CROSSROADS IN THE LABYRINTH
Volume 4
THE RISING TIDE OF INSIGNIFICANCY

by Cornelius Castoriadis*

translated from the French
and edited anonymously
as a public service

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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 Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*. http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf. December 4, 2003.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONTENTS

KAIROS

KOINŌNIA

POLIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CR   *The Castoriadis Reader*. Ed. David Ames Curtis. Malden, MA and Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1997. 470pp.

DR   *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group*. http://www.notbored.org/DR.pdf. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: January 2013. 63pp.

FTPK   *Figures of the Thinkable* including *Passion and Knowledge*. http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf and http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-Figures_of_the_Thinkable.pdf. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: February 2005. 428pp.

IIS   *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Tr. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1987. 418pp. Paperback edition. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1997. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.

OPS   *On Plato's Statesman*. Tr. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. 227pp.

PPA   *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*. (N.B.: The subtitle is an unauthorized addition made by the publisher.) Ed. David Ames Curtis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 304pp.

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

PSW1   *Political and Social Writings.* Volume 1: 1946-1955. *From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 348pp.

PSW2   *Political and Social Writings.* Volume 2: 1955-1960. *From the Workers' Struggle Against Bureaucracy to Revolution in the Age of Modern Capitalism*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 363pp.

PSW3   *Political and Social Writings.* Volume 3: 1961-1979. *Recommencing the Revolution: From Socialism to the Autonomous Society*. Tr. and ed. David Ames Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 405pp.

RTI(TBS) *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*. http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf and http://www.costis.org/x/castoriadis/Castoriadis-rising_tide.pdf. Translated from the French and edited anonymously as a public service. Electronic publication date: December 4, 2003.

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

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

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

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

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

CE   *La culture de l'égoïsme*. Avec Christopher Lasch. Traduit de l'anglais par Myrto Gondicas. Postface de Jean-Claude Michéa. Flammarion, Paris, 2012. 105pp.

CFG1   *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 1. *D'Homère à Héraclite*. Séminaires 1982-1983. *La Création humaine II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004. 355pp.

CFG2   *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 2. *La Cité et les lois*. Séminaires 1983-1984. *La Création humaine III*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Castoriadis et l'héritage grec" par Philippe Raynaud. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008. 313pp.

CFG3   *Ce qui fait la Grèce*. Tome 3. *Thucydide, la force et le droit*. Séminaires 1984-1985. *La Création humaine IV*. Texte établi, présenté et annoté par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Précédé de "Le germe et le *kratos*: réflexions sur la création politique à Athènes" par Claude Moatti. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2011. 374pp.

CL   *Les Carrefours du labyrinthe*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978. 318pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2017. 432pp.

CMR1   *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 1. *L'impérialisme et la guerre*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 443pp.

CMR2   *Capitalisme moderne et révolution*. Tome 2. *Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 318pp.

CS   *Le Contenu du socialisme*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 441pp.

D   *Dialogue*. La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 112pp.

DEA   *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Avec Daniel Cohn-Bendit et le public de Louvain-la-Neuve. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981. 126pp. *De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Paris: Éditions Le Bord de l'Eau, 2014. 107pp.

DG   *Devant la guerre*. Tome 1: *Les Réalités*. 1ᵉʳ éd. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1981. 285pp. 2ᵉ éd. revue et corrigée, 1982. 317pp.

DH   *Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe II.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. 460pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 576pp.

DHIS   Cornelius Castoriadis, Paul Ricœur. *Dialogue sur l'histoire et*

l'imaginaire social. Édité par Johann Michel. Paris: Éditions de L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2016. 80pp.

DR *Démocratie et relativisme: Débats avec le MAUSS.* Édition établie par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010. 142pp.

EMO1 *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier.* Tome 1. *Comment lutter.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.

EMO2 *L'Expérience du mouvement ouvrier.* Tome 2. *Prolétariat et organisation.* Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1974. 445pp.

EP1 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 1. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier.* Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 422pp.

EP2 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 2. *La Question du mouvement ouvrier.* Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2012. 578pp.

EP3 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 3. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 1. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 694pp.

EP4 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 4. *Quelle démocratie?* Tome 2. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2013. 660pp.

EP5 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 5. *La Société bureaucratique.* Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2015. 638pp.

EP6 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 6. *Guerre et théories de la guerre.* Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2016. 723pp.

EP7 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 7. *Écologie et politique*, suivi de *Correspondances et compléments*. Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 448pp.

EP8 *Écrits politiques 1945-1997.* Tome 8. *Sur la dynamique du capitalisme et autres textes*, suivi de *L'Impérialisme et la guerre.* Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2020. 709pp.

FAF *Fait et à faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe V.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997. 284pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2008. 352pp.

FC *Fenêtre sur le chaos.* Édition préparée par Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas et Pascal Vernay. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007. 179pp.

FP *Figures du pensable. Les carrefours du labyrinthe VI.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. 308pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2009. 364pp.

HC *Histoire et création. Textes philosophiques inédits (1945-1967).* Réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Poirier. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009. 307pp.

IIS *L'Institution imaginaire de la société.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975. 503pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 1999. 544pp. N.B.: Unless otherwise indicated, pagination always refers to the 1987 English-language edition of *IIS*.

M68 Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Jean-Marc Coudray. *Mai 68: la brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1968. 142pp.

M68/VAA Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort et Cornelius Castoriadis. *Mai 68: la brèche* suivi de *Vingt Ans après*. Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1988. 212pp. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008. 296pp.

MI *La Montée de l'insignifiance. Les carrefours du labyrinthe IV*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996. 245pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2007. 304pp.

MM *Le Monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990. 281pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2000. 349pp.

P-SI *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance*. Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet (novembre 1996). La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998. 37pp.

P-SID *Post-Scriptum sur l'insignifiance*. Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet suivi de *Dialogue*. La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2007. 51pp.

SB1 *La Société bureaucratique*. Tome 1. *Les rapports de production en Russie*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 317pp.

SB2 *La Société bureaucratique*. Tome 2. *La révolution contre la bureaucratie*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973. 441pp.

SB(n.é.) *La Société bureaucratique* (nouvelle édition). Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1990. 492pp.

SD *Une société à la dérive. Entretiens et débats 1974-1997.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005. 307pp. Paris: Éditions du Seuil/Points, 2011. 40pp.

SF *La Société française*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979. 315pp.

S. ou B. *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Organe de Critique et d'orientation révolutionnaire*. Paris. 1949-1965. See https://soubscan.org.

SouBA *Socialisme ou Barbarie. Anthologie*. La Bussière: Acratie, 2007.

344pp.

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

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

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Notice[*]

  I have brought together here most of my texts from the past few years that are devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics. A fifth volume of the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series will follow in a few months, containing writings bearing on psychoanalysis and philosophy.

  The reader will come across a few repetitions between some of the texts. They are inevitable when one must familiarize various audiences with the author's presuppositions, which are not evident to everyone. It would have been difficult to eliminate them without destroying the logical order of the arguments each time. I hope that I can count on the reader's indulgence.

<div align="right">July 1995</div>

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[*]Préface, first published in *MI*, 7 (7 of the 2007 reprint).

On the Texts

The texts appearing in this volume are reprinted here without modification, aside from the correction of misprints and of a few *lapsus calami*. [Translator/Editor (hereafter: T/E): Footnotes have been numbered consecutively, sometimes preceded by "French Editors," "Author's addition," or "T/E."] I have added postscripts for two texts. [French Editors: In this reprint edition, we have introduced a few minor formal corrections, most of which had been requested by the author himself in his working copy.[1] Also added, in footnotes, is some supplemental bibliographical information. T/E: Such additional information is preceded by the indication "French Editors."]

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[1]T/E: The French Editors, the Association Cornelius Castoriadis, the Castoriadis Estate, and Éditions du Seuil all refused to share Castoriadis's personal list of *errata* for this and the other five volumes in the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series.

Translator/Editor's Foreword

The text printed below is a lecture first delivered in Berlin in 2014 and read and/or published in various venues across Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and South Korea (see its publication note, below). It deals with the eponymous theme of *La Montée de l'insignifiance*, the fourth volume in the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series (1978-1997, with a sixth volume published posthumously in 1999) of Castoriadis's post-*Imaginary Institution of Society* writings. As such, it provides an overview of the present volume, the fourth in our six-volume *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* series, and offers pertinent background information on Castoriadis's work that sets the main topic of this volume in perspective.

The principal purpose of this text is to explore and to elucidate the complex and conflictual genesis and growth of Castoriadis's "rising tide of insignificancy" theme, which in fact grew out of the eponymous theme he had developed for Socialisme ou Barbarie, the revolutionary group and journal he cofounded in 1948. (I had already critically examined this prior theme in my contribution to the 1989 Castoriadis *Festschrift* edited by Giovanni Busino, referenced below in n. 38.) It also shows how Castoriadis's elucidation of capitalism and its conflict-ridden imaginary institution serves to challenge interpretations of contemporary society that take the incoherent and duplicitous ideology of "Neoliberalism" at face value and/or as an adequate summary and description of our current situation, as is often done these days.

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

Winchester, Massachusetts (USA), November 2021

The Theme of
"The Rising Tide of Insignificancy"
in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis[*]

> *It's all one album. All the material in the albums [*We're Only in It for the Money*, a revised version of Zappa's solo album* Lumpy Gravy*,* Cruising with Ruben & the Jets *and* Uncle Meat*] is organically related and if I had all the master tapes and I could take a razor blade and cut them apart and put it* [the "No Commercial Potential" project musical material] *together again in a different order it still would make one piece of music you can listen to. Then I could take that razor blade and cut it apart and reassemble it a different way, and it still would make sense. I could do this twenty ways. The material is definitely related.*
>
> —Frank Zappa[1]

As coordinator of the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website's Bibliographers' Collective and responsible for its English and French Castoriadis bibliographies and webographies, I have the opportunity to take note not only of all texts written by Castoriadis, now listed in 20 languages, but also everything written *about* Castoriadis in those languages. Since his death in 1997, it is interesting to note, two particular themes—one specific, one general—stand out as most cited.

The specific one is Castoriadis's devastating criticism of Bernard-Henri Lévy, whose *Barbarism with a Human Face*, along with other "antitotalitarian" writings of the "new philosophers" in the 1970s, plagiarized the ideas behind Socialisme ou Barbarie's critique of "bureaucratic capitalism" and deformed them by eliding the fact that this was a critique of bureaucratic capitalism *both East and West*. Often, when Lévy makes some stupid new statement or outrageous new error, people cite Castoriadis's "The Diversionists"—where Castoriadis considered Lévy no better than "the eighth

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[1]Barry Miles, *Frank Zappa: The Biography,* 23rd print ed. (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004), p. 160; found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We%27re_Only_In_It_For_The_Money

perfumer in a sultan's harem"—and "The Vacuum Industry"[2] —Castoriadis's defense of his friend Pierre Vidal-Naquet, whom Lévy had accused of being a "master censor" for having pointed out egregious errors in one of Lévy's books.

More than any other, Castoriadis's theme of a "rising tide of insignificancy" has posthumously caught people's attention. In part, this is due to easy internet circulation of a digitized recording of the November 1996 "Postscript on Insignificancy" interview,[3] with popular radio host Daniel Mermet, now regularly cited, linked, tweeted and retweeted. This popularity is also due to its uncompromisingly scathing, plainspoken critique of contemporary society, which makes Castoriadis's still-relevant views and analyses readily available to the general public, whether or not people have followed his political itinerary or his philosophical development. And the specific theme is related to the general one, for Lévy as authorial buffoon who nonetheless gets called a "philosopher" and who gets away with his errors because of what Castoriadis called the "*shameful degradation of the critical function*"[4] is treated by Castoriadis as symptomatic of his broader "insignificancy" theme.

What is less clear is how this general, relatively popular theme, along with the specific theme exemplifying the general one, is understood in the context of Castoriadis's work as a whole, and whether the general one serves as no more than a slogan whose content is filled in by each person without regard to motivations underlying this critique. Moreover, as we shall see, the "insignificancy" theme crucially intervenes in the author's overall oeuvre at a strange time and

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[2]"The Diversionists" (1977), now in *PSW3*, and "The Vacuum Industry" (1979) [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL2*].
[3]Now translated in *PSRTI*.
[4]See again "The Vacuum Industry."

in a strange way that makes it in some ways even harder for people to make out that theme's purpose and import.

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The theme of a "rising tide of insignificancy" might at first appear merely part of the dyspeptic ramblings of a disappointed and bitter old man nearing the end of his life. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.[5] A brief anecdote illustrates this point. At a gathering a few years after Castoriadis's death, a former S. ou B. member complained to me that this seemingly pessimistic "insignificancy" theme took Castoriadis far afield from his earlier political concerns. Yet, this comrade was asked in turn: What does the "socialism or barbarism" alternative indicate but that, *throughout his life*, such *barbarism* was for Castoriadis an ever-present tendency of modern-day society, to be ignored at our peril? The comrade had no reply.

Indeed, the "collapse of culture" in Russia was already broached as early as a pre-S. ou B. text from 1947,[6] and in a 1983 lecture Castoriadis reminds us that, like S. ou B., Hannah Arendt "saw very clearly that with totalitarianism we face…the creation of the meaningless."[7] For him, this theme stemmed from an overall analysis of a Weberian rationalization process gone mad within "bureaucratic

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[5]A careful reader may note the free borrowing here and below from the Anonymous Translator's Foreword to *RTI(TBS)*.

[6]"The Problem of the USSR and the Possibility of a Third Historical Solution," *PSW1*, 52.

[7]"Destinies of Totalitarianism," *Salmagundi*, 60 (Spring-Summer 1983): 108. [DAC-2021: we hope to reprint the original of this text, since translated into French for *DH* and reprinted in the sixth volume of the *Écrits Politiques* series, in a projected sixth volume of an eight-volume *Political Writings* series.]

capitalism," whether of the "total and totalitarian" (Russian) or "fragmented" (Western) variety. We cannot retrace here all the stages in Castoriadis's evolving articulation of this devastating process of emptying meaning out of people's lives, from his earliest writings and commentary on Weber, when he became the first person to translate the great German sociological thinker into Greek during the Second World War, to the 1949 inaugural S. ou B. editorial "Socialism or Barbarism" (*PSW1*); his 1956 essay on "Khrushchev and the Decomposition of Bureaucratic Ideology" (*PSW2*); his statement in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961, also in *PSW2*) that modern capitalism privatizes individuals while seeking the destruction of meaning in work, a destructive process that spreads outward in a generalizing way eventually to encompass all social activities and to become a destruction of social significations, especially those of responsibility and initiative; his 1965 talk given to Solidarity members on "The Crisis of Modern Society" (*PSW3*) that incorporates issues of gender and youth; his negative conclusions in the 1967 circular "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (*PSW3*) about the initial prospects for the shop stewards movement in England and for American wildcat strikes to provide an alternative to the growing bureaucratization of the labor movement; his 1968 reflections on the "tree of knowledge" threatening to "collapse under its own weight and crush its gardener as it falls" and on the juvenilization of all strata and segments of society ("The Anticipated Revolution," *PSW3*); the 1979 text "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (also in *PSW1*) where Castoriadis declares, "I have weighed these times, and found them wanting"; the updated version of this same text, "The Crisis of Culture and the State," as well as the ominously-titled essay "Dead End?" on the dangers of

technoscience [DAC-2021: these two 1987 texts now appear in *PPA* and *CL3*, respectively]; and on to such texts as "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" and "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" [DAC-2021: now in *CL4* and *CL3*, respectively], not to forget the 1982 text "The Crisis of Western Society" [DAC-2021: reprinted in French as the introductory essay for *La Montée de l'insignifiance* [*MI*] (which was originally published in 1990), translated for *CR*, and now reprinted in English in *CL4*]. Indeed, even this brief listing of thematic precursor texts from all periods of his life leaves out many pertinent bibliographical hints and indications, such as the stunning sections of *Devant la guerre* (1981) on "The Destruction of Significations and the Ruination of Language" and on "Ugliness and the Affirmative Hatred of the Beautiful."[8]

As these titles—and the mid-1940s to early 1990s texts to which they refer—indicate, what Castoriadis first labeled *barbarism* and later came to describe as a *rising tide of insignificancy* points to a *self-reinforcing multidimensional disintegration of meaning initiated and sustained through a rationalization process gone awry in bureaucratic capitalism*. One did not have to gain special, privileged access to Castoriadis's private papers[9] in order to understand that the "early Castoriadis"/"late Castoriadis" distinction, first hypothesized by Brian Singer,[10] does not hold, for one can

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[8]DAC-2021: *DG* now appears in *EP6*; we hope to translate it for the projected sixth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.

[9]As was granted by the family's "Association Cornelius Castoriadis" to Nicolas Poirier, who also happens to be a member of its secretive self-reelecting Council.

[10]See Brian Singer, "The Early Castoriadis: Socialism, Barbarism and the Bureaucratic Thread," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 3:3 (Fall/Autumn 1979): 35-56, and "The Later Castoriadis: Institutions under Interrogation," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*,

readily glimpse from the public record a *magmatic unity-in-tension* at work in Castoriadis's published writings as a whole:[11] there is no specific, definable division point allowing one to separate the "early" from the "late Castoriadis" or any distinctive themes or set of approaches that would unilaterally distinguish a "before" from an "after."

And yet this is precisely what, near the end of his life, Castoriadis himself attempted to do for his own work, at least as regards his publication plans. And he did so at precisely the moment when he first introduced this "rising tide" theme to the reading public!

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Three years after the publication of his *magnum opus*, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*,[12] Castoriadis published

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4:1 (Winter 1980): 75-101. I myself have consistently criticized Singer's thesis of an "early" and a "late Castoriadis" (modeled on an early/late Heidegger) since the 1992 Translator's Foreword to *PSW3* (see: xvi). [DAC-2021: See also my 1997 *World in Fragments* (*WIF*) Translator's Foreword, now reprinted as part of the Translator/Editor's Foreword for *CL3*.]

[11]"Unities and Tensions in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis, With Some Considerations on the Question of Organization" (talk given at the Athens Polytechnic on December 7, 2007 for a meeting organized by the Autonomy or Barbarism group on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the death of Cornelius Castoriadis): https://issuu.com/magmareview/docs/athens-nostrikeoutword_1_ . An earlier version, first read before a German-speaking audience in Vienna for an event celebrating the publication of a German-language Castoriadis translation, combined elements from the Translator's Foreword for *WIF* and a talk I delivered in English in September 2000 to a conference on Castoriadis held on the island of Crete: "Apropos of The 'Early' and 'Late' Work of Cornelius Castoriadis: For A Critical-Integrative Approach."

[12]*IIS* was originally slated to be included among the Éditions 10/18 reprints of his *Socialisme ou Barbarie*-era texts.

the first tome in his *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series. This 1978 volume—which brought together six major essays, previously published in various reviews and illustrative of key themes found in *IIS*—was followed only a full six years later by a second volume in the *Carrefours* series, *Domaines de l'homme*. *DH*—prefaced by what is perhaps his most eccentric text, bizarrely defying even normal paragraph organization!—was so large and so disparate that, despite the effort to organize each of these sequential volumes into distinctive domains—"Psyche," "Logos," "Koinōnia" in volume one; "Kairos," "Koinōnia," "Polis," "Logos" in volume two—it encountered trouble finding an audience. A third volume, *Le Monde morcelé,* more manageable in size, thus appeared just four years after *DH* did in 1986, prefaced by a short 1990 "Notice" intended to give readers a hint as to the (albeit enigmatic) overall coherence of its three interrelated sections ("Koinōnia," "Polis," "Logos"): "The world—not only ours—is fragmented. Yet it does not fall to pieces. To reflect upon this situation seems to me to be one of the primary tasks of philosophy today."[13] Readers may have found it difficult to appreciate the essential, but ontologically difficult to discern, connections among what he was admitting were these somewhat tangentially related texts.[14]

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[13]Avertissement, *Le Monde morcelé*, p. 7 [DAC-2021: now in the Notice for *CL3*]. Strangely, the publisher, Le Seuil, forgot even to list the previous volume in the series, *DH*, among the books written "by the same author." See: *ibid.*, p. 4.

[14]2018 Addition: Castoriadis kindly told me that my Translator's Foreword to *WIF* was one of the best presentations of these issues relating to his philosophical views. Note, though, that, because of the exigencies and vagaries of the publication of Castoriadis's *Carrefours* texts in English-language translation, beginning with *PPA,* the volumes published in English do not match, text for text and volume for volume, the contents of *Carrefours* volumes one through six and thus, despite the similarity in title names, *WIF* differs to some extent from *Le Monde morcelé*. [DAC-2021:

It was within this frustrating publishing context that Castoriadis found himself having to hold off for more than half a decade before publishing the fourth *Carrefours* volume, even as a large number of manuscripts and texts published in various journals continued to accumulate, awaiting anthologization. The "Notice" for *La Monteé de l'insignifiance*, dated "July 1995," sought a way out of this impasse—but at the expense of the (puzzlingly obscure) cohesion he had nevertheless previously wanted to affirm:

> I have brought together here most of my texts from the past few years that are devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics. A fifth volume of the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series will follow in a few months, containing writings bearing on psychoanalysis and philosophy.[15]

A strict, yet problematic, division was thus established between "Kairos"-, "Koinōnia"-, and "Polis"-themed texts in *Le Montée de l'insignifiance* and "Psyche"- and "Logos"-themed ones in *Fait et à faire*—the psychoanalytical/philosophical essays in this fifth *Carrefours* volume [DAC-2021: now available in English as *CL5*] nonetheless being preceded by the eponymous "Done and To Be Done," a wide-ranging reply to contributors to the 1989 Castoriadis *Festschrift* that treated a broad range of ontological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, ethical, political, economic, and social issues from *all* phases and features of his oeuvre.

A justification for such a distinction within Castoriadis's work itself exists that is neither entirely artificial

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See now the Translator/Editor's Forewords for *CL2* and *CL3*.]
[15]DAC-2021: See now the Notice to *CL4*.

nor a complete violation of Castoriadis's principles. For, he had affirmed, at least since his 1981 talk for Giovanni Busino on "The Nature and Value of Equality" (*PPA*; [DAC-2021: now in *CL2*]), that, while a "cobirth" of philosophy and politics first occurred in ancient Greece, these twins are *nonidentical*, and so it would be just as misguided to try to deduce a philosophy from a politics as it would be to deduce a politics from philosophy.[16] Yet the publishing considerations mentioned above were most likely paramount; he mentioned them to me directly and he never made any appeal in this respect to the "nonidentical" proviso that qualifies his "cobirth" thesis.

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So, the decision, within the *Carrefours* series, to separate topical subjects in a clear-cut manner from philosophical ones occurs just as the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme makes its appearance as the title of that series' fourth volume. We must try to be very clear about how such a division occurred, for that clear-cut break within what is still, I maintain, the *magmatic unity-in-tension* of Castoriadis's work is itself quite complex and difficult to discern.

Of course, since I am arguing that the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme itself is an extension, elaboration, and refinement, for more contemporary times, of the "barbarism" portion of the "socialism or barbarism" alternative Castoriadis had long expounded, I am not saying that this theme came into being only when its specific phrasing first appeared in print. Indeed, the now-eponymous text for *La Montée de*

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[16]Previous specifications of this sort may be found in "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (now in *IIS*).

l'insignifiance (March 1996), which elaborates its major premises, is an interview conducted back in June 1993. "The crisis of criticism,"[17] Castoriadis said there—reminding us of the connection between the general "insignificancy" theme and what he called the "*shameful degradation of the critical function*" when it comes to appraising authors like Lévy—"is only one of the manifestations of the general and deep-seated crisis of society."

> There is a generalized pseudoconsensus; criticism and the vocation of the intellectual are caught up in the system much more than was the case formerly and in a much more intense way. Everything is mediatized; the networks of complicity are almost omnipotent. Discordant or dissident voices are not stifled by censorship or by editors who no longer dare to publish them; these voices are stifled by the general commercialization of society. Subversion is caught within the all and sundry of what is being done, of what is being propagated. To publicize a book, one says immediately, "Here is a book that has revolutionized its field"—but it is also said that Panzini-brand spaghetti has revolutionized cooking. The word *revolutionary*—like the words *creation* and *imagination*—has become an advertising slogan; this is what a few years ago was called *cooptation*.[18]

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[17]Let us recall, regarding this contemporary "crisis of criticism," that, throughout *S. ou B.*'s existence (1949-1965), its subtitle was "An Organ of *Critique* and Revolutionary Orientation."

[18]"The Rising Tide of Insignificancy" (1993), translated in *RTI(TBS)*; see: 130-31 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL4*]. As Castoriadis admitted in the 1973 General Introduction to his Éditions 10/18 *S. ou B.* reprints, S. ou B. itself had generally *underestimated* the power of "cooptation." There (*PSW1*, 35), he speaks of "the established society's unbelievable

Here Castoriadis introduces, perhaps for the first time, the word "insignificant" as an operative concept for describing our contemporary state of affairs:

> Marginality has become something sought after and central: subversion is an interesting curiosity that completes the harmony of the system. Contemporary society has a terribly great capacity for stifling any genuine divergency, be it by silencing it, be it by making it one phenomenon among others, commercialized like the others.
>
> We can be even more specific. Critics themselves have betrayed their critical role. There is a betrayal of their responsibility and of their rigor on the part of authors; there is a vast complicity on the part of the public, which is far from innocent in this affair, since it agrees to play the game and adapts itself to what it is given. The whole is instrumentalized, utilized by a system that itself is anonymous. None of this is the making of some dictator, a handful of big capitalists, or a group of opinion makers; it is an immense social-historical current that is heading in this direction and that is making everything become insignificant.[19]

This first use of the term is perhaps also his most sweeping employment of it: "…making everything become insignificant."

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capacity to reabsorb, divert, and recoup everything that challenges it (which was noted, but certainly underestimated in *S. ou B.* texts and which is a historically new phenomenon)."

[19]"The Rising Tide of Insignificancy," *RTI(TBS)*, 131 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL4*].

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[2018 Addition: During the discussion period that followed a reading of the present paper in Spanish for a 2016 Castoriadis colloquium in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, a student asked me how the *psychoanalyst* Castoriadis viewed this "rising tide of insignificancy." I had to admit that, within the confines of an hour-long oral presentation, it was impossible to cover all aspects of this theme in his work and merely referred the questioner to a few relevant Castoriadis texts I had already mentioned in my presentation, explaining that the purpose of my talk was not to provide an exhaustive and unassailable account but to suggest a way of reading Castoriadis's work that might prove useful for readers in their efforts to think further on their own and to draw conclusions for themselves about both Castoriadis and our present-day situation. Nevertheless, a review of the properly psychological and psychoanalytical aspects of his work reveals additional features of his exposition of this overall theme that bear examination.

Begun in 1959, "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (MCR) endeavored to examine modifications within capitalism that would help account for the working class's failure, a year earlier, to oppose Gaullism, despite the negative effects De Gaulle's victory would soon have on its standard of living. To borrow the title of François Mitterrand's 1965 book, the General's triumph had established a *Permanent Coup d'État*. In this respect, Castoriadis's tripartite 1960-1961 article (*S. ou B.*, nos. 31-33) might be compared to Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), which attempted a Marxian-Freudian analysis of the rise of Nazism at the expense of the

proletariat's class interests.[20] Yet Castoriadis's text was intended to show how modern capitalism could lead, via disengagement from bureaucratized labor and political organizations that exclude or effectively discourage working people's active participation, to apathy, depoliticization, and generalized *privatization*. Like the rest of the group, he saw in De Gaulle's ascension to power a potential modernization of French capitalism—with people increasingly seeking *individualistic* (if conformist) solutions—not the harbinger of a return to fascism and/or mass mobilization within traditional organizations.

A quarter-century later, in a joint BBC discussion with Christopher Lasch, author of *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (1977), *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), and *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1984), Castoriadis described retrospectively the origins of his "privatization" thesis:

> 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,

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[20]In "On the Content of Socialism, I" (1955; now in *PSW1*; see: 309, n. 25), Castoriadis favorably cited three Reich volumes—*The Sexual Revolution*, *Character Analysis*, and *The Function of the Orgasm*—as regards "the profound relation between class structures and the patriarchal regulation of sexual relations." But no mention of *Mass Psychology*.

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. 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…"private" world.[21]

And yet, even with its exposition of the "fundamental contradiction" of capitalism—wherein "executants" (or "order-takers," i.e., workers) must be encouraged by "directors" (or "order-givers," i.e., managers) to participate in the production process (for, directors managing work from the outside cannot foresee all that must be done at the point of production) but also have to be excluded by the latter from effective participation (for, otherwise those directors would lose their *raison d'être* and workers' self-management would ensue)—MCR failed to account fully for the extent of the changes that had brought about this demobilization characteristic of modern capitalism.[22] Once those who objected to

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[21]"Beating the Retreat into Private Life" (edited excerpt from Michael Ignatieff's BBC broadcast, "Voices," published in *The Listener*, March 27, 1986: 20-21, now in *PSRTI*; see: 67-68). In order "to avoid misunderstandings," Castoriadis clarifies that "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."

[22]"Society's philosophy becomes consumption for the sake of consumption in private life and organization for the sake of organization in collective life," Castoriadis wrote in MCR (*PSW2*, 280). The other side of modern capitalism, however, is its potential for generalized contestation, beyond regimentation within traditional organizations, as he showed in "The Signification of the Belgian Strikes" (1961, in *PSW3*), which examined the mass protests of 1960-1961 in the Borinage area of Belgium that can be

MCR's novel arguments left the group (Castoriadis jokingly labeled them "neopaleo-Marxists"), *S. ou B.* published in 1964 a programmatic, 44-point editorial summarizing MCR's main theses while acknowledging their incompleteness:

> The crisis of capitalist production, which is only the flip side of this contradiction, already has been analyzed in *S. ou B.*, along with the crises of political and other kinds of organizations and institutions. These analyses must be complemented by an analysis of the crisis in values and in social life as such, and ultimately by an analysis of the crisis in the very personality of modern man, a result of the contradictory situations with which he must constantly grapple in his work and in his private life. This personality crisis also results from the collapse of values in the most profound sense of the term, namely, the fact that without values no culture is able to structure personalities adequate to it (i.e., to make the culture function, if only as the exploited).[23]

This more "culturalist" approach—already advocated in the 1962 internal S. ou B. document "For a New Orientation" (now in *PSW3*) that was rejected by the members of the "Anti-Tendency" who split from the group the next year—foregrounded "values" while anticipating his later study of "anthropological types" created or destroyed by capitalism (or by other social-historical forms) as well as fostering a Freudian perspective increasingly being developed by Castoriadis, who began his first analysis in the early 1960s and

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viewed retrospectively as a dress rehearsal for the outpouring of spontaneous activity in the May '68 rebellion in France.

[23]"Recommencing the Revolution," now in *PSW3*, 40-41.

himself became a practicing psychoanalyst in the early 1970s.

As the final *S. ou B.* issue was going to press, Castoriadis gave a May 1965 talk in English, "The Crisis of Modern Society," to S. ou B.'s sister organization, London Solidarity. Examining "the crisis of values" not only in the workplace but also as regards "political alienation," "family relationships," and "education," he explained that "what is at stake here is the very problem of the continuation of society. I don't mean just biological reproduction, but the reproduction of personalities having a certain relation to their environment."[24] The last installment of his five-part 1964-1965 *S. ou B.* series, "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (now the first half of *IIS*), which had already developed his anthropological critique of Structuralism and Functionalism while introducing a new take on the goal of Freudian psychoanalysis,[25] culminated in his elucidation of the "imaginary significations" that hold (or can no longer hold) a society and its individual members together. There, "the modern social imaginary" is said to have "no *flesh of its own*…it borrows its substance from the rational, from one moment of the rational which it thus transforms into a pseudorational, …it is doomed to crisis and to erosion and…modern society contains within it the 'objective' possibility of a transformation of what up to now has been the

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[24]"The Crisis of Modern Society," in *ibid*., 112.

[25]"Freud's proposition ['Where Id was, Ego shall come to be' (*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*)] can be completed by its inverse: 'Where Ego is, Id must spring forth' (*Wo Ich bin, soll Es auftauchen*). Desire, drives—whether it be Eros or Thanatos—this is me, too, and these have to be brought not only to consciousness but to expression and to existence. An autonomous subject is one that knows itself to be justified in concluding: this is indeed true, and: this is indeed my desire" ("Marxism and Revolutionary Theory," 1965, now in *IIS*, 104).

role of the imaginary in history."[26] In the "Conclusions" offered to his working-class British comrades, Castoriadis speaks more simply of "the two polar categories that create society: the personality of man and the structure of the social fabric and its cohesion."[27] On the societal level, he mentions an already familiar "destruction and disappearance of responsibility," "privatization" (defined as "people… withdrawing into themselves"), and "disrupted" community ties. Yet what he uncovers on the "*personal* level" is nothing less than a "radical crisis in the meaning of life and of human motives." Moreover, he remarks: "It is no accident that modern art and literature are more and more, if I may use the expression, 'full of the void'"—that is to say, these cultural forms themselves express a loss or devastation of meaning, or what he will call, nearly three decades later, a "rising tide of insignificancy."

In this more colloquial exposition, two additional points Castoriadis makes bear mention here. First, a section on "family relationships" that specifically mentions Sigmund Freud and "largely unconscious mechanisms" examines a crisis in the "process of identification." In the current age of "uncertainty," the "younger generations" find that they no longer have clear-cut and coherent parental role models to follow, ones that may indeed have been alienating in the past but that now have ceased to be fully operative. Immediately, there is a "total uncertainty that dominates relations between parents and children" as well as doubt as to what it now means to be a man or a woman, the two implying each other

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[26]*Ibid.*, 160.
[27]This mention of "the two *polar* categories" is particularly interesting because, unless I am mistaken, it is not until a decade later, in the second half of *IIS*, that we encounter the precise phrase *monadic pole—* Castoriadis's term for designating the already broken-up (and thereby socialized) remainder of the original monad of the singular psyche.

reciprocally.[28] Castoriadis was elucidating here a context for growing contestation by youth and women in mid-1960s Western countries. Thus, a second—"very important"—point concerns the nature of and prospects for this crisis: "If there is a crisis, it is because people do *not* submit passively to the present organization of society but react and struggle against it, in a great many ways. And, equally important, this reaction, this struggle of the people, contains the seeds of the new. It inevitably produces new forms of life and of social relations." Premises for individual and collective autonomy were being created, but it is only in striving, amid present-day uncertainty and absurdity, for a different existence that such autonomy might be achieved. "In this sense," Castoriadis concludes, "the crisis we have been describing is but the by-product of struggle." In other words, people are driven, in the absence of uncontested and incontestable roles, to invent new personality traits and social purposes at odds with established but disintegrating conditions, and this concurrent process of meaning-destruction and meaning-creation lies at the heart of a potential revolutionary self-transformation of society.

A 1983 interview by a psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst/sociologist afforded Castoriadis the occasion to provide his own professional take on "new clinical signs in

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[28]This early examination of changing gender roles (see also: *IIS*, 97) thus highlights the centrality of such alterations for overall social change. Remarkable for the time, the fourth part of "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" also includes a passage on the unprecedented nature of contemporary homosexuality, treated by Castoriadis not as a dysfunction but as an instance of defunctionalization and interrogation of traditional roles: "It is superficial to recall, for example, that homosexuality has existed in all human societies—and to forget that in every instance it has been socially defined: a marginal deviance that is tolerated, or despised, or sanctioned; a custom that is accorded a value, institutionalized, possessing a positive social function; a widespread vice; and that today it is—but just what is it, in fact?" (*ibid*.).

the present social malaise." He notes that the "classic symptomatology, that of obsessional neurosis or hysteria, no longer appears as frequently and clearly." Increasingly, those coming to analysis exhibit "disorientation in life, instability, peculiarities of 'character,' or a depressive disposition." He thereby hypothesizes what he calls:

> a homology among an ongoing process, the relative destructuration of society, and a destructuration or lesser structuration of the personality, its pathology included. A large proportion of people seems to suffer from a sort of formless or "soft" neurosis: no acute drama, no intense passions, but a loss of bearings, going hand in hand with an extreme lability of characters and behaviors.[29]

As in "The Crisis of Modern Society," Castoriadis emphasizes here that, before they began to wear out and be challenged, "models provided obvious bearings for the social functioning of individuals. …[T]here was no ambiguity over what a child could and could not, should and should not do. And that provided a clear outline of conduct for parents in the education of their children." As always, instances of transgression, acting-out, etc. confirmed those models rather than provided a social basis for their replacement with other ones. As in "Crisis," Castoriadis also explains to his interviewers that, on this level, he is above all describing a "*de facto* situation" about waning values, not expressing nostalgia for them or making "a value judgment" in favor of

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[29]November 21, 1983 interview with Michel Reynaud and Markos Zafiropoulos, published in the first issue of *Synapse* (January 1984) and now translated in *RTI(TBS)* as "Psychoanalysis and Society II"; see: 30 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL2*].

"this social system and these models," with their attendant "oppressive structures." The key point here, related directly to the later "rising tide of insignificancy" theme, is that, while previously the "dysfunctioning of society was situated at other levels: class conflicts, economic crises, wars," present-day "norms and values are wearing down and collapsing" from within. "The models being proposed, to the extent that they still exist at all, are flat or hollow, …. The media, television, the advertising industry offer models, certainly. They are the models of 'success': they operate from the outside, but they cannot truly be internalized; they cannot be valued; they could never respond to the question: What ought I to do?" And again, *struggle*, or rather here its absence, appears crucial: "The economic crisis" of the late 1970s and early 1980s "would not have been lived in the same way by people had it not occurred during this period of atrophy of values. Without this extraordinary wearing down of values, people would no doubt have acted differently."[30] Moreover, the conservative counterresponse, during the Reagan-Thatcher era, to "what was considered a period of permissiveness" evinced no greater chance of success; for, beneath a "superficial political level" of personnel changes and an economic attack on the poor, "the underlying sociological situation" remained the same. "These same people who shout about law and order behave exactly like the rest of society," Castoriadis observes; "and, were one to return—it is not impossible—to a generation of 'strict parents,' that would change nothing. For, these strict parents would still have to believe in something, and the entire way in which society operates would have to permit one to believe in that something, or make believe that one believes in it, without the antinomies and contradictions

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[30]*Ibid*., 31-32 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL2*].

becoming too frequent and too flagrant."[31] We are witnessing, Castoriadis asserts, a "wearing down of values," beginning with "the emptiness of the 'paternal discourse.'" Concomitantly, there is "a wearing down of reality-testing for children: there is nothing solid for them to run up against: they mustn't be deprived; they mustn't be frustrated; they mustn't be hurt; one must always 'understand' them."[32]

One is perhaps reminded here of the phrase "All that is solid melts into air," drawn from a passage in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto* to which Castoriadis often critically returned. Marx and Engels saw their times—wherein, too, "all that is holy is profaned"—as resulting from a "[c]onstant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation" that together serve to "distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones." Yet where Marx/Engels foresaw that man would "at last [be] compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind," Castoriadis came to express his doubts about the rationalist bent of both Marxism and Freudianism. In the 1967 circular announcing "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*," he stated, near the height of the Marx-Freud craze in France:

> Freud believed that progress in the field of knowledge and what he called "our god logos" would permit man to modify gradually his relationship to the obscure forces he bears within him. We have relearned since then that the relation between knowledge and the way people effectively act—both as individuals and as collectivities—is anything but simple and that the

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[31]*Ibid*., 34 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL2*].
[32]*Ibid*., 35 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL2*].

Marxian and Freudian forms of knowledge also have been able to become the source of new mystifications.[33]

For, as he explains in this same 1983 interview, "the problem today" is that "society, due to the wearing out of its imaginary significations (progress, growth, well-being, 'rational' mastery, etc.) is less and less capable of furnishing meaning."[34] What is occurring is nothing less than what Castoriadis would later agree is a "crisis of the imaginary":[35] "One has to at least be able to represent to oneself something that is not in order to be able [to] will [*vouloir*]; and, in one's deepest layers, one must want [*vouloir*] something other than mere repetition in order to be able to imagine. Now, no will on the part of present-day society can be glimpsed as concerns what it wants to be tomorrow—no will other than the frightened and crabby safeguarding of what is here today."

In "The Crisis of the Identification Process," a May 1989 talk to a group of psychosociologists, Castoriadis returned to what we saw was a key aspect of his 1965 talk: "[I]n contrast to what prevailed " in traditionally established societies and groups, even migratory ones—e.g., "Mongols, the Spartans, Phoenician merchants, gypsies, traveling

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[33]"The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (translated in *PSW3*; see: 121). Castoriadis continues: "Over a century of historical experience—and at all levels, from the most abstract to the most empirical—prohibits us from believing in a positive automatic functioning of history or in man's cumulative conquest of himself by himself in terms of any kind of sedimentation of knowledge." Yet he adds immediately: "We draw from this no skeptical or 'pessimistic' conclusion": the "suspension of publication" of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* did not mean a suspension of the relevance of the "socialism or barbarism" alternative.

[34]"Psychoanalysis and Society II," *RTI(TBS)*, 44 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL2*].

[35]"A Crisis of the Imaginary?" (1991), translated in *PSRTI*; see: 107ff.

salesmen"—he observes that "no existing totality of social imaginary significations is available, and no new one emerging, that would be capable of taking charge of and addressing this crisis of particular support networks." Indeed, "[i]f the crisis is affecting so central an element of social hominization as the identification process, that really must mean that this crisis is an overall and ongoing one."[36]

Instead of delving too deeply into how this 1989 presentation anticipates the "rising tide" theme—"the indefinite expansion of 'mastery,'" he asserts there, "at the same time…finds itself emptied of all the content that might endow it with the vitality it once enjoyed and that could, for better or for worse, allow the processes of identification to be carried out," whereas "meaning that is lived as imperishable by the men and women of today" is "nowhere to be found"—let us instead focus on what Castoriadis sees as one telling, if anecdotal, outcome concerning children today. Probably drawing here on his experience of his own young daughter's life at the time, he observes that, at birthday parties, presents no longer are reserved just for the birthday child, for now that child "(in reality, her parents)" is expected to distribute "gifts to the other children—lesser gifts no doubt, but gifts nonetheless—because it is intolerable for these beings to accept the fantastic frustration that consists in receiving gifts only on their birthdays." Not only has "reality-testing" by children collapsed amid an overall whittling away of patriarchal values; this example shows that the child's entire "relation to frustration, to reality, to the possibility of delaying gratification" is up for grabs. Castoriadis is not glowingly describing generalized gift-giving in a

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[36]"The Crisis of the Identification Process," translated in *RTI(TBS)*, 211 [DAC-2021: translation reprinted in *CL4*].

hyperinflationary potlatch utopia[37] but destruction of its very meaning here and now: "the consequence" in this specific case, Castoriadis concludes, is "the *nullification*, the becoming-insignificant, of the gift and of gratification." We thus discover, in this talk for a group of psychosociologists a full half-decade before the publication of the interview whose title would become "The Rising Tide of Insignificancy," a precise example of how Castoriadis viewed the process of the growing destruction of meaning in a practice that borders on being a Maussian total social fact *par excellence*.]

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In the year 1989, as the world was preparing to witness, and indeed participate in and create, momentous changes, including the fall of the Wall, Castoriadis kindly asked me to contribute to Busino's Castoriadis *Festschrift*. Choosing the theme "Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis," I was able to show that, in contrast to those who developed the "socialism or barbarism" theme before him (Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky), Castoriadis treated this dynamic duality as a "present contending alternative"—a *real alternative*, one whose result is uncertain—and not as two simple alternate outcomes projected into a vague (yet "historically determined") future. However, the ironic twist I

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[37]The reference here, of course, is to the Lettrist International's journal, *Potlatch* (1954-1957), precursor to *L'Internationale Situationniste* (1958-1969). In *Democracy and Relativism: Discussion with the "MAUSS" Group* (*DR*), Castoriadis expresses his reservations with regard to MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales, the Anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences) and what he considered that group's overbroad, yet restrictive, conception of gift-giving; see: *ibid.*, 3-4, as well as the Translator's Foreword, *ibid.*, xlvii-l.

discovered while studying this theme was that, while the "meaning of socialism" was increasingly being explored and expounded upon in the pages of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, the term *barbarism* had almost completely disappeared from Castoriadis's vocabulary (except as part of its masthead).[38] By

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[38]See n. 27 of my "Socialism or Barbarism: The Alternative Presented in the Work of Cornelius Castoriadis," *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, 86 (December 1989), reprinted in *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société. La philosophie militante de Cornelius Castoriadis*, ed. Giovanni Busino (Geneva: Droz, 1989): "My search was not exhaustive. I have relied on a combination of memory, a computer search of all Castoriadis articles translated by me, and the indexes to his various volumes of writings. The one exception, which Castoriadis brought to my attention, proves the rule and will demonstrate my point that the 'socialism or barbarism' theme has survived the period from 1953 to 1979 intact; it comes from 'Recommencing the Revolution'…. In Point 29 Castoriadis argues that the phase of bureaucratization and consumerization of the working class

> is neither superficial nor accidental. It expresses one possible destiny of contemporary society. If the term 'barbarism' has any meaning today, it does not mean fascism, or mass poverty, or a return to the stone age. It means precisely this "air-conditioned nightmare": consumption for consumption's sake in private life, organization for organization's sake in public life, and their corollaries—privatization, withdrawal from and apathy towards social questions, dehumanization of social relationships. That process is well advanced in the industrialized countries but it is engendering its own opposites. Bureaucratized institutions are abandoned by people who finally come into conflict with them. The race for ever-rising standards of consumption, for 'new' objects to consume, sooner or later reveals its absurdity. Those elements that allow the acquisition of consciousness, a socialist practice, and, in the last analysis, revolution, have not disappeared, but on the contrary proliferate in society today (Solidarity translation [now in *PSW3*]).

In *IIS*, we shall see, this description of modern barbarism as an 'air-conditioned nightmare'—which he already mentioned in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" and which he here distinguishes from fascism,

examining (1) crisis theory, (2) the creation/destruction pair, and (3) his conception of "culture," I demonstrated that this "present contending alternative"—with "barbarism" as half of that operative choice and active historical tendency within what came to be called the *dual institution of modernity*—did indeed remain a central theme in Castoriadis's work. And when (in a 1979 *Esprit* interview) he expressly resumed usage of the word "barbarism," he did so in order to affirm that he had "always" intended it as the absence of "historical productivity":

> To say [as you *Esprit* editors hypothesize] that a dull and lifeless social sphere has taken the place of a fecund one, that all radical change is henceforth inconceivable, would mean that a whole phase of history, begun, perhaps, in the twelfth century, is in the process of coming to an end, that one is entering into I know not what kind of new Middle Ages, characterized either by historical tranquility (in view of the facts, the idea seems comic) or by violent conflicts and disintegrations, but without any historical productivity: in sum, a closed society that is stagnating or that knows only how to tear itself apart without creating anything. (Let it be said, parenthetically, that this is the meaning I have always given to the term "barbarism," in the expression "socialism or barbarism.")[39]

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absolute or relative pauperization and ancient barbarism—will then be labeled a "general anaesthesia." An October 28, 1967 letter to readers announcing the split within the group [now in *PSW3*] repeats this statement about 'barbarism' as the 'air-conditioned nightmare.' This repetition could be considered a second exception…. "

[39]"Unending Interrogation" (July 1, 1979 interview with *Esprit*), translated in [DAC-2021: *CL2*].

Castoriadis also reaffirmed, immediately afterward, that such usage was not intended to be predictive of a necessary future, nor was it meant to be the complete description of a present (that remained marked, too, by multiple forms of crisis and—often tacit or inexplicit—contestation, even as—and in some respects because—the "project of autonomy" seemed to be on the wane): "There's no question of making prophecies. But I absolutely don't think that we are living in a society in which nothing is happening any longer," he stated.

　　　"The Crisis of Western Societies," first published in 1982, was reprinted as the introductory essay for *La Montée de l'insignifiance*.[40] This text sounded the "crisis" aspect of the socialism or barbarism theme—again without actually mentioning that theme, yet anticipating many motifs of its offspring, the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme.[41] My humble suggestion to Castoriadis in the Busino volume was that he return explicitly to this "socialism or barbarism" theme and place the alternative clearly at the very center of the (then-) present context of social decomposition both East and West. I called upon him to rework "the whole, updating the themes of the first volume [of *Devant la guerre*] and relating them directly to those that are to be developed in the second," so as to "more effectively bring out for his readers *and for himself* the contemporary stakes of the world struggle between barbarism and autonomous society as well as the

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[40]In the 1996 *MI* reprint [DAC-2021: now in *CL4*], Castoriadis omits the "first three pages of the 1982 French text which dealt with the situations of Russia and the West in the early 1980s. Today, these pages would have no more than a historical interest"—"though," as he characteristically added, "in my view the substance of my remarks remains true."

[41]The subheadings give a good idea of its motifs: "The Decomposition of Leadership Mechanisms," "The Vanishing of Social and Political Conflict," "Education, Culture, Values," and "The Collapse of Society's Self-Representation."

continuing relevance of his main ['socialism or barbarism'] theme." By the time my contribution appeared (in December 1989), this suggestion was of course already becoming inoperative—due to what, in April 1990, Castoriadis called "the pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" and the collapse of Russia's post-totalitarian ("stratocratic") empire. Yet, as my text itself noted, Castoriadis had, over the previous decade (1979-1989), continued to explore the destruction of social forms that arises within this barbarism vs. autonomy struggle. As we now know from a posthumously published interview conducted soon after *Le monde morcelé* was published (October 1990), Castoriadis started to make this alternative explicit again in a way that should please our Greek friends from the now-defunct "Autonomie ou Barbarie" group:

> Will our collectivities prove capable of laying down their own laws, in full knowledge of the relevant facts? It remains the case that democracy cannot exist without a passion for democracy on the part of individuals, without a political sphere inhabited by all. Will human beings have this desire or—rejecting self-limitation—will they be content with bread and circuses, cake and television? Here we rediscover the ancient dilemma: autonomy or barbarism.[42]

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Already, within months of Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election and her inauguration of the "right-wing counteroffensive," Castoriadis enunciated a point that would appear in his

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[42]See p. 21 of Christian Descamps's early 1990s "Entretien inédit avec Cornelius Castoriadis," *La Nouvelle Quinzaine Littéraire*, 1099 (16-28 février 2014): 20-21.

work throughout the 1980s: "all the inherited conceptions—Marxism as well as Liberalism—find themselves totally insolvent."[43] For, like all ideologies, these nineteenth-century ones, prolonged into the twentieth century and beyond, mask present-day reality. "The Crisis of Western Societies"—described in 1982 as an "excerpt" from the (promised but never published) second volume of *Devant la guerre*—began to reorient Castoriadis's critique of total and fragmented bureaucratic capitalism away from the theses found in his (controversially successful) first volume. Refusing to take Neoliberalism's tenets at face value, he saw there how "the absolute mental pauperization of the ruling strata" was

> expressed in the proclamations being made about the bankruptcy of Keynesianism (which amounts to saying that our failure to contain cancer proves Pasteur's bankruptcy), the fad of monetarism (a rehash of the old quantitative theory of money, a tautology whose transformation into an "explanatory" theory has long been known to be fallacious), or new demonological inventions like "supply-side economics."[44]

This crisis is described more broadly as "a crisis of social imaginary significations, …these significations no longer provide individuals with the norms, values, bearings, and motivations that would permit them both to make society function and to maintain themselves, somehow or other, in a

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[43]"Unending Interrogation," now in *CL2*. [DAC-2021: As noted in several T/E notes from various *Crossroads* volumes, "Liberalism" is meant here in the Continental sense of a conservative "free-market" or "laissez-faire" ideology.]

[44]"The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982), now in [DAC-2021: the present volume].

livable state of 'equilibrium.'"[45] Initiating an anthropological motif central to the "rising tide" theme[46]—though it harks back to questions raised in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961)—he asked, "To what extent do Western societies remain capable of fabricating the type of individual necessary for their continued functioning?"[47]

When, in the mid-1990s, Castoriadis decided to publish his prior decade's more topical/less philosophical texts in *La Montée de l'insignifiance*, he greatly underestimated how many relevant texts were available.[48] The English-language Anonymous Translator included some of these texts in the 2003 electro-samizdat volume *The Rising Tide of Insignificancy (The Big Sleep)*[49] and announced the

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[45]*Ibid*.

[46]"Without this [democratic] type of individual, more exactly without a constellation of such types—among which, for example, is the honest and legalistic Weberian bureaucrat—liberal society cannot function. Now, it seems evident to me that society today is no longer capable of reproducing these types. It basically produces the greedy, the frustrated, and the conformist" ("The Idea of Revolution" [1989], now in [DAC-2021: *CL3*]).

[47]"The Crisis of Western Societies," [DAC-2021: now in the present volume].

[48]As noted earlier, the *MI* "Notice" states (incorrectly): "I have brought together here most of my texts from the past few years that are devoted to the contemporary situation, to reflection on society, and to politics."

[49]As I was preparing *World in Fragments* 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 "rising tide of insignificancy"/"a society adrift" theme to the fore in book form for an English-speaking audience. An April 1989 *L'Express* piece, where this title first appeared, was finally translated as "The Big Sleep of the Democracies" for *PSRTI*. 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."

upcoming translation of many others relevant to the "insignificancy" theme. Castoriadis's widow had previously declared to me that no new posthumous anthologies would be published after *Figures du pensable* (1999). The Anonymous Translator's risky act of unauthorized translation thus [DAC-2021: may have helped induce] the Castoriadis heirs to publish a large number of these texts soon thereafter in *Une Société à la dérive*—then translated in a new pirate edition, *A Society Adrift: More Interviews and Discussions on The Rising Tide of Insignificancy, Including Revolutionary Perspectives Today*, which was followed by *Postscript on Insignificancy, including More Interviews and Discussions on the Rising Tide of Insignificancy, followed by Five Dialogues, Four Portraits and Two Book Reviews*.[50]

We now see that many "figures of *barbarism*"—illustrated in such titles as "Beating the Retreat Into Private Life," "We Are Going Through a Low Period…," "The Ambiguities of Apoliticism," "The Big Sleep of the Democracies," "A 'Democracy' Without Citizens' Participation," "Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth" [DAC-2021: now in the present volume], "Politics in Crisis," "A Crisis of the Imaginary?", "Society Running in Neutral," "The Crisis of Marxism and the Crisis of Politics," "A Society Adrift"—were articulated in Castoriadis's writings and interviews during the last two decades of his life and that such texts anticipate the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme. As Russia was collapsing in the mid-1980s, Castoriadis not only turned his sights westward to criticize the "rehashing found in contemporary 'liberal' discourses where no new ideas are to be found and there is not a single effort to face up

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[50]2018 Addition: In August 2017, a second edition of *PSRTI* appeared that contains a sixth Castoriadis dialogue (with Paul Ricœur) as well as a Translator's Postscript to the *Postscript on Insignificancy* Translation.

to the problems of the present,"[51] but criticized this rediscovery of liberalism as well as of individualism—"terms beneath which are hidden innumerable misunderstandings and fallacies"[52]—for its ideological masking of reality. Present-day democracy is "in fact, the regime of liberal oligarchy," which is "dying from privatization (gloriously named *individualism*), from people's apathy, from the unimaginable debasement of political personnel,"[53] he also asserted there, thus connecting his early 1960s critique of "modern capitalism" to the more recent rise of Neoliberalism while also updating that critique to encompass contemporary figures of barbarism. The "current state—of privatization and apathy," he said in January 1988,

> is untenable for this society in the long run. The "liberal republic"—that is to say, the regime of liberal oligarchy—cannot operate in an ongoing way on the basis of cynicism and "individualism." The people who are to make it operate cannot, as a whole, be totally cynical—or then the regime will collapse. Now, nothing in "liberal" discourse or in the "values" of the age explains why—save for the threat of the penal code—a judge shouldn't put his ruling up for auction or a president shouldn't use his office to fill his pockets.[54]

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[51]"We Are Going Through a Low Period…" (1986), translated in *ASA(RPT)*; see: 172.

[52]"Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy" (a January 24, 1985 talk) [DAC-2021: now in *CL2*].

[53]"What a Revolution Is" (a November 24, 1987 interview), translated in *ASA(RPT)*; see: 194.

[54]"A Political and Human Exigency" January 1988, *ASA(RPT)*, 200. [2018 Addition: Beginning with my September 2017 talk in Montreal, I make a point of emphasizing this last point about a president enriching himself

A few days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Castoriadis focused on attacking the "alarming vacuity" of political speech in the West as well as the emptiness of "neoliberal discourse [which involves] a wretched flattening out of what the great Liberals of the past used to say."[55]

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This contextualization of Neoliberalism within the "insignificancy" theme of contemporary figures of barbarism has *major implications for our contemporary understanding of capitalism and its imaginary institution*. "Neoliberal discourse," Castoriadis stated in "Done and To Be Done," should be viewed as "a gross farce intended for imbeciles."[56]

[T]he rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher and of Ronald Reagan has changed nothing of importance (the

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within the context of a decline of democratic values; everyone recognizes immediately the Trump example, as well as Castoriadis's prescience on this score. In "The Crisis of the Identification Process" [DAC-2021: now in the present volume], a talk delivered in May 1989, Castoriadis states: "But earning, despite the 'neoliberal' rhetoric, is now becoming almost totally disconnected from any social function and even from the system's internal legitimation. One does not earn because one has some worth; one has some worth because one earns," taking "Bernard Tapie in France, Donald Trump in the United States, Prince, Madonna, and so on" as his example.]

[55]"When East Tips West" (interview published November 1, 1989 in *Construire*, an organ of the Swiss cooperative Migros), translated in *ASA(RPT)*, 207.

[56]"Done and To Be Done" (1989), republished in the *Carrefours* volume supposedly devoted exclusively to philosophical and psychoanalytical issues; now in [DAC-2021: *CL5*]. Castoriadis adds, "The incoherency— rather, the shameless trickery—of contemporary 'Liberalism'…defies the imagination" (*ibid*).

change in formal ownership of a few large enterprises does not essentially alter their relation to the State), …the bureaucratic structure of the large firm remains intact [and] half of the national product transits the public sector in one way or another (State, local governmental organizations, Social Security); …between half and two-thirds of the price of goods and services entering into the final national expenditure is in one way or another fixed, regulated, controlled, or influenced by state policy, and…the situation is irreversible (ten years of Thatcher and Reagan made no essential changes therein).[57]

In the general feigned amnesia, the fact that "liberal ideology had already been demolished by some academic economists in the 1930s" is simply buried. "People pretend to forget that the present-day economy is an economy of oligopolies, not a competitive economy."[58]

Reagan-Thatcher rhetoric "changed nothing of importance"? Castoriadis, and in particular his "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," are often criticized for outdated

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[57]*Ibid*.

[58]"When East Tips West" (interview published November 1, 1989). He adds: "Market logic would require, for example, that one might best be able to find a rational basis for the price of capital, or its true value. Now, that's impossible; there is no 'objective value' of capital" (*ASA(RPT)*, 232). Seven months later, at the first Castoriadis Cerisy colloquium, he said: "Accompanying the Reagan-Thatcher offensive against the unions and wage levels, this regression allowed the Chicago tooth-pullers to trot out some old ideas refuted long ago (in fact, the quantitative theory of money), the 'experts' from the International Monetary Fund to hammer a few more nails into the poor countries' coffin, and Mr. Guy Sorman, in France, to become the apostle of the economic Enlightenment" ("What Democracy?" [DAC-2021: now in *CL6*]).

descriptions of a bygone Fordist world of full employment.[59] Yet members of S. ou B.—or, at least those ones who endorsed that controversial text—had been, Castoriadis asserted, "perhaps…the only ones who, in '59-'60, said that the problem in the modern, Western, developed, capitalist society is NOT an economic problem."[60] Participating in this "crisis of social imaginary significations," latter-day Liberalism is not to be taken seriously on its own narrow ideologically economic terms. Neoliberal *rhetoric* changed nothing; but that does not mean that nothing important changed as the tide of insignificancy continued, and continues, to rise.[61] Neoliberal discourse does not define the

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[59]Such criticisms usually neglect to mention his analyses of changes in modern capitalism, starting with his two Appendixes to the English-language Solidarity editions of "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (see now *PSW2*, 316-25 and 326-43).

[60]See "Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis for the Greek television network ET1's show 'Paraskiniom,' 1984 (with English-language subtitles). Video in Greek from publicly available online source. English translation: Ioanna." Available at: http://vimeo.com/85082034 or http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs9ZsKj-o1k. He elaborates further, saying "that the problem is not the pauperization of the proletariat, either relative or absolute, but that the problem lies elsewhere. The problem is that of freedom for people within production, the problem is in their everyday life, in the family, in education, and so on. From this standpoint, we offered an overall revision of the goals of action oriented toward real social change" (00:14:10 - 00:14:50).

