say.¹² There was no belief in the immortality of the soul. The first funerary inscriptions in which one sees the hope for another life and in which, in a certain way, one prays to the gods to favor the deceased date from after the end of the fifth century, that is to say, during the period of decadence. Until then, either there was no immortality or there was what Achilles says to Ulysses when the latter visited him in the land of the dead: "I would prefer to be the slave of a poor peasant on earth than be king of all the shades."¹³ Death is worse than life; there is no hope. That didn't keep the Greeks from creating things, in particular a democracy where it is clear that the law is posited by the people. That's certainly not a pure example, because there is what is left over from religiosity—a religiosity that doesn't have the same character. This may be seen in contemporary society. Even though there wasn't a total dechristianization with the French Revolution, modern democracies were

¹²*The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (Book 4, chapter 8). —T/E

¹³Paraphrase of *Odyssey* 11.486-91. —T/E

established on the principle of secularism [*laïcité*].

J.-L.D.: I want to return to ethics, to the specificity of the psychoanalytic position, a specificity that is fully expressed only in practice and inevitably experiences some interference as soon as there is an effort at theorization (though the treatment is never an “application” of the theory). This specificity follows from a way of listening that privileges especially the “eventfulness” of the psyche in the flow of its processes [*l'événementialité psychique dans son flux processuel*], in its contextualness, its dynamic. This privileging of the primary processes shunts to the background the contents of one's representations insofar as their validity can be assessed from the standpoint of secondary processes and argumentation of any sort.

In applied psychoanalysis, the use of such privileging allows one to interpret all the great constructs of the human mind (religions, metaphysics), up and including scientific systems, without examining them from the standpoint of their validity. All such systems can indeed appear then as projections onto the external world of certain endoperceptions of the operation of the psyche and can thus contribute to our knowledge of it: that is why, in echoing the choice of the term *metapsychology*, I have proposed that one speak of *metaoperation*.

It seems to me that it is important to situate correctly, at least at the outset, the specificity of this approach, which couldn't be aimed at “reducing” these systems any more, indeed, than one could try to “reduce” the other products of civilization, since there is no claim at all to substitute itself for them. Even if, in the last analysis, it proves untenable, this standpoint corresponds to psychoanalysis's refusal to produce a “world view.”

Thus, in *Moses and Monotheism*, when Freud speaks of Christianity as a “regression” to polytheism and to the figurative, as well as progress toward admission of the murder of the father (a rewarded admission), he is making reference to how the psyche operates without regression or progression

taking on a normative value.¹⁴ On the other hand, it is indispensable for him, according to his own logic, to posit the material-historical reality of the murder of the dominant male in the primal horde;¹⁵ there is a need to construct a myth—be it a scientific one—in order to approach the unknown.

K.v.B.: And the unknown is . . . ?

C.C.: The unknown is the horizon. It's the myth; it's the groundless [*le sans-fond*].

K.v.B.: The groundless, the much-talked-about *Ur-* of German philosophy.

C.C.: The *Ur-*, which Freud uses very often.¹⁶

¹⁴*Moses and Monotheism* (1939), in *Standard Edition*, vol. 23, p. 88. —T/E

¹⁵See, e.g., *ibid.*, p. 131, where Freud summarizes his argument from *Totem and Taboo* (1912). —T/E

¹⁶In what seems like a gross transcription error, the text has *Uhr* (a noun meaning clock, timepiece, or hour in German), instead of the obvious *Ur-* (the German prefix equivalent to *proto-*, denoting source, origin, primitive), as in Freud's use of the term *Urhorde* (primal horde). —T/E

Interview: Cornelius Castoriadis and Francisco Varela*

KATHARINA VON BULOW: I would like, first of all, to ask Francisco Varela how he discovered Cornelius Castoriadis, why he became interested in him, and what purpose Castoriadis “serves” in his own work. . . .

FRANCISCO VARELA: We’ve known each other for a number of years, more than fifteen years, certainly. The connections between our respective works are of various kinds, and they have, historically speaking, evolved and changed. At the start, I believe that what interested me in reading his work,¹ and similarly what Corneille found in my writings, is that we were both reflecting on the question of autonomy; for me, it was rather on the side of the living being, since I am a biologist, and for him it was on the side the imaginary and the social sphere. But these are problematics that obviously refer to each other.

K.v.B.: And the psychoanalytic aspect, too?

F.V.: It’s not the psychoanalyst that I’ve read, but rather the theorist of society and the thinker of the imaginary. For me, it’s not the same thing.

K.v.B.: And for your part, Cornelius, what interested you in Francisco Varela’s work?

C.C.: I had already been working for quite some time on the question of autonomy, which initially had, in my writings, a political signification. This was a political project for an autonomous society made by autonomous individuals—a project that is still mine, moreover. And starting at a certain moment, when I began to criticize Marx and to reject his conception of history, it quickly became apparent to me that history and the institution of society were the work of an instituting imaginary, a radical collective imaginary, parallel

*“Entretien Cornelius Castoriadis—Francisco Varela,” *D*, pp. 59-82. Reprinted in *P-SID*, pp. 99-122.

¹An allusion to *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975; [trans. 1987](#)).

to the radical creative imagination of the individual, and that therefore each society itself creates itself and, in itself creating itself, creates a proper world, a world of its own. And that is already there as early as 1964-1965, in the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*,² and I elaborated on it a great deal in the second of half of the book, which was published in 1975. When I discovered Francisco's work, especially that tremendous book I first read in English, *Principles of Biological Autonomy*,³ which was translated into French under the title *Autonomie et Connaissance*⁴—a revised version, moreover, and improved from the conceptual standpoint, but slightly abridged in its mathematical part. I discovered immediately an amazing kinship: since 1973, Francisco's work, like that of another Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana,⁵ with whom I was until then unfamiliar, has revolved around the same problematic as the one on which I was reflecting: How can a unity that I call, in my old philosophical terms, a *being-for-itself* appear; how can it emerge? (This last term doesn't suit me, but there will no doubt be further discussion on that.) How can a "being-for-itself"—that is to say, a living being (which, in a sense, is self-centered, that is to say, it lives its preservation, its

²The first part, "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory," was first published as a five-part series in the final issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. —T/E

³A work Castoriadis was the first to review, as soon as it appeared in English, in *Le Débat*, XXX (1982). [The full, correct reference is: "Francisco Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy*" (review), *Le Débat*, 1 (May 1980): 126-27. *Le Débat* certainly didn't published 30 issues in its first two years of existence, and *Principles* was published in 1979, the year before Castoriadis agreed to publish this special review in the very first issue of the historian Pierre Nora's new journal. What appears to be the roman numeral for 30 ("XXX") may instead have been temporary filler the unnamed French Editors never got around to completing. See now the translation of Castoriadis's Varela review in Part Five of the present tome. —T/E]

⁴Paris: Le Seuil, 1989 (subtitled *Essai sur le vivant*).

⁵Maturana and Varela, *De Máquinas y Seres Vivos: Una teoría sobre la organización biológica*. (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1973).

reproduction) as well as a psychical being or a social being (since every society aims at its self-preservation, its self-reproduction) emerge and in what does its specificity consist? And it's here that Maturana and Francisco had put forth the concept of the living organism's autonomy, a concept that is elaborated on to a tremendous extent in *Autonomie et Connaissance*. And it is radically opposed to the idea that one could account for living organisms solely on the basis of some external actions. Likewise are the principles Francisco formulated, and which I completely approve of and make use of myself, concerning cognitive closure and informational closure opposed to such an idea.

What, in short, does that mean for our listeners? I can say a word about that, and you'll correct me if I haven't understood you well. In any case, and since I now use much more the notion of *closure*, it's that, for a for-itself, a psychical subject therefore, or a living being, or a society, there is creation of a proper world—*Eigenwelt* one would say in German—and it's that nothing can enter into this proper world unless it is transformed in accordance with the principles of that world. That's rather easy to understand. Let's take the example of the living being: it is sensitive to a certain category of external shocks, but those shocks are never presented to it as "they are." Thus, higher living beings have a perception of colors, but, to use a radical, though completely correct, expression, the world of the physicist has no colors; it has wavelengths. Color is a quality that appears with certain categories of living beings, ones that do not perceive light vibrations as such, as electromagnetic vibrations, but perceive blue, red, and so on. Furthermore, and this is a point on which Francisco, too, has insisted, not only is there this transformation of what Freud quite rightly called *masses of energy*, masses of matter in movement, into qualities for the subject,⁶ but there is also the obvious fact that there is never a one-to-one correspondence. That is to say, for example, that the perception of color is always a function of a perceptual context—and I'll also add, moreover, a subjective one, but

⁶In the 1895 *Project For A Scientific Psychology*; see [WIF](#), p. 253. —T/E

that's another story. . . . So, there's that. And the same thing is true in one's psychical system. That's my domain rather than Francisco's, but let's take, if you don't mind, an extreme case: a paranoid person will interpret every movement as being aimed at destroying him or persecuting him. For example, this microphone you are holding in front of me is emitting at this moment some unpleasant smells that are clearly aimed at upsetting my nervous system. . . . He makes everything enter back into his system of interpretation. The same thing goes for a society, where such closure is more explicitly apparent in closed societies, for example, primitive or traditional ones. For someone with a true Hebraic mentality, an event as catastrophic as the Holocaust will be interpreted as an additional test imposed on the Jewish people, and on this people alone, which proves its election. The Holocaust will enter into the interpretative system that is the proper world of this Jewish imaginary universe. So, it's especially around these ideas that I met up with Francisco, and I even have used him . . .

F.V.: Here one would have to mention the Cerisy Colloquium on self-organization.⁷ . . . For my part, the motivation for this kind of reflection didn't come at all from Corneille's rather psychoanalytic side or from him as a social thinker. On the terrain of autonomy, I remained a biologist. Why? Because there was at the origin of this investigation into autopoiesis, which means self-construction, self-production . . .

C.C.: . . . or self-creation . . .

F.V.: . . . or self-creation, yes; this is a Greek neologism invented to designate what Corneille has just said a word about. There thus was, at the time this theme was being worked on, a desire to oppose what was, in the 1970s, the dominant way of thinking, which instead saw in the living

⁷*L'Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*, ed. Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983). [On June 13, 1981, during this colloquium, Castoriadis, René Girard, and others engaged in a discussion on "contingency in human affairs" that was published as "La contingence dans les affaires humaines. Débat Cornelius Castoriadis-René Girard," *ibid.*, pp. 282-301. —T/E]

being a system that gathered information, that picked up information, the shocks coming from the outside so that they would then have to be handled in a certain unitary way. This model, which is based on the metaphor of the computer, seemed to us to be completely unsatisfactory. But it really must be understood that we were truly moving against the current at the time and were rather isolated. Today . . .

C.C.: . . . we still more or less are so, no?

F.V.: In my opinion, things have evolved a great deal, and this model for thinking the living being, this excessive representationalism, is anyhow now much weaker. This concept of self-production or self-creation or autopoiesis was thus forged in order to express this fact, which is based on the organism's own biology, on biochemistry and cellular life. Why? Because—and this is for me the second important point—it's a gesture that is at the origin, at the very root, of life. One doesn't even necessarily have to think it at the level of mammals, human beings, or social beings: life *qua* self-constituting process already contains this distinctive characteristic of a for-itself, as Corneille would say, or of being *source of*—whence emerges the imaginary, which is, as a matter of fact, the capacity to give meaning to what are but masses of physical objects. This rootedness of meaning in the origin of life is the novel aspect of this concept of autonomy, of autopoiesis. Whence, I believe, its popularity, at least a certain success, in the years that followed. And what I have just said—viz., that there is an excess of the imaginary that comes from this self-construction of the living being—is one of the things I learned while reading Corneille. And I would never have dared to speak of the imaginary as being at life's origin had I not had at my disposal this sort of continuity between the biological phenomena at life's origin and the social domain. I am really saying *continuity*; I am not saying *identity*.

K.v.B.: In your latest book,⁸ Francisco, you

⁸*L'Inscription corporelle de l'esprit*, written in collaboration with Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch (Paris: Le Seuil, 1993). [In English: *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). —T/E]

nevertheless speak of philosophy at the very beginning; you mention the importance of phenomenology; you mention Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, observing that they, at least, placed the body at the beginning of their philosophy, the beginning of their reflection on perception, the imaginary, the constitution of the subject, etc., but that, for you, what isn't pertinent in philosophy is precisely the fact that we're dealing with a process that pertains to biology, therefore to a science, and that everything that has been thought about the mind, the soul, psychoanalysis, etc. seems to be called into question through this scientific approach.

F.V.: But no, not at all! What I am trying to say in my book is, in a certain way, the opposite. But in the following sense. To open a first parenthesis, I had written *The Embodied Mind* almost twenty years after this theorization of autopoiesis: many things have happened in the interim, and you cannot neglect the entire way in which my work has evolved. But above all, what is the fundamental goal of this reflection in *The Embodied Mind*? It's to raise a question that to me seems still very badly thought out in the sciences that deal with thought or cognitive and mental phenomena. And here I'm taking aim at neuroscience, linguistics, what is roughly called *cognitive science*.⁹ The open question is the abyss that exists between the mechanisms being proposed by

⁹See Varela, *Introduction aux sciences cognitives* (Le Seuil, 1999). [Actually, this book was edited by Daniel Andler; it first appeared from Gallimard (not Paris's Éditions du Seuil) in 1992 (not 1999), was reprinted the next year, and includes just one chapter from Varela: "Le système immunitaire: un 'soi' cognitif autonome," pp. 489-509. (A "new and enlarged" edition of Adler's collected volume appeared in 2004, also from Gallimard, with Varela's text appearing on pp. 585-605.) This chapter had been "translated from the English," the original text being "Immuknowledge: Learning Mechanisms of Somatic Individuation," in John Brockman, ed. *Doing Science* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1991), pp. 237-57, according to the extensive bibliography available on [a web page devoted to Varela's life and work](#). *Invitation aux sciences cognitives* (that is, *Invitation* and not *Introduction*) was the second edition of *Connaître: Les Sciences cognitives, tendances et perspectives* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988); it, too, was published by Seuil, but in 1996, not 1999. —T/E]

the sciences and the lived experience embodied in every individual. Without a clarification of the transition and the complication between these two poles, all efforts at a shared reflection on the autonomy of the living being and the social sphere can remain but a dead letter. It's here that phenomenology, in its Merleau-Pontean tradition, is of great help.

C.C.: I am in complete agreement with what you have just said. I would simply like to put forward a number of points. And first of all, what is striking when one sees the trend that is called *cognitivism*, and even *connectionism*, is that—as usual, I'm being blunt!—those people are idealists without knowing it. These positivists are idealists who don't know that that's what they are. What, for them, is a human being? It's a computational device, a system that calculates. That's the model of the computer: the current arrives, a contact is made or not made, and it's 0 or 1, No or Yes; and the final result is, quite summarily and briefly speaking, a huge accumulation of Yeses and Noes, 0s and 1s. Now, the essential thing about the human being, and what also plays a huge role in cognition, isn't to be found there. One cannot consider cognitive activities in detachment from other elements that are wholly decisive. As a psychoanalyst, I would say, first, that there is a psychical flux that is a flux of representations. And these are representations, not in the sense of cognitivism, that is to say, photographs I would have within myself of what happens on the outside, and that would be more or less adequate; that's an image that is completely false and concocted, even if philosophers have partaken of it for a long time. Instead, it's representation in the sense that there is always an image of the world, which is not an image in the sense of a carbon copy, but a creation of a world that is imaginary at each moment I speak, and imaginary in the strong sense of the term, which doesn't mean *fictive*. And this representation is always accompanied by two other vectors, an affective vector and a vector I'd call *intentional* in the classical sense of the term, that is to say, desirous, if one is speaking of human beings. To put it briefly, all ideas about the possibility of a computer replacing human thought, beyond calculations, beyond computation, can be clarified by

posing a question: Will there one day be a computer that, on its own and without instructions, will have sufficient passion for the question of the infinity of prime numbers or for the proof of the much-talked-about Last Theorem of Fermat to undertake an investigation into those problems?¹⁰ For my part, I say *No!* I say so because there, one must have a passion for the thing. And in addition, one must have an orientation toward investigation that cannot be given through mere calculation. Passion is on the order of the affect, and it is mixed with a desire to know, to be familiar with. . . . That's a first aspect, one which, I believe, is very important. A second aspect, which I gladly saw is really being considered in Francisco's latest book, is of course the social component. One cannot speak of a human machine, even if it is not completely a machine, or of an Ego that would operate all alone. When I operate, and this is already true in the case in perception, some social schemata are involved, language is involved, and the separation of objects is something I would have learned little by little in accordance with the way the world created by my society is organized. . . . This social component is in no way secondary; it is quite essential.

The third point—and here I believe that we are smack in the middle of the ocean of our ignorance—is, as a matter of fact, one's embodiment. And that, too, is a new approach I've been trying to work out for the past one or two years as concerns the Freudian Unconscious. What's at issue here? Freud speaks, of course, of drives, saying that they are the frontier between the psychical and the somatic,¹¹ but he does not envisage the dimension whereby the Unconscious would be very deeply anchored in the body, independent even of the fact that there would or would not be drives. This last expression is ill formulated because there always is, according precisely to what I have just said, a “tending toward,” a drive

¹⁰Andrew Wiles and Richard Taylor's proof of Fermat's Last Theorem (1637) was published in May 1995, six months before the present interview was conducted. —T/E

¹¹*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *Standard Edition*, vol. 7, p.168; see [WIF](#), pp. 253 and 266-67. —T/E

on the part of living organisms. . . . But anyhow, there is something other than the canonical drives Freud explored; there is a frontier that is semipermeable in both directions between the body and the soul. This way of distinguishing body and soul is at once inevitable and false: there is no soul without a body, but there is no body without a soul; as Aristotle said, Socrates' corpse is no longer Socrates; his soul is no longer there; Socrates is no more, it's over. Beneath the infrastructure of the Freudian Unconscious, therefore, there would be, in my opinion, some digging to be done in order to find either a rootedness—perhaps the word is ill chosen—or at least a profound and certainly *sui generis* binding between the biological sphere and the human psychical sphere.

F.V.: There is, in what you have just said, one aspect on which we are clearly and profoundly in agreement: the question of this rootedness of the imaginary, of the connection with corporeality. For me, too, this question is wide open: I have no answer to offer. But I would not confuse this question with the description you give of the computational model in cognitive science, which lacks emotions, drives. Personally, I can perfectly well envision the construction, the perfection, through the new cognitive schools of thought, of technical objects that would rightly be full of emotion. They would then have to be conceived on a noncomputational model—that of a dynamic system, for example, one that indissolubly integrates history and its constraints, such that intentionality and desire would appear for these objects. They would then perhaps not have a passion for Fermat's Last Theorem, but perhaps they will have a passion for other things. . . . This is, in any case, all that is at issue in the new robotics: having robots that desire to do "good robot jobs." This is an issue that exists today. At least, the question has been posed.

C.C.: Do you think that this task is achievable?

F.V.: In principle, yes.

C.C.: Beyond trivialities, I mean.

F.V.: Certainly, beyond trivialities. There remains an empirical problem, of course, but in principle I don't see that it would be impossible to have machines or technical objects where the sphere of drives or the emotional sphere is bound to the cognitive sphere in a way that is, I'm not saying

identical, but analogous to that of the living being. But that doesn't answer at all the second part of the question you raised, which is precisely the problem of the specificity of the mode of human experience and what that means for man. It's not the same thing.

C.C.: No, of course not.

F.V.: And it's true that today we have an increasing amount of proof that it is possible to theorize the emotional sphere in a way that would not be a sort of centrifugal residue of true knowledge, which would be merely abstract and logical. And at present, we have at our disposal models in which precisely the sphere of drives, the rational sphere, and the historical sphere are completely blended together. It's a bit like what I am trying to designate in what is (still!) a neologism: the *enactive*, the *enactive* view of knowledge. This word is for me like a flag used to signal the possibility of seeing the work to be done. It remains to be known whether it is completely achievable or not.

K.v.B.: Can you enlighten the lay listener a bit?

F.V.: You are right to ask for a few words of explanation.¹² *Enactive* is not a neologism of Greek origin; it's a derivation from the English word *enaction*, which designates the gestures that accompany the effort to make something emerge. For example, one says that President Clinton *enacted* his economic program; he got it going. We're talking about a gesture, a task, and it's also a conception and a history, too; all that goes together in the word *enaction*. To take another example, it will be said that one has *enacted* a theatrical play.

K.v.B.: But if man is already so complicated that even the philosopher, the sociologist, the psychoanalyst, the biologist, the mathematician, and all the scientists and philosophers since Aristotle have not succeeded in explaining him, why must one invent a robot, too?

C.C.: But here, the answer's easy: Robots are built as an attempt at understanding. At the start, these were horribly oversimplified models. Now, they're more complex and no

¹²See the definition of this concept in *The Embodied Mind*, pp. 207ff.

doubt will become increasingly complex. . . . Let it be said in passing, the first models, as Francisco emphasizes, were connected through the computer architecture of the time, which was called *Von Neumann architecture*. All operations were sequential: before responding to question B, question A had to be answered, and before question A, question W had to be answered . . . whereas now, thanks to “vector” architecture, one can envision—and one has already partially achieved, moreover—what is called *parallel processing*, where relatively independent centers—though not totally independent ones, or else it would no longer be a computer—can accomplish certain tasks while other centers accomplish other tasks, and so on. And the machine is made in such a way that the results converge in the fulfillment of one task.

And yet, I believe, the problem is nonetheless more difficult than that, because the question is not whether one will one day manufacture a computer that will know how to simulate the passions, but whether one will ever be able to formalize what we know as desires and passions and, especially, imagination. And here, it seems to me that there is a contradiction in terms. Why? Because every formalization is nonetheless, as I call it, *identitary*: starting from a certain number of axioms, it constructs, with a determinate syntax and a determinate semantics, a series of propositions or, let us say, machine operations. Now, human psychical and social life isn’t identitary; it’s magmatic: it cannot be separated into sets that are well-constructed, well-defined, and so on. It is a totality in which everything interferes, without one being able to say simply that everything interferes with everything, since there is the localizable, there are partial sets, and so on. And what is characteristic of both the social imaginary and the radical imagination of the subject as well as the theoretical imagination is for example, in the strictly cognitive domain, the capacity to create new axioms, in the most abstract sense of the term and not necessarily in the mathematical sense, new bases. Suddenly, a new basis is created, one that, precisely because it is of this type, cannot be grounded; it can perhaps be justified, if it’s a matter of a rational system, but it cannot be grounded, because it’s a creation. And a creation is neither deducible nor producible: that’s the true meaning of

the new. If it is deducible and producible, it isn't new; it exists potentially within the prior system.

F.V.: Well, yes, absolutely.

C.C.: And that, therefore, is the genuine question. The idea that one might simulate creation seems to me to be a contradiction in terms. At present, our friend Henri Atlan, for example, is talking about connected networks of automata while saying that there is a "random emergence of meaning." I am not discussing to what extent that is true or not, but I would say that positive scientists, when all is said and done, can no longer do anything but call *random* what is a creation. As a creation is, by definition, neither deducible nor producible, it is perceived as something that appears in radically random fashion. What is wrong in this idea is that the word *random* [*aléatoire*] makes sense mathematically (or else it's just a word) only for a predetermined set of possibilities. Now, precisely the proper characteristic of creation is to make possibilities arise that didn't exist beforehand. The first living cell that emerged created, in a sense, the possibilities of life, which previously existed only in a completely empty and sophistic fashion.

F.V.: I am in perfect agreement that that is indeed the profound question: At what point can one think creation, or at least give a description of it? But where I'm no longer in agreement with Corneille is apropos of what he rightly calls *identitary logic*. And there, as he very well knows, one is touching on a profound, even ultraprofound, debate, one that is at the heart of the modern sciences and modern mathematics: Is this identitary logic the right basis, the right foundation? Now, so long as this proof has not been provided, and, as far as I know, that proof isn't there yet, I don't feel I am limited to *two options*: either identitary logic, where I am therefore absolutely forced to deduce from first principles and therefore from an already predetermined set, or recourse to this randomness whose inadequacy you've just brought out. For, there is a radically different notion, as introduced in the effort to theorize dynamic systems and so-called nonlinear mathematics, that is the notion of *emergence*, which is not random since, precisely, it is relatively formalizable but not formalizable in the "ensemblistic-identitary" sense *qua*

deducible but *qua* conditions of the possibility of emergence. So, to take up again the example you just mentioned of the first living cell, it's true that before the origin of life there was a whole heap of possibilities that didn't exist and that, suddenly, it inaugurated. But how did it inaugurate them? It could be said, from the standpoint of nonlinear mathematics, that there was a heap of conditions of possibility, then this phenomenon of self-constitution arose, which is itself highly nonlinear or, at least, noncalculable, since it pertains in part to nonlinearity. But at the same time, it isn't random, since I can describe the basic processes that have to be put into action in order that there might be autopoiesis. I can reproduce them in the laboratory, in particular, and make autopoieses anew and in repeated fashion, possibly inventing a style of "implementing" life that is different from the kinds that have taken place on Earth. This is, in my opinion, if not a proof, at least a good argument in favor of this option that is based neither on randomness nor on the calculable, but which is precisely this possibility of creation *qua* conditions of possibility of emergence through nonlinear systems.

C.C.: We are perhaps arriving at the heart of the problem, where there is an ultimately radical philosophical choice [*option*]. . . . First of all, I don't like this term *emergence*, which gives one the impression that there is a property that emerges overall [*dans le global*] that is not contained in the parts. But it's not only that. When the life of higher living organisms makes color, for example, appear, no one, unless he's crazy, can qualify this phenomenon as an illusion, a secondary quality, and so on. We live in a world of colors, which we create, but which we don't create in a completely arbitrary way, because it corresponds to something, shocks we receive from the outside world. And this creation couldn't be reduced to a mere gathering of many local things. It's precisely the fact that numerous objects and their local connections are conditions that lead us to the following idea, which in my opinion is quite elementary but which, amazingly, is forgotten in this discussion—that is, the distinction between the necessary conditions and the sufficient conditions. In order for the Greeks to have created the *polis*, democracy, philosophy, the pursuit of proof, and so

on, there is a host, an infinity, of necessary conditions—including, already, the Big Bang, galaxies, the formation of the solar system, the emergence of life, Some of these are trivial, and it would be a bunch of idle chatter to lay emphasis on them. Others are not so: thus, Greek mythology, which is a necessary condition, is not sufficient; there is a kinship of signification, but something else was required in order to have created the *polis* and the rest. Now, as a matter of fact, creation has never taken place *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*; *qua* form, it is *ex nihilo*. That's the snag, and that's why I think that nonlinear mathematics can at best merely furnish an *ex post* description of the thing. . . . This is a bit what René Thom was trying to do with catastrophe theory, too.¹³

F.V.: That's one way of looking at things, but it's not the only one. And here I find you are judging in advance the jury's verdict. . . .