[61]A more nuanced elucidation appears in "The *Coordinations*: A Preface" (drafted in 1994), translated in *RTI(TBS)*:

> This offensive went hand in hand with—*was conditioned by but also has conditioned*—an ideological regression of uncommon breadth. The ideologies of the "Left" entered into a new phase of intense decomposition while "right-wing" currents were blissfully resuscitating basic errors that had been refuted three-quarters of a century ago (such as monetarism—a mere reissuance, under econometric cover, of the old quantitative theory of money, or supply-side economics, characterized by

new reality; instead, the continuing and deepening destruction of meaning inherent in the capitalist rationalization project includes the irrationalities of a dissembling neoliberal ideology as well as the real consequences of the "reactionary counteroffensive."[62] In May 1989, Castoriadis stated that the "sole signification truly present and dominant today is the capitalist one, that of the indefinite expansion of 'mastery,' which at the same time—and here we come to our pivot point—finds itself emptied of all the content that might endow it with the vitality it once enjoyed and that could, for better or for worse, allow the processes of identification to be carried out." As a result, "despite the 'neoliberal' rhetoric," earning money "is now becoming almost totally disconnected from any social function and even from the system's internal legitimation."[63] Yet also despite that rhetoric, "[t]his mixture of the money norm and of the bureaucratic-hierarchical norm suffices for us to continue to characterize the rich liberal

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George Herbert Walker Bush himself as "voodoo economics"). Moreover, these governments' proclamations stood in flagrant violation of their own practice—a phenomenon worth noting, not because it would be absolutely new, but because it was practically unheard of in the economic field. Thatcher and Reagan were elected by promising to rid society of "Big Government"; at the end of their respective terms of office, the share of the GNP going to state outlays remained practically unchanged. They had denounced Keynesianism just as vehemently—but any Keynesian would have condemned as excessive to the point of caricature the Reagan Administration's deficits (pp. 168-69, emphasis added).

As noted in the *ASA(RPT)* Translator's Foreword, "War Keynesianism was an option Castoriadis said Reagan employed in the 1980s, and Bush *fils* used it, to highly disastrous effect, in the 2000s" (*ASA(RPT)*, xxxi).

[62]"The 'Rationality' of Capitalism," composed in 1996-1997 and translated in [DAC-2021: *CL6*].

[63]"Crisis of the Identification Process" (a May 1989 talk), translated in [DAC-2021: the present volume].

societies as societies of fragmented bureaucratic capitalism,"[64] not as ones really embodying what the incoherent content of neoliberal ideology would have us believe.[65]

The "liberal (in the capitalist sense of the term) counteroffensive…initially represented by the Thatcher-Reagan couple" has indeed "won out all over"—among French "Socialists," the Scandinavians, etc.—Castoriadis observed in "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991). Creating a "comfortable or tolerable situation" for "80 to 85 percent of the population (who are further inhibited by fear of unemployment), …all the system's shit is dumped on the 'lower' 15 or 20 percent of society, who cannot react, or who can react only through vandalism, marginalization, and criminality: the unemployed and immigrants in France and England; Blacks and Hispanics in the United States, and so on."[66] What "this camouflage rhetoric allowed one" to do, "in default of the proclaimed objectives," was "to attain the new policy's real objectives: quite simply, redistribution of national wealth in favor of the rich and to the detriment of the poor."[67] After an interlude with the Supreme Court-mandated election of "the first MBA President" in the US leading to the largest economic collapse since the Great Depression, it is not surprising that this logic has developed far enough to make the "1 percent," in many people's minds, now a plausible

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[64]"What Democracy?" [DAC-2021: now in *CL6*].

[65]Less explored by Castoriadis than Neoliberalism's incoherencies and its ideological screening of reality—and perhaps surprisingly so, given his longstanding interest in the relations of production—are the vast changes *at the point of production* that have been introduced in the course of the conservative counterrevolution.

[66]"The Dilapidation of the West" (1991) [DAC-2021: now in the present volume].

[67]"The *Coordinations*: A Preface" (drafted in 1994), translated in *RTI(TBS)*; see: 169.

target for the "99 percent."

    This "unmitigated triumph of the capitalist imaginary under its crudest and coarsest forms," as Castoriadis described it soon before his death, *did not happen in a vacuum*, as one says—or, *rather, it was the context of the vacuum—rising insignificancy—that allowed this triumph*. The "conservative counterrevolution"

> exploited the bankruptcy of the traditional "left-wing" parties, the trade unions' enormous loss of influence, the monstrosity, now manifest, of the regimes of "actually existing socialism" even before their collapse, the apathy and privatization of whole populations, and their growing irritation with the hypertrophic growth and absurdity of state bureaucracies.[68]

Retaining the autonomy vs. barbarism theme within this contemporary meaning-vacuum, Castoriadis notes the flip-side of this "return to a blind and brutal form of 'Liberalism,'" that is, the concomitant condition for its existence: "all these factors express, directly or indirectly, the crisis of the social-historical project of individual and collective autonomy."[69] Already in 1986, he argued that "the strength of this pseudoliberalism…in large part, …comes from this, that 'liberal' demagoguery has known how to capture the profoundly antibureaucratic and antistatist movement and mood that has existed since the early 1960s (and that had escaped the shrewd notice of 'socialist' leaders)."[70] It is not

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[68]"The 'Rationality' of Capitalism," translated in [DAC-2021: *CL6*].
[69]*Ibid*.
[70]"We Are Going Through a Low Period…" (1986), translated in *ASA(RPT)*; see: 172.

that Castoriadis remained stuck in an allegedly obsolete theory of "bureaucratic capitalism"; it is that what passes for "the Left" abdicated to the "Right" people's continuing feelings of opposition to bureaucracy and the State. In "A Society Adrift" (1993), he noted the "near-total disappearance of conflict, whether it be socioeconomic, political, or 'ideological.'" He did so not in order to revel in "insignificancy" or to remain blind to current possibilities for change, but in order to frankly admit how the "triumph of… the 'liberal'-capitalist imaginary, and the near-disappearance of the other great imaginary signification of modernity, the project of individual and collective autonomy" had greatly altered the situation he described in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution." This "victory of the so-called Neoliberal counteroffensive"—note the phrase "*so-called* Neoliberal"

> has imposed things that had previously seemed inconceivable: straightforward cuts in real wages, and sometimes even in nominal wages, for example, or else levels of unemployment that I myself had thought, and written, in 1960, had become impossible, for they would have provoked a social explosion. Well, nothing happened. There are reasons for that, some related to the economic cycle—the threat, in large part a bluff, of "crisis" tied to the "oil shock," and so on—but others much more deep-seated, …. Basically, we are witnessing the full-fledged domination of the capitalist imaginary: the centrality of the economic, the unending and allegedly rational expansion of production, consumption, and more or less planned and manipulated "leisure time." This evolution does not express only the victory of the dominant strata, who would like to increase their

power. Almost all of the population participates therein. Cautiously withdrawn into its private sphere, the population settles for bread and spectacles. The spectacles are provided especially by television (and "sports"), the bread by all the gadgets available at various income levels. In one way or another, all social strata have access to this minimum amount of comfort; only minorities who have no weight are excluded therefrom. …The great majority of the population seems to settle for leisure time and gadgets, with a few occasional corporatist reactions that are unlikely to have repercussions. This majority harbors no collective desire, no project apart from safeguarding the status quo.[71]

So as not to lead one to think that this "so-called Neoliberal" victory would entail a return to the *status quo ante*, Castoriadis immediately adds: "In this atmosphere, the traditional safeguards of the capitalist republic are coming down, one after the other," and he goes on to enumerate the ways in which this victory is indeed a pyrrhic one for capitalism, for, just as "humanity is busily sawing off the limb on which it is perched"[72] ecologically, there is, even in the absence of direct contestation, an ongoing destruction of the crucial significations that allowed capitalism to thrive and flourish.

This "victory of the so-called Neoliberal counteroffensive," which grants a "centrality of the economic," has led many, from power-obsessed Foucauldians

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[71]"A Society Adrift" (1993), translated in *ASA(RPT)*; see: 251.

[72]Castoriadis, in "Dead End?" (1987) [DAC-2021: now in *CL3*], quoting E. O. Wilson of Harvard and Paul Ehrlich of Stanford in *Scientific American*, February 1986: 97.

to nostalgic Marxist fundamentalists, to believe that we are completely subjected to a totally new regime, one defined by neoliberal capitalist ideology, or that we can now return to the reassuring "laws" of capitalist accumulation, perhaps by finally getting the right interpretation of the "fetishism of commodities" in Chapter One of *Das Kapital*. What an understanding of capitalism as an imaginary institution of society shows—*when one takes into account the dual institution of modernity and the hypertrophically destructive "crisis of social imaginary significations" it is now undergoing*—is that there is no return to the *status quo ante*, nor is it (yet) plausible to believe that we are now living in a totally economic society, impenetrable to contestation and operating solely according to its own "logic." The danger of taking Neoliberalism at face value is that, in gullibly accepting its premises, we may be "taken in" by them, thereby noticing neither its incoherency nor its self-destructive tendencies (which can then be exploited for social change, but only through a renewal of the project of autonomy) nor its more mundane "real objectives" (a radical redistribution of wealth via an imposition of the money norm that is, however, self-undermining). One is even tempted to say that there is an objective concurrence among equally dogmatic and farfetched and superannuated ideologies, the "market fundamentalists" of Neoliberalism dourly telling us that "there is no alternative" coinciding with a hopeful "return to Marx" that would conjure away all that has intervened since 1848 or 1867 and deliver us an automatically guaranteed future.

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Since we are looking closely at the impact this titular choice of phrasing ("rising tide of insignificancy") has

had—an impact that has made it the top theme retained posthumously by readers—we should also note that the original 1993 interview—published a year later (June 1994) by interviewer Olivier Morel in his *La République Internationale des Lettres*—appeared there under a less gloomy, or at least more ambiguous, title: "Un monde à venir" (A world to come). It was only when *La Montée de l'insignifiance* came out in March 1996 that the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme first explicitly appeared in public, accompanied by the assertion that it goes beyond mere crisis:

> We are living a phase of decomposition. In a crisis, there are opposing elements that combat each other—whereas what is characteristic of contemporary society is precisely the disappearance of social and political conflict. People are discovering now what we were writing thirty or forty years ago in *S. ou B.*, namely, that the opposition between Left and Right *no longer has any meaning*. …There are, in truth, neither opposing programs nor participation by people in political conflicts or struggles, or merely in political activity. On the social level, there are not only the bureaucratization of the unions and their reduction to a skeletal state but also the near-disappearance of social struggles.[73]

Between the time when Castoriadis wrote his July 1995 "Notice" for *MI* and *MI*'s publication the following March, major strikes broke out in France, especially among railway workers, in protest against Social Security reforms proposed by the neo-Gaullist government of Prime Minister Alain

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[73]"The Rising Tide of Insignificancy" [DAC-2021: now in the present volume] (emphasis added).

Juppé, [DAC-2021: with these reforms] supported not only by the business establishment but also by reformist unions and intellectuals.[74] These strikes were initiated and conducted from below, by grass-roots *coordinations* that bypassed the established unions.[75] In the heat of those events, Castoriadis found himself obliged to add a footnote to this reprinted interview that would come to be known as "The Rising Tide of Insignificancy": "Whatever their final outcome might be, the strikes unfolding now (November-December 1995) in France defy, by their implicit signification, this characterization."[76] This note was added to counter a (previously) factual statement: "There have never been so few strike days in France…as during the last ten or fifteen years—and almost always, these struggles are merely of a sectoral or corporatist character." But Castoriadis also seemed to be acknowledging, more broadly, some limits to, or countervailing tendencies regarding, the "insignificancy" thesis, *and he did so precisely where this thesis would be introduced for the first time to the general public*.

    These were the most massive strikes in France since May '68. Might one argue that Castoriadis had missed, or effectively lost interest in, what was then being prepared, just as he had offered his negative conclusions about chances for

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[74]S. ou B. cofounder Claude Lefort supported CFDT reformist leader Nicole Notat in "Les dogmes sont finis," *Le Monde* (January 4, 1996): 10. Castoriadis refused to sign both the pro- and anti-reform petitions, published respectively in *Esprit* (signed by Pierre Rosanvallon, Alain Touraine, and Lefort, among one hundred others) and *Le Monde* (the latter instigated by Pierre Bourdieu). See Castoriadis's December 1995 *L'Événement du jeudi* interview, translated as "No to Resignation, No to Archaism" in *ASA(RPT)*.

[75]See Castoriadis's "The *Coordinations*: A Preface," written to introduce Jean-Michel Denis's study of this subject.

[76]DAC-2021: Now in the present volume.

consequential contestation within French society right before the May events?[77] Here we are given the benefit of hindsight. Yes, it is strange that the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme appears explicitly at the very moment it seemed overturned by events themselves. But not only we but Castoriadis himself benefitted from hindsight. In his case, when looking back at May '68—whose "immense possibilities" for "the historical period now opening" he glimpsed in June 1968[78]—he saw how the pull both of consumer society (reestablished by De Gaulle's reopening of gas stations) and of the microbureaucracies, with their crazed or criminal ideologies, brought people back from the breach they had opened.[79] Indeed, in "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism," May '68 becomes most likely an exception[80] within a periodization of modernity that ends in

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[77]See "The Suspension of Publication of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*" (dated July 1967; now in *PSW3*), the circular announcing the review's suspension *sine die*.

[78]"The Anticipated Revolution" (1968), now in *PSW3*; see: 145.

[79]See "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986), now in [DAC-2021: the present volume]. This excerpt—from another promised but never published work—is nevertheless meant as a defense of May '68 and the movements of the Sixties, as against the attempt to turn these events and these movements into forerunners of contemporary liberal "individualism." [DAC-2021: The mention of "microbureaucracies" in the text refers to the various Trotskyist, Maoist, and other groupuscules active at the time and, especially, in the aftermath of these events.]

[80]"After the movements of the 1960s, the project of autonomy seems totally eclipsed. One may take this to be a very short-term, conjunctural development. But the growing weight, in contemporary societies, of privatization, depoliticization, and 'individualism' makes such an interpretation most unlikely" ("The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" [1990], now in [DAC-2021: *CL3*]).

1950—i.e., right after the creation of S. ou B.![81] Castoriadis was also given a chance, after the 1995 strikes, to revise his "insignificancy" thesis. "[W]ould you now speak of a 'rising tide of significancy'?" he was asked in April 1996.

> No, that would be too rash; I stick to my terms. I added this note because it seemed to me obvious that what had been going on before, in terms of the waning of political and social conflict, could not be applied to this period strictly speaking, precisely because this movement, though in appearance corporatist with a very narrow scope, was in fact the result of a deep sense of dissatisfaction [with] the whole system. …I would not hurry to attach a qualification to what happened in November and December and what's happening now in terms of either "this was a last flame" or "this is a new beginning." We have to see what will happen. Nothing has changed very much. But there are signs that tend to show that something more than "a last flame" was at work. These signs are, for instance, a revival of social criticism, a revival of social critiques of the system, …, everyone realizes that the situation is at a dead end, and that this dead end is unbearable. So for the time being I think we have to keep our eyes open.[82]

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[81] After noting the crucial "concomitancy between the social, political, and ideological restlessness of the 1750-1950 epoch and the creative outbursts in the fields of art and culture," he notes, by way of contrast, how the "post-1950 situation goes together with a visible decadence in the field of spiritual creation" (*ibid*.).

[82] "A Rising Tide of Significancy? A Follow-Up Interview with *Drunken Boat*," in *RTI(TBS)*, 156-57. [DAC-2021: We hope to reprint this English-language interview by Max Blechman in the projected fourth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.]

He went on to say that he had been considering for some time the idea of launching a journal along with some people to whom he had been talking about this project. But in that interview, he also examined how the grass-roots workers' movement was unable to sustain itself in a lasting way with a broader program and to surmount the dilemma of remaining the reaction it was or of becoming coopted or itself bureaucratized. The imaginary of present-day society is not something easily sloughed off, and the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme remains operative.

In light of all this, the Anonymous Translator concluded that Castoriadis

> quite willingly considered the possibility that mass action from below might come to upset, pose a challenge to, or at least temporarily escape the logic of those disturbing underlying trends whose contours he had been tracing out. After all, his denunciations of the "vacuum industry," of the "void" of present-day Western societies and of their inability to offer anything other than hollow alternatives to the Third World and to Arab and Muslim cultures prey to religious and nationalistic fanaticism, as well as his analyses of the growing meaninglessness already discerned in Russian totalitarianism and in modern capitalism, were predicated upon, if not the hope, at least a strong desire that positive new options might continue to be created, to swell up from underneath today's stultifying complacency and generalized conformism.[83]

And remarkably, that is what, it seems to me, has been

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[83]Foreword, *RTI(TBS)*, xlviii.

retained, as readers and listeners have, following his death, made Castoriadis's plainspoken criticism of a "rising tide of insignificancy" the most popular and noticed feature of his work, instead of viewing that theme as faulty, cynical, pessimistic, or resigned. "Everyone realizes that the situation is at a dead end, and that this dead end is unbearable," he said. People did not need Castoriadis in order to know that. But they have recognized in his passionate denunciation of the established disorder things they too sense and feel and think. We live in dysphoric times.[84] "The American people think politics and politicians are full of baloney. They think the media and journalists are full of baloney. They think organized religion is full of baloney. They think big business is full of baloney. They think big labor is full of baloney." That was not Castoriadis speaking, but Castoriadis quoting former Republican Party Chairman Lee Atwater.[85]

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[84]Except, perhaps, for those who think that we will soon *become our gadgets*, downloading our personalities into them, and thus live forever.
[85]"Politics: Are U.S. Visions and Values Drying Up?" *International Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1990, p. 5, quoted by Castoriadis in "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" [DAC-2021: now in the present volume]. Shortly before his 1991 death from brain cancer, Atwater, who also apologized for the "naked cruelty" of the cynical ("Willie Horton") presidential campaign he organized in 1988, wrote the following remarkable statement, which (despite its converted-Catholic context) reads like a variation on Castoriadis's "insignificancy" theme: "My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood. The '80s were about acquiring—acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn't I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know who will lead us through the '90s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor

What also is remarkable, in retrospect, is how tenuous it was that this theme came to people's attention and was retained by them in the generally welcome way it has been, near the end of Castoriadis's life and then posthumously. *La Montée de l'insignifiance* came into being as a book to solve a frustrating publishing situation, and its selection of texts underestimated how many texts were available and relevant to the collection while undermining the global-integrative approach to world-fragmentation found in the previous volumes of the *Carrefours* series, especially the immediately prior one, *Le Monde morcelé* (world in fragments [DAC-2021: now *CL3*]). *MI*'s eponymous text previously bore a different title. Just as the book was coming out, stunning new wildcat events seemed to belie, at least temporarily, the apparently gloomy theses it was expounding. And it took a wildcat posthumous publishing project in another language to [DAC-2021: help induce the publication in French of] additional texts dealing with the "Insignificancy"/"A Society Adrift"/"The Big Sleep" theme, so that readers could obtain a broader, more complete, and more detailed view of what that theme entailed.

Here we witness the confluence of the purposeful and the fortuitous in the creation of the magmatic unity-in-the-making that is Castoriadis's overall oeuvre. Other texts and other titles could, under changed circumstances, have served to bring what we now know as the "rising tide of insignificancy" theme to the fore. This oeuvre could have been cut up in different ways and still have ended up, as it did, communicating its meaningful challenge to contemporary meaninglessness. And, as with Frank Zappa's assertion in the quotation that serves as an epigraph for the present text, the razor—the principle of ensemblistic-identitary division—that

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of the soul" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee_Atwater).

was used to cut up this oeuvre could itself have been used to cut up the material in different ways and, still, its basic import could have been understood and retained. "The rising tide of insignificancy" theme thus itself stands as tender testimony to the force of Castoriadis's ongoing opposition to barbarism as well as to the precariousness of all our efforts to create meaningful, sustainable responses in the face of the chaos of the world.

On the Translation

We refer the reader to "On the Translation" in *CL1* for an overview of translation issues that have arisen and have been addressed in the six volumes of the present series.

We note here simply a list of the various English-language words and phrases Castoriadis employed in the original French-language texts for this fourth volume: supply-side economics, labour-saving, lobbies (eight times), hobbies (twice), hobby, "History is bunk," sit-in (twice), teach-in, mood, Roundheads, attention span, they never had it so good, best-sellers, double bind (twice), Bill of rights (twice), Us-them, right of man, rights of Englishmen, hopeful and dreadful monster, due process of law, ready made, one best way, us-and-them, we the people, public goods.

KAIROS

The Crisis of Western Societies[*]

Prefatory Paragraph (1995)

I have omitted from this chapter the first three pages of the 1982 French text which dealt with the situations of Russia and the West in the early 1980s. Today, these pages would have no more than a historical interest, though in my view the substance of my remarks remains true. For forty years, a coalition of the richest countries on Earth trembled before the power of Russia, which had half the population and paltry productive resources in comparison with theirs and was hobbled by an ongoing and deep-seated internal crisis. Contrary to what we have been told, the matter was settled not by the "victory of the West" but by an implosion of the bureaucratic regime that was the first to surrender to what has been called the "process of competitive decadence" between the West and Russia. It is the Western side of this decadence that is examined in the pages that follow.

Just like the explanation of the relative strength of Russia, our understanding of the relative weakness of Western regimes refers us back to causes that are social and historical in nature. Behind the facts described are found factors that each person can observe for himself: the incoherency, the blindness, and the incompetency of the dominant strata in Western countries as well as of their political personnel. But these factors are, in turn, not the last word on the matter, either, for they still require analysis. How and why is it that the ruling strata of these countries, which dominated the planet for five centuries, are abruptly revealing themselves to

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[*]"La Crise des sociétés occidentales" was originally published in *Politique Internationale*, 15 (Spring 1982): 131-47. Reprinted in *MI*, 11-26 (11-29 of the 2007 reprint), with a 1995 introduction. [T/E: David J. Parent's translation, "The Crisis of Western Societies," appeared in *Telos*, 53 (Fall 1982): 17-28. Castoriadis has described it, in the first footnote to "The 'End of Philosophy'?" (now in *CL3*), as "poor." On occasion, I consulted the *Telos* translation while preparing this new translation, which first appeared in *CR*, 253-66.]

be in a state of decrepitude that places them in a position of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the Russian stratocracy? How and why do the richest, most productive societies the Earth has ever borne find themselves mortally threatened by a regime that does not even succeed in nourishing and housing its own population decently? How and why has this fantastic willful blindness of Western populations toward the monstrous virtual possibilities quite evidently contained in these facts ever come about and how and why does it continue to exist?

Behind these phenomena is hidden a process of decomposition of Western societies, all classes thrown together. Despite the various discourses produced over the past three-quarters of a century—decline of the West, civilizational crisis, a crisis of society—this decomposition remains to be understood and analyzed. In the pages that follow I propose to furnish a few, fragmentary elements of this analysis.

The Decomposition of Leadership Mechanisms

The manifestations of this decomposition can easily be catalogued through listing the abiding failures of the policies being pursued (or, still more radically, in the absence of any policy at all) in key areas. If the Western societies continue to function, it is assuredly not the fault of their leaders but, rather, the result of the extraordinary adaptability (resiliency) of capitalist and liberal institutions (characteristics totally unrecognized by the regime's critics and adversaries) and of the enormous reserves of all sorts (and not just wealth) previously accumulated.

I have already alluded [in the introduction not reprinted here] to the absence (and/or radical inadequacy) of Western policies with regard to the Third World and in

matters of weaponry. I can do no more than mention briefly two other decisive areas where the same situation is manifest.

The first is the economy. Capitalism has been able to continue operating, as a social system, basically thanks to its "economic" success: approximately full employment, expansion of production and consumption. This successful evolution has nothing "fated" about it (any more, conversely, than does a "collapse"). The enlargement of domestic markets—indispensable on a global scale, for the system taken as a whole—which is due to the long-term rise in real pay, was imposed upon capitalism via the struggles of laboring people. A century and a half was needed before this regime finally "understood" that one of the conditions for its dynamic equilibrium was a rough equality between the pace of increase in consumption and the pace of the rise in productivity. Nevertheless, this single condition was not sufficient because of near-inevitable fluctuations in investment and the cycles of expansion/contraction these fluctuations engender. Finally, after World War II governments were forced to assume management of overall demand in order to maintain approximately full employment. This is how the long wave of expansion from 1945 to 1974 was able to develop with only minor fluctuations in the capitalist economy.

One does not have to be a rocket scientist [*grand clerc*] to foresee that a phase of uninterrupted full employment was going to create other problems for the capitalist economy.[1] Already manifest (and aggravated by

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[1]Michał Kalecki had foreseen it in a famous article published in 1943. For my part, I had analyzed the problem, using the example of Great Britain, in the third part of "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1961), now in *PSW2*, 283-85; for the problem in general, and the inflation of the years 1960-1970, see "Author's Introduction to the 1974 English Edition" of "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," now in *PSW2*, 326-43.

other factors) in the Great Britain of the 1950s, these difficulties were generalized to embrace all industrialized capitalist countries during the second half of the 1960s, which led to an ongoing acceleration of price increases. The successive "accidents" represented by the Vietnam War and its mode of (non)financing in the United States, the international monetary crisis of 1970, and finally the Yom Kippur War and the oil embargo led to an explosion of such problems.

For eight years now [since 1974], the Western governments have strikingly demonstrated their impotence in the face of this situation. Overall, the sole result of the policies being applied has been to shatter the expansion phase and provoke a grave and ongoing rise in unemployment, without for all that tangibly reducing price hikes. To this self-sustaining inflation has been added a self-sustaining stagnation, each reinforcing the other. The absolute mental pauperization of the ruling strata is expressed in the proclamations being made about the bankruptcy of Keynesianism (which amounts to saying that our failure to contain cancer proves Pasteur's bankruptcy), the fad of monetarism (a rehash of the old quantitative theory of money, a tautology whose transformation into an "explanatory" theory has long been known to be fallacious), or new demonological inventions like "supply-side economics."

How long will the system be able to face up to the continuous rise in the number of unemployed and to the stagnation in the standard of living of those who work? The pockets of poverty and relative (and sometimes absolute) misery in the industrialized countries, whose size has until now been attenuated by the general economic expansion and the accompanying expectations (Roosevelt's "depressed third" had successively been transformed into a "quarter" and

then into a "fifth"), are becoming permanent and growing pockets filled with people without resources or hope. Those elements that had, amid the dislocation of values and motivations, somehow or other succeeded in cementing society together (expectations of rises in living standards and nonnull possibilities of "advancement"/ascending the skills-and-incomes ladder) are now in the process of disappearing. Finally, in growthless capitalist economies, unemployment cannot but continue to rise a few percentage points for the active working population per annum (corresponding to the natural increase in population, and augmented by the effects of labor-saving investments).

[Author's addition: The capitalist economy's entry during the past two years into a phase of expansion does not basically modify the preceding analysis. This moderate expansion is taking place, moreover, on the basis of new evolutionary changes that are heavy with consequences. For going on fifteen years, the thoroughgoing mental regression of the ruling classes and of political personnel, which has led to the economy's out-and-out "liberalization" (the heroic protagonists of which in France have been the "Socialists"), and the more and more effectively real globalization of production and trade have resulted in nation-States losing control over their economies. As was foreseen, these changes have been accompanied by an explosion of speculation that each day is transforming the capitalist economy more and more into a casino. Under these circumstances, even a return to Keynesian policies, which presuppose that the State has control over foreign trade and over monetary and credit policies, would hardly be meaningful. See, also, the 1995 Postscript to "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991), below in the present volume.]

The second area (which I can do no more than

mention here) is that of the complex of problems designated by the terms *energy*, *nonrenewable resources*, *environment*, and *ecology*. In part masked by the current phase of economic stagnation, these problems are worsening over time. Here again, policies are nonexistent, or disproportionate to the potential gravity of these questions.

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Superficiality, incoherency, a sterility of ideas, and a changeability of attitudes are therefore, quite evidently, the characteristic traits of Western political leadership groups [*directions*]. But how is one to explain their generalization and their persistence?

Undoubtedly, the mechanisms of personnel recruitment and selection among politicians play an important part here. Even more than in the bureaucratic apparatuses that dominate other social activities, the dissociation between possibilities of promotion and one's ability to work efficiently is reaching a limit within political parties. "Politics," in the prevailing sense of the term, has at all times been a bizarre profession. It has always demanded that one combine the faculties and specific abilities required, according to the type of regime under consideration, in order to "attain power" and the faculties and capacities required in order to know how to utilize this power. In itself, the art of oratory, the recollection of people's faces, and the ability to make friends and gain partisan supporters and to divide and weaken opponents have nothing to do with legislative genius, administrative talent, leadership in war or in foreign policy, any more than, under an absolutist regime, the art of pleasing the monarch has any relation to the art of governing.

It is nevertheless clear that any regime whatsoever can

survive only if, in one manner or another, its mechanisms and devices for the selection of political personnel succeed in combining, somehow or other, these two requirements. We do not have to examine here how Western parliamentary (or "republican") regimes have in the past resolved the problem. The fact is that, if during 100 or 150 years "capable" or "incapable" leaders have alternated in power, rare are the cases where governmental incapacity has constituted a decisive evolutionary factor.

The opposite is true today. One can find general sociological causes for this phenomenon: a vast movement of depoliticization and privatization, the disintegration of the control and correction devices that were operative under classical parliamentary regimes, a fragmentation of power among lobbies of all sorts. I shall return to this below. But two factors specific to the modern "political" organization must be emphasized quite particularly here.

The first factor is connected with the bureaucratization of the political Apparatuses (i.e., parties). The absolute rule of the contemporary totalitarian bureaucratic party holds more or less for all parties: the capacity to rise within the Apparatus has, in principle, nothing to do with the capacity to manage the affairs this Apparatus is charged with overseeing.[2] The selection of the fittest is the selection of those fittest at getting themselves selected.

The second factor is specific to the liberal countries. The choice of the principal leaders in these countries, we know, boils down to designating the most "sellable" personalities.[3] In the contemporary totalitarian bureaucratic Apparatus, the type of authority is neither rational nor

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[2]*DG*, 242-47 and the texts cited in *ibid.,* 245. [T/E: Castoriadis is citing here and below the first edition.]

[3]"Modern Capitalism and Revolution," in *PSW2*, 273-78.

traditional nor charismatic, to adopt Max Weber's distinctions. It is difficult, for example, to discern wherein lies Mr. Brezhnev's charisma. This type of authority being new, we must find a name for it. Let us call it *inertial authority*. But in liberal (or soft) bureaucratic Apparatuses, such as Western political parties, we witness a return of a "charismatic" type of authority: charisma is here, simply, the particular talent of a kind of actor who plays the role of "chief" or "statesman." (This was obvious long before the election of Mr. Reagan, who is, in this regard, only a symbol of this trend magnified to the point of becoming a platitude.) Of course, this trend has been provoked by the fantastic expansion of the power of the media and the servile attitudes they impose. As for the succeeding stages of the process, Kafka already described them wonderfully in "Josephine the Singer." Starting from the moment the tribe has agreed publicly that Mr. X is a "great leader," it feels vaguely compelled to continue playing its own role: that of applauding.

These accidental and inevitable leaders find themselves placed at the head of the vast bureaucratic Apparatus that is the modern State. This Apparatus is the bearer and organic producer of a proliferation of irrationality,[4] and among its agents the old *ethos* (that of the high-level official and the conscientious low-level civil servant) grows increasingly rare. And these leaders are faced with a society that is becoming less and less interested in "politics"—that is to say, in its fate as society.

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[4]See the texts cited in n. 2.

The Vanishing of Social and Political Conflict

For centuries one of the characteristics of Western countries was the very existence (practically unknown elsewhere in history) of a sociopolitical dynamic. This dynamic continually gave rise to currents and movements that aimed at taking charge of society, that proposed basic changes in its institutions and definite orientations for its social activities—both of them proceeding from, or connected with, systems of belief (or "ideologies," etc.) and opposed, certainly, to contrary tendencies and currents.

Over the past thirty years, however, we have been witnessing the *de facto* disappearance of such movements. On the "political" level in the strict sense, parties, completely transformed into bureaucratic machines, no longer obtain anything more than a purely electoral form of support from citizens they have become incapable of "mobilizing" in any sense of the term. These same parties, dying of ideological starvation, either hark back to litanies no one believes in any longer (Socialists and Communists in Western Europe) or camouflage as "new theories" and "new policies" some superannuated superstitions (Thatcher, Reagan, etc.).

Unions today are no more than lobbies defending the sectoral or corporative interests of their members. Here we have something more than what I, following others, analyzed as their bureaucratization. On the one hand, one can no longer even really speak of a more or less "unified" union bureaucracy pursuing its own objectives (little matter which ones); the sole goal of this bureaucracy is its self-preservation. On the other hand, it no longer suffices to state that these unions "betray" the interests of their constituents or "negotiate" them away while trying above all to avoid conflicts with capitalists and the managerial bureaucracy.

When the occasion arises they really do enter into conflict, but they do so in order to defend corporative interests, defining the latter in such a way as to transform the various categories of laboring people into so many lobbies.

The great movements that shook Western societies for twenty years—youth, women, ethnic and cultural minorities, ecologists—have certainly had (and potentially retain) considerable importance from all standpoints, and it would be frivolous to maintain that their role has ended. But their present ebb leaves them in the state of groups that are not just minoritarian, but fragmented and sectoral, and incapable of articulating their goals and their means in universal terms that would be both objectively relevant and mobilizing.

These movements shook the Western world, they even changed it—but at the same time they rendered it even less viable. This is a striking but ultimately not a surprising phenomenon, for if these movements have been able powerfully to contest the established disorder, they have been neither able nor willing to assume a positive political project. The net result for now, following their ebb, has been the accentuated dislocation of existing social regimes without the appearance of new overall objectives or supports for such objectives. The extreme case is illustrated by the acts and the gestures of the movement of contestation occurring in Germany. Three-hundred-thousand demonstrators against the Pershing missiles, tens of thousands of demonstrators in Frankfurt against an airport extension, but not a single demonstrator against the instauration of military terror in Poland. People really do want to demonstrate against the biological dangers of war, or against the destruction of a forest, but they are totally uninterested in the political and human stakes connected with the current world situation.

Present-day "political" society is more and more

fragmented, more and more dominated by lobbies of all sorts, and this creates a general blockage of the system. Each of these lobbies is indeed capable of effectively hindering every policy that is contrary to its real or imaginary interests; none of them has any general policy; and, even if they had one, they would not have the ability to impose it.

Education, Culture, Values

The question is thus raised: To what extent do Western societies remain capable of fabricating the type of individual necessary for their continued functioning?

The first and the main workshop for the fabrication of conformal (true-to-form) individuals is the family. The crisis of the family today does not consist only, and not so much, in its statistical fragility. What is at issue is the crumbling and disintegration of the traditional roles—man, woman, parents, children—and the consequence thereof: the *formless disorientation* of new generations. What has been said above about the movements of the last twenty years also holds in this domain (although the process dates back, in the case of the family, much further, and already it is three-quarters of a century old in the most "evolved" countries). The disintegration of traditional roles expresses individuals' push toward autonomy and contains the germs of emancipation. But the ambiguities of its effects have long been noted by me.[5] The more time passes, the more one is justified in asking oneself whether this process is expressed more by a blossoming forth of new ways of living than by sheer disorientation and anomie.

One can perfectly well conceive of a social system in

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[5]"The Crisis of Modern Society" (a 1965 lecture published in 1966), now in *PSW3*.

which the role of the family would be granted less emphasis while other institutions of training and rearing would be granted greater emphasis. In fact, numerous archaic tribes, such as the Spartans, achieved such systems. Even in the West, starting in a certain era this role increasingly came to be fulfilled by the educational system on the one hand, the surrounding culture on the other—whether general or particular (local: village; or work-related: factory, etc.).

The Western educational system has entered, for going on twenty years now, a phase of accelerated disaggregation.[6] It is undergoing a crisis of contents: What is being transmitted, and what *ought to* be transmitted, and according to what criteria? In other words, there is a crisis of curricula and a crisis of that *in view of which* these curricula are defined, It is also experiencing a crisis of the educational relationship: the traditional type of undisputed authority has collapsed, and new types—the master-teacher/pal [*maître-copain*] type, for example—have succeeded neither in defining themselves, nor in affirming themselves, nor in extending themselves. But all these observations would still remain abstract if they were not related to the most flagrant and blinding manifestation of the crisis of the educational system, the one no one dares even mention. Neither pupils nor teachers [*maîtres*] are interested any longer in what happens in the school as such; education is no longer *cathected* as education by the participants. It has become a bread-winning chore for educators, a boring burden for pupils, for whom it has ceased to be the only extrafamilial opening and who are not of the age (nor in possession of the physical structure)

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[6]"Student Youth" (1963), now in *PSW3*. [T/E: There may be a pun here in the contrast between the current "disaggregation" of the educational system and the *concours d'agrégation*, France's traditional teacher's certificate examination.]

required to see in it an instrumental investment (the profitability of which, moreover, is becoming more and more problematic). In general, it has become a question of obtaining a piece of paper (a diploma) that will allow one to exercise a profession (if one finds work).

It will be said that, at bottom, it never has been otherwise. Perhaps. The question does not lie there. Formerly—just a short while ago—all dimensions of the educational system (and the values to which they referred) were incontestable. They have ceased to be so.

Leaving a weakened family, frequenting—or not frequenting—a school lived as a chore, the young individual finds herself confronted by a society in which all "values" and "norms" are pretty much replaced by one's "standard of living," one's general welfare, comfort, and consumerism. No religion, no "political" ideas, no social solidarity with a local or work community or with "schoolmates." If she is not marginalized (drugs, delinquency, unstable "personality"), there remains the royal road of privatization, which she may or may not enrich by indulging in one or several personal crazes. We are living the society of *lobbies* and *hobbies*.

The classical educational system was nourished, "from above," by the living culture of its time. This is still the case with today's educational system—to its detriment. Contemporary culture is becoming, more and more, a mixture of "modernist" imposture and museum-ism.[7] Ages ago "modernism" became old hat, began to be cultivated for its own sake, and now is often based on instances of mere plagiarism tolerated only because of the neoilliteracy of the

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[7]"Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1979), now in *PSW3* [T/E: see also "The Crisis of Culture and the State" (1987), now in *PPA*], and "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1990), now in *CL3*.

public (as is illustrated, for example, by the admiration the "cultivated" Parisian public has in recent years shown for productions that repeat, in a diluted way, inventions from the 1920s). No longer is past culture alive within a living tradition, but instead it has become an object of knowledge for museumgoers or for tourists who seek out curiosities ruled by the latest fashions. On this level, and as banal as it may be, the label of "Alexandrianism" is becoming applicable (and is even 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 Collapse of Society's Self-Representation

There can be no society that *is* not something for itself, that does not *represent* itself *as* being something—this being consequence, part, and dimension of the fact that it has to *posit itself as* "something."

This "something" is neither a simple ordinary "attribute" nor an "assimilation" of itself to any natural or other kind of object. Society posits itself as being something, a singular and unique self, named (i.e., identifiable [*repérable*]) but otherwise "indefinable" (in a physical or logical sense); in fact, it posits itself as a supranatural, but sufficiently identified and detailed substance, re-presented by "attributes" that are the coinage of the imaginary significations that hold society—and *this* society—together. "For itself," society is never a collection of perishable and substitutable individuals living on some territory or other, speaking this or that language, practicing "outwardly" some customs or other. On the contrary, these individuals "belong" to this society *because* they participate in its social imaginary

significations, its "norms," "values," "myths," "representations," "projects," "traditions," etc., and because they share (whether they know it or not) the will to be *of* this society and to make it be on a continuing basis.

All this evidently partakes of the institution of society in general—and of the society each time examined. Individuals are its sole "real" or "concrete" bearers, such as they have been fashioned, fabricated by its institutions—that is to say, by other individuals, who are themselves bearers of these institutions and of the correlative significations.

This boils down to saying that every individual has to be a bearer, "sufficiently as to need/usage,"[8] of this *self-representation* of society. Here is a vital condition for the *psychical* existence of the singular individual. But what really matters much more in the present context is that this is a vital condition for the existence of society itself. The individual's "I am something"—Athenian citizen, Florentine merchant, or whatever—which covers over for this individual the psychical Abyss over which it lives, is identifiable and, above all, acquires meaning and content only by reference to the imaginary significations and the constitution of the (natural and social) world created by its society. The effort of the individual to be *X* or to remain *X* is, *ipso facto*, an effort to make be and to give life to the institution of its society. It is through individuals that society realizes itself and reflects itself through complementary parts that can be realized and be reflected (can reflect) only by realizing society and reflecting it (by reflecting). Now, the crisis of contemporary Western societies can be grasped most fully by reference to this dimension: the collapse of society's self-representation, the fact that these societies can no longer posit themselves *as*

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[8]T/E: Castoriadis takes this phrase from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.5.1133b20.

"something" (other than in an external and descriptive way)—or that what they posit themselves as is crumbling apart, flattening out, and becoming empty and self-contradictory.

This is but another way of saying that there is a crisis of social imaginary significations, that these significations no longer provide individuals with the norms, values, bearings, and motivations that would permit them both to make society function and to maintain themselves, somehow or other, in a livable state of "equilibrium" (the "everyday unhappiness" Freud contrasted with "neurotic misery").[9]

In order to try to avoid all misunderstandings or sophisms (which in any case are inevitable), let me add that I am not saying that previous societies offered humans "happiness" or "truth"—nor am I saying that their illusions are more valid than the illusions, or absence of illusions, of contemporary society. I am speaking from a *factual* viewpoint: the conditions for an adequate socialization of human beings, the conditions for the fabrication of social individuals capable of making society function and of reproducing the society that made them be. It is from this standpoint that *validating* (*Gelten*) social imaginary significations is a *sine qua non* condition for the existence of a society. Nor could it be said that the crisis of social imaginary significations in contemporary society implies, purely and simply, a dis-alienation, a disengagement, an opening of society onto the question of itself. For such an "opening" to take place, this society would still need to be

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[9]T/E: Freud wrote in his (and Josef Breuer's) *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-1895) that his reply to his patients was that "much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness" (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2, p. 305).

something other than a simple collection of externally uniformized and homogenized individuals. Society can open itself onto its own question only if, in and through this question, it still affirms itself as society; in other words, only if *sociality as such* (and, moreover, historicity as such) is positively affirmed and posited as what, in its *fact of being* (*Das-sein*), does not raise a question, even if it raises a question in its determinate being (*Was-sein*).

Now, what precisely is in crisis today is very much *society as such* for contemporary man.[10] We are paradoxically witnessing, at the same time as a (factual or external) hyper- or oversocialization of life and of human activities, a "rejection" of social life, of others, of the necessity of the institution, etc. The war cry of early nineteenth-century Liberalism, "The State is evil," has become today, "Society is evil." I am not speaking here of the confused pseudophilosophies of the age (which express, moreover, on this point, and without knowing it, a historical movement that far surpasses them), but, first of all, the increasingly typical "subjective lived experience" of contemporary man. Here is the extreme outcome of what I have been analyzing for twenty years as the privatization in modern societies, other aspects of which some recent analyses have illustrated under the heading of "narcissism." Let us leave aside this aspect, which may give rise to facile disputes, and let us pose the question in brutal fashion: Does contemporary man *want* the society in which he lives? Does he *want* another one? Does he *want* society in general? The answer may be read in acts, and in the absence of acts. Contemporary man behaves as if existence in society were an odious chore, which only an unfortunate fate has prevented him from avoiding. (That this may be the most monstrously infantile of illusions obviously changes nothing

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[10]For Russian society, see the fourth chapter of *DG*, in particular 251-64.

as to the facts.) The typical contemporary man acts as if he were *submitting* to society, which, moreover (under the form of the State, or of others), he is ever ready to blame all evils on and to make—at the same time—demands for help from or to ask for "solutions to his problems." He no longer nourishes any project relating to his society—neither that of its transformation nor even that of its preservation/reproduction. He no longer accepts social relations; he feels caught in them and he reproduces them only in so far as he cannot do otherwise. The Athenians or the Romans *wanted themselves* (and quite explicitly) to be Athenians or Romans; the proletarians of yesteryear ceased to be mere matter for exploitation starting from the moment they *wanted themselves* to be something other than what the regime was forcing them to be—and this "something else" was for them a collective project. Who could say, then, *what* contemporary man wants himself to be? Let us pass from individuals to the whole: present-day society does not want itself as society, it endures itself. And if it does not want itself, this is because it can neither sustain or forge for itself a representation of itself that it might affirm and give value to nor engender a project for social transformation to which it might adhere and for which it would want to struggle.

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An analogous collapse affects the other dimension of society's self-representation: the dimension of historicity, society's definition of itself by reference to its own temporality, its relationship with its past and its future.

I shall limit myself here, as concerns the past, to underscoring the paradox in which contemporary society lives its relationship to "tradition" and through which, in fact, it

tends to abolish this tradition. Here we see the coexistence of a glut of information with a basic ignorance and sense of indifference. The collection of information and objects (never practiced to such an extent before) goes hand in hand with the neutralization of the past: object of knowledge for some, a tourist's curio or a hobby for others, the past is a source and a root for no one. It is as if it were impossible to stand straight up in front of the past, as if one could not escape from the absurd dilemma of servile imitation vs. denial for the sake of denial, except through indifference. Neither "traditionalistic" nor creative and revolutionary (despite the tales being told on this score), the era lives its relationship to the past in a mode that itself certainly represents as such a historical novation: that of the most perfect exteriority.

For a long time, the era could think—and one could think—that this strange abolition of one's relationship to the past proceeded from a new and intense relationship society was instaurating with its future, its time-to-come [*à-venir*]. In singing the praises of the bourgeois era, Marx on the one hand, and the reality (a certain reality) of American society on the other, joined forces on this score. It was supposed that an intense preoccupation with the future, a concentration on transformational projects, and the changes modernity itself had wrought signified (and justified) a radical break with the past. "History is bunk," said Henry Ford; the Model T, obviously, was not.[11]

This was true, for a time (and it remains to be explored, which we cannot do here). It no longer is so. As

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[11]T/E: The full statement, made with some qualification, was delivered by Ford in a May 25, 1916 *Chicago Tribune* interview: "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we make today."

concerns substantive culture, the era of great modern creativity reached its end around 1930.[12]

How, then, did this society see its future? Other societies before it had seen theirs as indefinite repetition or as expectation of the realization of a mythical Promise. Western society lived its future within the ideology of "progress"— ever gradual (Liberalism) or leading, by a sudden leap, to a qualitative transformation (Marxism/Anarchism).

In fact, the two variants (mundane progressivism and "revolutionary" progressivism) are inscribed within the same overall interpretation of History. For this interpretation, there was an "inevitability of progress" (this was also Marx's explicit position and the one implicitly required for his work as a whole to have a meaning). There was also, at a deeper level, a need for History to "make sense" (the role of the Judeo-Christian heritage has been decisive in this regard, but its position is also consubstantial with the dominant Greco-Western philosophical position, that of the centrality of *logos*, become Reason, and Divine Reason). Little matter that this "meaning" should have been expressed in terms of "progress" (and not as a "test," for example), and ultimately coined in the hard cash of the accumulation of the forces of production and "rising living standards."[13]

This representation (criticized, as one knows, as early as the nineteenth century) was severely shaken by World War I, then by Fascism, Nazism, and World War II. The elimination of Nazism, the expansion phase in the capitalist economy, and decolonization gave it a new lease on life for an additional quarter-century. It also enjoyed another support, for it permitted Westerners to remain blind to the fact that the

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[12]See the texts mentioned in n. 7 of the present chapter.
[13]See "Reflections on 'Development' and 'Rationality'" (1976), now in *CL2*.

"victory over Nazism" had been accompanied by the consolidation and considerable expansion of Communist totalitarianism. The inevitability of progress authorized one to treat Communism—or its most disagreeable traits—as a "transitory" phenomenon and to await the inevitable "liberalization" of the regime, which one was and remains ready to finance.

The final awakening was late, but it was brutal. The recently decolonized countries did not rush toward the delights of parliamentarianism. *Homo œconomicus* delayed making his appearance. And when he did appear, as in several Latin American countries, his appearance was made in order to condemn the great majority of his brothers to the most atrocious misery, under protection of military men and torturers educated *ad hoc* by "the greatest democracy in the world." The environmental crisis and the outlook of "zero growth" came to undermine from without the representation of the future as indefinite exponential growth—before the oil shocks and an inflation rebellious to all remedies did so from within. Western man was long able to regard savages as ethnographic curiosities and previous phases of history as stages in the march toward today's happiness; he could ignore the fact that, without anything obliging them to do so, 600 million Hindus continue to live under a rigid caste system [*régime*] (at the same time that they practice "parliamentary politics" and construct a nuclear bomb). Nevertheless, the exploits of Idi Amin and Jean-Bédel Bokassa in Africa, the Islamic explosion in Iran, the tribulations of the Chinese regime, the Cambodian massacres, and the boat people of Vietnam finally shook his sense of certainty that he represents the realization of the innate goal [*finalité*] of humanity as a whole. If he had comprehended something of what is going on in Russia and in the countries Russia has enslaved, the

Afghanistan invasion, and the instauration of a military dictatorship in "socialist," "People's" Poland, he would have had to account for the fact that the society in which he lives constitutes but a very improbable exception in the history of humanity as well as in its current geography.

This challenge to the apparent "universalism" of Western culture could not help but have repercussions on the self-representation of this culture and the image it could make for itself of its future. The nature of these repercussions was not determined *a priori*. Western culture could have found in them the motivations that would have provided firmer support for the values to which it still claims adherence. But on the contrary, it seems to be losing, through this crisis, the self-confirmation it was seeking from without. Everything is happening as if, by a curious phenomenon of negative resonance, Western societies' discovery of their historical specificity were succeeding in undermining their adherence to what they were able and willing—and still more, their will to know what they want in the future—to be.

The Movements of the Sixties[*]

The issue of *Pouvoirs* in which the article originally appeared was devoted to interpretations of the May 1968 student-worker rebellion and also included papers by Luc Ferry ("Interpréter Mai 68"), Alain Renaut ("La Révolution introuvable?"), Gilles Lipovetsky ("'Changer la vie' ou l'irruption de l'individualisme transpolitique"), and Edgar Morin ("Mai 68: complexité et ambiguïté"). Morin's and Castoriadis's texts were republished, along with a text by Claude Lefort ("Relecture") and Morin's May 1978 *Le Monde* article, "Mais," in *Vingt ans après*, a supplement to the twentieth-anniversary republication of Morin, Lefort, and Castoriadis's book, *Mai 68: La Brèche* (Paris: Fayard, June 1968; 2nd ed. Paris: Editions Complexe, 1988; Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008). Castoriadis's original article for *La Brèche*, "The Anticipated Revolution" (tr. Basil Druitt and ed. David Ames Curtis), is now available in [PSW3].

Ferry/Renaut's reply to Castoriadis's criticism can be found in *68-86. Itinéraires de l'individu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), a book they dedicated expressly to Castoriadis. There they attempt to explain the apparent refutation, by actual events, of their thesis that the collective protests of a May '68 are a thing of the past, a closed "parenthesis" in history. In November-December 1986, just six months after the colloquium Ferry and Renaut had organized on May '68 (the acts of which appeared in the aforementioned issue of *Pouvoirs*), there occurred a new outbreak of massive student protests—against the "Monory reforms" Castoriadis had criticized in advance in the present article—and these protests were accompanied by huge railworker strikes initiated at the grassroots level. Both the May 1968 student uprising and the 1986 student protests against conservative French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac's Gaullist government's plans for educational reforms were, Ferry/Renaut nonetheless maintained, "inscribed within the same logic of individualism." To help establish this continuity of a Tocquevillean "democratic individualism" between a "revolutionary individualism" that supposedly ended around 1968 and the "narcissistic individualism" of the

NOTICE

Author's addition: "The Movements of the Sixties" is a fragment of a text on May '68 that will soon be published in its entirety in *Esprit*. [T/E: The version of this addition that appears in *MI* says "elsewhere" instead of specifically "in *Esprit*." The projected full text was never published.] The first part, not published here, discusses the question of the interpretation of the historical events in general, and then the interpretation of the virtual possibilities contained in the May '68 movement, as well as its international dimension and its historical roots. [T/E: Again, we follow the original *Pouvoirs* version; the *MI* version of this sentence ends after "historical events."] In the pages that follow, I criticize the interpretation of May '68 given by Gilles Lipovetsky in *L'Ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983) and by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in *La Pensée 68. Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, tr. Mary H. S. Cattani [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990]), who, while expressing a desire to uphold an "interpretative pluralism," highly privilege Lipovetsky's theses.

Seventies and Eighties, they (mis)quote Castoriadis himself. Castoriadis, it turns out, is an "individualist," too, for he says, "We are speaking of an autonomous society, we are aiming at an autonomous society, but an autonomous society can only be composed of autonomous individuals." Ferry/Renaut, however, have transformed two sentences into one, completely eliminating the second half of the second sentence. Significantly, the crucial omitted words read: "and, conversely, truly and fully autonomous individuals are possible only in and through an autonomous society." Castoriadis's key point—namely, that the individual is in fact not an autarchic unit, unrelated to or "opposed" to society, but a "walking and talking fragment" thereof—is lost in this attempt by Ferry/Renaut to bury the difficult, but still extant, project of radical individual and social self-transformation under an "interpretation" of the writings of Tocqueville (and also of Benjamin Constant). (The actual quotation comes from Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Cornelius Castoriadis's book *De l'Écologie à l'autonomie* [Paris: Seuil, 1981], pp. 101-102; a partial translation by Alastair Davidson appeared as "From Ecology to Autonomy," in *Thesis Eleven*, 3 [1981]; see p. 21. The excerpted translation in *CR* did not include this passage.)]

Without this privileging, moreover, the connection they are trying to establish between the May movement and what they have, curiously, chosen to call "'68 thought" collapses. It goes without saying that the discussion of this part of the work of these three authors—who have all my esteem and sympathy—does not imply a rejection of what they otherwise contribute in these texts: the fine anthropological analyses of Lipovetsky or the vigorous critique conducted by Ferry and Renaut against the various sorts of imposture that have for so long dominated the French intellectual scene. It is all the more regrettable that Ferry and Renaut have added to an erroneous analysis of May '68 a completely fallacious connection between the events and an ideological constellation that is completely foreign to these events.

The "interpretation" of May '68 in terms of a preparation (or an acceleration) of contemporary "individualism" constitutes one of the most extreme efforts I know of—the good faith of the authors remaining unquestionable—to rewrite, despite all appearances to the contrary, a history through which most of us have lived, to distort the meaning of events that are still, if I may say so, almost "hot." Everything that has introduced a tremendous renewal—the effects of which are often still present—in the life of contemporary societies, and in particular of French society, is, in their outlook, erased. Those weeks of fraternity and active solidarity, when one spoke to anybody and everybody in the street without fear of being taken for a fool, when every driver would stop to give people a lift—were they merely a form of hedonistic selfishness? "Talk to your neighbors," a slogan written on the walls in May '68, would have been slyly proposing the modern isolation of individuals in their private sphere. The sit-ins and teach-ins of all sorts, in which professors and students, schoolteachers and pupils, doctors, nurses, and hospital staff, workers, engineers, foremen, business and administrative staff spent whole days and nights discussing their work, their mutual relations, the

possibility of transforming the organization and the aims of their firms—all this would have contained in embryo a vision of other people as "loony gadgets."[1] When in the packed Sorbonne lecture hall, "delegates" from the most incongruous and improbable occupational categories—from the retired to the handicapped—rose up and asked finally to be listened to and heard by society, they no doubt did not know either what they were saying or what they were doing.

Within the May movement and through it took place a tremendous process of resocialization, even if it proved fleeting. People were not asking to feel each other's warmth or smell each other's bodies—nor simply "to be together." They were animated by the same propensities: on the negative side, they vigorously rejected the empty futility and pompous stupidity that then characterized the Gaullist regime and today characterizes the regime of President François Mitterrand and Prime Minister Jacques Chirac; on the positive side, they desired greater freedom for each and everyone. People were seeking truth, justice, freedom, community. They were unable to find the institutional forms that could incarnate these views in a lasting manner. And—something that is almost always forgotten—they were a minority in the country. This minority was able to predominate without terror or violence during several weeks, simply because the conservative majority was ashamed of itself and dared not appear in public. The May minority might, perhaps, have been able to become a majority had it gone beyond proclamations and demonstrations. But that implied a different dynamic into which it was clearly neither willing nor able to enter. If one wants to locate French "individualism" during May '68, think then about what sealed the fate of the movement's collapse after the Grenelle Accords were modified: the reprovisioning of the gas pumps.

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[1]French Editors: This is an expression by Gilles Lipovetsky.

Order was finally reestablished when the average Frenchman was once again able to drive in *his* car, with *his* family to *his* favorite picnic spot or to *his* vacation home. That allowed him to vote at 60 percent for the Government four weeks later.

Nor is it possible purely and simply to ignore, as is fashionable nowadays, the "contents" of the movement, namely the *substance* of its demands and the *meaning* of its forms and modes of action. May's "ideological" atmosphere —like, basically, that of the movements of the Sixties in general—consisted of a blend of "traditional revolutionary" ideas and a critical questioning, or outstripping, certainly often latent and confused, of the traditional forms and contents of the "socialist" and "workers' movements." This can be seen even in the confusion and the illusions of many participants. Even the worst mystifications that enjoyed currency before, during, and, above all, after May were underpinned by the desire to see realized, somewhere, some form of self-organized and spontaneous collective activity. Those who were "pro-Chinese" were not so because they hoped that China was achieving a Nazi or even a "Leninist" society; they were so because they dreamed that a real revolution was taking place there, that the masses were eliminating the bureaucracy, that the "experts" were being put in their places, and so on. The fact that this desire was able, in this case, to engender practically criminal illusions is *another* matter. But the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" was glorified *because* it would have allegedly meant a liberation of people's activity and creativity—not because it favored the introduction of Taylorism and industrial techniques.

I have spoken elsewhere[2] of the critique and rejection of the traditional organizational forms that characterized the

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[2]In the part of this text not published here.

movement; in a complementary fashion, it would be necessary to understand the significance, in terms of *content*, of a *form* such as the sit-in or the open assembly. But above all, it would be necessary to stop throwing overboard, or loading as contraband cargo on the ship of individualism, the considerable changes in social reality (and its institution) introduced by the movements of the Sixties and Seventies, and *explicitly pursued* by them. Is it because society evolved the way it did that the freedom to use contraception or abortion has toppled from the level of autonomy of subjects to that of unprincipled hedonism? The movements of the Sixties, have they, then, nothing to do with changes in the relationships between parents and children or between the sexes—or should we see in these things, along with Régis Debray, the "victory of productivist reason," of the "law of commodity-object," and of "capitalist ideology"?[3] Is the fact that American Blacks were able to loosen a little the racial discrimination to which they had been subjected also without any interest from the point of view of individual and social autonomy? And why is the questioning of the traditional contents and forms of education and teaching, as well as the traditional teacher/pupil relationship—with the small part of its effects that are still inscribed in reality—totally ignored? Have people then returned completely to the positions already pompously stated in 1964 by Louis Althusser when faced with the first signs of student discontent: namely, that nobody can question the content of teaching (or its structure) because its task is to transmit scientific and objective knowledge? Has it been forgotten that before 1968, as far as the established

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[3]T/E: See Debray's *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France* (Paris: Ramsay, 1979). The first phrase, at least, appears in the excerpted translation: "A Modest Contribution to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Tenth Anniversary," *New Left Review*, 115 (May/June 1979): 47.

powers as well as the "left-wing" organizations were concerned, the only educational problem worthy of discussion was that of student loans and scholarships? Nothing is changed by the fact that today, thanks to the Restoration and to its instrument in educational matters, Mr. Chevènement, "pedagogy" is again spurned and that fundamental questions have been obliterated by those who have taken advantage of the reactions provoked by extravagant promises and by ridiculous and pernicious forms of extremism, here like everywhere else. I would really like to see someone question for a second, and with rational arguments, the right of students to ask, as soon as they are capable of doing so, the following question: Why and how is what you are teaching us interesting or important? I would really like to hear someone refute the idea that true education also consists of encouraging and enabling students to pose these sorts of questions and argue about them. And I would like to be shown that it was not the movements of the Sixties, but the "Haby reform," the "Chevènement reform," or the future "Monory reform" that have brought these questions to the awareness of society.[4]

It is strange to hear people today label "'68 thought"[5] a set of authors who saw their fashionableness increase after the *failure* of May '68 and of the other movements of the time and who did not play any role even in the vaguest sense of a "sociological" preparation of the movement, both because their ideas were totally unknown to the participants and

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[4]T/E: Jean-Pierre Chevènement was replaced by René Monory as Minister of National Education on March 20, 1986, when Chirac became Prime Minister in a "cohabitation" government under President Mitterrand. René Haby had held that post under the previous president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

[5]By Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in their book *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism* (see the prefatory Author's addition, this chapter).

because these ideas were diametrically opposed to the participants' implicit and explicit aspirations. Were one to have passed around an anthology of the writings analyzed by Ferry and Renaut on the night barricades were erected in the Latin Quarter, at best one would have provoked an irrepressible laughter, and at worst one would have led the participants and the movement to disband. The well-known writing on the Sorbonne walls, "*Althusser à rien*," needs no commentary.[6] No one in his right mind who was familiar, in the Sixties, with Jacques Lacan's writings and personality would have dreamed that he could ever have anything to do with a social and political movement. Michel Foucault did not hide his reactionary positions until 1968, although he spoke less, it is true, of the way in which he had put them into practice during a students' strike in 1965 at Clermont-Ferrand. The erasure of the subject, the death of man, and the other asinine conceptions contained in what I have called the French Ideology[7] had already been in circulation for some years. Their inescapable corollary, the death of politics, could be made explicit without much effort (and it was done by Foucault not long after May '68: since all politics is a strategy, it could lead only to the establishment of counterpowers, and *therefore* of powers); it is clearly incompatible with the very activities in which the participants in the movements of the Sixties, including May '68, were engaged.