K.v.B.: Excuse me, but I don't understand. . . .

F.V.: It's a question of whether nonlinear mathematics is always *post factum*. . . .

C.C.: . . . therefore descriptive

F.V.: . . . yes, whether it is descriptive or not. And it's too soon to say. I would like to lay emphasis on this problem in the following way. A brief preliminary parenthesis: on the word *emergence*, I'm in agreement with you. I don't like it much either; it's woolly. . . . A good term would have to be invented. But what I mean by the word *emergence* is precisely this inseparability between the global nature of a phenomenon, which therefore depends on all the parts, and the specificity of each locality. That's what is rich.

C.C.: Of course.

F.V.: And therefore, for example in the case of the origin of life, of autopoiesis, I cannot separate out the particular properties of nucleic acids, proteins, and lipids that participate in the constitution of cells any more than I can separate out the global aspects of this constitution, for

¹³René Thom, *Prédire n'est pas expliquer*, 2nd rev and corr. ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1993). [New ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 2009). —T/E]

example, the fact that there is a boundary, and therefore some conditions for diffusion that are not, by definition, local but global. And here, as one can see, the local and the global go hand in hand. And it's this inseparability that is the symptom, precisely, of nonlinearity. That word perhaps doesn't fit either, but that's what I'm designating. And in the case of autopoiesis, one has a particularly eloquent example of something I can nevertheless offer as a descriptive framework that is *pre factum*. Why? Because this *pre factum* description allows me to reconstitute it in the laboratory; it's not just *post factum*. That said, we're still too much in the prehistory of these theoretical tools to know whether they might allow us to go further. So, you see, I remain prudent, but at the same time I am not as radical as you, who are saying that it's always *post factum*. For, we have examples in which this description is "productive," in the sense that it sets up the generative conditions, after which the emergence of the phenomenon is neither a surprise nor an *a posteriori* explanation. And neither is it some kind of calculation that would allow me to know exactly what is going to happen.

C.C.: Yes, agreed. . . .

K.v.B.: A decision has to be made, because unfortunately time is running out. . . .

F.V.: That's a shame . . .

K.v.B.: . . . And so I would like to ask you a very stupid question, but one that, perhaps, is going to clarify the stakes of our discussion a bit: What do both of you hope for from your investigations, for the future of society? You, for example, Cornelius, at the end of that article that gives a bit your autobiographical intellectual trajectory, published in your latest book,¹⁴ you end, after a severe critique of Marxism, with a vision that I would qualify as relatively utopian, that of a society to come, therefore with this idea that there nevertheless will one day be a new man, an autonomous man, an autonomous society in which the subject will be capable of escaping from all the constraints of a society that makes him suffer, and against which we have fought. I

¹⁴"Done and To Be Done" (1989; in [CR](#)).

presume that you, too, Francisco, are a biologist who is “human” enough to make the distinction between an entirely scientific society and a human society. So, in your work what do you hope for, for society?

C.C.: It’s perhaps up to Francisco to answer first. . . .

F.V.: Your question catches me a bit unawares, because I confess quite naively to you that my motivation pertains to what Corneille has analyzed in one of his latest articles;¹⁵ it’s epistemological passion, the desire to know. And while the social consequences of what I do don’t leave me indifferent—how could they ever?—that’s not why I work. I let myself go in this eroticism of knowledge and understanding. And then, obviously, I try to give to my fellow citizens some things I deem important. But it’s rather as a citizen that I am a political man, which I have always been. I also have a passion for everything that happens around me, but not as a biologist. As a biologist, what drives me, what really gets me going inside, is this epistemic drive. I can’t really tell you anything else. That’s perhaps not very good for the political sphere, but I want to be sincere; that’s what’s true for me.

K.v.B.: I really like this *eroticism of knowledge*. What about you, Cornelius?

C.C.: Here, Francisco is . . . Platonic! As for me, I’m a bit more divided than Francisco—although I don’t feel divided. I, too, have, to the best of my ability, this eros of knowledge; I can stay up all night in order to understand a theorem, to study a new book on physics—as much as I might understand it—or quite simply to read a history book. But at the same time, I feel deeply concerned about the fate of the society in which I live. And for me, the two things are not unrelated; there is, in a certain sense of the term, a relation between the two of them. But I don’t think that one could deduce a politics from a philosophy or from some scientific knowledge [*d’un savoir*]. For, there is, here again, an ultimate decision to be made. . . . Thus, in contemporary scientific knowledge, there is a great divide between, on the one hand,

¹⁵“Passion and Knowledge” (1992; in [FT\(P&K\)](#)).

those for whom this whole fantastic luxuriance of forms being has created, from galaxies to flowers all the way up to musicians' symphonies, can be reduced, can be boiled down to various combinatories of a form or of a few very simple forms (this is the case with the neurophysiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, for example, in France); and, on the other hand, the idea that being is creation, that being's property is to give rise to new forms. Well, in what sense does that tie in with politics? I think quite simply that the latter philosophical choice liberates us to think politics; it liberates us from social forms of determinism, from the idea that one could never do otherwise, that history will never be able to exit from this circle within which it is constantly turning: oppression, a bit of freedom, re-oppression, and so on. It affirms that nothing, in scientific knowledge, is opposed to the idea that we will be able one day to create a society in which autonomous human beings will be capable collectively of governing themselves in an autonomous way. From this standpoint, it's not a deduction from the philosophical sphere heading in the direction of the political sphere, yet it involves, nonetheless, a certain complementarity. And here, I believe that Francisco will probably be in agreement.

F.V.: Completely in agreement, even. But grant me that you are reflecting at the social level in a more explicit way than I do. And the possibly deducible relation between what I do at the levels of living beings and mathematics and politics is less direct. I therefore place more confidence in my intuition as a citizen than in my intuition as a scientist when it comes to my political commitments—even if they are, of course, things that are tied together in multiple ways.¹⁶ But the way you've phrased your question, I was under the impression that you were expecting from me something like a finished product that would have found its place, so to speak, in some kind of utopia, some kind of ideal world. And I obviously have nothing like that to offer to you.

¹⁶See *Ethical Know-how: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Interview: Cornelius Castoriadis and Alain Connes*

C.C.: I'm very happy that you agreed to come to this program. And that is so for at least two reasons. First, although I am not a mathematician, I have always been attracted by mathematics, in fact since I was an adolescent, and I continue to marvel at it today. So, for me to meet a major mathematician is a bit like marveling before the Chartres Cathedral and meeting a "builder" who explains to you how it was constructed. And second, in reading the book you wrote with Jean-Pierre Changeux, *Matière à pensée* (Matter for thought)¹—a quite lovely title, indeed—I noticed that we have positions that are very close as concerns the essence of mathematics, what doing mathematics means, what is presupposed, what it consists in, And finally, there is this mystery of the possible and even, in my view, almost certain encounter between mathematical constructs and something that we of course rediscover, recreate, but that also constrains us like an objective reality, which is ideal certainly, but with a marvelous internal coherency, an extraordinary richness in the extraordinary way it unfolds.

To tell you the truth, I don't know what subject to question you about: the topics are so numerous, but the need to be understood by every "educated person" rules out many of them. So, perhaps we could begin with the famous question of "thinking" machines. I'm first going to tell you what I think about it, then we'll see if we are in agreement or not. Such machines are certainly a tremendous human creation and do many things man is incapable of doing. But for the time being at least, they are incapable of operations that are within the reach of a . . . an earthworm, whose cells, for example, know how to recognize the stereochemical forms of the

*"Entretien Cornelius Castoriadis—Alain Connes," *D*, pp. 83-110. Reprinted in *P-SID*, pp. 123-50.

¹Paris: Odile Jacob, 1989; new ed. 1992. [Reprinted in 2008. —T/E]

molecules they are to accept, reject, and elaborate. One therefore has to take those limits into account, knowing all along that they are certainly temporary, or at least can be pushed back. But up to what point? What can be said *a priori* about such limits? In my view, there could never be a genuine thinking machine. And in order to justify this statement, I'll take up the felicitous distinction you make in your discussion with Jean-Pierre Changeux about the three stages of work of the mathematician. There's a first stage, on which everyone will agree: calculations, algorithms, can, following Church's famous thesis on mathematical logic, be entrusted to a machine, to what is called a universal Turing machine—with some obvious reservations, since someone has to construct this machine, give it a program and some tasks to resolve (the machine doesn't invent any task to be resolved or even any of the methods). This allows me to go straightaway to the third stage, which you call *intuition*, which for my part I call *creative imagination*, and which is the faculty of the human being, the human soul—though it's a socialized soul, of course, one that has at its disposal language and a historical heritage—to invent for itself arbitrarily some tasks, to fabricate arbitrarily some forms (when I say *arbitrarily*, that's a first approximation), and to invent, too, that particular domain that is mathematics, which is precisely where it creates something that, in my opinion, equally pertains to the imagination: proof procedures. And finally, there is an intermediate stage, which is the entirely creative, or rather evaluative, capacity to retrace the path one has followed, to compare one's method with other possible methods and then to redefine one's tactics, perhaps even one's strategy—this being a capacity you call, after some hesitation in your discussion with Changeux, *reflection*, a term with which I am in perfect agreement.

ALAIN CONNES: One can indeed ask oneself the *a priori* question of whether some limits do indeed exist for what machines might eventually be capable of doing. As a mathematician, I would willingly place this limit within the distinction between what has a meaning, what is interesting, in contrast to what has no interest, no pertinence. It is truly this notion of *meaning*, of *interest*, that is the most difficult to

formalize, to define in such a way that a machine might have access to it.

But before discussing this question any further, I would like to go back over the different levels of mathematical work you have mentioned. In particular, I'd like to go back over this idea—which to my mind is false—that since calculation is now completely something to which machines have access, it's a level we understand perfectly well. I believe that one would be wrong to say that: when we have, for example, a calculation to be done that is very complicated, it can certainly be entrusted to a computer, but that presupposes, first of all, as you have made it clear, that the computer has been given the necessary programming and then, what's much trickier, that we know how to read the result correctly. For, if a computer provides us with ten pages of formulas, we really haven't moved forward in the sense, precisely, that such a result . . .

C.C.: . . . isn't comprehensible. . . .

A.C.: That's it, isn't comprehensible. And my second remark, still on this same level about calculation, is that in fact, when the human mind learns to make calculations, however simple and mechanical they might be, they acquire, in doing so, all sorts of mechanisms that, if they are not acquired, are ultimately going to render one's intuition weak, impotent. It's a bit as if a walker going from a point A to a point B were to lower his head in order not to see the path he is going over, the people he meets, I am thinking here, of course, of schoolchildren: it would be a serious mistake to let them use calculators too early on; for, learning to do multiplications, sums, etc., registering these very simple operations in the mind is fundamental for one to develop gradually, alongside the mechanism itself, an intuition and a sense of magnitudes. This is a point it would be quite wrong for one to dodge.

C.C.: Absolutely!

A.C.: As for the level of reflection, it's true that one can now formalize a vague outline for going back over things, of the kind I discussed with Changeux in our book, which begins to resemble a true form of reflection. But such a description leaves me a bit unsatisfied in the sense that what

is missing there is some sort of focus on a goal that is relatively ill defined when one reflects on a problem. In that sense, moreover, the distinction between the second and third levels is rather fuzzy, and it's hard to know how to be more specific about it.

So, to come precisely to this third level, that of intuition, or the creative imagination according to you, which in any case gives access to this mathematical reality that is independent of our own existence, what one does here, when one studies certain objects through this or that axiomatic system, is follow a sort of Ariadne's thread that is extremely difficult to define but that allows one to move about within this mathematical "geography." And I'd like to try to focus on this movement by giving two examples of problems, or enigmas, that are principal motivations for me when it comes to mathematics. The first enigma is that of the space in which one lives, an enigma that obviously couldn't be disjoined from the relationships that exist between mathematics and physics, since perception of this space of physics can no longer be separated from what such perception teaches us about it. And the second enigma is, let us say, the series of prime numbers, which underlies arithmetic, numbers, this whole mystery that is constantly there before us when we reflect on arithmetic and even on simple things. When one ventures far enough toward an elucidation of these two mysteries, one then glimpses—a truly astonishing thing—that they have a huge amount of points in common, that concepts developed for one apply to the other, etc.—and that, finally, one cannot truly disjoin the perception one has of the physical world from an investigation into these enigmas. One then comes, at least I come—but perhaps I'm an extremist?—to the following certitude, that mathematical reality is the sole reality that might be precisely, correctly defined, and to the following problem, which for me is key: that of understanding in what sense physical reality is inscribed, takes specific form [*se specifie*], within mathematical reality.

C.C.: I am almost completely in agreement with you, should my agreement or disagreement be of any great interest. Above all, I am very happy that, in mentioning these two enigmas, you have put your finger on some questions that

have always filled me with admiration and wonder; we'll talk about that some more. Before then, another word about your first stage of calculation—which is not first in time, moreover, but logically lower, if I may put it that way. One always has to come back to that stage. Let's say that a mathematician has a brilliant intuition and that she tries, or others try, to put it down on paper; if the intuition then contradicts some things that are well-established—and if the contradiction pertains to the first level: something is A or is not A, is in contradiction to A—well, that brilliant intuition collapses. There really are many examples of this in the history of mathematics.

A.C.: That's it, exactly. And the period of calculation, verification, proof almost, could, it might be said, be compared to the work of the experimental scientist who goes back to his lab bench. You can have an idea, and what in mathematics replaces the experiment is that.

C.C.: Absolutely.

KATHARINA VON BULOW: That's why a philosophy book, despite its core intuition, requires a thousand pages of writing to explain the idea that was there at the origin.

A.C.: Above all, it needs to go back and conduct an experiment; and in mathematics, such experimentation is proof; it's demonstration.

C.C.: Yes—with the following difference, that in philosophy we don't have rigorous demonstrations; we cannot reduce what we are saying to a small group of axioms from which one would deduce the rest. There is no direct referral to experiment [*l'expérience*]. Philosophy labors under the constraint of experience [*de l'expérience*], but it's then a matter of the constraint of human experience as a whole. And, as a matter of fact, you don't have this hardness, this crystalline character that is the proper characteristic of mathematics; that's a huge difference.

But let's get back to our question, and to your three stages. I, too, believe that it isn't possible to separate reflection totally from intuition (for you) or imagination (for me). Allow me to explain myself. Suppose that one incorporated into a machine what you quite correctly call an

evaluative function, which, as a function in the vulgar sense—the respiratory function, for example—is going to allow the machine, as it makes its computations, to see whether or not it is getting near a goal—a goal that is defined in advance, since the machine wouldn't be able to set that goal on its own. But this evaluative function, if it is itself algorithmizable, will be able to work only on the basis of possibilities that are defined in advance.

A.C.: Absolutely.

C.C.: Whereas the genuine labor of reflection is indissociable from the creative imagination in the following sense, that, in the course of such an effort, one can give rise to criteria of choice, for example, or other elements that were not given in advance.

A.C.: I quite agree.

C.C.: On the other hand, of course, and for the same reason, one will never be able, during such a “mechanical” labor of evaluation, see the meaning in it, as you say, or the fecundity, as I would say, which here again is a contribution of the imagination and is something without which the invention of a method of proof would lose a huge portion of its criteria. Let's take the example of one of the great methods of proof, which is there already in Euclid and then in Archimedes, the method of exhaustion,² which lies at the basis of an enormous number of things in modern mathematics, in the theory of limits, What does it allow me to do? It allows me to approach as close as I can to—and, ideally, to exhaust—what remains. It was of course invented at the outset for a specific application, but at a given moment one glimpsed that it had a fecundity that went far beyond the objects in whose terms it had been constructed. And here again imagination was needed.

A.C.: Absolutely. Moreover, this method offers a very good example, for one can clearly see therein what distinguishes the mathematician from a computer: exhaustion is going to give him access to the infinite, to take him to the limit. Thus, despite an infinite number of operations, he will

²That is to say, by increasingly precise approximations.

be able in his mind to imagine the number π , whereas, in the case of the computer, it . . .

C.C.: . . . will produce decimals.

A.C.: That's it; it will amass operations but won't ever have such direct access. And that's what is quite remarkable in mathematics: it gives man access to the infinite, that is to say, offers him some access beyond a finite number of operations. Let's take the same problem from another end. Some rather paradoxical things often happen in mathematics: in order to study entirely finite sets, one uses tools that were designed to study infinite groups, which are called *Lie groups*, and these groups are in fact much simpler to analyze than finite groups because their structure, underpinned by the continuum, allows the use of algebraic methods. A philosophical problem that is highly present is then raised here: Is the universe surrounding us, our mind, etc. *a priori* finite, *a priori* limited by finitude? Or, as I hope in a certain way, does there exist, beyond the finite, beyond what is tangibly and materially real, a reality that can be called mathematical (though what you name it doesn't really matter), it being characterized precisely by the infinite and exerting upon us something like an appeal, an attraction, such that, despite our human condition, it gives us access to something that has to do with a certain sort of eternity, a certain sort of atemporality, a certain sort of independence from space, from the point of space in which we exist?

C.C.: A parenthesis: this transition already occurs at the level of the simple living being, which, curiously, uses mathematics, uses its results: when a dog chases after a rabbit, it resolves a differential equation. . . .

A.C.: It doesn't resolve it. It follows a solution.

C.C.: Yes, it applies a solution to the equation that is called the *pursuit curve*, but it doesn't know it; it does it like that. . . .

A.C.: I'll take another example: when one does a sum, one uses the carry-over. This is what the mathematician calls a *cocycle*.³ . . . But a proper knowledge of terminology is

³This is said of points located on one and the same circle.

certainly not going to help us in doing correct sums!

C.C.: Of course. It's therefore not living beings in general; it's the specificity of the mind or the human psyche, and in particular those huge innovations in the order of being that are the imagination and the imaginary. I believe that this is quite essential. But to come back to the two enigmas of which you spoke, I, too, have admired and worked on the huge problems posed by space, Zeno's paradoxes (which have lost none of their topical interest), the question of the discrete and the continuous,⁴ And here one touches on contemporary physics, with the quantification of space. . . . As for prime numbers, one of the things I've most marveled at during my brief studies of mathematics—in my adult years, alas!—was how a basic theorem, and even practically all theorems concerning the true arithmetic of prime numbers—that is to say, numbers that have no other divisor than themselves and 1—use analysis, which is a chapter of mathematics that deals with limits and continuity. And it has been proved, for example, that the frequency of prime numbers within the totality of natural numbers diminishes according to a logarithmic function, which has nothing to do with arithmetic, of course. But such proofs, those of Jacques Hadamard and Charles Jean de la Vallée-Poussin, are full of integrals! So, one has the impression—I don't like this word, but, well, I'll use it so as not to lose time—that there is a certain kind of *transcendence* of the mathematical object, because one started with prime numbers, one opened a completely different chapter of analysis, and with it, via another path, one rediscovers some results concerning prime numbers. It's a bit like young Marcel Proust walking with his parents in Combray: the road seems long to him; he no longer recognizes the landscape; he feels lost; and then, at a bend in the path that seems to him to be at the end of the world, there he is suddenly in front of “the back-gate of our own garden.”⁵

⁴See “Remarks on Space and Number” (1993; in [FT\(P&K\)](#)).

⁵In the “Combray” chapter of *Swann's Way. Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 124. —T/E

...

A.C.: Later, there was an elementary proof of this theorem about the frequency of prime numbers, which is due to Atle Selberg. From a somewhat naive standpoint, it could be said that prime numbers play a bit the same role elementary particles do in physics, that is to say that they are, in fact, the basic components of integers from the standpoint of multiplication. The point of departure for Leonhard Euler's theory is that, if one forms a series of powers from integers, one obtains a function that is factorized into a product of terms indexed by prime numbers.

C.C.: Fortunately for physicists, the number of elementary particles is finite; at least, they think so. I don't know what they would do with an infinite number of elementary particles; no doubt, they would be obliged to change methods!

A.C.: In fact, they are already confronted with this problem. The various categories of elementary particles are finite in number, but if one looks at their possible states, they are infinite in number.

C.C.: That's true. So, there's a bifurcation that appears here straightaway, since you have spoken of physics; it opens up two paths. A first one, which I would like to rule out straightaway, is that of reductionism. It starts from an obvious fact: our brain—with which we do mathematics, among other things—is a physical object, and, in particular, a living object, a biological object. And on that score biologists come in to state: Mathematics is in the brain, period. Yet as far as I'm concerned, I can't manage to understand how the infinite is *in* the brain! The infinite is, as a matter of fact, an ideality created by the human imagination. For it to operate, the brain is a necessary but not sufficient condition. And this distinction is too often forgotten.

The other path leads us to what an American physicist, Eugene Wigner, called "the unreasonable effectiveness of

mathematics” when it is applied to the real world.⁶ A huge problem! In your book with Changeux, you make a very important remark, to which I subscribe completely: that physics isn’t reducible to mathematics. Likewise, mathematics isn’t reducible to physics: there are entire branches of mathematics . . .

A.C.: . . . of course, arithmetic, for example. . . .

C.C.: . . . yes, that have no physical reality; already, there are prime numbers, but there is also infinite-dimensional space. . . . They become tools, though they have no physical reality. There is, therefore, in mathematical language, a nonempty intersection between the physical universe and the mathematical universe; there is a part where they overlap, and in that part the effectiveness of mathematics is truly diabolical. And then there’s a part of physics that is on the outside—perhaps its most essential part, in a sense—as there is a part of mathematics that is also on the outside, which is just as essential, moreover. And here we have, in my view, a very strong argument against all forms of reductionism.

A.C.: Absolutely. Moreover, apropos of the human mind, the materialist point of view is quite limited, not only because, of course, the brain is a material, finite object but especially because it claims to understand what matter is, because it is mistaken and deceives us. Certainly, so long as one is interested in biological phenomena on the molecular level, one can indeed have a nearly valid idea of what one is dealing with, but as soon as one changes scale to deal with elementary particles, quantum mechanics, this very notion of matter, of a material world, becomes evanescent. This is nevertheless the key question we have to face: What is external reality? And the same argument that would localize mathematics in the brain can be “paraphrased” for external reality and end up with the exact same conclusion, that is to say, that external reality exists only in the brain. Which hardly gets us anywhere.

⁶“[The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences.](#)” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 13:1 (February 1960). —T/E

For me, external reality, everything that is outside us, is basically and first of all an inexhaustible source of information; and secondly, it's something that is, in a certain way, inescapable [*d'incontournable*]. Now, mathematical reality, when one is talking about prime numbers, about the infinity of prime numbers, has exactly those characteristics—of being a source of information that is unpredictable, inexhaustible, on the one hand, and inescapable, inevitable, on the other. Such is the initial experience one has of mathematics: it cannot be captured in one go, nor can the mass of information it represents be bypassed [*contourner*]. If someone comes one day with a very powerful computer and says, "I have produced the largest prime number," one knows that he's mistaken because we have the proof of the infinity of prime numbers.

C.C.: It is, in addition, a wonderful proof, which is already there in Euclid and which a ten-year-old child of normal intelligence has to be able to understand.

A.C.: But it would absolutely not work on a computer, since one takes numbers, one takes the product of all the numbers that come before and adds one, and that's absolutely impossible to do with a machine. But it's like that: mathematics is a truly inescapable reality that is perfectly well defined and an inexhaustible source of information—whereas external reality, even in a somewhat intuitive sense of the material world that surrounds us, is something that is much more difficult to define and perceive. For, whatever progress might be made in physics, one will never have at one's disposal anything but models of the external world. In order to grasp space, for example, a child has, until age one, one and a half, a sort of archaic model of the external world that allows him to move about and not fall down a hole; the child will refine this model, improve on it in the course of his existence, but it will forever remain just a model. And when we were just speaking of the problem of the discrete and the continuous, that shows very well, once again, that one perceives the material physical world that surrounds us in an intuitive manner without being able to approach it in another way than step by step and through models that, obviously, are mathematical models.

K.v.B.: I would like to come back to the materialists' claim to localize mathematics in the brain. . . .

A.C.: But we're not denying that it's present in the brain; we're denying that that's its sole place of "existence."

...

K.v.B.: I know that both of you are refuting this materialist reduction and that my question is a bit provocative. I'll pose it again in another way. The body is matter; it contains biologically, physically, a mind—I'm thinking of Francisco Varela's book *The Embodied Mind*⁷—that, without knowing it, exploits the infinite possibilities of mathematics, biology, the human sciences, and philosophy, for example. But in fact everything is already there and it merely repeats the same investigation without ever getting to the end. What do you think about that?

C.C.: A coherent materialist or rationalist or determinist thesis ought to state that everything was already there not only in the human mind but as early as the Big Bang. Virtually, all mathematical theorems were there, but also Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passion According to Saint Matthew* or Édouard Manet's *Olympia*. In a sense, this thesis is irrefutable, but at the same time it's what Plato would have called an "abyss of chattering." It doesn't mean anything.

A.C.: I believe that one cannot discuss this problem of materialism without returning to the question, which for me is basic, of what time is. One of the reasons for the virulence of the materialist thesis is Darwinism and its alleged explanatory power. But what we have here is a huge hoax, because this explanatory power exists only insofar as one would understand the passage of time. Just a few words on that. In contemporary physics, time is made into one of the co-ordinates of space-time, and it is then believed that one has understood what it is. But that, in fact, is a total illusion: physics doesn't explain and never says why time passes, why times flows. It's a co-ordinate, but spatial co-ordinates do not flow; as for time, it flows. So long as one hasn't reflected in

⁷*The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). —T/E

a sufficiently precise manner on this flow of time, the Darwinian explanation will remain a vicious circle: species disappear because time passes, but why does it pass? What does this passage of time signify? What does our perception of this passage signify?

On this basic problem of the relationships between the physical world, the material world, and this access to the infinite, this sort of “transcendence” that constitutes the originality of the human soul, I admit that I have a rather radical point of view. I trust only things that exist independently of time and thereby attribute to mathematical reality alone this independence, this a-temporality that allows one to be assured of its existence independent of our comprehension of the flow of time. And I make this into the first stone on which to construct my conception of reality. The question then is posed of how we fit within this reality of the physical universe with which we are familiar, that of the Big Bang and, precisely, this temporality that characterizes us and that characterizes the universe in which we live. And in working on this problem, in discussing it with physicists, I have more or less ended up with the conclusion that the flow of time had nothing to do with a co-ordinate in space-time, nothing to do with this somewhat naive model that one has of space-time and physics, but in fact had to do with thermodynamics. In a paradoxical, provocative way, I’ll say that, if time passes, that’s because we are bathed in 3° Kelvin radiation, this background radiation coming from the Big Bang. For me, time goes by because we are incapable of knowing the microscopic distributions of what happens in the universe that surrounds us and because this lack of information, this sort of macroscopic perception we have of it, gradually destroys our bodies and erodes our genetic distinctness. And in order to struggle against that, we have at our disposal only this discrete phenomenon that is the transmission of life, the transmission to other generations of this sort of bible that is contained in our genetic information and that, because it is discrete, rigid, will be very hard to damage and will be able, on the contrary, to struggle and to thrive against this flow of time we can do nothing about, for it is due to destruction, to friction, to our own inability to

know all the details of the microscopic world surrounding us.