It will be said that we are examining only the

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[6]T/E: Perhaps it does require some comment for the English-speaking reader. It is a play on words; "Althusser à rien" sounds like "Al, tu [ne] sers à rien" ("Al[thusser], you're useless").

[7]See "Psychoanalysis: Project and Elucidation" (1977), in *CL1*. [T/E: See also "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1979), in *PSW3*, 304, as well as the discussion of the "complementary ideology" in "The Diversionists" (1977), *PSW3*, 272-73.]

"manifest contents" of the movement and that, thanks to the good old Cunning of Reason, nothing prevented the May '68 participants from being acted upon by ideas radically different from those they professed and openly tried to put into practice. This would be pushing paradox a bit far, because one would have to admit, then, that the true unconscious motivation that drove the May participants to act [*faire*] was the idea that nothing can be done [*faire*] and nothing must be done. But the real question lies elsewhere. Everybody knows—and it is astonishing that the authors of *La Pensée '68* hardly take it into account—that the first announcements of the various deaths (of the subject, man, meaning or signification, history, etc.) had been sent out long before May '68 by the representatives of a pseudoscientific ideology, Structuralism: in chronological order, by Claude Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Roland Barthes, Althusser. And long before May '68, Structuralism had been criticized, notably by the author of the present article, both as to its content as such and as to its political implications.[8]

Those who lived through those times can testify that being a militant at the beginning of the Sixties in contact with certain student and university circles in Paris entailed taking a stand against Structuralism in general and Althusser in particular. Althusser, as I have already stated, did not wait long to go on the counterattack and declare as early as 1964 that educational programs and structures were in their essence exempt from the "class struggle"; that is to say, exempt from the political question. The other authors of the "French Ideology" very explicitly (like Foucault) or implicitly situated themselves within the "territory" of Structuralism. They had

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[8]See "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (1964-1965), now in *IIS*, 94-164. And, in retrospect, see my article "The Diversionists" (1977), now in *PSW3*.

all said what they had to say (if, indeed, they ever did have anything to say…) before May '68, and with enough "success" (within the Paris intelligentsia and in publishing terms) for their ideas to have had time to exert an "influence" on the actors in the movement. But no sign of such an influence can be found. It suffices to look, for instance, at the Introduction to the book by Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Le Gauchisme*, at the *Journal de la Commune étudiante* by Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Alain Schnapp, or at the various collections of wall inscriptions (for example, Julian Besançon, *Les Murs ont la parole*).[9] Not the slightest trace of the "ideas" of those ideologues will be found there, except for the rare instances in which they are ridiculed or denounced. What constantly appears is criticism of the established order, the famous appeals to the imagination (one wonders how that could relate to Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, or even Lacan!), and obviously the celebration of freedom and of "*jouissance*," but above all of socialism and of a new social order.

It could not have been otherwise. Lacan, for example, spoke of the "*dès-être*" ("unbeing") of the subject both before and after '68. Both before and after, nobody could have imagined (save for a few bold academics in the American Middle West) either that he was revolutionary or that he was individualistic. He was clearly, strictly, and openly Lacanary and Lacanistic. His central thesis had always been that the

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[9]*Le Gauchisme, remède à la maladie sénile du communisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1968) [T/E: tr. Arnold Pomerans as *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (London: André Deutsch Ltd., 1968), it includes on pp. 41-48 a loose, partial translation and rewriting of Castoriadis's 1963 *Socialisme ou Barbarie* article "Student Youth" (now in *PSW3*)]; *Journal de la Commune étudiante* (Paris: Seuil, 1969) [T/E: tr. Maria Jolas as *The French Student Uprising: An Analytical Record* (Boston: Beacon, 1971)]; *Les Murs ont la parole* (Paris: Tchou, June 1968).

schize (the splitting) of the subject amounted to structural alienation and is therefore insurmountable. The central question of all political activity, which was present during May '68, is the question of the institution. This is something carefully occulted by Lacanism thanks to the smoky mystifications of the "Law" and the "symbolic," emitted precisely to prevent all possible distinction between a "*de facto* validity" and a "*de jure* validity," thus cutting short the questioning that must precede all political action. In this respect, it is easy to see that the other authors discussed by Ferry and Renaut are essentially indebted to Lacan and that they all share with him the same sly and vulgar skirting of the elementary question: What, then, is the status of *your* discourse?

May '68 had a double, apparently contradictory, one could almost say paradoxical effect on this microcosm. On the one hand, "Structuralism" melted away; no one dared invoke its name any longer and the most adept, like Foucault, claimed they no longer were and/or had never been a part of it. On the other hand, those same authors (and their various acolytes, subclan chiefs, and so on) were rapidly propelled to a qualitatively different level of "success" and notoriety. To fix the ideas, as is said symbolically and in mathematics, if 30,000 copies of Lacan's *Écrits* were sold before '68, 300,000 will be sold after. That was certainly due to the adeptness at media and mercantile manipulation of the said personalities or of their impresarios, as well as to the strong demand on the national and export wholesale market in the commerce of ideas. But it is also fundamentally due to the *failure* of May '68—and therein lies the colossal blunder of Ferry and Renaut. What the ideologues supply after the fact is a legitimation of the *limits* (of the ultimate limitations; in the last analysis, of the historic weaknesses) of the May

movement: You did not try to seize power and you were right, you did not even try to establish a counterpower and you were right once again, because to say *counterpower* is to say *power*, and so on. At the same time, what the ideologues furnish us with is a retrospective legitimation of withdrawal, renunciation, noncommitment, or of a punctilious and measured commitment: in any case, we are told that history, the subject, autonomy are only Western myths.

Moreover, this legitimation will rapidly be relayed in the song of the new philosophers, beginning in the mid-Seventies: politics aims at the whole [*le tout*], it is therefore totalitarian, and so on (and these lyrics also explain to us its success). Before falling back on "vacation homes" and private life, and *in order* to do exactly that, people needed a minimum of ideological justification (not everybody, alas, enjoys the same freedom from yesterday's words and actions as some other people do). This is what the ideologues continued to supply in slightly modified wrappings. It is astonishing that Ferry and Renaut have not seen the perfect harmony between the ideology of the death of the subject, man, truth, politics and so on, and the state of mind, the humor, the mood, the *Stimmung* that followed the *failure* (and what is more, the *bizarre* failure) of May and the *disintegration* of the movement. There were, certainly, among the people mobilized in May, a number of participants who continued to be militants among the Trotskyists, the Maoists, and so on. They never amounted to more than a few thousand altogether, and their numbers rapidly declined after 1972. For the rest, for the tens or hundreds of thousands who acted in May-June 1968 but who no longer believed in a real movement, who wanted to find a justification or a legitimation both for the failure of the movement and for their own incipient privatization while also retaining some sort of

a "radical sensibility"—for all these people, the nihilism of the ideologues, who had at the same time managed to jump on the bandwagon of a vague sort of "subversion," was admirably convenient. Ferry's and Renaut's misinterpretation [*contresens*] is total. "Sixty-eight thought" is anti-'68 thought, the type of thinking that has built its mass success on the ruins of the '68 movement and as a function of its failure. The ideologues discussed by Ferry and Renaut are ideologues of man's impotence before his own creations. And it is a feeling of impotence, discouragement, tiredness that they have come to legitimate, after '68.

As for the ideological filiations of the May '68 movement, insofar as it is possible and of interest to provide "concrete" origins, they have been retraced in detail by Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Alain Schnapp, in the already cited *Journal de la Commune étudiante*, and suitably summarized by Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit when they write in *Le Gauchisme* that their book could have been replaced by "an anthology of the most incisive articles to have appeared in such radical journals as *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, *L'Internationale Situationniste*, *Informations et Correspondance Ouvrières*, *Noir et Rouge*, *Recherches Libertaires* and to a lesser extent in Trotskyist publications."[10]

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May '68 and the other movements of the Sixties have shown the persistence and the power of the aim of autonomy, expressed both in the rejection of the bureaucratic-capitalist world and in the new ideas and practices invented or propagated by those movements. But they have also testified

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[10]*Obsolete Communism*, p.18.

to this dimension of *failure* that has so far been indissolubly linked, at least in appearance, with modern political movements: the immense difficulty involved in prolonging in a positive direction the critique of the existing order of things, the impossibility of assuming the aim of autonomy, as simultaneously individual and social autonomy, through the instauration of a collective form of self-government (whence, after the collapse of the movement, the multifarious and multifariously ridiculous driftings toward the Maoist and Trotskyist micro-bureaucracies, toward "Mao-spontex" liquefaction, or toward pseudo-"subversive" ideological nihilism).

But this failure has been with us since the beginning of Modern Times. It is represented by officers who finally brought the army of Roundheads to its senses and by Cromwell, who became Lord-Protector. It is found in the New England that fell short of, rather than going beyond, the line laid down by Jefferson (Tocqueville's America is a society at the same time idealized and bygone). It is in the France that pulled back when confronted by the task of continuing the immense work initiated between 1789 and 1792—whence the open field left to the Jacobins and then to the Terror. It is in the Russia of 1917, where the Bolsheviks seized power in the population's absence and established the first totalitarian power in Modern Times.

This failure, need we recall, only very rarely is total. In most cases, these movements result in the formal instituting of certain rights, freedoms, guarantees under which we still live. In other cases, nothing is formally instituted, but deep traces are left in the mental outlook and actual life of societies; such was undoubtedly the case with the 1871 Paris Commune, such is certainly the case, as I stated earlier, with the movements of the Sixties.

The situation is clearly linked to the antinomic character of the modern political imagination. This imagination is, on the one hand, under the sway of the aim of autonomy and its successive extensions into the various fields in which the social sphere [*du social*] is instituted; on the other hand, it seldom, and only for a brief time, manages to disengage itself from the representation of politics—and of the institution—as an exclusive fief of the State and from the representation of this State (which itself continues to incarnate, even in the most modern societies, the figure of a power based on divine right) as belonging only to itself. The result has been that, in modernity, politics as collective activity (and not as a specialized profession) has been able to be present so far only as spasm and paroxysm, a bout of fever, enthusiasm and rage, a reaction to the excesses of a Power that in other respects is still both inimical and inevitable, enemy and fatality; it has, in short, been able to be present only as "Revolution."

One can find within oneself the mischief to show that the "meaning" of May '68 has in the end been a growth in sales of pornographic videocassettes. It might be less amusing, but more fruitful, to see in May '68 and in the movements of the Sixties the enormous promises virtually contained in contemporary society and the immense difficulty modern humanity experiences in trying to get away from all this idiocy, politicize itself, and decide that taking care of its (collective) business could become its normal and regular condition.

The dissolution of the movements of the Sixties has heralded the beginning of the new regressive stage in the political life of Western societies, a stage we have been witnessing since the early Seventies. This regression goes hand in hand with (and is almost synonymous with) a new

round of bureaucratization/privatization/mediatization, and at the same time, to express it in a more traditional language, with a massive return of authoritarian political tendencies in the liberal-oligarchic regime. People have the right to think that these phenomena are temporary or permanent, that they express a particular moment in the evolution of modern society, or that they are the conjunctural expression of insurmountable features of human society. What is not permissible is to forget that, thanks to and by means of the type of collective mobilizations represented by the movements of the Sixties, Western history is what it is and Western societies find sedimented within themselves the institutions and characteristics that, somehow or other, make them viable and may one day serve as the starting point and the springboard for something else.

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Here is the only important division. There are those, like myself, who consider that the margins of freedom contained in the contemporary regime are but the centuries-long sedimented byproducts of movements of this type; that, without these movements, the regime not only would never have produced these freedoms but would have, each time, unrelentingly whittled them down (as is happening now); and that, finally, humanity can certainly do better. And there are those who think—they seldom dare say it, except "on the Right," but their arguments and their reasoning boil down to the same thing—that we live in the finally-found form of a free and just political society (some reforms, of course, remain to be accomplished). The discussion cannot but stop here, and everybody can make their choices or confirm ones they have already made.

And yet, even if it were admitted that we are living at the end of a period of historical inebriation begun for the second time some eight centuries ago in the first free burgher [*bourgeoises*] towns of Western Europe, at the end of a dream of freedom and self-government, of truth and responsibility, even if it were admitted that today we are finally in a position to see, in all sobriety, the finally-found form of political society, the definitive truth of the human condition in the guise of Pasqua and Fabius, Hernu and Léotard,[11] *Playboy* and video-clips, pop philosophy and "postmodern" hodgepodges; even if such were the case, it would be incongruous to see in all that the "meaning" of 1776 and 1789, of 1871, of 1917, and of May '68, for, even in this nightmarish hypothesis, the "meaning" would lie in the attempt to bring into being other possibilities for human existence.

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[11]T/E: At the time of Castoriadis's writing, Charles Pasqua was Chirac's strong-armed Interior Minister who was later convicted of illegal lobbying during his time in office; Laurent Fabius, chosen by President Mitterrand to abandon the "Common Program" with the Communists and to implement an austerity plan, had just ceased to be Prime Minister; Charles Hernu had been Mitterrand's Defense Minister until forced to resign in 1985 for his role in the dynamiting of Greenpeace's antinuclear-testing ship, the *Rainbow Warrior*; and François Léotard, an up-and-coming politician who favored Reaganite and Thatcherite policies and who was later convicted for his role in the major Franco-Pakistani "Karachi Affair" kickback scheme, had just been appointed by Chirac as Culture Minister.

The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism[*]

The downfall of the Roman Empire lasted three centuries. Two years have sufficed, without the aid of foreign barbarians, to dislocate irreparably the worldwide network of power directed from Moscow, its ambitions for world hegemony, and the economic, political, and social relationships that held it together. Search as one might, it is impossible to find a historical analogy to this pulverization of what seemed, just yesterday, a steel fortress. The granite monolith has suddenly shown itself to be held together with its own saliva, while the horrors, monstrosities, lies, and absurdities being revealed day after day have proved to be even more incredible than anything the most acerbic critics among us had been able to affirm.

At the same time as are vanishing these Bolsheviks for whom "no fortress is impregnable" (Stalin), the nebula of "Marxism-Leninism," which for more than a half-century had almost everywhere played the role of dominant ideology, fascinating some, obliging others to take a stand in relation to it, has gone up in smoke. What remains of Marxism, "the unsurpassable philosophy of our time" (Jean-Paul Sartre)?[1] Upon what map, with what magnifying glass, will one now discover the "new continent of historical materialism," in

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[*]Originally published as "L'Effondrement du marxisme-leninisme," in *Le Monde*, April 23-24, 1990. [T/E: The original title, "Marxisme-léninisme: la pulvérisation," and other phrases dropped from *Le Monde*'s published version were restored in *MI*, 38-50 (43-57 of the 2007 reprint), and in the translation, "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism," *Salmagundi*, 88-89 (Fall 1990-Winter 1991): 371-83, which was reprinted in *WIF*, 58-69. There and here, *Le Monde*'s useful subtitles have been retained.]

[1]T/E: "Marxism…remains, therefore, the philosophy of our time. We cannot go beyond it [*il est indépassable*] because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, tr. and intro. Hazel E. Barnes [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963], p. 30).

what antique shop will one purchase the scissors to make the "epistemological break [*coupure*]" (Louis Althusser) that was to have relegated to the status of worn-out metaphysical speculations reflection upon society and history, replacing it with "the science of *Capital*"? Hardly is it worth mentioning now that one will search in vain for the least connection between anything said and done today by Mr. Gorbachev and, not Marxist-Leninist "ideology," but any *idea* whatsoever.

After the fact, the suddenness of the collapse may seem as if it could go without saying. Was not this ideology, from the first years after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in Russia, in head-on contradiction with reality—and was not this reality, despite the combined efforts of Communists, fellow travelers, and even the respectable press of Western countries (which, for the most part, had swallowed whole the Moscow Trials), visible and knowable for those who wanted to see and to know? Considered in itself, had it not reached the height of incoherence and inconsistency?

But the enigma is thereby only further obscured. How and why was this huge scaffolding capable of holding up for so long? Claiming to be "science" and "ideological criticism," Marxism-Leninism promised the radical liberation of the human being, the instauration of a "really democratic" and "rational" society—and it came into being as the hitherto matchless figure of mass slavery, terror, "planned" poverty, absurdity, lies, and obscurantism. How was this unprecedented historical fraud able to operate for so long?

Where Marxism-Leninism settled into power, the answer may appear simple: thirst for power and self-interest for some, Terror for all. This response is inadequate, for even in these cases the seizure of power has almost everywhere been made possible by a large popular mobilization. Nor does this response say anything about its near-universal attraction.

To elucidate that attraction would require an analysis of world history over the past century and a half.

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Here we must limit ourselves to two factors. First, Marxism-Leninism presented itself as the continuation, the ultimate radicalization of the emancipatory, democratic, revolutionary project of the West. This presentation was all the more credible since it was for a long time—as everyone today happily forgets—the only thing seemingly opposed to the beauties of capitalism, both in the world's metropolises as well as in the colonies.

Behind this, however, there is something more, and here lies its historical novelty. On the surface, there is what is called an ideology: a labyrinthine "scientific theory" (Marx's) sufficient to keep cohorts of intellectuals occupied until the end of their lives; a simplified version, a vulgate of this theory (first formulated by Marx himself), with an explanatory force adequate for the mere faithful; finally, a "hidden" version for the true initiates, first appearing with Vladimir Lenin, that makes the absolute power of the Party the supreme objective and the Archimedean point for "the transformation of history." (I am not speaking here of the summits of the Apparatuses, where pure and simple obsession for power, coupled with total cynicism, has reigned at least since Stalin.)

Holding together this edifice, however, were not "ideas," or arguments. It was, rather, a new imaginary, which developed and changed in two stages. In the properly "Marxist" phase, during the era in which the old religious faith was dissolving, it was, as we know, the imaginary of secular Salvation. The project of emancipation, of freedom as activity, of the people as author of its own history, was

inverted into a messianic imaginary of a Promised Land, within reach and guaranteed by the substitute for transcendence that had been produced by that age, namely, "scientific theory."[2]

In the following, Leninist phase, this element, while it did not disappear, found itself increasingly supplanted by another: more than the "laws of history," it is the Party, its Boss, their actual power, power itself, force, Brute Force that became not only the guarantor but the ultimate point of fascination and fixation for representations and desires. At issue here is not fear of force—real and immense though it is where Communism is in power—but the positive attraction Force exercises over human beings.

If we do not understand that, we will never understand the history of the twentieth century, neither Nazism nor Communism. In the latter case, the combination of what people would like to believe and of Force has long proved irresistible. And it is only from the moment when this Force no longer succeeded in imposing itself (Poland, Afghanistan), only when it became clear that neither Russian tanks nor H-bombs could "resolve" all problems, that the rout truly began and that the various brooks of decomposition united in the Niagara that has been pouring down in torrents since the Summer of 1988 (the first demonstrations in Lithuania).

Marx and Marxism

The strongest reservations and the most radical

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[2]Father Jean-Yves Calvez, S.J., trying with complete Christian benevolence to help out his Marxist friends, instead clobbers them over the head when he speaks of the messianic component of Marxism in the April 14, 1990, issue of *Le Monde*. [Author's addition: There, he praised Marxism for safeguarding messianic hope.]

criticisms with regard to Marx cancel neither his importance as a thinker nor the grandeur of his effort. People will still be reflecting upon Marx when they will search with difficulty in dictionaries for the names of Messrs. von Hayek and Friedman. It is not, however, by the effect of his work that Marx has played his immense role in effectively actual history. He would have been only another Hobbes, Montesquieu, or Tocqueville, had a dogma not been able to be drawn from him—and had his writings not so lent themselves to it. And if they do so lend themselves, this is because his theory contains more than just the elements of that dogma.

The vulgate, due to Engels, which claims that Marx's sources were Hegel, Ricardo, and the French "utopian" socialists, masks half the truth. Marx is equally the inheritor of the emancipatory or democratic movement—whence his fascination, to the very end of his life, for the French Revolution and even, in his youth, for the Greek *polis* and *dēmos*. This movement of emancipation, this project of autonomy, had already been in motion for centuries in Europe and had culminated in the Great Revolution.

But the Revolution left an enormous, and double, deficit. By furnishing it with new bases, the Revolution maintained and even accentuated immense inequalities of effectively actual power in society, rooted in economic and social inequalities. It maintained and reinforced the strength and bureaucratic structure of the State, "checked" to a superficial degree by a stratum of professional "representatives" separated from the people.

First in England and then on the Continent, the nascent workers' movement responded to these deficiencies as well as to the inhuman existence to which capitalism, spreading with lightning speed, had subjected the working

class. The seeds of Marx's most important ideas on the transformation of society—notably that of the self-government of the producers—are to be found not in the writings of the utopian socialists but in the press organs and self-organizing activity of English workers from 1810 to 1840, long before Marx first began writing. The nascent workers' movement thus appears as the logical continuation of a democratic movement broken off midway.

At the same time, however, another project, another social-historical imaginary stormed the stage. This is the capitalist imaginary, which transformed social reality before one's very eyes and clearly seemed destined to rule the world. Contrary to a confused prejudice still dominant today—and which is at the basis of the contemporary version of classical "Liberalism"—the capitalist imaginary stands in direct contradiction to the project of emancipation and autonomy. Back in 1906, Max Weber derided the idea that capitalism might have anything at all to do with democracy, and one can still share a laugh with him when thinking of South Africa, Taiwan, or Japan from 1870 to 1945 and even today. Capitalism subordinates everything to the "development of the forces of production"; people as producers, and then as consumers, are to be made completely subordinate to it. The unlimited expansion of rational mastery—pseudomastery and pseudorationality, as is abundantly clear today—thus became the other great imaginary signification of the modern world, powerfully embodied in the realms of technique and organization.

The totalitarian potentialities of this project are readily apparent—and fully visible in the classical capitalist factory. If capitalism neither in that epoch nor later succeeded in transforming society into one huge factory, with a single command structure and a single logic (which, after their own

fashion and in a certain manner, Nazism and Communism later tried to do), this was due to rivalries and struggles between capitalist groupings and nations—but especially to the resistance the democratic movement offered, from the very outset, on the societal level and to the workers' struggles on the factory level.

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The contamination of the emancipatory project of autonomy by the capitalist imaginary of technical and organizational rationality, with its assurance of automatic "progress" in History, occurred rather early on (it is already found in Saint-Simon). It is Marx, however, who was the theoretician and principal artisan of the penetration into the workers' and socialist movement of ideas that made technique, production, and the economy into the central factors. Thus, via a retroactive projection of the spirit of capitalism, Marx interpreted the whole of human history as being the result of the evolution of the forces of production—an evolution that, barring some catastrophic accident, was to "guarantee" our future freedom.

Upon reworking, political economy was brought into action in order to show the "inevitability" of the path to socialism—just as Hegelian philosophy, "put back on its feet," was used to unveil a Reason secretly at work in history, realized in technique, and capable of assuring the final reconciliation of all with all and of each with each. Millenarian and apocalyptic expectations of immemorial origin were thenceforth given a scientific "foundation" fully consonant with the imaginary of the age. As "last class," the proletariat received its mission as Savior, and yet its actions were necessarily to be dictated by its "real conditions of

existence," themselves tirelessly fashioned by the action of economic laws that had to force it to liberate humanity as it liberated itself.

The Effects of Marxism

One tends all too easily to forget today the enormous explanatory power the Marxist conceptual outlook, even in its most vulgar versions, long seemed to possess. It revealed and denounced the mystifications of classical Liberalism, showed that the economy operates for capital and for profit (a fact which, to their bewilderment, American sociologists have come to discover over the past twenty years), and predicted the worldwide expansion and concentration of capitalism.

Economic crises have succeeded one another for more than a century with almost natural regularity, producing poverty, unemployment, and an absurd destruction of wealth. The carnage of World War I, the Great Depression of 1929-1933, and the rise of Fascism could only be understood at the time as striking confirmations of Marxist conclusions—and the issue of the actual rigorousness of the arguments leading to these conclusions held little weight when compared to the crushing mass of the real situation.

Nevertheless, under pressure from workers' struggles, which continued nonstop, capitalism was obliged to transform itself. From the end of the nineteenth century onward, the claim that capitalism would inevitably lead to (absolute or relative) pauperization was disproved by the rise in real wages and by reductions in work time. Enlargement of domestic markets through increased mass consumption gradually became the conscious strategy of the ruling strata and, after 1945, Keynesian policies more or less assured an approximation of full employment. An abyss came to separate

Marxian theory from actual reality in the world's wealthy countries. However, with the aid of theoretical acrobatics, to which national movements in the former colonies of these countries seemingly lent support, some people transferred onto the countries of the Third World and onto the "wretched of the Earth" the role of "builder of socialism," which Marx had imputed, with less unlikelihood, to the industrial proletariat of the advanced countries.

The Marxist doctrine has undoubtedly aided people enormously to believe—therefore, to struggle. But Marxism was not the necessary condition for these struggles which have changed both the condition of the working class and capitalism itself, as is shown by the countries (for example, Anglo-Saxon) into which Marxism has been able to penetrate only to a slight degree. And there was a very heavy price to be paid.

This strange alchemy, in which are combined (economic) "science," a rationalist metaphysics of history, and a secularized eschatology, has been able to exert such a powerful appeal for so long because the resulting mixture responded to the thirst for certainty and to the hope for a salvation guaranteed, in the last analysis, by something much greater than the fragile and uncertain activities of human beings, namely, the "laws of history." It thus imported into the workers' movement a pseudoreligious dimension ripe with catastrophes to come. In the same gesture, it also introduced into this movement the monstrous notion of *orthodoxy*. Here again, Marx's exclamation (in private), "I am not Marxist," bears little weight in comparison with the real situation. The person who says "orthodoxy" is saying need for appointed guardians of orthodoxy, for ideological and political functionaries, as well as demonization of heretics.

Joined with modern societies' irrepressible tendency

toward bureaucratization, which from the end of the nine-teenth century onward penetrated into and came to dominate the workers' movement itself, orthodoxy powerfully contributed to the establishment of Party-Churches. It also led to a near-complete sterilization of thought. "Revolutionary theory" became Talmudic commentary on sacred texts, and Marxism itself, faced with the immense scientific, cultural, artistic upheavals that began to accumulate around 1890, either remained completely aphonic or limited itself to character-izing these changes as products of bourgeois decadence. One text by Georg Lukács and a few phrases from Leon Trotsky and Antonio Gramsci do not suffice to weaken this diagnosis.

Homologous with and parallel to these developments is the transformation Marxism enticed the movement's participants into making. During the greater part of the nineteenth century, the working class of the industrializing countries brought itself through a process of self-constitution, taught itself to read and write and educated itself, and gave rise to a type of self-reliant individual, a person who was confident in his own forces and his own judgment, who taught himself as much as he could, who thought for himself, and who never abandoned critical reflection. In getting a corner on the workers' movement, Marxism replaced this individual with the militant activist who is indoctrinated in the teachings of a Gospel; who believes in the organization, in the theory, and in the bosses who possess this theory and interpret it; who tends to obey them unconditionally; who identifies with them; and who is capable, most of the time, of breaking with this identification only by falling apart.

Leninist Totalitarianism

Some of the elements of what became totalitarianism

thus had already been set in place in Marxism: the phantasm of total mastery inherited from capitalism, orthodoxy, fetishism for organization, the idea of a "historical necessity" capable of justifying everything in the name of ultimate Salvation. It would be absurd, however, to make of Marxism—still less of Marx himself—the father of totalitarianism, as has been done with demagogic ease for the past sixty years. For as much as (and, numerically, more than) Leninism, Marxism has been continued in the form of Social Democracy, about which one can say everything one wants except that it is totalitarian, and which has not had any trouble finding in Marx all the necessary quotations for its polemics against Bolshevism in power.

The true creator of totalitarianism is Lenin. The internal contradictions of this personage would be of little account if they did not illustrate, once again, the absurdity of "rational" explanations of history. A sorcerer's apprentice who swore only by "science," inhuman and yet without any doubt sincere and unmotivated by personal interest, extraordinarily lucid about his adversaries and blind concerning himself as he went about rebuilding the Czarist state Apparatus after having destroyed it and protesting against this reconstruction, the creator of bureaucratic commissions designed to struggle against the bureaucracy he himself made proliferate, in the end he appears both as the near-exclusive artisan of a fantastic upheaval and as a piece of straw floating on the flood of events.

Nevertheless, it was he who created the institution without which totalitarianism is inconceivable and which is today falling into ruin: the totalitarian party, the Leninist party, which is, all rolled into one, ideological Church, militant army, state Apparatus already *in nuce* when it still is held "in a taxi carriage," and factory where each has his place

in a strict hierarchy with a strict division of labor.

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Of these elements, which had long existed already, but in dispersion, Lenin made a synthesis and conferred a new signification upon the whole that he made of them. Orthodoxy and discipline were carried to the limit (Trotsky boasted of the comparison of the Bolshevik party to the order of Jesuits) and extended onto the international level.[3]

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[3]It is not without value to recall for new generations a few of the "twenty-one conditions" adopted by the Second Congress of the Third International (July 17-August 1, 1920):

> 1. …All the Party's press organs must be run by reliable Communists. The…press and all the Party's publishing institutions must be subordinated to the Party leadership. 9. The Communist cells [in the unions, etc.] must be completely subordinated to the Party as a whole. 12. …In the present epoch of acute civil war the Communist Party will only be able to fulfill its duty if it is organized in as centralist a manner as possible, if iron discipline reigns within it and if the Party center, sustained by the confidence of the Party membership, is endowed with the fullest rights and authority and the most far-reaching powers. 13. The Communist Parties of those countries in which the Communists can carry out their work legally must from time to time undertake purges [re-registration] of the membership of their Party organizations in order to cleanse the Party systematically of the petty-bourgeois elements within it. 15. As a rule, the program of every Party belonging to the Communist International must be ratified by a regular Congress of the Communist International *or by the Executive Committee* [my emphasis—C.C.]. 16. All decisions of the Congresses of the Communist International and decisions of its *Executive Committee* [my emphasis—C.C.] are binding on all parties belonging to the Communist International ("Theses on the Conditions of Admission to the Communist International," in *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses*

The principle that "those who are not with us are to be exterminated" was applied without mercy, the modern means of Terror were invented, organized, and applied *en masse*. Above all, the obsession with power, power for the sake of power, power as end in itself, by every means possible and little matter what for, emerged and took hold, no longer as personal trait but as social-historical determinant. It was no longer a matter of seizing power so as to introduce definite changes; it was a matter of introducing the changes that allow one to stay in power and to reinforce that power nonstop.

In 1917 Lenin knew one thing and one thing only: that the moment to take power had come and that tomorrow it would be too late. But what to do with it? He did not know, and he said so: Our teachers unfortunately have not told us what to do in order to build socialism. Later on, he was also to say: "This is Thermidor. But we shan't let ourselves be guillotined. We shall make a Thermidor ourselves."[4] This must be understood as meaning: If, in order to retain power, we must turn our orientation completely upside down, we shall do so. Indeed, he did so several times over. (Later on, Stalin brought this art to absolute perfection.) A single fixed point was ruthlessly maintained throughout the most incredible changes in course: the limitless expansion of the power of the Party, the transformation of all institutions, starting with the State, into its mere instrumental appendages, and, finally, the pretense, not simply that the Party is directing society or even speaking in society's name, but that it is in fact society itself.

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of the Third International [Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980], pp. 93, 95, 96).
[4]T/E: This quotation appears in Victor Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 131.

The Failure of Totalitarianism

Under Stalin this project, as one knows, attained its extreme and demented form. Also, beginning with his death its failure began to become apparent. Totalitarianism is not some immutable essence. It has a history, one that we shall not retrace here, but that, it must be recalled, is in the main a history of the resistance by people and things to the phantasm that society can be totally resorbed, and history completely shaped, by the power of the Party.

Those who denied the validity of the notion of totalitarianism are going on the offensive again today. They draw their argument from the very fact that the regime is collapsing (with such a logic, no regime in history would ever have existed) or that it has encountered internal resistances.[5] Clearly, these criticisms themselves shared in the phantasm of totalitarianism: totalitarianism could and should have been, for better or worse, what it claimed to be: a faultless monolith. It was not what it said it was—therefore, quite simply, it was not.

Those who, however, have discussed the Russian regime seriously (I am not speaking of *Reader's Digest* or Ms. Jeane Kirkpatrick)[6] have never fallen victims to this mirage. They have emphasized and analyzed its internal contradictions and antinomies:[7] indifference and passive resistance on the part of the population; sabotage and wastage

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[5]See, for example, the reviews of S. Ingerflom in *Liber*, March 1990.
[6]T/E: This parenthetical phrase, found in the original French typescript, does not appear in the versions that appeared in *Le Monde* and then in *MI*.
[7]For my part, I have done so since 1946 and have never ceased doing so since. See *SB1* and *SB2*; 2nd ed. *SB(n.é.)*. [T/E: The principal texts from this two-volume collection of texts, most of which originally were published in the review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, are now available in *PSW*, vols. 1-3.]

of industrial as well as agricultural production; the deep-seated irrationality of the system, from its own point of view, due to its own delirious bureaucratization; decisions made according to the whims of the Autocrat or of the clique that has succeeded in imposing its will; a universal conspiracy of deception, which has become a structural trait of the system and condition for the survival of individuals, from zeks to Politburo members. All of this has been vividly confirmed by the events that began in 1953 and by the information that has not stopped pouring in ever since: zek revolts in the camps after Stalin's death, the East Berlin strikes in June 1953, Khrushchev's Report, the Polish and Hungarian Revolutions in 1956, the Czechoslovak movement in 1968 and the Polish one in 1970, the flood of dissident literature, and the Polish explosion of 1980 which made the country ungovernable.

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After the failure of Khrushchev's incoherent reforms, the necrosis which was eating away at the system and left it no escape but a flight in advance toward overarmament and external expansion had become manifest. I wrote about this in 1981, saying that one could no longer speak in terms of "classical" totalitarianism.[8]

To be sure, the regime could not have survived for seventy years had it not been able to create for itself large points of support within society, from the ultraprivileged bureaucracy down to the various strata that have successively benefitted from a degree of "social promotion." In particular,

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[8]See my article, "Destinies of Totalitarianism," in *Salmagundi*, 60 (Spring-Summer 1983): 107-22. The French translation now appears in *DH*, 201-18 (249-71 of the 1999 reprint). [T/E: We hope to reprint this text in the projected sixth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.]

it created a type of behavior, and an anthropological type of individual, ruled by apathy and cynicism, preoccupied solely with tiny and precious improvements that this individual can, by dint of guile and intrigues, add to its private niche.

On this last point, the regime has half succeeded, as is shown by the extreme slowness of popular reactions in Russia even after 1985. But it has also half failed, as is best seen, paradoxically, within the party Apparatus itself. When the force of circumstances (impasses in Poland and Afghanistan, the pressure of American rearmament in the face of its own growing technological and economic retardation, the inability to bear any longer the costs of its overextension worldwide) showed that the evolution toward "stratocracy," dominant under Brezhnev, was becoming untenable in the long run, within the Apparatus and around an uncommonly capable leader a sufficiently large "reformist" group was able to emerge, impose itself, and impose a series of changes that would have been unimaginable shortly beforehand—among which was the official death certificate of single-party rule drawn up on March 13, 1990. What the future holds for these changes remains totally obscure, but their effects are now and henceforth irreversible.

After the Deluge

Like Nazism, Marxism-Leninism allows us to gauge the folly and monstrosity of which human beings are capable, as well as their fascination with Brute Force. More than Nazism, it allows us to gauge their capacity for self-delusion, for turning the most liberating ideas upside down, for making them the instruments of unlimited mystification.

As it collapses, Marxism-Leninism seems to be burying beneath its ruins both the project of autonomy and

politics itself. The active hate on the part of those, in the East, who have suffered under it leads them to reject any project other than the rapid adoption of the liberal-capitalist model. In the West, people's conviction that they live under the least bad regime possible will be reinforced, and this will hasten their sinking even further into irresponsibility, distraction, and withdrawal into the "private" sphere (now obviously less "private" than ever).

Not that these populations possess many illusions. In the United States, Lee Atwater, Chairman of the Republican Party, speaking of the population's cynicism, says: "The American people think politics and politicians are full of baloney. They think the media and journalists are full of baloney. They think organized religion is full of baloney. They think big business is full of baloney. They think big labor is full of baloney."[9] Everything we know about France indicates that the same state of mind prevails there, too. Yet actual behavior carries much more weight than opinions. Struggles against the system, even mere reactions, are tending to disappear. But capitalism changed and became somewhat tolerable only as a function of the economic, social, and political struggles that have marked the past two centuries. A capitalism torn by conflict and obliged to confront strong internal opposition, and a capitalism dealing only with lobbies and corporations, capable of quietly manipulating people and of buying them off with a new gadget every year, are two completely different social-historical animals. Reality already offers abundant indications of this.

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[9]See "Politics: Are U.S. Visions and Values Drying Up?," in the *International Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1990: 5. [T/E: This article, by Michael Oreskes, originally appeared the previous day in *The New York Times* under the title "American Politics Loses Way As Polls Supplant Leadership."]

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  The monstrous history of Marxism-Leninism shows what an emancipatory movement cannot and should not be. It in no way allows us to conclude that the capitalism and the liberal oligarchy under which we now live embody the finally resolved secret of human history. The project of total mastery (which Marxism-Leninism took from capitalism and which, in both cases, was turned into its contrary) is a delusion.

  It does not follow that we should suffer our history as a fatality. The idea of making a *tabula rasa* of everything that exists is a folly that leads toward crime. It does not follow that we should renounce that which has defined our history since the time of ancient Greece and to which Europe has added new dimensions, namely, that we make our laws and our institutions, that we will our individual and collective autonomy, and that we alone can and should limit this autonomy. The term *equality* has served as a cover for a regime in which real inequalities were in fact worse than those of capitalism. We cannot, for all that, forget that there is no political freedom without political equality and that the latter is impossible when enormous inequalities of economic power, which translate directly into political power, not only exist but are growing, too. Marx's idea that one could eliminate the market and money is an incoherent utopia. To understand this does not lead one to swallow the almightiness of money, or to believe in the "rationality" of an economy that has nothing to do with a genuine market and that is more and more coming to resemble a planetary casino. Just because there is no society without production and consumption does not mean that these latter moments should be erected into ultimate ends of human existence—which is the real

substance of "individualism" and "Liberalism"[10] today.

These are some of the conclusions to which the combined experience of the pulverization of Marxism-Leninism and the evolution of contemporary capitalism should lead. They are not the ones public opinion will draw immediately. Nevertheless, when the dust clears it is to these conclusions that humanity will have to come, unless it is to continue on its race toward an illusory "more and more" that, sooner or later, will shatter against the natural limits of the planet, if it does not collapse beforehand under the weight of the emptiness of its own meaning.

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[10]T/E: Liberalism in the Continental sense of a conservative "free-market" or "laissez-faire" ideology.

Between the Western Void and the Arab Myth[*]

Cornelius Castoriadis: The decision to wage the [Gulf] war showed a total disregard for long-term factors, particularly the risk of deepening the existing cultural, social, political, and imaginary rift between the Western countries and the Arab world.

Edgar Morin: We can now draw up an initial retrospective assessment. This war was waged in a region where all problems are not only interdependent but tied together in a series of Gordian knots. That's why, both before and during the war, I thought that the main line of demarcation was not between pacifists and warmongers but, rather, between those who wanted to undo these Gordian knots and those who wanted only to strike Saddam's Iraq and avoid the Palestinian problem.

Today, the issue is whether the war has cut through these Gordian knots, has further entangled them, or whether it allows one now to undo the gravest ones. It's important that the war was short, that it didn't employ poison gases or terrorism, that it didn't become generalized, that it didn't go all the way, since President George Herbert Walker Bush didn't push on to Baghdad, and finally that it allowed the Iraqi people to express their hostility to Saddam Hussein. This has, to our great relief, allowed us to avoid a series of catastrophes that a long and intractable war would have set off.

But that's not enough for us to gauge this war. Who would have thought in 1919, after the Treaty of Versailles, that the main effect of the 1914-1918 war would be not the weakening of Germany and the sidelining of the USSR but

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[*]Discussion with Edgar Morin, originally published in *Le Monde*, March 19, 1991. Reprinted in *MI*, 51-57 (58-66 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: The present translation first appeared in *RTI(TBS)*.]

the unfurling of these two powers under totalitarian banners? It was only after 1933 that it became apparent that the Great War had brought about effects that were the opposite of those sought by the victors. So, too, is it that what is going to occur in the future will give the Gulf War its meaning.

The future depends, obviously, upon the new situation that is going to take shape in the Middle East. I think that this situation has already been altered by the overall responsibility America has taken on throughout the whole region after its victory. America today is no longer just the sword of a Cold War West, with Israel as its forward eastern stronghold. It is tending to become responsible for a general pacification with regard to its Arab and European allies, and with regard to the United Nations, too. Thus, as soon as the fighting stopped, Bush and his Secretary of State, James Baker, did indeed establish a "linkage" between the Kuwaiti question and the Middle East question, something that until then they had refused to do.

And today a chance exists for there to be a convergence of efforts to resolve the most virulent of problems, the one that binds the independence of Palestine to the security of Israel, since it's an idea shared by the Europeans, it's the idea of the January 15 Mitterrand plan, it's the USSR's idea. In Israel itself, the disappearance of the Iraqi threat and the impossibility, under present circumstances, of achieving the dream of a Greater Israel that would drive the Palestinians off their lands go together to create new conditions for acceptance of the freedom of a people whom the Israeli army locked up in ghettoes for the full duration of this war.

Finally, the UN, whose role had been eclipsed at the stage of the land attack against Iraq, is once again becoming the embryo of an international authority. After August 2,

1990, it had shown itself capable of cracking down on state piracy, and it might prove capable of regulating international tensions. That depended upon the accord struck between the US and the USSR, which depended in turn upon the antitotalitarian revolution broached by Gorbachev. It's clear that if the counterrevolution triumphs in the USSR, the UN will be weakened. But presently we're going through a sunny spell favoring hope and action—though we don't know how long this spell will last.

C.C.: I don't in any way share your view of the UN's role, even hypothetically. I don't think that the situation surrounding an accord between the US and the USSR, which does explain the Security Council's behavior, might be the enduring and normal state of relations between these two countries. The French and the English will continue to align themselves with the United States. But in the end the USSR hasn't given up great-power status any more than China has.

At present, the question at hand is that of the Middle East. Will the Security Council's unanimity be able to withstand its onslaught? Will everyone rally to the position of the American hawks and the Israeli right, who would just as soon see the Palestinians leave for Jordan? There's Jerusalem. There's the Kurdish problem. And who's going to challenge Hafez al-Assad? If there's an accord, the risk is that it will once again be concluded at the Palestinians' and the Kurds' expense.

The UN has never been anything but an organ through which the great powers deal with their disagreements. It's worth as much as the Holy Alliance between 1815 and 1848 or the concert of powers after the 1878 Congress of Berlin. It can seem to act so long as transient agreements among the powerful hold up.

But behind all that is posed the question of the

relationship between the Islamic world and the West. On the one hand, there is the Arabs' tremendous self-mythologization. They present themselves as History's eternal victims. Now, if there ever was a conquering nation, it was that of the Arabs from the seventh to the eleventh century. Arabs didn't sprout up naturally along the slopes of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco; they were living in Arabia. In Egypt, at the start, there wasn't a single Arab. Today's situation is the result, first of all, of conquest and of the more or less forced conversion of subject populations; then of the Arabs' colonization, not by the West, but by their coreligionists, the Turks, over a period of centuries; and, finally, of the Westerners' semi-colonization of these Arabs during a relatively much shorter period of time.

And, politically speaking, where are the Arabs at, at the present hour? These are countries in which the structures of power are either archaic or a mixture of archaism and Stalinism. They've taken the worst of the West and tacked that onto a culturally religious society. Within these societies, theocracy has never been shaken off. The penal code is the Koran. The law doesn't result from the national will; it's sacred. The Koran itself isn't a revealed text, written down by human hands; it's substantially divine. This deep-seated mentality persists, and it resurfaces when one is faced with modernity.

Now, modernity is also the emancipatory movements that have gone on for centuries in the West. There have been centuries-old struggles to separate the religious from the political. Such a movement never developed in Islam. And this Islam is faced with a West that no longer remains alive except by devouring its inheritance; it maintains a liberal *status quo* but no longer creates significations that are emancipatory in character. The Arabs are pretty much being

told: Throw away the Koran and buy Madonna videos. And at the same time, they're being sold Mirage fighter planes on credit.

If there's a historic "responsibility" of the West in this regard, it really lies here. The void of signification in our societies that lies at the heart of modern democracies cannot be filled by more gadgets. Nor can it dislodge the religious significations that hold these societies together. That's what makes the prospects for the future so weighty. The effect of the war is already, and tomorrow it will be even more, an accentuation of this cleavage that is casting Muslims back toward their past.

It is, moreover, tragically amusing to see today that, were Saddam Hussein to fall, there's a big chance he'd be replaced by a fundamentalist Shiite regime—that is to say, the kind of regime the West hastened to combat when it was installed in Iran.

E.M.: Before the war, Jean Baudrillard had proved in logical fashion that, in any case, there couldn't be a war.[1] You have, in turn, just proved logically that, given all the contradictions at work, and so on, no progress is possible. Fortunately, life, in what it has that is innovative, doesn't obey logic, as you very well know. There is, in any case, a new world situation that perhaps will allow us to escape this vicious cycle. But let's get to the bottom of things.

At ground level, the North African masses seem elated to be taking an oppressor for a liberator. That's true. But this isn't some Arab or Islamic trait: we've lived it here at home, too, be it only in idolatry for Stalin or Mao, something that didn't happen so long ago. We've experienced religious, nationalistic, and messianic forms of hysteria. But today our

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[1]T/E: Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), tr. and intro. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Western European peninsula is living at low mythological tide. We no longer entertain big hopes. So we believe, in this perhaps temporary state, that passions and forms of fanaticism are peculiar to the Arabs.

From a higher elevation, we can express our regret that democracy hasn't succeeded in implanting itself outside of Europe. But one need only think of Spain, of Greece, of yesterday's Nazi Germany, and of France itself to understand that democracy is a system that has a hard time taking root. It's a system that feeds upon diversity and conflict—so long as it is capable of regulating these and of rendering them productive—but that can also be destroyed by diversity and conflict. Democracy wasn't able to implant itself in the Arab-Muslim world first of all because that world wasn't able to achieve the historical stage of secularization [*laïcisation*], though it undoubtedly carried the seeds of it from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, whereas the European West was able to enter into that stage beginning in the sixteenth century. Only secularization, which signals the decline of religion in the State and in public life, allows democratization. Even in those Arab-Islamic countries where there have been powerful secularizing movements, democracy has seemed but a weak solution as compared to revolution, which at the same time allowed emancipation from a domineering West. Now, the promise of nationalist revolution, like that of Communist revolution, has in fact been a promise of a religious type, the former bringing the religion of the nation-State, the latter that of earthly salvation.

Finally, let us not forget that the secular message coming from the West arrived at the same time as imperialist domination and the threat of cultural homogenization. Our technoindustrial sweep over the rest of the world brought along with it a loss of identity.

So, in resisting a threat to their identity, people found themselves obliged to cling to a foundational past as much as to an emancipatory future. This resistance has recently been magnified by another phenomenon of capital importance, one that began to loom larger in the Eighties: the collapse of an emancipatory future. This loss of the future is something that we, too, have suffered; we've lost the "progressive" future the development of science and of reason once promised us. The ambivalent features of science and reason have become more and more apparent, and we've lost any "radiant" future of earthly salvation, which collapsed decisively with the Berlin Wall.

When the future is lost, what remains? The present, the past. So long as we continue to consume, we over here live from day to day in the present. What can they over there consume of the present? What did the fabulous Western- or Soviet-model recipes for development bring them? Underdevelopment. So, when there's no more future and the present is in a sorry state, what remains is the past.

That's why the tremendous upsurges in fundamentalism mustn't be seen as the Arab countries falling back upon themselves, like some soufflé that has collapsed. These upsurges are the products of a historical loop in which the crisis of modernity—that is to say, of progress—itself gives rise to this fundamentalism.

You speak, rightly so, of the problem of meaning. For us, History no longer has a remote-control meaning. For us, the old certainties are in a very sorry state.

Up till now, it has always been thought that human beings need certainties in order to stay alive. When the great certainty-bearing religions declined, other rationalistic, scientistic certainties brought with them the assurance of guaranteed progress. Can we imagine a humanity that accepts

uncertainty, questioning, with all that that entails in the way of risks of anxiety? Certainly, a huge mutation in our way of being, of living, and of thinking would be required.

This is, nonetheless, our new destiny. But that doesn't mean that we would be able to live without roots, without myths, or without hopes—provided that we know that our myths and our hopes, as Blaise Pascal knew, come close to being a kind of religious faith, a wager. We have to make our roots operate in a new way, within space and time. What we must not do is live day to day within the present but replenish ourselves, rather, in the resources of the past ("What thou hast inherited from thy fathers, acquire it to make it thine," said Goethe).[2] And we should no longer project ourselves into a promised future but into one that is wanted and willed. Our myth is that of human brotherhood [*fraternité humaine*] rooted in our homeland-Earth.

We are at a new beginning, and it's in this sense that I believe that it possible to bring the UN embryo to life, as well as to try to defuse what remains the world's powder keg on the fault line stretching across the three monotheistic religions, between East and West, between religion and lay culture [*laïcité*], between modernism and fundamentalism, and, finally, between humanity's progress and a great regression.

C.C.: It seems clear to me that the world situation is intolerable and untenable, that the West today has neither the means nor the will to modify this situation in any essential way, and that the emancipatory movement has broken down. It seems just as clear to me that, in order to make and do

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[2]T/E: Morin's quotation from Goethe was cited from memory; the quotation itself may be found in *Totem and Taboo*, cited in n. 1 on p. 158 of vol. 13 of the *Standard Edition* of Freud's works, where the editor identifies it as coming from *Faust*, part 1, scene 1.

things [*faire*], one must have the will to make them and to do them. Still, one must look reality in the face. When Edgar Morin brings up the problem of identity, he's in fact referring to the problem of meaning, which is what confers upon the believer an identity: I am a good Muslim, a good Christian— or even a bad Christian. For, even *qua* bad Christian, I am something definite.

We are sons and daughters of…. But we are also those who aim at…. That is to say, we have a project that is no longer Paradise on Earth, that is no longer messianic or apocalyptic, but this does say something about that toward which we are heading. That's what the West is missing today. The sole thing pushing these societies is the push toward naked wealth and raw power.

Parenthetically speaking, we do know that for a whole period of time the Arabs were more civilized than the Westerners. Then, poof! But what they picked up from the heritage of Antiquity never was political. The Greeks' political problematic, which is fundamental for democracy, never crosspollinated [*n'a fécondé*] either Arab philosophers or Arab societies. The free towns of Europe wrested communal liberties for themselves at the end of the tenth century. This is not a matter of "judging" the Arabs: we are taking note of the fact that it took ten centuries for the West somehow or other to release political society from the grip of religion.

I shall end with an anecdotal remark. Before the war, George Herbert Walker Bush was considered by his fellow citizens to be a weakling. Now, he's a hero. But America is going to find itself again immediately faced with its real domestic problems, before which Bush will be impotent. The crisis of American society is going to continue, with the decay of its cities, its social rifts, and all the rest we know. And

that's also what is beginning to happen in Europe, and it is going to get worse so long as peoples remain dull and apathetic.

E.M.: Our society continues on in a bad way. All the processes at work are leading us toward a great civilizational crisis. Are we regressing or are we progressing? Once again, let us expect the unexpected. Let us save at least within ourselves the most precious treasure of European culture: critical and self-critical rationality.

C.C.: When the Greeks, already on the decline, conquered the East, the East was Hellenized in a few decades. When Rome conquered the Mediterranean world, it Romanized that world. When Europe played the same role, it didn't know how to influence the local cultures in any depth. It destroyed them without replacing them.

What remains today as a defendable heritage of what Europe has created and as a germ for a possible future is a project of autonomy for society. This project now finds itself going through a critical phase. It's our responsibility to revive this project, to advance and to crosspollinate the world's other traditions.

The Dilapidation of the West[*]

Esprit: With the Gulf War and the end of Communism, current events seem to be raising the question of the value of the democratic model. Shouldn't it be said that, after all, some form of relativism exists within the international order? Is there, on the other hand, a new bipolarity, or a renewed supremacy on the part of the United States?

C.C.: With the collapse of the Russo-Communist empire, China's impotence, the (perhaps temporary) confinement of Japan and of Germany within the field of economic expansion, and the manifest nullity of the 12-member European Community as a political entity, the United States occupies alone the stage of world politics, is reaffirming its hegemony, and claims to be imposing a "New World Order." The Gulf War has been one manifestation of this trend. Nevertheless, I do not think that one could speak of an absolute supremacy or of a unipolar order. The United States has to confront an extraordinary number of countries, problems, and crises for which its planes and its missiles offer it no assistance. Neither the growing "anarchy" in the poor countries of the world, nor the question of underdevelopment, nor that of the environment can be settled by bombardments.

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[*]"Le Délabrement de l'Occident," an interview conducted by Olivier Mongin, Joël Roman, and Ramin Jahanbegloo, was published in *Esprit*, December 1991: 36-54, and reprinted in *MI*, 58-81 (43-57 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: My English-language translation, with translator's notes, originally appeared in *Thesis Eleven*, 41 (1995): 94-111, as "The Dilapidation of the West: An Interview with Cornelius Castoriadis." The Postface was originally written March 22, 1994 in English specially for the *Thesis Eleven* translation, and subsequently translated into French by Castoriadis himself for the reprint of his interview. We have now followed the June 1995 French version of the Postscript, which appeared in *MI* with added mentions of Rwanda and Burundi. See also n. 14, below. Reprinted in *RTI(TBS)*.]

And even from the military point of view, the Gulf War probably showed the limits of what the United States can do—short of using nuclear weapons.

At the same time, the United States is undergoing a process of subsidence, an internal dilapidation that, I believe, people in France are not taking into account—wrongly so, for the U.S. is the mirror in which the other rich countries of the world can gaze at their future. The fraying of the social fabric, the ghettoes, the population's unprecedented apathy and cynicism, corruption at all levels, the fantastic crisis in education (a majority of graduate students are now foreign born), the challenge to English as the national language, the continuing degradation of the economic and productive apparatus—all this ultimately serves to undermine the United States's potential for world hegemony.

Esprit: Does not the Gulf crisis show the failure of the supposed universality of Western values?

C.C.: The Gulf crisis has served, in tremendous fashion, to bring out some factors that already were known, or that should already have been known. We saw the Arabs, and Muslims in general, identify in massive numbers with this gangster and executioner of his own people who is Saddam Hussein. As soon as Saddam took a stand against "the West," they were ready to forget about the nature of his regime and the tragedy of his people. The demonstrations subsided after Saddam's defeat, but the undercurrent is still there: Islamic fundamentalism is as strong as ever, and it is extending its grip over regions that were believed to be embarked upon another course (North Africa, Pakistan, sub-Saharan countries). This fundamentalism is accompanied by a visceral hatred of the West—which is understandable, since an essential ingredient of the West is the separation of religion and political society. Now, Islam—like, moreover, almost all

religions—claims to be a *total* institution; it refuses to grant a distinction between the religious and the political. This current culminates in and builds its enthusiasm upon an "anticolonialist" rhetoric that, in the case of Arab countries, is—this is the least that can be said—hollow. Today there are Arabs in North Africa because this area was colonized by Arabs beginning in the seventh century; likewise for the countries of the Middle East. And the first non-Arab "colonizers" of the Middle East (and of North Africa) were not Europeans but other Muslims—first the Seljuk Turks, then the Ottoman Turks. Iraq remained under Turkish domination for five centuries—and under a British protectorate for forty years. I am not trying to minimize the crimes of Western imperialism but rather to denounce the mystification that presents the Muslim peoples as having no responsibility for their own history, as having never done anything other than submit passively to what others, that is to say the Westerners, have imposed on them.

Esprit: Are we not witnessing here the limits of this universalism that is represented by the West, now that it is being confronted with an antidemocratic form of culturalism?

C.C.: There are several levels to this question, a question that today is reaching a tragic intensity. In a sense, "universalism" is not a creation specific to the West. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are "universalistic" since their appeal is addressed, in principle, to all human beings, who all have the same right (and even the same duty) to convert. This conversion presupposes an act of faith—and it entails an adherence to a specific world of *significations* (and of norms, of values, etc.) that, moreover, is *closed*. This closure is the characteristic trait of highly heteronomous societies. What is characteristic of Greco-Western history is the rupture of this closure, the calling into question of the

significations, institutions, and representations established by
the tribe. This gives an entirely other content to universalism,
for this rupture goes hand in hand with the project of social
and individual autonomy, therefore with the ideas of liberty
and equality, self-government of collective units and the
rights of the individual, democracy and philosophy.

Now, here we encounter a paradox of the first
magnitude, one that is blithely passed over, however, by those
who discourse about the rights of man, the indeterminacy of
democracy, communicative action, the self-foundation of
reason, and so on—the Panglosses who go on spouting their
navel-gazing rhetoric without ever allowing themselves to be
distracted by the sound and fury of effectively actual history.
The "values" of the West claim to be universal—and
undoubtedly they are, even superlatively so, since they
presuppose and entail a disengagement from every particular
form of social-historical closure within which human beings
always necessarily at the outset find themselves caught. One
cannot avoid seeing, however, that these "values" have a
particular social-historical *rootedness*, and it would be absurd
to claim that this rootedness was contingent. To proceed
rapidly and to take up the matter *in medias res*, let us say that
this rupture of closure lies *behind* us, five or twenty-five
centuries behind us. Others, however, do not have it behind
them. We can defend "our values" reasonably, but this is
possible precisely because we have erected reasonable
discussion as the touchstone of what is acceptable and
unacceptable. If someone else enters into this discussion, this
person has in fact tipped to the side of our tradition, where
everything can be examined and discussed. If, on the other
hand, he barricades himself behind some sort of divine
revelation, or even simply behind a tradition that he considers
sacred (this is, in a certain way, the case of the Japanese

today), what would it mean to impose upon him a reasonable discussion? And we tend to forget too easily what happened not that long ago in Christian lands to books that claimed to be conducting simply a reasonable discussion without reference to faith and what happened to the authors of those books.

For others—be they Islamic, Hindu, whatever—to accept universalism with the content the West has tried to give to this idea, they would have to exit from their religious closure, from their magma of imaginary significations. Until now, they have not done so very often—it is among them, *par excellence*, that pseudo-Marxism or Third Worldism has served as a substitute for religion—and they are now even, for reasons to which we shall return, clutching to religion.

We cannot discuss here and now why it has been, and still is, thus. Why, for example, did Hindu philosophy never challenge the existing social world, or why did Arabic commentators on Aristotle write interminably about his metaphysics and his logic but completely ignore the entire *political* problematic of the Greeks? Likewise, one had to wait for Spinoza, the excommunicated Jew, to find an instance of political reflection within the Jewish tradition. We can pause, however, to examine the factors that *today* render the rich Western societies incapable of exerting an emancipatory influence upon the rest of the world, asking ourselves not only why these societies do not contribute to the erosion of religious significations, inasmuch as these significations block the constitution of a political space, but also why the rich societies are perhaps tending in the long run to reinforce the grip of these religious significations.