C.C.: I would like to go back over a few of the topics you've just mentioned, and first of all what you said apropos of Darwin and Darwinism, which is quite right but insufficient. The knot of the problem is that there is no Darwinian explanation; there is but a grandiose tautology: Only those who are fit to survive do survive.

A.C.: But we're in agreement!

C.C.: Now, the key question is twofold. Firstly, why are there different living beings? Secondly, and especially, why do these differences head in the direction of an increasing complexity of life? Here, Darwin had no answer; he leaned on examples that were of very little value: variations within a species, etc. Next, with mutations, one found not an answer but a missing piece for making the fact of evolution comprehensible: there is evolution because there is mutation. But those mutations are random, they arise by chance, and so the enigma reappears: How does it happen that random mutations so often—not always, because there are some that are deadly or damage the beings that carry them—produce coherent forms, ones capable of living and even of being the seat of new mutations that will lead further along the ladder of complexity? About that, modern Neo-Darwinism has, in my opinion, no answer. Here, too, one talks about randomness, but in my opinion such randomness—not the trivial randomness of dice being thrown or cards being drawn—is a pseudonym offered by deterministic and positivistic scientists for the fact of creation. There are two possibilities: either something is a production that occurs on the basis of what exists—and one can then explain it, saying how it has been manufactured—or this isn't so, and the determinist calls *random* what he cannot explain, that is to say, the fact of a creation.

A.C.: There, we're completely in agreement.

C.C.: And there is increasing complexity, for which Stephen Jay Gould tried to give an explanation. He starts from zero complexity, a first life form appears, which obviously cannot go below zero. If, therefore, it goes somewhere, it will be toward complexity, and at the end of one billion years, there will be some very complex forms. . . . But

thermodynamics doesn't allow such an argument, since it teaches us that there are many more chances for these forms to lose complexity rather than that they would continue to become more complex. What isn't being seen here is that life is a creation and a permanent creation of new forms, and that humankind is such a creation, with what characterizes it in particular, that is to say, the creative imagination.

Before coming to the much-talked-about question of the universality of mathematics, a word on what Alain just said about time. I do not believe that thermodynamics would be able to explain time to us. The great problem it has to face is obviously the arrow of time, why there is a before and an after, why it flows. But here, two times must be distinguished.

A.C.: Quite right.

C.C.: There is a time I'll call *ensemblistic-identitary* or *algorithmic*, for which thermodynamics holds. But if this time were the only one, there would have been a few initial forms that would have worn away at the end of fifteen billion years. Now, what we note is that there still is an emergence of new forms. There is, therefore, another time, which is not the simple time of wearing out, but instead the time of creation, which I shall call *poietic time*—because *poi sis* means creation. And thereupon is marked the true before/after. Do you agree?

A.C.: Completely. Certainly that would require many further explanations, but let's say that I was speaking here of the flow of time in the naive sense of the term. And it is quite obvious that one would have to make the distinction among at least three or four forms of time. . . .

K.v.B.: If one reads the absolutely superb pages of Augustine or some other great philosophers about time, one notices that what frightens them the most is the time that flows out, deterioration, death, oblivion. . . .

A.C. and C.C.: Obviously, that's the big thing!

K.v.B.: Well, through Christ and Saint Paul, Christianity has very cleverly put a halt to time, introducing a redemption of time: for all eternity, it has already happened and already been redeemed, for all Christians. And you, too, speak of eternity and infinity. Whence my question: Are not the sciences, and especially mathematics, a language that both

opens onto the infinite and leaves some traces such that man might imagine himself an eternal being . . . ?

C.C.: Of course not; there's a huge logical leap there.

A.C.: Of course, and the difference is that, knowing very well all the while that we are not eternal, this flow of time prevents us from conceiving of our being as independent of time. For me, the ideal would be to have an awareness of one's own existence, from one's birth up to the present moment, that would be identical to the one we have as a limited physical being living in space: the fact that our legs would be of such and such a length has never bothered us, the limited size of our bodies in space doesn't affect us in the least. But the limitation of the size of our being in time obviously causes distress. And the reason why that distresses us, why it causes anxieties for us, is that we watch with impotence this flow of time without truly being able to perceive ourselves, to perceive ourselves in our totality independent of time. So, I think that one can have experiences that go against that, and in particular through the practice of mathematics. For, the objects one deals with there, the ones to which one has access, have precisely this atemporal character, this character of being independent of space and time, which ensures that the perception one has of them allows access to something eternal. That doesn't mean that anyone who has such an experience is eternal, of course; simply, this can radiate over the entire life of an individual, thickening the present moment in both directions, at once in the past and in the future. That, for me, is the key compensation for the fact, precisely, that mathematics is not a physical object and cannot be localized in the physical world.

C.C.: That's a quite fair way of putting it. And it may be noted, in relation to what Katharina is saying, that it is precisely Christianity—but also most, and almost all, religions—that invented the following marvelous “trick” in order to respond to this dread of death: There is an eternity somewhere, elsewhere, and we shall participate personally in this eternity; and there is an infinity that is not only the infinite number of infinities of mathematics but who is a person, who is good, and who loves us, etc. And for centuries,

that worked.

As for this experience of eternity, of timelessness, it's certain that mathematics allows us to have it, but so do great works of art, for example. Once again, the *Passion According to Saint Matthew* was created in Leipzig, in such and such a year, by an individual who had twenty children, . . . Yet all that isn't pertinent in relation to the meaning and musical content of the *Passion According to Saint Matthew*. Man creates and has access to a world of idealities, of what is imperceptible, certainly, but that world is nonetheless immanent, and he succeeds in bringing it into his own world; mathematics is an excellent manifestation of this, but art and even great thought are so, too.

Just a word about matter, about which you say quite rightly that it becomes evanescent with modern physics. Yet there's more to it: the categories of our ordinary perception themselves become evanescent there—separability, for example, in quantum theory, or identity. And I am not talking about causality. Physics thus makes us discover strata of being that differ from the usual strata in which we live, and that's one of the reasons why it exerts such fascination.

A last point before coming to the question of timelessness. I was very glad to note our agreement on that issue: one doesn't work on mathematics solely with one's brain in the trivial sense; the psyche, the human soul can do nothing if there were not at once representation, desire, and affect. One does mathematics because one desires to do mathematics and because doing mathematics procures pleasure.

A.C.: Absolutely. And also because one feels attracted by a mystery. . . .

C.C.: Yes, but it's on all three sides at once; that's the fascination the question of meaning exerts. After all, the entire human being is involved therein. And this is yet one more reason why I don't believe that a machine will ever be able to think: I don't see a machine becoming passionate about proving the infinity of prime numbers. Why would that interest it?

Now, on the question of universality and timelessness [*l'intemporalité*], or atemporality, how does this question

manifest itself? First, I believe, it manifests itself through the fantastic permanence in time of our creations. Secondly, through the certainty we have—and to which, moreover, physics offers a sort of corroboration—that Pythagoras' theorem is not valid simply starting in 540 B.C.E., when Pythagoras, at Samos or in Southern Italy, invented, created the proof for it, but that it was already there during the formation of the solar system . . .

A.C.: . . . exactly . . .

C.C.: . . . as something intrinsic to the operation of the physical world. We are certain that there, already, the square of the hypotenuse was equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides. Thirdly, and here we have the most important point, because we know how to teach and gain acceptance for mathematical truths from any human being—which is not the case with other human, cultural, etc. creations, where that is either impossible or extremely difficult. If I take a normally intelligent “savage” and bring him to the opera to have him listen to *Tristan and Isolde*, is he going to go into ecstasies? That's not at all obvious. For him to understand something about it, for him to find this work accessible, a long process of acculturation would be necessary. On the other hand, I'll be able, through the effort of teaching him, to lead him to an understanding of what are . . . Banach spaces, for example,⁸ and get him to accept them. That seems to me both obvious and of capital importance. And that, too, is why I disagree with your “partner” Jean-Pierre Changeux, who writes, in your joint book, that perhaps beings on other planets have another mathematics. He does not glimpse the consequences of what he is saying, for if they have another mathematics, they also have another physics . . .

A.C. . . . and another chemistry, of course . . .

C.C.: . . . and other molecules. Therefore, what one talks about on Earth is false, the laws of physics aren't universal, etc. That isn't possible! Do you agree with this distinction between a timelessness that is specific to mathematics and a merely *de jure* timelessness that holds only

⁸Functional spaces in standard use in analysis.

for some of our other creations?

A.C.: Completely. I'll even add that I think that mathematics calls upon a different sense than those put into action in the other domains of human creation. Of course, one also uses vision, hearing, etc., but those senses have access to something whose universality, precisely, is much greater, much stronger, much more communicable.

K.v.B.: We're going to have to stop. . . .

C.C.: A last point, since we've already gone beyond our limits. . . . To come back to the "unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics," its applicability to physics, I shall formulate the thing in the following way, soliciting one last time Alain Connes's opinion, for this is "my" ontological thesis: there is in being in general a dimension that is, as is said in mathematics, *everywhere dense*, everywhere present, and that pertains to what I call *ensemblistic-identitary* logic, or a part of mathematics.

A.C.: Absolutely. And that part is present even in language.

C.C.: Of course, in language, in human creations, in a poem, too, in a Bach *Fugue*, in *Tristan and Isolde*, in a picture, everywhere, and in particles, and so on. But that it would be everywhere does not mean that it exhausts being. And inasmuch as it doesn't exhaust being, it doesn't exhaust what exists physically or what exists psychically, what exists that is human, or mathematical creation itself. That's the reason why there is this intersection, this so-important partial overlap, between the physical world and the mathematical world.

A.C.: I believe that we are entirely in agreement on that.

Interview in Annex: Cornelius Castoriadis and Robert Legros*

ALAIN FINKIELKRAUT: We shall start with a statement from Cornelius Castoriadis that is also to be found as something like a *leitmotiv* in Robert Legros's book, *L'Idée d'humanité*:¹ "Before Greece and outside of the Greco-Western tradition, societies are instituted on a principle of strict closure."² What does that statement mean? What is this principle of strict closure? And if the Greeks did make themselves capable of breaking the closure through which most societies institute themselves, what is the meaning for us of this great inaugural gesture?

C.C.: There is one thing that must be established at the outset. It's that, in almost all the cultures with which we are familiar, not only are what is valid for each one its institutions and its own tradition but, in addition, for each one, the other ones are invalid. The rupture of closure, the breaking of closure begins when the first Greek philosophers, or geographers, or historians glimpse that what rules Greek society and the other societies appertains not to the nature of things, to a *phusis*, but to a *nomos*, that is to say, to an

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¹*L'idée d'humanité: introduction à la phénoménologie* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1990; Paris: Librairie générale française, 2006). —T/E

²"The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983; now in *PPA*, p. 82). —T/E

institution, a convention, a social law. That yields, for example in Herodotus, some stories that deride the customs of the Greeks by presenting the King of the Persians, who points out to the Greeks the funeral customs of the Indians and to the Indians the funeral customs of the Greeks.³ For each of those two peoples, the customs of the others are pure and simple abominations. But the break is formed also and especially starting at the moment when the philosophers begin to demolish the mythological traditions and to seek in their own activity of thought a principle of truth and reflection. And this break also extends right away into the sphere of politics with democracy. Of course, calling into question whether the law pertains to *phusis* remained of limited scope in Greece, in particular on the political level, with slavery, the status of women, etc. But it was reborn in modern times. That's not at all a copy; it's something else. It's a new departure that took place in Europe, which, starting at a certain moment, drew inspiration again from the Greeks and which culminated where we know—in the Enlightenment, in the French Revolution—both in society's will to self-institution and in autonomous human reflection, to wit: Religion is a private matter, the Scriptures perhaps contain some amount of revelation or they don't, but even such revelation has to be sifted through the screen of reason. That is there already in René Descartes trying to prove the existence of God; it's Immanuel Kant, and so on. Now, that continued on for a certain amount of time. The question that is posed today is the following: To what extent did the rapid rise of another tendency manifest itself in modern times, which is a rather major one, namely, the tendency toward rational mastery of the world and, in particular, a tendency to center everything on the economic sphere, expansion of the forces of production (it is in this sense that Marx was a participant in the capitalist universe), and which is expressed at the level of concrete individuals (who cannot, each and every one, be a capitalist or an entrepreneur) by a race after an ever higher so-called standard of living; to what extent is the

³Herodotus *Histories* 3.38.3-4. —T/E

development of this tendency in the process of eliminating the value of autonomy?

What I mean by this is that one has been wrong of late to speak of *individualism*, or of *narcissism*. Individualism is a hollow expression, behind which there is some content. Individuals do not value the individual as individual; they value a content, and this content is a certain kind of life of this individual. And that life is what we agree to call *consumer society*.

A.F.: Robert Legros, what for you is the meaning of this statement about the breaking of closure?

ROBERT LEGROS: If you don't mind, I shall start off from what Cornelius has just said to say that, in our modern world, there are, at bottom, two antagonistic projects: the project of autonomy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the project of mastery, which is bound up with the idea of *individualism*. Now, as far as I'm concerned, it seems to me—and this is a topic of disagreement that could give rise to a discussion—that these two projects are not so independent and that the pursuit of autonomy can—I am not saying “has to”—be at the origin of this pursuit of mastery on the part of consumer society. But, in order to introduce the terms of this debate, I therefore come back to the expression *breaking closure*, since my book, in effect, tries to reflect on the meaning of such closure. The question is as follows: In what sense is there closure? Let us underscore right away that, were there no possibility of breaking it, what we do as philosophers, our very act of questioning, would lose all meaning. In order to introduce this question, I would like to start from the way in which Kant presents the problem, which boils down to questioning us about the way in which the problem presents itself in the Enlightenment. Kant says to us the following: Man—and it is this definition that, in his view, is expressed by the Enlightenment—is “naturally major.”⁴ What this signifies is that he is originally autonomous or, to

⁴Kant uses the Latin phrase *naturaliter majorenes* in the second paragraph of “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment” (1784). Legros's French is translated directly, here and below, in the text. —T/E

borrow an expression from Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “only man is originally nothing at all.”⁵ And that means: Man is a being that has no nature, that is not destined to imitate an ideal nature, on the one hand, and that, on the other, is not reducible to some immediate inclinations that would be natural. And that is because, precisely, he is nothing, he has no nature, he is autonomous. Here, Kant tells us, is what man is originally: he is “naturally major,” therefore autonomous by nature, therefore “naturally” without nature. But, Kant adds immediately, throughout human history man has believed that he wasn’t major, that he was a minor, that is to say, in short, that, throughout human history, man has accepted the principle of heteronomy rather than that of autonomy. And in addition, throughout human history men “gladly remain” in a certain state of minority, and this state of minority, says Kant, has thus “become almost a nature,”⁶ which signifies, at bottom (this meets up with a theme often developed by Castoriadis), that the principle of heteronomy naturalizes people’s attitudes. It naturalizes attitudes first of all in the sense that it renders them (almost) spontaneously minor, submissive: it is in a certain sort of spontaneous way that individuals end up submitting, and therefore that attitude is natural (or naturalized) in the sense that it has something spontaneous about it. The principle of heteronomy naturalizes attitudes also in the sense that the principles that order attitudes are external to what they could decide, in the sense they would pertain to *phusis*. The norms are not decided by us; they are transcendent, pertaining to *phusis* and not to *nomos*. And, finally, one’s attitude is naturalized to the extent that the meaning of things appears as natural, familiar: it goes without saying. What conclusion does Kant draw? He draws the conclusion that, since man is nothing by nature, naturalization is an illusion and, consequently, what reveals

⁵Quoted in Matthew Bell’s *The German Tradition of Psychology in Literature and Thought, 1700-1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 158, which cites the *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (I.iii.379). —T/E

⁶See the second and third paragraphs of Kant’s essay. —T/E

that which is properly human is attachment to naturalization. What interested me is the objection the Romantics make to this idea of Kant's, for it seems to me to be rather strong. It consists in saying: If man is nothing by nature, well, one cannot even say that autonomy would be original. What must be said is that it's naturalization that is original, that is to say that man becomes human through his inscription within a particular form of humanity that has its norms, its ways, its customs. In other words: Man is first of all naturalized, and it is thanks to this naturalization that he has a chance of being human, that is to say, of distinguishing himself in a singular way, of autonomizing himself, of inventing himself.

This argument seems to me to be a strong one, yet the conclusion drawn by the Romantics from this argument seems to me to be false. If naturalization is original, say the Romantics, then (here is the wrongly-drawn conclusion) wrenching one away from such naturalization is a sort of dehumanization. That is to say that the act of wanting to autonomize oneself, of wanting to make oneself independent from tradition leads to an abstract humanism, a kind of humanism that is, at bottom, dehumanizing since abstract man no longer is anything. How would abstract man (that is, man abstracted from all tradition, from every culture) be something if man is nothing by nature? And if abstract man is nothing, if he no longer has anything human about him, isn't one to understand that the deep-seated meaning of the human is to fit into a tradition, or into a culture?

C.C.: There we have the fallacy. . . .

R.L.: No doubt the fallacy lies there, but the difficulty comes, it seems to me, from what is being upheld through an argument that is very strong: If abstract man is an empty universality, how would there not be a threat of dehumanization in a universalist project, in wrenching one away from particular concrete characteristics?

C.C.: The argument is quite strong, and it was quite misunderstood by the entire rationalist current within the history of philosophy: the human being becomes a human being in being socialized, and there is no society in the abstract; there is a concrete sociality. And if we inspect the history of humanity, we see that we are little Western

provincials. Anyone among us, any Frenchman or American today, believes that it goes without saying that no one can arrest him, that he is free, that he has rights, etc. All that in no way goes without saying and is true only for a tiny period of history and for a tiny geographical area. Most of the time, societies have lived in heteronomy, domination, etc., and it is within those ones that people are socialized, which hasn't prevented works that are also quite considerable from being able to be created—religions, poems, and all the rest. It's just that there is a rupture in history, and that's what the Romantics don't see. More precisely, there are two things the Romantics don't see: firstly, that, if one remains within their point of view, one is obliged to place all traditions on the same level. Any critical point of view, any political point of view, any value-based point of view is necessarily ruled out, for all traditions would be of the same value. And this contains, moreover, an internal contradiction, for no tradition would ever accept that. Go tell an Islamic fundamentalist, for example, or not even a fundamentalist, that all traditions are of the same value: it's not true; only his own tradition is valid.

...

A.F.: And we rediscover there the principle of strict closure. . . .

C.C.: Precisely.

A.F.: For a tradition to function as a tradition, it has to be founded on the following principle: My tradition alone is valid.

C.C.: My tradition alone is valid. Now, at that moment we end up simply with the idea that this naturalization of man in a particular tradition turns—and can only turn—universal history into a tale of sound and fury where everything is valid. There we have the internal contradiction. But, secondly, what the Romantics misunderstand, what is at the very foundation of the possibility of their attitude, is that, starting at a certain moment, a critical point of view is born, appears, emerges—a point of view that poses the question, as Kant, as a matter of fact, would say: *Quid juris*, what about right? In fact, religion has been able to be admirable; there are very beautiful temples, etc.; there is a social organization, the pariahs—why not?—but what happens if the following questions were to

appear: What the *Rigveda*, etc. tells us—is that what we want, is that just, is it true? Then a point of view emerges that we cannot ignore.

We cannot—and here we have, in my opinion, the error of every rationalist fundamentalism—ground this point of view rationally, because its rational foundation would again presuppose Reason, and I cannot impose Reason on Søren Kierkegaard or Blaise Pascal, if they don't want it, if they tell me that they have their revelation. However, starting at the moment when I accept the critical point of view, the question *What about right? What about truth?*—starting at that moment, I have to recognize that, *de facto*, people exist only in their being socialized into a given tradition, but that all traditions are not of the same value, and that, starting at a certain moment, we break or we try to break this closure, and that's the project of autonomy.

R.L.: I am completely in agreement in saying that one cannot draw the conclusion that all traditions are of the same value, a conclusion the Romantics tended to draw. But what interests me in this argument is, at bottom, the following: if we are creations of our society, or if we are fabricated by an institution that tends to fabricate individuals who reinforce the norms of the institution, if that's the way it is, is a break possible? Is the break only apparent? Is not our desire for autonomy itself instituted through a societal form? In a word: How is one to comprehend the idea of autonomy if the taste for gaining it is itself socially, politically, historically engendered? These questions are raised by Romantic thought, which aims at challenging the idea of individual autonomy by bringing out the fact that what is human is the fruit and the creation of a tradition, a culture, a history. In addition, Romantic thought is not to be limited to suggesting that individual autonomy is never but an appearance of autonomy; it goes so far as to suggest that the project of autonomy, to the extent that it goes hand in hand with a definition of man as being universal (abstracted from all tradition), can lead to the threat of a kind of alienation: in a society in which the idea of human universality is expressed, the danger can arise that this idea ends up pointing to a biological universality of man, that men would be led to define themselves through their

belonging to a species (the human species) and no longer recognizing themselves as anything but consumers.

A.F.: Yes, here it seems to me that this is the key point in your debate with Castoriadis, because, at bottom, for him, there are two projects that don't overlap: the project of rational mastery of the world, which opens out onto this consumer society with which we are familiar, caught in the dizzying cycle of manufacturing, of the endless machinations of modern technique. And there is on the other hand, for Castoriadis, the project of autonomy, which is precisely what is covered up, canceled out, or caricatured by the project of rational mastery. It seems to me, on the contrary, Robert, that you are taking up the argument of the Romantics while reworking their thought from within and challenging this apology of tradition to which it leads. For you, in effect, these two projects are connected: there is a relation between this desire for autonomy, this foundation of man as abstract being, as universal being, and consumer society. This relation is the one the Romantics have tried to think through, and Tocqueville, too (I hope we'll have the time to come back to it, for this connection of Tocqueville with the Romantics, at least on this point, is one of the most innovative, the most original, and the most subversive aspects of your book). Well, I would like for us to try to go further in this divergence between the two of you.

C.C.: There are several things that would have to be said. First, I believe the objection Robert presents doesn't hold up. To say that the only thing all men would have in common is their being consumers does not boil down to saying that man is reduced to the universality of his biological being, because, from the biological standpoint, man, like all living species, would not seek to extend indefinitely the objects and dimensions of his consumption: he would have a level of his consumption that would fill him up and then that would be all. The folly of the modern world's pattern of consumption pertains to the purest imaginary level. It has nothing natural about it; it's a pure historical artefact. On top of that, this masks something else that is much more important. I don't want to enter into the question of the universality of man, but, well, what an inspection of history

and ethnology shows us is not the universality of man *qua* consumer; it's a universality of man *qua* creator, *qua* producer of imaginary identities, religions, significations, values, norms, and so on. Now, obviously, here the difficulties begin, because these products are different. The question is: Where can one recognize oneself, and to what extent can this breaking of closure, which, with Greece, opens up a crack and, with the West, grows so wide, afford us another type of universality in which human creativity sifts out and, at the same time, maintains some criteria that allow it to eliminate what, within this creativity, may also arise that is monstrous? For the monstrousness engendered by our creativity—that, too, exists. The second thing I wanted to say is that it is incontestable that, in the modern era (and already in the ancient era, but in another way than for the modern era), the project of autonomy and the project of an indefinite expansion of some sort of so-called mastery have contaminated each other, the most flagrant case being that of the revolutionary movement, which, under the sway of Marxism, assumed that one had only to achieve mastery over nature in order to give man autonomy—which is a total illusion. As far as I'm concerned, I think, on the contrary, that what we need today is not a mastery, but a control of this desire for mastery, a self-limitation. We need to eliminate this folly of unlimited expansion; we have need of an ideal of a frugal life, a management, like a good father of the family, of the planet's resources. If the two projects have contaminated each other, one must know how to distinguish between them, and such distinguishing isn't easy. No one is proposing to stop scientific research on the pretext that some very dangerous things might come out of it, but there are nonetheless some very dangerous zones, the transition from research to its application, then to the economic application, which raises questions and has to be controlled by society.

R.L.: The unbridled pursuit of consumption is obviously instituted; it has nothing natural about it. But what I meant is this: Can society institute itself while explicitly recognizing that it is grounded on the abyss? In other words: Is there a possibility of social life without conformism? The Romantics tell us: There is no social life that fails to secrete

an image of what man is, an apparently natural, positive image. And if that is so, is not wrenching one from all tradition going to lead to an image of man the consumer? How could one grasp what man is in his everyday life if we understand ourselves only as autonomous beings? Is not social life then led to give rise to the image of man as consumer if there is not some rootedness in a certain tradition? The Romantics claimed that that was so and, at bottom, hasn't history shown that, in part, they were right? Hasn't it been since men claimed they were autonomous subjects in the sense that that has been understood historically and socially that they have claimed to be masters and possessors of nature, to borrow Descartes famous expression,⁷ and hasn't it been since then that consumer society has developed?

A.F.: History would require that we take into account the Romantics' argument since, as a matter of fact, they prophesied the reality in which we exist today.

R.L.: They did indeed foretell that the project of autonomy and the project of mastery could not help but contaminate each other, to borrow Castoriadis's expression. The same prediction is to be found in Tocqueville, even though he was not a Romantic: the more equalization there is, the more the desire for autonomy will spread, and, *simultaneously*, the greater will be the threat of a general submission to the passion for well-being.

C.C.: I believe, and you show this rather well in your book, that Tocqueville saw precisely that there lay the main danger. He wasn't talking like this, but one could designate it by talking about a degeneration or a complete flattening of democracy, an emptying out of all genuinely democratic content. This idea of mere desire for well-being blends completely with the somber prospects Tocqueville often sketched out around what he calls *despotic democracy* or, since the term *despotic democracy* doesn't really work, *the emergence of a tutelary State*. He once again demonstrates the

⁷In part 6 of *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, by René Descartes. —T/E

depth of his vision, which in a certain way was anticipated almost fifteen years earlier by Benjamin Constant, when the latter characterized the Moderns in a both dreadful and brilliant phrase: “The Ancients demanded of political life freedom; we demand of the State the guarantee of our enjoyments [*jouissances*].”⁸ That’s what the contemporary Frenchman is. All he demands of society and the State is the guarantee of his enjoyments; he demands nothing else. What enjoyments those are is another story. . . .