What is the "example" the liberal-capitalist societies offer to the rest of the world? First, that of wealth and of technological and military prowess. This is in fact what others would really like to adopt, and sometimes they succeed in

doing so (Japan, the "four dragons," and soon, undoubtedly, a few other countries). But as these examples show, and, contrary to Marxist and even "liberal" dogmas,[1] as such this neither implies nor entails anything relative to the emergence of an emancipatory process.

At the same time, however, these societies present to the rest of the world an image in the form of a foil, that of societies in which a void totally lacking in signification reigns supreme. The only value in liberal-capitalist societies is money, media notoriety, or power in the most vulgar, most derisory sense of the term. Here, communities are destroyed. Human concern for others [*la solidarité*] is reduced to a few administrative measures. Faced with this void, religious significations are able to stand their ground and even to regain in power.

There is, of course, what the journalists and the politicians call "democracy"—which in fact is a liberal oligarchy. One would search in vain here for an example of a responsible citizen—that is, someone "capable of governing and being governed," as Aristotle said[2]—and of a political collectivity that actually reflects and deliberates. Thanks to a long series of previous struggles, some important and precious—though partial—liberties no doubt manage to survive. These liberties, however, are essentially defensive in character. In the effectively actual social-historical reality of contemporary capitalism, these liberties function more and more as the mere instrumental complement of the mechanisms that maximize individual "enjoyments"

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[1]T/E: "Liberal" is meant here in its continental sense of an advocate of "free-market" capitalism and would be associated, in Anglo-Saxon parlance, with a *conservative* ideology. Castoriadis expands on his notion of a "liberal oligarchy" below.
[2]T/E: Aristotle *Politics* 1252a16.

[*jouissances*]. And these "enjoyments" are the *sole* substantive content of the "individualism" being pounded into our heads these days.

I take exception to this brand of "individualism" because there can be no pure—that is to say, empty—individualism. Individuals who are allegedly "free to do as they please" do not do just anything or no matter what. Each time they do precise, definite, particular things; they desire and emotionally cathect certain objects and reject other ones; they value this or that activity, and so on. Now, these objects and these activities are not and can never be determined exclusively, or even essentially, by "individuals" alone; they are determined by the social-historical field, by the specific institution of the society in which these individuals live, and by its imaginary significations. One can undoubtedly speak of an "individualism" on the part of true Buddhists, even if its metaphysical presuppositions are diametrically opposed to those of Western "individualism" (there, the nothingness of the individual; here, the substantial and autarchically-established reality of the individual). But what is the substantive content of a Buddhist "individualism"? In principle, it is the renunciation of the world and of its "enjoyments" or "pleasures." Likewise, in the contemporary West, the free, sovereign, autarchic, substantial "individual" is hardly anything more, in the great majority of cases, than a marionette spasmodically performing the gestures the social-historical field imposes upon it: that is to say, making money, consuming, and "enjoying" (if that happens to occur…). Supposedly "free" to give to its life the meaning [*sens*] it "wants," in the overwhelming majority of cases this individual "gives" to its life only that "meaning" that has currency, that is to say, the non-sense of indefinite increases in the level of consumption. This individual's "autonomy" is

turned back into heteronomy, its "authenticity" is the generalized conformism that reigns around us.[3]

This boils down to saying that there can be no individual "autonomy" if there is no collective autonomy, and no "creation of meaning," by each individual, for its life that is not inscribed within the framework of a collective creation of significations. And it is the infinite insipidity of these significations in the West today that is the condition for its inability to exert an influence upon the non-Western world, to contribute to the erosion of the grip religious and other similar significations have over that world.

Esprit: There would no longer be, then, any overall meaning. But does that necessarily mean that there would be no peripheral meanings, in this or that sector of society, in the freedom of individuals, and to the extent that each individual would be able, so to speak, to construct a meaning for itself?

On the other hand, a sort of slippage of language apparently has occurred during our discussion. When it is said that meaning no longer exists, people automatically hear that *pregiven* meaning no longer exists. Now, the problem does not lie there, in that the absence of a pregiven meaning does not necessarily create a void. There might be, on the contrary, a chance, a possibility for some freedom that would permit people to exit from a state of "disenchantment." But is not the big question, then, whether this test of freedom is not *itself* untenable?

C.C.: Clearly, I was not speaking of the disappearance of a pregiven meaning, and its disappearance I do not deplore. Pregiven meaning is heteronomy. An autonomous society, a genuinely democratic society, is a society that calls all pregiven meanings into question; it is a society in which, for

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[3]T/E: See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1990), now in *CL3*.

this very reason, the *creation of new significations* is liberated. And in such a society each individual is free to create for its life the meaning it wants to create (and that it is capable of creating). It is nevertheless absurd to think that the individual can do so out of all context and beyond all social-historical conditioning. Given what the individual is ontologically, this proposition is in fact a tautology. The *individuated* individual creates a meaning for its life by participating in significations that its society creates, by participating in their *creation*, either as "author" or as (public) "receiver" of these significations. And I have always insisted on the fact that the genuine "reception" of a new work is just as creative as the creation thereof.

This may be seen clearly in the two great periods of our history during which the project of autonomy emerged and truly *individuated* individuals appeared for the first time. In ancient Greece, the rise of truly individual creators and of a public capable of accepting their innovations goes hand in hand with the rise of the *polis* and of the new significations it embodies: democracy, isonomy, liberty, *logos*, reflectiveness. Though much more complex, in modern Western Europe the situation is analogous. Great art and philosophy, and even scientific research, certainly remained for a long time intimately connected with religious significations, but already the way in which art, philosophy, and science were situated in relation to those significations had changed. And relatively early on, great "profane" forms, and works, were created; society gave rise to these nonsacred forms and works and proved capable of welcoming them. Milan Kundera has shown this in the case of the novel, and he has emphasized that its "function" was to call the established order and daily

life into question.[4] And how could we forget the greatest
writer of modern Europe, Shakespeare, in whom we find not
an ounce of religiosity? By the end of the eighteenth century,
however, the European creation had freed itself from all
"pregiven" meaning. It is one of those marvelous
"coincidences" of history that the last very great religious
work of art, Mozart's *Requiem*, was written in 1791—at the
moment the French Revolution was going to launch its attack
against the Church and against Christianity, a few years after
Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had defined Enlightenment
thinking as the triple rejection of Revelation, Providence, and
Eternal Damnation, and a few years before Pierre-Simon
Laplace had responded, apropos of the absence of God in his
Système du monde, that he had no need of that particular
hypothesis. This elimination of "pregiven" meaning did not
keep Europe from entering, for 150 years, from 1800 to 1950,
into a period of extraordinary creation in all domains. For the
great novelists, the great musicians, the great painters of this
period, no pregiven meaning existed (any more than for the
great mathematicians and scientists). In the fields of research
and of meaning-creation a lucid intoxication took hold. It is
certainly not accidental that the most weighty signification to
be found in their works is a permanent interrogation
concerning signification itself. In this way Marcel Proust,
Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and so many others link back up
with Athenian tragedy.

This period comes to a close around 1950 (an
evidently "arbitrary" date, it is there to give an idea), but not
because we have entered into a more "democratic" phase than
before. Indeed, without the least paradox the opposite could
be maintained. Rather, it is because the Western world has

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[4]T/E: Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (1986), tr. Linda Asher (New
York: Grove Press, 1988).

entered into crisis, and this crisis consists precisely in this, that *the West ceases to call itself truly into question*.

Esprit: Would there not, then, be a relationship between this meaningless void and the loss of this great art of which you have spoken?

C.C.: Clearly the two go together. Great art is both society's window onto the chaos and the form given to this chaos (whereas religion is the window toward the chaos and the *mask* placed upon this chaos.) Art is a form that masks nothing. Through this form, art shows the chaos indefinitely —and thereby calls back into question the established significations, up to and including the signification of human life and of the contents of this life that have been left the furthest beyond discussion. Love is at the center of personal life in the nineteenth century—and *Tristan und Isolde* is both the most intense presentation of this love and the demonstration that it can be achieved only through separation and death.

Far from being incompatible with an autonomous, a democratic society, great art is for this reason inseparable from such a society. For, a democratic society knows, has to know, that there is no guaranteed signification, that it lives over the chaos, that it is itself a chaos that must give itself its form, one that is never settled once and for all. It is on the basis of this knowledge that it creates meaning and significa-tion. Now, this is the knowledge—which also may be called knowledge of mortality, a topic to which we shall return—that contemporary society and contemporary man object to and reject. Great art thereby becomes impossible, at best marginal, without re-creative participation on the part of the public.

You asked whether the test of freedom is becoming untenable. There are two responses to this question, and they are of a piece [*solidaires*]. The test of freedom is becoming

untenable to the extent that one happens to *do nothing* with this freedom. Why do we want freedom? We want it, in the first place, for itself certainly, but also to be able to *make and do* things. If one has nothing to do, if one can do nothing, if one does not want to do anything, this freedom is transformed into the pure figure of emptiness. Horrified by this void, contemporary man takes refuge in the laborious overfulfillment of "leisure" pursuits, in a more and more repetitive and ever accelerated performance of routine. At the same time, the test of freedom is indissociable from the test of mortality. ("Guarantees of meaning" are obviously the equivalent of a denial of mortality: here again the example of religions speaks volumes.) A being—an individual or a society—cannot be autonomous if it has not accepted its mortality. A genuine democracy—not a simply procedural "democracy"—a self-reflective and self-instituting society, one that can always call its institutions and its significations back into question, lives precisely in the test of the virtual mortality of all instituted signification. It is only starting from here that it can create, and, should the opportunity arise, instaurate "imperishable monuments": imperishable in the sense that they demonstrate, for all persons to come, the possibility of creating signification while living on the edge of the Abyss.

Now, the ultimate truth of contemporary Western society is evidently to be found in the desperate and bewildered flight before death, the attempt to cover over our mortality. It is coined in a thousand ways: by the suppression of mourning, by "morticians," by the interminable tubes and hoses of the relentless healthcare profession, by the training of psychologists specialized in "assisting" the dying, by the relegation of the aged to nursing homes, and so on and so forth.

Esprit: If one refuses to despair of modern democracy, if one thinks that there should still be some possibility of creating social significations, does not one then collide against an anthropological line of argument, a discourse somewhat Tocquevillean in character that stretches from François Furet to Marcel Gauchet and that consists in saying that in the evolution of democratic societies individuals are led to take refuge in the private sphere and to become individualized? Is that not a structural inclination of modern societies? Conversely, if one agrees with your thinking, which is oriented toward action, what are the conditions for an autonomous form of action in a democratic society? Is there not the possibility of acting publicly amid all this commotion?

C.C.: The "structural inclination" of which you speak is not "structural," it is *historical*—it is that of modern capitalist societies, not that of democracy.

But first a "philological" remark. I think that there is a confusion that weighs heavily upon contemporary discussions. In Tocqueville, the meaning of the term "democracy" is not political; it is sociological. It is equivalent, in the final analysis, to the elimination of hereditary statuses, which thereby instaurates an "equality of conditions," at least on the juridical level. This equalization culminates, or can culminate, in the creation of a mass of undifferentiated individuals, who embrace this lack of differentiation and refuse excellence. At the end of this path lies the "tutelary State," the most benevolent and the most terrible of tyrants, as well as "democratic despotism" (an absurd notion, in my view, since no form of despotism can exist unless it instaurates new differentiations). Tocqueville accepts the movement toward equalization, which he considers to be a historically irreversible tendency (willed by Providence, in his view), but his pessimistic streak is still

nourished by his nostalgia for former times, when individual excellence and glory were not rendered impossible by what he calls "democracy."

For me, as you know, the primary meaning of the term democracy—whence all the rest flows—is political: a regime in which all citizens are capable of governing and being governed—the two terms being indissociable—a regime of explicit societal self-institution, a regime of reflectiveness and self-limitation.

Once that is posited, the anthropological question evidently becomes fundamental. It has always been at the center of my concerns, and that is why, since 1959-1960, I have granted such importance to the phenomenon of the *privatization* of individuals in contemporary societies and to the analysis of this phenomenon.[5] For, beginning in the Fifties, modern capitalist society achieved equilibrium and secured its survival by throwing people back into the private sphere and by confining them within this sphere (which was rendered possible by the economic well-being of the rich countries but also by a whole series of social transformations, notably concerning consumption patterns and "leisure" pursuits), parallel and synchronous with an immense movement of *withdrawal* on the part of the population, of apathy and of cynicism with regard to political affairs. (While "spontaneous" in appearance, this movement essentially has been induced by what occurred during the entire preceding period of history.) Moreover, despite a few counterphenomena to which we shall return, this evolution has only become accentuated since the Fifties. Now, the paradox is that capitalism has been able to develop and to

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[5]T/E: See "Modern Capitalism and Revolution," first published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 31-33 (December 1960—April 1961—December 1961), and now in *PSW2*.

survive only through the conjunction of two factors, both of which are anthropologically related and both of which capitalism is in the process of destroying.

The first was social and political conflict, as expression of the struggles of groups and of individuals for autonomy. Now, without this conflict there would not have been, on the political level, what you call "democracy." Capitalism as such has nothing to do with democracy (one needs only look at pre- as well as postwar Japan). And on the economic level, without social struggles capitalism would have collapsed dozens of times over already during the past two centuries. The potential for increased unemployment was absorbed by reductions in the duration of the work day, the work week, the work year, and work life; production found outlets in domestic consumer markets that were constantly being enlarged by working-class struggles and by the rises in real wages these struggles brought with them; the irrationalities of the capitalist organization of production were corrected, for better or worse, thanks to the ongoing resistance of working people.

The second factor is that capitalism is able to function only because it has inherited a series of anthropological types it did not create and could not itself have created: incorruptible judges, honest Weberian-style civil servants, teachers devoted to their vocation, workers with at least a minimum of conscientiousness about their work, and so on. These types did not arise and could not have arisen by themselves; they were created during previous historical periods in relation to values that were considered at the time both sacrosanct and incontestable: honesty, service to the State, the handing down of knowledge, craftsmanship, and so forth. Now, we live in societies where these values have notoriously become a laughing stock, where the amount of

money you have pocketed, it matters little how, or the number of times you have appeared on television alone count. The sole anthropological type created by capitalism, the one that was indispensable for its establishment [*s'instaurer*] at the outset, was the Schumpeterian entrepreneur: someone who cares passionately about the creation of this new historical institution that is the *business enterprise* and who strives constantly to enlarge it through the introduction of new technical complexes and of new methods of market penetration. Even this type is being destroyed by what is now occurring; as far as production is concerned, the entrepreneur is being replaced by a managerial bureaucracy; as concerns the making of money, stock-market speculation, initial public offerings, and financial dealings bring in much more than "entrepreneurial" activities.

Therefore, at the same time that we are watching, through this process of privatization, the increasing dilapidation of the public space, we are also witnessing the destruction of the anthropological types that have conditioned the system's very existence.

Esprit: You have described the present regime as a "liberal oligarchy" that functions in a closed sphere and is very content to do so since in this way it can conduct its business without interference—the population not intervening, in fact, except to choose one or another political team. Are you sure things function exactly like that? There are still some social struggles, some lively forms of conflict going on in this society—though less so, no doubt, than in the past, when things were centrally organized around work and there were struggles connected with trade-union conflicts. It is unclear, however, whether it can be said categorically that all people are falling back on the private sphere.

Let us take an extreme example: riots like the one at

Vaulx-en-Velin [T/E: in October 1990] also bear witness to a will to participate actively that is as strong as that encountered in the workers' movement during the nineteenth century. Fifty years ago, in contrast, French society was much less participatory, much more exclusive than it is today. There nevertheless has been, so to speak, some democratic "progress"—even if it is through a triumphant media culture. Therefore, it cannot simply be said that all that is just a demand for buying power and for entry into the capitalist system.

     C.C.: What's at issue is to establish what one considers essential or central to the system and what one considers secondary, peripheral, just "noise." The liberal oligarchy certainly does not function in a closed sphere. What must be understood is that the *less* it functions in that way the *more* it gains strength—precisely as an oligarchy. In fact, sociologically speaking, it is rather "closed" (see the social origins of those recruited for the top schools, etc.). From its own point of view, it has every interest in enlarging its recruitment base, the breeding ground for self-cooptation. It would not become more "democratic" for all that—any more than the Roman oligarchy became democratic when it finally accepted the idea of including the *homines novi*. On the other hand, a liberal regime (as opposed to a totalitarian regime) enables the oligarchy to perceive "signals" emanating from society, even outside the official or legal channels, and, in principle, to react, to seek reconciliation. In reality, it does so less and less. What did Vaulx-en-Velin amount to (besides the creation of a few new committees and bureaucratic posts "to deal with the problem")? Where are things at in the United States, with the ghettoes, the drugs, the collapse of education, and all the rest?

     In reality, after the failure of the movements of the

Sixties, the two "oil crises," and the liberal (in the capitalist sense of the term) counteroffensive, which was initially represented by the Thatcher-Reagan couple but which has finally won out all over, we are seeing a new arrangement of "social strategy." A comfortable or tolerable situation is maintained for 80 to 85 percent of the population (who are further inhibited by fear of unemployment), and all the system's shit is dumped on the "lower" 15 or 20 percent of society, who cannot react, or who can react only through vandalism, marginalization, and criminality: the unemployed and immigrants in France and England; Blacks and Hispanics in the United States, and so on.

Of course, conflicts and struggles remain and reappear here and there. We are not living in a dead society. In France, these last years, there have been the college students, the high-school kids, the railroad workers, the nurses. And an important phenomenon has arisen: coordinating committees [*coordinations*] have been created. These *coordinations* are a new form of democratic self-organization of movements that expresses people's experience of the bureaucracy and their contempt for it—even if parties and trade unions still are out there trying to swallow up these movements.[6]

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[6]T/E: An illustration of this point is given in a short *Libération* (Paris) newspaper item of March 26, 1992 (p. 37), a few months after Castoriadis's interview with *Esprit*. While the national student *coordination* was gearing up for a day of action in all major cities and towns against the Socialist Education Minister Lionel Jospin's proposed university education reforms, a separate "provincial *coordination*," organized by the student union close to the Socialists, was granted a special audience with Jospin's assistant, who promised significant concessions to this second "*coordination*." A clever way for the Socialists, politically under great pressure at the time, to let off a little steam, and for its student-union ally, the UNEF-ID, to affect the status of an influential and effective political player. *Coordinations* again sprang up amid the more recent (March 1994) student-worker protests against conservative

It should also be noted, however, that these movements against the existing order are most of the time corporatist in character. In any case, they remain very partial and very limited in their objectives. Everything happens as if the enormous sense of disillusionment provoked both by the collapse of the Communist brand of mystification and by the silly spectacle of the actual functioning of "democracy" were leading everyone to lose their will to bother themselves any more about politics in the true sense of the term, the word itself having become synonymous with crooked schemes and suspect maneuverings. In all these movements, any idea of broadening the discussion or of taking larger political problems into account is rejected as downright evil. (And they cannot even be blamed for this, for those who have tried to "politicize" these movements are in general the last remaining dinosaurs, Trotskyists and the like.) The most striking case is that of the ecologists, who have been dragged kicking and screaming toward debates concerning general political issues—whereas the ecological question itself involves, quite obviously, the totality of social life. To say that the environment must be saved is to say that society's way of life must be changed radically, that one is willing to give up the frantic consumer race. This is nothing less than *the* political,

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Prime Minister Édouard Balladur's plan for a "youth minimum wage" lower than the national one. Nurses, railway workers, and other categories of the working population in France created *coordinations*, most notably during the massive strikes of November-December 1995. See Castoriadis's preface to Jean-Michel Denis's *Les Coordinations. Recherche désespérée d'une citoyenneté* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 1996), pp. 9-13, and *Drunken Boat*'s 1996 follow-up interview to Castoriadis's interview in this volume, "The Rising Tide of Insignificancy." Both the preface and the follow-up interview ("A Rising Tide of Significancy?") first appeared in *RTI(TBS)*; we hope to reprint both in the projected fourth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.

psychical, anthropological, and philosophical question posed, in all its profundity, to humanity today.[7]

I do not mean by this that the only alternative for action is that of all or nothing, but rather that a lucid action must always keep the global horizon in sight, must be engaged in the generality of the social and political problem, even if it must also be aware that for the moment it can obtain only partial and limited results. Moreover, this exigency must be assumed by the participants.

On the other hand, it cannot be said, as you have done, that society today is much more inclusive, without asking: Inclusive *within what*? It is inclusive within what it itself is, within this magma of dominant imaginary significations I have tried to describe.

Esprit: There is a point that we have not yet broached but that you just touched upon when you spoke of the inconsistencies of the ecology movement. This is the problem of technical change. We do not hesitate to ask you this question, for you are one of the rare contemporary philosophers to have a familiarity with the exact sciences. We are in an age in which some people tend to see in technology the source of all our society's ills. Do you think that technique has become, in effect, a completely autonomized system upon which the citizen no longer has any means to act?

C.C.: Two facts seem to me incontestable. First, that technoscience has become autonomized: no one controls its evolution or its orientation and, despite the existence of a few "ethics committees" (their ridiculousness is beneath comment and betrays the vacuousness of the whole affair), no one takes

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[7]T/E: See "The Revolutionary Force of Ecology" (1993, now in *RTI(TBS)*, and which we hope to reprint in the projected seventh volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*) and its fourth note, on French political-ecology groups.

into consideration at all the indirect and the lateral effects of this evolution. Second, that it has an *inertial* trajectory, in the sense this term is given in physics: left to itself, the movement continues.

This situation embodies and expresses all the traits of the contemporary age. The unlimited expansion of pseudomastery is pursued here for its own sake; it is detached from any rational or reasonably discussable end. Whatever can be invented will be invented; whatever can be produced (at a profit) is produced, the corresponding "needs" being stirred up afterward. At the same time, the meaninglessness and emptiness of all this is masked by scientistic mystification, which is today more powerful than ever—and this, paradoxically, at a moment when genuine science has become more aporetic than ever as concerns its foundations and the implications of its results. Finally, we find again in this illusion of omnipotence the flight before death as well as its denial: I am perhaps mortal and weak, but there are strength and power somewhere, at the hospital, inside the particle accelerator, within the biotechnology laboratories, and so on.

That this evolution, destructive as it is, is also in the long run self-destructive of technoscience itself seems to me certain, but it would take too long to discuss that matter. What must be emphasized right now is, first, that this illusion of omnipotence must be dispelled. Second, that for the first time in the history of humanity the extremely difficult question of setting controls (other than ecclesiastical ones) on the evolution of science and of technique is posed in radical and urgent fashion. That requires us to reconsider all the values and habits that rule over us. On the one hand, we are the privileged inhabitants of a planet that is perhaps unique in the universe—in any case, if the truism may be granted, unique

for us—of a marvel that we have not created and that we are, rapidly, in the process of destroying. On the other hand, we obviously cannot give up knowledge without renouncing what makes us free beings. Like power, however, knowledge is not innocent. One therefore must at least attempt to comprehend what one is in the process of trying to know and be attentive to the possible repercussions of this knowledge. Here again appears, in multiple forms, the question of democracy. Under present conditions and within present structures, it is unavoidable that decisions on all these matters are limited to ignorant politicians and bureaucrats and to technoscientists who are motivated, in the main, by a logic of mutual competition. It is impossible for the political collectivity to form, on its own, a reasonable opinion on these matters. More important still, on this level we are, so to speak, putting our finger on the question of the essential norm of democracy: self-limitation, the avoidance of *hubris*.[8]

Esprit: What you call the "project of autonomy" therefore ultimately passes by way of education.

C.C.: In a democratic society, the centrality of education is beyond discussion. In a sense, it can be said that a democratic society is an immense institution of continuing education, a permanent institution of self-education of its citizens, and that it could not live without that. For, as a *reflective* society, a democratic society has to appeal constantly to the lucid activity and the enlightened opinion of all citizens. This is exactly the opposite of what takes place today, with the reign of professional politicians, "experts," and televised polls. It is not a matter, not essentially in any case, of the education dispensed by the "Ministry of Education." Nor will we approach democracy through the implementation of an nth "educational reform." Education

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[8]T/E: On all these points, see "Dead End?" (1987), now in *CL3*.

begins with the birth of the individual and ends with the individual's death. It takes place everywhere and always. The walls of the city, books, shows [*les spectacles*], and events educate—and, today, in the main "miseducate"—citizens. Compare the education Athenian citizens (and women and slaves) received when they attended performances of tragedy with the kind of education a television viewer receives today when watching *Dynasty* or *Perdu de vue*.[9]

Esprit: This issue of self-limitation brings us back to the debate over mortality and immortality, which appears central: what is striking when one reads you is the impression that there is, on the one hand, the political writings and, on the other, the work of the philosopher-psychoanalyst. But in fact there is in your works an ongoing shared theme, which is the question of time: How is one both to reestablish [*renouer*] a relationship with time and to exit from the phantasm of immortality?

C.C.: It is, first, a matter of exiting from the modern illusion of linearity, of "progress," of history as cumulation of acquisitions or process of "rationalization." Human time, like the time of being, is the time of creation/destruction. The only "cumulation" there is in human history, over the long term, is that of the instrumental, the technical, the ensemblistic-identitarian. And even the former one is not necessarily irreversible. A cumulation of significations is nonsense. Over historically given segments of time, there can be only a profoundly *historical* (that is to say, anything but linear and "cumulative") relationship between those significations that are created by the present and those that are created by the past. It is only in exiting from the phantasm of immortality

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[9]T/E: *Perdu de vue* was a popular French television show presenting "real-life" incidents that involved missing persons—one precursor to today's "reality TV."

(whose aim, as a matter of fact, is to abolish time) that a genuine relationship to time can be knit together [*nouer*]. More exactly—since the expression "relationship to time" is bizarre, time is not something external to us with which we might have a relationship; we *are* in time even as time is making us—it is only then that we are truly able to be present in the present while being open to the future and while nourishing with the past a relationship that is one neither of repetition nor of rejection. To liberate oneself from the phantasm of immortality—or, in its vulgar form, from a guaranteed form of "historical progress"—is to liberate our creative imagination and our creative social imaginary.

Esprit: Here one thinks of one of your texts in your new book, *Le Monde morcelé*, titled "L'état du sujet aujourd'hui."[10] There the question of the imagination clearly becomes central. What is at issue, indeed, is the liberation of a subject capable of imagining, that is to say, at bottom, of imagining *something else* and therefore of not being alienated by past-present time. What is interesting is that the work already is this capacity to become an imagining subject. Should one expect of this imagining subject in a democratic society to make works, in the sense of products, or is not this imagining subject at bottom *already* the work?

C.C.: There are several levels to the question. First, the subject *always* is an imagining subject, whatever it does. The psyche is radical imagination. Heteronomy can also be seen as the blockage of this imagination within repetition. The work of psychoanalysis is directed toward the subject's becoming autonomous in the double sense of the liberation of its imagination *and* of the instauration of a reflective and deliberative instance that engages in dialogue with this imagination and judges what it produces.

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[10]T/E: Translated as "The State of the Subject Today" (1986), now in *CL3*.

This same "becoming-autonomous" of the subject, this creation of an imagining and reflective individual, will also be the work of an autonomous society. I am obviously not thinking of a society in which everyone would be Michelangelo or Beethoven or even an unequaled artisan. But I am thinking of a society in which all individuals will be open to creation, will be able to receive creation in a creative way, even to do with it what they will.

Esprit: The problem of "making a work," in the sense of a work of art, therefore is secondary.

C.C.: It is secondary in the sense that not everyone can, or has to, be a creator of works of art in the proper sense of the term. It is not secondary in the sense of the creation by society of works in the most general sense of this term: works of art, works of the mind, institutional works, works "pertaining to the cultivation of nature [*de culture de la nature*]," if I may so express myself. These are creations that go beyond the private sphere; they have to do with what I call the "private/public" and "public/public" spheres.[11] These creations necessarily have a collective dimension (either in their realization or in their reception), but they are also the ballast of collective identity. This, let it be said parenthetically, is what Liberalism and "individualism" forget. In theory and strictly speaking, the question of a collective identity—of a whole with which one might, in key respects, identify, in which one participates and about which one might bear some concern, and for whose fate one feels oneself responsible—cannot and must not be raised in Liberalism and "individualism"; it has no meaning there. As it is nevertheless an unavoidable question, in actual practice Liberalism and "individualism" shamefully and

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[11]T/E: See the "Autonomy: Politics" section of "Done and To Be Done" (1989), now in *CL5*.

underhandedly fall back upon empirically given forms of identification, and in reality on "the nation." The nation emerges like a rabbit out of the hat of all contemporary theories and "political philosophies." (One speaks at one and the same time of the "rights of *man*" and of the "sovereignty of the *nation*"!) Now, if the nation is not to be defined by reference to "blood right" (which leads us directly to racism), there is only one basis upon which it can be defended in reasonable fashion: as a collectivity that has created works capable of claiming a universal validity. Beyond some folkloric anecdotes and some references to a largely mythical and unilateral "history," to be French signifies that one belongs to a culture stretching from the Gothic cathedrals to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and from Montaigne to the Impressionists. And as no culture can claim [*revendiquer*] for its works a monopoly on the claim [*prétention*] to universal validity, the imaginary signification *nation* cannot but forfeit its cardinal importance.

If its institutions constitute a collectivity, its works are the mirrors in which it can look at itself, recognize itself, call itself in question. They are the tie between its past and its future; they are an inexhaustible deposit of memory and at the same time the mainstay of its future creation. This is why those who affirm that in contemporary society, within the framework of "democratic individualism," no place exists any longer for great works, are, without knowing it or wanting it, pronouncing a death sentence upon this society.

What will be the collective identity, the "we," of an autonomous society? We are those who make our own laws; we are an autonomous collectivity made up of autonomous individuals. And we are able to look at ourselves, recognize ourselves, and call ourselves back into question in and through our works.

Esprit: But does not one have the feeling that this "looking at oneself in a work" has never functioned contemporaneously with the work itself? The great periods of artistic creation are not *at the same time* the moment during which society sees itself in its works. The society of the time does not see itself in Arthur Rimbaud or in Paul Cézanne: it is after the fact that it does so. On the other hand, should we not today consider ourselves tributaries of all the traditions that have made our society what it is, even if they are not all mutually compatible?

C.C.: You are taking one case, almost unique in history, certainly full of significance but not the one you attribute to it. To be brief, on this scale the "misunderstood genius" is a product of the end of the nineteenth century. With the rise of the bourgeoisie came a profound scission between popular culture (which, moreover, was rapidly being destroyed) and the dominant culture, the bourgeois culture of *pompier* art.[12] The result was the appearance, for the first time in history, of the phenomenon of the *avant-garde* and of an artist who is "misunderstood," not "by accident" but *of necessity*. For, the artist was reduced at that time to the following dilemma: to be bought by the bourgeois of the Third Republic—to become an official, *pompier*-style artist—or to follow his own genius and to sell, if lucky, a few canvases for five or six francs. There followed the well-known degeneration of the "avant-garde," when the only thing that counted was to "shock the bourgeoisie" [*épater le bourgeois*]. This phenomenon is connected with capitalist

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[12]T/E: The word *pompier* refers to painting and other artworks that are academic in style, superficial in form, and conventional in content; *pompier* art, often contrasted with such styles as Impressionism that were developed outside the established salons, was shown in fire stations (hence the name *pompier*) and other established institutional settings.

society, not democracy. It expresses precisely the nondemocratic scission between culture and society as a whole.

In contrast, Elizabethan tragedy or Bach's *Chorales* were works that the people of the time went to see in the Globe Theater or sang in the churches.

As to the question of tradition, a society is not obliged to repeat its tradition in order to maintain a relationship with it; quite the contrary, even. A society can maintain with its past a relationship of rigid repetition—which is the case in what are called, as a matter of fact, *traditional societies*—or simply an erudite, museum-oriented, and touristic relationship —which is more and more the case in our society. In both cases, the past is in fact dead. A past can be alive only for a present that is creative and open to the future. Consider the case of Athenian tragedy. Among the forty or so works that have been handed down to us, there is only one, *The Persians* by Aeschylus, that is inspired by an actual event; all the others take their subject matter from the mythological tradition. Each of these tragedies, however, remodels that tradition; they renew its signification. Between the *Electra* of Sophocles and the *Electra* of Euripides there is, so to speak, nothing in common, save the canvas of action. There is a fantastic freedom there that is nourished by laboring upon a tradition and that creates works of which neither the rhapsodists who recited the myths nor even Homer could ever have dreamed. Nearer to us, we can see how Proust transubstantiates, in his profoundly innovative oeuvre, the entire French literary tradition. And the great Surrealists were nourished infinitely more by this tradition than the Academicians of their day.

Esprit: We are not going to open up again the debate about French intellectual life, but it is striking to observe, in relation to the problem of mortality, the present current of

deconstruction upon a Heideggerian or Jewish background. Some people go on and on about mortality or finitude, but nothing can be said about this finitude except to note that it is finitude.

Do we not have here a symptom of a sort of blockage? If one follows along with this current, what one must above all avoid doing is to take any action, and one ends up singing the praises of passivity. If we grant that not all those people are buffoons—and not all of them are, surely—still we see that this thinking of finitude ends up, so to speak, biting its own tail. Why, then, does this kind of thought maintain such a grip over people?

C.C.: As far as I am concerned, I see in it 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.[13]

This sterility is not an individual phenomenon. It expresses, as a matter of fact, the social-historical situation. There is also certainly a, so to speak, "intrinsic" philosophical factor: the internal critique of inherited thought, notably of its rationalism, obviously should be conducted. The pompous pronouncements of "deconstructionism" notwithstanding, this

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[13]T/E: See "The 'End of Philosophy'?" (1989), now in *CL3*. Former fellow Socialisme ou Barbarie member Jean-François Lyotard spoke of "the end of grand narratives" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

critique is being conducted in reductionist fashion. To reduce the entire history of Greco-Western thought to "the closure of metaphysics" and to "onto-theo-logo-(phallo)-centrism" is to conjure away a host of infinitely fecund germs contained within this history; to identify philosophical thought with rationalist metaphysics is simply absurd. And on the other hand and above all, a critique that is incapable of positing other principles than those it criticizes is itself condemned, as a matter of fact, to remain itself within the circle defined by the objects criticized. In this way, the whole critique of "rationalism" that is being conducted today ultimately ends up simply with an irrationalism that is only its flip side and, at bottom, a philosophical position as old as rationalist metaphysics itself. To disengage oneself from inherited thinking presupposes the conquest of a new point of view, which is what this tendency is incapable of producing.

But once again, it is the social-historical situation as a whole that weighs so heavily here. The inability of what today passes for philosophy to create new points of view, new philosophical ideas, expresses, in this particular field, the incapacity of contemporary society to create new social significations and to call itself into question by its own means. What I have just tried to do is to shed light, as much as is possible, on this situation. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that, when all is said, we do not and cannot have an "explanation" for what is going on. Just as creation is not "explicable," neither is decadence or destruction. Historical examples abound, but I will cite only one. In the fifth century BCE, there were at Athens, not to mention anyone or anything else, three great tragedians, plus Aristophanes and Thucydides. In the fourth century BCE, nothing comparable. Why? It could always be said that the Athenians were beaten in the Peloponnesian War. So? Were their genes transformed

in the process? Athens in the fourth century is already no longer Athens. There obviously were the two great philosophers, who took to flight at dusk but who were in essence the strange products of the preceding century. There were above all the rhetoricians—with whom we are today so abundantly provided.

All this is combined with a total lack of political responsibility. Certainly, most of these "philosophers" today would shout, to whomever will listen, their devotion to democracy, the rights of man, antiracism, and so forth. But in the name of what? And why should one believe them when they in fact profess to be absolute relativists and proclaim that everything is only a "narrative"—or, to be vulgar about it, a piece of gossip? If all "narratives" 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.[14]

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[14]T/E: Again, see "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1990), now in *CL3*. Also to be noted here is that a question and the first paragraph of Castoriadis's last reply, which appeared on the proof copy (and thus were included in the *Thesis Eleven* translation, since this hand-corrected proof copy was the one made available by the author to the translator at the time), were eliminated at this point, perhaps for space considerations, from the final version printed in *Esprit* (the interview ends neatly at the very bottom of page 54), and thus (inadvertently or by design?) from the *MI* reprint, too. Here is the English-language version of the passage in question, which precedes the final paragraph of this interview:

    Esprit: Added up, your position seems rather pessimistic.

    C.C.: Why would that be pessimism rather than an attempt to see

As for me, precisely because I have a project I am not abandoning, I owe it to myself to try to see reality as clearly as possible, as well as the actual forces at play in the social-historical field. As someone else said, I am trying to look at things with "sober senses."[15] There are moments in history in which all that is feasible in the immediate term is a long and slow work of preparation. No one can know if we are traversing a brief phase of sleep in society today or if we are in the process of entering into a long period of historical regression. I, however, am not impatient.

Postscript

The above interview took place almost four years ago. In one sense, especially insofar as the discussion of its main theme, the dilapidation of the West, is concerned, there is not

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        things as they really are? One certainly could be mistaken, which is another matter. But there is also another way of being mistaken, one practiced to the full by everyone and that I have always avoided like the devil: it is to postulate the existence of a "good solution." This is the way the Marxists reasoned morning, noon, and night: Since the revolution *must* be inevitable, such and such an analysis of the present situation is "true" while another is "false."

A few other words and phrases were also altered in this way, but in those cases it would seem rather more clearly that the intention was to drop certain passages, and so the present version of the translation reflects those changes. The interesting omission is of "and negative" after "defensive" in Castoriadis's characterization of certain liberties. In "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime" (1996), now below in the present volume, Castoriadis explains why "even Isaiah Berlin's qualification that [these rights and liberties] are 'negative' is inadequate."

[15]T/E: This phrase comes from the *Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and was already cited in the second note for "Third World, Third Worldism, Democracy," now in *CL2*.

much to add to it. In another sense, the changes in the planetary scene and its dynamic would require a totally new development, which cannot be given here and now, but of which I shall try to sketch some of the main lines below.

The state of deep political apathy characteristic of Western societies remains as strong as ever. It has certainly played a central role in the dramatic demonstration, over the last two years, of the political nonexistence of "Europe" occasioned by the Yugoslavian events. The same events, as well as those of Somalia and Haiti or of Rwanda and Burundi, have shown the derisory character of the "New World Order" and the real impotence of U.S. policy.

Islamic fundamentalism is now tearing apart Algeria, where the toll of terrorism and counterterrorism is mounting every day. In a different way, the same is true of Sudan. The effects of the "peace" agreement between Israel and the PLO remain more than doubtful, given the attitude of the Israeli colonists as well as growing Palestinian opposition, both from the "right" and from the "left," to Yasser Arafat.

But much more important is the wholesale change in the world perspective. The basic assumptions on which any reasonable analysis during the 1950-1985 period would have to base itself are obsolete or are rapidly becoming so. The countries of the ex-USSR are in a chaotic state and nothing, absolutely nothing, can be said as to the direction toward which they are moving; as a matter of fact, there simply *is* no "direction" whatsoever. This already, in and of itself, introduces an essential instability into international relations, totally different from the more or less regulated tensions of the Cold War period. This coincides with a phase when the West is becoming increasingly incapable of managing both its domestic and its foreign affairs. Some more words on this are in order here.

Despite some asides on the world character of capitalism, imperialism, and so on, the whole of the economic, political, and social analysis of developed capitalism, from Adam Smith and David Ricardo through Marx and up to the Keynesians and the neo-neo-classical economists, was done within a "national" framework. "National" economies were, e.g., the central object of inquiry (Marx can be taken as analyzing either a single, isolated national economy or a fully homogenized "world economy," which boils down to the same thing), with "foreign trade" as an *ad libitum* and minor addition. The relative success of Keynesian analysis and macroeconomic policies in the immediate postwar decades was based on the fact that national governments were more or less able to manage, through budgetary and monetary measures (including manipulations of the exchange rate, over which they were supposed to exercise sovereign power), the level of employment, rate of growth, level of prices, and external balance. (It matters little here that the simultaneous achievement of the desired objectives on these four variables at once proved, broadly speaking, impossible.)[16] But "national" economies, in the traditional sense, exist less and less. Therefore, and independent of the degree of imbecility of politicians, national policies are less and less able to influence economic developments. Through a funny coincidence, this process came to the forefront during the same period (the decade of the Eighties) when the Thatcher-Reagan neo-"liberal" craze spread throughout the rich countries (including "socialist" France and Spain). The outcome was the present-day chaotic state of the world economy, in which all sorts of catastrophic "accidents" are

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[16]T/E: This parenthetical sentence was added by Castoriadis to the French translation that appeared in *MI*.

possible. Now, one should remember that the social and political stability of the rich "liberal" countries in the postwar period was strongly predicated upon the ability of the system to supply the goods—i.e., approximately full employment and rising consumption levels.

The mess is compounded by developments in the Third World. Leaving aside the Islamic countries, about which I have already spoken, and Latin America, where prospects remain obscure, a clear-cut division into two zones is rapidly establishing itself. A zone of atrocious misery, tribal strife, and death (mainly, but not only, Africa), where even the traditional and Western-supported corrupt dictatorships are becoming more and more unstable. And the East-Asian zone of rapidly industrializing countries under more or less authoritarian political regimes, with plenty of cheap, overexploited labor, the competition of which, both in the form of exports and of "relocation" of plants, compounds the economic problems of the rich countries. But certainly dwarfing all this is the Chinese process of dizzyingly rapid capitalist industrialization within the crumbling political structure of Communist political rule. Whatever the future developments in China may be, they are certain to throw totally off-balance the fragile existing world disorder.

<div align="right">March 22, 1994—June 1995</div>

The Rising Tide of Insignificancy[*]

Olivier Morel: I would like to begin by evoking your intellectual itinerary, which is both atypical and symbolic. What is your judgment today of the adventure you began in 1946 with the founding of Socialisme ou Barbarie?

Cornelius Castoriadis: I have already written about all that at least twice,[1] so I shall be very brief. I began to be interested in politics at an early age. I discovered both philosophy and Marxism at the same time, when I was twelve, and I joined the illegal organization of Communist Youths under the Metaxas dictatorship during my last year in high school, at age fifteen. After a few months, the comrades in my cell (I should like to mention here their names: Koskinas, Dodopoulos, and Stratis) were arrested, but, even though they were brutally tortured, they did not turn me in. I thus lost contact, which I did not regain until the start of the German Occupation. I rapidly discovered that the Communist Party had nothing revolutionary about it but was instead a chauvinistic and totally bureaucratic organization (what would today be called a totalitarian microsociety). After an

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[*]This radio interview by Olivier Morel was originally broadcast in France by Radio Pluriel. Appearing under the title "Un Monde à venir" (A world to come) in *La République Internationale des Lettres*, 4 (June 1994): 4-5, the interview was reprinted as "La Montée de l'insignifiance" in *MI*, 82-102 (96-121 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: The present translation, based on the *République Internationale des Lettres* version, was originally to be published in the American anarchist review *Drunken Boat*. It now follows the French book version. For additional publication information, see the publication note to "A Rising Tide of Significance? A Follow-Up Interview with *Drunken Boat*," now in *RTI(TBS)*, a text we hope to reprint in the projected seventh volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.]
[1]In my 1973 General Introduction in *SB1*, now in *PSW1*, and in "Done and to be Done" (1989), now in *CL5*. [T/E: See also the 1990 "Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Interview" at the Cerisy colloquium, now available in English translation at: https://www.agorainternational.org/enccaiint.pdf.]

attempt at "reform" with some other comrades, which of course quickly failed, I broke with the Party and joined the most left-wing Trotskyist group, which was led by an unforgettable revolutionary figure, Spiros Stinas. But there, too, with the help also of a few books miraculously saved from the dictatorship's *autodafés* (Boris Souvarine, Anton Ciliga, Victor Serge, Alexander Barmine—and, obviously, Leon Trotsky himself, who articulated *a,b,c* clearly but didn't want to spell out *d,e,f*), I soon began to think that the Trotskyist conception was incapable of accounting for the nature of both the "Soviet Union" and the Communist parties. The critique of Trotskyism and my own conception of things took on definitive form during the first Stalinist *coup d'État* attempt in Athens, in December 1944. Indeed, it was becoming clear that the CP was not a "reformist party" allied with the bourgeoisie, as the Trotskyist conception would have had it, but was aiming at the seizure of power in order to set up [*instaurer*] a regime of the same type as existed in Russia—a bit of foresight that was strikingly confirmed by the events that followed, starting in 1945, in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. This also led me to reject Trotsky's idea of Russia as a "degenerated workers' State" and to develop the conception, which I still consider correct, that the Russian Revolution had led to the instauration of a new type of exploitative and oppressive regime in which a new ruling class, the bureaucracy, had formed around the Communist Party. I called this regime total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism. Having come to France at the end of 1945, I presented these ideas within the French Trotskyist party, and this attracted to me a number of comrades with whom we formed a tendency critical of the official Trotskyist policy. In the Autumn of 1948, when the Trotskyists addressed to Tito, who by then had broken with Moscow, the

simultaneously monstrous and ridiculous proposal to form a United Front with him, we decided to break with the Trotskyist party and we founded the group and review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, whose first issue came out in March 1949. The review published forty issues, until the Summer of 1965, and the group itself was dissolved in 1966-1967. Work during this period at first consisted in deepening the critique of Stalinism, of Trotskyism, of Leninism, and, finally, of Marxism and of Marx himself. This critique of Marx can be found already in my 1953-1954 *S. ou B.* text, "Sur la dynamique du capitalisme" (nos. 12 and 13 [T/E: now reprinted in *EP8*; we hope to translate this text for the projected eighth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*]), which was critical of Marx's economics; in the 1955-1958 articles "On the Content of Socialism" [T/E: all three parts now in *PSW1* and *PSW2*], which were critical of his conception of socialist society and of labor; in "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961 [T/E: now in *PSW2*]); and, finally, in texts written starting in 1959 but published in *S. ou B.* in 1964-1965 under the title "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (now the first part of *IIS*, 1975 [T/E: English translation, 1987]).

Since the end of Socialisme ou Barbarie, I am no longer directly and actively involved in politics, save for a brief moment during May 1968. I try to remain present as a critical voice, but I am convinced that the bankruptcy of the inherited conceptions (be they Marxist, Liberal,[2] or general views on society, history, etc.) has made it necessary to reconsider the entire horizon of thought within which the political movement for emancipation has been situated for centuries. And it is to this work that I have harnessed my

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[2]T/E: "Liberal" in the Continental sense of conservative believers in the "free" workings of a "capitalist market."

efforts since that time.

O.M.: Has the political and militant dimension always been your basic priority? Might a philosophical stance be the silent point that predetermines your political positions? Are these two activities incompatible?

C.C.: Certainly not. But first a clarification: I have already said that for me, from the outset, the two dimensions were not separate, but at the same time, and for a very long time now, I have thought that there is no direct path from philosophy to politics.[3] The kinship between philosophy and politics consists in this, that both aim at our freedom, our autonomy—as citizens and as thinking beings—and that in both cases there is, at the outset, a will—reflective, lucid, but in any case a will—whose aim is our freedom. Contrary to the absurdities now once again enjoying currency in Germany, there is no rational foundation for reason, nor is there any rational foundation for freedom. In both cases there is, certainly, a reasonable justification—but that comes downstream; it is based upon what autonomy alone renders possible for human beings. The political pertinence of philosophy is that it is precisely philosophical critique and elucidation that allow one to destroy false philosophical (or theological) presuppositions that have so often served to justify regimes based upon heteronomy.

O.M.: The labor of the intellectual, therefore, is critical to the extent that it shatters self-evident truths, to the extent that it is there to denounce what seems to go without

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[3]T/E: Here a line seems to have been dropped from the final published French version. It may be translated as follows: "For example, in Marxism, or what passes for such, there is a false deduction of a bad politics from an absurd philosophy." This statement appears quite compatible with arguments advanced in *IIS* and elsewhere, though perhaps it interrupted the flow of the argument here.

saying. This undoubtedly is what you were thinking when you wrote: "One had only to read five lines of Stalin to understand that the revolution could not be *that*."[4]

C.C.: Yes, but here again a clarification is necessary. The labor of the intellectual ought to be critical, and in history it has often been so. For example, at the moment of the birth of philosophy in Greece, the philosophers called into question the collective, established representations, ideas about the world, the gods, the good civic order. But rather quickly there was a degeneration: the intellectuals abandoned, they betrayed, their critical role and became rationalizers for what is, justifiers of the established order. The most extreme example—but also undoubtedly the most eloquent, if only because he embodies a destiny and an almost necessary culmination of the inherited philosophy—is Hegel, with his celebrated proclamation: "All that is rational is real, and all that is real is rational." In recent times we have two flagrant cases, in Germany with Martin Heidegger and his deep-seated adherence, beyond happenstance and anecdotal evidence, to the "spirit" of Nazism, and in France with Jean-Paul Sartre, who since at least 1952 went about justifying Stalinist regimes and, when he broke with ordinary Communism, went over in support of Castro, Mao, and so forth.

This situation has not changed very much, except in its expression. After the collapse of totalitarian regimes and the pulverization of Marxism-Leninism,[5] a majority of Western intellectuals pass their time glorifying Western regimes as "democratic" regimes—perhaps not "ideal" ones (I know not what that expression means) but the best regimes humanly achievable—and claiming that if one lodges any criticisms

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[4]T/E: See the last line of "Intellectuals and History" (1987), now in *CL3*.
[5]T/E: See "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" (1990), above in the present volume.

against this pseudodemocracy, it will lead us straight to the Gulag. We thus have an endless critique of totalitarianism, which comes seventy, sixty, fifty, forty, thirty, or twenty years too late (many of today's "antitotalitarians" supported Maoism in the early Seventies). In this "antitotalitarian" critique, its proponents permit themselves to pass silently over 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, and so on. Or, another way of doing the same thing, one retreats into one's polystyrene tower and tends one's precious personal productions.

O.M.: In sum, there may be said to be two symmetrical figures: the responsible intellectual, who takes his responsibilities seriously but who ends up in murderous irresponsibility, as in the case of Heidegger and Sartre, whom you denounce, and the out-of-power intellectual, who ends up absolving himself of any responsibility for the crimes actually being committed. Can things be formulated in this way, and where then do you situate the correct role of the intellectual and of criticism?

C.C.: One must rid oneself of both an overestimation and underestimation of the role of the intellectual. There are thinkers and writers who have exercised immense influence in history—not always for the best, moreover. Plato is undoubtedly the most striking example here, since everyone still today, even when he does not know it, reflects in Platonic terms. But in every case, starting from the moment when someone gets involved in expressing his opinions on society, history, the world, and being, he enters into the field of social-historical forces and begins to play there a role that can stretch from the minute to the quite considerable. To say that this role is a role of "power" would be, in my opinion, an abuse of

language: the writer, the thinker, with the particular means her culture gives to her, her capacities, exercises some influence within society, but that pertains to her role as citizen; she says what she thinks and speaks out on her own responsibility. No one can rid oneself of this responsibility, even the person who does not speak and who thereby lets others speak and allows the social-historical space to become occupied, perhaps, by monstrous ideas. One cannot at the same time indict "intellectual power" and denounce for complicity with Nazism the German intellectuals who kept quiet after 1933.

O.M.: It seems that it is becoming more and more difficult to find points of support for one's criticism and for expressing what one thinks is working badly. Why does criticism no longer function today?

C.C.: The crisis of criticism is only one of the manifestations of the general and deep-seated crisis of society. There is a generalized pseudoconsensus; criticism and the vocation of the intellectual are caught up in the system much more than was the case formerly and in a much more intense way. Everything is mediatized; the networks of complicity are almost omnipotent. Discordant or dissident voices are not stifled by censorship or by editors who no longer dare to publish them; these voices are stifled by the general commercialization of society. Subversion is caught within the all and sundry of what is being done, of what is being propagated. To publicize a book, one says immediately, "Here is a book that has revolutionized its field"—but it is also said that Panzini-brand spaghetti has revolutionized cooking. The word *revolutionary*—like the words *creation* and *imagination* —has become an advertising slogan; this is what a few years ago was called *cooptation*. Marginality has become something sought after and central: subversion is an interesting curiosity that completes the harmony of the system. Contemporary

society has a terribly great capacity for stifling any genuine divergency, be it by silencing it, be it by making it one phenomenon among others, commercialized like the others.

We can be even more specific. Critics themselves have betrayed their critical role. There is a betrayal of their responsibility and of their rigor on the part of authors; there is a vast complicity on the part of the public, which is far from innocent in this affair, since it agrees to play the game and adapts itself to what it is given. The whole is instrumentalized, utilized by a system that itself is anonymous. None of this is the making of some dictator, a handful of big capitalists, or a group of opinion makers; it is an immense social-historical current that is heading in this direction and that is making everything become insignificant. Obviously, television offers the best example: due to the very fact that something is the top story for twenty-four hours, it becomes insignificant and ceases to exist after these twenty-four hours are up, because one has found or one has had to find something else to take its place. This cult of the ephemeral requires at the same time an extreme contraction: what on American television is called "attention span," the useful duration of attention of a viewer, which was ten minutes still a few years ago, gradually falling to five minutes, to one minute, and now to ten seconds. The ten-second television spot is considered the most effective medium; it is the one used during presidential campaigns and it is fully understandable that these spots contain nothing of substance but are devoted instead to defamatory insinuations. Apparently, it is the only thing the viewer is capable of assimilating. This is both true and false. Humanity has not degenerated biologically; people are still capable of paying attention to a well-reasoned and relatively long speech; but it is also true that the system and the media "educate"—that is,

systematically deform—people, in such a way that they finally won't be able to show an interest in anything that lasts beyond a few seconds, or at most a few minutes.

There is here a conspiracy—not in the legal sense but in the etymological sense: everything "conspires," "breathes together," is blowing in the same direction—of a society in which all criticism is losing its effectiveness.

O.M.: But how is it that criticism was so virulently fecund during the period that culminated in 1968—a period without unemployment, without economic crisis, without AIDS, without Jean-Marie Le Pen-type racism—and that today, with economic crisis, unemployment, and all the other problems, society is apathetic?

C.C.: We must revise the dates and periods. Basically, today's situation already was there at the end of the 1950s. In a text written in 1959-1960 ("Modern Capitalism and Revolution"), I was already describing society's entry into a phase of apathy, of individual privatization, of the withdrawal of each into his tiny personal circle, of a depoliticization that was no longer just conjunctural. It is true that during the Sixties the movements in France, in the United States, in Germany, in Italy, and elsewhere, the movements of youth, of women, and of minorities seemed to disprove this diagnosis. But as early as the mid-Seventies one could see that there was in all this a kind of last great flareup of the movements that began with the Enlightenment. The proof of this is that all these movements ultimately mobilized only minorities of the population.

There are some conjunctural factors that played a role in this evolution—for example, the oil crises. In themselves, these oil crises hardly are of any importance, but they facilitated a counteroffensive, a form of crisis blackmail on the part of the ruling strata. Yet this counteroffensive could

not have had the effects it had, had it not met up with an increasingly lackluster population. At the end of the Seventies, one saw in the United States, for the first time in perhaps a century, labor agreements between businesses and unions in which the latter accepted wage cuts. We are seeing levels of unemployment that would have been unthinkable at any time since 1945. I myself had written that such levels had become impossible, since they would immediately have made the system explode. Today it is clear that I was mistaken.

But behind these conjunctural elements, much weightier factors are at work. The gradual, then accelerated collapse of the left-wing ideologies, the triumph of consumer society, the crisis of modern society's imaginary significations (significations of progress and/or of revolution)—all that, to which we shall return, manifests a crisis of meaning, and it is this crisis of meaning that allows conjunctural elements to play the role they play.

O.M.: But this crisis of meaning or of signification has already been analyzed. It seems that we have passed, in a few years or decades, from crisis as *Krisis*—in the sense, for example, of Edmund Husserl[6]—to a discourse on crisis as loss and/or absence of meaning, to a sort of nihilism. Might there not be two temptations, as close to each other as they are difficult to identify? On the one hand, one can deplore the present decline of the Western values inherited from the Enlightenment (we have to digest Hiroshima, Kolyma, Auschwitz, totalitarianism in the East); and, on the other, one

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[6]T/E: See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, tr. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970). This text, originally published in German in 1954, was drafted by Husserl between 1934 and his death in 1938, according to the English-language translator.

can proclaim (in the nihilistic or deconstructionist outlook) that decline is itself the very name of late Western modernity, that the latter either cannot be saved at all or can be saved only by a return to (religious, moral, phantasmatic, etc.) origins, that the West is guilty of combining reason and domination in a way that achieves its empire over a desert. Between these two tendencies, of mortification that imputes Auschwitz and Kolyma to the Enlightenment philosophers and of nihilism relying (or not) on a "return to origins," where do you situate yourself?

C.C.: I think, first of all, that the two terms you are opposing to each other here ultimately boil down to the same thing. In good part, the ideology and mystifications of deconstructionism are based upon the "guilt" of the West: briefly speaking, they proceed from an illegitimate mixture, in which the critique (already first undertaken a long time ago) of instrumental and instrumentalized rationalism is surreptitiously thrown together with a denigration of the ideas of truth, autonomy, and responsibility. One plays on the guilt of the West in relation to colonialism, to the extermination of other cultures, to totalitarian regimes, to the phantasm of "mastery" in order to leap to a fallacious and self-referentially contradictory critique of the Greco-Western project of individual and collective autonomy, of aspirations to emancipation, of the institutions in which the latter have been, be they partially and imperfectly, embodied. (The funniest thing is that these same sophists do not refrain, from time to time, from posing as defenders of justice, democracy, human rights, and so on).

Let us leave Greece aside here. For centuries, the modern West has been animated by two totally opposite, though mutually contaminated, social imaginary significations: on the one hand, the project of individual and

collective autonomy, the struggle for the intellectual as well as spiritual and also socially real and effective emancipation of the human being; and on the other, the demented capitalist project of an unlimited expansion of pseudorational pseudomastery, which for a long time has ceased to concern merely the forces of production and the economy so as to become a global project (and for that reason all the more monstrous), that of a total mastery of physical, biological, psychical, social, and cultural data. Totalitarianism is but the most extreme point of this project of domination—which, moreover, is inverted into its own contradiction, since in it even the restrained, instrumental rationality of classical capitalism becomes irrationality and absurdity, as Stalinism and Nazism have shown.

To return to the point of departure of your question, you are right to say that we are not living today a *krisis* in the true sense of the term, namely, a moment of decision. (In the Hippocratic writings, the crisis point in an illness, the *krisis*, is the paroxysmal moment at the end of which the sick patient either will die or, by a salutary reaction provoked by the crisis itself, will initiate his process of healing.) We are living a phase of decomposition. In a crisis, there are opposing elements that combat each other—whereas what is characteristic of contemporary society is precisely the disappearance of social and political conflict. People are discovering now what we were writing thirty or forty years ago in *S. ou B.*, namely, that the opposition between Left and Right no longer has any meaning: the official political parties say the same thing; Balladur is doing today what Bérégovoy did yesterday.[7] There are, in truth, neither opposing programs

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[7]T/E: At the time of this 1994 interview, Édouard Balladur was the neo-Gaullist French Prime Minister; Pierre Bérégovoy was his Socialist predecessor at the same post.

nor participation by people in political conflicts or struggles, or merely in political activity. On the social level, there are not only the bureaucratization of the unions and their reduction to a skeletal state but also the near-disappearance of social struggles. There have never been so few strike days in France, for example, as during the last ten or fifteen years—and almost always, these struggles are merely of a sectoral or corporatist character.[8]

But as was already said, the decomposition of society may be seen especially in the disappearance of significations, the almost complete vanishing of values. And the latter is, in the end, threatening to the very survival of the system. When, as is the case in all Western societies, it is openly proclaimed (and in France the glory goes to the Socialists for having done what the Right dared not do) that the sole value is money, profit, that the sublime ideal of social life is to enrich yourself, is it conceivable that a society can continue to function and reproduce itself on this basis alone? If that is the case, public servants ought to ask for and accept baksheeshes for doing their work, judges ought to put their decisions up for auction, teachers ought to grant good grades to the children whose parents slip them a check, and the rest accordingly. I wrote almost fifteen years ago about this, that the only thing stopping people today is fear of penal sanctions.[9] But why would those who administrate these sanctions themselves be incorruptible? Who will guard the guardians? The generalized corruption one can observe today

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[8]Note added by the author for the French *MI* reprint: Whatever their final outcome might be, the strikes unfolding now (November-December 1995) in France defy, by their implicit signification, this characterization. [French Editors: See the author's commentaries in "No to Resignation, No to Archaism" (1995); T/E: now in *ASA(RPT)*.]