I would like to say another thing about the breaking of closure. It does not mean detachment from all tradition but, rather, the instauration of another relation with tradition. Tradition, such as it is in a strictly traditional society, when it is held as valid without any contestation, signifies quite precisely: “The question of the legitimacy of tradition will not be posed.” As is said in the courtroom: It is forbidden to pose it. Tradition is there; that’s all. Now, for us, as a matter of fact, the question posed is that of another relation to tradition, and this other relation was sketched out in Greece. Consider the way in which the tragedians treated mythology: there’s a different relation to tradition. They did not limit themselves to repeating the myths; each one reinterpreted them, giving to mythology an entirely different content. When the Moderns came in, they took back up the medieval tradition. They took back up the story of Faust, whatever. But they also created with these another relation, and for us the problem is precisely that of instaurating, with our tradition and the tradition of humanity in general, another relation. In a traditional society, this relation is one of blind obedience. In contemporary society, it’s a touristy/museum-oriented relation. One goes to the Parthenon for a half hour, one waits in line for three-quarters of an hour in front of the Orsay Museum, and there

⁸A paraphrase of [“The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns”](#) (speech delivered in 1819 to the Royal Athenaeum of Paris). In translation, the actual passage reads in full: “The aim of the Ancients was the sharing of social power among the citizens of the same fatherland: this is what they called liberty. The aim of the Moderns is the enjoyment of security in private pleasures; and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these pleasures [*jouissances*].” —T/E

you have it, you've done some historical tourism; that's the relation to tradition. But there are much deeper things in our past that can nourish us and furnish us with a horizon. The sole thing we would have in common would be our being consumers? No, it's our participation in this human history to which we owe almost everything we are, to which we also owe this capacity to break closure, which, if we were born in Dahomey in the tenth century, none of us here, not Immanuel Kant himself, would be capable of conjuring up by himself. We owe [*devons*] to history this capacity, therefore we are to [*devons*] maintain it; we have a historical debt, and we pay this debt by pushing further this tradition of freedom, this demand for or requirement of [*exigence de*] freedom, and by transmitting it to the new generations.

A.F.: Before Robert responds, I'm going to give you a few impressions about the relation we have today with tradition and creation. What strikes me is that the wealth of our national cultural heritage [*patrimoine*] and the vitality of contemporary art are now glorified in consumer language. I am thinking here of an issue of *Nouvel Observateur* that celebrates what it calls "the feast of culture." In order to talk about *culture*, its proliferation, its variety, and the public's taste for it, one spontaneously speaks in culinary terms. Everything is eaten today—even culture. Consumer society knows no limit: the loftiest and most enriching activities are reduced to the pleasure of having something restorative to eat.

R.L.: Isn't it only where man understands himself as a universal and abstract being that a touristy/museum-oriented relation to tradition and a consumerist relation to culture can be established? To reopen the question, one could come back to Kant and start then no longer from his text on the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment] but from what Kant calls *genius*. For, what Kant calls *genius* is no longer at all the subject in the sense of the conscious, willing subject. This is a being that is outstripped by what it does. It is at once outstripped by the meaning of what it works out and outflanked by the questions raised by what it creates. The artist creates and is all the more creative when he does not want to be the origin of what he does. He wants to give expression to something that outstrips him. This could lead one to think that it's not because we

would have knowledge that we are in a self-instituting society; it is not because we would have this knowledge that we would be more creative: does not creation (or, let us say, to generalize: *invention*, the faculty of inception, of distinguishing oneself in a singular way, of rendering oneself autonomous) go hand in hand with a certain absence of lucidity? Does not the greatest lucidity—namely, we know ourselves to be creators of norms—go hand in hand with a certain kind of sterility? Is there not the danger, in contemporary art, of producing just in order to express creation? The art of a traditional society is certainly much less lucid, since it does not recognize itself as art, believing that the norms being applied are norms that pertain to *phusis* and in no way to *nomos*, but wasn't it sometimes more inventive than a kind of art that claims to be completely lucid about its own origin?

C.C.: You are posing some very important and very complex questions. There is, in particular, the question of contemporary art or supposedly contemporary art, which perhaps is to be set aside. But I wouldn't say that one can put into general use the idea that the work of genius, as Kant would say, the great work of art, necessarily includes a huge portion of nonlucidity in the usual sense; here again, we need to get things straight and agree on what we're talking about. It includes a huge portion of creation, that is to say, of radical imagination, of something that suddenly rises up. And at the same time, it is never a great work of art—that's something Kant knew very well; everyone knows it very well—if a fantastic quantity of logic and lucidity is not mixed in with this imagination, this sudden arising. One shouldn't believe that Chopin, when he sat down at the piano to improvise, was doing just anything whatsoever. In his fingers, there were entire volumes of arithmetic, and in his head, too; otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to improvise as he improvised. That's obvious. That's a separate question.

There are two questions here. I think that modern art is not the victim of its lucidity but, rather, of its will to create the new for the sake of the new. When I myself speak of self-institution, I don't at all mean that one would bring together all the citizens every morning and say: OK, we're changing

the laws because they're yesterday's laws. . . . No, I mean simply that one doesn't have to have a revolution each time to change the laws, whatever ones they might be. It is possible that the laws might be tacitly ratified, if not indefinitely, then for a very long time, quite simply because they are good, because no one would be thinking of other, better ones. Let's take the example of philosophy. If there's a philosopher who has some original ideas, does lucidity prevent him from being original? I think that that's false. I think that lucidity is an essential ingredient in order for him to be able to distinguish, as a matter of fact, between what is original and what is not so or what quite simply doesn't hold. I believe, therefore, that the domains must be distinguished, and one thing has to be understood. An autonomous society, a society that gives itself its laws and that knows that it is giving itself these laws, such a society can exist only with autonomous individuals. These are two sides of the same coin: without autonomous individuals, there is no autonomous society. That seems clear to me. So, what is an autonomous individual? It's someone who is socialized: she has, in a certain fashion, internalized society's institutions. But what institutions has she internalized? She has internalized institutions of autonomy. She has internalized free examination, as you say at the University of Brussels,⁹ free reflection, free research, and that is internalized as much as blind obedience to the Scriptures, for example, is internalized. It is learned, too. There is an education in autonomy, that's certain, and there is a tradition of autonomy that always has to be reflective, that is to say, be able to go back over itself. Now, beyond what I have just said, there is a huge problem. I am not saying that, in an autonomous society, the content of everyone's life has to be a brilliant artistic creation; that would be crazy. But these are questions of life's content that an autonomous society will have to resolve for itself. Having some autonomy therefore does not suffice; we will autonomy for itself, but we will it also in order to do things.

⁹Robert Legros teaches at the Free University of Brussels and the University of Caen. —T/E

To do what? Not everyone can write *The Art of the Fugue*; that's obvious. And it would perhaps be horrible if everyone could create *The Art of the Fugue*. There is therefore a question of the contents of human life, which a thinker, a philosopher cannot pull out of her head, for such contents cannot but be the act of a collective historical creation.

A.F.: At bottom, making autonomy, and not tradition, society's supreme norm, its supreme value, means thinking that what is properly human in man is the capacity to invent, to create something new, to think for oneself. This is the phrase Arendt borrows from Augustine: "This beginning did in no way ever exist before. In order that there be such a beginning, man was created before whom nobody was."¹⁰ A wholly naive and undoubtedly not very philosophical question is then posed: Beginning with a view to what? One begins, one thinks for oneself, but one can think a bunch of stupid things; one can create things that aren't worth the effort. Can the definition of what is properly human do without what Castoriadis calls *substantive values*?

R.L.: I don't think that one could do without the question of *substantive values*. Indeed, we cannot will autonomy for its own sake. Nevertheless, we attach a price to the substantive values we want to defend only to the extent that they preserve autonomy, that is to say, the capacity to think and act for oneself, the faculty of invention and creation. To tell the truth, I think that the opposition between an attitude that is submissive to substantive values, one that renounces autonomy, and an attitude that aims at autonomy only for its own sake is a false opposition. For, the meaning (of our actions, our works, our words, and that to which we are subjected, the meaning of suffering, death, life) is irreducible to the substantial: it isn't natural, transcendent, given, external, for it is always the fruit of a creation. But it is also irreducible to the conventional: we don't decide on it in a sovereign manner or in an arbitrary way, for, in a certain

¹⁰In Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (1929), ed. with an interpretive essay by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 55. —T/E

fashion, it decides on us. I mean that we ourselves are what we are on account of our inscription within an already sensible world. Art shows us that the greatest creations are in no way linked to a will to create with a view to creating. And consumer society shows us that a certain kind of pursuit of autonomy for the sake of autonomy can go hand in hand with the most insipid sort of conformism.

C.C.: It must first be reiterated as forcefully as possible that contemporary society today in 1990, the society in which we live, believes that it is innovative, but it's perhaps one of the most conformist societies that would have ever existed in history. The society of generalized conformism: what one calls *postmodernism* is generalized conformism.¹¹

Beyond that, there's a huge problem; it is, obviously, the end of religion, that is to say, the falling of the veils with which people have always covered over the stark fact of their mortality. Everything we're saying here, which renders explicit the creation, by man (by people collectively, including individuals' contributions), of the significations within which man lives, signifies that there is no transcendence, or that, if there is transcendence, in any case there is no socially instituted representative of this transcendence. It's that we live in a world that has in itself no meaning and that we can live only by creating meaning. We know that, in creating meaning, it depends on us and that, in another way, it does not depend on us. Here we have the abyss, and it's here that the genius is not especially a genius. Genius or, quite simply, the boy and girl who are in love, make something arise that comes from elsewhere—that's certain. But learning to live with this deep awareness of our mortality, of the very mortality of our works and of the meaning we have been able to create, is the prerequisite for all

¹¹“The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism” (1992; now in *WIF*). A first version of this lecture was “delivered in English on September 19, 1989, during a Boston University symposium, ‘A Metaphor for Our Times’” (*ibid.*, p. 414) and translated by Castoriadis himself into French the next year (i.e., the same year as the present discussion with Legros) in *MM*. —T/E

genuine democracy, and it is for this reason that democracy is the most difficult and tragic regime of all.

R.L.: We do indeed have an awareness of the mortality of our works and of meaning, but also with the awareness that we are not the masters of the meaning of what we do or create: with the awareness that we make or create meaning only by being outflanked by it and drawn into the infinite questions to which it gives rise.

Dialogue in Annex: Cornelius Castoriadis and Paul Ricœur On History and the Social Imaginary*

CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS: No need to say how happy I am to be able to talk with you, Paul Ricœur, and how honored I am that you have wished to dialogue with me for your *Bon Plaisir* radio program.¹ And you do indeed know that, since it was you I came to see shortly after 1968 to propose a topic for a doctoral thesis on *the imaginary element*, which remained what it was at the time: elementary and imaginary. . . .

PAUL RICŒUR: You have published more than just some elements. And I have several times referred to the “imaginary production of society.”² For, I believe that our shared interest really lies in this issue of the imaginary seat of social relations and social production.

C.C.: Yes, well, for my part, I don’t speak of *production* but of “institution.” I do so deliberately, of course. I wanted to ask you about that, about this word “production.” This may seem a bit of a scholastic quarrel, but I’m not looking for any quarrel with you. When Immanuel Kant speaks of the imagination, he describes it as “productive”

. . .

P.R.: That’s really my parentage.

C.C.: He calls it “creative” only once, in passing, in the third *Critique*. And that’s undoubtedly not by accident, inasmuch as Kant, in this *Critique of Judgment*, drew his inspiration from eighteenth-century literature, making

*Cornelius Castoriadis and Paul Ricœur, *Dialogue sur l’histoire et l’imaginaire social*, ed. with an intro. by Johann Michel (Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2016): 39-71. Except when otherwise indicated, all notes are from Michel’s edition.

¹*Le Bon Plaisir de Paul Ricœur*, France Culture, radio program broadcast March 9, 1985.

²Ricœur is making reference to Castoriadis’s work, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975; English translation, 1987).

numerous references to English authors. But this term *production*, for me, is overly tied to Karl Marx, already, but also to Martin Heidegger.

P.R.: I finesse this. . . . In reality, I am returning to a pre-Marxist moment of the word, to its Fichtean moment. For, *produzieren*³—that’s Fichte. What in fact won me over to the concept of productive rather than creative imagination is that I was attaching to the idea of creation something infinitely more primordial, something that would be related to the order of a sacred founder, whereas, on the human scale, we are always in an order that is institutional. That is where I encountered *producing*, which is not *creating*. The word *production* is to be coupled with the word *reproduction*, it seems to me. As opposed to an imagination that only reproduces in copies something that is already there, production is essentially a production of new syntheses, of new configurations. This is what interested me, on the plane of language, with metaphor;⁴ we produce new significations by making an intersection between different semantic fields. Now that I am working on narrative, I see in the production of narrative configurations, through plotting, the production of a story.⁵ That’s the way in which I use the word *produce*.

C.C.: Here we are, straight away, right within what both unites us and separates us the most. And I would like to take advantage of this radio show to understand you better. You say “production,” “reproduction”—and “reproduction” even when it comes to combining things that are not already there! Now, it is impossible for me to think the *polis*, the

³In Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s work, reflection in itself is empty: it therefore implies production (*produzieren*), that is to say, reflection of something or on something (images, concepts, etc.).

⁴Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (1975), trans. Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

⁵Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (1983-1985), trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988).

Greek city, for example, or philosophy, which emerges in the sixth century [B.C.E.], as mere recombinations of elements that were already there. What institutes the *polis* as *polis* is a signification that it creates and by means of which it creates itself as *polis*.

P.R.: But we never experience production in this form! You are presenting us there with the myth of production. Let us set aside the issue of the Greek city in order to take up an experience we can rightly have: that of some kind of production on the order of language. We are not familiar with any other productions but ones that follow rules [*productions réglées*], that is to say, that we do not produce everything in what we produce. I am in complete agreement with you: One cannot speak of “elements that were already there.” In my current analysis of narrative, I show that there are no prior elements in the sense that the events that are combined and that compose the narrative didn’t exist as variables of this narrative. Let us take, for example, the different ways in which one can recount the events of the French Revolution: the event’s “differential” varies each time depending on the narrative, depending on whether one draws some plot from Tocqueville, some other one from Augustin Cochin,⁶ or yet another one from Furet.⁷ That is why one cannot speak of a combinatory of prior elements, which would be, as it were, an associationist view.

C.C.: But that’s the Structuralist view. Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that in black and white.

P.R.: It’s not mine, for that would presuppose that there would be sorts of atoms, differently combined.

C.C.: And each society rolls the dice.

P.R.: That is so only in a static, and not productive, view. By *static view*, I mean the view that sees a combinatory

⁶Augustin Cochin, *L’Esprit du jacobinisme: Une interprétation sociologique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979).

⁷François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978), trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, England and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

as a set of fixed “elements” upon which one performs some rearrangements, with, in the end, some mutually discontinuous static structures. Opposite that, in what I call *introducing a plot*, there’s a moving process wherein the “elements” are reshaped in terms of the lesson drawn from an event. An event is determined by its role in the story being recounted. There is an event for one, not for the other. In one plot, the taking of the Bastille is not an event: in another, it’s an origin. Consequently, there are, as it were, no prior, fixed elements. Yet I maintain that we can produce only in accordance with rules; we do not produce everything we produce, were it only because we already have a discourse before speaking. Others have spoken and have established some rules of the game. What we can do is re-place them in what Malraux called “regular deformations [*déformations réglées*].”⁸ We can proceed through regular deformations, but always within something prestructured, something already structured that we restructure. That is why we are never in a situation that you would call *creation*, as if one would draw the form from the absolutely formless.

C.C.: And that’s exactly why the idea of institution, and not production, is at the center of my work. The self-institution of society implies that we are always working within the realm of the already settled [*du déjà réglé*], by manipulating or modifying rules [*règles*]; but also by positing new ones, by creating them. That’s our autonomy.

P.R.: The idea of absolute novelty is unthinkable. There can be something new only in a break [*rupture*] with the old: there is something pre-settled before us, which we unsettle in order to settle it otherwise. Yet no situation exists where there is, as it were, . . . the first day of creation.

C.C.: There lies the whole problem—in the way of thinking temporality and being in temporality. In an initial view, which is not necessarily yours, everything is predetermined, already logically preinscribed within a great book of possibilities. Starting from these essential elements, which are material as well as spiritual elements or elements

⁸André Malraux employed the expression “coherent deformation.”

of meaning, certain combinations are produced that themselves allow other combinations, and so on and so forth. But another way of considering temporality is to note therein the emergence of levels of being. Let us take an entirely empirical example: the first living cell on Earth, which represents something new compared to the primeval ocean. Of course, not something absolutely new; it is rule-bound [*réglée*]; it cannot violate a quantity of rules. Likewise, when Wagner composes operas, he cannot violate certain properly musical rules, others concerning his biological metabolism, his relations with the other, etc. That doesn't keep him from laying down new harmonies, which were, before him, absurdly dissonant. When the Greeks created mathematics—and the precursory role played by the Babylonians or the Egyptians matters little here—they created the idea of proof starting from a minimum number of axioms and in accordance with given rules.

P.R.: Ah, but I follow you! We had just spoken of where we are closest and furthest away from each other. Here, I find myself closest. I continually plead in favor of the notion of *thought-event*: there are thought-events; there are innovations. But here we have to think dialectically. One cannot think innovation except conditionally: first of all, there have to be some prior configurations. That is not at all what you were saying when you mentioned a register of possibilities that would be immutable, as if one were going to draw from a sort of great treasury of possibilities. That doesn't exist. What does exist are prior configurations that we reconfigure—and we proceed in this way, from configurations to configurations. You just spoke of Greek rationality, of the Greek miracle,⁹ . . . but one mustn't go too far! There really

⁹Castoriadis expressed reservations regarding the thesis of a “Greek miracle” (a phrase originated by French historian Ernest Renan and taken up by others since then, but which ill fits Castoriadis's atheistic outlook). See the last page of the published transcription of his 1996 oral presentation, “L'Anthropogonie chez Eschyle et chez Sophocle,” in *La Grèce pour penser l'avenir*, intro. Jean-Pierre Vernant (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000): 151-71 (the published French translation of the Greek in *FP* and thus also the [FT\(P&K\)](#) English translation, “Aeschylean

was a before . . . that occurs through attempts, by trials and errors; around Plato, we see some schools, the school of Eudoxus, the way one found the five regular solids; all that constitutes some small emergences that accumulate, but on the basis, precisely, of something pre-ordered, of missed tries, of fruitless attempts. One glimpses that Copernicus and Kepler's cosmological portrayal was anticipated . . .

C.C.: . . . by Eratosthenes.

P.R.: We're never in a sort of passage from nothing to something, but from a something to something, from one other to another—which goes from configured to configured, never from formless to form. This is what I meant by limiting the excesses of a sort of anarchism of Reason. Reason follows upon itself, but in a dialectic of innovation and sedimentation. There is sedimentation of research and thoughts—and of the *said*, of what has been said before us. It is starting from things already said that we say something else. Sometimes we say it better, but we remain in a sort of continuity of a saying that corrects itself and accumulates. I do not know whether you are close to Michel Foucault, but this is a discussion one can have apropos of his *Archaeology of Knowledge*.¹⁰ Can one think total discontinuity as the leap from one episteme to another? In Foucault's case, that works well when one takes three or four registers like language, biological classifications, economics, money, etc. But when there is a break in a line, there is continuity on another line, and it is not because one has changed epistemes in those few registers that one has changed it in mathematics or in theology or in law and especially in continued existence. Perhaps we would no longer be in agreement here, and I would like to discuss this with you; for, here lie the stakes involved in the word *instituting*. It seems to me that, behind all the breaks in thought, there is an ongoing setting [*décor continuel*] that still

Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man," omitted those final oral remarks). Contrary to what Ricœur claims here, Castoriadis did not employ this phrase in their discussion. —T/E

¹⁰Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York, Pantheon Books, 1972).

forms the continuity of human communities. Before the institution, there is a living-together that has a certain continuity, that can be instituted, can reinstitute itself, can constitute itself through rupture upon the background of transmitted, received legacies, providing, if I may put it thus, the *basso continuo*.

This analysis gives a certain primacy to the continuity of existence, to the perpetuation of a living-together as background for instituting operations, and allows one to situate the discontinuities of meaning upon continuities of existence. There is a meaning/existence relation; it is on the level of meaning that there can be some breaks, some events, sudden appearances [*surgissements*].

You just mentioned biology, but, well, we no longer have any human mutations: we are in a biological continuity of generations that, like the continuity of living beings, lies in the background of the discontinuity of our thoughts. It was in this respect that I wanted to limit the pretension—in the English-language sense of *claim* in *truth claim*: pretension to truth, to rightness—involved in the notion of a discontinuity in the creation of institutions.

C.C.: If you accept discontinuity at the level of meaning and not at the level of existence, that suits me perfectly. If I were polemical, I would say that you are conceding to me what I need. For, for me, ontologically, society like history is meaning. And it is starting from this level that I can establish a discontinuity between the Sudanese President (Gaafar Nimeiry) or Ayatollah Khomeini and us. If not, we are all just talking bipeds; we live in instituted societies anchored in a common Judaic past, that of the religions of the Book. But the discontinuity, the cut [*coupure*], is effectuated at the level of meaning—and it is accompanied, moreover, by other cuts, those of hands and other members for thieves and fornicators. That's something that we cannot accept and that we would have to condemn if we were not caught up in some kind of stupid self-indictment. That sort of discontinuity alone interests me. As for Foucault, I have spoken of him briefly and very brutally: I totally object to his conception of the human enterprise as a staccato of mutually unrelated epistemes.

P.R.: But you, what do you say? I set a limit on Foucault's argument precisely by affirming a certain historical continuity of legacies.

C.C.: What continuity?

P.R.: Something like the continuity of life, not necessarily from the biological standpoint, but the life of the mind, properly human life, living and continued living-together—conviviality. In other words, we can think the notion of *interruption* only with the idea of *continuation* in the background. I believe, moreover, that that is the definition of time in Spinoza's work.¹¹ He was saying that it was the continuation of existence.

C.C.: Of course, but let us try to rise a bit higher in relation to *our* history, even if it is that history of ours that allows us to speak—a condition that is anything but negligible, philosophically. Remaining within the course of a history that is Greco-Western, or European in the broad sense, and that begins at least with the Homeric poems, all meaning, every new form that emerges, is not the result of a combination of preexisting forms, even if it retains a certain reference to this past.

P.R.: But then we are both on the same side!

C.C.: Yes, here we are on the same side. But if I consider the Aztecs, I can no longer say the same thing.

P.R.: Me neither!

C.C.: And one would have to be a really bold Hegelian Marxist to maintain that the Aztecs have been dialectically surmounted, surpassed—Derrida would say *relevés*—in being massacred by Christopher Columbus! Here one no longer has any continuity. Or else, a continuity of another order: no human society can go without giving a meaning to the world. And this *Eingebung*, as Heidegger calls it, this donation of meaning can have barely any relations, except trivial ones, with that of another society.

P.R.: I don't manage to see where we differ, because I grant that each configuration—whether it be narrative,

¹¹Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), trans. from the Latin by R. H. M. Elwes: "Duration is the indefinite continuance of existing" (Part II, Definition V).

whether it be metaphorical, whether it be political, institutional—is, as such, new in relation to every other one: it is qualitatively different from every other one. I simply challenged that it might bring some configuration out of nothing. I see humanity proceeding in fact through breaks, discontinuities, but always within the order of the configurative. If we have a great continuity, it is really the one you have stated, where—proceeding from the Greek fiber, root, trunk—we recognize ourselves in a certain continuity.

C.C.: But that's for us.

P.R.: Yes, it's for us, and even for those whom we call the others. But can we think absolute alterity? What language reveals to us, what is manifested in language more exactly, is not only that translation has been possible but also that it has been successful. We will never be faced with a tongue [*langue*] that would be absolutely untranslatable. . . .

C.C.: No more than being faced with an absolutely translatable text, except if it's a series of mathematical formulae.

P.R.: To speak of the limits of translation supposes that one would have at least been able to begin and, to a certain extent, to succeed in this operation. Without translation, there would be no humanity, but some human species, like dogs and cats. What makes there be one humanity is this translatability in principle, which recreates the continuity of meaning within the discontinuity of the productions and strokes of configuration.

C.C.: Perhaps there's another way of seeing that. Roman Jakobson taught us that every successful translation in the domain of poetry is not strictly cognitive, that it is in fact a new creation. I believe that the entire problem lies there. Let us look, for example, at everything the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even nineteenth centuries were able to produce in the way of historical knowledge about the Old Testament, about Hebraic history, about Greek history. It is absolutely flabbergasting, one sometimes says to oneself: but what is one talking about? About Greece? About the Old Testament? No, one is speaking there in fact of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Where I radically separate myself from Foucault is that, for me, there

is a Greece, there is an Old Testament, and all the interpretations we give of it are based/lean on a signification that serves as referent for these successive creations that are interpretations. They are not absolutely arbitrary. If one told me that the *Iliad* is speaking in fact of the Battle of Verdun, any discussion or refutation is pointless. There is a limit. When the great Gladstone thought that he could establish that the *Iliad* is a fallen theology of the Old Testament, he crossed this line and was saying something absurd. Such absurdity was certainly necessary for his political-philosophical-theological attempt, but it was an absurdity nonetheless. It can interest me only for what it says about Victorian England. But other interpretations of Greece, from France's nineteenth century, from our era, are interesting, pertinent. Why are they so? A big problem.

P.R.: In order to discern better our disagreement, I would like to start from what we certainly share in common when you say, "I believe that there is a referent and that there was an Old Testament, a Greece, etc." What does that signify, if not that the multiplicity of interpretations and the reinterpretations of interpretations are other approximations of the same thing? Something of what happened on the order of thought was also a set of events [*ensemble événementiel*]. Recorded in the canonical texts of the Bible, this ensemble constitutes us, as it were, opposite it. This is a source of corrections and approximations for all our reconstructions. In other words, our constructions, in the historical case you yourself have chosen, aim at being reconstructions. It's a task of reconstruction, as it were. I take this word in the sense used in painting when one speaks of a "rendering" of a landscape, and the verb "to render" in both senses of the word. On the one hand, one must pay a debt; on the other, make a creative work, a creation that is at the same time a freeing [*affranchissement*] from an insolvent debt. This struggle is to be found again, moreover, in the work of the creative person who is always making other paintings when he produces series—Monet's series, his haystacks or

C.C.: Cézanne's *Apples*.

P.R.: Yes, Cézanne's *Apples*. It's always something else and always the same thing. With something on the order

of duty: he had to render what is owed, as it were, to do justice [*rendre justice*] to something that exists and that precedes him.