[9]T/E: "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1979), in *PSW3*, 303.

in the contemporary politico-economic system is not peripheral or anecdotal; it has become a structural, a systemic trait of the society in which we live.

In truth, we are touching here upon a fundamental factor, one that the great political thinkers of the past knew and that the alleged "political philosophers" of today, bad sociologists and poor theoreticians, splendidly ignore: the intimate solidarity between a social regime and the anthropological type (or the range of such types) needed to make it function. For the most part, capitalism has inherited these anthropological types from previous historical periods: the incorruptible judge, the Weberian civil servant, the teacher devoted to his task, the worker whose work was, in spite of everything, a source of pride. Such personalities are becoming inconceivable in the contemporary age: it is not clear why today they would be reproduced, who would reproduce them, and in the name of what they would function.

Even the anthropological type that is a specific and proper creation of capitalism, the Schumpeterian entrepreneur (who combines technical inventiveness with an ability to round up capital, organize a business firm, explore, penetrate, and create markets), is in the process of disappearing. This type is being replaced by managerial bureaucracies and speculators. Here again, all these factors are conspiring with one another. Why struggle so hard to produce and to sell at a time when a successful killing in the exchange rate markets on Wall Street in New York or elsewhere can bring you 500 million dollars in a few minutes? The amounts at stake each week in speculation are on the order of the GNP of the United States for a year. The result is to put a drain on the most "entrepreneurial" elements, drawing them toward these kinds of activity that are completely parasitic from the point of view of the capitalist system itself.

If one puts all these factors together and takes into account, moreover, the irreversible destruction of the terrestrial environment, which capitalist "expansion" (itself a necessary condition for "social peace") necessary entails, one can and one should ask oneself how much longer the system will be able to function.

O.M.: Are not this "dilapidation" of the West,[10] this "decomposition" of society, of values, this privatization and this apathy of citizens also due to the fact that, faced with the complexity of the modern world, the challenges have become too great? We are perhaps citizens without a compass….

C.C.: That citizens are without a compass is certain, but that relates precisely to this dilapidation, to this decomposition, to this unprecedented wearing out of social imaginary significations. One can note it yet again in other examples.

No one knows any longer what being a citizen is, but no one even knows any longer what it is to be a man or a woman. Sexual roles have dissolved; one no longer knows in what that consists. In former times one knew it, on the various social, economic, and group levels. I am not saying that this was good; I am taking a descriptive and analytical point of view. For example, the famous saying, "A woman's place is in the home" (which precedes Nazism by several millennia), defined a role for the woman: this is criticizable, alienating, inhuman, whatever you want—but in any case a woman knew what she had to do: be at home, take care of the house. Likewise, the man knew that he had to feed his family, exercise authority, and so forth. Likewise, in the sexual game: in France one makes fun (and, I think, rightly so) of Americans' ridiculous legalism, with the stories of sexual

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[10]T/E: See "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991; Postscript, 1994-1995), now above in the present volume.

harassment (which no longer have anything to do with abuses of authority, the position of the boss, etc.), the detailed regulations published by universities on the explicit consent required on the part of the woman at each stage in the process, and so on—but who does not see the profound psychical insecurity, the loss of bearings for one's sexual identity, that this legalism is pathetically trying to palliate? The same goes for parent-child relations: no one knows today what it is to be a mother or a father.

O.M.: This dilapidation of which we are speaking is certainly not the sole fact in Western societies. What should be said about the other ones? On the other hand, can one say that it is also bringing down with it Western revolutionary values? And what is the role, in this social evolution, of the much talked-about "guilt" of the West?

C.C.: In the history of West, there is an accumulation of horrors—against others just as much as against itself. This is not the privilege of the West: whether it's China, India, Africa before colonization, or the Aztecs, horrors have piled up everywhere. The history of humanity is not the history of class struggle, it is the history of horrors—though it is not only that. Here, it is true, there is a question open to debate, that of totalitarianism: Is it, as I think, the culmination of the folly of "mastery" in a civilization that has provided the means for extermination and indoctrination on a scale hitherto unknown in history; is it a perverse fate immanent to modernity as such, considering all the ambiguities modernity bears within itself; or is it something else again? For our present discussion, this question is, if I dare say so, theoretical to the extent that the West has directed the horrors of totalitarianism against its own (including the Jews), to the extent that "Kill them all, God will know His own" is a phrase not of Lenin's making but of a very Christian duke,

spoken not in the twentieth century but in the thirteenth,[11] to the extent that human sacrifices have been practiced abundantly and regularly by non-European cultures, etc., etc. Khomeini's Iran is not a product of the Enlightenment.

There is, in contrast, something that is specific and unique to the West and its burdensome privilege: this social-historical sequence that began with Greece and that was resumed, starting in the eleventh century, in Western Europe is the sole one in which one witnesses the emergence of a project of freedom, of individual and collective autonomy, of criticism and self-criticism: discourses denouncing the West are its most striking confirmation, for one is capable in the West—at least some of us are—of denouncing totalitarianism, colonialism, the traffic in Blacks or the extermination of the American Indians. But I have not seen the descendants of the Aztecs, the Hindus, or the Chinese undertake an analogous self-criticism, and still today I see the Japanese denying the atrocities they committed during World War II. The Arabs unceasingly denounce their colonization by the Europeans, imputing to the latter the ills they themselves suffer—poverty, the lack of democracy, the arrested development of Arabic culture, and so forth. But the colonization of certain Arab countries by the Europeans lasted, in the worst of cases, 130 years (that's the case of Algeria, from 1830 to 1962). These same Arabs, however, were reduced to slavery and colonized by the Turks for five centuries. Turkish domination over the Near and Middle East began in the fifteenth century and ended in 1918. It happens that the Turks were Muslims—therefore the Arabs do not talk about them. The flourishing of Arabic culture stopped around the eleventh century, the

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[11]T/E: Phrase attributed to Cistercian abbot Arnaud Amalric during the Albigensian Crusade, at the time of the 1209 Massacre at Béziers, which resulted in the indiscriminate killing of thousands.

twelfth at the latest, eight centuries before there was a question of conquest by the West. And this same Arabic culture was built upon the conquest, the extermination, and/or the more or less forced conversion of conquered populations. In Egypt, in 550 CE, there were no Arabs—no more than there were any in Libya, in Algeria, in Morocco, or in Iraq. They are there as descendants of conquerors who came to colonize these countries and to convert the local populations of their own free will or by force. But I see no criticism of these facts in the circle of Arabic civilization. Likewise, one talks about the traffic in Blacks by Europeans starting in the sixteenth century, but it is never said that the traffic in Blacks and their systematic reduction to a state of slavery were introduced into Africa by Arabic merchants starting in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (with, as always, the willing participation of Black kings and tribal chiefs), that slavery never was spontaneously abolished in Islamic lands, and that it still subsists in some of them. I am not saying that all that erases the crimes committed by the Westerners; I am saying only this, that the specificity of Western civilization is this capacity to call itself into question and to undertake self-criticism. There are in Western history, as in all other histories, atrocities and horrors, but it is only the West that has created a capacity for internal contestation, for challenging of its own institutions and of its own ideas, in the name of a reasonable discussion among human beings that remains indefinitely open and that recognizes no ultimate dogma.

O.M.: You say somewhere that the weight of responsibility of Western humanity—precisely because it is this part of humanity that has created internal contestation—makes you think that a radical transformation

must take place here first.[12] Do not the prerequisites for a genuine sort of autonomy, for emancipation, for a self-institution of society, perhaps for some "progress"—in brief, for a renewal of the imaginary significations created by Greece and resumed by the European West—seem to be lacking today?

C.C.: First, we mustn't mix up our discussion with the idea of "progress." There is no progress in history, save in the instrumental domain. With an H-bomb you can kill many more people than with a stone hatchet, and contemporary mathematics is infinitely richer, more powerful and complex, than the arithmetic of primitive peoples. But a painting by Picasso is worth neither more nor less than the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira, Balinese music is sublime, and the mythologies of all peoples are of an extraordinary beauty and depth. And if we're talking on the level of morality, we have only to look at what is going on around us for us to stop talking about "progress." Progress is an essentially capitalist imaginary signification, one that Marx let himself be taken in by.

That said, if one considers the present-day situation, a situation not of crisis but of decomposition, of dilapidation of the Western societies, one finds oneself faced with an antinomy of the first magnitude. Here it is: What is required is immense, it goes very far—and human beings, such as they are and such as they are constantly being reproduced by Western societies, but also by the other societies, are immensely far removed from that. What is required? Taking into account the ecological crisis, the extreme inequality of the division of wealth between rich countries and poor countries, and the near-impossibility of the system to continue on its present course, what is required is a new imaginary

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[12]T/E: See, for example, "The Idea of Revolution" (1989), now in *CL3*.

creation of a size unparalleled in the past, a creation that would put at the center of human life other significations than the expansion of production and consumption, that would lay down different objectives for life, ones that might be recognized by human beings as worth pursuing. That would evidently require a reorganization of social institutions, work relations, economic, political, cultural relations.

Now, this orientation is extremely far removed from what humans today are thinking, and perhaps far from what they desire. Such is the immense difficulty to which we have to face up. We ought to want a society in which economic values have ceased to be central (or the sole ones), in which the economy is put back in its place as a mere means for human life and not as its ultimate end, in which one therefore renounces this mad race toward ever increasing consumption. That is necessary not only in order to avoid the definitive destruction of the terrestrial environment but also and especially in order to escape from the psychical and moral poverty of contemporary human beings. It would therefore be necessary, henceforth, for human beings (I am speaking now of the rich countries) to accept a decent but frugal standard of living and to give up the idea that the central objective of their life is that their level of consumption increase two or three percent per year. For them to accept that, it would be necessary that something else give meaning to their lives. One knows, I know, what this other thing might be—but obviously that does not mean anything if the great majority of people do not accept it and do not do what must be done for it to be achieved. This other thing is the development of human beings instead of the development of gadgets. That would require another organization of work, which ought to cease to be a drudgery in order to become a field for the deployment of human capacities. It would also require other political

systems, a genuine democracy that includes the participation of all in the making of decisions, another organization of *paideia* in order to raise citizens capable of governing and of being governed, as Aristotle so admirably said[13]—and so on.

Quite obviously, all that poses immense problems. For example, how could a genuine democracy, a direct democracy, be able to function, no longer on the scale of 30,000 citizens as in classical Athens, but on the scale of 40 million citizens as in France, or even on the scale of several billion individuals on the planet. These are immensely difficult, but in my opinion soluble, problems—on the condition, precisely, that the majority of human beings and their capacities be mobilized to create the solutions instead of being preoccupied with knowing when one will be able to have a 3D television set.

Such are the tasks that lie before us—and the tragedy of our age is that Western humanity is very far from being preoccupied with them. For how long will this portion of humanity remain obsessed by these inanities and these illusions that are called commodities? Would some sort of catastrophe—an ecological one, for example—lead to a brutal awakening, or rather to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes? No one can answer these types of questions. What one can say is that all those who are aware of the terribly weighty character of the stakes involved must try to speak up, to criticize this race toward the abyss, to awaken the consciousness of their fellow citizens.

O.M.: An article in *Le Monde* by Frédéric Gaussen recently mentioned a qualitative change: a dozen years after the "silence of the intellectuals," the collapse of totalitarianism in the East functions as a validation of the Western democratic model, intellectuals are speaking up

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[13]T/E: Aristotle *Politics* 1252a16.

again to defend this model, invoking Francis Fukuyama, Tocqueville, and there is the ambient consensus about "weak thought."[14] That certainly is not the "change" you have been calling for.

C.C.: Let us state straight off that the vociferations of 1982-1983 around the "silence of the intellectuals" were nothing but a minor politician-led operation. Those who were vociferating wanted the intellectuals to rush to the aid of the French Socialist Party, which few people were ready to do (even if not a few of them profited from it to obtain their posts and so on). Since at the same time—for this and other reasons—no one wanted to criticize it, nothing was said. But all that concerns just the Parisian microcosm; it is of no interest, and it is far removed from what we are talking about. And neither has there been a recent "reawakening" of the intellectuals in that sense.

I also think that what you call the "ambient Tocquevilleanism" is going to have a short life. Tocqueville, no one will contest, is a very important thinker; he saw in a very young United States of the 1830s some very important things, but he didn't see other ones that were just as important. For example, he did not grant the necessary weight to the social and political differentiation already fully installed during his time or to the fact that the imaginary of equality remained confined to certain aspects of social life and hardly affected the effectively real relations of power. It would certainly be very impolite to ask today's Tocquevilleans, or

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[14]T/E: See Italian postmodernist Gianni Vattimo's *Il pensiere debole* (Milan, 1983; *Weak Thought*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, tr. with an intro. Peter Carravetta [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012]), cited by Castoriadis in other texts. The Frédéric Gaussen article mentioned in the interview is "Le murmure des intellectuels," *Le Monde*, April 17, 1993: 2.

alleged Tocquevilleans: What then do you have to say, as Tocquevilleans, about the strong social and political differentiations that in no way are being attenuated, about the new ones that are being created, about the highly oligarchical character of the alleged "democracies," about the erosion of the economic as well as anthropological conditions for the "march toward the equality of conditions," about the clear incapacity of the Western political imaginary to penetrate quite vast regions of the non-Western world? And what about the generalized political apathy? Certainly, on this last point, we will be told that Tocqueville had already glimpsed the emergence of a "tutelary State." But this State, while it may indeed be "tutelary" (which cancels out any idea of "democracy"), is in no way, as he believed, "benevolent." It is a totally bureaucratized State, delivered over to private interests, eaten up by corruption, incapable even of governing, since it has to maintain an unstable equilibrium between the lobbies of all sorts that fragment contemporary society. And Tocqueville's "growing equality of conditions" has come to signify simply the absence of external signs of inherited status and the equalization of all by the general form of equivalence, namely, money—provided one has some. If you want to rent a suite at the Hotel Crillon or the Ritz, no one is going to ask you who you are or what your grandfather did. All you need is to be well dressed and to have a well-provisioned bank account.

The Western-style "triumph of democracy" lasted a few months. What one sees now is the state of Eastern Europe and the ex-"Soviet Union," Somalia, Rwanda-Burundi, Afghanistan, Haiti, sub-Saharan Africa, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Algeria, and I shan't go on. All these discussions have been terribly provincial. One discusses these matters as if the topics that are fashionable in France exhausted, by themselves, the

preoccupations of the whole planet. But the French population represents one percent of the world population. This is beneath ridiculousness.

The overwhelming majority of the planet is not living the "equalization of conditions" but, rather, poverty and tyranny. And contrary to what both Marxists and Liberals believed, this impoverished and tyrannized majority in no way is in the process of preparing itself to welcome the Western model of the liberal-capitalist republic. All it looks for in the Western model are weapons and consumer goods—not *habeas corpus* or the separation of powers. This is strikingly so in Muslim countries—one billion inhabitants—in India—almost another billion—in Africa, in China—still another billion—in most of the countries of Southeast Asia and Latin America. The world situation, which is extremely grave, makes a mockery of the idea both of an "end of history"[15] and of a universal triumph of the Western-style "democratic model." And this "model" is being emptied of its substance—even in its countries of origin.

O.M.: Your acerbic criticisms of the Liberal Western model ought not to prevent you from seeing the difficulties with your overall political project. In a first stage, democracy is for you the imaginary creation of a project of autonomy and self-institution, which you wish to see triumph. In a second stage, you draw upon this concept of autonomy and self-institution to criticize liberal capitalism. Two questions: Is this not a way for you, first of all, to mourn the death of Marxism, both as project and as critique? And is there not, in the second place, a sort of ambiguity, to the extent that this "autonomy" is precisely what capitalism structurally needs in order to function, atomizing society, "personalizing" its clientele, and making citizens docile and useful so that they

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[15]T/E: See now "The 'End of History'?" (1992), in *PSRTI*.

all will have internalized the idea that they are consuming of their own free will, obeying of their own free will, and so on?

C.C.: Let me begin with your second question, which rests on a misunderstanding. The atomization of individuals is not autonomy. When an individual buys a fridge or a car, he does what 40 million other French individuals do; there is here neither individuality nor autonomy. This is, as a matter of fact, one of the mystifications of contemporary advertising: "Personalize yourself, buy Brand X laundry detergent." And millions of individuals go out and "personalize" (!) themselves by buying the same detergent. Or else, 20 million French households at the same hour and at the same minute press the same button on their television set in order to watch the same asininities. This is the unpardonable confusion of people like Gilles Lipovetsky and others,[16] who speak of individualism, narcissism, and so forth, as if they themselves had swallowed this deceptive advertising. As precisely this example shows, capitalism has need not of autonomy but of conformism. Its present-day triumph is that we are living an era of generalized conformism[17]—not only as concerns consumption but also as concerns politics, ideas, culture, and so on.

Your other question is more complex. But first a clarification of a "psychological" nature. Certainly, I was a Marxist, but neither criticism of the capitalist regime nor the

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[16]T/E: See Gilles Lipovetsky's *L'Ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). Castoriadis mentions this book in the Author's addition to his critique of Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut's *La Pensée 68*: "The Movements of the Sixties" (1986), now above in the present volume.

[17]T/E: See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalized Conformism" (1990), now in *CL3*. The French title Castoriadis gave to this English-language talk translates literally as "The Era of Generalized Conformism."

emancipatory project is an invention of Marx. And I believe that my path shows that my primary concern never was to "save" Marx. Very early on I criticized Marx, and I did so precisely because I discovered that he had not remained faithful to this project of autonomy.

As to the underlying nature of the question, we must reexamine matters upstream. Human history is creation. This means that the institution of society is always self-institution, but a self-institution that does not know itself as such and does not want to know itself as such. To say that history is creation signifies that one can neither explain nor deduce this or that form of society on the basis of real factors or logical considerations. It is not the nature of the desert or the landscape of the Middle East that explains the birth of Judaism—or, moreover, as it is again in fashion to say, the "philosophical" superiority of monotheism over polytheism. Hebrew monotheism is a creation of the Hebrew people, and neither Greek geography nor the state of the productive forces at the time explains the birth of the democratic Greek *polis*, because the Mediterranean world was full of cities and slavery was found everywhere around there—in Phoenicia, in Rome, in Carthage. Democracy was a Greek creation, a creation that certainly remained limited, since there was slavery, the status of women, and so on, but the importance of this creation lies in the idea, unimaginable at the time for the rest of the world, that a collectivity can self-institute itself [*s'auto-instituer*] explicitly and self-govern itself [*s'autogouverner*].

History is creation, and each form of society is a particular creation. I am speaking of the imaginary institution of society, for this creation is the work of the anonymous collective imaginary. The Hebrews imagined, they created their God as a poet creates a poem, a musician a piece of music. Social creation is obviously infinitely broader, since it

is, each time, creation of a world, the proper world of this society: in the world of the Hebrews, there is a God with quite particular characteristics, a God who has created this world and these men, given them laws, and so forth. The same thing is true for all societies. The idea of creation is not at all identical to the idea of value: it is not because this or that individual or collective thing is a creation that it is to be valued. Auschwitz and the Gulag are creations under the same heading as the Parthenon or Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral. There are monstrous creations, but absolutely fantastic ones. The concentration camp system is a fantastic creation—which does mean that one has to swallow it. Some advertising people say, "Our firm is more creative than others." It actually can be so while creating idiocies and monstrosities.

Among the creations of human history, one is singularly singular: the one that permits the society under consideration to itself call itself into question. This is the creation of the idea of autonomy, of the reflective return upon oneself, of criticism and self-criticism, of a questioning that neither knows nor accepts any limit. This creation therefore takes place at the same time as democracy and philosophy. For, just as a philosopher cannot accept any external limitations on his thought, so democracy recognizes no external limits to its instituting power; its sole limits result from its self-limitation. It is known that the first form of this creation arose in ancient Greece; it is known, or it ought to be known, that it was resumed, with different characteristics, in Western Europe beginning already in the eleventh century with the creation of the first burgher [*bourgeoises*] communes that demanded self-governance, then with the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the workers' movement, and more recently with other

emancipatory movements. In all this Marx and Marxism represent only a moment, an important one in certain regards, catastrophic in others. And it is thanks to this series of movements that there subsists in contemporary society a certain number of partial liberties, essentially partial and defensive ones,[18] that have become crystallized in a few institutions: the rights of man, the prohibition of *ex post facto* laws, a certain separation of powers, and so on. These liberties have not been granted from on high by capitalism; they have been wrested and imposed through these centuries-old struggles. They are also what makes the present-day political regime, not a democracy (it is not the people who hold and exercise power), but a liberal oligarchy. This is a bastard regime, one based upon the coexistence of the dominant strata's power with an almost uninterrupted effort at social and political contestation. But as paradoxical as this might seem, it is the disappearance of this contestation that is endangering the stability of the regime. It is because workers did not just go along [*ne se laissaient pas faire*] that capitalism was able to develop as it did. It is far from certain that the regime will be able to continue to function with a population of passive citizens, resigned wage earners, etc.

O.M.: But how could a participatory democracy function today? What would be the social relays of an effective sort of contestation and criticism? You sometimes mention a strategy of waiting or patience, which would await

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[18]T/E: The originally published text read (as given here via translation), "essentially negative and defensive ones," but a second instance of *partielles* has come to replace *négatives* in the final French book version (*MI*, 101; 119 of the 2007 reprint), and we have followed this reading. On the reason why "negative" is inadequate and would have had to be changed, see n. 14 in "The Dilapidation of the West," now above in the present volume. Nevertheless, there now is a bit of redundancy here with the two instances of "partial."

an accelerated dilapidation of the political parties. There could also be a worst-case strategy, which would wish for an aggravation of the situation so that one might exit from the current generalized apathy. But there is also a strategy of urgency, which would go out and meet the unforeseeable.[19] But how and by whom will what you term "conceiving something else, creating something else" arrive?

C.C.: You said it yourself: I cannot by myself alone furnish an answer to these questions. If there is a response, it is the great majority of people who will provide it. For my part, I observe, on the one hand, the immensity of the tasks and their difficulty, the extent of the apathy and privatization in contemporary societies, the nightmarish intricacy of the problems facing the rich countries and those that are posed to the poor countries, and so on. But also, on the other hand, one cannot say that Western societies are dead, simply writing them off from history. We are not yet living in fourth-century Rome or Constantinople, where the new religion had frozen all movement and where everything was in the hands of the Emperor, the Pope, and the Patriarch. There are signs of resistance, people who are struggling here and there; there have been in France for the past ten years the *coordinations*;[20]

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[19]T/E: A sentence from Morel's question was dropped here from the final French book version (see *ibid*.), which reads (as given here via translation), "Obviously, I am not asking you for *ex nihilo* solutions." Its removal, if it was not done inadvertently, may be because of the anomaly of Morel saying to Castoriadis that he is not expecting from this philosopher of creativity "*ex nihilo* solutions." A restitution of this sentence might serve to account for the otherwise anomalous repeat of "But" to begin two seemingly consecutive sentences.

[20]T/E: These are grass-roots coordinating committees of striking workers, students, etc. organized separately from the established unions and political organizations. See "The *Coordinations*: A Preface" (1996), in *RTI(TBS)*. We hope to reprint this text in the projected fourth volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.

there are still some important books that appear. In the Letters to the Editor columns of *Le Monde*, for example, one often finds letters expressing entirely healthy and critical points of view.

I obviously cannot know whether all that suffices in order to turn the situation around. What is certain is that those who are aware of the gravity of the questions raised ought to do everything in their power—whether by speaking out, by writing, or simply by the attitude they adopt in the place they occupy—so that people might awaken from their contemporary lethargy and begin to act in the direction of freedom.

KOINŌNIA

Anthropology, Philosophy, Politics

I

The general title for this series of lectures I have been asked to introduce happens to be: "For a General Science of Man." I understand this title to mean not science in the contemporary and somewhat degraded sense of this term—algorithmic computation and experimental manipulation—or a "positive science" from which all traces of reflection would have carefully been wiped away but, rather, in its former meaning, referring to knowledge concerning man and including all the riddles to which this simple word *knowledge* gives rise as soon as one begins to interrogate it. These riddles but multiply when one recalls that this knowledge of man (in the objective genitive, knowledge about man) is also a knowledge of man (in the subjective and possessive genitive)—therefore, that man is at once the object and the subject of this knowledge.[1]

That leads us straightaway to a first well-known classical determination of man, since man is, of all the beings we know, the sole one that seeks knowledge in general and a knowledge of himself in particular. One can even say that

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[*]"Anthropologie, philosophie, politique," a lecture given at the University of Lausanne on May 11, 1989, was first published in *Conférences et Travaux Alexandre-César Chavannes pour une "science générale de l'homme": Actes des colloques du Groupe d'Études Pratiques Sociales et Théories* (Lausanne: Institut d'anthropologie et de sociologie de l'Université de Lausanne, 1990), pp. 25-69. Reprinted in *MI*, 105-24 (125-48 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: The text was first translated into English for a special Cornelius Castoriadis issue of *Thesis Eleven*, 49 (May 1997): 99-116, and reprinted in *RTI(TBS)*.]

[1]T/E: When the author makes mention of "man," he is referring to the generic *anthrōpos*—"the species, male as well as female," as Castoriadis has said elsewhere—not the exclusively male *anēr* (whose genitive in Greek is *andros*).

here the particular precedes the general. The question *What about knowledge in general?* cannot be thought without asking the prior question *What about knowledge of man?* (here in both the objective and subjective genitive). For, it is man who knows or does not know, and this preliminary question is, in turn, only one part of the question: What do we know of man, and does that which we know of him allow us to state that he can know something in general and something of himself in particular? One will notice here how the question doubles back upon itself—which to some might appear to be a vicious circle or a hopeless situation. In fact, the circle is not vicious; it is the circle of reflection doubling back upon itself, leaning upon itself in order to call itself into question—the circle, that is, of genuine philosophical reflection.

　　　Still, a brief commentary is needed on the term "a *general* science of man." I am sure that the organizers of this series of lectures did not intend thereby a mere gathering together of all the scattered disciplines concerning man— from physical anthropology to sociology, passing by way of psychology, linguistics, and history. They did not intend thereby an encyclopedia of the human sciences but a knowledge that aims at the "genericalness" or "genericity" of the human—I am intentionally avoiding the term *universality* —that is, that which appertains to the *genus homo* as such. Now, here we encounter another decisive particularity, also well known but not adequately explored: in the human domain, we do not have the same relationship, the same structure of relationship, as the one we find, or constitute, in other domains, between the singular—the concretely given exemplar—and the universal or the abstract. Such and such a physical, or even biological, object is only one example, one particular instantiation, of the universal determinations of the

class to which that object belongs; its singularities are at once accidental and statistical. In the human domain, by contrast, while there certainly are the accidental and the statistical without end, singularity here is not alien to the essence, nor is it added over and above the latter. Here, singularity is essential; each time, it is another side of the being of man that emerges, creates itself, through this or that individual or such and such a society.

How are we to think this original relationship—one unique to the human domain—that ensures that this or that man, such and such a society, by its very singularity and not in spite of that singularity, is able to modify the essence of man or of society—without, however, ceasing to belong to the one or the other (for, otherwise we would not even be able to label it *man* or *society*)? The solution to this apparent antinomy will be provided, I hope, by what follows. But first we must set aside a response that comes to mind immediately, one that is halfway satisfactory but still missing what matters most.

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We could say, in effect, that this or that man, such and such a society, in their singularity (that is, there was only one Hebrew people, or one Roman society, not two, and there never again will be another one elsewhere; what they are or have been could not be fabricated from some elements, picked up left and right, among the Nambikwara, New Yorkers, or pre-Columbian Amerindians), teach us simply some of the *possibilities* of the being man that, without them, would remain unknown or would not have been realized. And in a sense, that is so. If Socrates existed, his existence shows that the possibility of "being Socrates" appertains to human

being. And if Reinhard Heydrich existed, the same thing may be said of him. Heydrich is one human possibility. If the Aztecs regularly practiced human sacrifices, that tells us something about the being of human societies. And likewise, if elsewhere societies proclaiming equality and liberty as human rights do exist.

This idea is important, and it should not simply be set aside. It should not be set aside without further ado first of all because it unsettles our tendency to confine ourselves to what we are given as the average and usual type of man and society—and, quite especially, to our own society and to the individuals we encounter therein. One of the paradoxes of the contemporary age is that it is in this age of television and global tourism that people can be so astonished at how one can be Persian[2]—that is to say, Iranian—believing that over there it is a matter of ways of doing and being that are completely aberrant, whereas, however criminal they may be in some of their actual manifestations, it is of such ways of being and doing (societies ruled by religion and religious fanaticism) that human history is above all made. In other words, people think that living in a society where everything can be challenged goes without saying, whereas this is the thing that goes without saying the least of all. This possibility therefore shakes up our banal and false sense of self-evident truths.

The other reason this idea is important and cannot simply be set aside is that it illustrates what I said about the specificity, at once ontological and gnoseological, of the question of man. Indeed, no horse will ever be born that would oblige us to reconsider our idea of the horse's essence, whereas, for example, the appearance of what was called totalitarianism has obliged Westerners—right in the twentieth

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[2]T/E: Montesquieu's question, from his *Persian Letters* (1721).

century, when one was celebrating the victory of the ideas of progress, freedom, and so on—to reconsider, at great pain, what they believed they knew about human societies, about the course of history, and about their own society.

Nevertheless, this idea is problematic, and decisively inadequate. Can we truly say that this gamut of singularities, of societies and individuals that succeed one another and that are juxtaposed with one another, does nothing more than realize some allegedly predetermined "possibilities of human being"? Would we truly dare say that Socrates (since I spoke of him a moment ago), or *Tristan und Isolde*, or Auschwitz, or the *Critique of Pure Reason*, or the Gulag "realize some of the possibilities of human being" in the sense that every triangle I might define is a concrete realization of the possibilities contained in the essence of the triangle? Can we for an instant think that there exists an unlimited catalog, an unending directory, that holds all these types of individuals and societies in stock—or, perhaps, a general law that determines in advance the possibilities of being human, possibilities that would then, either randomly or systematically, be deployed in history?

As strange as this might appear, two major tendencies in modern European thought have supported this view: Structuralism and Hegelianism. The idea's absurdity is, it seems to me, easy to show. If the Structuralists were right—if, as Claude Lévi-Strauss said in *Race and History*, for example, different human societies are but different combinations of a small number of invariable elements—the Structuralists would then have to be able to produce on the spot, here and now, all the possible types of human society, as a geometrician exhibits the five regular polyhedrons and proves that there can be no others. That has never been done, and it cannot be done. And if the Hegelians were right, they would

have to be capable both of revealing to us the rigorous systematicality of the historical succession of the various types of society and of extending this systematic succession in such a way as to cover every conceivable future. We know that Hegel accomplished the first task only upon a monstrous bed of Procrustes, where entire chunks of the history of humanity were lopped off, others were stretched or compressed out of shape, and where Islam was placed "before" Christianity and the latter "truly" began only with its Germanization, Protestantism, and so forth. But the second task, that of deducing the future, is also completely senseless, since it necessarily and absurdly leads to the affirmation that the "end of history" is now already upon us. This "end of history" is neither a matter of Hegel's mood nor a personal opinion of his but at once the presupposition for and the conclusion to his entire system. The *coup de grâce* given to this idea comes in the form of a statement made by Hegel himself (in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*): Of course, he says, after the end of history there still remains some empirical work to be done. Thus, for example, the history of the twentieth century would no longer be anything but the object of some unfinished "empirical work" that just any underling student of Hegel's could complete without encountering, in principle, any real problems.[3]

In truth, the term *possibility* can have here, as such, only a purely negative meaning. Indeed, nothing in the universe, nothing in the structure and laws of the universe, rendered impossible or prohibited the construction of the Cathedral at Reims or the institution of the Gulag. Yet the forms of society, its works [*œuvres*], the types of individual that arise in history do not belong on a list, be it an infinite one, of posited and positive possibilities. They are *creations*,

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[3]T/E: See now "The 'End of History'?" (1992), in *PSRTI*.

starting from which new possibilities—hitherto inexistent ones, because heretofore meaningless—appear. The expression *possible* has meaning only within a system of well-specified determinations. Is the *Fifth Symphony* possible at the moment of the Big Bang? Either the question has no meaning or, if it does, the sole response is: It is impossible. The possibility of the *Fifth Symphony* is posited starting from the moment men create music.

It has been stated over and over again for the past forty years that there is no human nature, no essence of man. This negative remark is completely inadequate. The nature, or essence, of man is precisely this "capacity," this "possibility" in the active, positive, not predetermined sense of *making be other forms* of social and individual existence, as a glance at the otherness [*alterité*] in institutions of society, in tongues, or in works makes abundantly clear. This does indeed mean that there really is a human nature or an essence of man, which may be defined by the following key specific property: creation, in the manner of and after the fashion according to which man creates and self-creates himself [*crée et s'autocrée*]. And this creation—an apparently banal, yet decisive, remark whose consequences we have not ceased to unravel—has not ended, in any sense of the term.

II

From this, some philosophical—and, more especially, ontological—consequences of capital importance already follow. I shall briefly explicate two of them.

Creation does not signify indetermination. Creation *presupposes*, certainly, a certain indetermination in being, in the sense that what is is never such that it excludes the surging forth of new forms, of new determinations. In other

words, from the most essential standpoint, what is is not *closed*. What is is open; what is is always also *to-be*.

But creation also does not signify indetermination in another sense: creation is precisely the positing of new determinations. What would we have understood about music, or about the French Revolution, if we had limited ourselves to saying: *History is the domain of the indeterminate*? The creation of music as such, or of this or that particular musical work, or the French Revolution is the *positing of new determinations*; each one is a creation of *forms*. A form—an *eidos*, as Plato would have said—means a set of determinations, a set of possibilities and impossibilities that are defined starting from the moment the form is posited. Here we have the positing of new determinations, and of *other* determinations, ones not reducible to what was already there, not deducible and not producible starting from what was already there. Socrates is not Socrates because he is indeterminate but because he determines—through what he says, through what he does, through what he is, through what he makes himself be, and through the way in which he makes himself die—a type of individual that he embodies and that did not exist beforehand. The ontological import of this remark is immense: there exists at least one type of being that creates something else, that is a source of alterity, and that thereby itself alters itself [*s'altère lui-même*].

A general science of man, research bearing upon the *genus homo*, is therefore precisely this: research bearing upon the conditions and the forms of *human creation*. For the reasons previously stated, such research can only be a continual back-and-forth movement between singular creations and what we can think of the human as such. Without these singular creations, without a comprehension of

them, we know nothing of man; to probe another singular creation is not to add a thousandth horse to the nine-hundred-ninety-ninth already studied by zoologists but, rather, to unveil another form created by human being. What extraterrestrial ethnologist visiting the Earth around 5000 BCE could have predicted, or even suspected, that these shaggy beings might one day create democracy or philosophy? And had she thought or suspected that, had she simply posed the question to herself, she would have done so only because these forms, or very analogous ones, had already been created on her mysterious home planet.

Creation means the capacity to bring about the emergence of what is not given—not derivable, by means of a combinatory or in some other way—starting from the given. Right away, we think that it is this capacity that corresponds to the deep meaning of the terms *imagination* and *imaginary*, once we have abandoned the superficial ways these terms have been used. The imagination is not simply the capacity to combine some already-given elements in order to produce therefrom another variant of an already given form; the imagination is the capacity to posit new forms. Granted, this new form utilizes elements that are already there, but the *form* as such is new. More radically still, as was glimpsed by certain philosophers (Aristotle, Kant, Fichte) but always occulted anew, the imagination is what allows us to create for ourselves a *world*—or to present to ourselves something of which, without the imagination, we would know nothing and we could say nothing.

The imagination begins with the sensibility; it is manifest in the most elementary data of the sensibility. We can determine a physicophysiological correspondence between certain wavelengths of light and the color red or blue; we absolutely cannot "explain" either physically or

physiologically the sensation red or blue as to its *quality*. We might have seen the red blue or the blue red, or other unprecedented colors; for the *quale* and the *tale* of the color, there is no "explanation." The imagination incorporated in our sensibility has brought into being this form of being that does not exist in nature (in nature, there are no colors; there are only instances of radiation), the red, the blue, color in general, which we "perceive"—though the term is certainly an abuse of language—and which other animals, because their sensorial imagination is *other*, "perceive" in another way. Imagination—*Einbildung* in German—signifies a *setting into images*, which of course is in certain regards common to us all, inasmuch as we belong to the *genus homo*, and always also each time absolutely singular. The same goes for what I call the social imaginary, the instituting imaginary, to which I shall return immediately.

But if that is true, then, contrary to the old commonplace, what makes of man a man is not that he is reasonable or rational. And this, quite evidently, is an aberration. There is no madder being than man, whether he is considered in the depths of his psychism or in his diurnal activities. Ants or wild animals have a functional "rationality" far superior to that of man: they do not stumble, nor do they eat poisonous mushrooms. Men have to learn what is nourishment and what is not. It therefore is not on the basis of "rationality," of "logic"—which, *qua* operant logic, is generally characteristic of *every living being*—that we can characterize man. It is our capacity for creation that shows us why the essence of man could not be logic, not be rationality. With logic and rationality one can go as far as virtual infinity (after two billion there is still two billion to the two billionth power); one can draw out, *ad infinitum*, the consequences of *already posited* axioms, but neither logic nor rationality will

ever allow one to imagine a new axiom. The highest form of our logic, mathematics, can receive a new impetus each time only if one imagines, only if one invents. And that is something mathematicians know very well, even if they are not always capable of elucidating it. They know of the central role the imagination plays not only in the solution to problems that already have been posed but also in the positing of new mathematical worlds. Such a positing is not reducible to mere logical operations, for otherwise it would be algorithmizable, and then one could simply mechanize the process.

Based on these remarks, we can posit the imagination and the social imaginary as essential characteristics of man. Man is *psuchē*, soul, psyche in its underlying strata, unconscious. And man is society; he *is* only in and through society, its institution, and the social imaginary significations that render the psyche fit for life. And society is always also history; there never is—even in a primitive, repetitive society—a frozen or congealed present. More exactly, even in the most archaic society the present is always also constituted by a past that inhabits it and by a future it anticipates. It is therefore always a historical present. Beyond biology, which in man both persists and finds itself put irremediably out of order [*déréglée*], man is a psychical being and a social-historical being.

Moreover, it is at these two levels that we rediscover the capacity for creation, which I have named the *imagination* and the *imaginary*. There is the radical imagination of the psyche—namely, perpetual upsurge of a flux of representations, of affects, and of desires, all three indissociable each from the others. If we do not understand that, we do not understand anything about man.

Nevertheless, it is not the psyche, in the sense I give to this term, that can create institutions. It is not the

Unconscious that creates the law or even the idea of the law. Rather, the Unconscious receives law as alien, hostile, oppressive. Furthermore, it is not the psyche that is able to create language; the psyche must receive language, and with language it receives the totality of the social imaginary significations that language bears, conveys, and renders possible.

But what will we say about language and laws? Are we to imagine a primitive legislator, one who does not yet possess language but who is still sufficiently "intelligent" to be able to invent it without having it and to persuade the other human beings, who still do not have it, that it would be useful to talk? A ridiculous idea. Language shows us the social imaginary at work, as instituting imaginary, positing at once a strictly logical dimension—what I call the *ensemblistic-identitarian* (every language has to be able to say one plus one equals two)—as well as a properly *imaginary* dimension, since in and through language are given the social imaginary significations that hold a society together: taboo, totem, God, the *polis*, the nation, wealth, the party, citizenship, virtue, or eternal life. Eternal life is quite evidently, even if it "exists," a social imaginary signification, since no one has ever shown or proved mathematically the existence of eternal life. And here we have a social imaginary signification that ruled, for seventeen centuries, the life of societies that considered themselves to be the most civilized in Europe and the world.

The only way we can think this social imaginary that creates language, that creates institutions, that creates the very form of the institution—and the institution has no meaning from the perspective of the singular psyche—is as the creative capacity of the anonymous collective. This anonymous collective is realized each time humans are assembled and it gives itself, each time, a singular instituted figure in order to exist.

Man's knowing and acting are therefore indissociably psychical and social-historical, two poles that cannot exist one without the other. And they are irreducible to each other. All that we find that is social within an individual, and the very idea of an individual, is socially fabricated or created, in correspondence with the society's institutions. In order to find in the individual something that is not truly social, if that is possible—and it is not, since in any case what is not social has to pass by way of language—one would have to be able to reach into the ultimate core of the psyche, where the most primary desires, the most chaotic modes of representation, and the rawest and wildest affects are at work. We can do no more than reconstitute it.

Whether it is a matter of us "normal" people, the dream recounted by a patient in analysis, or the psychotic's unfolding delusion, we are always also confronted with the social: there is no dream as an analyzable object unless it is recounted (be it even by myself to myself) and every dream is populated with social objects. It sets on stage something of the psyche's primary desire, which has to be staged and is staged under *this* form only because it encounters opposition from the social institution as represented in the case of every individual by what Freud called the Superego and censorship. Not "Thou shalt not do that," "Thou shalt not sleep with thy mother," but much more. The instance, or agency, of censorship and of repression is just as aberrant, and just as logical, as the great monotheistic religions are; not "Thou shalt not sleep with thy mother" but "Thou shalt not desire to sleep with thy mother."

As soon as it goes beyond its monadic primary phase, the Unconscious turns its desire toward someone who happens to be there—generally, the mother—and who is forbidden, and this conflict, internalized by the individual,

constitutes both the *raison d'être* of the dream as such and the *raison d'être* of its content and of its type of elaboration. This does not stop something of the psyche from always succeeding, somehow or other, in percolating through the successive strata of socialization to which the psyche of the being in question is subjected and in bubbling up to the surface.

The psychical, properly speaking, cannot be reduced to the social-historical. And despite the attempts by Freud and others, the social-historical cannot be reduced to the psychical. One can interpret the "psychoanalytical" component of this or that particular institution by showing that it also corresponds to unconscious schemata and that it satisfies unconscious tendencies or needs—which is always true. The institution must always also answer to the quest for meaning that is characteristic of the psyche. Nevertheless, the fact of the institution is in itself completely alien to the psyche. This is why the socialization of the individual is so long and arduous a process. And this is also, no doubt, why babies cry without any reason, even when they are full.

III

The question *What about man?*—the question of philosophical anthropology—therefore becomes: What about the human psyche and what about society and history? One can see straightaway that these questions are philosophical questions and that they precede all others. In particular, we have to draw out all the consequences from the well-known and basic fact (the consequences of which, once again, have apparently not yet been drawn) that, for example, philosophy is born in and through society and history. One need only inspect the societies and the historical periods with which we

are familiar to see that almost all societies in almost all periods have been instituted not in the interrogatory mode but in the closure of meaning and signification. For them, what is already instituted and received—inherited—as instituted has always been true, valid, and legitimate. Man is a being that seeks meaning and that, for that purpose, creates it. But at first, and for a very long time, man creates meaning in closure and he creates the closure of meaning; he is always trying, even today, to return thereto. The rupture of this closure is inaugurated through the combined birth and rebirth [*naissance et renaissance*]—in Greece and in Western Europe—of philosophy and politics. For, both philosophy and politics radically call into question at one and the same time the established social imaginary significations and the institutions embodying these significations.

Philosophy begins, in effect, with the question: What am I to think? It is partial, of a second-order, and therefore false to define philosophy by the "question of being." Before there would be a question of being, the human being must be able to ask itself the question: What am I to think? Now, generally, that is not what is done in history. The human being thinks what the Bible, the Koran, the General Secretary, the Party, the tribe's witch doctor, the ancestors, and so on tell him to think. Of course, the question *What am I to think?* is deployed immediately in a host of other questions, *What am I to think of being?* but also *What am I to think of myself?* and *What am I to think of thought itself?*—which brings about thought's own reflectiveness. But to ask *What am I to think?* is *ipso facto* to challenge and to call into question the collectivity's, the tribe's instituted and inherited representations and to open the way to unending interrogation.

Now, these representations, as well as institutions in general, not only form a part of the concrete being, the

singular being, of the society under consideration but also determine it. If a society is *what* it is—is this-very-something (*ti*) distinct from the others—that is because it has itself created the world that it has itself created. If Hebraic society, such as we represent it to ourselves via the Old Testament, is Hebraic society and not any other one whatsoever, that is because it has created a world, the world described in the Old Testament. Being a "mythical" society, it recounts itself to itself by telling itself stories; it recounts to itself the story of God, of the world, and of the Hebrews—but at the same time this story lays out an entire structure of the world: God as creator, man both as master and possessor of nature (Genesis did not wait for Descartes) *and* as prone to sin even prior to birth, the Law, and so on. The Hebrews are Hebrews only to the extent that they think all that—just as the French, the Americans, and the Swiss of today are what they are only to the extent that they embody the imaginary significations of their respective societies, to the extent that, in a sense, they almost "are" these walking, working, drinking, etc. imaginary significations.

To call these representations, these significations, and these institutions into question is therefore equivalent to calling into question the determinations, the very laws, of one's own being and doing so in a reflective and deliberate fashion. This is what happens with philosophy and politics. Here we can make a second major ontological conclusion arising from philosophical anthropology: being—being in general—is such that there are beings that of themselves alter themselves [*s'altèrent d'eux-mêmes*] and create, without knowing it, the determinations of their particular being. This holds for all societies. But, we can add, being is such that there are beings that can create reflection and deliberation, whereby they alter in a reflective and deliberate manner the

laws, the determinations, of their own being. That exists, so far as we know, in no other region of being. Yet, we can make even further specifications.

Every society exists in creating social imaginary significations—or, the *immanent imperceived*. Some examples are the Hebraic, Christian, or Islamic God, or the commodity. No one has ever seen a commodity: one can see a car, a kilo of bananas, a meter of fabric. It is the social imaginary signification *commodity* that makes these objects function as they function in a commercial society. The imperceived is *immanent*, since obviously for a philosopher God is immanent to the society that believes in God, even if this society posits Him as transcendent; He is present therein more than any material entity, but at the same time He is imperceivable, at least in ordinary times. What of Him is "perceivable" are some very derivative consequences: a Temple at Jerusalem or elsewhere, some priests, some candelabra, and so forth.

This immanent imperceived, created by society, does not exist in other regions of being. And with the immanent imperceived appears *ideality*. Ideality signifies that the signification is not rigidly attached to a support and that it goes beyond all its particular supports—without, of course, ever being able to do without any support whatsoever in general. Everyone can, referring to signs or symbols, talk with different means or expressions of God, of eternal life, of the *polis*, of the Party, of the commodity, of capital and interest: these are idealities. They are not *fetishes*. A good definition of an originary fetish could begin with this remark: a fetish is an object that necessarily bears and conveys a signification and is one from which this signification cannot be detached. This holds for certain primitive beliefs as well as, in certain regards, for ourselves (I am leaving aside here fetishism as a

sexual perversion—which, moreover, perfectly well corresponds to this definition: the erotic signification is rigidly attached to this or that object, this or that type of object, the fetish-object).

These significations possess each time in society a *de facto*, positive validity. They are legitimate and incontestable within the society under consideration. The question of their legitimacy is not raised, and the very term *legitimacy* is anachronistic when applied to most traditional societies.

But, starting from the moment interrogation and philosophical and political activity arise, another dimension is created: the one defined by the idea, the exigency, and even the effective actuality of a kind of validity that no longer would be merely *de facto*, positive, but now is *de jure* or rightful [*de droit*]: we are speaking about *right* [*droit*] here not in the juridical sense but in the philosophical sense. *De jure* validity, and not simply *de facto* validity, means that we no longer accept a representation, or an idea, simply because we have received it and that we do not have to accept it. We require [*exigons*] that one might render an account of and a reason for it, what the Greeks called *logon didonai* (the conativity of this idea with public political control in the *agora* and the *ekklēsia* is patently obvious). And the same thing holds for our institutions.

It is therefore in and through the social-historical that this demand [*exigence*] for *de jure* validity emerges and is created. Here again we have an ontological creation, the creation of an unprecedented form, just like mathematical proof, the quasi-proofs of physics, philosophical reasoning, or the political institution itself starting from the moment this institution is posited as always having to be validated in a reflective and deliberate manner by the collectivity it institutes.

At this point arises, nevertheless, a question that underlies the entire history of philosophy—one that is treated rather badly in, and is ill treated by, philosophy itself. If *de jure* validity, if the assertion that an idea is true and that it is true both today and yesterday, two-million years ago or in four-million years—if this sort of validity arises in and through the social-historical and with the synergy, the collaboration, of the psychical, how can that which presents itself with this pretension to *de jure* validity escape the psychical and social-historical conditioning by means of which it each time makes its appearance; how can it avoid the closure of the world within which it has been created? In other words—and this is the question that really matters to us in the highest degree (which is why philosophy always also has to be anthropological)—how can the valid be effectively actual and the effectively actual be valid?

To underscore the importance of this manner of posing the question, let us recall, for example, that, in a philosophy as great and as important as Kantian philosophy, which has left its mark to such extent on the rest of the history of philosophy, effective actuality and validity, separated by an abyss, cannot be thought together. Kant asks how we can have, *de jure*, necessary and true knowledge, and he ends up constructing or assuming a transcendental subject (one could just as well call this subject *ideal*) that in effect possesses, by construction, certain *a priori* knowledge—true, nontrivial, and necessary knowledge. But what good does it do for us that a transcendental subject or consciousness might have this assured knowledge of which Kant speaks? I am not a transcendental subject; I am an effectively actual human being. To tell me that the transcendental subject is constructed in this way and can, due to this very fact, attain synthetic *a priori* judgments does not interest me. That would be of

interest to me only to the extent that I, *too*, am a transcendental subject.

Here we have the perpetual oscillation in Kant. On the one hand, he speaks about what the subject is from the transcendental point of view. On the other, he refers to "our experience," "our mind" (*Gemüt*), "us men" (*wir Menschen*). Is it a question, then, of "our mind"—or of "the mind" from the transcendental perspective? This oscillation is settled, but tragically so, in Kant's practical philosophy, according to which I ultimately can never truly be moral since I am necessarily always moved by "empirical"—that is, effectively actual—determinations. It is upon this stake that philosophy has remained impaled since Plato precisely because philosophy has not succeeded in facing up to the following question, the only genuine one in this regard: How can validity become effective actuality, and effective actuality validity? It is not possible to respond to this question here. I shall indicate merely a few benchmarks that enable us to elucidate it.

If we want to speak of *truth*, distinguishing it from mere correctness (*alētheia* as opposed to *orthotēs*; *Wahrheit* as opposed to *Richtigkeit*), and if we say that "2 + 2 = 4" is correct but that the philosophy of Aristotle or of Kant is true or has to do with the truth, we have to reexamine the signification of this term and modify it. We must call *truth* not a property of statements, or any result whatsoever, but the very movement that breaks closure as it is each time established and that seeks, in an effort of coherency and of *logon didonai*, to have an encounter with what is. If we give this meaning to the truth, we have to say that it is the social-historical, the anthropological in the true sense, that is the site of the truth. For, not only is it in and through the social-historical that language, signification, ideality, and the

requirement [*exigence*] of *de jure* validity are created, but it is also only in and through the social-historical that we can respond to this exigency so far as we possibly can. And above all, it is only in and through the social-historical that this rupture of closure and the movement that manifests it can *be*. Indeed, without this idea of the truth we would simply be torn between the "points of view" that are "true" within and for each "subject" of closure—therefore, absolute relativism— and the idea of a definitive and complete system, which would be the closure of all closures.

Moreover, it is also in and through the social-historical, and as a function of the second kind of creation of which I just spoke, that there appear reflective subjectivity and the political subject, inasmuch as these are opposed to the all and sundry of "prior" humanity—namely, to conformal or "true-to-form," socially fabricated individuals, as respectable and worthy of honor and love as they might often be.

It is also only in and through the social-historical that are created a public space and a public time for reflection—a synchronic and diachronic *agora*, which prevents each subjectivity from becoming shut within its own closure. It is, finally, to the extent that the social-historical is continued creation, and dense creation, that the results of philosophical reflection as they are each time attained can be called back into question. Without such a creation, philosophy would, once created, risk congealing or becoming merely a setting into logical order of the given once-and-for-all-achieved social world, as has indeed been the fate of philosophy in India, in China, in Byzantium, and in Islam; or, finally, it would risk remaining an immobile aporetic suspension of instituted certitudes for the benefit of some form of mysticism, as in the majority of Buddhist currents of thought.

Nonetheless, reflection certainly also finds in the

radical imagination of the singular psyche the positive condition for its existence. It is this imagination that allows the creation of the new—that is to say, the emergence of forms, figures, original schemata of thought and of the thinkable. And it is also because there is radical imagination, and not simply reproduction or recombination of the already seen—noncongealed, unsettled imagination, imagination not limited to already given and known forms—that the human being is capable of receiving, of welcoming, of accepting another's original creation—for, without that, such creation would remain a delusion or an individual pastime. This holds for philosophy as well as for art, and also for the sciences.

In both cases—that of the imagination that creates the original and that of the imagination that is capable of gathering it—a new type of individual is involved: reflective and deliberative subjectivity. Such subjectivity is critically and lucidly open to the new; it does not repress the works of the imagination (one's own or others') but is capable of receiving them critically, of accepting them or of rejecting them.

IV

Such an individual is itself a social-historical creation. This individual is both the result of and the condition for established institutions being called into question. These remarks lead us, by way of conclusion, to the question of politics.

I intend by *politics* the collective, reflective, and lucid activity that arises starting from the moment the question of the *de jure* validity of institutions is posed. Are our laws just? Is our Constitution just? Is it good? But good in relation to what? Just in relation to what? It is precisely through these interminable interrogations that the object of genuine politics

is constituted, which therefore presupposes calling existing institutions into question—be it perhaps to reconfirm them in whole or in part. This amounts to saying that through politics thus conceived man calls into question, and might possibly alter, his mode of being and his being *qua* social man. The social-historical is therefore also the site where the question of the *de jure* validity of institutions, and therefore also of people's various *behaviors*, arises. This last point is very important, for it shows that the ethical question is created in and through history, that it is not necessarily given *with* history (contrary to what is being said on this score), and that it is a part of the political question in the profound sense.

In a traditional society, in a heteronomous society, people's behaviors are themselves *instituted*. One does as one does; one marries him or her whom one is to marry; under such and such circumstances, one has to do this or that. There are more than six-hundred commandments the young Jewish boy is supposed to know by heart by the time of his bar mitzvah. With such instituted behaviors and pregiven responses, the question *What am I to do?* is not raised.

Nor is it raised, moreover, if one is a Christian. The idea of a Christian ethics is an absurdity. Christian ethics knows no questions. The answer to every conceivable question is to be found in its entirety in the Gospel, and Christ clearly says there what must be done: One should abandon one's father, one's mother, one's spouse and follow Him. If there is a problem of Christian ethics, it is because the Christians have never been able to do what the Gospel commands them to do—in other words, it is because Christianity never was Christianity, save perhaps for a brief initial period; it is because Christianity very rapidly became an instituted Church, with the attendant instituted duplicity, and because one therefore began to ask oneself the question

of how one is to reconcile the prescriptions of the Gospel with one's effectively actual life, which is unrelated to these prescriptions. Whence the indelible mark of hypocrisy on all the injunctions of a historical Christian "ethics."

The question *What am I to do?* itself belongs to the set of interrogations that arise once the code of behaviors has been shattered.

But even taking up the matter from the purely ethical end, we may ask: How can one, when faced with someone who wants to raise the question *What am I to do?* only in a very narrow sense, forget for an instant that the conditions and the ultimate norms of making and doing [*faire*] are fixed in place each time by the overall institution? The question *What am I to do?* becomes almost insignificant if it leaves out the question of what I am to do in relation to the conditions and norms of making and doing, therefore in relation to the institutions already in place. Some people have been talking a lot, lately, about *the other*. There is an entire philosophy that claims to be built upon the "gaze of the other," which is supposed to create for me some sort of claim [*exigence*]. But *what* other? These philosophers are thinking of the "others" they have met—or else, an other in general. The big problem is raised, however, by these real "others"—five and a half-billion of them—whom one does not encounter but about whom one knows, quite pertinently, that they do exist and that they lead, for the most part, a heteronomous existence. The question *What am I to do?* is essentially political.

Politics is the lucid and reflective activity that interrogates itself about society's institutions and that, should the opportunity arise, aims at transforming them. This implies not that politics picks up the same old bits and pieces in order to combine them in a different way but, instead, that it creates new institutional forms—which also means: new

significations. We have proof of this in the two creations from which our tradition proceeds, the Greek democracy and—under another, much vaster, but also, in certain regards, more problematic form—the modern democratic and revolutionary movement. New imaginary significations emerge therein that are borne by institutions, are embodied by them, and animate them.

Take, for example, the first democratic *poleis*, where the citizens thought of themselves as *homoioi*, similars, equals, even before the term *isoi* achieved a complete break with the Homeric poems (where there was no question of Ulysses being the *homoios* of Thersites). There the citizens were equals; there was *isonomia* for all. Of course, besides the male citizens there were also the women and the slaves: this is *not a model*. But we find therein some *germs*. In Modern Times, these significations are taken up again and carried much further. One speaks of equality, liberty, and fraternity *for all*. This "for all" is a social signification that arises in the West and that, politically speaking, is not Greek (I leave aside the Stoics, who were politically irrelevant).

Starting when? It is said that equality is already there in the Gospel. But the equality of the Gospel, like that of Paul, exists only on high; it is not down here. In the Christian churches, there were comfortable seats for the lords, chairs for the good burghers of the parish, and benches or nothing at all for the mere faithful, who are in other respects our brothers. And these Christian brethren—who no longer are Greeks or Jews, freemen or slaves, men or women, but children of God and perfectly equal[4]—are, in order to hear this very same discourse, seated differently, or divided between those sitting

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[4]T/E: Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

and those standing. Modern equality is not the equality of Christianity; it is the creation of a new historical movement that has put forward the demand for a kind of equality that is not in heaven but, rather, in the here and now. It is not surprising that, in and through this movement, Christian ideas might have been reinterpreted and recycled. Let us recall that during the French Revolution some could think of Jesus Christ as the first *sans-culotte*.

We live now in a world where these imaginary significations—liberty, equality—are still present, though a closer look at them reveals at the same time an enormous contradiction. If one considers the significations of liberty and equality in their deepest rigor, one can see first of all that, far from being mutually exclusive (as a mystificatory discourse, in circulation for more than a century, has repeated), each implies the other.[5] But one can also see that they are far from realized, even in so-called democratic societies.

In fact, what these societies realize are regimes of liberal oligarchy. The "political philosophy" that has become respectable nowadays veils its eyes before this reality—at the same time, moreover, that it proves incapable of providing any genuine philosophical discussion of the foundations of this oligarchical system: nowhere have I seen a discussion worthy of the name on the metaphysics of "representation," for example, or on the metaphysics of parties, which are the true seats of power in modern societies. Let us dare to speak of reality and note that to speak of political equality between a street sweeper in France and Monsieur Francis Bouygues is a bit of a joke.[6]

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[5]T/E: See "The Nature and Value of Equality" (1982), now in *CL2*.
[6]T/E: Francis Bouygues (1922-1993) was the magnate of a huge multinational construction company and owner of the first privatized French television network.

In France—and the situation is the same in all the liberal-oligarchic countries—the "sovereign people" is made up of approximately 37 million electors. How does it exercise its sovereignty? It is called upon every five or seven years to designate among 3,700 people, at most, those who will represent them for the next five years—or the President who will govern them for the next seven. The ratio is 1:10,000. Let us multiply this figure by ten, to take into account all the capitalists, state managers and technocrats, members of party apparatuses, media managers, and so on, and we arrive, with a bit of generosity, at the figure of 37,000 persons out of 37 million. The dominant oligarchy is formed by one thousandth of the population—a percentage that would make the Roman oligarchy turn green with envy.

These regimes of liberal oligarchy represent the compromise our societies have reached between capitalism properly speaking and the emancipatory struggles that have attempted to transform or liberalize capitalism. This compromise guarantees, it cannot be denied, not only some liberties but also certain possibilities for certain members of the dominated categories of the population.

Yet one talks of equality. One is talking, too, of the "rights of man." The rights of what man? There are around five-and-a-half billion human beings on the Earth. This liberal oligarchy, plus certain creature comforts, exist only in the OECD countries, plus or minus one or two others—be it around 700 million persons. An eighth of the human population benefits from these human rights and from certain creature comforts. The great gimmick of Reaganism and Thatcherism was to concentrate the poverty onto 15 or 20 percent of the population, the underprivileged who no longer can say anything at all or who might, at the very most, explode in an ineffectual way. The others "never had it so

good," as the saying goes in English, and are perhaps at this moment out buying a second color television set. As for the remaining seven-eighths of the world population, they are prey to poverty (obviously not everyone, for there, too, we find some rich and privileged people) and they live, generally, under some form of tyranny. What became, then, of the rights of man, equality, liberty? Should one say, as Edmund Burke said to the French revolutionaries, that there are no rights of man but only rights of Englishmen, of the French, Americans, Swiss, and so on?[7]

Can one exit from this situation? A change is possible if and only if a new awakening takes place, if and only if a new phase of dense political creativity on the part of humanity begins—which entails, in turn, that we exit from the state of apathy and privatization characteristic of today's industrialized societies. Otherwise, although historical novation certainly will not cease since any idea of an "end of history" is multiply absurd, the risk is that this novation, instead of producing freer individuals in freer societies, might give rise to a new human type, whom we may provisionally call zapanthropus[8] or reflexanthropus, a type of being that is kept on a leash and maintained in the illusion of its individuality and of its liberty by mechanisms that have become independent of all social control and that are managed by anonymous apparatuses already well on the way toward achieving dominance.

What political thought can do is pose in clear terms

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[7]T/E: In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke denigrates the "rights of men," proclaimed by the French revolutionaries, as "abstract principles," contrasting them with "the rights of Englishmen…a patrimony derived from their forefathers."

[8]T/E: "Zapanthropus" is formed from *zapping* (channel surfing) and *anthrōpos* (man in the generic sense).

this dilemma that confronts us today. It obviously cannot resolve that dilemma all by itself. The dilemma can be resolved only by the human collectivity waking from its slumber and deploying its creative activity.

The Crisis of the Identification Process[*]

The previous speakers at this colloquium have, if not exhausted the properly psychoanalytical and psychosociological processes involved in the question of identification—how could they have?—at least broached those subjects at length, so I shall not address these aspects. Moreover, I shall be adopting another point of view, what I call the *social-historical* point of view, which does not mean the same thing as "sociological" in the usual sense of this term.

Contrary to what was said by the speaker, André Nicolaï—if, at least, I understood him well—in my opinion there really is a *crisis* of contemporary society, this crisis produces the crisis of the identification process, and at the same time it is reproduced and aggravated by the crisis of identification. I therefore shall adopt an overall, comprehensive approach to the problem, taking the position that the identification process, in its each-time-singular specificity for each historically instituted society, and identification itself are moments of the totality of society and that these moments make no sense, either positively or negatively, when detached from this social totality. In order to justify this somewhat strong assertion, allow me to take a few examples from the topics already treated during this colloquium.

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[*]"La Crise du processus identificatoire" was originally delivered as a lecture to a colloquium titled "Malaise dans l'identification." This colloquium was organized in May 1989 by the Association de Recherche et d'Intervention Psychosociologique (ARIP). The acts of the ARIP colloquium were published under the same title in *Connexions*, 55 (1990-1991). My text appears on pp. 123-35. It was reprinted in *MI*, 125-39 (149-67 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: The text was first translated into English for a special Cornelius Castoriadis issue of *Thesis Eleven*, 49 (May 1997): 85-98, and reprinted in *RTI(TBS)*.]

It is quite correct to say that we can elucidate (though not explain) the crisis of identification in contemporary society by making reference to the weakening or the dislocation of what the speaker Jacqueline Palmade calls the tendency of the identification process to lean on [*l'étayage*] a variety of socially instituted entities such as habitat, family, workplace, and so on. Nevertheless, as may be seen with the help of a very simple consideration, we cannot stop there.

Take the example of habitat. We know of peoples, great peoples or small tribes, that have always lived as nomads. Among these peoples, habitat has a completely different meaning. The tent that is carried across the steppes of Central Asia is, certainly, a reference site for the nomadic individual or family. As is immediately clear, however, in such a society things are instituted in an entirely other way, and the possibility of making sense of the site where one is depends on factors other than its "stability." The same goes for gypsies or for those, in societies with which we are familiar, who have been itinerant peddlers (for at least three-thousand years), sailors, and so on.

The same may be said for the family support network [*l'étayage familial*]. Far be it from me, fervent Freudian and psychoanalyst that I am, to underestimate the importance of the family setting and family ties—the capital, indeed decisive role they play in the hominization of the tiny newborn monster. Yet, it must not be forgotten that we should not become fixated on a half-real, half-idealized type of family that was able to exist in certain strata of Western society for, say, the past two centuries, and conclude thereby that the present crisis of identification had to occur just because that particular type of family is incontestably in crisis today. Without going into a historical excursus on the topic, it may be recalled that, while the Spartans were not very likeable

people, they were completely "normal" individuals; they functioned perfectly well, were victorious in battle for century upon century, and so on. The "family environment" in Sparta, however, was something entirely other than what we consider "normal." Apart from the initial nursing period, the upbringing of the child was conducted in a directly social—and, as our half-literate modern intellectuals would say, "totalitarian"—manner. Whatever one might call it, this was a *directly social* form of childrearing.

In the third place, all these phenomena—the increasing fragilization of the family, the increasing fragilization of one's habitat as something to lean on, and so forth—appear to be neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for the onset of a crisis, since we see this same crisis taking place, and massively so, in individuals coming from milieux and living in milieux where there is neither a crisis of one's habitat nor even, properly speaking, a family crisis. If one looks at the middle classes in society today, one cannot speak of a "habitat crisis" as such. There are certainly other habitat-related phenomena: one's locality no longer has the same signification it might previously have had, for example, and so on. And yet, here we are seeing some individuals who clearly have lost their bearings as adults. This brings us back, certainly, to deeper problems that develop during the period when identification and even the identity of these people were being established—without, however, one being able to have recourse to an explanatory paradigm relating specifically to these networks of support.

In sum, we are speaking the way we are now speaking because in our culture the identification process, the creation of an individual-social "self," used to pass by way of sites that no longer exist or that are now in crisis. But another reason for us to speak like this is because, in contrast to what

prevailed among the Mongols, the Spartans, Phoenician merchants, gypsies, traveling salesmen, and so on, no existing totality of social imaginary significations is available, and no new one emerging, that would be capable of taking charge of and addressing this crisis of particular support networks.

We are thus led, via another path, to the idea that we—or, in any case, that I—already have formed. If the crisis is affecting so central an element of social hominization as the identification process, that really must mean that this crisis is an overall and ongoing one. Some have spoken of a "crisis of values" for a long time—in fact, for at least the past 150 years. Things have reached the point where such talk risks reminding one of the story of the boy who cried wolf. People have spoken about this crisis for so long that now, when it is finally arriving, one reacts as if its arrival were just some stale old joke. But I firmly believe that the wolf really has arrived. I agree with the speaker Jean Maisonneuve when he says that the term *values* remains vague; that, indeed, is the least that can be said on this score. For this reason, I speak about a crisis of *social imaginary significations* (henceforth, simply *significations*), that is, a crisis in the significations that hold this society, like any society, together—though later on we shall see how this crisis is expressed at the level of the identification process.

Every society creates its own world in creating the significations that are specific to it. Indeed, it creates a magma of significations, such as the Hebraic God and everything He implies, all the significations that can be brought together under the term Greek *polis*, or the significations that go with the emergence of capitalist society (or, more exactly, of the capitalist component of modern society).

The role of these social imaginary significations, their "function"—I am using this term without any "functionalist"

connotation—is threefold. They are what structure the *representations* of the world in general, without which there can be no human beings. These structures are each time specific: our world is not the ancient Greek world, and the trees we see beyond these windows do not each shelter a nymph; it's just wood, we say, which is a construction characteristic of the modern world. Secondly, these significations designate the *finalities* or ends of action; they dictate what is to be done and not to be done, what is good to do and not good to do. One should, for example, adore God or, perhaps, accumulate the forces of production—whereas no natural or biological law, nor even any psychical one, says that one must adore God or accumulate the forces of production. Thirdly, and it is this point that is undoubtedly the most difficult to discern, these significations establish the types of *affects* that are characteristic of a society. For example, there clearly is an affect that is *created* by Christianity, which is *faith*. We know or believe we know what faith is, this nearly indescribable sentiment that establishes a relationship with an infinitely superior being whom one loves, who loves you, who can punish you, all of this steeped in a strange psychical humidity, and so on and so forth. This sort of faith would be absolutely incomprehensible to Aristotle, for example. For, what can this idea really mean, that one might love the gods or be loved by the gods *in this fashion*, be possessed by these affects, the undeniable expression of which can be seen on the faces of the true faithful in Bethlehem on any given Christmas Eve? This affect is social-historically instituted, and one can point to the person who created it: Paul. With the de-Christianization that has occurred in modern societies, it is no longer as present as it once was. But there really are affects that are characteristic of capitalist society, too. Without entering into a description

that would risk taking a merely literary turn, allow me to recall that Marx described these capitalist affects very well when he spoke of a perpetual restlessness, constant change, a thirst for the new for the sake of the new and for more for the sake of more—in short, a set of socially instituted affects.

The instauration of these three dimensions—representations, finalities, affects—goes hand in hand, each time, with their concrete expression in all sorts of particular, mediating institutions—and, of course, in the first group surrounding the individual, the family, then a whole series of neighboring groups that are, topologically speaking, mutually inclusive or intersecting: other families, the clan or tribe, the local collectivity, the work collectivity, the nation, and so on and so forth. By means of all these forms, a particular type of individual—that is, a specific anthropological type—is, each time, instituted. The fifteenth-century Florentine is not the twentieth-century Parisian, and he is not so as a function of trivial differences but as a function of all that he is, thinks, wants, loves, or detests. And at the same time, a whole hive of social roles is established, each one of which is—paradoxically—both self-sufficient and complementary in relation to the others: slave/free, man/woman, and so on.

But, among the significations instituted by each society, the most important is undoubtedly the one that concerns society itself. Every society we have known has had a representation of itself as *something* (which, parenthetically, very well goes to show that it is a matter here of *imaginary* significations): We are the Chosen People; we are the Greeks, as opposed to the Barbarians; we are the descendants of the Founding Fathers, or the subjects of the King of England. This representation is indissociably tied to a society's *wanting itself* as society and as *this-here* society and to its *loving itself* as society and as *this-here* society—that is to say, there is a

cathexis both of the concrete collectivity and of the laws by means of which this collectivity is what it is. Here, at the social level, there is in the representation (or in the discourse that society maintains about itself) an external, social correlate [*correspondant*] to each individual's ultimate identification that is always also an identification with a "We," with a *de jure* imperishable collectivity. With or without religion, this identification still has a fundamental function to perform, since it serves as a defense—and, no doubt, the social individual's principal defense—against Death, the unacceptable fact of one's own mortality. But the collectivity is, ideally speaking, imperishable only if the meaning, the significations it institutes, are cathected as imperishable by the members of society. And I believe that the whole problem in the contemporary crisis of identification processes can and should be broached from this angle, as well: Where, we may ask, is the meaning that is lived as imperishable by the men and women of today?

My response, it will have been understood by now, is that, socially speaking, this meaning is nowhere to be found. Such meaning concerns society's self-representation; it is a meaning in which individuals can participate, a meaning that allows them to coin for their own personal accounts a meaning of the world, a meaning of life, and, ultimately, a meaning for their respective deaths. No need to recall here the more than central role that religion, in the broadest acceptation of the term, has played in this regard in all modern Western societies. But the rich liberal oligarchies, satiated and insatiable (a point to which we shall return below), are instituted precisely via their break with the religious universe, even if they sometimes (as in England) have kept an "official" religion. They have put religion at a distance. That was done not as an end in itself but because

modern societies have been formed in such a way that they *are* and are instituted via the emergence—and, up to a certain point, via the effective institution in society—of two central significations. Both of these significations are heterogeneous with respect to, not to say radically opposed to, the Christian religion that once dominated this social-historical area, and each one is, in principle, antinomical to the other.

On the one hand, there is the signification of the unlimited expansion of an allegedly rational alleged mastery over everything, nature as well as human beings. This signification corresponds to the capitalist dimension of modern societies. On the other hand, there is the signification of individual and social autonomy, of freedom, of the search for forms of collective freedom, which correspond to the democratic, emancipatory, revolutionary project. Why call them antinomical? Because the first signification, the capitalist one, leads to the Ford factories around Detroit circa 1920, that is, to straightforwardly micrototalitarian microsocieties where everything—including the workers' private lives *outside* the factory—is regulated by management down to the tiniest detail, this being one of the immanent tendencies of capitalist society. And because the second signification, that of autonomy, leads to the idea of a participatory democracy—which, moreover, could not remain confined to the narrowly "political" sphere and halt before the gates of the factory or any other business enterprise. This antinomy between the two main significations of modern society has not prevented their multiple mutual contamination. And yet I think—as I believe I have previously shown at length, at least on the economic level—that if capitalism has been able to function and to develop, it is not *in spite of* but *thanks to* the conflict that existed in society and, concretely speaking, thanks to the fact that the workers

don't just let things happen [*ne se laissent pas faire*]. More generally speaking, I believe that capitalism's survival can be attributed to the fact that, as the result of historical evolution, revolutions, and so on, society had to institute itself also as a society recognizing a minimum of liberties, of human rights, of legality, and so forth. I spoke of a mutual contamination between two central significations of modern society, but their mutual functionalities must also be underscored. Let us recall Max Weber and what he said about the importance of a legalistic State for the proper functioning of capitalism (foreseeability as to what can take place on a juridical level, therefore the possibility of rational calculation, and so on).

Grossly oversimplifying, it can be said that different anthropological types of individuals correspond to each of these two main significations. To the signification of the unlimited expansion of "rational mastery" many human types can be made to correspond, but, to get a handle on what we are talking about, let us think of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur. Obviously, this entrepreneur cannot exist all by himself: parachuted into the middle of the Tuareg, he would no longer be a Schumpeterian entrepreneur. To be one, he requires a host of things—including, for example, both workers and consumers. There is, thus, a "complementary" anthropological type for this entrepreneur, a type required in order for this signification to be able to function; and, in accordance with the abstract logic of the thing, it is in this case the disciplined—and, ultimately, the completely reified—worker that is required.

To the other signification—autonomy—corresponds the critical, reflective, democratic individual. Now, what the twentieth century has bequeathed to us after the terrible adventures that the oldest among us here have gone through—and that, moreover, are not necessarily nearing an end—is that

the signification of autonomy (not to be confused with pseudoindividualism) appears to be going through a period of eclipse or prolonged occultation at the same time that social and political conflict is, practically speaking, on the wane. I am still speaking here of the wealthy Western societies, where one will have to search with a magnifying glass for any genuine political conflict, whether in France or in the United States; one will also have to search with a magnifying glass for any genuine social conflict, since all the conflicts that we observe have become essentially corporatist in character and remain confined merely to this or that sector of the population or the work force. As I have written elsewhere, we are living the society of "hobbies and lobbies."[1]

This evolution, already long underway, became manifest in the period beginning around 1980, that is to say, during the Thatcher-Reagan era and the period when the French Socialist Party discovered the virtues of "the market," free enterprise, and the profit motive. The sole signification truly present and dominant today is the capitalist one, that of the indefinite expansion of "mastery," which at the same time—and here we come to our pivot point—finds itself emptied of all the content that might endow it with the vitality it once enjoyed and that could, for better or for worse, allow the processes of identification to be carried out.

One essential part of this signification was its mythology of "progress," which gave a meaning both to history and to future-oriented aims, and which also gave a meaning to society, such as it was, as supposedly the best support for this kind of "progress." We know that this mythology is now falling into ruin. But, we may ask, what is today the subjective expression, for individuals, of this

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[1]T/E: See "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982), now above in the present volume.

signification and this reality that is the "expansion," apparently "unlimited," of "mastery"?

For a small number, it is, of course, a certain "potency," whether real or illusory, and the increase thereof. For the overwhelming majority of people, however, it is not and cannot be anything but a continual increase in consumption, including alleged leisure, which has now become an end in itself. What is becoming, then, of the general model of identification that the institution offers to society and that it proposes to and imposes on individuals as social individuals? The model is now the individual who earns the most and enjoys the most. Things are as simple and banal as that. This is now even being said aloud more and more, which does not keep it from being true.

Well, let us take "earning." But earning, despite the "neoliberal" rhetoric, is now becoming almost totally disconnected from any social function and even from the system's internal legitimation. One does not earn because one has some worth; one has some worth because one earns. (See Bernard Tapie in France, Donald Trump in the United States, Prince, Madonna, and so on.) No one can contest Madonna's talent; it is enormous *because* she gets paid so many hundreds of thousands of dollars per two-hour concert appearance.

Although the analysis remains to be done, we may say that to this change corresponds the ever-more thoroughgoing transformation of the system, as to its economic dimension, into a vast financial casino. The amounts speculated each day on the exchange-rate market alone, not even on the stock-exchange market of "real assets," match France's GNP. And those sums speculated each week match the GNP of the United States. Even from the strictly capitalist point of view, success in this game serves no function and possesses no legitimacy. Business enterprises are themselves entering the

game through such well-known schemes as initial public offerings, leveraged buyouts, and so on.

The very slender tie that once might have existed or seemed to exist between labor or accomplished activity, on the one hand, and income or pay, on the other, has now been broken. In France, a brilliant mathematician, a college professor, will be paid 15,000 to 20,000 francs per month, maximum—and he will see his students, upon graduation, if they decide to give up math and go to work for a large computer company, start their career at 40,000 to 50,000 francs per month. In this example one can foresee the long-term ruination of the internal logic of the system: it needs these young people who will begin at these rates, but it equally needs those who will train them and whom it won't pay. In short, the system is currently living on the sweet folly of mathematicians and their absent-minded-professor side. (Thatcherism, which is now pushing for the destruction of research in British universities, is but the extreme logical consequence of this ruination of the system's own logic.)

Under these conditions, how can the system continue? It continues because it still benefits from models of identification that were produced *during previous eras*: the mathematician of whom I just spoke, the "upright" judge, the bureaucrat who is a stickler for rules, the conscientious worker, the parent who feels responsible for his children, the teacher who, without any reason, is still dedicated to her profession. But nothing in the system, such as it is, serves to justify the "values" that these characters embody, the ones that they cathect and are supposed to be pursuing in the fulfillment of their activity. Why ought a judge to be honest? Why should a teacher work up a sweat over his little urchins instead of just passing the time away in class, except on the day that the education inspector is scheduled to visit? Why

should a worker exhaust herself screwing in the 150th bolt if she can fool Quality Control? There was never anything in capitalist significations from the outset—but there is, especially, nothing in them as they have now become—that could provide an answer to these questions. And once again, this state of affairs raises the long-term question of whether it is possible for such a system to reproduce itself—but this is not our topic today.

What is the connection between these evolutionary changes and the most subjective processes? It is that this whole world of continual consumption, casino speculation, appearances, and so forth, is insinuating itself into families and touching the individual at the earliest stages of the socialization process. The mother and the father are not just the "primal group"; they are, quite obviously, society in person and history in person leaning over the newborn baby's crib—if only because they *speak*, for speaking is not "groupal"; it's *social*. One's tongue is not, as is stupidly said, a "communication tool"; it is first and foremost an instrument of socialization. In and through one's tongue are expressed, are said, are realized, are transferred a society's significations. Mother and father transmit what they are living; they transmit what they are; they provide the child with poles of identification—and they already do so simply by being what they are.

Leaving aside "marginal" people here, let us consider good mothers and fathers of the "middle classes," as one says. What are they transmitting to their children? They are transmitting this: Get the most, enjoy the most; everything else is secondary or nonexistent. Allow me to make an empirical observation in this regard. When I was a child, and again when I was raising my first child, birthdays were celebrated with gift-giving, and each of the birthday child's

little friends came bearing a gift for that child. Today, such a thing has become inconceivable. The birthday child (in reality, her parents) distributes gifts to the other children—lesser gifts no doubt, but gifts nonetheless—because it is intolerable for these beings to accept the fantastic frustration that consists in receiving gifts only on their birthdays; each time a gift is distributed somewhere, they too must have gifts, though lesser ones. We need not emphasize what this implies about the child's relation to frustration, to reality, to the possibility of delaying gratification, as well as the consequence: the *nullification*, the becoming-insignificant, of the gift and of gratification.

The child enters an inane world. He is immediately inundated with an incredible flood of toys and gadgets (I am not talking about the projects and gang members, or about the children of millionaires; I am talking about 70 percent of the population). And he is bored shitless, drowned like a dead rat beneath all this junk, as witness the fact that he drops these toys and gadgets at every opportunity to go watch television, abandoning one inanity for another. The entire contemporary world is, in a nutshell, already placed in this situation. What does it all mean, if we go beyond the level of mere description? It is once again, of course, a desperate flight from death and mortality—which, moreover, as one knows, have been banished from contemporary life. Death is not really known; mourning exists neither in public nor as a ritual. It is also this that the present-day accumulation of gadgets and the state of universal distraction aim to mask. Here again, moreover, as we already knew from neurotics, we see that these gadgets and this distraction do nothing more than represent death itself, distilled into tiny droplets and transformed into the small change of daily life. This is death by distraction, death by staring at a screen on which things

one does not live and could never live pass by.

Both on the level of daily life and on that of culture, what characterizes the present age is not "individualism" but its opposite, generalized conformism and collage.[2] Conformism is possible only on the condition that there be no massive and solid core of identity. As a well-anchored social process, this conformism in turn ensures that no such core of identity can any longer be constituted. As one of the leading lights of contemporary architecture said in New York during an April 1986 colloquium, "At last, postmodernism has delivered us from the tyranny of style."[3] In other words, architects are rid of the tyranny of having to be themselves. They can now do just anything, stick a Gothic tower alongside an Ionic column, and set the whole within a Thai pagoda. They are no longer tyrannized by style; these are true individualistic individualities: individuality henceforth consists of stealing various elements from left and right in order to "produce" something. But the same thing holds, on a more concrete level, for the everyday individual: he lives by making collages; his individuality is a patchwork of collages.

In conclusion, we may say that there cannot *not* be a *crisis* of the identification process, since there is no self-representation of society as the seat of meaning and of value, no self-representation of society as inserted into a history that is past and to come, itself endowed with meaning, not "by itself," but by the society that is constantly reliving it and recreating it in this way. These are the pillars of an ultimate identification with a highly cathected "we," and it is this "we" that is today becoming dislocated. Society is now posited, by

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[2]T/E: See "The Retreat from Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalized Conformism" (lecture first delivered in English five months after the present 1989 talk and first published in French in 1990), now in *CL3*.
[3]T/E: This quotation also appears in the first footnote in *ibid.*

each individual, as a mere "constraint" imposed on the individual—a monstrous illusion, but one lived so vividly that it is becoming a material, tangible fact, the indicator of a process of desocialization—and yet, simultaneously and contradictorily, it is to this society, illusorily lived today as an external "constraint," that the individual also addresses uninterrupted demands for assistance. And with this contradictory attitude toward society comes the complementary illusion that history is, at best, a tourist attraction to be visited on vacation.

Discussion, Questions, Responses

• On the current "renewal" of religion, religious fundamentalism today, etc.

C.C.: One must go beyond Durkheim's idea about religion as the sole possible pole of collective identification. This is why I speak of the *social imaginary* and of *imaginary significations*, which cover strictly religious societies as well as borderline cases. Take, for example, the role of religion in the Greek democratic city, which is surely not that of religion in regimes of Oriental despotism. While being everywhere, religion in the city was kept at a distance from politics; no one ever dreamed, for example, of asking a priest what law ought to be adopted. The same thing goes for modern society, which puts religion at a distance but does not, for all that, collapse, and which is in crisis not because it has put religion at a distance but because it is not capable of engendering another way for people to be together. As for the "return of the religious," I don't believe in it as far as our Western societies are concerned. The fundamentalist reaction in Islam, the persistence of the religious in India, and so forth are phenomena of another order: those are societies that have

never exited from a state of religious heteronomy. I think that, in our societies, the return of religion can only be marginal in character and that this phenomenon has been artificially inflated by intellectuals, journalists, and politicians who have so few ideas, so few themes to discuss, that they resort to old phantoms just to have something to say.

•   On the possibility of the emergence of new institutional forms.

C.C.: In Europe as well as in the United States, the movements of the Sixties were, in reality, the last large-scale collective manifestation of the attempt to instaurate something new. These movements failed as far as their main aim was concerned, but at the same time they left a legacy of important results with regard to the situation both of young people and of Blacks and women, results that we should neither despise nor underestimate nor reject. Since then, we have witnessed an evolution that finds its perfect expression in the frightening ideological situation of today. Everywhere, universities pay "Professors of Economics" to recount a load of asininities that have been refuted a thousand times over— not by Marx and the Marxists but by the neoclassical economists themselves during the 1930s, by Piero Sraffa, by John Maynard Keynes, by Joan Violet Robinson, by Edward Hastings Chamberlin, by George Lennox Sharman Schackle, and so on. And then we have the journalists who write best sellers, piling up one false platitude on top of another in defense of a "market" that in reality doesn't even exist. The "market" that does exist has nothing in common with the one described in textbooks, either; it is essentially oligopolistic and, even in England and the United States, highly regulated by the State. One cannot have 50 percent of a country's GNP pass through a country's budget and not expect this budget to

have a strong influence on the market. This ideological aberration is itself an important sign of the crisis. There is no new subversive or revolutionary discourse, but there is no conservative discourse either. The conservative discourse is summed up in Ronald Reagan's smile and in his gaffes.

• On the connection between the capitalist project, the project of autonomy, and the idea of enterprise.

C.C.: What pushed the project of an unlimited expansion of a pseudorational pseudomastery the furthest were Communism and totalitarianism in general. One will understand nothing about totalitarianism if one fails to see therein the extreme, the delirious form of this project of total mastery. Totalitarianism certainly failed in reality, but nothing guaranteed that it *had to* fail. This is undoubtedly what Orwell, too, had in mind when, at the end of *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, totalitarianism's greatest triumph is achieved not through violence but through the fact that Winston Smith cries because he loves Big Brother—that is, he has internalized Big Brother completely. It happens that Hitler was beaten; it happens that Communism is collapsing on its own. But who will say that either event was fated? It is incontestable, as I said, that there have been multiple contaminations. It is true, moreover, that the workers' movement in general, and quite particularly Marxism and Marx himself, were from the beginning steeped in this atmosphere, in which the increase of the forces of production was made the universal criterion, production was considered the main locus of all social life, the idea that progress could and would go on indefinitely was taken for granted, and so on—all of it constituting the capitalist project's contamination of the project of autonomy. In its essence, the project of autonomy is completely incompatible with the idea of mastery; the project of autonomy is quite literally also a

project of *self-limitation*, as can be seen today in the most concrete way: if people don't stop this race toward "mastery," soon they won't exist at all. As for enterprise—which ought to be the topic of a separate discussion, one that cannot be conducted here and now—it is unclear how there could be, in the business firm, a type of power, structure, hierarchy, and organization whose validity we reject for society as a whole.

•   On death, and its relationship to the ethical question.

        C.C.: For every society, the unbridgeable abyss that is the awareness of our own mortality has always been more or less covered over, in one way or another, without its ever being completely hidden from us. This is where religion comes into its own. Religion is a compromise formation in the grand sense of the term; it is the compromise formation from which all others derive. Religion has always said: You are going to die, but this death is not a true death. The denial of death can take a multitude of forms: the return of the ancestor in the child of the next generation, ancestor worship, the immortality of the soul, and so on. Thus—and the most stunning examples come from monotheism, and in particular from Christianity and Islam—in the end death succeeds in taking on a positive value. The mass for the Christian dead is fantastically striking in this regard, at once a lamentation and a glorification: alas, one is mortal; one is naught but dust— yet, *grâce à Dieu*, one is immortal and one is going to return to the bosom of God. In other cases, such as Buddhism, for example, the coverup is of another sort. We shall not talk about the Greeks, for whom—alone, as far as I am aware—life after death was worse than life on earth, as is clear in the *Odyssey*: any eventually positive connotations for the immortality of the soul appear only with the onset of the period of decadence, the fourth century BCE and Plato. Modern societies, which demolish the edifice of religious

significations, have in most recent times proved incapable of setting up anything else in their stead.

I am talking about an ethics that would have an effective social actuality, not about philosophers who might construct an ethics for their own account. And when, looking at it from this end, one returns to the question of death in such a society, one notices that the most truly applicable descriptions are those of the theologians. We must summon Pascal to our aid here: the modern individual lives in a headlong flight from the knowledge both that he is going to die and that nothing he does, strictly speaking, has the slightest meaning. So he runs, he jogs, he shops in supermarkets, he goes channel surfing, and so on—he *distracts* himself. Once again, we are not talking about people on the fringes of society but about the typical, the average individual. Is this the sole possible "solution" after the dissolution of religion? I think not. I believe that there are other ends whose emergence society can bring about while recognizing our mortality. I believe that there is another way of seeing the world and human mortality, another way of recognizing our obligation to future generations—which represents the flip side of our debt to past generations, since none among us is what she is except as a function of hundreds of thousands of years of labor and human effort. Such an emergence is possible, but it requires that historical evolution turn in another direction and that society cease its slumber upon a huge pile of gadgets of all sorts.

•   On the identification process from the psychoanalytic standpoint.

C.C.: As I said at the outset, I did not want to treat the psychoanalytical angle because I thought that it had already been broached adequately at this colloquium, nor did I want to touch any more closely upon the exact correlations between

the psychoanalytic standpoint and the social-historical one. But what I have spoken about concerns not only the "late stages of identification." Something of the ways of being of those first adults whom one encounters—who, to be sure, are not just anyone—insinuates itself into the child's psychical and even psychocorporeal structuration. Without any doubt, one would have to take up again the question of those identification processes that in psychoanalysis are called "primary" and not speak simply of "the mother," such as she has been or will be in Polynesia, in France, in Florence. She is always "the Mother," to be sure. She has breasts; she produces milk and acts as a caregiver; she is at once good object and bad object, and so on and so forth. But from the very outset, the mother is not and cannot be simply this generic mother; she is also the mother in *this* society—which entails a host of things. This would merit a very long discussion: in fact, it brings us back to the famous quarrel over the "atemporality," or the transhistoricity, of the Unconscious and over the precise meaning of this term.

• On "traditional values" and the possible emergence of "new values."

C.C.: I do not see how a new historical creation could effectively and lucidly stand up to and oppose this bizarre formlessness in which we live unless it were to instaurate a new and fecund relation to tradition. To be revolutionary does not mean to declare bluntly, as Abbé Sieyès did, that all the past is "gothic nonsense [*absurdité gothique*]."[4] First of all, the gothic is not absurd. And, above all, there is another relation with tradition that is to be instaurated. That does not mean that we should restore traditional values as such or because they are traditional; rather, we should establish a critical attitude whereby we are capable of granting

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[4]T/E: A phrase from Abbé Sieyès's *What Is the Third Estate?* (1789).

recognition to some values that have been lost. I do not see, for example, how one can avoid revalidating the idea of responsibility or—dare I say?—the value of a very attentive reading of a text, both of which are in the process of disappearing.

•   On the possibilities of action on the part of a subject today.

        C.C.: In the present situation, a subject capable of entering into the kind of discussion we are conducting here does indeed enjoy the enormous privilege of being able to inspect an extraordinary host of possibilities that are already there before her. And, to the extent that she finds within herself the necessary strength, she may be able to choose, to decide to be one way rather than another—which is a much more difficult thing, though not impossible, for the citizen who is simply caught in the glue of consumer society.

Freud, Society, History[*]

1. Psychoanalytic theory has entered sufficiently into our age's stock of intellectual knowledge for it to be possible for us to dispense with offering a summary account—which would be ridiculously inadequate, anyway. We shall limit ourselves here to sketching out the main lines of a discussion of the contributions psychoanalytic elucidation does or can make to thinking the political or politics,[1] as well as, at the same time, of the deficiencies that might be imputed to this elucidation or of the aporias to which it gives rise. The discussion will be centered on the work [*œuvre*] of Sigmund Freud itself. A few cursory indications will be provided in the bibliography about the directions post-Freudian, psychoanalytically-inspired discussions have taken these themes.

From the point of view of political thought, the interest of psychoanalysis lies in its potential contribution to a philosophical and political anthropology. This obvious point must be underscored in an age when, contrary to the grand political philosophy of the past, people seem to grant so little

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[*]French Editors: Text published, with a few small modifications, some of which are adopted here, under the title "Psychanalyse" in the *Dictionnaire de philosophie politique*, ed. Philippe Raynaud and Stéphane Rials (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), pp. 518-23; 3rd ed., pp. 598-603. Reprinted as "Freud, la sociéte, l'histoire" in *MI*, 140-55 (168-87 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: See the Bibliographical Orientation at the end of this article for full bibliographical information concerning the *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter: *GW*) and *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter: *SE*), Freud's collected works in German and English. The present translation first appeared in *RTI(TBS)*.]

[1]On this distinction, see my 1988 text "Power, Politics, Autonomy," now in *CL3*. [T/E: See also the beginning of the first section of "Democracy as Procedure and Democracy as Regime" (1996), now below in the present volume.]

interest to the anthropological presuppositions of politics, as well as, more generally, to those of any sociology and history that do not remain merely descriptive in character.

In this regard, what really matters is to distinguish, within Freud's work, between two categories of writings. The properly psychoanalytic writings, which concern the psyche as such, contain a host of contributions that may be qualified as definitive: the discovery of the dynamic Unconscious and of repression, the interpretation of dreams, the theory of drives and of neuroses, the conception of narcissism or that of aggression, to mention merely the principal ones. People who labor to elucidate the human psyche—an effort that certainly remains open for an indefinite time to come—will no doubt be able to take up these notions again, modify them, or go further with them. Those engaged in such a labor will, in our opinion, be obliged in any case to start from them. The same does not hold when it comes to the second category of Freud's writings, those bearing on society: *Totem and Taboo* (1913a), "The Claims of Psycho-Analysis to Scientific Interest" (1913b), "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915b), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), "Why War?" (1933b), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), as well as lecture thirty-five of the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933a), in addition to several texts of lesser importance and some allusions to social and political questions scattered here and there in his other works. Here, the situation is less clear cut, which is not astonishing, since these were, for Freud himself, incursions into domains that were more or less eccentric to his main field of concern. Apropos of these texts, it is difficult to speak of any definitive contributions, and yet that does not keep them from being extremely rich in ideas and in

incitements to thinking.

The discussion that follows will be organized around four main themes. All of these themes concern psychoanalysis's potential contribution to the following questions:

- the question of the "origins" of society or, in fact, that of the process of the hominization of the species;
- the question of the structure and content of social and political institutions and, in particular, that of power and domination, of the instituted inequality of the sexes, of labor and knowledge, and, finally, of religion;
- the question of the historicity of institutions, in their structure and in their content;
- finally, the question of politics as such, namely, that of the content of a desirable or wished-for [*souhaitable*] transformation of institutions, of the meaning of this desirability, and of the possibilities and limits of such a transformation.

2. The question of the "origins" of society, that is to say, in fact, of the hominization of the human species, contains in truth two distinct interrogations: that of knowing in what the difference between animality and humanity consists and that of knowing "how" this difference came about. It is important to underscore here that Freud takes as given the obvious differences (language, technique, and so on)—but without failing to see that their emergence raises a problem—and basically concerns himself with the birth of institutions in the narrow sense, boiling them down to two: the prohibition of incest and the prohibition of "intraclan" murder. The existence of these prohibitions in humans and

their absence in the animal species closest to man are for him the central question, and the answer is to be sought first of all in an "event" that produced them.

This "event" is reconstituted in what Freud himself calls the *scientific myth*, a myth that was expounded for the first time in *Totem and Taboo*. Its broad outlines must be recalled here. Leaning on hypotheses formulated first by Charles Darwin (1871), then by W. Robertson Smith (1894) and J. J. Atkinson (1903), Freud took up the idea of the primal horde. In this primal horde, hominoids were said to live under the domination of a powerful male who possessed all the females and expelled (or castrated, or killed) the boys when they reached maturity. The excluded brothers were to have succeeded "one day" ("as a function, perhaps as well, of a technical invention") in forming a coalition highly tinged with homosexuality and in killing the father.[2] The murder, once accomplished, was to have been followed by the cannibalistic ingestion of the body of the murdered father, an imaginary incorporation of his strength, and then (perhaps after long periods of struggle among the brothers) by the taking of an oath, through which the brothers renounced possession of the females of the clan as well as intraclan murder. Yet the brothers, while still hating the despotic father, had also feared him, venerated him, and loved him. They therefore erected in his place an animal (or, more rarely, another object) as a totem of their clan, the murder and eating of which were prohibited—save in special feast periods, during which this animal was killed and ritually consumed, in commemoration of the founding murder. Such would be the

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[2]T/E: The English translation of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* reads: "Some cultural advance, perhaps, command over some new weapon…" (*SE* 13: 141; on this same page appears the phrase "one day," to which Freud later appended a mitigating footnote).

origin of the prohibition of incest and of the prohibition of intraclan or intratribal murder, as well as of the first "religious" institutions (totemism, taboo), guarantors thenceforth of an already human social order. The memory traces of the originary situation as well as of the killing of the father, handed down from generation to generation (Freud insists upon the phylogenetic, that is to say, simply genetic, character of this transmission, but such a hypothesis is not needed), would constitute the foundation both for the horror of incest and for one's ambivalence toward the father figure.

It is not very useful to discuss and refute this "scientific myth" on the terrain of the positive forms of knowledge. The hypothesis of a universal primitive totemism has been abandoned, or in any case it is very highly contested by contemporary anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). Primate ethology finds a "primal horde" (polygamous dominant adult, with the expulsion of young males) in gorillas but not in chimpanzees, phylogenetically closer to hominoids, which live in groups practicing panmixia. On the other hand, it is important to underscore here that, in these fields of positive knowledge, no response is given to the question Freud quite rightly asked himself, the one about the origin of the two major prohibitions. A "neo-Darwinian" answer could be furnished, in a pinch, to the question of the origin of the prohibition of intratribal murder: Among the groups of protohominoids, only those groups that, in one way or another, would have happened upon the invention of the prohibition of murder could have preserved themselves, the others having eliminated themselves after a while on their own. Still, this answer has to leave us in the dark about the question of uninhibited intraspecies aggression, which is absent from animal species yet characteristic of humans, and any discussion of this form of aggression cannot help but

appeal to properly psychical factors. When it comes to the prohibition of incest and the horror of incest, however, no "neo-Darwinian" answer can be invoked. The assertion that, without such a prohibition, there would be no human society is correct, yet tautological and implicitly teleological.

The main objections lodged against *Totem and Taboo*'s "scientific myth"—a myth to which Freud remained faithful until the end of his life—stem from the fact that, like all origin myths, this one implicitly presupposes that of which it wants to explain the birth: here, the fact of the indelible alterity between human psychism and animal psychism and the fact of the institution. The coalition of the brothers for nonbiological ends is already a sort of institution, and in any case it presupposes this other institution that is language (even if one leaves aside the "new technical invention"). The ambivalence of the brothers toward the murdered father is an essentially human trait; hominization is therefore presupposed in what is to "explain" its advent. In addition, and above all, the (certainly justified) preoccupation with accounting for the prohibitions every society presupposes leaves us entirely in the dark about the huge "positive" component of every set of institutions and of the significations these institutions carry with them. This may be seen in Freud's having been reduced to finding himself obliged to consider language or technique (labor) implicitly as givens or as going without saying, as well as in the impossibility of reducing the immense variety and complexity of social edifices to the repetitive play of drives that, by definition, are everywhere and always identical, and to the vagaries of an Oedipus complex that would have to account, all at once, for primitive beliefs, polytheism, monotheism, and Buddhism.

That does not keep Freud's views from shedding powerful light on the tendencies of the psyche, which

constitute the prop [*l'étayage*] for the socialization of individuals. In this regard, primacy no doubt belongs on the side of the introjection of the parental imagos (though Freud insists only on the role of the paternal imago); the (successful or failed, it matters little) identification with this imago; and the constitution, within the Unconscious of the singular human being, of an instance of authority or "agency" [*une instance*], the Superego and/or Ego-ideal, which prohibits and enjoins. In this sense, the "scientific myth" of *Totem and Taboo* acquires the signification it could (and should) have had from the outset: not that of an "explanation" of the genesis of society starting from an "event" but, rather, that of an elucidation of the psychical processes conditioning the singular human being's internalization, in its infantile situation, of social institutions and significations. Fundamental in this regard, if generalized and reworked out, is the analysis of leader identification furnished in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921).

We must also note that Freud implicitly furnishes us, at another level, with one of the elements that allows us to describe the radical alterity between humanity and animality at the level of the psychism. Though not exploited by Freud in this direction, his text on "Instincts [*sic*] and their Vicissitudes" (1915a) allows us in effect to posit this alterity as determined by the lability or "displaceability" [*la labilité*] of the psychical representatives of the drives in humans—as opposed to the rigidity of this connection in the animal psychism, for which each drive (instinct) possesses its canonical and biologically functional representative or representatives.

This rapid overview would be incomplete were we not to indicate that, in his late 1920s texts (*The Future of an Illusion*, *Civilization and its Discontents*), Freud furnishes

some answers to the question of hominization (or of the genesis of society) that are different from those of *Totem and Taboo* (although these two sets of responses are compatible). In *Future*, the main factor is the civilizing activity of "minorities," who impose prohibitions and institutions on human masses always dominated by their drives and always in masked [*larvée*] war against civilization—a war that, in Freud's view (and with accents in this text that are sometimes frankly anarchistic in character), is justified by the excessive price the masses pay for their belonging to civilized society, in terms of real deprivations and "instinctual" frustrations. At the same time, and particularly in *Discontents*, these drives are no longer only sexual (or libidinal) but also and especially aggressive; they are drives directed toward the destruction of the other as much as of their own subject. Here we obviously are hearing an echo of the major revision Freud undertook of his theory of the drives, and of the psychical apparatus, since the time of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920); he replaced the oppositions of pleasure/reality and of libidinal drives/self-preservative drives with the duality of Eros/Thanatos, those "immortal adversaries" erected into cosmic forces whose struggle dominates and forms the history of civilization as well as that of humanity.[3]

    3. Clearly, the distinction between the question of the "origin" of society as such and that of the "origin" of particular, more or less transhistorical large-scale institutions does not correspond to anything real. Clearly, too, it would be too much to ask psychoanalysis for an "explanation" of the structure and content of these institutions. While for a

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[3]T/E: The phrase "equally immortal adversaries" appears, relative to Eros and Thanatos, at the very end of *Civilization and its Discontents*, *SE* 21: 145.

moment at the outset of his career Freud thought that his method would allow for an elucidation of the birth of language, he quickly had to abandon this illusion, limiting himself to supporting until the end Karl Abel's unlikely theory about the universality of the "antithetical meaning of primal words"[4] (a thesis, it is true, that finds an echo in some characteristics of the functioning of the Unconscious but could not apply to any diurnal social language). No more than other institutions, psychoanalysis could not produce language, which it has to presuppose. Likewise, it is not possible to reduce labor to the reality principle and to recognition of the necessity of deferring satisfaction of the drives (or of needs); as for its history (and for the history of technique), several of Freud's formulations show that he shared, with everyone else in the Western world of his time, the implicit and illusory postulate of there being an immanent "progressiveness" to human activities. The same goes for knowledge. Freud invokes a drive for knowledge (*Wißtrieb*) rooted in infantile sexual curiosity (and haunted by the questions "Where do children come from?" and "Where does the difference between the sexes come from?"), which is tied to a drive for mastery. While the discovery and elucidation of infantile sexual theories are among psychoanalysis's great contributions, nothing therein comes to shed any light, however, on the origin and specificity of these strange "drives," which clearly are without any biological or somatic support or function, and still less on their history. Finally, the transition from the "primitive democracy" of the brothers (*Totem and Taboo*) to asymmetrically and antagonistically divided societies—in other words, the birth and persistence of domination—remains just as enigmatic in Freud as in all

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[4]T/E: See Freud's "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words," *SE* 11: 153-62.

other authors who have treated this question.[5]

     Much richer, though also debatable, are the contributions of the Freudian conception to the question of the difference and instituted inequality of genders (sexes), or to that of the patriarchal organization observed in practically all known societies. Anatomical sex organs can account for instituted gender difference, not for the domination of one gender over the other (even though this domination sometimes is, in certain regards and in part, only apparent). The institution of society must ensure settled relationships of sexual reproduction (though up to what point is another question) and must instaurate man and woman as indivisible and highly asymmetric polarities. But to go from the necessity of this asymmetry to a necessity of domination of one gender by the other is a sophism analogous to the one that claims to go from the necessity of an internal differentiation and articulation of society to the alleged necessity of antagonistic and asymmetrical division. Freud rightly insisted on humans' psychical bisexuality, and late in life he granted the relativity of the notions of "activity" and "passivity" in the psychical domain. These ideas render even more arduous the task of "explaining" patriarchy. He postulated, in a first phase of his work (which goes until 1925), a "precisely analogous" situation between the young boy and the young girl (Freud, 1900, 1916-17, 1921, 1923; see the Editor's Note to Freud, 1925, p. 244), both of them being caught in the Oedipus complex. The young boy has to abandon his mother as love-object as well as the corresponding wish to eliminate the father, faced as he is with what he lives as a threat of castration to be inflicted by the latter, and he takes refuge in the hope that one day he will in turn be able to become a

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[5]T/E: See *IIS*, 151-56, on "the appearance of the antagonistic division of society into *classes*," which "continues to be shrouded in deep mystery."

father. Nothing more specific is said about the young girl. From this perspective, the patriarchal situation clearly has to be postulated as already being there (here, one can catch an echo of the state of the "primal horde") and simply doomed to reproduce itself over and over again. But, after numerous preparatory allusions beginning in 1915, Freud is led to reformulate completely his conception in "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Differences Between the Sexes" (1925). The innovations of this text are, firstly, the recognition of the role of the mother as first libidinal love-object for children of both sexes and, secondly, the central place granted to their discovery that the little girl is "castrated" (*sic*) and, by way of consequence, the scorn she incurs on the part of the little boy as well as on her own part and the ineradicable envy of the penis that will dominate her life from then on. Yet to try to make of these psychological facts the foundation for the patriarchal institution is, here again, a *petitio principii*, a begging of the question. That the penis or the phallus might in children's view be cathected with this cardinal value (and not, for example, the full belly of a pregnant woman) already presupposes the ambient (social) value given to masculinity. Nor can the incontestably essential role of the father in the child's psychosocial maturation account for patriarchy. The decisive characteristic of patriarchy is the contraction into a single person of four roles: biological genitor; object of the mother's desire, breaking up the fusional state that tends to be established [*s'instaurer*] between her and the child (of either sex); identificatory model for boys and valued sexual object for girls; and, finally and especially, instance of power and representative of the law. It can be argued that this contraction is "economical" (but one would have to not neglect the costs). It could not be maintained that it is ineluctable. In any case,

no doubt can exist about Freud's own patriarchal bias, as expressed in his judgment that women are much less capable of sublimating than men, in the myth from *Totem and Taboo* (where mothers and sisters play no role), and in the way in which he considers divine androcracy, notably in its monotheistic form, as going without saying.

Much clearer and, in several regards, more solid is the interpretation of religion Freud furnishes in *The Future of an Illusion*—but also, it is true, much less specifically psychoanalytical. Religion is an illusion, in the precise meaning defined by Freud on this occasion: not only erroneous belief, but belief sustained by a desire, a passionately cathected error.[6] Socially speaking, it constitutes the keystone of the edifice of drive suppression [*l'édifice répressif des pulsions*] constructed by institutions. Psychically speaking, it works essentially through the "humanization of the world": *man…fülht sich heimisch im Unheimlichen*, one feels at home (familiar) in strange surroundings.[7] Religion accomplishes this by the "replacement…of natural science by psychology":[8] it anthropomorphizes the universe and relies on infantile projections, notably that of the all-powerful paternal imago. Whence its capacity to satisfy multiple psychical needs: it responds, somehow or other, to the "desire for knowledge"; it protects "man's self-regard," which is threatened by the wide world and one's feelings of terror before nature; it consoles some of the real miseries of life as well as some sufferings and deprivations imposed by culture; and it furnishes a semblance of a solution to the most anxiety-

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[6]T/E: This definition appears at *SE* 21: 30-31.

[7]T/E: The standard English translation of *The Future of an Illusion* has "the humanization of nature" and "can feel at home in the uncanny" (*ibid.*: 16 and 17, respectively).

[8]T/E: *Ibid.*: 17.

ridden riddle of all, mortality.[9] Freud does not, for all that, despair of the possibility of going beyond religion: "Men cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into 'hostile life.'"[10]

4. Let us repeat: It would be asking too much and it would be unfair to require of psychoanalysis a "theory" of society and history. Nevertheless, it is Freud himself who legitimates such requirements—not through his incursions into these domains (which could be considered as some initial attempts, ones coming, moreover, from someone who recognizes and repeats that his main preoccupations and his knowledge are located elsewhere), but through his repeated affirmation that there is no room for any distinction between an "individual Unconscious" and a "collective Unconscious," that there is only one Unconscious of the human species. It then may be asked: What about the huge variety of societies and human cultures? A first, not very satisfactory response would consist in positing the differences among societies as being superficial or epiphenomenal (here belong the attempts, begun already in Freud's time, to rediscover the same unconscious "structures" in all ethnic groups and behind all social edifices). Another response, one much more faithful to the spirit of Freud's own contributions (notably *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*) would be to see therein the effect of history and of different stages of this history in

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[9]T/E: *Ibid.*: 16. The standard English translation has "curiosity" at this point in the text, instead of "desire for knowledge" (though the phrase "instinct for knowledge or research" certainly appears elsewhere, e.g., in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, *SE* 7: 194). And, if we have identified the correct passage to which Castoriadis is referring, Freud is talking about "civilization" generally, not religion in particular, but the context of a critique of religion is clear here in *The Future of an Illusion*.
[10]T/E: *Ibid.*: 49.

which the societies we observe would find themselves placed. This response would send us back to another question: What makes there be history, in the strong sense of the term, whereas psychoanalysis would lead us (and, in the immense majority of cases, rightly so) to consider that repetition and reproduction of the existent, as ensured by the very nature of the process of the human being's socialization, are the prevailing traits of human societies? To this second question, Freud's writings furnish two responses that do not pertain to the same logic. The first one, to which we have already alluded, boils down to postulating the immanence of some sort of factor of progression—at any rate, in the mastery of natural reality and of scientific knowledge. By its nature, this first response makes it difficult to understand how moments of rupture can exist. Now, moments like this are, as we have seen, at the center of *Totem and Taboo*. Such founding events are also central to *Moses and Monotheism*, a brief examination of which may serve to illuminate Freud's difficult relations with historicity.

This book, which is poignant as much on account of its content as for the historical circumstances of its composition (between 1934 and 1938), aims at explaining the birth of monotheism as well as the circumstances of its adoption by the Jewish people, the reasons for the latter's extraordinary attachment to its religion and its collective psychology, made up at once of feelings of pride and of the perpetuation of an unconscious sense of guilt. Full, as all Freud's writings are, of fascinating hints, it fails in its central purpose. This purpose is the elucidation of the origins of monotheism. Now, in a paradox that generally goes unnoticed, Freud explicitly postulates that, when his story begins, monotheism had *already* been invented (worship of the single "Sun," as introduced by Akhenaten—a historically

certified fact) and that "Moses," an Egyptian prince in
Akhenaten's entourage, transmitted it to the Hebrews after the
defeat of the new religion in Egypt. Why had Akhenaten
invented monotheism? According to Freud, because Egypt
had become a "great world empire" reaching the frontiers of
the then-known world, with absolute power concentrated in
one person, the Pharaoh.[11] This explanation is at once banal,
logically untenable (the Chinese, the Romans, and many,
many others should then have been monotheists), and
unrelated to the idea, so often repeated, that the one God
would be a projection of the infantile imago of the father. But
the Hebrews (in the vein of "the masses' hostility to
civilization" already posited in *Future* and in *Discontents*)
found intolerable both this "suppression of the drives"
required by the new religion and their liberator, whom they
killed.[12] The "return" of this repressed murder (centuries after
its accomplishment) and the accompanying guilt are said to
explain the firmness or rigidity of the Hebrews' attachment to
their religion as well as several other "traits" of this people,
notably its "spirituality." Yet it is difficult to grant that, had
the Egyptians put Akhenaten to death (instead of just placing
his son, after his death, in guardianship), they would have

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[11]T/E: *Moses and Monotheism*, *SE* 23: 65; see also *ibid.*: 21.

[12]T/E: The phrase "the hostility of the masses to civilization" can be found
in *The Future of an Illusion*, *SE* 21: 39. In this work (as well as
elsewhere), Freud speaks of a "suppression of the instincts" (*ibid.*: 7) and
a "renunciation of instinct" (*ibid.*: 7, 10, 15); I have chosen "suppression
of the drives" to translate *répression pulsionnelle*, "suppression" being the
standard English translation of *répression*, while the word "repression"
appears as *réfoulement* in French. As Castoriadis himself distinguishes,
above in this text as well as elsewhere, between animal "instinct" and
human "drives," *pulsion* is translated as "drive" and *instinct* as "instinct,"
thus regularly necessitating the inclusion of a "[*sic*]" after "Instincts" in
Jones's English-language title for Freud's 1915 article "Instincts and their
Vicissitudes."

become quasi-Hebrews. Nor does anything render intelligible the continuation/alteration of monotheism among the Christians and Muslims. As in the "scientific myth" of *Totem and Taboo*, here too the massive fact of social-historical creation becomes the object of an attempt at occultation by means of some allegedly intelligible and in fact more than frail "reconstructions."

5. The question of whether psychoanalysis can contribute to political thought properly speaking can be coined in several other closely connected if not simple juxtaposed aspects of the same interrogatory investigation: Does psychoanalysis have something to say about desirable institutions (or condemnable ones; but that boils down to the same thing, since in both cases the affirmation of a norm is assumed)? Does it have something to say about any other kind of normality for the human being than a "positive" one (that is, one defined in relation to the framework of a given society)? Does it know anything about its own ends, beyond relieving psychical suffering or helping subjects to adapt to the instituted social order? Does it bring out any boundaries to possible efforts at transforming society for the better? Because we are unable here to treat these different moments in a systematic way, we shall limit ourselves to a few observations that, we hope, are of the essence.

Freud never concealed his highly critical attitude toward the social institutions of his age (which, in substance, are identical to those of ours). He repeatedly condemned the hypocrisy of the official sexual morality, the "excess of drive suppression," civilization's tendency to oblige the individual to "live beyond his psychical means," and he unambiguously condemned great economic inequalities. He maintained this attitude until the end of his life. In *Future* and in *Discontents*,

he evokes the possibility of offering a psychoanalytic examination of the "pathology of collective formations,"[13] hopes that "infantilism is destined to be surmounted"[14] (with regard to the illusion of religion), appeals to "our god *Logos*,"[15] and awaits a new burst of Eros against Thanatos, against the aggressiveness and destructiveness that characterize intra- and intersocial relations. The totemic myth is already resolved through instauration of an egalitarian institution, the "primitive democracy of the brothers" (the sisters remaining, of course, on the sidelines). This democracy is paid for, however, by the totemization of the murdered father—which can be generalized into totemization of any instituted imaginary artifact whatsoever, an imaginary instance of authority serving as guarantor of the institution (the term *totemization* can be considered in this context as equivalent to those of *alienation* and *heteronomy*). The hopes expressed in *Future* and in *Discontents* imply that it is possible to go beyond such totemization.

Another factor comes to light in *Discontents*, however, as well as in the texts on war, giving them a highly "pessimistic" coloring: that is, the "death instinct," hetero- and self-destructiveness. All of historical experience, like that of Freud's age—and what is one to say about our own?—shows that this factor cannot be overestimated. And in no way is it necessary to accept Freud's cosmological metaphysics as regards Thanatos in order to recognize the importance of the following two manifestations, which

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[13]T/E: The standard English translation has "pathology of cultural communities" in *Civilization and its Discontents* (*SE* 21: 144); the German *Kultur* is translated as "civilization" when a noun and as "cultural" when an adjective.

[14]T/E: *The Future of an Illusion*, *SE* 21: 49.

[15]T/E: The phrase "our God *Logos*" appears twice on *SE* 21: 54, with the word *Logos* printed in Greek.

history as well as clinical experience confirm on a daily basis: the unbounded aggressiveness of human beings and their compulsion for repetition. The second of these is used by society in order to ensure the preservation of institutions, *whatever ones they may be*; the first is kept in check by being, among other things, channeled "outward," taking advantage, too, of the "narcissism of minor differences."[16]

It is incontestable that an irreducible minimum of drive repression [*refoulement des pulsions*] is the requisite for all socialization—therefore a precondition every consideration of a political nature has to take into account. This theme is nothing new for political thought: Freud meets up here with Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Diderot, and even Kant. But in a more radical formulation, there is an unsurpassable hostility, on the part of the psychical core, to the socialization process itself, a process to which it has to be subjected under penalty of death, as well as an insurmountable unconscious persistence to the constellation that is formed by originary ultra-"narcissism," egocentrism, omnipotence of thought, withdrawal into the universe of phantasying, hate, and a tendency toward the destruction of the other, which is turned against the subject herself. (This is what, under a crude and unsatisfying form, the masses' "hostility to civilization"[17] expresses.) A boundary is thus set on the possible states of human society: the "nature" of the human soul forever excludes the realization of a "perfect society" (with the meaninglessness of this expression) and will always impose on humans a split in their psyches. Beyond some messianic and pastoral Marcusean promises (Marcuse, 1955), however, the true question is that of the possibility of a society that does not totemize its institutions, that facilitates individuals in their

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[16]T/E: See *Civilization and its Discontents, SE* 21: 114.
[17]T/E: See *Future*, *SE* 21: 10 and 15, and *Discontents*, *SE* 21: 87 and 96.

accession to a state of lucidity and reflectiveness, and that succeeds in diverting the polymorphic pushes of the psychical chaos toward paths that are compatible with a civilized life on the scale of humanity as a whole (and it is explicitly to humanity as such that Freud is referring at the end of *Discontents*).[18]

Historical experience can easily be invoked in order to deny this possibility. But such an invocation would be fallacious. For Freud himself (*ibid.*), it would be a matter of a novation in the history of humanity (of a new stage in the struggle between Eros and Thanatos). It is by definition impossible to pronounce an opinion on the chances for success or failure of this novation on the basis of past experience or even on the basis of purely theoretical considerations (short of the boundaries recalled above). And this experience itself is not univocal. The detotemization of institutions was achieved in part in democratic Athens and still more so in the modern West. Diversions of the drives in the direction of socialization have been accomplished everywhere and always; without them, there would have been no societies. The question is: What might their limit be? Perhaps the most weighty interrogation is the one concerning the possibility of overcoming tribal narcissistic identifications. Freud's invocation of Logos overestimates the "rational" dimension of human existence and does not take into account the fragmentation of the social imaginary into multiple and rival imaginaries. Freud explicitly postulates the possibility of a fusion of human cultures into a culture of humanity. An antinomy then arises: It seems impossible to

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[18]T/E: In the last chapter of the *Standard Edition* translation of *Civilization and its Discontents*, the reference is to "mankind," but "humanity" also appears throughout this text and *The Future of an Illusion*, and the two words are synonymous.

conceive of any culture whatsoever that would not be marked by a high degree of particularity, whereas a culture of humanity can be thought of only as universal. This antinomy certainly is not absolute, and it could even be said that it is speculative in character. The flat and empty eclecticism of the "universal" culture of the contemporary West encourages us, however, to be more than circumspect.

Nevertheless, despite the political nihilism of the overwhelming majority of today's analysts, a psychoanalytic attitude could not remain in this balancing act of opposing discourses, for it cannot dodge the question of the end and of the ends of the activity of analysis. Freud returned to this question on several occasions. His most striking formulations ("restore the capacity to work and to love," "Where Id was, Ego shall come to be")[19] clearly assign to psychoanalysis as its end a project of the subject's autonomy embodied in the capacity to elucidate unconscious drives and in the reinforcement of a reflective and deliberative instance, which Freud calls the Ego. But no subject is an island, and the subject's educational formation is highly dependent on its socialization by institutions. Once accepted, the psychoanalytic project induces a norm by which institutions are to be gauged: whether they hinder or facilitate the accession of subjects to their autonomy and whether or not they are capable of reconciling that autonomy with the autonomy of the collectivity.