C.C.: Cézanne, Monet—they are inexhaustible, not, of course, because the *Water Lilies* or the *Apples* are inexhaustible as physical phenomena but inexhaustible qua visual objects and objects to be painted. And I will remain forever indebted vis-à-vis Greece, a topic on which I have chosen to work.

P.R.: This inexhaustibility, that's what I call *the continuous*: the great continuity of Being behind the discontinuity of productions.

C.C.: Here's the difference: I won't call it *the continuous*, for it's a mode of being. And that's more than a terminological problem. I will always be indebted to Ancient Greece, and we will always be so, because the significations it created are inexhaustible, ceaselessly giving rise to new interpretations. . . .

P.R.: Yes, that's it exactly; it's a mode of being. In any case, you are not at all for those sorts of eruptions or irruptions that would be other than all the other ones and that would never form series . . . ? To my mind, what characterizes a human memory, a cultural memory, is that it can accumulate: it is not simply additive, erasing, as it were, its own precedents. No, it links up with them and they become in the same stroke its antecedents.

C.C.: I agree completely, but what you are saying there is true only for our history, which is the sole one to rest on such cumulateness. And that is so first of all because it has meant itself to be that. Instead of slumbering upon the traditions of the tribe—there was a hero who did this and that—of repeating them with small continuous deformations (precisely what Lévi-Strauss describes in the four volumes of his *Mythologiques*), it has doubled back upon them and, with Herodotus, given them another status: What the Ancients kept going on about was just talk, the truth isn't that truth, and we want to know the truth. And there again, you have a break.

P.R.: The successive forms in which the past—which you yourself have described as inexhaustible—has been taken back up and reinterpreted themselves contained something

potential, something unfinished. And through a sort of retroaction of our new creations on the old moments, we set free [*délivrons*] possibilities that had been prevented. There's a fundamental difference in relation to Structuralism—and perhaps here we are on the same side: the structures are not saturated. And this unemployed, repressed potential, each new creation retroactively, as it were, frees it up [*le délivre*]. There would probably be a place there for some Freudian concepts like *the inhibited*, *the repressed*. It is through the freeing up of the repressed that we make a continuity with our own past, but through the very means of the discontinuity of which you were speaking. It is there that the concept of *institution* . . .

C.C.: Forgive me for being a bit direct, but these unemployed potentialities—you see very well where they lead you—you just as much as Sigmund Freud, moreover. Ultimately, this boils down in the end to saying that the entire history of humanity was already there at the moment when the first Anthropopithecus created the first spark by striking together two stones. . . . The regression is not infinite but, precisely, finite. Or an infinite descent, as Pierre de Fermat would say, and Euclid before him. For me, the human being's potentiality is, if I may say so, the potentiality of potentiality. One cannot speak in terms of a potential that becomes actual, but one can speak of *creation of new potentialities*. And here again, it once more becomes scholastic to say: Of course, all these potentialities have to be at the start in an initial potentiality. The potential of playing the piano presupposes: the piano, European musical notation, music professors to teach it to students, a certain degree of separation between music and religious ritual, etc. We have here so many created potentialities.

P.R.: You are not taking into account at all my main argument, namely, retroaction: in opening the future, we are setting free new potentialities. I don't feel at all imprisoned by the scholastic argument that everything would already be

contained from the outset. . . . Canguilhem¹² was already discussing this conception apropos of germs that contain germs, etc. Leibniz himself, for a moment, maintained this view he called *development*.

C.C.: But the biologists were already searching for the germ in the germ, *ad infinitum*.

P.R.: There, I'm not with them at all! I object entirely to this idea of *development* (*Entwicklung*), as if everything was rolled up and one only had to unroll it. My own historical schema would maintain, rather, that we are always in a dialectical relation between what Reinhart Koselleck¹³ (a German of the Bielefeld School¹⁴ who worked a great deal on the categories of history) calls a *horizon of expectation* and a *space of experience*. One mustn't exit from this polarity. It is because we project a horizon of expectation, thus actually opening up innovation ahead of us, that we can remake a continuity with what precedes us, because we read it otherwise. . . . There is something absolutely specific in historicity: it is precisely this power to institute something new in reprising the received legacy. Once again, it is this that I call *retroaction*. That has nothing to do with biological theory, where we do indeed have alternatives between development and evolution. . . . We are not in biology but in history.

C.C.: Of course we are in history, and not in biology. But this domain you call *symbolic*, I call it, for my part, the

¹²Georges Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life* (1952), trans. Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

¹³Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) was a German historian and philosopher who profoundly renewed historical epistemology. Ricœur is making reference to his masterwork, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1979), trans. and with an intro. by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁴The Bielefeld School was a German historiographical movement (affiliated with Bielefeld University) that made a name for itself through its effort to link History to the methods of the Social Sciences within an approach that was sometimes close to that of the *Annales* School.

domain of signification, and this signification . . .

P.R.: It's that I don't want to allow myself to be dragged into the opposition of the imaginary And that's why I retain rather the Kantian imagination, which covers what has been broken in two by the phantasmatic and the symbolic.

C.C.: The Kantian imagination—but that's a subject about which we'll have to return—remains the imagination of a subject, even as it is reprised by Heidegger in his book on *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.¹⁵ As for me, I am trying to think a social imaginary, that is to say, a creativity of the social-historical field, of the social-historical collectivity as such. And I begin with the beginning, the first principle, the first paradigm: the institution. Which presupposes a continuity of living-together on the part of human communities. I do not believe that there could be human communities without institution. We both are readers of Freud: the primordial drives of a being that would not be schooled by the institution—that's not living-together but “killing one another” or “having incest with each other.” Therefore, there is an institution that is *self-creation of society* and that brings about the emergence in Being of this third region, that of an immanent meaning, of an instituted meaning, of an embodied signification. And when you say that there is no absolute rupture, that one always remains within the rules of language: Certainly, yes. But language itself? Can one derive it from monkeys' mimicry, as does someone who passes, alas, for a philosopher?¹⁶ Can I derive the polysemy of language . . .

¹⁵Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), trans. Richard Taft, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). [See [WIF](#), pp. 215-16. —T/E]

¹⁶Castoriadis is alluding here to René Girard's theory of “mimetic desire” (see, in particular, his *Violence and the Sacred* [1972], trans. Patrick Gregory [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977]). [See also “La contingence dans les affaires humaines. Débat Cornelius Castoriadis-René Girard” (June 13, 1981 at the Cerisy Colloquium), in *L'Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*, ed. Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983): 282-301. —T/E]

P.R.: That is absolutely not what I am saying. We are always speaking in a setting [*milieu*] where language has already been spoken. In this sense, we are already preceded, qua individuals and qua collectivity. We do not know any tongue emanating from an animal cry. We are right away in language [*la langue*].

C.C.: And we know no tongue-less humanity. Therefore, we do not know any humanity that, in a way, does not proceed from a first self-creation.

P.R.: Self-creation, no. Successive reconfigurations, yes.

C.C.: But then language [*le langage*] is a transformation of the animal cry, which you reject.

P.R.: I have no access to this first moment of language. Precisely, the problem you yourself are condemned to pose to yourself is that of an institution that commences from nothing.

C.C.: I cannot simply dispose of it.

P.R.: I am saying that one is faced with an institution that proceeds from institutions. Just as there are always tongues that proceed from tongues, so there are institutions that proceed from institutions. We do not know anything noninstituted. In other words, as soon as there is man, there are, in short, three things: tool, norm, language; and perhaps four, with burial, a certain relation to the dead.

C.C.: Later on.

P.R.: And not simply a biological relation. We do not treat the dead like some natural waste products but as ancestors.

C.C.: The oldest burial places are less than 50,000 years old, and it is certain that the first tools, norms, and even language are quite earlier than that.

P.R.: We always come after the moment when things have been. I believe that the passage from the biological to the human institution escapes us entirely. That is why we are always in the preinstituted, in the newly instituted. And I don't see where you can place the notion of creation except in the sense of a thought-event we reconfigure exactly as we recount another history with the same archives. The archives are there and then we write the history of the French

Revolution. But we wouldn't be able to have innovation of thought without a sort of great event reserve, broad swaths configured in a certain way by our predecessors—and which we reconfigure otherwise. Innovations always go from configurations to configurations and to reconfigurations.

C.C.: Once again, this discussion has no meaning unless we distinguish some levels. . . . Let us take Thales; that's not a mythical person, and he is at the confluence of a multitude of continuities: his tongue, his education, the content of his theorem, which he perhaps had learned from the Egyptians, or by frequenting masons, architects. . . . But at a certain moment, as one says in narratives, he was not content with this acquired knowledge or with handling little boards; he wanted to *demonstrate* this property of triangles. Here, we are no longer in the realm of simple continuity; suddenly, there *emerges* a new figure of the historical that, like other contemporaneous figures, bears the same signification, or rather the same magma of significations: *logon didonai*, giving an account of and a reason for. There's the absolute rupture that marks the singularity of our history: giving an account of and reason for, when I affirm that the square of the hypotenuse is equal, etc., but also when I claim that these here are the laws that the city should adopt, or that the Persians live according to such and such customs and the Egyptians such and such other ones. And giving an account of and reason for—without stopping at a mythical history, at the Tables of the Law, or at the narratives of the ancestors.

P.R.: Nothing in all that contradicts me. I am saying exactly the same thing: with Thales, an unprecedented and previously unheard of mode of thought emerges, but at the same time men continue to live. I will therefore never be faced with a discontinuity from beginning to end.

C.C.: Let's not insist on that; it's absolutely certain.

P.R.: And it is thus that there can be one humanity. I begin here but I continue there.

C.C.: I'm completely in agreement with you. And I myself have written that the most radical political revolution conceivable will leave intact many more things than it will

transform¹⁷—billions of individuals, forests, fields, buildings. . . . The question that really matters to me here is the emergence of a new figure. So when you say that this inexhaustibility of things in the past is tied to our capacity for innovation toward the future . . .

P.R.: I will insist on one concept that, moreover, Jacques Lacan had highlighted in Freud's work: the notion of *deferred action*.¹⁸ This corresponds to a word more personally mine, which I just employed, that of *retroaction*. I am coming back to it, for this notion is quite important for us: when a breakthrough in truth occurs, we are at the same time always capable of linking it back up, precisely because we are not at an absolute beginning. We are not the absolute beginning of everything. In order to be a creator, we have to be able to remember what we have abandoned in order to include it in what we have found.

C.C.: Absolutely. But I have the impression that we are dialoguing, as one says in English, "at cross purposes," a bit beside each other. Perhaps that is because you are speaking especially about our European history—and the truth of all that you are saying is magnificently borne out. Whereas, I am trying—excuse me for going a bit beyond it—to speak also of

¹⁷"Every institution, as well as the most radical revolution one could conceive of, must always take place within an already given history. Should it have the crazy project of clearing the ground totally, such a revolution still would have to use what it finds on the ground in order to make a clean sweep. The present, to be sure, always transforms the past into a *present past*, that is, a past relevant for the *now*, if only by continually 'reinterpreting' it by means of that which is being created, thought, posited now; but it is always *that given past*, not a past in general, that the present shapes according to its own imaginary" ("Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *PPA*, p. 170). The original French publication of this text did not occur until January 1988, but it was first drafted in "Burgos, March 1978." There may be other such statements elsewhere in Castoriadis's oeuvre. —T/E

¹⁸"Deferred action" is the English translation of the Freudian concept drawn from the noun *Nachträglichkeit*, which signifies the psychism's reworking of past events. See the reprise of this concept [*l'après-coup* in French] as a conception of psychical causality and its Structuralist extension in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 151-93.

other histories. But, with Greece, what happens? Each time one does something new in Europe, one turns with anxiety toward the Greeks to say, "That was already there," or to say, "It's in keeping with the Greeks," or to say, "So, we have something that the Greeks could not have imagined, but still"

P.R.: Yes, the Greeks were the first to do so. Recall Plato, who remembered a *palaios logos*,¹⁹ an "ancient saying"

...
C.C.: In that much-talked-about saying, which is undoubtedly inauthentic, the Egyptians said of the Greeks that they were "eternal children," ever capable of forgetting one round of a game in order to start another game.²⁰ Perhaps in that, too, we have remained Greek.

P.R.: I was thinking of the lovely text by Nietzsche, in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*,²¹ on the advantages and disadvantages of history. . . . It's that, believing that we are newcomers, we are in fact "latecomers." It is very important that in our own experience we negotiate this twofold relationship of early/late comers. Think of the arrogance of newcomers. There is at the same time a weakness in the Nietzschean language of late-comers, which is their epigonic character. Among them, the arrogance of false prophets . . .

C.C.: Yes, absolutely, with still the same difference:

¹⁹This phrase is found in Plato, notably in the *Phaedo* (70c). *Palaios logos* can also be translated as "a certain ancient speech," "a certain tradition."

²⁰At *Timaeus* 21a, Critias begins to recount to Socrates a *palaion ak ko n logon* (an old, heard or reported story), wherein Solon is supposed to have been told by an Egyptian priest that "you Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you" (22b, Jowett translation). —T/E

²¹The *Untimely Meditations* or *Unfashionable Observations* or *Thoughts Out Of Season* (*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*) bring together a series of four philosophical works by Friedrich Nietzsche. Ricœur is referring to the *Second Piece*, "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life" (1874; *Unfashionable Observations*, tr. with an Afterword by Richard T. Grey, [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995]).

this going back over history, in order to fertilize the past in this way, to re-enrich it, is specific to us. We have created it, and others have been able at times to borrow it from us. Elsewhere than in the West, one's relation to the past is, precisely, more or less mythical. Obviously, myth, too, changes, drifts little by little, but never in order to go back over its signification, to question it, to give an account of and a reason for it. Undoubtedly, and here I follow you completely, the two things go hand in hand: it is because we change horizons that we constantly need to turn ourselves around in order to question our origins. People who do not change horizons have no need of that. . . .

P.R.: We partake of a certain contingent historical fiber.

C.C.: There you have it. *Contingent* is the word that really matters for me.

P.R.: We have the experience of making continuity through strokes of discontinuities and retroactive reprises. But we cannot think that such contingency would have no universal signification: we can think humanity in its entirety only as a communicative process, one that would, precisely, be placed under "the rule of the best argument."²² No human culture would be so other that it would not be able to enter into a relation of mutual translatability with our own. An American philosopher, Donald Davidson, may be mentioned on this score for his criticism of the notion of "organizing scheme":²³ It is, he says, impossible to conceive of absolutely different civilizations as if they belonged to a radically untransmittable organizing scheme. If they were radically other, we would not even know them; we know that they are other only because we have encountered the limits of

²²Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1983), trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen; intro. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

²³Ricœur is making reference to Davidson's notion of "conceptual scheme," which he translates here as *schème organisateur* (see "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 47 [1973-1974]: 5-20).

translation—but a translation that, as a consequence, has, as we have already said, succeeded. We must really place at *that* moment one's relation with what is different, doing so in terms of the idea of humanity as the model for successful communication. I grant that this is an idea, in the Kantian sense of the word, that is to say, a regulative idea. It is this regulative idea that makes humanity hold together, that gives it the signifying coexistence of not being several humanities but, rather, a single humanity. True, this is a task, but at least we know that we are not working for nothing when we make the effort. . . . Thus, as Jean-Marc Ferry has shown in his dissertation:²⁴ While there is no international community of law, at least one can speak of international problems. For example, that of world debt. Take the way in which world debt is treated; it is already a preliminary for international law [*l'amorce d'un droit international*]. In other words, we cannot start from an absolute void of communication, even among different cultures. When the rest of us read the Koran or the *Upanishads* or Lao-Tzu, we cannot help but read them as texts to be interpreted and also texts that have been interpreted. Certainly, it's our culture that furnishes some hermeneutic models, but we reawaken these hermeneutic models, too, among the others. The best proof of this is that the great scholars of other cultures are in many respects the students, the disciples of the great masters of Western hermeneutics. In this sense, we can presume that there is a single human mode of making continuity, of making tradition, and of making innovation in one and the same unique gesture of innovation/tradition.

C.C.: Before letting you have the last word, one remark: It is not possible to think humanity as a unity. No, that, it's not true, or else it's true in certain regards and not in other ones. What is true is that *I want* humanity as unity. That is not a theoretical truth.

P.R.: That's exactly what I am saying.

C.C.: We are then in agreement on that: Humanity qua

²⁴Jean-Marc Ferry, *Habermas. L'éthique de la communication* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987).

unity is not a regulative idea of Reason; it's a political imaginary signification that animates a political project.

P.R.: There is not simply an imaginary practice; there is also a practical Reason. This is an act of thought in accordance with some categories of practice and therefore with some legal requirements. We are not capable of thinking a total void of the juridical realm.

C.C.: No, there is a human making/doing [*un faire human*], a reflective making/doing, which raises itself to the level of the political and that, as such, absolutely has to incorporate ethics, the ethical moment. Thinking the unity of humanity? Yes, but the human sacrifices committed by the Aztecs, the massacre of the Melians by my ancestors, the Athenians, Auschwitz, the Gulag—I don't see the translation that could bring me close to *that* humanity. The monstrous is too easily evacuated; Hannah Arendt, in her book on totalitarianism,²⁵ said that the phenomenon of totalitarianism collapses the traditional categories for understanding history. And she was right.

P.R.: We absolutely did not speak of evil. I am completely on your side.

C.C.: You call it *evil*, I call it *the monstrous*, but it's really there.

P.R.: I mean that there are irrecoverable things in the construction of meaning.

C.C.: And that, too, is still meaning, at its level.

P.R.: You are really heading in my direction, if I may say so: I recognize the unacceptable, the unbearable, and the intolerable only within the limits of an effort to understand that therefore lies under the rule of the best argument. And the limit to the argument is the violent deed. I can exclude it only on the basis of a practice of argumentation. The blind spot is the inadmissible on the level of argumentation.

C.C.: But this blind spot, this point of blindness, is constitutive of reality. The rule of the best argument is worthless opposite Hitler, the Stalinists, Khomeini, etc. The beautiful argument—I can always carry it with me into the

²⁵Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

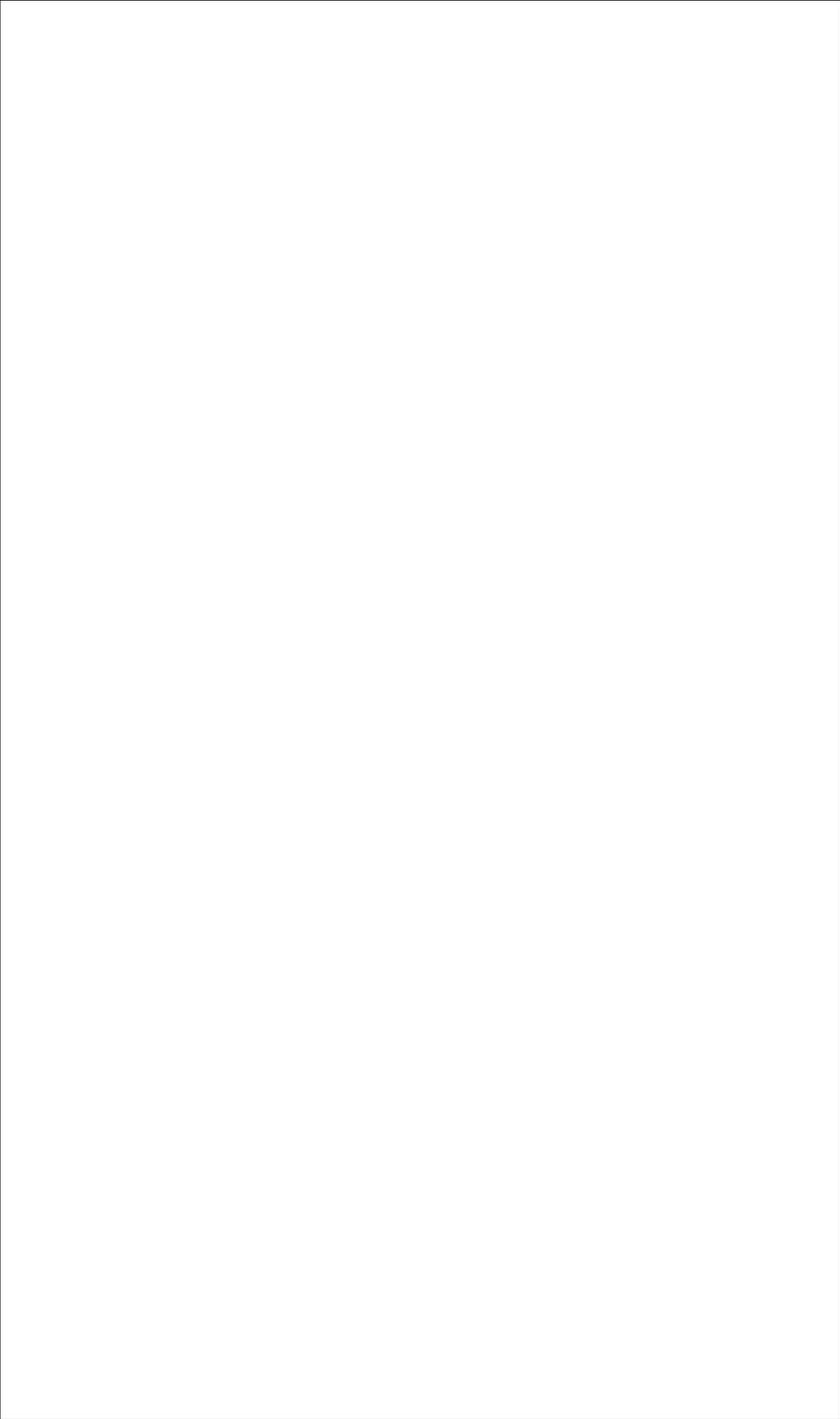
other world. . . .

P.R.: The phrase “is worthless” is set precisely within the universe of meaning. I reject the meaningless, but I could not act like Adorno,²⁶ who knew perfectly well what evil was but had no idea of the good. And if I did not have, like Habermas²⁷ or others, the limit-idea of successful communication (and, consequently, certain successful, even if constrained, communicative practices), I would not be able to say “no” ethically to a horrible motivation. I can understand it imaginarily only upon the following condition: in this effort, I continue my task as translator. I am the universal translator of that very thing I refuse and that I reject absolutely from my horizon.

²⁶Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).

²⁷Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*.

**PART FOUR
FOUR PORTRAITS**



Benno Sternberg-Sarel*

Benno Sternberg-Sarel died suddenly in Paris on March 9, 1971. Born in Romania in 1915, he took refuge in France in 1936. An underground militant during the German Occupation, he drew close to Trotskyism. But the experience of the postwar period, and especially his stay in Berlin (1946-1952), which made him see the superficiality of the Trotskyist analyses of Stalinism, rather quickly led him away from them, and, starting in 1952, he worked with the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* until the moment when that group decided to suspend its activity (1966)—a decision to which, moreover, Benno was opposed.¹

Benno Sternberg-Sarel published numerous articles, in particular in *Les Temps Modernes* (“Lénine, Trotsky, Staline et le problème du parti ouvrier,” 1951; “Introduction aux événements d’Allemagne orientale,” 1953; “Révolution par le haut dans les campagnes égyptiennes,” 1969),² in *Esprit*, and in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (nos. 7, 8, 13, 19, 21, 36, 37).³ But his key contribution was his book, *La classe*

*“Benno Sternberg-Sarel,” *Les Temps Modernes*, 299-300 (June-July 1971): 2484-85. Signed “C. C.”

¹See “The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*” (June 1967 circular sent to subscribers and readers; now in [PSW3](#)) and the translator’s footnote (*ibid.*, pp. 122-23 n. 2). —T/E

²With the subtitle “Réflexions à propos du cinquantenaire de la formule léniniste du parti” (Reflections apropos of the fiftieth anniversary of the Leninist party formula), the first text (Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and the problem of the workers’ party), appeared in the November 1951 issue of *Les Temps Modernes* (pp. 848-79); for the second, Castoriadis has cited the subtitle (Introduction to the events of East Germany) of this October 1953 article (pp. 672-94), whose title was “Combats ouvriers sur l’Avenue Staline” (Working-class fighting on Stalin Avenue); the third (Revolution from above in the Egyptian countryside) appeared in the April 1969 issue (pp. 1772-1802). —T/E

³Until issue 36, he published under the pseudonym Hugo Bell; thereafter as Benno Sarel. Castoriadis neglects to mention Bell/Sarel texts published in nos. 14, 38, and 40; see: <http://www.agorainternational.org/toc.html>. —T/E

ouvrière en Allemagne orientale (Paris: Éditions Ouvrières, 1958),⁴ which he worked on for ten years, since the time of his stay in Berlin. Excerpts from a first draft of this work were published (under the pseudonym Hugo Bell) in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1950 and 1951 (nos. 7 and 8). He had sent a second version of the manuscript to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who offered an analysis of it, accompanied by his own interpretation, in *L'Express* (August 27, 1955; now in *Signes*, pp. 348-66).⁵ Based on personal knowledge of the facts and of the country, and offering a meticulous analysis of official documents, this major book bared for everyone to see the birth and consolidation of the bureaucracy as a dominant and privileged social layer as well as the growing gap between it and the proletariat, which the revolt of June 1953 in East Berlin was going to make dazzlingly manifest. He also formulated clearly the antinomy that runs through the bureaucratic system, not only inasmuch as, in its official ideology and rhetoric, it has to claim to represent a proletariat it oppresses and a socialism it flouts, but, at a still deeper level, inasmuch as it cannot make the production process operate in its concrete everyday course without trying to rely on the managerial capacities and tendencies of the proletariat, capacities and tendencies it is thus obliged both to promote and to combat. This analysis—the essential features of which, let us repeat, had been formulated and published as early as 1950-1951—was amply confirmed by the events of 1953, while those of 1956 showed that its import went far beyond East Germany and that its content concerns all countries subject to the power of the bureaucracy.

For many long years, Benno Sternberg-Sarel had been drawn to the problems of the Third World. His text on Egypt,

⁴The corrected and full title is *La classe ouvrière d'Allemagne orientale: essai de chronique: 1945-1958* (The working class of East Germany: a chronicle essay: 1945-1958). —T/E

⁵"L'avenir de la révolution," *L'Express*, August 27, 1955: 7-10; in translation, "The Future of the Revolution," *Signes*, trans. and intro. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 278-92. —T/E

published in *Les Temps Modernes* in April 1969,⁶ shows those same qualities at work that had made *La classe ouvrière d'Allemagne orientale* such a valuable work. He had begun to gather the materials and notes for a work on the agrarian problem in the ex-colonial countries; it is difficult to say, for the moment, whether, and in what form, something will be able to be published from it. His knowledge of the social reality of the Arab countries, which grew rapidly with his frequent and prolonged field visits, as much as his acceptance of his Jewish identity, filled him with gloom during the final years of his life and led to his preoccupation with what he considered to be the false perspective from which a large portion of leftist tendencies in France viewed the Arab-Israeli conflict and, in particular, his preoccupation with the monstrous and oft-made identification of Nasserism and similar regimes with any sort of socialism.