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[19]T/E: The first quotation, perhaps apocryphal, comes from Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society* (1950), 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 264-65: it "has come to me as Freud's shortest saying" (see Alan C. Elms, "Apocryphal Freud: Sigmund Freud's Most Famous 'Quotations' and Their Actual Sources," *Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 29 [2001]: 83-104). The second quotation is Castoriadis's own version of a sentence written by Freud in German (see *GW* 15:86; *SE* 22: 80); we use the English translation found in *IIS*, 102.

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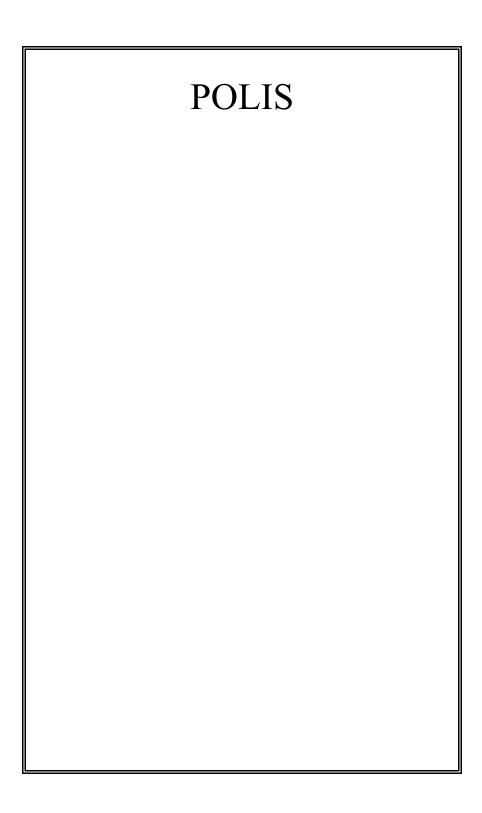Mitchell, Juliet (1974). *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

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POLIS

The Greek and the Modern
Political Imaginary*

Why "the Greek and the modern political imaginary"? Why "imaginary"? Because I hold that human history—therefore, also, the various forms of society we have known in history—is in its essence defined by imaginary creation. In this context, "imaginary" obviously does not signify the "fictive," the "illusory," the "specular," but rather the positing of new forms. This positing is not determined, but rather determining; it is an unmotivated positing that no causal, functional, or even rational explanation can account for.

Each society creates its own forms. These forms in turn bring into being a world in which this society inscribes itself and gives itself a place. It is by means of them that society constitutes a system of norms, institutions in the broadest sense of the term, values, orientations, and goals [*finalités*] of collective life as well as of individual life. At their core are to be found, each time, social imaginary significations, which also are created by each society and which are embodied in its institutions. God is one such social imaginary signification, but so is modern rationality, and so forth. The ultimate objective of social and historical research is the restitution and the analysis, as far as possible, of these significations for each society under study.

We cannot conceive such creation as the work of one

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or of a few individuals who might be designated by name but only as that of the anonymous collective imaginary, of the instituting imaginary, to which, in this regard, we shall give the name *instituting power*. Such power can never be rendered fully explicit; it is exercised, for example, on account of the fact that every newborn baby in society has imposed upon it, via its socialization, a language. Now, a language is not only a language; it is a world. The newborn infant also has imposed upon it various forms of conduct and behavior, feelings of attraction and repulsion, and so on. This instituting power, I said, can never be made fully explicit; it remains in large part hidden within the depths of society. At the same time, however, every society institutes, and cannot live without instituting, some kind of explicit power, which I relate to the notion of the political sphere [*le politique*]; in other words, it constitutes the instances or authorities capable, explicitly and effectively, of issuing sanctionable injunctions. Why is such a power necessary, why does it belong among the ultrarare instances of social-historical universals? We can see why by noting straight off that every society must maintain itself, preserve itself, defend itself. It is constantly being challenged, first of all, by the world in its very unfolding, the infraworld as it exists before being constructed by society. It is menaced by itself, by its own imaginary, which can rise up and challenge the institution as it already exists. It is also threatened by individual transgressions, a result of the fact that at the core of each human being is to be found a singular psyche, irreducible and indomitable. It is threatened, finally, until further notice, by the other societies. Also and above all, each society is immersed in a temporal dimension that itself cannot be mastered, a time-to-come that is to-be-made and to-be-done, in relation to which there are not only enormous uncertainties but also decisions that must be taken.

This explicit power, the one we speak of in general when we speak of power, which concerns the political [*le politique*], in its essence rests not on coercion—there obviously always is coercion to some extent or other and, as we know, it can reach monstrous heights—but rather on the internalization, by socially fabricated individuals, of the significations instituted by the society under consideration. It cannot rest on mere coercion, as is shown by the recent example of the collapse of the regimes of the Eastern bloc. There must be a minimum of adherence, be it only by a portion of the population, to the institutions already in place, or coercion loses its grip. From the moment that, to take the example of the Eastern-bloc regimes, the ideology one wanted to impose upon the population started to come unraveled, then collapsed and was exposed in its endless vapidity, from that moment on the power of coercion ultimately was doomed, as were the regimes employing it—at least in a world like the modern one.

Among the significations that animate the institutions of a society, one is of particular importance: the one that concerns the origin and the foundation of the institution, or the nature of the instituting power, and what would be called in an anachronistically modern, Eurocentric (and, to be strict about it, also Sinocentric) language, its "legitimation" or "legitimacy." In this regard, a cardinal distinction is to be made, when looking at history, between heteronomous societies and societies in which the project of autonomy begins to emerge. I call *heteronomous* a society in which the *nomos*, the law, the institution, is given by another—*heteros*, in Greek. In fact, as we know, the law never really is given by *someone else*, it is always the creation of the society. In the overwhelming majority of cases, however, the creation of this institution is nevertheless imputed to an extrasocial instance

or authority, or, in any case, it eludes the power and the activity of living human beings. It becomes immediately clear that, so long as that holds, this belief constitutes the best means of assuring the perenniality, the intangibility, of the institution. How can you challenge the law when the law has been given by God? How can you state that the law given by God is unjust when justice is nothing other than one of the names of God, like truth is nothing other than one of the names of God? ("For Thou art the Truth, Justice, and the Light")?[1] But this source obviously can also be other than God: the gods, founding heroes, the ancestors—or impersonal, but equally extrasocial instances such as Nature, Reason, or History.

Now, within this immense historical mass of heteronomous societies, a rupture occurs in two cases. It is here that we may begin to broach our topic. These two cases are represented by ancient Greece, on the one hand, and, on the other, Western Europe beginning with the first Renaissance (in the eleventh and twelfth centuries), which the historians still wrongly include as part of the Middle Ages. In both instances, one finds a dawning recognition of the fact that the source of the law is society itself, that we make our own laws—whence results the opening up of the possibility

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[1]T/E: While such affirmations identifying one or another of these three terms with God abound in the Bible, we cannot find a specific quotation to this effect for all three either there or in the subsequent voluminous Christian literature on the subject. Ephesians 5.9 does state: "For the fruit of the light [of the Lord] consists in every sort of goodness, justice, and truth" (Louis Second French translation translated into English) and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704) affirms that "God is light, God is truth, God is justice" (Second Point of the Second Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, in the eighth volume of the 1875 edition of his *Œuvres Complètes*, p. 125, translated into English), but usually Castoriadis has in mind an Old Testament source when making this point, at least about justice.

of challenging and calling into question the existing institution of society, which now is no longer sacred, or in any case not sacred in the same way as before. This rupture, which is at the same time a historical creation, involves a rupture of the closure of signification as it has been instaurated in heteronomous societies. It instaurates in one stroke both democracy and philosophy.

Why speak of the "closure of signification"? The term *closure* here is given the very precise meaning it enjoys in mathematics, in algebra. An algebraic field is said to be closed when every algebraic equation that can be written in this field, with the elements of this field, can be solved with elements from this same field. In a society in which there is a closure of signification, no question that can be raised within this system, within this magma of significations, is lacking a response within this same magma. The Law of the Ancestors has a response to everything, the Torah has a response to everything, as does the Koran. And if one wanted to proceed any further, the question would no longer have any meaning within the language of the society in question. Now, 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.

The same thing goes for democracy. In its genuine signification, democracy consists in this, that society does not halt before a conception, given once and for all, of what is just, equal, or free but rather institutes itself in such a way that

the questions of freedom, of justice, of equity, and of equality might always be posed anew within the framework of the "normal" functioning of society. And in contradistinction to what I have just called *the* political [le *politique*], that is to say, what in every society has to do with explicit power, it must be said that politic*s* [la *politique*]—not to be confused with court intrigues or the good management of instituted power, which exist everywhere—concerns the overall, explicit institution of society and the decisions that concern its future. It, too, is created for the first time in these two historical domains; it is created as lucid activity, or activity that attempts to be lucid as far as possible, and it intends, it aims at the overall, explicit institution of society.

I will say that a society is autonomous not only if it knows that it makes its laws but also if it is up to the task of calling them back into question. Likewise, I will say that an individual is autonomous if that individual has been able to instaurate another relation between its Unconscious, its past, the conditions under which it lives—and itself as a reflective and deliberative instance.

Until now, we have been unable to speak of a society that would be autonomous in the full sense of the term. We can say, however, that the project of social and individual autonomy has arisen in ancient Greece and in Western Europe. Whence our present topic. From this standpoint, study and research bearing on these two societies enjoy a political privilege in that their elucidation, independent of other (narrowly historical or philosophical) interests, encourages political reflection on our part, whereas reflection on Byzantine society, or on Russian society until 1830 or 1860, or on Aztec society, though it may be fascinating, does not, from the standpoint of politic*s* in the sense just described, teach us anything or incite us to think things out any further.

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So, Greece. Which Greece? Here we must pay attention and be rigorous, I shall even say severe. For me, the Greece that matters is the Greece extending from the eighth to the fifth century BCE. This is the phase during which the *polis* created, instituted, and, in approximately half the cases, transformed itself more or less into the democratic *polis*. This phase came to a close with the end of the fifth century; important things still happened in the fourth century and even afterward, notably the enormous paradox that two of the greatest philosophers who ever existed, Plato and Aristotle, were philosophers of the fourth century but were not philosophers of the Greek democratic creation. I shall say a few words about Plato in just a moment. Aristotle is doubly paradoxical because, in a sense, he "preceded" Plato and because he was, in my view, a democrat. But even Aristotle was reflecting *about* democracy, from the outside, as it were, and there already were in his time some creations of the democracy that he no longer truly comprehended, the most striking example being tragedy. He wrote a brilliant text, *The Poetics*, which, however, failed to grasp what was essential to tragedy.

It follows immediately that, when we are reflecting on Greek politics, our sources cannot be the philosophers of the fourth century and, in any case, certainly not Plato, who was imbued with an ineradicable hatred of the democracy and of the *dēmos*. One is quite often grieved to see modern scholars, who have otherwise contributed much to our knowledge of Greece, searching for Greece's political thought in Plato. It is as if one were to seek the political thought of the French Revolution in a reactionary such as Charles Maurras (bearing in mind the differences in character between the two authors).

Of course, Plato allowed glimpses from time to time of what the reality of the democracy was, for example in the speech of Protagoras in the dialogue of the same name, a speech that admirably expresses the *topoi*, the commonplace wisdom of fifth-century democratic thinking and beliefs. We know that he allowed these glimpses in order to refute them, but that matters little. Our sources can be none other than the reality of the *polis*, the reality expressed in its laws. There one also and especially finds a form of political thought instituted, materialized, incarnated. These sources are to be sought, too, in the practice of the *polis*, in its spirit. Of course, there always are questions of interpretation. This reality sometimes comes to us with a minimum of diffraction, as in the case of the laws themselves; sometimes with a diffraction that remains to be judged and appreciated, as with the historians, Herodotus and especially Thucydides, who are infinitely more important in this regard than Plato, or others, as with the tragedians or the poets in general. As to sources for our comprehension of the Western world, their extraordinary superabundance excludes any description, even of a summary nature.

I am going to proceed in a somewhat schematic and apparently arbitrary way, juxtaposing, in the briefest way possible, what I consider the fundamental instituted traits of the Greek political imaginary—that is to say, the imaginary as it was instituted in political institutions—with those of the modern political imaginary.

1. The relationship between the collectivity and power. The opposition between the direct democracy of the Ancients and the representative democracy of the Moderns is immediate and obvious. One can gauge the distance between these two conceptions by noting that in Ancient Greece, at

least in public law, the idea of representation was unknown, whereas among the Moderns it is at the basis of their political systems—apart, that is, from moments of rupture (workers' councils, for example, or soviets in their initial form), when the alienation of power from the represented toward the representatives is rejected and when those made delegates by the collectivity (such delegation sometimes being indispensable) are not only elected but may be revoked of their duties at any moment. To be sure, the Greeks—and I shall limit myself here to the case of the Athenians, since it is the case in which our knowledge is the least incomplete— have "magistrates." These magistrates, however, were divided into two categories. The magistrates whose functions involved some sort of expertise were elected. And as the perhaps not exclusive but certainly central business of Greek cities was the waging of war, the most important form of expertise was that concerning war, so the *stratēgoi*, or generals, were elected. A whole series of other magistrates, including several of real importance, were not elected; people became magistrates by a drawing of lots, or by rotation, or by a system combining the two, as was the case with the *prytaneis* and with the *epistatēs* of the *prytaneis* who, for one day, played the role of "President of the Republic" of the Athenians.

Two remarks need to be made on this score. First, the Moderns provide several empirical justifications for the idea of representative democracy, but nowhere among the political philosophers (or among those who claim to be such) has there been any attempt to provide a reasonable foundation for representative democracy. A metaphysics of political representation determines everything without it ever even being voiced or made explicit. What is this theological mystery, this alchemic operation that makes of your

sovereignty, one Sunday every five or seven years, a fluid that spreads over the entire country, enters into the ballot boxes, and comes out again that same evening on the television screen, on the faces of the "representatives of the people" or on the face of *the* Representative of the people, the monarch with the title of president?[2] This operation is clearly of a supernatural character, and no one has ever attempted to provide a foundation for it or even to explain it. People limit themselves to saying that under modern conditions direct democracy is impossible, therefore that representative democracy is necessary. So what! Something more than that, however, can be required, even on the "empirical" level.

Second, the question of elections. As M. I. Finley has said in his book, *Politics in the Ancient World*,[3] the Greeks invented elections. But a point of capital importance usually has been overlooked or has not been given adequate attention: for the Greeks, elections represent not a democratic but an *aristocratic* principle, and in the Greek tongue this is almost a tautology. It is so, too, in reality. When you elect people, you never try to elect the worst; you try to designate the best, which in Greek is spelled *aristoi*. Of course, *aristoi* has multiple significations: it also signifies the "aristos" (as we say in French, the "nobs" in England), those who belong to

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[2]T/E: Castoriadis is describing here the French system of political representation. Differences with other Western parliamentary systems are, in this respect, slight. Throughout the subsequent discussion, however, the reader should keep in mind that Castoriadis's presentation was made to a French—and not a British, American, or other—audience.

[3]T/E: *Politics in the Ancient World*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). For the full understanding of this passage, it should be noted that the title of the French translation of Finley's book, which Castoriadis cites, is *L'invention de la politique*, "the invention of politics." M. I. Finley is the name adopted by an American classical scholar who taught at Cambridge University after he was driven out of the United States during the McCarthy era.

the great and illustrious families. That does not stop the *aristoi* from being, under one heading or another, "the best." And when Aristotle proposed, in his *Politics*, a regime that he thought would combine democracy and aristocracy, this regime was a mixture of the two principles to the extent that there were also to be elections. From this standpoint, the actual regime of the Athenians corresponded to what Aristotle called his *politeia*, which he considered the best.

2. Participation by the body politic was essential under the Athenian regime, and laws were established to facilitate such political participation. In the modern world, we witness an abandonment of the public sphere to specialists, to professional politicians, interrupted only by rare and brief periods of political explosion known as revolutions.

In the ancient world, there was no State as apparatus or instance separated from the political collectivity. The collectivity itself exercised power, also using, of course, various instruments—among others, policemen who were slaves. In the modern world, in large part as an inheritance of the absolute monarchy but highly reinforced by subsequent events (the French Revolution and so on), there exists a powerful, centralized, bureaucratic State endowed with an immanent tendency to absorb everything into itself.

In Antiquity, the laws were publicized, engraved upon marble so that everyone might read them, and the courts were popular in nature. Every Athenian citizen, and on the average twice in his life, was called upon to take part in a jury. Jurors were chosen by lot, a process Aristotle described at length in the *Constitution of the Athenians*,[4] stressing the very complex

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[4]T/E: The description of jury selection begins with section 63. The title of Aristotle's book is usually—and incorrectly—translated as *The Constitution of Athens*. Castoriadis provides the correct and literal

procedures adopted for the purpose of eliminating all possibility of fraud in the designation of judges. In the modern world, the law is drawn up and implemented by specialists and is made incomprehensible to ordinary citizens. Here we witness a "double bind," to employ the language of psychiatrists, a twofold contradictory injunction: ignorance of the law is no excuse for anyone, but no one can know the law. To know it would require five years of legal studies, after which time one will still not know the law; one will be but a specialist in business law, criminal law, maritime law, and so on.

   3. There was in the Greek world an explicit recognition of the power and the function of government. In the modern period, where governments are nearly omnipotent, we notice that in the imaginary and in political and constitutional theory the Government is concealed behind what is called the "executive" power. This term is tantamount to mystification, it is a fantastic abuse of language, for the "executive power" does not "execute" anything. The lower echelons of the administration do engage in "execution" in the sense that they apply, or are supposed to apply, preexisting rules that enjoin them to carry out this or that specific act once conditions defined by these rules obtain. When the government wages war, however, it does not "execute" any law; it acts within the very broad bounds of a law that recognizes it this "right." And this we have seen in reality, in

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translation, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, so as to insist that this "Constitution" (in fact there were, according to Aristotle, about a dozen major political revolutions or fundamental changes) is the expression of a people's political arrangements, not the ordered relations of some separate state instance or authority. "City-state" for *polis* is another anachronistic translation, as Castoriadis has just made clear.

the United States with the Vietnam war, Panama, and Grenada, and now we are probably going to see it again in the case of the Persian Gulf, after which time Congress will be unable to do anything but approve the action.[5] This occultation of governmental power, this pretense that the government does nothing but "execute" laws (what laws does the government "execute" when it prepares, proposes, and imposes a budget?), is only a part of what may be called the instituted duplicity of the modern world, other examples of which we shall see later.

In the ancient world, there were experts, but their domain was that of *technē*, the domain in which a specialized knowledge can be employed and in which the best can be distinguished from the less good: for example, among architects, shipbuilders, and so on. No experts existed, however, in the domain of politics. Politics was the domain of *doxa*, of opinion; no political *epistēmē* or political *technē* existed. This was why the *doxai*, the opinions of everyone, were, as a first approximation, equivalent: after discussion, there has to be a vote. Let us note in passing the following absolutely fundamental point: the postulate of the *prima facie* equivalence of all *doxai* is the *sole* justification for the principle of majority rule. (We are not talking about procedural justifications, namely, that at some point the discussion must end: it would then suffice simply to draw lots.)

In the modern imaginary, experts are present in all domains, politics is professionalized, and the pretense of a political *epistēmē*, of a political knowledge, makes its

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[5]T/E: This speech was given October 29, 1990. The United States government did indeed wage war on Iraq, beginning on January 17, 1991, without Congress even exercising its constitutional prerogative to declare it.

appearance even if its advent, too, is not generally proclaimed in the public square (this is another instance of duplicity). It should be noted that the first person, at least to my knowledge, who dared to have pretensions to a political *epistēmē* was obviously Plato himself. It was Plato who proclaimed that one must be done with the aberration that is a government by men who are only in *doxa*, and it was he who conferred the *politeia* and the conduct of its affairs upon the possessors of "true" knowledge, the philosophers.

4. In the ancient world, it was recognized that it is the collectivity itself that is the source of the institution, at least of the political institution properly speaking. The laws of the Athenians always began with the famous preamble: *edoxe tē boulē kai tō dēmō*, it appeared (it seemed) good to the Council and to the people, that…. The collective source of the law is made explicit. At the same time, we witness the strange situation of religion in the Greek world (and not only in the democratic cities): religion was highly present, but it was a religion of the city and this religion was kept at a distance from public affairs. I do not believe that one will find a single instance in which a city sent delegates to Delphi to inquire of the oracle, What law ought we to vote? One could have asked, Should we engage in battle here or over there? One might even have demanded, Would so-and-so make a good legislator? Never, however, would one have asked something bearing on the content of a law. In the modern world, there is of course the rather difficult breakthrough, which finally burst forth in 1776 and 1789, that is the idea of the sovereignty of the people, though this idea coexists with religious residues; at the same time, the attempt to found this sovereignty of the people on something other than itself also persists: "natural law," Reason and rational legitimation, historical laws, etc.

5. There were in the ancient world no "constitutions" in the proper sense. Once one exits from a sacred world, from the imaginary signification of a transcendent foundation for the law and of an extrasocial norm for social norms, the crucial problem of self-limitation thereby arises. Democracy is quite evidently a regime that knows no external norms; it has to posit its own norms, and it has to posit them without being able to lean on another norm for support. In this sense, democracy is certainly a tragic regime, subject to *hubris*, as was known and was seen in the second half of the fifth century BCE at Athens; it had to confront the issue of its own self-limitation. Now, the necessity for such self-limitation was clearly recognized in Athenian laws: forthrightly political procedures existed, such as the strange and fascinating institution that is *graphē paranomōn*, that is to say, the accusation by a citizen against another citizen that the latter had induced the Assembly to adopt an "illegitimate law" (we need to reflect on the abysses opened by this phrase). The judiciary existed in strict separation, and its power continued to develop—to such an extent that, in the fourth century, Aristotle said of Athens what almost could be said today of the United States, namely, that the judicial power tends to rise above all others.

Finally—and unfortunately I cannot dwell at length on this immense theme—there is tragedy. Although its many different significations can by no means be reduced simply to its political aspect, tragedy also possessed a very clear-cut political signification: the constant reminder of self-limitation. For, tragedy was also and especially the exhibition of the effects of *hubris* and, more than that, the demonstration that contrary reasons can coexist (this was one of the "lessons" of the tragedy *Antigone*) and that it is not in obstinately persisting in one's own reasons (*monos phronein*)

that it becomes possible to solve the grave problems that may be encountered in collective life (which has nothing to do with the watery consensus of contemporary times). Above all else, however, tragedy was democratic in this, that it was a constant reminder of mortality, that is, of the radical limitation on human beings.

In Modern Times, there are formal "constitutions"; in a few exceptional cases, these constitutions endure, as in the United States, on condition of making a few dozen amendments and of surviving a civil war, but in most other cases they are merely scraps of paper. (There are, at present, approximately 160 "sovereign States" that are members of the United Nations, almost all of them endowed with "constitutions"; it is doubtful that even twenty of them could be qualified as "democratic" in any sense of the term.)

Now, of course, these constitutions are supposed to provide an answer to the problem of self-limitation; in this sense, one certainly cannot just reject out of hand the idea of a constitution, or of a "bill of rights." Very potent, however, is the force exerted by the illusion of constitutionalism, the idea that it suffices to have a constitution in order for questions to be settled. Nothing illustrates this better than the famous "separation of powers," which is proclaimed in practically all modern constitutions but which is more than problematic. First, behind the legislative power and the "executive" power stands the true political power, which generally is not mentioned in constitutions or is mentioned (as in the present-day French constitution) only in nominal fashion: that is, the power of parties. When Mrs. Thatcher proposes a bill to the British Parliament, this Parliament is going to exercise its "legislative" power—but it is Mrs.

Thatcher's party that will vote on it.[6] Mrs. Thatcher then returns to 10 Downing Street, changes her dress, becomes the chief of "the executive," and sends a fleet to the Falkland Islands. That is what the "separation of powers" means. There is no separation of powers; the majority party concentrates legislative and governmental (the latter deceitfully labeled "executive") power in its hands; and in certain cases, as is alas the case in France and even in Great Britain, the government has the upper hand over the judicial power: the judicial power's dependence on the government, in France, is scandalous, not only in actual fact but even in the written law. As for parties themselves, they, being bureaucratic-hierarchal structures, have nothing democratic about them.

6. Underlying these political institutions are its political imaginary significations. What, in Antiquity, is suspended over everything else is the idea that the law is us, that the *polis* is us. Ruling over everything else, in Modern Times, is the idea that the State is Them [*L'État c'est eux*]. Them-and-us, as they say in England. A highly characteristic indicator is the idea of informing on someone: one is not supposed to snitch on someone who has committed a misdemeanor, or even a crime. Why? Is it not *your* law that has been violated? In Athens, as one knows, every citizen could bring another before the courts, not because this other individual would have personally injured him, but because the latter violated the law (*adikei*).

7. Among the Ancients, it was clearly understood, and constantly repeated, that society forms the individual.

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[6]T/E: We should note again that Castoriadis's speech was given in October 1990, not long before Mrs. Thatcher was hustled out of office—by her own party.

Quotations to this effect can easily be drawn from such authors as Simonides, Thucydides, and Aristotle. Whence the enormous weight placed on the citizenry's *paideia*—its education in the broadest sense of the term. In Modern Times, there remains, no doubt as the heritage of Christianity and of Platonism, the idea of an individual-substance, itself ontologically autarchic and self-producing, that enters into a social contract (a notional one, certainly; transcendental, if one prefers) whereby this substantive individual would make an agreement with others to found a society or a State (but should not we ask whether the individual might be incapable of doing this, even notionally or transcendentally?). Whence the ideas of the individual against the State or against society, and of civil society against the State.

8. Among the Ancients, the object of political activity was, certainly at the outset, the independence and the reinforcement of the political collectivity, independence being posited here as an end in itself. But also, at least for Athens in the fifth century, the collectivity was seen as a set of individuals reared by the *paideia* and the common works of the city—as Pericles says in the Funeral Oration.[7] The object of political activity among the Moderns is essentially the defense of (private, group, class) interests and defense against the State, or the lodging of demands addressed to it.

9. When one considers the participation of individuals in the political collectivity, there were, among the Ancients, as one knows, very heavy restrictions on the conditions for this participation. The political community was limited to those who were free adult males; women were totally excluded, certainly, and slaves and foreigners were also

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[7]T/E: See Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.34-46.

excluded. In Modern Times, the situation is entirely different. In theory, the members of the political collectivity living in a given territory possess all political rights, provided that they meet certain age and nationality requirements; there is an appeal to universality—human rights, etc.—but in practice strong limitations on political participation exist (not to mention the long struggle for the political rights of women, which, historically speaking, has hardly just come to pass, but whose results remain in reality quite limited).

10. In the ancient world, institutive political activity was very highly limited, not to say nonexistent, beyond the strictly political domain. For example, no one thought of interfering with property ownership or with the family (even if Aristophanes probably echoed certain dissenting positions of some Sophists on this score—so as to mock them). In Modern Times, and this is in my opinion the immense contribution of Europe, there is an extraordinary, and in principle unlimited, opening up of explicit institutive activity and certainly, as well, an actual challenging of institutions dating from times most immemorial, for example in the case of the workers' movement as well as of the women's movement.[8] In principle, no institution in modern society can escape being called into question.

11. Among the Greeks, there was an insurmountable limitation of political activity to the dimensions of the *polis* in its historical and actual givenness, its being-thus. Among the Moderns, there is a conflict between the universalistic dimension of the political imaginary and another central

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[8]T/E: The French equivalent of the first phrase here, "of the workers' movement as well as," appeared in *Les Grecs, les Romains et nous*, but, for whatever reason, was dropped from the *MI* reprint.

element of the modern imaginary: the Nation and the Nation-State. As Edmund Burke asked, Are we talking about the rights of man, human rights, or about the "rights of Englishmen"?[9] In theory, the question is rejected out of hand; in reality, things proceed quite differently.

12. The political ethos dominant among the Ancients was brutal frankness. This is to be found, for example, in Thucydides, in the speech of the Athenians to the Melians.[10] The Melians reproached the Athenians for making them bow to injustice; the Athenians responded, We are following a law we have not invented, but one we found existing before us, a law followed by all men and even by the gods, namely, the law of the strongest. This attitude was expressed in brutal fashion, and it was accompanied by the explicit idea that right exists only among equals. Equals are those who are members of a collectivity that has been able to posit itself as sufficiently strong so as to be independent and within which the men have been able to posit themselves as capable of claiming and of obtaining equal rights.

Here let us open a parenthesis on slavery. It is said that the Ancients justified the practice of slavery, which in reality

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[9]T/E: In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke's exact words for the first term are "as the rights of men." Still, as Castoriadis's phrase "*rights of man*" indicates, Burke's reference is clearly to France's 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (and not, e.g., to Thomas Paine's 1791 book *Rights of Man*), Burke denigrating these "rights of men" as "abstract principles" and contrasting these with "the rights of Englishmen…a patrimony derived from their forefathers."

[10]T/E: The Melian Dialogue, as recounted by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, may be found at 5.84-116. The Athenians' reply appears at 5.105. Castoriadis also refers to the Melians in "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in *CL2*; in "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions" (1993), below in the present volume; and in "From the Monad to Autonomy" (1991), now in *CL5*.

is nonsense of the first magnitude. The first justification of slavery of which I am aware is to be found in Aristotle (if you want, you can also talk about Plato, with the story of the three races,[11] but that is not the same thing). It is unthinkable, for a classical Greek, that slavery might be justified, given that he learns to read and to write with the *Iliad*, where one knows from the start that the most noble characters one encounters in this epic are going to be reduced to slavery (after the poem ends, in the continuation of the legend). Who would ever dare to think that Andromache or Cassandra is a slave "by nature"? Aristotle was the first to try, at the end of the fourth century, to provide a "justification" for slavery. The classical conception is admirably expressed in the famous fragment from Heraclitus, of which one usually cites only the first few words: War is father of all things, it is war that has shown (*edeixe*, has revealed a preexisting nature) who are gods and who are men, it is war that has created (*epoïēse*, has made of them) freemen and slaves.

Among the Moderns, we encounter instituted duplicity and ideology. Here again the origin is certainly to be found in Plato, with the "noble lie" in *The Republic*,[12] but it continues with Rome, Judaism, and instituted Christianity: one says one thing and does another. We are all, as God's children, equal, but in the churches there are, at least there were, separate pews for the lord, the nobles, and the bourgeois, while most of the people remained standing.

13. In Antiquity, the proclaimed objective of human activity, engraved upon the frontispiece of the political edifice, undoubtedly was the ideal of the man who is *kalos kagathos*, along with virtue, *paideia*, or, as Pericles says in

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[11]T/E: Plato *Republic* 413a-415e.
[12]T/E: *Ibid.*

the Funeral Oration, *philokaloumen kai philosophoumen*, living in and through the love of beauty and of wisdom. Among the Moderns, the proclaimed collective objective is undoubtedly the pursuit of happiness, universal happiness, which, however, is but a sum of private happinesses. Behind the frontispieces, the actual objective of the Ancients undoubtedly was, on the individual as well as on the collective level, what they called *kleos* and *kudos*—glory, renown, esteem. Among the Moderns, it is undoubtedly wealth and power—and, as Benjamin Constant has said, "the guarantee of our enjoyments."[13]

14. Behind all this lies another, deeper stratum of the imaginary: the way in which the world as a whole and human life are endowed with meaning, with signification. For the Greeks, the fundamental thing is mortality. I know of no other language in which the word "mortal" signifies "human" and "human" signifies "mortal." Of course, one finds in seventeenth-century and later French poetry the phrase "the mortals": this is but a remembrance of one's classical studies, not what animates the mother tongue, that is to say, society itself. For the Greeks, in contrast, the *thnētoi*, the mortals, are the humans: that is what being human is. Whence the oft-repeated injunction, *thnēta phronein*—think like a mortal, recall that you are a mortal—which is found in tragedy and elsewhere. You see this in Herodotus's story about Solon and Croesus;[14] when Croesus complained to Solon that the latter had not mentioned him among the happy men Solon has known, Solon responded to him, among other things: But you are still alive, it cannot be said of you that you are happy; one

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[13]T/E: In his 1819 speech at the Royal Athenaeum of Paris, "The Liberty of Ancients Compared with that of Moderns."
[14]T/E: Herodotus *Histories* 1.30-33.

could say that only after your death. The obvious, paradoxical, and tragic conclusion is this: You can be said to be happy only once you are dead, when nothing that might destroy your happiness or tarnish your *kleos* can happen to you any longer. One never *is* happy: one has to be dead in order, perhaps, to *have been* happy. As we know, the greatest misfortunes befell Croesus. And at the same time, our mortality is inhabited by *hubris*, which is not sin but excess. Hebraic or Christian sin presupposes that there are well-marked boundary lines (that is, marked by somebody else) between what must be done and what must not be done. What is specific to *hubris* is that there are no marked boundaries; no one knows at what moment *hubris* begins, yet there is a moment when one is in *hubris* and this is when the gods or things intervene to crush you.

Among the Moderns, the phantasm of immortality persists, even after the disenchantment of the world. This phantasm has been transferred onto the idea of indefinite progress, onto the expansion of an alleged rational mastery, and is manifest above all in the occultation of death, which is increasingly characteristic of the contemporary age.

15. There was among the Ancients an implicit ontology, as found in the oppositions between *Chaos* and *Kosmos* and between *phusis* and *nomos*. Being is as much chaos—both in the sense of the void (*chainō*) and in the sense of a jumble defying all definition—as it is cosmos, namely, visible and beautiful orderly arrangement. Being, however, in no way is wholly "rational"; such an idea was excluded from the Greek conception of things, even in Plato. The gods and Being do not worry about the humans; in a sense, even the contrary can be said: *to theion phthoneron*, the divine is envious, says Herodotus.[15] The gods are neither omniscient

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[15]T/E: Herodotus *The Histories* 3.40.2.

nor all-powerful. Nor are they any more just. It suffices to read the *Iliad* to see the heinous crimes committed by the gods: Hector is killed as a result of Athena's threefold treachery. The gods themselves are subject to an impersonal supreme law, *Anankē*, which prepares perhaps for their demise, as Prometheus proclaimed, and which is the law of creation/destruction, as was clearly expressed by Anaximander.

The modern world, on the other hand, does not succeed in freeing itself from a unitary, therefore almost inevitably theological, ontology. Once again, it was Plato who created this ontology, with its monstrous equation, also laid out by Plato, wherein Being equals the Good equals Wisdom equals the Beautiful—which later led someone like Martin Heidegger to repeat that the task of philosophy is to seek the meaning of Being, without him ever once asking himself the question whether Being has or can have a meaning and whether this very question has any meaning (it has none). Behind all this lies a Hebraico-Christian Promised Land, this Being-Good-Wisdom-Beauty lying somewhere out there on the accessible horizon of human history; ultimately, the theological promise is transferred onto the notion of "progress."

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Let me conclude very rapidly. I have obviously not presented all this in order to say that we must return to the Greeks, or even that Greek creation in this regard matters more than that of Modern Times. I have emphasized certain aspects; I could highlight many other aspects where there is, not a "transcendence" (the term has no meaning), but instead something other that appears with modernity and that for us is fundamental: a much more radical calling into question, a

universalization that is really effective up to a certain point, not because it has actually been achieved but because it is explicitly posited as an exigency, a requirement, a demand [*exigence*]. My conclusion is that we must go further than the Greeks and the Moderns. Our problem is to instaurate a genuine democracy under contemporary conditions, to make of this universalization that remains formal or, better, incomplete in the modern world a substantial and substantive universality. That can be done only by putting "enjoyments" in their place, by demolishing the excessive importance the economic has taken on in the modern world, and by trying to create a new ethos, an ethos connected at its center to man's essential mortality.

DISCUSSION

Roger Pol-Droit: Reading the detailed outline of your lecture, which you sent me,[16] I had the feeling of running up against three obstacles. They have become three questions, which do not exhaust, by far, the series of questions your analyses raise.

First difficulty: How do you articulate the singularity and the contingency of the birth, at Athens, of democracy and philosophy with the potential universality of this Greek "germ," as well as with your attack on the "philosophy of history" in the classical sense of the term? Let me quickly delineate the elements of this first question so that the problem will be clear to everyone.

The Greeks, and more specifically the Athenians, are the sole people to have constituted a society explicitly deliberating on the laws it gives itself while envisaging their

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[16]The method adopted for opening the evening's discussion was to have a few prepared questions be posed before the audience intervened.

alteration, foreseeing the possibility of their reformulation, and making an effort to render their own rules visible as well as liable to emendation and correction. It is at Athens, and nowhere else, that was constituted, in one and the same movement, reflection on the principles of the laws—the just and the unjust, good and evil—and on the elements of this reflection itself: reason, the true and the false, what is thinkable and what is unthinkable.

Singular and contingent, the Greek birth of democratic practice and philosophical reflection nevertheless has a universal calling. The rupture occurred at one given time and in one given place, but it was not to be enclosed within a delimited period of time or restricted to a narrowly circumscribed cultural space. On the contrary, it addresses itself, virtually, to every person of every culture—it concerns the historical becoming of humanity in its entirety. All this has been said a thousand times.

Where, then, is the difficulty? There is none, or not an insurmountable one, once one postulates, as Hegel or as Marx does, the existence of a meaning to history, of a dialectical rationality that would explain the necessity of its forward march. The least that can be said, however, is that this is not the case for you: history *is not*, according to you, "a rational unfolding" and your attack on these visions of history is connected with your thesis concerning the radical self-institution of imaginary significations.

I therefore ask you how you articulate the fact of Greece, in its ultimate form of absolute contingency, its potential for universality, and the absence of any form of rational unfolding in your overall conception of human history.

The second difficulty I encountered is tied to the question of the possibility of democracy on a planetwide

scale. As I understand it, your analysis of the various points of contrast between ancient Greek democracy and modern European democracy could lead one to think, very roughly speaking, that the former possesses a sort of limited but "full" universality whereas the latter, while proclaiming an unlimited universality, is strewn with conflicts, notably those situated around individuals' relations to the State, and to technocracy.

My question is this: What would democracy have to become in order for it to become effectively universal and to exclude no one, whatever one's sex, one's culture, or one's imaginary world?

The third and last obstacle I collide against is what I shall label the temptation toward pessimism. It has nothing to do with the temptation toward skepticism, for you have quite often exhibited a spirited animosity against the latter. What I label pessimism issues, in my view, from the convergence of a few of your remarks upon which you have been most insistent. First, there are your remarks concerning the past half-century, which tend toward the conclusion that the epoch is not nihilistic but really nil, and that it is not even an epoch.[17] Next, there is the absence of a hidden motor of history that would permit you to recover or recycle all that has been both horrifying and sterile in this century. "Nobody can protect humanity from folly or suicide," you wrote somewhere.[18]

I therefore ask you what gives you hope and makes you struggle in spite of everything; not your personal makeup, which makes you laugh rather than cry, for one can also be

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[17]T/E: See, for example, "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1979), in *PSW3*, and "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1990), now in *CL3*.
[18]T/E: "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in *CL2*.

joyous in despair, but rather in the name of what, if you can formulate this, you put up resistance and you wager that this resistance is not vain?

I am not unaware of the excessiveness of such questions, but I thank you in advance for trying to contribute some elements toward at least some possible responses.

Cornelius Castoriadis: Please excuse my unsatisfactory and too brief answers. They will certainly be so in my view, for the questions raised are absolutely fundamental.

I shall combine the first and third questions, both of which have to do with our general view of history—I would not say of being, but of history. Just as we cannot live except on the basis of an ethic of mortality, our philosophical reflection itself has to be deeply impregnated with this idea of mortality, and not just of individual death. If you will permit me this grandiloquent expression, being is creation and destruction: the two go together. Anaximander knew that, but little account has been taken of it. Now, this lies at the center of a reflection on history that would try to break out of these eschatological myths that the "progressive" schemes of history—whether those of Kant, Hegel, or Marx—constitute. I believe we must leave all that behind.

Humanity itself is a local accident. The forms humanity has given to its creation are equally contingent. Within these creations there are elements that, given the entire set of physical conditions, for example, are not contingent. We are animals: we have to eat and reproduce, and a social regulation of these necessities also must exist. That, however, does not explain the infinite variety of forms within history. We are always conditioned by the past, but no one has said that that past was necessary. Such creation, for example that

of the Athenian democracy, has been contingent. It is, at least for us, of an absolutely extraordinary character, such that this contingency does not foreclose a sort of virtual perenniality of certain outcomes. How and why? This is Roger Pol-Droit's question. It is difficult to answer in detail, but I have two words to say about it.

Society cannot exist except by creating signification. Signification means ideality, but not in the traditional philosophical sense. Here "ideality" signifies something very important, more important than material things, an imperceptible element immanent to society. Institutions, in the genuine sense of the term, pertain, like language, to "the immanent imperceptible."

It happens that certain of these idealities go beyond their place of origin, whether in the domain of logic and mathematics or in that of aesthetics. But we are not discussing here the creation of rules for arithmetic or geometry or the creation of works of art. Something else is of concern to us. Here we are dealing with self-questioning on the individual and collective levels. To place oneself at a distance from oneself, to produce this strange dehiscence within the being of the collectivity as well as in that of subjectivity, to say to oneself, "I am me, but what I think is perhaps false," these are creations of Greece and of Europe. This is a local accident. I am neither willing nor able to insert it into any theology or teleology of human history. It would have been perfectly possible for Greece not to have existed. In which case, we would not be here tonight, for the idea of a free public debate, in which anyone can call into question the authority of anyone else, would not have emerged. There is nothing necessary about that, and we must admit it.

It also must be admitted, however, that the privilege of these two creations (the Greek and the European) resides

in the constitution of a universal that is no longer logical or even technical. A hatchet serves a purpose in no matter what culture: if people do not know how to use it, they learn right away. The same thing goes for jeeps, or for machine guns. The universality of self-reflectiveness, on the individual or collective level, is of another type. Such self-reflectiveness, which is at the basis of democracy, is like a virus or a poison. Human beings are susceptible to being "poisoned" by reflection, to being caught up in this affair called reflectiveness, in the demand for freedom of thought and for freedom of action. But this does not appertain to any sort of human nature.

The social institution can, moreover, create an insurmountable obstacle to this liberating contamination. For example, for a true Muslim—with all due reverence for all beliefs—philosophy obviously is absolutely incapable of contesting the fact that, as a text, the Koran is divine in origin. There is on this point no possibility of reasonable discussion. When one asks, as Roger Pol-Droit does, and as I am asking myself, by what achievements Western societies can succeed in punching a hole into these universes of belief, no general answer can be found. We must hope that the Western example, as lame as it has become, will little by little eat away at [*corrodera*] this set of essentially religious significations and will open some breaches on the basis of which a movement of self-reflection, on both the political and intellectual levels, can be unleashed.

I referred to the West as "lame." Permit me to take an example from my latest book, since it comes to mind right now.[19] One cannot eat away at Islamic cultures by persuading

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[19]T/E: *Le Monde morcelé*. Castoriadis is referring to a remark at the end of a 1989 interview, which has been translated into English as "The Idea of Revolution" and now appears in *CL3*.

them that Madonna is superior to the Koran. This, however, is pretty much what they are being told at present. These cultures are not being corroded by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, but by Madonna or the equivalent. This is the drama of the West and of the present-day situation.

The second question poses an immense problem, one that cannot genuinely be discussed here. What, were it to occur, would an effective universalization of democratic institutions, a planetary democracy, and so on mean? What does it presuppose? It is absolutely evident that it presupposes, before all else, the acceptance by all, whatever their private beliefs, that a human society cannot exist except on bases that are not set by any revealed dogma. Much more than that, however, must be assumed. Above all, there are also concrete forms that remain to be created. For, it would be as crazy to think that one might apply Athenian democracy to a political unit the size of the French nation as it would be to think that one could apply, say—though it is not a model—the Constitution of the French Fifth Republic to the entire planet. The gap is just as great. This leaves, therefore, a field of creation that it is up to the future to constitute.

Now, in relation to all that, can one be pessimistic or optimistic? Roger Pol-Droit believes he sees, in his last question, a temptation to pessimism, which I resist. For my part, I do not see things like that at all. As long as there continue to be people who reflect, who call into question the social system or their own system of thought, there is a creativity to history that no one can forget. The links we have with this creativity are through living individuals. These individuals exist, even if they are presently very few in number and even if, in actual fact, the dominant tone of the age is not at all to our taste.

Q: If democracy were to be universalized to the scale

of the entire planet, would not one then risk witnessing the disappearance of all forms of alterity and seeing constituted a world without the Other, and therefore without a representation of one's own potential death?

C.C.: It is often thought that one cannot define oneself except *against* another. To what extent is this true? This is an absolutely arbitrary postulate. This term, in appearance innocent, lends itself to confusion. In phonology, as far as I know, the labials are not warring against the dentals. The labials do not require the death of the dentals in order to exist as labials. The term "opposition" here is a fantastic abuse of language. It is a matter of distinction, of differentiation.

Your argument would hold if someone said: "I am asking for and I am proposing a society in which there will be no differentiation, in which we will all be alike." In that case you could say, not that this is a utopia or even a contradiction, but rather beneath stupidity. Such a society absolutely cannot exist and it is absolutely not desirable. It is death…. Perhaps Nicolae Ceauşescu dreamed of it: cloning himself so as to have a Romania with 25 million Ceauşescus. This is possible, but he was mad. In other words, each of us lives by our difference with others, but not in opposition with the others. That is what has to be understood.

Q: You have spoken of the birth of Athenian democracy as a rupture within this closure of signification that is constituted by a religious universe. But can such a rupture ever be total?

C.C.: There can never be a total rupture of closure, that is certain. But there exists an enormous qualitative difference between a world in which there is a closure, perhaps with fissures because nothing ever holds together absolutely, and a world that opens up this closure.

In the most closed form of Christianity, there is always

the huge thorn of theodicy. In the end the reply always has to be: "God only knows why some children are born mongoloid." There never is, however, a total rupture of closure. Even in the most radical philosophy there always are an enormous number of things that cannot be called into question and that probably will be called into question later on. Moreover, in a sense, a philosophy worth its salt tends to close. It can go on repeating, "I do not want to close"; it nevertheless closes in its way of not closing, and so forth, that is to say, it determines something or other. And truth is this movement of rupture of one closure after another. It is not correspondence with something.

Q: Might one not think that the Greeks detested power and saw it only as a necessary evil, as is shown, for example, by the usage of lot drawings in the place of elections?

C.C.: I will be more nuanced than you about the detestation of power by the Greeks, the idea that it was a necessary evil, and so on. Pericles, for example, did not exercise power in Athens inasmuch as he was elected as *stratēgos* but as a function of the influence he gained over the people. And why did he acquire such an influence? Clearly because he was bent on acquiring it. It cannot be said that he detested power or that he had been obliged to take it. I believe that what one must see in the Athenian regime, if you take it at the moment of its greatest brilliance, let us say during what is called the Golden Age of Pericles, is this fragile equilibrium between some people's desire for power, popular control, and the fact that individuality was not crushed.

Afterwards, as the democracy came unraveled, the desire for power—and it really is a classic case, since one finds there such striking examples—became something else. Take Alcibiades. For Alcibiades, all means are good to win power: convincing people to vote for the absurd military

expedition to Sicily, betraying his country, passing over to the side of the Lacedaemonians, giving them the winning strategy for the Peloponnesian War, passing back over to the Athenian side, and so on. There you have the end of the Athenian democracy.

Q: How did the Greeks reconcile the principle of equality, on which democracy rests, with their taste for struggle, for combat, for competition, the *agōn*, in which the best person alone carries the day? And what is to be done today about this same problem?

C.C.: It first must be emphasized that the conception the Athenians had of democracy was wholly related to the idea that rights exist only among equals. Now, who were the equals? The free males. This was very clear cut, in Thucydides as well as in everyone else. And it is very striking to see that Aristotle, in book 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is devoted to justice, when he arrives at the question of public justice, says in fact that, in politics, there is no just and unjust. Here, politics is not the management of current affairs, where obviously there is the just and the unjust; it concerns rather the institution. For Aristotle, who on this point remains profoundly Greek, and with whom we would therefore be in disagreement, you cannot judge the fundamental core of the political institution of the City. It gives power to the *oligoi*, to the few in number, or to the *dēmos*, or to some others. There is no just and unjust in that. Aristotle's views in *The Politics* itself are not formed on the basis of considerations of the justice or injustice of political regimes, but from considerations of convenience, appropriateness, or adequacy as regards human nature. That is what renders certain regimes better and others less good, and not the fact that they are just or unjust.

In its absolutist conception, the agonistic element

cannot be reconciled with democracy. We do not say that we want to instaurate democracy for the strongest or for the weakest. This is precisely the great achievement of Modern Times, which actually existed in germinal form in the Greeks' invention of a *logos* that claims to be universal but whose universality never was put into true political effect among them. The great contribution of Modern Times is that we want democracy for all. Nowadays, within democracy, a place must certainly be left for the agonistic element that is there within every human being, and this place must be constructed in such a way that this agonistic element not be expressed either in carnage or in the kind of scenes that follow each soccer match in which the fans of Liverpool crush those of Milan, and so on.

On this point, the Greeks can still serve as a useful example for us. Jakob Burckhardt was the first to see it: Greece was a culture in which the agonistic element held a central place. It was present in democratic Athens, not only against the other cities, but within the City. But what form did it take? The form it took was, for example—I am taking the example most favorable to my argument, but little matter—the tragedy competitions, *agōn tragikos*, the tragic struggle, that is to say, the competition between three, four, or five poets, the best of whom was to be crowned. The Olympic Games were not "games": they, too, were *agōnes*. There were poetry competitions, and also, before the *dēmos*, the competition between those who thought of themselves as political chiefs or political leaders, those who wanted to be the best through their arguments, and so on. This means that within the City even the agonistic element was channeled toward forms that no longer were destructive of the collectivity but on the contrary were creative of positive works for this collectivity.

The Athenian Democracy:
False and True Questions[*]

Rereading this ninth *Lettre de la montagne* for the nth time while I was reading Pierre Vidal-Naquet's text, I was regretting that Pierre did not have the time to do the history—which no doubt would fill volumes—of the Greek mirage and the Roman mirage, of the successive interpretations, and of the numerous 180-degree turns in these interpretations that have been performed over the centuries.[1]

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[*]Speech given at a colloquium held at the Centre Pompidou on March 27, 1992, in which Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Pierre Lévêque also participated. All three talks appeared in *Esprit*, December 1993 [T/E: errata, *ibid.*, February 1994: 201]. "La démocratie athénienne: fausses et vraies questions" was reprinted in *MI*, 183-93 (220-33 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: The three speeches were translated and published in *On the Invention of Democracy*, an appendix to Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato* (1964), tr. David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996). Castoriadis's contribution was reprinted in *RTI(TBS)*. This minicolloquium held to celebrate and critically examine the 2,500th anniversary of Cleisthenes' reforms was organized by David Ames Curtis and Clara Gibson Maxwell with the support of Pascal Vernay and Stéphane Barbery and was chaired by former Socialisme ou Barbarie member Christian Descamps. Transcription of the speeches was by Olivier-Michel Pascault.]

[1]Author's addition: In his presentation, Pierre Vidal-Naquet had recalled the well-known excerpt from the ninth of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Lettres de la montagne*, which I cite *in extenso*, for it applies to all modern "democratic" countries:

> You especially, Genevans, keep your place and go not at all toward the elevated objectives that are presented to you in order to conceal the abyss opening before you. You are neither Romans nor Spartans; you are not even Athenians.... You are Merchants, Artisans, Bourgeois ever preoccupied with their private interests, their labor, their dealing, their gain; people for whom liberty itself is only a means for acquiring without hindrance and for

This began already in Athens itself, and no later than the fourth century BCE. There were Plato and his view of the democracy as the power of the *vulgum pecus*, the power of the illiterates who believe that they know better than those who know "truly," the power of those who assassinate generals, assassinate Socrates, and so on. Skipping over the next twenty-two centuries, let me note simply the near-reversal that was performed at the moment of the French Revolution, making reference here to Vidal-Naquet's beautiful text on "Bourgeois Athens."[2] Above all, let me recall the great reversal that took place in England around 1860 with the work of the great George Grote, which was to be followed by Wilhelminian pastorals in Germany with Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, similar currents in France, and so on, not to forget the Nazis' attempts at appropriating a "Dorian" Greece. This is no doubt the richest object available

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possessing in safekeeping (in *Œuvres complètes* [Paris: Gallimard, 1964], vol. 3, p. 881).

From Rousseau to Adam Ferguson to Benjamin Constant, this brief anthropological glimpse of modern "democracy" was self-evident. It has become invisible for contemporary "political philosophers." [T/E: Also of note, in light of Castoriadis's regret that Vidal-Naquet did not have the time that evening to examine "the successive interpretations" of Rome and Greece, is the appearance in translation of a Vidal-Naquet text with which Castoriadis was familiar and which was originally written as the preface to a 1976 French translation of Moses I. Finley's *Democracy Ancient and Modern*: "The Tradition of Greek Democracy," tr. David Ames Curtis, *Thesis Eleven*, 60 (2000): 61-86.]

[2]"La Formation de l'Athènes bourgeoise" (Pierre Vidal-Naquet in collaboration with Nicole Loraux, 1979), in *La Démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), pp. 161-209. All the texts appearing in this book are to be consulted on this theme. [T/E: Portions of this volume, including "The Formation of Bourgeois Athens," appeared as *Politics Ancient and Modern*, tr. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, England and Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995). Here "formation" also has the sense of "education."]

(only the history of Christianity is, from this point of view, as rich) for a study on the social-historical imagination as source, not even for reinterpretation, but for *re-creation* of a founding era by succeeding eras, according to the imaginary proper to these later eras. The Athens/Rome opposition, moreover, still plays a role in France. As a child, I read the great *Histoire Romaine* by Victor Duruy, the preface to which ends with an appeal to the French, inviting them to study Roman history, for—this is the final phrase of the Preface and, sixty years later, it remains in my memory—"Even more than Athens, it is of Rome that we are the inheritors." Now, still recently, Claude Nicolet has in fact once again taken up this theme. Does there remain even a grain of truth to this assertion? Let me begin the few things I have to say here with a joke that brings us back to the *Lettres de la montagne*. If I were Rousseau, and if you were Genevans, I would say to you this evening—as well as to all Western peoples: You are not Athenians, you are not even Romans. Rome, certainly, was never a democracy; it always was an oligarchy. But at least until around 150 BCE, there remained a sort of devotion to the *res publica*, which today is something that is disappearing completely under the blows of "Liberalism."[3]

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My response will bear, first, on a certain number of points I wish to make. I won't try to systematize these points, but the intimate connections between them will be, I believe, readily understood.

First, upstream from the creation of the *polis*, there is the enormous heritage of Greek mythology. It was going to be

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[3]T/E: In the Continental sense of a conservative "free-market" or "laissez-faire" ideology.

reworked, of course, but it was still to be found in the Greek democratic creation. The first known *political* drawing of lots took place between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades after their victory over the Titans; for them, it was a way of determining the division of their respective areas of domination. If Zeus is master of the universe, it is *by chance*: he drew the heavens.[4] Likewise, the entire mythological conception of the relations between right and force remained alive, as will be seen again both in Aeschylus's *Prometheus* and in the Athenians' dialogue with the Melians, in Thucydides.[5]

Second, if one passes now to Homer, one already finds there the *agora*, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet has just recalled for us. Much more noteworthy, though, are the famous verses from the *Odyssey* about the Cyclopes, which Pierre did not mention, no doubt because they are much better known. The Cyclopes have no *agora* and no laws. I am abridging a translation that certainly would open up some problems. I do not want to enter here into questions concerning either the dating or the content of the Homeric poems. Moses Finley has written a marvelous book on this topic,[6] and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, in a Preface to the *Iliad*,[7] reminds us that Homer was,

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[4]That none of the three principal gods held any prerogative over the *Earth* is also to be underscored. This aspect would require lengthy commentary.

[5]T/E: As was explained in n. 10 for "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary" (1991), now above in the present volume: "The Melian Dialogue, as recounted by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, may be found at 5.84-116. The Athenians' reply appears at 105." Castoriadis also refers to the Melians in "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in *CL2*, and in "From the Monad to Autonomy" (1991), now in *CL5*.

[6]*The World of Odysseus* (1954; rev. ed., London: Chatto and Windus, 1978).

[7]Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "L'*Iliad* sans travesti," preface to the republication of the Paul Mazon translation (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); reprinted in *La Démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs*, pp. 29-53.

above all, a poet and not a war correspondent or a reporter covering Ulysses's expeditions. Nevertheless, I attribute great importance to these phrases from Homer, for with current dating one cannot push him much further back than 750 BCE. Now, we positively know that the process of colonization— the great colonization drive, not the (much older) colonization process that took place on the coasts of Asia Minor—already had begun around this time: Pithecusae (Ischia) and Cumae, in Italy, attest to it. We must understand what this colonization was and what it presupposed. First, it already presupposed a certain prior history on the part of the *polis*: it would be absurd to suppose that a *polis* founded in 752 had sent out a colony already in 750—and this, from Euboea to central Italy! In itself, next, it differs greatly from other colonization efforts in Antiquity, or even in Modern Times. The colony was not a possession or an outpost of the metropolis; in fact, it *self-institutes itself* [*s'auto-institue*]. With its veneration of the metropolis, a connection certainly remained in effect; most of the time the latter certainly also furnished the models for the colony's institutions, but often, too, the laws of the colony were new, different. I think that it is in the colonies as much as if not more than in Greece proper that the politicohistorical germs of what later became the democracy are to be sought. In the colony there was certainly the *oikistēs*, the "founder," the leader of the expedition, but it is characteristic of the process that no king or autocrat is to be found among these *oikistai*.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet said quite rightly a moment ago that in the history of ancient Greece there were two moments of rupture—what I would call two creations. There is the creation of the *polis qua polis*, which subsequently might turn out to be oligarchical or tyrannical. And later, especially at Athens (so as not to enter into a discussion about Chios),

there is the creation of democracy properly speaking. We must underscore, however, an aspect of the history of Sparta that is forgotten in these discussions. For the little that can be said about it, and leaving aside the affair of the helots and "helotry," if I may label it so, Sparta began as a city in which power belonged to the *Damos* (people) and the citizens were *homoioi*. Pierre Vidal-Naquet translates this last term by "peers"; one could also propose "fellows or similars [*semblables*]" or "true similars," which would be the literal meaning. This occurred between 650 and 600, or a century before Cleisthenes. Sparta, however, also has a *history*: for reasons that remain very obscure to us, the dynamic of Spartan society is an oligarchic one that reached its term in the fourth century. This dynamic is completely the opposite of the one that unfolded at Athens, and probably also in a great number of other cities about which, alas, we have no information. Of the more than 150 *politeiai* of Aristotle and his students, only one remains for us; of the others, only fragments, from which not very much can be drawn. Perhaps our image of the Greek world would be rather different if we had all these treatises on the constitutions-institutions of these various other cities.

We therefore must limit ourselves to Athens—and it is here that the evidence shows us a true *history* and a *creative* history. It is not simply that "things changed"; institutions were being created or renewed almost constantly through what Aristotle calls the eleven *metabolai* or changes of regime. Of these changes of regime, some were major, others less significant. There were, moreover, not just changes of regime (one only has to think of the history of "the arts" or of tragedy), but one must insist on these, and the tables must be turned completely around so as to call white what until now the tradition has called black. The Athenians and their system

of rule [*régime*] were constantly "accused" of "instability,"
and echoes of this conservative mentality are still to be found
even in Hannah Arendt, with her lauding of Roman *auctoritas*
and *traditio* as opposed to the Athenians' versatility. But
precisely what is both characteristic of Athens and precious
because of what it offers us is its continued explicit self-
institution, namely, the creation, for the first time in recorded
history, of a *strong historicity*. History in general exists
everywhere, of course, and never will a Tupí Guaraní be like
she was a second earlier. At the institutional level, however,
such change remains imperceptible, and in savage or
traditional societies the "seconds" are counted in millennia or
centuries. Now, at Athens, as one can see in the sixth, fifth,
and even still in the fourth century, change took place
between generations or even within the same generation. Not
only is Sophocles wholly other than Aeschylus, but the old
Sophocles does not write like the young Sophocles. This is
not an "individual" phenomenon: the form of tragedy
changes, architectural style changes, people change,
institutions change. If you want *traditio* and *auctoritas*, you
must want the Roman tragedian Ennius forever and not the
history of tragedy. And then, starting at a certain moment,
people start to change for the very worst, with the
Peloponnesian War and Thucydides's terrifying descriptions
of how the war corrupted everything; almost speaking of
"wooden language [*langue de bois*],"[8] Thucydides says that

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[8]T/E: Literally a "wooden tongue," which may be described as the
repetitive churning out of meaningless stock phrases, most often
associated, in a French context, with the deadening rhetoric of the
Communist Party. Castoriadis himself wrote in 1989 a piece critical of
Louis Althusser and the French Communist Party, humorously titled "De
la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc" (From wooden tongue to
rubber tongue), now in *EP3*; we hope to translate this text for the projected
third volume of Castoriadis's *Political Writings*.

the war made words come to signify the opposite of what they signified. This was no longer the same *dēmos*—and it was *that dēmos* that would condemn the Arginusae generals and that would condemn Socrates.