Almost all those who were engaged in militant activities alongside Benno became his friends. His good faith in discussions, his openness to others, and his naturally inborn need to understand what the other person was saying before countering him never led Benno to abandon his own critical faculties, still less to approve, out of kindness or laziness of mind, of anything of which he was not himself convinced. Humor often came out in what he had to say, and he loved to laugh in a frank and exuberant way. Never did he display any personal animosity in the political disputes he happened to enter and, what is infinitely rarer, never did he provoke it in others.

Death struck him down as his efforts to give his troubled life a stable base and a less-jarring form were on the verge of success and before his maturity had yielded all the fruits one had been led to expect. His death may ensure that his work will remain incomplete, but not his image for those who knew him.

⁶See n. 2, above, this chapter. —T/E

C.L.R. James and the Fate of Marxism*

Although I am of Greek origin and was brought up in Athens, the first person to speak to me about Athenian democracy in relation to today's problems was C.L.R. James, a Black expert on cricket and a revolutionary from Trinidad. Although aspects of the above relation were addressed in *Correspondence*, it is also a subchapter in our book *Facing Reality*.¹ In order to situate the things I want to say, you must realize the predicament in which people like James and myself, despite twenty years' difference in age, and lots of others who joined the revolutionary movement found themselves in the Forties and the Fifties. I do not know how or when James joined the revolutionary movement, but I joined it during the second half of the Thirties, at the age of fifteen, and immediately we found ourselves facing the monstrous deformation of the revolutionary ideas of Marxism

*A lecture delivered under the auspices of the C.L.R. James Society, the Africana Studies Department, Wellesley College, and the Afro-American Studies Department, Harvard University on April 4, 1992. I thank Selwyn R. Cudjoe, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and the C.L.R. James Society for giving me the opportunity to address these matters, which I think are very important as well as very difficult for all of us. Published as "C.L.R. James and the Fate of Marxism," *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain, eds. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 277-8; "Questions and Answers," *ibid.*, pp. 288-97; and "Letter, No 3 Cornelius Castoriadis to C.L.R. James," *ibid.*, pp. 302-303. [This third letter was preceded by ones concerning Castoriadis from "Raya Dunayevskaya to C.L.R. James," written on September 27, 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 298-99, and from "C.L.R. James to Cornelius Castoriadis and Friend," written on January 7, 1957, *ibid.*, pp. 300-301. This English-language talk, the question-and-answer session, and the Letter have been lightly edited for consistency and clarity, with an Americanization of spellings. —T/E]

¹Editor: Castoriadis was one of the authors of *Facing Reality* (1956). [Originally published in Detroit by the group Correspondence, it was reprinted in the same city by Bewick in 1974. Factory School (no place of publication provided) reissued it in 2006. The 1956 edition is available online at <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015068648313>, the 1974 edition at <http://raumgegenzement.blogspot.de/2010/06/23/c-l-r-james-grace-c-lee-grace-lee-boggs-pierre-chaulieu-castoriadis-facing-reality-1974>. —T/E]

itself that was holding sway then in the form of the Communist Party and Stalinism. As you know, Stalinism, a form of state power, was not only able to manipulate people, appear as the realization of socialism, and to lie worldwide; it also killed tens of millions of people inside and outside of Russia. So, we found ourselves facing this monster; and rather quickly, at least I think so, the most subversive or the craziest among us felt that we had to break with Stalinism. Once you broke with Stalinism, the first avenue opened to you was Trotskyism and that is the course James and I took. And then at some stage, as James used to say—he was a wonderful speaker and his sense of dialectical development was always there and alive when he spoke—one began to see that Trotskyism was not all that satisfying and that the theory about the degenerated workers' State and the unconditional defense of the USSR was not holding water. So one started to criticize Trotskyism, and it is at this point that James and I met. Thus, while James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee formed a group within Max Shachtman's Workers Party and then went on to James P. Cannon's Socialist Workers Party, our own group, which I founded with comrades from the French Trotskyist Party from which we split in 1948, started producing *Socialism or Barbarism* and attempting to build a new organization. Despite our differences that remained, we stuck together for a while. However, once we split with Trotskyism, the question arose: What could one do with Marxism itself? This was the most difficult part of the journey, which is over for me. For others, it is not. Yet, even if that stage of the struggle was over, the question remained: What next? If you want to remain active as a revolutionary, if you want a radical transformation of this bloody society with all its inequalities and injustices, nonfreedom, and so on, despite the more democratic facade, what next? And there, I think after 1957 or 1958, James and I parted company.

Let me start with what I considered the tragic fate of Marxism, and then I'll say something about James. First of all, what one observed empirically was that after a while Marxism became the pretext for a lot of people—for example, the Stalinists and the Social Democrats who, most of the time, proclaimed that they were Marxists—and the cover for

politics and policies that had nothing to do with what generally were the initial potentialities and aims of the working-class movement and also the initial intentions of Marx himself. With that, one started to ask why was this so and how was it possible? The point I reached around 1960, culminating in 1965 with a text about Marxist revolutionary theory that appeared in *Socialism or Barbarism* (later becoming the first part of [*The Imaginary Institution of Society*](#)), is that from the beginning there was a deep antinomy in Marx's thought. Perhaps one can formulate this antinomy in the following manner: two elements struggled with each other. At the end, one element took over in the name of Marxism. Up to a point, the influence of these two elements remained active with James, at least up until the moment I was in communication with him in 1958.

Why am I talking about two elements in Marxism? Marx had this fundamental intuition that men, or as we would say today, humans, make their own history, but they make it in given conditions. This is an absolutely correct and unobjectionable idea. However, the problem is to know what these conditions are and how far they only condition or really determine the activity of the people. With this went the first element, what I call the revolutionary element, the extraordinary importance he gave to the self-activity of the people. For instance, in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, one observes the attention Marx gave to the manner in which the French workers would gather in their bistros and talk, and one could see their lives on their faces. In one of his later writings, one sees the famous sentence proclaiming that one concrete step in the effective movement is worth much more than ten thousand programs on paper.² So, too, was his recognition of the tremendous importance of the Paris Commune, which he initially condemned, but, when he saw its activities, immediately recognized as what he called the dictatorship of the proletariat.

²In a [May 5, 1875 Letter from Marx to W. Bracke in Brunswick](#), Marx wrote from London: "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs." One sometimes sees this statement exaggerated in paraphrase to a "thousand programs." —T/E

Next, there is the other element: that is, Marx's contamination by and participation in what I call the *capitalist* or *Occidental imaginary* of this period. This is expressed in what one can call *Marxist rationalism*, in the deprecatory sense of the word, which expresses itself at the economic level—the attempt to build a Newtonian mechanics of capitalist economy in *Das Kapital*, an attempt that does not succeed; in the theory of historical materialism that one can find, for instance, in very closed form in *The Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* where one gets the final truth about human history in three pages; in the determination of the superstructure by the infrastructure, and so on. Also, what I find very important is this belief in the centrality of production and economy in society. For Marx, the idea of communism and the important historical role of the proletariat is based on the central role of the proletariat in production. Also, his idea of a socialist or communist society is based necessarily on the idea that it is only when the productive forces of a society reach a certain level that one can speak about the liberation of humankind. I ask, what is this necessary and sufficient level of productive forces? The level of productive forces we have in the 1990s, at least in the developed countries, is a level of which Marx never dreamt. The development of production over the last century was a hundred times more than the development of the productive forces between the Paleolithic and Marx's period. So, what is the necessary and sufficient level of the productive forces to ensure this liberation? To my mind, this is one indication of Marx's serfdom to the capitalist imaginary, which one can trace back to Western rationalism. For example, if one follows historical materialism, or Engels for instance, one would find what I call *the imaginary* or the beliefs of precapitalist societies to be "primitive nonsense" (Engels's phrase).³ Why is it that the beliefs of African peoples or of the American Indians are primitive nonsense but Christianity, with its idea about a virgin bearing a child and remaining a virgin even after the birth, or three persons being one and one

³Engels to Conrad Schmidt in Berlin (London, October 27, 1890). —T/E

person being three, is not primitive nonsense? What is behind this? It is a purely rationalistic conception of progressive history whereby people become more and more rational; it is a total misunderstanding of imaginary creation in human history whereby each society attempts to construct a world, to give meaning to its own existence and to the life of individuals in it, and to make sense of what is going on around. We try to make sense in various ways, which contain a rational component but which in the end hang more or less in the air. Behind all of this there is naive progressivism and also this philosophy called *dialectical materialism*. By the way, Marx and Lenin never spoke about dialectical materialism; this is a Stalinist invention. When you try to find out what is really materialism in Marx, Engels, or in all materialist philosophers, you end up with the idea that there is something they call matter that is ruled by strict laws. This is the basic tenet.

Now, if one turns to any idealist philosopher who is worth his/her salt, one will find that s/he agrees totally with the notion that everything is ruled by rational laws. The only difference is that at the horizon one speaks about matter without being able to define what matter is; or one shifts the burden of the definition to science, thus continually changing the definition of matter as poor Lenin does in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, where he starts by saying matter is what I can touch and then he says that it is electrons because by then the latter had been discovered. On the other hand, the idealist Hegel says that the essence of the world is spirit. Now, what is spirit? Neither the former nor the latter could define matter or spirit. But the common point in most traditional metaphysics is the belief in these rational laws that determine how the real develops, evolves, appears, and so on.

However, what is worse in Marxism and even in Marx himself, despite his personal attitude when he noted in a famous sentence that he was not a Marxist, was a strict

adherence to his own orthodoxy.⁴ I think that the catastrophic effect of Marxism, which became apparent already with Social Democracy but mostly with Leninism, was the introduction of this concept of orthodoxy within the working-class movement. What is orthodoxy? Orthodoxy is what is defined in the books. But the books do not speak for themselves, and even if one records the books on electronic contraptions and one has a cassette, there will be discourse. Yet the question remains: What is the meaning of this discourse? You have to interpret. Ah, but who interprets? This is a predicament the Muslims, Christians, and Jews have had for twenty-five hundred years. If everybody can interpret, then everything is lost. To prevent this, we have one instance that is the true interpretative instance, for example the Catholic Church or the Party. If you have orthodoxy and one instituted instance {of authority} that is the guardian of orthodoxy, then the people who do not agree are heretics. For the sake of salvation of the heretic, for his or her own salvation's sake, you must burn him or her at the stake, because it is the only way to purify his/her soul. So, the revolutionary heretics must be brought in front of the court, confess their crimes, and be killed in the basement of the Lubyanka {Prison} and thereby expiate their crimes. This was the main root of the trouble with the practical effects of the influence of Marxism in the workers' movement, effects that

⁴Marx's famous sentence, "I am not a Marxist" is usually quoted out of context. When shown some writings by people in Germany who were saying that they were Marxists, Marx retorted, "If this is Marxism, I am not a Marxist." The clause is conditional. He was a Marxist. Both the events in the First International and the construction of the German Social Democratic Party demonstrate that Marx was a very strict adherent to his own orthodoxy. [Quoted in a Letter from "[Engels to Eduard Bernstein in Zurich](#)" (London, November 2-3, 1882; English translation in *MECW*, vol. 46, p. 353), Marx reportedly told his son-in-law Paul Lafargue, apropos of certain *French*—not German, as Castoriadis says—Marxists, that "If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist." There is, however, no conditional in Marx's French original (*Ce qu'il y a de certain c'est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste*). Yet since Marx was indeed reacting specifically to people calling themselves *Marxist*, this was, as Castoriadis argues, not necessarily a blanket disavowal of Marxism in general. —T/E

were reflected in the most cruel and monstrous forms in Leninism and Stalinism. This was also present in Social Democracy even though as Social Democracy evolved this tendency started to get watered down—but then everything became watered down in Social Democracy, so it is not worth talking about. Now, we have a Socialist Party ruling France, and when they named the new Prime Minister, Monsieur Pierre Bérégovoy, the immediate effect was that the stock exchange went up, because they were confident that Monsieur Bérégovoy would manage the French economy well and that the value of the franc would remain stable, possibly at the cost of another half million unemployed, but that does not matter, of course. The important thing is that our inflation be less than that of the Germans.

Now about James. Let me introduce some autobiographical elements here. In 1947, I came to know of the existence of the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the United States when I was still in the French Trotskyist Party, at a time when we were all preparing for the Second World Congress of the so-called Fourth International. The main item in this Second World Congress was the famous Russian Question, which was really the crux of all the division and discussion in the Trotskyist movement. The questions were asked: “What is Russia, and what is the essence of the Russian State?” As you know, the classic Trotskyist answer was that it was a degenerated workers’ State. In Greece, but especially in France, I had developed a position that Russia had nothing to do with a workers’ State and that the nationalization of property, and the so-called planning, had nothing to do with socialism and with true collective planning but were just instruments of the rule of the bureaucracy. In fact, the bureaucracy had become an exploitative and dominant class. Unknown to us, the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the United States (Johnson was a pseudonym of James, Forest was a pseudonym for Dunayevskaya, and Ria Stone a

pseudonym for Lee) was doing the same thing.⁵ They were producing papers criticizing the official Trotskyist position and advocating the theory of state capitalism. The funny thing is that while we agreed on our criticism of the Trotskyist position and on the essence of the Russian State, we did not agree on the label with which to name the thing. They were talking about *state capitalism* while I was talking about *totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism*. Perhaps it is of no interest to enter into a discussion about why we were calling the same phenomenon by different names. However, the main point was that in talking about state capitalism, one was taking into the bargain the obligation, more or less, to show that the Russian economy was functioning along the lines of the capitalist economy, along the lines of the presumed laws Marx had discovered in *Das Kapital*.

The person in the Johnson-Forest Tendency who was very adamant and insistent about the conception of state capitalism was Dunayevskaya, the economist of the group.⁶ Her articles in *The New Internationalist* show the weaknesses of her position. For instance, she was trying to find increasing unemployment in Russia. Why? Because in a capitalist economy there must be increasing unemployment. But there was no unemployment to be found. So Dunayevskaya pulled a terrible rabbit from out of her hat and said: "But what about the people in the concentration camps?" So I said, "That's nonsense. The people in the concentration camps are not there to wipe out increasing unemployment. They are there for totally different reasons." Another weakness in the position of the Johnson-Forest Tendency was the attempt to sustain the

⁵We all used pseudonyms at that time because the police were much less tolerant than they became afterward, especially for people like James, who was an alien and finally was deported, and for myself, who was an alien in France who could be deported within twenty-four hours without any legal recourse.

⁶Editor: See Dunayevskaya's letter to James, September 22, 1947, reproduced in [C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies](#), pp. 298-300. It might be useful to contrast these remarks with those of Lou Turner in [ibid.](#), pp. 193-204, "Epistemology, Absolutes, and the Party."

old Marxist classical economic position about the falling rate of profit which, for me, as a trained economist, was already a sort of Loch Ness monster, a sea serpent. What is the falling rate of profit and how is it grounded? It cannot be determined empirically, one cannot prove it theoretically, and it contradicts the other tenets of Marxist economic theory. Despite these differences and especially through Grace Lee, who stayed almost eight months in Paris during 1947-1948, I became acquainted with James and the whole Tendency because we were looking in very much the same way at what appeared to us as the main thing: the self-activity of the working class. I had written two texts in Hegelian jargon—I apologize for mentioning them, but as Stendhal says, that was the crystallization point in a sort of intellectual love affair between Grace and me—in order to explain to Grace Lee where I stood. One was called “The Phenomenology of Proletarian Consciousness”⁷ and the other was “The Concentration of Productive Forces.”⁸ I was trying to show that through some sort of self-development, combined moments of experience, moments of alienation of this experience, and moments of new—what I would now call—creation, the proletariat evolved from what it was in the beginning (sheer raw material for exploitation) to become a self-conscious working class. This working class then becomes organized in a party, then is dominated by this party, and it finally breaks away from this party which becomes totally counterrevolutionary—of course, I had in mind the Leninist-Stalinist Party—to create a true human socialist society. Grace was delirious about the first text and I am sure that she sent it on to James.

This collaboration continued and the material traces of it exist. No text of James’s was published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, but from the first number of the latter there is a

⁷This March 1948 draft text was finally published in *SBI*; a draft English-language translation is available from David Ames Curtis, the translator of this text. —T/E

⁸This March 1948 draft text was finally published in *SBI*; now available in *PSWI* as “The Concentration of the Forces of Production.” —T/E

translation of *The American Worker*, a pamphlet the Johnson-Forest Tendency produced. The first part was an account of the life of Paul Romano, a Detroit automobile worker.⁹ As a result, for the first time there was something that was absent totally from the entire Marxist tradition and from Karl Marx himself, except in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: that is, the acknowledgment that being a worker does not mean that one is just working or that one is just being exploited. Being a worker means living with workers, being in solidarity with other workers, living in working-class quarters of the city, having women who are either workers themselves or, if they are not, their predicament is the same or even worse than that of the men. But the really tragic aspect of a worker's life appears in the second part, in which Lee speaks about the contradiction in a worker's life. On the one hand, s/he hates the factory and the work; on the other hand, s/he cannot help being drawn there, not just to earn his or her livelihood but because it is a community, and this was their [the Johnson-Forest Tendency] idea of the "invading socialist society."¹⁰ The pathetic {i.e., emotionally moving} part of this description comes when Lee speaks about the retired workers, about sixty-five years old or so, who cannot but go back to haunt {outside} the walls of the factory just to smell the atmosphere or to see fellow workers coming out of the factory and to chat with them. We translated *The American Worker* in the first six numbers of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and then we circulated another pamphlet that Lee and the other women of her group had written, *A Woman's Place*, an ironic play on the old jest that a woman's place is in the kitchen or with the children and so on.¹¹

⁹Pseudonym for Paul Singer. —T/E

¹⁰See the Editor's n. 18 below in this chapter—T/E

¹¹First written in 1952 and published in the columns of *Correspondence*, *A Woman's Place*, by "Mrs. Marie Brant" (Selma James) and "Mrs. Ellen Santori" (Filomena Daddario), was issued as a pamphlet in February 1953. A reprint (in Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James, *The Power of Women*

There was a divergence between us in 1948. We, in France, decided to quit the Trotskyist party, but Lee and James were not in agreement with us. They decided to stick with Cannon's Socialist Workers Party, but two or three years later they left because it proved to be a hopeless enterprise to change the Trotskyists. Then things started to accelerate. We came out of a period of historical gloom whose nadir was the Korean War period. It was a time when nobody was moving. Then there were strikes in France,¹² automobile strikes in the United States (1955),¹³ and the dockers' strikes in Britain.¹⁴ We were talking about all these things and then finally there was Nikita Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU.¹⁵

In 1953 James was deported. I think he went to London before going to Ghana. I went to London to meet him in 1954 or 1955, and we started to discuss things together. We had lively exchanges and agreed on most things. Then James came to France in the spring of 1955 and we had a joint meeting in Boulogne with {presentations} by James, Lefort, me, and other people in our group. Out of this discussion came number 20 of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which is full of material. Nothing in this number is written by James, but then

and the Subversion of the Community [Montpelier, Bristol, England: Falling Wall Press, 1972]) is now available at <http://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james>. —T/E

¹²See "1953 et les luttes ouvrières" (the Editorial for the 13th issue of *S. ou B.*, which was reprinted in *CMRI*, pp. 375-77) as well as a number of other articles in this January-March 1954 issue. —T/E

¹³See "Wildcat Strikes in the American Automobile Industry" (1956; now in *PSW2*). As noted there in n. 7, "Most of Castoriadis's article consists of his abridged translation of the (August 1955) *Correspondence* account" of these strikes. —T/E

¹⁴See "Les grèves des dockers anglais," *S. ou B.*, 18 (January-March 1956): 61-74, reprinted in *EMOI*, pp. 305-32. —T/E

¹⁵See "Khrushchev and the Decomposition of Bureaucratic Ideology" (1956; now in *PSW2*). —T/E

I do not believe in private property in any field (except for toothbrushes) and especially not in the field of ideas. This issue effects a give-and-take there, then, and although there is no James text as such, the ideas certainly bear the mark of this exchange.

Then there was the Hungarian Revolution, and James came to Paris and spoke to our group while I acted as an interpreter both ways. He was a wonderful speaker. I hope you understand the praise I want to give to him. When he rose to speak, it was as though you suddenly had Louis Armstrong himself taking the trumpet and doing a wonderful solo. He was extremely moving, capable, articulate, lively, and he conveyed his message forcefully. After this I went to London to see James. He proposed and I accepted that we produce a pamphlet that ultimately became *Facing Reality*. Around 1950, I had moved far beyond the Leninist conception of the party. I was absolutely sure that this conception was at the root of the totalitarian revolution in the USSR, but James and Lee were stuck with it. This was the most lively part of our disagreements and discussion in this period. Nonetheless, I contributed pages 90 to 105 of *Facing Reality* although they were edited a bit and perhaps vulgarized in some sense by James. My contribution contained a criticism of the Leninist vanguard conception, and it advanced the idea that there is no vanguard. Any vanguard is a vanguard at a certain moment. There is no permanent vanguard of which you can say that it is always ahead or that it always has the most important ideas. That controversy represented the end of my relationship with James—I do not remember all the details—but he decided to publish the pamphlet in 1958 and I became rather angry with him.¹⁶

I think, however, that the antinomy about which I spoke in Marx, though attenuated, still remained in James until the time we parted in 1958. On the one hand, he had this wonderful sense of the self-activity of the people, and he was

¹⁶Editor: Castoriadis's source of anger seemed to have come from the alacrity with which James published *Facing Reality* without fully working out the ideas contained in the pamphlet and without having Castoriadis's final approval to publish his section in the pamphlet.

able to translate it in universal terms that were not absolute universals, if I may use this expression. Also, the women's contribution to his group was very important. Sometimes I used to mock them and tell them that for them the real bearer of the revolutionary project was a black girl working as an unskilled automobile worker in Detroit. They would laugh, but there was the perception of this important point about the woman's position and the black position in the struggle. And James saw a reflection of this in the strikes in Western European countries, in the Polish and Hungarian events, and in the movement of colonial peoples who, at the time, were intensifying their struggle. I remember the extremely important discussions we had together about Ghana and Kenya. For me, it was a sort of changing point in my way of seeing things, because by virtue of what James had to say about the way the people in Ghana and Kenya were organizing their struggle, I was able to overcome the classical Marxist conception that argued that these people had to go through industrialization, become proletarians, and so forth, before they could contribute to the emancipatory movement. Through this, I was able to see that if there is to be a solution to humanity's predicament, it could occur only through some sort of genuine synthesis between what people in the rich, developed, industrialized countries have to offer and what people in the so-called backward countries have to offer, especially as community links go, views of solidarity between human beings go, views on what in human life is worth{y}, and so on. This was the kernel of what was extremely important and, to my mind, positive in James's thought. This sense of the struggle of the people was already there in *The Black Jacobins*,¹⁷ an important book, and James was able to carry it over when he spoke about modern capitalism.

Yet, remnants of Marxism also were still very much apparent in James's thought at that time. He insisted, and rightly so, that the most important thing was the workers' struggle at the point of production. Now, if one takes this point seriously, it completely destroys the Marxian conception

¹⁷First published in London by Secker and Warburg in 1938. —T/E

of economics and this is what I have done. Excuse me for being modest. If one takes seriously the idea that the important thing is the workers' struggle at the point of production, then the first thing you see is that labor power is not a commodity. But all of *Das Kapital* is built on the assumption that labor power is a commodity. Labor power as a commodity is what the capitalist would like it to be and what he tries to do with it (and cannot). He can extract as many calories as technology allows from a ton of coal, but he cannot extract as much surplus labor as he would like from a worker's day because the worker resists, the workers coalesce, and thus emerges an informal organization of the workers who are opposed to the formal organization of the factory according to the management's plan. This informal organization both allows the workers to limit the actual exploitation and, this is the paradoxical thing, allows capitalist production to go on. The proof of this is that if you want the whole thing to collapse immediately, you just have to have everybody work to rule. If they work to rule, nothing works. If the airline pilots and the airport personnel started working to rule, I would never be in Atlanta tonight as I am planning to be. If you take this seriously, then the whole Marxist position about labor power and economic laws and rising rates of exploitation go down the drain. And that's true. Or, the other point about the invading socialist society, a very important concept I remember discussing with James and Lee. The idea is that elements of socialist relationships are already forming *within* the capitalist society. We named our group's periodical *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. They said that we should have named it *Socialism and Barbarism*. And that's the idea behind the invading socialist society.¹⁸ In a certain sense the two things go together. There is a part of the truth in it: that is, despite the efforts of capitalism to commodify people, this never succeeds and people resist, although in 1992 perhaps

¹⁸In 1947 James, Lee, and Dunayevskaya published *The Invading Socialist Society* as a pamphlet of the Johnson-Forest Tendency. [The second edition, prefaced by James (Detroit: Bewick, 1972) is now available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1947/invading/index.htm>. —T/E]

one would be less strongly affirmative about the failure of capitalism's efforts to commodify people. Or, at least, if not to commodify them then to get them stuffed with pseudocommodities and forget or almost forget anything else. If, therefore, on the other hand you talk about the invading socialist society, then you keep something that is there in Marxism and that is part of what is wrong with Marx. You keep the apocalyptic, messianic streak; the idea that there is a definite end to the road, and unless everything blows up we are going there and we are bound to end there, which is not true.

In relation to the messianic aspect, I want to speak of one more point you may not like at all. Together with this messianic streak, both in Marx and in James, went the Christian reference of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: blessed be the poor, for to them belongs the kingdom of heaven,¹⁹ that is, the idea that there is a historical privilege of the poor, the downtrodden, and so forth. I do not think that this is true. Of course, there is a negative historical privilege of the class we can symbolize in the names of George Bush and Lee Iaccoca. There is nothing to expect from them except what they are doing. But for the rest of the society, apart from all the considerations about the developments in the economy, which mean that you cannot talk anymore about the proletariat as the hegemonic class, or the subject of history and so on, I believe that democratic politics, revolutionary politics, politics toward an autonomous society must appeal to 95 percent of the population in the society today. And these are not necessarily the poorest, or only the poor, or only the downtrodden. They are in all fields. We saw this in France in 1968 when, leaving aside the students, in factories where the workers were on strike and where the Stalinists did not prevent them from occupying the factories, where people were active and mastered the situation, the general assemblies combined the workers, the technicians, the engineers, and administrative personnel. Only the {CEO} was not there. Only when all workers in the widest sense of the term get

¹⁹Castoriadis's translation or paraphrase of Matthew 5:3. —T/E

together can they reorganize production so that the products are shared more equitably and production is made more efficient while, at the same time, the toil of people is lessened.

I will end with another provocative streak. Athenian democracy, which, as I told you, James was the first to speak about in relation to contemporary society, was started almost twenty-five hundred years ago by the revolutionary reforms of Cleisthenes. Cleisthenes was not a proletarian. He was a member of one of the most powerful and most aristocratic families in Athens. You might impute to him motives that are not pure and say that he introduced democracy in order to outdo the other rival aristocratic families. I do not think this would be true, but at any rate, this revolution would have gone nowhere if the Athenian demos had not been there to support it, to keep it alive, and to carry it forward for more than a century.²⁰ But still the initiator was an aristocrat. From this analogy, there is something we ought to keep in mind and that is that virtually the whole of humanity should and ought to struggle for a transformation of society so as to make it more human.

Questions and Answers

WINSTON JAMES: I want to raise a number of questions. I found the presentation very stimulating, very interesting, and I am very sympathetic to its overall thesis. But there are certain elements within it that I find rather problematic. The first one is this extrapolation that seems to have taken hold, that of seeing Stalinism and so-called totalitarianism in Eastern Europe as having its roots in Marx. I really think that this is an extremely problematic thesis to argue, and I am not by any means convinced by all of it. I was

²⁰Exactly one week prior to this talk on James, Castoriadis had participated, along with Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Pierre Lévêque, in a discussion at the Pompidou Center in Paris on the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of democracy. His contribution, "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions," was included in *Cleisthenes the Athenian*, David Ames Curtis's 1996 Humanities Press translation of Vidal-Naquet's and Lévêque's classic 1964 essay, and was reprinted in [RTI\(TBS\)](#). —T/E

quite astonished that in your presentation one of the crucial elements that helps to explain the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union was not mentioned at all. And that was the fact that the Russian revolution occurred in Russia. It did not occur in Germany, it did not occur in Britain, it did not occur in France, it did not occur in an advanced capitalist society, even if we stick to relative terms. Yes, there are problems here such as what we mean by developed, etc. But what is very clear is that in 1917, Russia was by no means as advanced in terms of the development of the productive forces as was Germany. And, indeed, they were depending upon Germany to save them from France or Britain. And I think that the material basis—and there is a rationale to that type of argument—actually conditioned some of the possibilities of that society and created conditions that were more conducive to the development of some of the things that we saw in Russia. And I could elaborate on how that happened, but I just want to make the basic point: I do believe that any serious analysis of Stalinism or totalitarianism in Eastern Europe has got to take that into account. One also has to take into account that the Civil War actually destroyed the cream of the Bolshevik party; some of the most dedicated, the most selfless, the most energetic members of the Bolshevik party sacrificed their lives during the Civil War in trying to defend the country and maintain the revolution. I think those things are crucial elements in understanding the rise of Stalinism.

I agree fundamentally with your argument about rationalism in Marx, and I argued at the James Conference on the logic to which that pushed someone like James in terms of what I would regard as a profound level of Eurocentrism in his argument. On labor power, I'm surprised that you regard the idea that labor power has got this other characteristic to it, this living quality to it, as something of a departure from Marx, because I don't think it is so. It's there in Marx. That's precisely the contradiction at the heart of capitalism, the fact that you have a commodity that is alive—of course, it is a commodity but it's alive—but it is also a commodity. It is something that is bought and sold, but it's alive, it has passions, it has feelings, it has pains, it gets sick, it has joys,

and Marx always recognized those aspects. So I don't see anything particularly new in your formulation and I certainly do not think that is a stick one should use to beat Marx with.

RICK RODERICK:²¹ Since I am more sympathetic to Marx, I will comment on the issue of living labor although I would not do so at length. Harry Cleaver, my favorite economist, has a wonderful account of how, by ignoring other things in Marx which is nothing unusual for a text we enjoy reading, if you wish to one can reconstruct a class struggle-based Marxism which by analogy looks something like various versions of chaos—where one can reconstruct many Marxist categories based upon this autonomous workers' power. But the critique I think James would share with Cornelius is that official Marxism, including academic Marxism, has totally underestimated the heterogeneous power of workers to defy being commodified, and time and time again that has been overlooked in production. For me, that's the important insight on which we may agree. I'll let Cornelius address the Stalinism issue, since I am not a Stalinist.

C.C.: I'll try to be as brief as possible. Of course, Marx knew that a working day was not like ten kilograms of sugar, but that is not the question. He was no fool. The question is what does he do with this fact in his economic theory. One has to be serious. Labor power is a commodity. Now, a commodity has no say about its own price. A hamburger never told me, "No! no! no! You can't buy me for one dollar; you must add ten cents." And a commodity has no say about the use value you want to extract from it once you've acquired it. On these two points, labor power cannot

²¹Editor: Rick Roderick's lecture, "Further Adventures of the Dialectic" [*C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*](#), pp. 205-14, was delivered on the same occasion as Castoriadis's lecture. In this exchange, he also responds to the questions that were asked from the floor. Winston James, an assistant professor of history at Columbia University, is the editor of *Inside Babylon*. Paget Henry, chairman of the Afro-American studies program at Brown University, has coedited *C.L.R. James's Caribbean* with Paul Buhle. The late Clinton Jean was the author of *Behind the Eurocentric Veils*. Azinna Nwafor wrote the introduction to George Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism*.

be regarded as a commodity; but it is upon treating labor power as a commodity that all of Marxist economic theory is built.

It is built around the idea that workers have no say about what Marx calls the value of their labor power, and that's why he has the theory about the rising rate of exploitation. Otherwise, where do you draw this from? But there has not been a rising rate of exploitation, at least in advanced capitalist countries, because the working-class struggle raised the value of labor power or the standard of living of the working class and brought down the length of the working day. In Marx's time, we started with a working week of seventy-two hours or more and now we are at forty. The same thing is true about the use value of labor power. Without this, we would have an increasing rate of exploitation, and you would have all the other things that follow from this, including the rising organic composition of capital and so on.

As to the first part of your argument, I feel as though I was Rip Van Winkle coming back to the world forty years after, because your arguments are the very arguments that Trotsky developed during the whole of the 1930s. James, Lee, and I thought that we had refuted those arguments as early as 1945, but I will give you a very short rehearsal of our refutation. First of all, I didn't say that the roots of totalitarianism were in Marx. What I said is that what was catastrophic in Marx was the idea of orthodoxy and this could lead to totalitarianism. The proof that Marx is not the cause of totalitarianism or the condition of it is the fact that one has social democratic governments which, whatever one may think of them, are not totalitarian governments. Lenin is the true creator of totalitarianism, a position he states long before the revolution, in 1903. If you take the pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?*²² you have the idea of a party that, at the same time, is a small army, a church because of its doctrinal orthodoxy, and a sort of factory because there is a division of labor and everybody obeys what the higher authority says. This is the model that is in Lenin's head. When 1917 arises, you have

²²*What Is to Be Done?* was first published in 1902, not 1903. —T/E

this fantastic contradiction that up to October 15 Lenin, in hiding, writes *State and Revolution* in which you do not find the word *party*. You will find a Utopian description not of an Athenian but of a modern polis where “every cook can govern.”²³ And then he takes power and who are the groups that govern? Before the Civil War, Lenin and the Central Committee behave in an absolutely dictatorial way, and Lenin says we must purify the Russian land of all this vermin who are the people who don’t agree with us. And that’s there.

With regard to the argument about Russia being a backward country, how do you know what would have happened if Germany had done the revolution in 1919? I tell you that Leninism would have come up stronger, not weaker. Why is it that in France up until ten years ago a majority of the working class followed the Stalinist party? Is France a backward country? And it is not only France. Italy and lots of other countries have a Stalinist party. So, I suggest you look at the literature again, at the exchange of arguments that have been made, and you will find that Trotsky and the Trotskyists were saying that it was impossible for Russia to extend the regime outside of Russia because with the extension of the regime, the isolation of Russia would have broken down and the regime would have collapsed. But they happily installed themselves in Czechoslovakia, which was not a backward country, in Eastern Germany, which was not a backward country, and even Hungary, which was not a backward country; and they remained there until there was a revolution by the population or other reaction.

²³The phrase apparently originates in a sometimes optimistic misquotation from Vladimir Lenin’s October 1917 *Prosveshcheniye* magazine piece, [Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?](#): “We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled laborer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration.” Initially published in *Correspondence*, 2:12 (1956), a first edition of James’s pamphlet appeared in June 1956 as *Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece, and Negro American and American Politics*. A [second edition](#), from Bewick (Detroit), was published in 1992 as *Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece; Its Meaning Today*, to coincide with “celebrations of the 2,500th anniversary of the creation of a democratic society in Ancient Greece,” according to the unsigned Introduction. —T/E

PAGET HENRY: I was intrigued by the critique that you articulated and the sense of progressivism associated with it. That has been such a basic part of the dynamics of Western history. I was curious as to how you see history now. As you look ahead, particularly as we see the formation of three capitalist blocs (the Japanese, the European, and the North American), it seems that the power of a rationalized capitalism and the likelihood of the greater commodification of social reality will occur, a possibility that Marx explored when he discussed technology and automation. It seems to me that this side of Marx is on the ascendancy, so I was just curious about what you think history would look like beyond this point.

RODERICK: One advantage and one reason I still have trouble dropping the word *Marxist* from the various things I call myself is that, unlike many theorists of the present age, Marx has an account of the reality of commodification just as well as he has an account of the commodification of reality. I think that's a nice dialectical way to state it. For example, J{ean} Baudrillard has one of those accounts but not the other. I think we do need to take seriously the commodification at that level of what might be called the cultural critique of commodities, especially in the advanced countries. I think that's a wide-ranging topic. Marxism isn't the only approach to that topic, but it's a topic I have been trying to work out so I'll have to leave you a footnote. This is a topic where a reading of the *Grundrisse*, based on some new premises, might yield some very nice results. But this seems to me to be an important topic because the commodification of culture from where we draw our meanings and where, after all, we may establish our political personae and identities, if one can imagine a complete commodified limit to that situation, looks bleak indeed. And in that context one feels compelled to quote the first sentence of William Gibson's novel, *The Neuromancer*: "The sky above the port is the color of television tuned to a dead channel."²⁴ I don't want to be that pessimistic, but that's the

²⁴First published by Ace Books (New York) in 1984. —T/E

landscape of a commodified culture where the political, not only living labor—I was speaking there in the progressive sense of humans, but as consumers and as human beings and many other things—if those meanings drop or become simply more goods for sale, that's the part of the critique where I think Marx is still very useful.

C.C.: Certainly, the problems our friend raised are very important, serious-looking, and threatening. It's not just the commodification of social reality. That's one thing. The other thing that goes with it is the privatization of individuals. It's the withdrawal of individuals from political and social affairs. It is the waning of social and political struggles, which are not there anymore in the rich countries of the West. There is no political opposition. There are two ruling parties that are the same thing, and there are no important workers' struggles. Of course, there are some struggles in society: the women's struggle, the struggle of the minorities, and so on. But in general, one has the impression that these struggles tend to be marginalized and that the ruling strata go along their way in the middle of increasing apathy, cynicism, and so on, and a feeling of helplessness on the part of society. And this is our predicament today. I don't know what history would look like, or looks like, given the present conditions. Whatever happens, we have to struggle against this sort of thing.

I would like to make one final point. Marx was and still is a great thinker. But he's one among many great thinkers, and it would be ridiculous for us, if we call ourselves revolutionaries or whatever, whenever a problem comes up to go to Marx to see if there is a place in which one can find the answer. This is such a ridiculous contradiction in terms. You want to change the world, and you have to find an answer in Marx. It is absolutely incredible. It's a sort of theoretical suicide, a self-condemnation to radical sterility. You get some inspiration from Marx—but you can also get some from Hegel, Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza, and lots of other thinkers—and then you go along and try to create ideas that more or less find an encounter with today's reality and that can help us to go further.

CLINTON JEAN: I have a lot of questions but we don't have enough time. I am very happy that the last speaker

raised the question of what your view of contemporary history is. I was thinking that one of the important things about the study of historical materialist conditions or conditions from that approach is that it tended to unify the rise of capitalism with the exploitation of the Third World countries. When I was a younger man and read about nineteenth-century colonialism, I got the impression that these folks left Europe, went to the rest of the world, colonized it, ripped it apart, and so on, and I was wondering what people were doing when this was happening. Lately, it has begun to strike me that we are now witnessing a situation where the United Nations has turned into a white man's club. You've got a bunch of people such as John Major and others who sit there and before them are brought questions as to what to do with General Manuel Noriega and Saddam Hussein and while these are not my personal heroes, it seems to me that it's astounding that the head of a State could be arrested by a major power and brought to trial in another country. I was wondering how you put things like that into the picture, and extending your own remarks about the commodification of reality, it seems to me that at the moment, there has developed a kind of strange coincidence of the flow of history between what used to be called the Soviet Union and contemporary American society where Soviet Russia, as it used to be called, made a mistake in trying to think that a country had to go through socialism or whatever to arrive at some kind of human condition. This was a serious error. It's not so much that Stalinism grew out of Russian conditions or from the very beginning there was something in Lenin that misdirected them into serious authoritarian overkill and so on. I feel that if you think that to get to a humanist socialist system you need to have an abundance of the basic goods, you were bound to go in the direction that Russia did. It's no wonder that we see this situation where the United Nations does not represent a cultural plurality of world voices. I wonder if you could extend the comment that you made in response to the last question.

RODERICK: Let me preface my remarks by saying that I think it's an excellent question, and I also agree with what Cornelius said about Marx, that one didn't have to look

up everything one had to say in Marx. On colonialism in particular, you would not want to take much comfort from Marx on the British in India, for example. I doubt that's a part of Marx that many of us would want to endorse. In terms of what I see as a kind of global power elite, based in the core—and I still want to call them capitalist countries because I am not going to call them Utopias—capitalist countries are a sort of white man's U.N. club, Bush's New World Order and, in its incipient outlines, it seems to me, that as far as I know we've done about all we can to denounce Stalin and the Soviet Union. I thought they were gone. I'm going to turn the rest of my career toward attacking the pseudodemocracy in this country and the gap between its practices and its promises. I mean, the Soviet Union is gone. Dialectically, as it were, it may turn out that we needed the Soviet Union to show the heterogeneous and differential groups in struggle that it couldn't work. Now that they are gone, after a period people may say, "Well, what the hell! Maybe we should try something new." So, it may be that the Soviet Union played a certain role in stabilizing our own power, and it may end up in this new multipolar world that the power elite may miss the Soviet Union. They may end by calling on Stalinists to return to take over. By the way, Bush did something like that in China. Certainly, Bush's support for China looks that way to me. I'm going to devote my energies to criticize this society where I happen to be.

C.C.: I think one ought to have no illusions about the U.N. or any other such organizations. In theory, Lenin always thought in terms of the relationship of forces. In *Realpolitik*, you will see that there is a relationship of forces in the U.N. It is not even a white man's club, although many white men are members of the club. There are the three groups you talked about—in fact, Europe is not much of a group—but you also have the force of the rest of the world in the situation it has been left in by both colonization, half-colonization, decolonization and half-decolonization, which are muddling through and not going anywhere.

And that's the actual situation. That it's rather bleak, there is no question about it, and I wouldn't want to make a forecast that everything we do will be all right in the end. The

point is not to make a forecast. It is to see the situation we are in, the problems that we have to address, and to keep on working.

AZINNA NWAFOR: Unfortunately there is not enough time to do full justice to an account that one finds terribly tendentious and schematic; an exemplary instance of what used to be known as cathedral Marxism. Let me raise two questions: First, you said that one of the reasons you felt you had to leave Marxism was because of its shortcomings. The question to this then is how do you address people like Georg Lukács who said that they had to remain within the movement to exercise any kind of influence on what is called underdevelopment—influence not only politically but also intellectually and theoretically as well. It's a red herring when you say you are not looking for answers in Marx. One of the most creative developments, what in fact I've called an ahistorical movement, was found in people who remained within the movement, and Antonio Gramsci would be an instance of this. In any case, how do you address such questions?

My second question addresses your comments on the colonial movements. You found finally that there was a revolution in Ghana, which presumably went against the dogmatic instance of mechanical development, but in fact they found out that the hope for socialism exists because China, India, and Africa constitute the largest segment of the world's population and that the grasp has to be found in what has to be seen as the weakest link in the chain of imperialism, not necessarily that they [these countries] had to develop to a certain stage, but that they constitute the weakest link in the chain. Also in the answers Marx gave to his Russian questioner when he was asked, "Does it mean that Russia also has to go through all of this?" To which he replied: "No, they don't have to go through that." These were all there long before the Ghanaian Revolution. Why do you continually insist upon what is seen as a schematic movement in development?

C.C.: First of all I was terribly schematic, not tendentious, because I had to say in twenty minutes what I have written in three thousand pages. So, if you think you

could do better, that's fine. Second, it's funny that you bring up the sentence by Lukács which says one must remain within the movement in order to influence it. This proved to be suicide for Lukács. Lukács was an important theoretician in 1919-1923 when he wrote *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). After that he became silent, he became a lackey of Stalin, he didn't open his mouth. He wrote this ghastly book in 1948, *The Eclipse of Reason*, which is the purest Zhdanovian book written by a philosopher, and that was the fate of Lukács who wanted to remain within the movement.²⁵ Which movement? At the time of Lukács, already, you could ask—and that was also true for Jean-Paul Sartre and a whole bunch of other intellectuals—what is a movement? Why was *this the* movement? It was the movement because it had guns and prisons. And Lukács and Sartre and all the other fellow-travelers were bowing, not before the working class, but before state power. But, at the present time, what is the point of your question? Which movement should I remain in? Where is it?

As to the third point of your question, I did not say that I discovered the colonial question when James talked to me about Ghana. I said that this was a triggering point in my mind to see that colonial people could display this self-activity, self-mobilizing and self-mobilizing stance that, in classical Marxist terms, only the proletariat could achieve. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot say that the Russian Revolution degenerated because Russia was a

²⁵Max Horkheimer, not Georg Lukács, is the author of the 1947 book *Eclipse of Reason*. The following year, near the height of influence of the Zhdanov Doctrine, Lukács did indeed publish a book of literary criticism that was first translated into English two years after that as *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki, and Others*, trans. Edith Bone with a foreword by Roy Pascal (London: Hillway Pub. Co., 1950). Only in 1952 did he write a book that was later published in English as *The Destruction of Reason*. It is unclear whether Castoriadis himself confused these two (or three) titles or an editing error intervened at some point. See also Castoriadis's earlier piece, "Note sur Lukàcs [sic] et R. Luxembourg [sic]," *S. ou B.*, 26 (November-December 1958): 20-22, now available online at <http://www.magmaweb.fr/spip/spip.php?article86>. —T/E

backward country but Marx knew that backward countries as well can make a revolution. It's either one or the other. I said that, contrary to what Marx and Lenin thought about colonialism and racism—Marx condemned half of the European population (the Russians, the Slavs, the Hungarians, the Romanians, the Czechs) as inferior in his foreign policy article, and Lenin's position was that the masses should revolt under the leadership of the party—James called for the self-mobilization of the masses, and that was the important thing. And this self-mobilization, according to strict Marxist theory, could only be the task of the industrial proletariat, which is not true, and, if true, would doom all revolutionary movements, since the industrial proletariat properly speaking is today a vanishing minority.

Cornelius Castoriadis to C.L.R. James

Paris, 29th September 1957

Dear J,

I have just finished reading the draft of the Manifesto [*Facing Reality*]. I find there are many formidable things in it, and that you have performed something of great and permanent value. Of course, there are many small points of detail, emphasis, drafting, which we can easily discuss and settle when we meet. Here are three questions of a more general character, which I want to submit to you before we meet, to help {facilitate} a more clear discussion:

a) I think it is necessary to make the concept of socialism more clear, or rather, more explicit. You perform 9/10ths of the work, showing with admirable concreteness socialism in the deeds of the workers, be it in Hungary or in a U.S. factory. But it is absolutely indispensable, I think, especially given the stage of maturity of our audience, to push to a more abstract level, and to sketch briefly the working and/or “principles” of a socialist society, precisely as *the organic and natural prolongation and universalization* of the concrete basis laid down before. Ideas like workers’ management of the factory, workers’ management of the economy (the plan), equal pay, abolition of piece and rate work, total auto-administration by the Councils (workers, farmers, etc.), abolition of the separate State apparatus (industrialization of the “functions” of the State), etc., must be *explicitly* formulated—and are nothing more {than} the clear universal expression of the concrete historical material.²⁶ This could be done very briefly (one or two pages).

b) The same, I think we ought to sum up in one or two pages (after page 40, perhaps) the ideas expressing the real, deep roots of the crisis of capitalism and bureaucracy, and

²⁶In the July-September issue (no. 22) of *S. ou B.* (now in [PSW2](#)), Castoriadis had just published the second part of “On the Content of Socialism,” which examined and expounded these principles and ideas in great depth—T/E

state explicitly that underconsumption, business fluctuations, rate of profit, etc., either are of no concern to us or nothing but phenomenal (and *changing*) expressions of the essence of the crisis: the permanent suppression of the self-activity of individuals and the new social units by bureaucratic organization, plan, administration, education, and philosophy. This is vital given the amount of deep and widespread confusion over these matters among our largest conceivable audience.

c) The most important, I think the section about the organization (by the way, I propose to find another expression for “*small organization*”) should have a different distribution of emphasis. Rather, there is one of the two elements {that} is practically missing altogether: a positive conception of the proper *historical role and function of the organization*, which should be developed side by side with the denunciation of the traditional conception. The latter rested on the idea that the organization was the depositary of the universal (general interests as opposed to sectional, international to national, maximum program as opposed to minimum demands—Lenin in *What Is to Be Done*, etc.). We, developing the concept of socialism as self-organization of the proletariat carried to the extreme, say: the universal is within the proletariat. The function of the organization is, first to help give an expression to this universal, secondly to make it explicit, thirdly to transpose it constantly to the total level (from plant to economy, from production to the whole of social activities, etc.). All this means concretely and in the first place that it is the only place in modern society where there can and must be an organic coalescence of workers and intellectuals, as persons and as points of view. We have to stress this positive function (carefully distinguishing and opposing it to Lenin’s transformation of “advanced workers” into some sort of political intellectuals) and the absolute *need* for such an organization. We cannot work alone, and we cannot call people to work with us unless we are able to show (a) the unconditional importance of what is to be done, (b) that it can be done in a way germane to the deepest aspects of our philosophy and politics, i.e., in a new type of organization. We have not only to destroy Lenin’s conception of the party

as [the] depository of the Reason in History (and so naturally claimant to absolute power), but to oppose to it on *two different levels*, (1) the Workers Councils, depositories of the New Human Reason in action, {and} (2) the organization of workers and intellectuals, *not* rival to the Councils and necessary part of the historical process leading to the Government by the Councils.

Remembering Irving Howe*

I had corresponded with Irving Howe over the last fifteen years concerning articles for *Dissent* and related matters,¹ but we had never met. Then, in August and September of 1990, Octavio Paz and my friends at *Vuelta* organized an international symposium in Mexico City on the theme “The Twentieth Century: The Experience of Freedom,” bringing together writers and intellectuals from Europe, East and West, and the Americas, to discuss the collapse of communist totalitarianism and the new political and ideological configuration. (The proceedings of the symposium have since been published in seven volumes by *Vuelta* under the title *La experiencia de la libertad, Mexico, 1991*. They include talks and commentary by Irving Howe.)

Irving and I fraternized immediately—both spontaneously, so to speak, and under the pressure of the “objective situation.” Indeed, we were almost the only ones to stand up against the new converts to capitalist “liberalism” from the East, especially Russia. These people would not tolerate any criticism of the Western economic, political, and social regimes; they had seen the light of “free markets” and defended an unadulterated Thatcherist theology with the same dogmatism and crude demagoguery they had been using some months or years before to glorify the communist orthodoxy. I was very much impressed during these discussions by Irving’s pugnacity, his intellectual rigor, and the wealth of his argumentation.

*“Remembering Irving Howe,” *Dissent*, Fall 1993: 514-49. Castoriadis’s contribution appeared on p. 525.

¹Besides “The Crisis of Marxism and the Crisis of Politics,” reprinted above in the present tome, the only other article by Castoriadis to appear in Howe’s journal was a “somewhat abridged” translation of a 1977 article originally written in French: “The French Communist Party: A Critical Anatomy,” trans. Adrienne Foulke, *Dissent*, Summer 1979: 315-25 (a new and complete English-language translation, “The Evolution of the French Communist Party,” later appeared in [PSW3](#)). Howe had rejected another Castoriadis text in translation as inappropriately too sophisticated for what he described as his “middlebrow” readership. —T/E

We promised to keep in touch and, two years later, I had the pleasure of meeting Irving and his wife in Paris. We found ourselves again in broad agreement concerning the main (gloomy) traits of the world situation. I remember expressing at some length my ideas about the deep ideological regression characteristic of the present climate everywhere, and Irving urging me to write a piece on this theme for *Dissent*, which, unfortunately, I have not yet found the time to do.

I will always regret that I only had the opportunity of meeting this exceptional man so late in his life, and in mine.

Raoul*

I met Raoul for the first time during the Winter of 1946-1947. The Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI) was then, as it so often was, internally at full boil. On the one hand, the struggle between the “Right” ({Yvan} Craipeau, {Paul} Parisot, {Albert} Demazière) and the “true B.L.s”¹ ({Pierre} Frank-{{Jacques} Privas) was at its height. On the other hand, and much more important, as it should have been, there was the discussion around the “Russian question,” which had witnessed the hatching of two small tendencies opposed to the orthodox Trotskyist line on this question (Russia as a “degenerated workers’ State,” its “unconditional defense,” the Stalinist parties in the capitalist countries described as *reformist*): those of Lucien {Sania Gontarbert}-{Daniel} Guérin² (USSR, state capitalism) and {Pierre} Chaulieu-{{Claude} Montal³ (USSR, a new type of social formation: total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism).

We must have met at one of the numerous discussion meetings about the Party’s position and program. Raoul came to me, at once teasing and open, and we set a rendez-vous to discuss things. He came to my place, on Rue Falguière, where I was living with my girlfriend, also a Party member,⁴ and he very quickly became as attached to us as we were to him.

*“Raoul,” published in a special issue on “Raoul” in the *Cahiers Léon Trotsky*, 56 (July 1995): 187-89. Signed “Cornelius Castoriadis (Pierre Chaulieu).” [“Raoul” was the pseudonym of the French Trotskyist Claude Bernard (1921-1994). —T/E]

¹Bolshevist-Leninists. —T/E

²See the “Note on the Lucien, Gu[é]rin, Darbout Thesis” in “On the Regime and Against the Defense of the USSR,” *PSWI*, pp. 42-43. —T/E

³Chaulieu was a pseudonym for Castoriadis, Montal for Claude Lefort. —T/E

⁴Comrade Victorine (Jeanine “Rilka” Walter), the mother of his elder daughter Sparta. See page 5 of the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview: <http://www.agorainternational.org/enccaiint.pdf>. —T/E

Quite rare were the weeks when, despite his numerous obligations, he would not come unannounced two or three times to Rue Falguière.

What attached him to us is difficult to say. Probably, our character as not at all typical “Party members” and the fact that we could speak with him not only about politics but also about a host of other topics with a free and open mind, something he clearly cherished and shared himself. But there was also a strong feeling of attraction for my ideas, to which I shall return.

What attached us to him was his charm, his warmth, his humor, his love of jokes and funny stories, the richness of both his highly original, slangy language and his lively, colorful way of speaking, which was accompanied by extremely expressive gestures, his sincerity, his merciless and fair judgment of people, his conspicuous sturdiness, and his unflinching solidarity.

We spent our evenings together in this way, evenings that for me remain unforgettable, until the moment when the “Chaulieu-Montal Tendency” decided to leave the PCI and found *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Autumn 1948). Not that there would have been between us a break, far from it, but our get-togethers became more spaced out, and then, after my separation from my girlfriend, those meetings ceased.

We again saw each other frequently during two subsequent phases: one, around 1954-1955, the other in 1957. In both cases, it was a matter, on his part, of a political initiative. The first time, he had formed, with some comrades from the PCI, a (more or less clandestine, I believe) group; he envisaged the possibility of a break; and he wanted to explore possibilities of a collaboration with *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Our discussions did not end in success, for reasons that concerned them. The second time, I had envisaged, and proposed to the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, to undertake the publication of a journal that would be intended for a larger audience than that of the review, with the collaboration of people from outside the group. I had approached Raoul in this spirit, and I was met with a positive reception on his end. But the attempt foundered, an unnatural coalition between Claude Lefort and Alberto VEGA having succeeded in getting my

proposal rejected by the group. I still saw Raoul a few times later on. The last time was by chance, at a play, around 1982 or 1983. He had already had his coronary and was less flamboyant than he had been in the past. We promised to see each other again, and it is to my bitter regret that I did not take the initiative.

I have alluded to the level of ideas. Raoul had come closer and closer to the theses I was presenting within the PCI, and I had, up until our departure from the PCI and again in 1954 and 1957, the clear impression that he was a few millimeters away from working with us. He did not do so, and I think that two factors held him back. The first was “personal,” or better *ad hominem*. Raoul had a very strong sense of smell, in the metaphorical sense. He quickly sniffed people out and sized them up from the outset, in a practically irrevocable way. And there was in the “Chaulieu-Montal Tendency” a certain number of people he couldn’t stand (one would say, in Greek, that their breathing wasn’t in sync). If one had pushed him, he would undoubtedly have said that he couldn’t bear what he considered their *petit-bourgeois* softness and the tepidness of their militancy.

The second factor was certainly the more important one. I am convinced that Raoul no longer believed in the “degenerated workers’ State” or in the “reformist” character of the Stalinist parties. In particular, when we discussed the countries of the “glacis”⁵ (the satellite countries), he had no objection to what I was saying about their being structurally assimilated by the USSR. And what happened in this regard in the months and years that passed could only confirm his appreciation of this idea. But I believe that, without saying it, he considered all those discussions to be without any great pertinence. On the one hand, he was convinced that the revolution would either sweep away Stalinism over there as well as here or at least would definitively clarify what its nature was. On the other hand and above all, Raoul was first

⁵A fortress’s sloped, protective outer walls, hence, in the parlance of the time, the countries of Eastern Europe that served as a buffer zone for Russia. —T/E

and foremost a militant. And, in order to be so fully, he needed an organization whose mode of operation (“B.L.,” as he said with a touch of pride), size (even if minimal), and prevailing concerns furnished him with a terrain for militant action. That is why he never wanted to cut his umbilical cord with the Trotskyist organization until that organization cut it for him.

I did not speak of Raoul’s fierce internationalism, the fraternal bonds he immediately created with working-class comrades, his ability to analyze social relations of forces or to retrace the historical development of the movement. Nor have I spoken of what was, in this realist, an indisputable and deep-seated revolutionary romanticism and an ever-present nostalgia for armed action. I know that I have not been able to offer a greater rendering of the lively radiance of this character. For that, one would have to have talents I do not possess.

PART FIVE
TWO BOOK REVIEWS



Francisco Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy**

Principles of biological autonomy: the title can and is to be understood in its double meaning. What defines the living being is autonomy, with the signification Francisco Varela gives to the term (organizational closure). But also, by thus delimiting and positing the existence of the living being, biology's own autonomy as a theoretical field of endeavor is assured.

Autonomy is to be contrasted with heteronomy (which Varela calls *allonomy*), namely, with the control, the *gestalt*, afforded by a computer and the schema of input-process (occurring within a more or less black box)-output. Varela rightly criticizes the dominance of the cybernetic-informational model, which has been popularized {since the Fifties}. In particular, he rises up against the naive and abusive employment of the term and idea of *information* and brings to light the presuppositions (pertaining to a simplistically positivist-rationalist metaphysics) that are involved in its application to biology: there is said to be—"outside," "over there"—some "information" the organism would merely have to gather and process. In truth, there is "information" only in, through and for the organism.

That, too, is what the idea of autonomy and organizational closure signifies. Starting from what for it can be but disturbances, a living system makes *be* what *for it* (and, in the first place, for no one else) is information. To treat such disturbances as *information for the system* is to fall into methodological confusion, to straddle [*enjamber*] the distinction between two categorial domains, and to confuse the point of view of the observer with that of the system. The system has to be treated, first and foremost, intrinsically. The living being is autopoietic; it itself is constantly producing itself. This is not to be understood solely from the "material"

*"Francisco Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy*" (review), *Le Débat*, 1 (May 1980): 126-27. The editors had asked "a few personalities" to "indicate to us, from among recently published *foreign* works, those that would be worth bringing to the attention of the French public" (p. 126).

point of view but also from the nomic point of view (that of the relationships or laws that regulate the system) and from the informational point of view (Varela writes: *in*-formation, formation *within*). The organizational closure of the living being is, *ipso facto*, closure and autonomy of its cognitive domain. The living being can *be* only by making *be* the distinction between self and nonself. Yet this nonself can *be* for it only in accordance with modes determined by the self. The immediate result of this is that there is no sense in talking about “representation” of the outside on the inside (or, to employ a terminology that is not Varela’s: It’s the living being that creates the “image,” as *image* and as *such and such* an image). Analysis of the immune system or the nervous system strongly backs up these considerations.

Auto-poiesis is also nomic. The autonomy of the living being is achieved in and through the circularity and the indefinite recursiveness of processes that unfold therein. Such circularity and recursiveness are not just “material.” The production and reproduction of the “material” components of the system, regulated by given relationships, also involve the production of these relations of production, and in an indefinitely recursive way. Here, Varela’s ideas tally with ones that play a key role in other domains, in particular the domains of psyche and society. Recursion is not recursion among elements of the same type; it crosses the boundary *between* types. The living being continually produces and reproduces both the material elements (components) and the formal elements (laws and relationships) of its existence, each by the other. (Think of the circularity that is the institution of society/individual.)

It is therefore not simply a matter of self-regulation but of self-creation (a word Varela does not utter), since it is the living being that posits the laws and relationships that make it *be as* living being, as *eidos* and as *such and such an eidos*. The philosophical implications here are of capital importance. So are the logical and mathematical implications. To say that the components (which are regulated by relationships) produce the relationships that produce them as components boils down to saying, in short, that here one has to go beyond the distinction between elements of a set and

operations within this set. It is therefore to take into account the problems of self-reference, to attempt to exit from the “theory of types” by means of which mathematicians and logicians have, since Bertrand Russell’s time, tried to evade those problems, and to take into consideration new classes of mathematical-logical being such as reflexive domains (domains that are isomorphic to their applications within themselves) and new tools (like Spencer-Brown logic).¹ Varela develops those implications at length here, and his developments clearly show both the decisive importance of these fields and the enormous difficulties one encounters therein.

As for the philosophical implications, I have just one or two remarks to make. The being of the living being is its autonomy—namely, the maintenance of its identity, which is synonymous with the maintenance of its unity. Being and one is the same, as Aristotle already said.² Identity and unity are here those of the cognitive domain of the organism: “mechanisms of knowledge and mechanisms of identity are two sides of the same systemic coin” (p. 211). The organism *is*, as a living being, only by being *what* it is; it is impossible to dissociate the question of being [*de l’étant*] and the question of Being [*de l’être*].

This amounts to saying that it is impossible to dissociate genuine science from genuine philosophy. One can formulate reservations, criticisms, and disagreements about numerous points made in this major book. That is just one more indication of the fecundity of its approach as well as the pertinence of its questions. Above all, one must recognize and hail in the work of this young Chilean biologist—as well as in Henri Atlan’s *Entre le cristal et la fumée*,³ which came out

¹George Spencer-Brown, author of *Laws of Form* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969). —T/E

²Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1003b23. —T/E

³*Entre le cristal et la fumée: essai sur l’organisation du vivant* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979). —T/E

last Fall—one of the signs, which fortunately seem to be increasing in number, of the end of scientism and its wretched blackmail, with a renewal of the demand for philosophy [*l'exigence philosophique*] arising right from within the most rigorous sort of scientific activity.

Philosophy as Antidote: Roger-Pol Droit, *Philosophy and Democracy in the World**

Following Martin Heidegger, a number of his epigones continue to sing the song of the end of philosophy (of metaphysics, onto-logo-theo-phallocentrism, etc.). Heidegger, at least, wanted the place of philosophy to be taken by the “thought of being,” though it remains difficult to this day to see in what that might consist. For this reason, perhaps, some are content, in borrowing from him the word *deconstruction*, to give themselves over to negative exercises on the corpus of inherited philosophy, while others call for the advent of a sort of “weak thought.”¹ On the other side of the Atlantic, where philosophy properly speaking has been and continues to be described as *Continental*—in the sense of a European continent that would end at the English Channel—analytic philosophy continues to occupy the main space in the university teaching of philosophy (in the absence of high-school teaching of the subject), at the same time that a resuscitated pragmatism is proclaiming (see Richard Rorty)² the uselessness of philosophy in the established sense of the

*“La philosophie comme antidote. Une enquête de l’Unesco l’établit: loin d’être dépassée, la philosophie est l’objet d’un intérêt croissant à travers le monde” (book review of Roger-Pol Droit’s *Philosophie et démocratie dans le monde. Une enquête de l’Unesco*, *Le Monde des Livres*, November 24, 1995: X. [This book appeared in English as *Philosophy and Democracy in the World: A UNESCO Survey*, trans. Catherine Cullen (Paris: UNESCO, 1995), as well as in Spanish. —T/E]

¹See *Il pensiero debole*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovati (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1988). —T/E

²See Castoriadis’s “Response to Richard Rorty” (1991; in [ASA\(RPT\)](#)). As noted there (p. 95, n. 1): “in response to Castoriadis’s earlier talk ‘The “End of Philosophy”?’” (published in *Salmagundi*, 82/83 [Spring/Summer 1989]: 3-23; now in *PPA*, with an added final paragraph), Rorty had offered his ‘Comments on Castoriadis’s “The End of Philosophy?”’ (*Salmagundi*, *ibid.*: 24-30, Rorty’s title lacking the extra quotation marks Castoriadis had placed around ‘end of philosophy’).” —T/E

term.

Alongside what could be called an *internal crisis*, weighty historical factors are at work against philosophy having an effective presence in society. On a world scale, the rise of technoscience, which marks the almost uncontested domination of the capitalist imaginary, finds its complement in the positivism of most scientists, but also in populations' superstitious belief in all-powerful Science and Technique—which Heidegger himself shared. Moreover, despite the collapse of Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism in most—but not all—of the countries it dominated, more or less ideological dictatorships survive in numerous countries, and religious forms of fundamentalism—mainly Islamic—dominate or are threatening to do so in other ones, thus rendering impossible, in both cases, the public exercise and free teaching of philosophy.

In this context, it is consoling to learn that, far from being moribund, the public teaching of philosophy at the high-school level as well as in the universities has experienced over the last half century {i.e., since the War} a remarkable expansion for the first time in history. This is what the second survey, conducted by UNESCO beginning in September 1994 as part of its “Democracy and Philosophy in the World” program establishes. Sixty-seven countries answered this survey, whereas the previous one (1951-1953) had concerned only nine of them.

One may be surprised by this spread of the teaching of philosophy throughout the world. There is hardly any doubt that it is due in large part to numerous countries' achievement of independence. Even if what we have here is the effect of an adoption of Western models, one can nonetheless be very pleased about this process that in all likelihood will astonish more than one European reader. Roger-Pol Droit—who coordinated work on the present survey, presents its main lessons, and frames everything with pertinent and extensive reflections of his own—says that “it is a significant invention of the modern era” (p. 68) whose fruits we are still far from seeing. One must add to that the effects of the recent liberation of a large number of countries from Communist tyranny, which certainly made the teaching of “philosophy”

compulsory but reduced such teaching to indoctrination in dialectical and historical materialism.

Two Opposing Positions

Two questions discussed in this book, those concerning philosophy's relationship to democracy and the "European" character of philosophy—or at least of the contents of what is taught—will most certainly raise the strongest interest.

Regarding the first question, Droit sifts out from the responses received two diametrically opposed positions: (1) philosophy, one speciality among others capable of being broached only by a few minds, would have no role to play in the political education of citizens, which is to be carried out elsewhere; or (2) philosophy, a key component in the training [*formation*] of citizens that is indissociable from democracy, ought to "help each individual to practice analyzing . . . his or her own convictions, to grasp the diversity of arguments and viewpoints of others, to perceive the limited nature of even our surest knowledge" (p. 99).

The second question poses greater difficulties. Would philosophy in general, or philosophy as taught, be "Greek," "European," "Eurocentric"? However little it might be pushed, would not the teaching of it be (one of many) underhanded ways of extending the West's cultural domination of the planet? One does not have to discuss the exact place of Indian or Chinese thought in relation to Greco-Western philosophy (whether some people like it or not, Arab philosophy belongs to the latter; in the main, it has tried to respond to the questions Aristotle raised). It can easily be granted that they should, one way or another, be part of teaching curricula, including, obviously, in Europe. That does not erase the very strong singularity of Greco-Western philosophy. It is not a matter of a "privilege," and still less would it be a result of the West's world domination.

Obligations

It happens that it is in this region of the world, among these peoples, and through their languages that democracy and philosophy were created or developed to a point elsewhere unknown. That creates no privilege, but it very much does create some obligations. It is not an accident that it is this kind of philosophy, and not another, that was the womb for the development of the natural sciences as well as the humanities. Nor is it an accident that this is the only kind to have worked on thinking the political (the essence of power) and politics (the desirable content for the order of the City).³ And it isn't an accident, either, that Greco-Western philosophy did not limit itself to affirming that Being is or that it is not, but unendingly asked itself how it is, and what Being signifies. Nor, finally, to cut short a long series, is it an accident that it has constantly practiced self-reflectiveness.

It is still more difficult to grant the tenor of certain responses. "Decolonize philosophy" say the African responses (p. 70). "No relation between philosophy teaching and [the country's] cultural traditions is visible" (Uruguay, p. 139). To say that one must necessarily establish a *relation* between these traditions and the rest of the things that are taught is meaningless. Why not decolonize mathematics or biochemistry? And if "the relations between the teaching of philosophy and cultural traditions are conflictual" (Mali),⁴ it must be recalled that *this* conflict, the opposition of *muthos* and *logos*, is the very signature on philosophy's birth certificate. Heraclitus wanted Homer to be chased from the

³On Castoriadis's distinction between the political [*le politique*] and politics [*la politique*], see, e.g., "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988; now in *PPA*, pp. 156-62). —T/E

⁴This sentence, on p. 152 of the French, was not translated for the English-language edition; the translation here is our own. —T/E

games and beaten, and he treated Hesiod as ignorant.⁵

One thing seems to me to have been insufficiently accentuated throughout this survey: the capital importance of philosophy for awakening in everyone *thaumazein*, amazed questioning in the face of the world, being, truth, our own existence. Such amazed questioning, such wonderment remains the supreme antidote to ideological beliefs as well as to contemporary technoscientific delusion.

⁵Heraclitus fragments 42 and 40 in Kathleen Freeman's *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 27. —T/E

APPENDIX: POTENTIAL FUTURE TRANSLATION PROJECTS*

N.B.: Translations of some of these texts may be prepared at a later date for publication in electronic volumes devoted to Castoriadis's post-S. ou B. public interventions.

BOOK-LENGTH TRANSLATION PROJECTS

FR2002A *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.

FR2004A *Ce qui fait la Grèce. Tome 1. D'Homère à Héraclite. Séminaires 1982-1983. La Création humaine II.* Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004.

FR2007A *Fenêtre sur le chaos.* Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007.

FR2009A *Histoire et création. Textes philosophiques inédits (1945-1967).* Réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Poirier. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009.

FR2010A *Démocratie et relativisme: Débats avec le MAUSS.* Édition établie par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010.

FR2011A *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.

*All date-letter references mentioned in this Appendix refer to the Bibliographies on the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website: <http://www.agorainternational.org/fr/bibliographies.html>; # = missing info.

**A VOLUME ON
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FR1982B “Table ronde. Égalités et inégalités: Héritage ou mythe occidental?” (“Le 29 septembre 1981”). *Ibid.*: 70-98; Castoriadis, *ibid.*: 70-72 et 87-88.

FR1983F Cornelius Castoriadis, René Girard, *et al.* “La contingence dans les affaires humaines. Débat Cornelius Castoriadis-René Girard” (13 juin 1981 au colloque de Cerisy). *L’Auto-organisation. De la physique au politique*. Sous la direction de Paul Dumouchel et Jean-Pierre Dupuy. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983: 282-301. Présentation. *Ibid.*: 281.

FR1983I “Je ne suis pas moins esclave de mon maître”. *Information et réflexion libertaire* (Lyon), 51 (été 1983): 33-35.

FR1986B1: Préface (Paris, 1er décembre 1985). *CL*: 7-15.

FR1987A “L’auto-organisation, du physique au politique” (entretien à Radio-France avec Gérard Ponthieu). *Création et désordre. Recherches et pensées contemporaines*. Paris: L’Originel/Radio-France, 1987: 39-46.

FR1987C “Imaginaire social et changement scientifique” (conférence-débat organisée par l’Action locale Bellevue le 23 mai 1985). *Sens et place des connaissances dans la société*. Paris: CNRS, 1987: 161-83.

FR1987H “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!’” (“Un entretien [du 18 février 1987] mené par Dominique Bouchet”). *Lettre Science Culture*, 28 (octobre 1987): 1-2.

FR1988C “L’utilité de la connaissance dans les sciences de l’homme et dans les savoirs” (“table ronde présidée par Étienne Barilier”). *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*,

79 (avril 1988): 87-131; Castoriadis, *ibid.*: 91-95, 99-101, 102-03, 106, 107-08, 113-15, 116, 117-18, 122, 128-29 et 130.

FR1990A “Pour soi et subjectivité”. *Colloque de Cerisy. Arguments pour une méthode (Autour d’Edgar Morin)*. Sous la direction de Daniel Bournoux, Jean-Louis Le Moigne et Serge Proulx. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990: 118-27.

EN1991C “Cornelius Castoriadis interviewed by Paul Gordon.” *Free Associations*, 24 (1991): 483-506.

FR1991O “Fragments d’un séminaire philosophique”. *Ibid.*: 104-6.

EN1993D “Imagining Society—Cornelius Castoriadis Interview.” *Variant*, 15 (Autumn 1993): 40-43.

EN1994C “Cornelius and Cybèle Castoriadis: Writer Psychoanalyst, Paris, 1991.” *Fathers and Daughters: In Their Own Words*. Introduction by William Styron. Photographs by Mariana Cook. San Francisco: Chronicle Books: 1994: 66-67.

FR1995A “Tract” (texte pour une oeuvre d’art). Costis Triandaphylou. *Espace électrique*. Athens: Artbook, 1995: 41; voir: 26 (31 en grec), 63.

FR1997B “Conseils à un débutant: apprendre à discerner” (entretien par Nicolas Truong), *Le Monde de l’Education, de la culture et de la formation*, 244 (janvier 1997): 48-49.

FR1997C “Les carrefours du labyrinthe V” (conférence du 22 mars 1997). *Parcours. Les Cahiers du GREP Midi-Pyrénées*, 15-16 (septembre 1997): 385-410 (voir FR1998D).

FR1999D “Fragments d’un séminaire sur la vertu et l’autonomie”. *Areté. Revista de filosofia*, 11:1-2 (1999): 293-313.

EN1998A Elie Wiesel, Fritjof Capra, Vaclav Havel,

Bronislaw Geremek, Seizaburo Sato, René-Samuel Sirat, Cornelius Castoriadis. "Man's Freedom, God's Will." *Civilization. The Magazine of the Library of Congress*, 5:2 (April-May 1998): 54-57; see 57 (see also quotation on 67).

EN1998B Immanuel Wallerstein, Michael Novak, Timothy Garton Ash, Cornelius Castoriadis, Michael Mann, Richard von Weizsäcker. "The Prospect of Politics." *Civilization. The Magazine of the Library of Congress*, 5:2 (April-May 1998): 70-77; see 74.

EN1998C "A Conversation Between Sergio Benvenuto and Cornelius Castoriadis" (7 May 1994). Trans. Joan Tambureno. *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, 6 (Winter 1998): 93-107.

FR1999G "Extraits. Cornelius Castoriadis: 'Se reposer ou être libre'" (Dossier: L'autonomie, une valeur qui monte). *Dirigeant. Revue Proposée par le Centre des Jeunes Dirigeants d'Entreprise*, 38 (Mars 1999): 17.

FR2008C *L'imaginaire comme tel*. Texte établi, annoté et présenté par Arnaud Tomès. Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2008: 145-58.

FR2008D "Les conditions du nouveau en histoire" (séminaire du 18 janvier 1989). *Cahiers Critiques de Philosophie*, 6 (été 2008): 43-62.

A VOLUME ON WAR AND REVOLUTION

EN1980B "Facing the War" (translation of [FR1980A](#)). Trans. Joe Light, *Telos*, 46 (Winter 1980-81): 43-61.

"Facing War." Trans. ## ##. *Solidarity Journal*, 2 (### 198#): ##-##.

FR1981C "Vers la stratocratie" (extraits de *DG*: 114-21, 124-27, 169-77, 179-82 et 237-38). *Le Débat*, 12 (mai 1981): 5-17 (voir [FR1980A](#) et [FR1981B](#)).

FR1981D “Illusions ne pas garder” (20 décembre 1981).
Libération, 21 décembre 1981: 9.

DH: 50-55.

EN1982A “The Impossibility of Reforms in the Soviet Union” (translation of [FR1981B](#): 171-82). Trans. Jim Asker.
Thesis Eleven, 4 (1982): 26-31.

EN1982B “The Toughest and Most Fragile of Regimes” (translation of [FR1982F](#)). Trans. David Berger. *Telos*, 51 (Spring 1982): 186-90.

FR1982D “Le pouvoir au bout du char” (propos recueillis par Louis-Bernard Robitaille). *Le Nouvel Observateur*, ## (2 janvier 1982): 14-19.

Devant la guerre (12 décembre 1981).

EN1982C Alain Besancon, Alexandre Astruc, Andre Gluecksmann, Bernard-Henri Levy, Cornelius Castoriadis, Czeslaw Milosz, Edgar Morin, Fernando Arrabal, Huber Matos, Jean-Marie Benoist, Jean-Marie Domenach, Lane Kirkland, Leonid Plyushch, Marek Halter, Michel Crozier, Michel Leiris, Natalya Gorbanevskya, Nikita Struve, Olga Svintsova, Olivier Guichard, Olivier Todd, Pierre Golendorf, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Samuel Beckett, Stanislaw Baranczak, Susan Sontag, Tania Plyushch, Vladimir Bukovsky, Vladimir Maximov (partial list). “Help Save *Que Me*.” *New York Review of Books*, 29:8 (May 13, 1982): 51.

EN1982E “‘Facing the War’ and ‘The Socio-Economic Roots of Re-Armament: A Rejoinder’” (reply written in English). *Telos*, 53 (Fall 1982): 192-97. (See [EN1980B](#).)

FR1982E “L’Occident est déjà en retard d’une bataille”. *Paris-Match*, 1706 (5 février 1982): 80-81.

FR1982F “Le plus dur et le plus fragile des régimes” (“Entretien avec Paul Thibaud, enregistré le 3 février 1982”). *Esprit*, mars 1982: 140-46.

FR1982I “La vraie menace russe” (interview d’Eugène Silianoff). *Paris-Match*, 30 octobre 1982: 3-5, 11, 13 et 16.

FR1982J “Le régime russe se succédera à lui-même” (11 novembre 1982). *Libération*, 12 novembre 1982: 16.
DH: 69-73.

FR1982K “La Russie ne veut pas la guerre: elle veut la victoire” (propos recueillis par Olivier Nouaillas). *La Vie*, 1942 (18-24 novembre 1982): 51.

FR1983A “Pologne, notre défaite” (Tripotamos, Tinos, 11-15 août 1982). Préface à la *Banque d’images pour la Pologne*. Paris: Limage 2, 1983: 7-13.

EN1983A “The Destinies of Totalitarianism” (article originally written in English; subsequent translation by Castoriadis as FR1986B9). *Salmagundi*, 60 (Spring-Summer 1983): 107-22

FR1983D “Le débat du *Débat*. Union soviétique”. *Le Débat*, 24 (mars 1983): 190-92.

EN1984E “Defending the West” (translation of expanded version of [FR1983C](#)). Trans. Alfred J. MacAdam. *Partisan Review*, 51 (1984): 375-79. (Castoriadis called this title “misleading” and the translation “particularly bad”; his letter of protest to *Partisan Review* concerning this unauthorized translation was never published.)

EN1987B “Cold War Fictions” (translation of letter to Professor Otto, editor of *Sozialwissenschaftliche Literatur Wissenschaft*, concerning Hauke Brunkhorst’s review of *Devant la guerre*). *Solidarity Journal*, ## (Summer 1987): 14-15.

“Communication.” *Thesis Eleven*, 16 (1987): 125-26.

FR1988E Alain Besançon, Cornélius [*sic*] Castoriadis, Robert Charvin, Jean Ellenstein, Marc Ferro, Patrice Gelard, Annie Kriegel, Michel Lesage, Lilly Marcou. “Débat. De

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