This leads us to another important conclusion: Democracy is not an institutional *model*; it is not even a "regime" in the traditional sense of the term. Democracy is the self-institution of the collectivity by the collectivity, and it is this self-institution as movement. Certainly, this movement is based on and is facilitated each time by determinate institutions, but also by the knowledge, spread out among the collectivity, that our laws have been made by us and that we can change them. I will say, in closing, two words on the limits of this self-institution.

One can shed light on one important aspect of the specificity of the history of Athens as a democratic history by reexamining the conception (which results from a sort of "military materialism") that makes of the invention of the phalanx the condition for democracy. According to this conception, the invention of the phalanx as the warrior organization of the members of a city led—via an "extension" of the equality of conditions prevailing among the soldiers in the phalanx organization—to democracy. This conception sins at both ends. First, the phalanx itself could not have been "invented" if the imaginary of citizen equality were not already highly present. When one reads the *Iliad*, one sometimes stops to ask oneself what this "swarm" and these "droves [*troupeaux*]" of anonymous warriors, Achaeans or Trojans, did and what purpose they served on the field of battle, except perhaps simply to bear witness to the worthiness, the *kleos* and *kudos*, of the heroes whose duels alone are constantly being sung. Homer is describing here, quite evidently, the embodiment on the military level of the

aristocratic imaginary (and in this regard, at least, he is referring to a world that was no doubt already bygone in his time). In the phalanx is achieved, nevertheless, an equality and solidarity among combatants. Achilles would never have thought of putting himself elbow-to-elbow with Thersites and of protecting the latter with his shield. For the phalanx to be conceivable, the combatants must think of themselves as equals, as being alike [*pareils*], ready to defend one another. The phalanx is a result, not a "cause," of the imaginary of equality. And, as a second aspect, the phalanx does not at all, in itself, suffice to steer the community toward the establishment of a democratic state. It exists just as much at Sparta. Moreover, under another form the Roman legion is similar to the phalanx: the organizational differences pertain to other sorts of considerations. But Rome was never a democracy in the sense Athens was.

I now arrive at the question of slavery and Finley's famous phrase, which Pierre Vidal-Naquet makes his own: "In the ancient world, freedom advanced hand in hand with slavery."[9] I will not discuss the question on the theoretical, abstract level. I will simply pose a few questions on the level of facts.

First, how many slaves were there at Athens around 510 BCE? The number of slaves that we know, or rather that we suppose/calculate with difficulty, to have existed at Athens does not relate to the era of the instauration of the democracy, to its initial conditions, so to speak—and still less to the entire *previous* history of Athens, where one sees the proliferation of the germs of the democratic creation. This

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[9]T/E: At the end of "Was Greek Civilization Based on Slave Labour?" (*Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* [London, Chatto and Windus, 1985], p. 115), M. I. Finley states: "One aspect of Greek history, in short, is the advance, hand in hand, of freedom *and* slavery."

number was also undoubtedly quite inflated by the number of public slaves who worked in the mines of Laurium. And one knows that these mines were discovered, or at least put into operation, shortly before the second Persian War, that Themistocles convinced the *dēmos* to use their proceeds for the construction of the fleet, and so forth.

On this point, I am in agreement with two very different persons, Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx. Marx said that the genuine socioeconomic condition for the ancient democracy was the existence of a host of independent petty producers.[10] And when one knows of Jefferson's attitude of opposition to the development of large-scale industry (therefore, of a proletariat) in the United States of his time, one can comprehend that behind this attitude lay the idea that democracy had to be based on the small agrarian property, the extension of which actually was possible in the United States until the "closing of the Frontier" in the West in the early years of the twentieth century.[11]

Slavery is to be found everywhere in the ancient world, but democracy is to be found only in a few cities. It is there in Sparta—certainly under another form, but it is unclear in what way the fact that there were helots and not commodity-slaves should affect the postulated connection. In the aristocratic Greek cities, too, slavery was of a commercial sort—just as was the case, obviously, at Rome, where one

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[10]T/E: On p. 596 of vol. 3 of *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), Marx writes: "Hence the popular hatred against usurers, which was most pronounced in the ancient world where ownership of means of production by the producer himself was at the same time the basis for political status, the independence of the citizen." He had spoken of "small independent individual producers" two pages earlier. This may or may not be the source Castoriadis has in mind.

[11]T/E: The US Census Bureau famously dated this "closing of the Frontier" a bit earlier: 1890.

sees, on the contrary, that slavery advanced hand in hand with the power of the oligarchy.

There are here, in my view, two points of fact that are decisive. The slavery present during the creation of the democracy was without any doubt very limited in extent. And in almost all the ancient cities, one finds slavery but not any democracy at all.

The development of slavery at Athens advanced hand in hand, in my view, with another extremely important trait, the development of "imperialism." I cannot linger on this point here, but in my view it is clear that the failure of Athens from every point of view is due to the combination of this "imperialism" with the maintenance of the view that only Athenian citizens could be political subjects. If Rome conquered the ancient world, if today we French speakers speak a language that, as Proust said, is an erroneous way of pronouncing Latin, it is due not to the warrior virtues of the Romans, nor to their frugality, but to the fantastic policy of gradual *assimilation* that Rome invented, or rather was obliged to invent, beginning no doubt already with the plebs. At the outset, the plebs were made up of foreigners, immigrants, metics. They struggled, they withdrew to the Aventine, and so on. And after one or two centuries, Rome was obliged to digest it—and this practice of digesting conquered populations was gradually extended, with the help of a host of institutions (Roman colonies, Latin colonies, the granting of *civitas romana* to portions of defeated populations, which thus served to divide these peoples internally), to the populations of Italy after the Social War (90 BCE), and, finally, to all free inhabitants of the Empire, with the edict of Caracalla (212 CE)—at the same time that the emancipation and assimilation of slaves came to be practiced on a larger and larger scale.

Now, the Athenians never envisioned an extension of Athenian citizenship in normal times (the extensions that took place for the benefit of the Plataeans and the Samians were to come later, at the moment of catastrophe). Very few instances of naturalization were known, and also few emancipations of slaves. The Empire remained throughout its history the group of cities that were subject to the *polis par excellence,* Athens. The task of extending, and even of maintaining, the Empire therefore quickly became absurd—as also did the task of modern European nations that wanted to dominate their colonies without even trying to assimilate them, which, in any case, they never really could have achieved.

I now arrive at one of the great apparent paradoxes: the greatest Athenian philosopher is Plato, and Plato is a sworn enemy of the democracy. More generally, one does not find in the Greek philosophers, apart from Aristotle, of whom I shall not speak, any thinking through of democracy. The sole notable exception is Protagoras, to whom I shall return. We also know, however, that Democritus, his junior, was a democrat (see Diels B251 and B255). Now, contrary to Protagoras, Democritus was the object, on Plato's part, of a *damnatio memoriae*; it is not unreasonable to think that this neglect corresponds to an intention on Plato's part to accord the least notice possible to Democritus's opinions in general and to his political opinions in particular. That Plato knew the work of Democritus may be seen in reading the *Timaeus*—and Aristotle, who speaks about it all the time, had to have known of this work during his years at the Academy.

All the time one happens upon authors who speak of "Greek political thought," meaning thereby Plato. This is as ridiculous as to want to discover the political thought of the French Revolution in Joseph de Maistre or Louis de Bonald. The basic Greek political creation is the democracy—which

is the object of Plato's inextinguishable hatred. He heaps calumnies upon it, calumnies he succeeded, moreover, in imposing upon a great proportion of learned and vulgar opinion for more than two thousand years. The great statesmen [*politiques*] of Athens—Themistocles, Pericles— are presented as demagogues who filled the town with useless things, like walls, naval works, and so on. The critical thinkers—Protagoras, Gorgias—are Sophists in the sense Plato succeeded in giving to this word. The poets are corrupters and presenters of false images (*eidōla*). Aeschylus and Sophocles as presenters of false images and corrupters? Plato is judged by his judgments.

The spirit of the democracy is to be sought, and to be found, in the tragic poets, in the historians, in Herodotus in the discussion among the three Persian satraps on the three regimes, in Thucydides (and not only in Pericles's Funeral Oration), and obviously, especially, and above all in the institutions and the practice of the democracy.

In tragedy, let me take up briefly the example of *Antigone*.[12] *Antigone* is in my view, more than all the others, *the* tragedy of the democracy. One knows the importance for Greek thought—clearly so in the fifth century and probably already beforehand—of the idea of *nomos* not simply as law but as human law, law posited by humans—pretty much what I call the self-institution of society. Now, in the famous *stasimon* of *Antigone* (332-75), "Many things are awesome, and nothing is more awesome than man,"[13] Sophocles speaks

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[12]For a somewhat more extended discussion of *Antigone*, see my text, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in *CL2*. [T/E: See also two posthumous texts, "Anthropogony and Self-Creation" and "Notes on A Few Poetic Means," both now in *CL6*.]

[13]T/E: In admiration for some recent youth lingo, I have chosen "awesome" as my translation for the impossible-to-translate Greek word *deinos*; in French, Castoriadis chooses "*terrible*." Castoriadis himself

of the fact that man himself has taught himself (*edidaxato*) his tongue, thought, and the *astunomous orgas*—the passions that give laws to (that institute) cities. *Orgē* is anger, affect, passion—this is where "orgasm" comes from. Humans are described as those who have themselves *taught to themselves* how to institute cities. Note here the idea of the democracy as the regime that institutes itself in full knowledge of the relevant facts [*en connaissance de cause*].

As for Protagoras, it suffices to turn to the celebrated speech he makes in Plato's dialogue of the same name. On the meaning of this speech, I am completely in agreement with what Pierre Vidal-Naquet has said about it, and I myself have written that, without any doubt, it contains the *topoi*, the commonplaces, of democratic reflection that were to be found during that era at Athens—as does, moreover, Socrates's speech (the "personification of the laws") in the *Crito*.[14] Now, Protagoras says exactly the opposite of what Plato will spend his whole life trying to show; Protagoras says that in politics there is no *epistēmē*, no certain and assured knowledge, nor any political *technē* that belongs to specialists. In politics, there is only *doxa*, opinion, and this doxa is equally and equitably shared by all. This is also, let it be said in passing, the sole possible justification, other than procedural, for majority rule.

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comments on the difficulties of translating this Greek term into a modern language in his posthumous text "Notes on A Few Poetic Means," now in *CL6*.

[14]T/E: Concerning Protagoras's speech in Plato's *Protagoras*, see "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary" (1991), now above in the present volume; concerning Socrates' personification (Castoriadis literally says "prosopopoeia") of the Laws in Plato's *Crito*, see n. 34 of "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988), now in *CL3*. In both these instances, Castoriadis refers to these speeches as expressing the "*topoi*" of ancient Greek "democratic thinking."

But one must turn in particular toward the effectively actual institutions of the democracy in order to understand its spirit. First, there is direct democracy, that is to say, the idea of everyone participating politically in decisions concerning public affairs. There is the invention of the elective principle for posts requiring a specific sort of know-how, but also rotation and sortition for the other posts. There is the idea, appearing for the first time in history, of the responsibility of magistrates before the people, *euthunē*. There is the *de facto* revocability of all magistrates and also the extraordinary institution that is called *graphē paranomōn*, by means of which one can haul before the popular courts someone who has convinced the people's Assembly to pass an "illegitimate" law—an appeal of the people against itself before itself, which opens an abyss for us to reflect upon. There is the separation of the judicial [*du juridique*] from the legislative and the governmental. There is an understanding of the importance of the economic conditions for democracy, for participation ("ecclesiastic" wage, etc.). There is, finally, the fantastic clause, which Aristotle attests to in the *Politics*, that forbids inhabitants of a border area from participation when it comes to voting for or against war with a neighboring city, for to make them vote on this issue would be to place them in an inhuman double bind: either they vote as Athenian citizens, possibly for war, neglecting the fact that their homes risk being destroyed, their fields devastated, and so forth, or they vote as particular human beings who cannot forget their own skin, their family, their olive trees, and they vote against war, not because such was the interest of the *polis* but because such was their particular interest. To glimpse the gulf separating the Greek political imaginary from the modern political imaginary, let us try to imagine for an instant what would happen today if someone had the preposterous (and

quite evidently *politically just*) idea of proposing that, in votes of the French National Assembly concerning winegrowing, the deputies from winegrowing districts should be forbidden from voting.

As I have said a thousand times, it is not a matter of making all this into a model, a paradigm, or the like. Nonetheless, it should be understood that what we have here are some fecund germs for all thinking about the project of autonomy, the project of an autonomous society.

We must also, of course, understand the limits. These limits are obviously slavery, the status of women—all that has been said and resaid—but much more than that, we should understand that these limits are the limitations of this self-institution and that these latter are, first of all, the limitations of the *polis*; in other words, these limits are expressed by the city's inability to bring to the political level the signification of *universality*—which nevertheless was to be found in Greek philosophy from the outset, as early as the first pre-Socratic writings. Consubstantial with the birth of philosophy is the birth of the idea of a universal *logon didonai,* providing a reasoned account, of a search for the truth and a questioning of what exists as a people's representations; this idea knows no geographical bounds, no limits of race, language, political community, or the like. Now, as it turned out, this idea proved incapable of penetrating into the field of politics. Political universality, even if it remains a mere idea, is a creation of modern Europe, not of Greece. Universality of thought is a Greek creation, the forms of democracy are a Greek creation, but not political universality. There were things that were not touched. The important thing about slavery is not that there were slaves; it's that the question was not and could not be raised. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet says, in a comedy by Aristophanes one can envision a gynecocracy, rule by women,

in order to laugh about it, but it was out of the question to envision a doulocracy, rule by slaves, even to laugh about it. This was an impassible boundary for one's field of vision (and its crossing in postclassical times by the Cynics or the Stoics was to remain purely theoretical). There was also, despite demands for a redistribution of lands and the famous communist experiment on the Lipari Islands, about which nothing is known except that it failed, another limit: private property was not called back into question (except in order to laugh, as in the *Assembly of Women*).

In modern Europe, what we have is precisely the calling into question of both political inequality and economic inequality. What the final response to this question will be is another story—*the* story, history. Yet, no one dares any longer to say today that private property, for example, results from any sort of divine decree. Its defenders will line up their arguments, they will invoke various authorities, cite the bankruptcy of "Communism" in Russia—but they will be obliged to discuss the matter.

This is the great novelty of the modern creation, its *alterity* with respect to the Greek creation. Nevertheless, it should not stop us—far from it—from reflecting upon the first germs of this autonomy that we want and that we will [*que nous voulons*].

Culture in a Democratic Society[*]

Nothing, in appearance, is more obvious than the question implied by the title of the present text. What, indeed, could be more immediately evident, for those who think that they live in a democratic society, than to inquire about the place of culture in their society—all the more so as we are witnessing today, apparently, both an unprecedented dissemination of what is called culture and an intensification of questions and criticisms that bear upon what is thus being disseminated as well as upon its ways of being disseminated?

There is a way of responding to this question that is, in truth, a way of avoiding it. This response has consisted, for now going on two centuries, in affirming the specificity of the place of culture in a democratic society (as opposed to what was the case in nondemocratic societies). It is claimed, in this nonresponse, that this specificity consists solely in the following: that here culture is for everyone and not for an elite (however that elite may be defined). This "for everyone" may, in turn, be taken in a simply quantitative fashion: whatever the existing culture may be, it should be put at everyone's

disposal, not only "in principle [*juridiquement*]" (which was not the case, for example, in pharaonic Egypt), but sociologically, in the sense that the existing culture should become effectively accessible to all—as is facilitated today, supposedly, by universal, free, and mandatory education as well as by museums, public concerts, etc.

Yet this sociological "for everyone" may also be taken in another, stronger sense. Taking the existing culture to be a product of a class society, made by and/or for the dominant strata of that society, one may demand a "culture for the masses." As we know, this demand sums up the theory and the practice of *Proletkult* in Russia during the first years after the revolution of 1917 and, in mystification and horror, the Stalinist and Zhdanovist theory and practice of "socialist realism" a few decades later.

I shall not discuss here this last conception of cultural dissemination, resuscitated today by various (feminist, Black, etc.) movements that condemn the totality of the Greco-European legacy as being a product of "dead white males." I ask only why one does not also condemn, on the basis of the same principle, the Chinese, Islamic, or Aztec cultural legacy, products of dead males, respectively yellow, white, and "red." At bottom, the question boils down to an old philosophical interrogation: Do the effective conditions for the genesis of a work (of an idea, of a reasoned argument, etc.) determine, without further ado, its *validity*? To answer in the affirmative is to fall into the old contradiction of self-referentiality, for this response implicitly boils down to passing a judgment as to the validity of this very statement, a judgment that claims to be independent of the effective conditions for its genesis—unless one arbitrarily places oneself in the position of prophet or messiah. This indeed is what was done, on behalf of the proletariat and by placing oneself in its stead,

with an honest naivety by the partisans of *Proletkult* and with infamous effrontery by the Stalinists.

Obviously, such an "assignment of origin" is not simply absurd. But the attitudes of *Proletkult*, fanatical feminists, etc.—or simply a "genealogy" *à la* Nietzsche, warmed over with a Parisian sauce and served up as an "archaeology" a century later[1]—serve to eliminate the ineliminable question of *de jure validity*. (That Jefferson owned slaves does not, *ipso facto*, invalidate the Declaration of Independence.) And in their unfathomable confusion, they simply "forget" to pose the abyssal question: How can words and works of other times and places still speak to us and, sometimes, make us tremble?

II

Both the term *culture* and that of *democracy* immediately raise a series of interminable questions. Let us take some initial bearings. We shall call *culture* all that, in the public domain of a society, goes beyond that which is simply functional and instrumental in its operation and all that introduces an invisible—or, better, an imperceivable [*impercevable*]—dimension invested or "cathected" in a positive way by the individuals of this society. In other words, culture concerns all that, in this society, pertains to the imaginary *stricto sensu*, to the poietic imaginary, inasmuch as this imaginary dimension is embodied in works and in patterns of behavior that go beyond the functional. It goes without saying that the distinction between the functional and the poietic is not itself a material distinction, it is not in the "things."

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[1]T/E: The reference is to Michel Foucault and his 1969 book, translated as *The Archaeology of Knowledge.*

The term *democracy* lends itself to infinitely greater discussion, first because of its very nature and, second, because it has long been the stake in political debates and struggles. In our century, everybody—including the most bloodthirsty tyrants (Nazis and Fascists excepted)—claims to be a democrat. We can attempt to escape from this cacophony of claims by returning to the etymology of this term: democracy is the *kratos* of the *dēmos*, the power of the people. Of course, philology cannot settle political conflicts, but at least it makes us reflect upon the following question: Where in the world today, in what country on this planet, do we see realized the *power of the people*?

Yet at the same time we see this power being affirmed, under the heading of "sovereignty of the people," in the constitutions of all countries that today call themselves "democratic." Leaving aside for the moment the possibility that this affirmation is simply duplicitous, let us accept the letter of the law in order to sift out a meaning for this term that few people would dare to contest: in a democracy, the people are sovereign, that is to say, they make the laws and the law. Or else, we may say: Society makes its institutions and its institution; it is autonomous; it self-institutes itself [*s'auto-institue*]. But since every society in fact self-institutes itself, we must add that, at least in part, it self-institutes itself *explicitly* and *reflectively*. I shall return later on to this last term. In any case, a democratic society recognizes in its rules, its norms, its values, and its significations its own creations, whether deliberate or not.

This autonomy, this freedom of a democratic society implies and at the same time presupposes the autonomy, the freedom of individuals; the former is impossible without the latter. And yet such individual autonomy, such individual freedom, stated and guaranteed by law, by the constitution, by

declarations of the rights of man and of the citizen or by a bill of rights, rests in the last analysis, both *de jure* and *de facto*, on the collective law, which is formal as well as informal. Real, effective individual freedom (I am not speaking of philosophical or psychical freedom) must be decided by a law—even if this law is called a "Declaration" or "Bill of Rights"—that no individual could lay down or ratify on its own. And within the framework of this law, the individual can in turn define for itself the norms, values, and significations through which this individual will try to order its own life and to give that life a meaning.

This autonomy, or explicit self-institution, which emerges for the first time in the democratic Greek cities and reemerges, with much greater breadth, in the modern Western world, marks the break that democracy entails *vis-à-vis* all previous social-historical regimes.[2] In the latter systems of rule, which are regimes of *instituted heteronomy*, the source and foundation for the law, as well as for every norm, value, and signification, are posited as being transcendent to society itself: transcendent in the absolute, as in monotheistic societies, and transcendent, in any case, relative to the effective actuality of living society, as in the case of archaic societies. Such an assignment of its source and its foundation goes hand in hand with a *closure of signification*; the word of God, or the arrangements bestowed by the ancestors, are taken to lie beyond discussion and to be established once and for all.

What goes for society as a whole also holds for individuals: the meaning of their lives is given, settled in advance, and, for this reason, assured. No discussion is possible concerning institutions—therefore, also, no possible

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[2]See, for example, my text "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988), now in *CL3*.

discussion about social beliefs, about what is valid or invalid, about good and evil. In a heteronomous—or simply a traditional—society, the closure of signification shuts off in advance not only every political question as well as every philosophical one, but just as well every ethical or aesthetic question. In every circumstance, what is to be done is dictated without possible appeal by the law and by collective mores. Nothing in this situation is changed when interminable commentaries or a subtle casuistry is introduced (as with the Talmud, Doctors of the Church, or Islamic theologians).

The same thing holds for culture. No doubt, heteronomous societies have created immortal works—or, quite simply, a countless host of beautiful objects. And already, this statement shows—from a democratic perspective, as a matter of fact—the untenability of the historical proscriptions today's new fanatics want to issue concerning cultural matters. Following the logic of certain feminists, for example, I ought to cast out the *Passion According to Saint John* not only because it was composed by a dead and white male but because it gives expression to a religious faith that, in my own view, is alienating.

And yet these immortal works remain forever inscribed within a given social-historical context and horizon. They always also embody imaginary significations as they are each time instituted. This is why the immense majority of works are connected with the sacred in general, or with the politically sacred: they fortify the society's instituted significations through adoration of the divine, hero worship, praise for great kings, or the glorification of warrior bravery, piety, and other virtues consecrated by tradition. Obviously, I am painting a rather rough portrait here, but such is the source upon which the great works bequeathed to us by archaic societies, by the great traditional monarchies, by the

true European Middle Ages (that is, from the fifth to the eleventh century), or by Islam draw their inspiration.

If works and their creators act, so to speak, in the service of instituted significations, what the public in these societies finds in them is the confirmation and illustration of collective and traditional significations and values. And this situation is consonant with the specific mode of "cultural temporality" of these societies, namely, their extremely slow rhythm, the buried, subterranean character of the alteration of styles and contents, which is parallel and almost synchronous with changes in language itself. Indeed, it is also consonant with our inability, *ex post facto*, to individuate the creators—an inability that is in no way due to our lack of sufficient information. This is how one paints under the Tang dynasty, one does not paint otherwise; this is the one way to sculpt or build under the twentieth pharaonic dynasty, and one would have to be a specialist to be able to distinguish such works from those that preceded them or followed them by a few centuries. Thus is there one form, canonically and ecclesiastically regulated down to its tiniest details, for a Byzantine icon of this or that saint or of this or that moment in the life of the Blessed Virgin. Anticipating matters somewhat now, let us point out here that, in contrast, it is impossible to confound a fragment composed by Sappho with a fragment from Archilochus, a piece written by Bach with one by Handel, and that, in listening to certain passages from Mozart, one can cry, "But, it's already Beethoven!"

III

The creation of democracy, just like a fragile germ or seed, radically alters this situation. A brief philosophical

digression is indispensable here, as it will elucidate, I hope, the question left open above concerning transhistorical validity.[3]

When all is said and done, Being is Chaos, Abyss, Groundlessness. But it is also creation. It is, to employ a Latin expression, a *vis formandi* (a power of formation) that is not predetermined and that superimposes on the Chaos a Cosmos, a World that is organized and ordered somehow or other. In the same way, the human, too, is Abyss, Chaos, Groundlessness—not only inasmuch as it participates in being in general (for example, *qua* matter and *qua* living matter) but also inasmuch as we are beings of imagination and of the imaginary. The emergence of these determinations itself manifests the creation and the *vis formandi* that appertains to being as such, but these determinations also concretely realize the mode of being of the creation and *vis formandi* specific to the properly human. Here we can do no more than note the fact that this *vis formandi* is accompanied, in the human sphere, by a *libido formandi*: to the potential for creation found in being in general, the human sphere adds a desire for formation. I call this potential and this desire the *poietic* element of humanity. Reason itself, in its specifically human form (which is not the same as the rationality intrinsic to animals, for example), is but an offspring thereof.

The "meaning" with which human beings wish to, and must, always invest the world, their society, their own persons and lives is nothing other than this formation, this *Bildung*, this setting into order. Perpetual, and perpetually endangered, this effort is that of a gathering together of all that presents itself, and of all that it itself gives rise to, into an order, an organization, a Cosmos. When man organizes rationally—

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[3]For what follows, see, for example, "Institution of Society and Religion" (1982), now in *CL2*.

"ensidically," that is, in an ensemblistic-identitary manner—he does nothing but reproduce, repeat, or prolong already existing forms. But when he organizes poietically, he gives form to the Chaos. This giving-of-form to the Chaos (to the Chaos of what is and that within man himself)—which is, perhaps, the best definition of culture—manifests itself with striking clarity in the case of art.[4] This form is meaning or signification. Signification here is not a simple matter of ideas or representations, for it must gather together—bind in a form—representation, desire, and affect.

This is evidently what religion—all religion—has succeeded so marvelously in doing, so long as it itself has held together. By way of a parenthesis, let us add that we discover here the full meaning of the famous Latin verb *religere*: to bind [*lier*] not only the members of a collectivity but everything, absolutely everything, that presents itself, and to bind the former with the latter.

Religion accomplishes this stupefying *tour de force*, however, only by coupling the significations it creates with a transcendent guarantee—a guarantee for which human beings, quite obviously, have a desperate need. It also couples these significations with a form of closure, which seems—but only *seems*—to be consubstantial with the very idea of meaning, but which results, in truth, from this transcendent guarantee itself. Religion establishes this guarantee and this closure by denying to living humanity the possibility of creating meaning: all meaning [*sens*], and all nonsense, has been created once and for all. The *vis formandi* is thus reduced and strictly channeled, and the *libido formandi* is limited to an enjoyment of its past products, without knowing that they are its own doing.

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[4]See, for example, *DG* (1981 edition), 238-42; also "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation" (1979), in *PSW3*.

Now, democratic creation abolishes all transcendent sources of signification. They are abolished, in any case, in the public domain, but in fact, if this creation is pushed to its ultimate consequences, they are abolished for the "private individual," as well, for democratic creation is the creation of unlimited interrogation in all domains: what is the true and the false, what is the just and the unjust, what is the good and what is evil, what is the beautiful and the ugly. It is in this that its *reflectiveness* resides. Democratic creation breaks the closure of signification and thus restores to living society its *vis formandi* and its *libido formandi*. In reality, it does the same thing in private life, since it claims to give to each person the possibility of creating the meaning of her own life. This presupposes that the person has accepted as fact that there is not, as a treasure that has been hidden or that is to be found, any "signification" in being, the world, history, or our own lives. In other words, it entails acceptance of the fact that we create signification on the basis of the baseless, the groundless [*sur fond de sans fond*], meaning on a backdrop of meaninglessness [*sens sur fond de a-sens*], that we too give form to the Chaos through our thought, our action, our labor, our works, and that therefore this signification has no "guarantee" external to itself.

This means that we are alone in being—alone, but not solipsists. We are alone already due to the fact that we speak and we speak to ourselves—whereas being itself does not speak, not even to announce the riddle of the Sphinx. But we are not solipsists, since our creation (and already our speech) leans on being, since our creation is constantly relaunched by our confrontation with being and kept in motion by the effort to give form to that which lends itself thereto only partially and fleetingly—whether it be the visible or the audible world, our being in common, or our innermost life—and since our

creation is thus generally ephemeral, sometimes durable, always risky, and, in the very end, caught within the horizon of destruction—which in being is the flip side of creation.

But then the conditions for cultural creation appear wholly changed. Here we arrive at the heart of our question. Briefly speaking, we may say that in a democratic society the cultural work does not necessarily lie within a field of instituted and collectively accepted significations. It does not find therein its canons of form and content, any more than its author can draw therefrom her subject matter and working methods or the public some support [*l'étayage*] for its show of allegiance. The collectivity itself creates, overtly, its own norms and significations—and the individual is called upon, at least *de jure*, to create, within what in formal terms are quite broad boundaries, the meaning of its life and, for example, truly to judge by itself the cultural works that are presented to it.

Of course, one must be careful not to present this passage in absolutist fashion. There always is a social field of signification, which is far from simply formal in character and from which no one, be she the most original artist ever, can escape: all she can do is contribute to its alteration. We are essentially social and historical beings. Tradition is always present, even if it is not explicitly confining. Both the creation and the acceptance of significations are always social, even when, as in the case of culture proper, they are not formally instituted.

IV

These, we may say, are the basic characteristics of the social field, and it is altered when a democratic society is instaurated. One can see this in the case of ancient Greece,

which I shall not discuss here, as well as in the case of modern Europe.

Let us now consider the properly modern phase of the Western world, from the great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, which were democratic and in fact de-Christianizing, until around 1950, the approximate date starting from which I believe one can discern the onset of a new situation. What is the field of significations underlying the unprecedented cultural creation that took place over a period of a century and a half? To respond to this question would certainly require an immense social-historical investigation, which there can be no question of undertaking here. I shall limit myself to jotting down a few notes that concern basically the subjective side of the question, that is, the personal translation and expression of these new significations.

On the creator's part, one can no doubt speak of an intense sense of freedom and of a lucid intoxication accompanying it. There is the intoxication of exploring new forms, of the freedom of creating them. Thenceforth, these new forms were explicitly sought after for their own sake. They did not arise as a mere outgrowth of the artistic process, as had been the case in previous periods. This freedom, however, remained linked to an object. It entailed a search for and an instauration of a meaning in the form—or better, an explicit search for a form that would be capable of bearing and conveying a new meaning. To be sure, there was also a return to the *kleos* and *kudos*—the glory and renown—of the Ancients. But Proust already said what is at issue here: the act itself changes us rather profoundly, so that we no longer attach importance to its motives—like the artist "who has bound himself to work with the idea of fame [*gloire*] and has

at the same moment rid himself of all desire for fame."[5] Here, the actualization of freedom is freedom in the creation of norms, exemplary creation (as Kant says in the *Critique of Judgment*). And for this reason, such creation is destined to endure. This is eminently the case in modern art (in the sense of the period designated above), where there was an exploration and creation of forms in the strong sense. Even if it was not easily accepted by those to whom it was addressed, and even if it did not correspond to "popular taste," modern art was thereby democratic—that is to say, liberatory. And it was democratic even when its representatives happened to be politically reactionary, as was the case with Chateaubriand, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Degas, and so many others.

But above all, it remained linked [*lié*] to an object. While it ceased to be religious, modern art became "philoso-phical"—it involved the exploration of ever-new strata of the psychical and the social, of the visible and the audible, so that it might, in and through this exploration, and in its own unique way, give form to the Chaos. This does not mean that modern art is philosophy, but it was able to exist only by questioning meaning as it was each time established and by creating other forms for it. It may be recalled at this point that this was the theme of the long meditation that constitutes the last volume of *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*, literally: "In Search of Time Lost"), titled *Le Temps retrouvé* (*Time Regained*, in English), where Proust finally makes it his object to "find the essence of things."

Here again, Kant had seen the thing, although he travestied it when he said that the work of art is "presentation in the intuition of the Ideas of Reason." For, what art presents

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[5]From *The Sweet Cheat Gone* (*La Fugitive*), in *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 2, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Scott Hudson (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 920.

are not the Ideas of Reason, but the Chaos, the Abyss, the Groundlessness to which it gives form. And through this presentation, it is a window on the Chaos; it abolishes our tranquil and stupid assurance about our everyday life; it reminds us that we forever live at the edge of the Abyss—which is the main thing an autonomous being knows, although this does not prevent this being from living and creating—like, to cite Proust once again, the "atheistic artist" who believes himself "obliged to begin over again a score of times a piece of work the admiration aroused by which will matter little to his body devoured by worms, like the patch of yellow wall painted with so much knowledge and skill by an artist who must for ever remain unknown and is barely identified under the name Vermeer."[6]

The public, for its part, participates in this freedom "by proxy," vicariously, using the artist as go-between. Above all, the public is caught up in the new meaning of the work—and it can be so caught up only because, despite inertia, delays, resistances, and reactions, this public itself is creative. The reception of a great new work is never and can never be a matter of mere passive acceptance; it is always also re-creation. And the publics of Western countries, from the eighteenth century down to the middle of the twentieth century, have been authentically creative publics. In other words, the freedom of the creator and her products are, in themselves, socially invested or cathected.

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Are we still living this situation? A risky question, a dangerous one from which I shall not try, however, to

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[6]From *The Captive* (*La Prisonnière*), in *ibid.*, p. 600.

extricate myself.

I think that, despite appearances, the rupture of the closure of meaning that was instaurated by the great democratic movements is in danger of being covered back over.[7] On the level of the real functioning of society, the "power of the people" serves as a screen for the power of money, technoscience, party and State bureaucracies, and the media. On the level of individuals, a new closure is in the process of being established, which takes the form of a generalized conformism.[8] It is my claim that we are living the most conformist phase in modern history. People say, each individual is "free"—but in fact, all people passively receive the *sole* meaning the institution and the social field proposes to them and in fact imposes on them: teleconsumption, which is made up of consumption, television, and consumption simulated via television.

Let me linger briefly over the "pleasure" of the contemporary teleconsumer. As opposed to the pleasure of the spectator, the auditor, or the reader of a work of art, this sort of pleasure includes only a minimum of sublimation: it involves a vicarious satisfaction of drives through a kind of voyeurism, a bidimensional "organ pleasure" accompanied by a maximum of passivity. What television presents may in itself be "beautiful" or "ugly," but whatever it is it is received passively, in inertia and conformism. If I read a great novel like a mediocre crime novel, skipping through the pages to find out "how it's going to end," at the end of the evening I

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[7]I have written abundantly on this topic since 1959. See, for example, "Modern Capitalism and Revolution" (1960-1961), now in *PSW2*, as well as "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982) and "The Dilapidation of the West" (1991), both now above in the present volume.

[8]"The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (first delivered in English at Boston University in September 1989; first published, in French, in 1990), now in *CL3*.

end up with a headache. If I read it like a great novel, remaining attentive to the time proper to its phrases and narration, I am engaged in a strange and multiple psychical and mental activity that stimulates me without tiring me.

The triumph of democracy has been proclaimed as the triumph of "individualism." But this "individualism" is not and cannot be an empty form wherein individuals "do what they like"—any more than "democracy" can be simply procedural in character. "Democratic procedures" are each time filled by the oligarchical character of the contemporary social structure—as the "individualistic" form is filled by the dominant social imaginary, the capitalist imaginary of the unlimited expansion of production and consumption.

On the level of cultural creation—where, of course, judgments are most uncertain and most liable to challenge— one cannot underestimate the rise of eclecticism, collage, spineless syncretism, and, above all, the loss of the *object* and the loss of *meaning*, which go hand in hand with an abandonment of the search for form (form always being infinitely more than form since, as Victor Hugo said, it is the bottom that rises to the surface).

The most pessimistic prophecies—from Tocqueville's prophecy of the "mediocrity" of the "democratic" individual, passing by way of Nietzsche and his discussion of nihilism ("What does nihilism signify? That higher values are being devalued. It lacks a goal, it is missing the answer to the question 'Why?'"),[9] and extending to Oswald Spengler and Martin Heidegger and beyond—are now in the process of being fulfilled. They are now even in the process of being theorized in "Postmodernism," whose displays of self-contentment are as arrogant as they are stupid.

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[9] *Wille zur Macht*, §2. See also §12: "A goal [*Ziel*] is always a meaning [*Sinn*]."

If these statements are accurate, be they only partially so, culture in *such a* "democratic" society runs the greatest of dangers—not, of course, in its erudite, museum-oriented, or touristic form, but in its creative essence. Society forms a whole—albeit one that is certainly fragmented, certainly hypercomplex, certainly enigmatic. Thus, just as the current evolution of culture is not wholly unrelated to the inertia and the social and political passivity characteristic of our world today, so a renaissance of its vitality, should it take place, will be indissociable from a great new social-historical movement, which will reactivate democracy and will give it at once the form and the contents the project of autonomy requires.

We feel troubled by the fact that it is impossible to imagine in concrete terms the content of such a new creation—whereas in fact this is the very stuff of creation. Cleisthenes and his companions[10] neither could have nor should have "foreseen" tragedy and the Parthenon, any more than the members of the French Constituent Assembly or the Founding Fathers could have imagined Stendhal, Balzac, Rimbaud, Manet, and Proust or Poe, Melville, Whitman, and Faulkner.

Philosophy shows us that it would be absurd to believe that we might ever exhaust the thinkable, the feasible, the formable, just as it shows that it would be absurd to set

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[10]T/E: Cleisthenes was the late sixth-century BCE Athenian reformer generally credited with introducing the political reforms that led to the instauration of democracy at Athens. Castoriadis contributed a text, "The Athenian Democracy: False and True Questions" (1993), for the supplement to the translation of Pierre Leveque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's classic 1963 study of this 2,500-year-old reform: *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato*, tr. David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1996). Castoriadis's text now appears above in the present volume.

limits on the formative potential always stirring within the psychical imagination and within the collective social-historical imaginary. But it does not stop us from noting that humanity has traversed periods of despondency and lethargy that are all the more insidious as they have been accompanied by what some have called "material well-being." To the extent, whether frail or firm, that this depends on those who have a direct and active connection with culture, if their work remains faithful to the requirements of freedom and responsibility they will be able to contribute to making this phase of lethargy be as short as possible.

<div align="right">Paris, October 1991—April 1994</div>

The Ethicists' New Clothes[*]

The Recent "Return of Ethics," and Its Conditions

For almost two centuries running (practically speaking, since Kant), ethics seemed to be turning more and more into a strictly academic discipline, philosophy's poor relation, or else a matter for religious catechism. Characteristic of this situation, for example, is the fact that, aside from two works—*Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion* by Henri Bergson and *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* by Max Scheler—and perhaps one or two others, the most important philosophical authors of the twentieth century—Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Alfred North Whitehead—practically never spoke about ethics (any more, indeed, than they spoke about politics). And yet for approximately the past twenty years we have witnessed an apparent return to the offensive of a discourse that makes ethics its paramount authority. The term "discourse," however, grants too much. In the worst of cases, the word "ethics" is simply used as a slogan; in the best, it is merely the sign of a malaise, and the mark of a question.

The question we must ask is the following: Why this reversal? The reasons no doubt are multiple and complex. At first glance, three among them appear most imposing.

At the very outset, let us note a certain particularity to the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: these

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[*]"Le Cache-misère de l'éthique" was originally published in *Lettre international*, 37 (Summer 1993): 2-8. Reprinted in *MI*, 206-20 (249-66 of the 2007 reprint). [T/E: First translated in *[WIF](#)*, 108-22. All the notes in this chapter have been supplied by the translator. A *cache-misère* is a cloak or overcoat worn to hide the miserable state of one's clothing. I have had to take some liberty in devising, with Castoriadis's approval, an appropriate English-language translation for this title.]

centuries are perhaps the first ones in history that can be described as *political*. Speaking of Napoleon, Hegel reports that in Modern Times politics takes the place of the Ancients' *fatum*. The era opened by the American and French Revolutions (and already by the thinkers of the Enlightenment) continued during the nineteenth century in the democratic movement and the workers' movement, but it seems to have come to a close with the pulverization of Marxist-Leninist ideology[1] and the collapse of totalitarian regimes appealing to this ideology. It is this era that, more than any other period in human history, seems both to have confided upon politics the most important role in the solution of human problems and to have engendered, for the best and sometimes for the worst, peoples' massive participation in political activities. We are now experiencing the aftershock: the fraudulent bankruptcy of Communism, but also a growing sense of disillusionment on the part of populations faced with the obvious impotence of conservative Liberalism.[2] In addition, we are witnessing the growing privatization of individuals in an ever-more bureaucratized society that is itself increasingly given over to supermarkets and mass media; the corruption and/or nullity of professional politicians; and, finally, the disappearance of any historical horizon, any social, collective, political prospects. Long ago, these conditions had already combined to cast discredit upon the very word *politics*, which has come to signify demagogy, trickery, and underhanded maneuvers, a cynical striving for power by any and all means. Whereas—for Marx, for example—the collective combat for the transformation of

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[1]T/E: See "The Pulverization of Marxism-Leninism" (1990), now above in the present volume.

[2]T/E: In the Continental sense of a "free-market" or "laissez-faire" ideology.

society seemed to include and to subsume all else (a position clearly expressed and fully rationalized by Leon Trotsky in *Their Morals and Ours*), the monstrosity of actual Communist regimes has led many people, and among them the best, to impugn every overall vision or aim for society (a position that is, in the final analysis, simply incoherent) and to seek in their individual consciences (or in transcendent principles) the norms that could animate and guide them in their resistance to these regimes.

A second great activity that should be mentioned here for the role it has played in aiding this "return of ethics" is science, or more exactly "technoscience." Another phenomenon of massive proportions, technoscience is an equally original trait of this phase in the history of humanity and it, too, has undergone unprecedented development, so that it can now lay claim to be politics' rival for the role of custodian of universal solutions to the problems of humanity. But technoscience, as well, ceases at a certain point to appear to be beyond all challenge. Not that modern man would have completely abandoned his magicoreligious belief in "Science." Nonetheless, after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, including J. Robert Oppenheimer's contrition, passing by way of the growing destruction of the environment, and arriving at artificial insemination and genetic manipulations, a constantly expanding number of people have begun to doubt the innate goodness both of scientific discoveries and of their various applications. Whence the creation of "ethics committees" and university chairs in bioethics as the semblance of a response to the questions that have thereby arisen.

Finally, though it is useless to insist upon this last

point, there is the general crisis of Western societies.[3] This crisis is a crisis of "values," and, more profoundly, a crisis in what I call *social imaginary significations*, the significations that hold a society together. In this crisis must also be included what very well must be called *the crisis of philosophy*, which is expressed, among other ways, in the grandiloquent proclamations, from Heidegger and others, about the onto-theo-logo-phallo-centric "closure of Greco-Western metaphysics." This crisis leads some into reactive attempts to revive or to recycle a traditional ethics. To be included therein are, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre's "neo-Aristotelian" book on ethics, *After Virtue*, Jürgen Habermas with his "communicative ethics," or John Rawls and his quasi-Kantian theory of justice.

In all these cases, we witness a rejection, if not of all politics, in any case of all politics in the grand sense, as well as an attempt to find an ethics (whether defined as such or otherwise) capable of providing the criteria that could guide, if not action, at least the acts and behaviors of singular individuals. One cannot help but notice the kinship between this turnaround and the withdrawal into the "private" sphere that is characteristic of the present age, along with its "individualist" ideology. Nor can one, if any historical memory remains, miss noticing the parallel between this "ethical" rejection of politics and the turn toward the private man (and the flourishing of philosophies that turned upon his conduct) twenty-three centuries ago, after the decline of the Greek democratic *polis* (as was rightly noted by Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*). I shall return to this point later on.

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[3]T/E: See "The Crisis of Western Societies" (1982), now above in the present volume.

Inconsistencies and Misunderstandings

Let us emphasize straight off what seem to be the basic inconsistencies in these attitudes. They are inconsistent starting at least from the moment they claim to be anything other than and more than a visceral reaction to the monstrosities of totalitarianism and its attempt to subordinate everything to a pseudo-"politics" (which itself barely camouflaged a rage for unlimited domination). What these reactions forget, or cover over, is the following basic and obvious fact: all our acts find the effective condition of their possibility, both as concerns their material conditions and as concerns their signification, in the fact that we are social beings who live in a social world that is what it is because it is instituted thus and not otherwise. We are not "individuals," freely floating above society and history, who are capable of deciding sovereignly and in the absolute about what we shall do, about how we shall do it, and about the meaning our doing will have once it is done. We are certainly not *determined* by our setting and by our situation, but we are conditioned by them infinitely more than we would like to think. Above all, *qua* individuals, we choose neither the questions to which we will have to respond nor the terms in which they will be posed, nor, especially, the ultimate meaning of our response, once given. The consequences of our acts are launched into an ever-unfolding social-historical world, and they escape us. We therefore cannot ignore this development.

Our acts are not determined, but they do have conditions. These conditions are in no way simply "external." Would Kant have been Kant if he had been born at Burgos and not at Königsberg? Of these conditions, an immense part escapes our grasp and forever will. No one ever will be able

to choose the place and the epoch of one's birth, the situation or the character of one's parents. And yet, another part of these conditions depends upon us and this part can, at least in principle, be called into question and perhaps be transformed. It is this part that relates to the explicit institutions of society. True politics is nothing other than the activity that, starting from an interrogation about the desired form and content of these institutions, makes as its objective the realization of those institutions that are deemed to be the best and, notably, the realization of those institutions that favor and allow for human autonomy.

If this can clearly be seen, one can also see that politics stands over and above ethics—which does not mean that the former should in any sense eliminate the latter. Aristotle was right to say (in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) that politics is the most architectonic of the sciences that concern the human being. Let us insist upon his image: if the house is badly built, all efforts to live well in it will be, at best, a series of unsatisfactory *bricolages*, or fix-up jobs. Let us also insist upon calling things by their correct names. When heroic dissidents like Vladimir Bukovsky, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov, Václav Havel, György Konrad, Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuron, Bronislaw Geremek, and so many others opposed Communist totalitarianism, whatever might have been their underlying motivations (ethical, religious, or otherwise) or their way of justifying their actions to themselves, and whatever they had in mind to replace that system, it was obviously *politics* that they were doing—even if they said the contrary. They deemed to be absolutely bad not only the actions of the Communists but also the regime the latter had put into place that allowed these actions to occur. They thought that another regime (and perhaps, in these instances, almost any other regime) would be better, and

that, in any case, the destruction of the existing regime was the necessary precondition for any discussion about a better system and for any attempt to bring about such a system. Ethically motivated and undoubtedly valid, in attacking institutions as such their public action transcended ethics and became, *ipso facto*, political.

Examples: Bioethics and Lying

With the help of two examples of topical interest, I shall attempt to illustrate the sovereign place a correctly conceived politics holds in human acting.

The newspapers are always full of discussions and information about bioethics. Committees are appointed, recommendations are made. What is striking is the almost ridiculous modesty of the solutions offered when compared to the enormity of the issues at stake. Among the issues discussed are: medically assisted procreation; the question of whether, and under what conditions, the sperm of an unknown donor or of a dead husband can be used; that of whether a "surrogate mother" can rent out her uterus, and so on. Discussion continues about euthanasia and about the maintenance of life-support systems for persons who are in an irreversible state of coma or simply in the terminal phase of a painful illness. All that is very well and good. But no one raises the following question: Is it "ethical"—or simply decent—to spend public funds (when private monies are involved, the question remains the same), thousands of dollars, for a single attempt at artificial insemination when we know the pitiful state of basic sanitary and medical facilities, or even the food situation, of the countries in which five-sixths of the world population live? Does the desire of Mr. and Ms. Smith to have "their own" child (be it only 50

percent "theirs") have more ethical weight than the survival of dozens of children from poor countries who could be taken care of by these sums of money? Does the universality of ethical imperatives operate only above a set per capita GNP? Is it a bioethics that we truly need—or really, rather, a *biopolitics*?

Some will recoil in fright at this idea or at the very term *biopolitics*. This response shows a lack of understanding or testifies to a certain hypocrisy. For, at present, we very well do have a biopolitics that does not, however, dare to utter its name and that is constantly condemning to death in a tacit way, even in the world's wealthy countries, hundreds of persons for "economic," that is to say, *political*, reasons (for obviously the division and allocation of resources in a society are political questions *par excellence*). I am not even speaking here about differences in the quality of care, depending upon whether you are rich or poor, but about the well-known and well-established fact that, due to a dearth, for example, of kidney dialysis machines in comparison with current needs, doctors have to choose which patients will benefit from their use and which ones will be denied it. Their criteria are no doubt humane and reasonable. But do not all ethics say, "Thou shalt not kill"? In an equally tacit way, simply by living as we do we condemn to death hundreds of thousands of persons every month in the poor countries of the world.

Another example of illustrative value is that of lying. Solzhenitsyn (in the *Gulag Archipelago* and elsewhere), as well as Havel and many others, have rightly insisted upon the fundamental role lying plays under totalitarian regimes as a means of governance. They equally insist upon the fact that the tacit complicity of the general population is indispensable for the lie to be able to play this role. Those who want to derive their denunciation of lying from purely "ethical"

principles have to make absolute a rule of the type, Thou shalt never lie. It is nevertheless clear that if one sees in this maxim not a political rule but an absolute ethical one, one ends up spouting absurdities. If the KGB questioned me about the identity of other dissidents, or about where the *Gulag Archipelago* was stashed away, to be consistent I would have to tell the truth. The triviality of the example should not prevent us from drawing an important conclusion: the question, "When must the truth be told and when is it to be hidden?", pertains not simply to an ethical but to a political judgment, for the effects of my response do not concern my person alone, my conscience, my morality, or even just the life of other persons designatable by name; rather, these effects directly affect the public sphere as such and the fate of society as an anonymous collectivity—this being the very definition of politics.

Radical Inadequacy of Traditional Philosophical or Religious Ethics

Another conclusion of equal importance may also be drawn from these examples. No abstract rule, no universal commandment possessing any concrete content can relieve us of the burden of and the responsibility for our acts. To cite Aristotle once again, each act is always necessarily set in the realm of the particular, not the universal; it therefore requires from us the exercise of *phronēsis*, a term ill translated in Latin as *prudentia*, prudence. *Phronēsis* is the capacity or power to judge at the very place where no mechanical, objectifiable rules that would facilitate judgment can be found.

Now, all the religious moralities with which I am familiar, and almost all philosophical moralities, violate this requirement, for they fail to recognize that every ethical rule

can be applied only in particular circumstances and that each rule therefore also depends upon an exercise of *phronēsis* that may lead even to the transgression of the rule. Thus do such moralities draw up lists of commandments and catalogues of specific virtues that cannot always be applied. But above all, and this is the essential point, they fail to recognize or they occult the tragic dimension of existence and of human action, which so often places us in situations that offer no cost-free solutions. The traditional philosophical or religious moralities are happy moralities. They claim to know where Good and Evil lie. For them, the sole problem is that of the inner man: we know, or we always ought to know, where Good and Evil lie, though we are not always "able" to will it, or we will it for "bad reasons" (Kant).

The overwhelming fact of human life, however, is that what is Good and what is Evil under given circumstances is often obscure or can be attained only through the sacrifice of other goods. To take once again a trivial example: there are cases where someone would have to be killed in order to save several others. The ethical commandment says, Thou shalt not kill. It does not say, Thou shalt not kill, *except*…. It says, Thou shalt not kill, *period*. It is, by its very nature, absolute. And one can also maintain (and I, too, would maintain on the level of principle) that with human lives we neither can nor should practice any sort of "accounting." How is one to say that that which saves fifty persons while sacrificing forty-nine others is Good? And yet, we are, or we may find ourselves, in situations where we have to make such decisions.

We encounter this fatal weakness again in one of the loftiest and most rigorous philosophies that ever has existed, the practical philosophy of Immanuel Kant (*Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals, Critique of Practical Reason*). We are familiar with the central principle of the

Kantian ethic: *Act in such a way that the maxim of your act might become universal law*. We are also familiar with the criticisms that have been directed against it (already by Hegel), as regards its formalism. What especially must be pointed out, however, is that this principle leaves us helpless in the most difficult—therefore, the most important—cases. One of its aspects remains unchallengeable: not universality, but the *requirement* of a potential universalization. That is to say: I have to act in such a way that I might be able to render an account of and a reason for what I have done, I have to be able to defend my act in a reasonable way *erga omnes*, in front of everyone. Yet we cannot speak here of universal law. Every action being particular, the kind of universality involved here would be able to express itself only as follows: Every other person, placed under the same circumstances, would have to act the same way. Specified in this way, however, the statement is without interest in trivial matters (the only kind in which the expression "placed under the same circumstances" retains a bit of meaning) and empty in important affairs, precisely those instances that are characterized by the singularity of the circumstances. In the latter case, the principle signifies simply, In my place, you would have done the same thing. But in this place, you never shall be. (Kant tried to show that the violation of his principle led to contradictions, but his arguments in this instance are fallacious.)

  This brings us to another fatal weakness of traditional ethics, one that may be expressed, in apparently paradoxical manner, by saying that they are *only* ethics. Philosophers and theologians devote dozens of pages to discussing cases with exquisite subtlety and yet they carefully remain silent (or postpone discussion to other volumes) when it comes to the largest issues. As it happens, these obviously are the issues

that always have a political dimension to them, traditional moralists tacitly recognizing here the predominance of the political dimension over the ethical one. Let us take once again the simplest and most flagrant case, that of homicide. No ethical injunction seems more indisputable than "Thou shalt not kill." And none has been, nor remains, so constantly, cynically, and officially violated. Kant himself discusses in detail a question as momentous as that of whether or not one should return something that has secretly and confidentially been entrusted to one's care—but he has not a word to say in the *Critique of Practical Reason* about officially sanctioned homicide. It is a crime to kill someone—but traditional ethics and the ethics of the *Critique of Practical Reason* pay no attention to the murders committed, by tens and hundreds of thousands, during the course of a war. Nor am I aware that there ever has been a war between Christian nations in which the arms of both belligerents were not blessed by their respective Churches. *Raison d'État* is infinitely stronger than practical reason and the Ten Commandments.

Return to History

How is one to explain this fantastic hiatus, this abyss between the "private" and the "public," between ethics and politics, the abandonment of the decisive to the benefit of the trivial, the halt to reasonable discussion and the resignation of the critical spirit before the gates of Power, what very well must be called the *instituted duplicity* of our societies?

To begin to elucidate this question, one would have to provide a summary of the entire history of humanity. One would have to enquire about the persistence of the "state of nature"—that is to say, of the war of all against all and the reign of brute force—among collectivities. Or at the very

least, one would have to reexamine the history of our Greco-Western and Hebraico-Christian civilization. This, of course, would be an impossible task, even if the historical reexamination were limited to a "history of ideas," which would mutilate it beyond recognition. It is the history of the social imaginary that would have to be done, and it would have to be done on perhaps the most enigmatic level of all: the institution, by each collectivity, of a social-historical "we," of a collective identity in its hitherto apparently insurmountable opposition to the others' "we," the difference between the law that governs our relationships (as criticizable as that law might be) and the nonlaw that in practical terms reigns over our relations with the "outside world." Neither Christianity nor Islam changed anything about this, for their histories are full of wars, including a new category of wars they themselves invented, crueler still than the others: wars of religion. Let us simply recall, to turn back the clock a bit, that Jehovah gave the Ten Commandments (including, "Thou shalt not kill") to Moses in the desert, but when the Hebrews entered Palestine—the land He had promised to them—they exterminated, with His accord, all the non-Israelite peoples then inhabiting the country. The Hebrews at least enjoyed, however, this one distinction: once Palestine was conquered, they remained there and left everyone else alone. Not so for the Christians and Muslims, who felt that they had to convert the infidels by sword, fire, and blood.

Here we can offer only a few sparse and rhapsodic historical benchmarks.

In the "true" Greek world (i.e., until the end of the fifth century BCE), no opposition existed in principle between the "private" and "public" (though they were clearly distinguished), nor did any opposition exist between ethics and politics. Hegel saw this quite well. When speaking of that

world, one cannot speak of duplicity, either instituted or otherwise: relationships were ruled by a brutal frankness. Contrary to inanities in abundant supply at least since Fustel de Coulanges, the collectivity did not "resorb" the individual in the classical democratic Greek city. And yet the hierarchy of values was clear and univocal. The highest virtues of man were the civic or political virtues. And even the religious virtues, or those of piety, were subordinated to them. In Herodotus's story about the happiest men Solon told Croesus he had known, Solon placed Tellus the Athenian, who died defending his city, in first position; Kleobis and Biton, the sons of the priestess of Argos whom the gods had put to death in their sleep following an act of great religious (and filial) piety, were placed second.

True, in Sophocles's *Antigone* an extreme, a tragic form of opposition was acted out between Antigone and Creon. Contrary to run-of-the-mill interpretations, however, the tragedy did not involve an opposition between the "private" or piety, on the one hand, and the "public" or politics, on the other: to obey divine laws is *also* a law of the city; to obey the laws of the city is *also* a divine injunction. Both of the principal characters in this tragedy were wrong because each had become entrenched in his or her own reasons while ignoring the other's reasons. Creon's son says to his father, Your wrong is to will *monos phronein*, to be alone in the truth. But his observation holds for both Creon *and* Antigone.[4] This is, generally speaking, what remains impossible for the Moderns to understand. For the latter, and whatever they might say, the political community remains in essence an element that lies "outside" man's humanity. This opposition between community and humanity began to appear

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[4]T/E: See "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in *CL2*.

only with defeat in the Peloponnesian war and the decline of the city. And yet even Socrates continued to recognize the primacy of the political principle, as when in the *Crito* he personified the Laws to reprove him for thinking of making an exception for himself.

The split begins with Plato on the factual level—but not so in theory. It begins on the factual level with Plato inasmuch as Plato never tired of condemning the actual city. But this split did not exist yet on the level of theory, where Plato still tried to reconcile the political principle and the ethical principle. Plato attempted a reconciliation between the two principles not by hierarchizing them in one fashion or another but by confounding the two domains ontologically. There was, for him, a "substantial soul," but its virtues were the same as the virtues of the good civic regime. In one case as in the other, virtue, or good order, was the correct relationship between parts of the soul or parts of the city (this, indeed, was the very definition he gave of justice). In both instances, the relationship was placed under the hegemony of the superior and most worthy part: the thinking part of the soul and the philosophers in the city.

Aristotle rightly challenged this assimilation between the soul and the city. Even if for him, too, the cardinal virtue was an essentially political virtue—i.e., justice (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 5)—and if most of the virtues he examined concerned the individual's relationships to other individuals, there was neither an identity nor an analogy between the individual and the collective. Yet it is characteristic of the epoch during which Aristotle reflected and wrote, an epoch of crisis and imminent dissolution for the world of the *polis*, that the question that he was the first to raise—namely, whether it is the same to be a good man and a good citizen—received from him no categorical answer.

Aristotle vacillated between the classical idea—namely, that politics is the highest and most worthy of occupations, the most architectonic—and the idea, heralding the times to come, that the sovereign good for human beings is contemplation, the *bios theōrētikos*, which alone is capable of achieving our natural finality, our *telos*: to "behave as far as possible like immortals."[5] One is to behave therefore like god, for the god of Aristotle, pure thought thinking itself, is incapable, without lowering itself, of busying itself with the affairs of the world, an object unworthy of itself. Contemplative activity is the only activity that approaches the ideal of autarchy. This contemplative life, certainly, is a human life; it therefore presupposes the city. But in the sequence he laid out, the city appears merely to be instrumental to the achievement of a contemplative life.

With the Cynics, the Epicureans, and especially the Stoics, the withdrawal into the private sphere became quite striking. For the Stoics in particular, with their deterministic fatalism, there could be no question of politics, and the entirety of ethics was reduced to an inner attitude, the sole thing that "depends upon us." This is the famous *ta eph' hēmin*, an expression that was borrowed from Aristotle (for whom it obviously had an entirely other meaning than what the Stoics intended, since Aristotle granted the existence of a human kind of freedom that makes of us "the principle of what will come").[6] Because the unfolding of "real" events is determined and fated, we can only grant or refuse our assent

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[5]T/E: *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7.1177b33.
[6]T/E: For *ta eph' hēmin*, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5.1113b7-8. In "Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul That Has Been Able to Be Presented as a Science" (1968), in *CL1*, Castoriadis renders *archē tōn esomenōn* as "origin of what will be," citing Aristotle *De Interpretatione* 9.18b31-19a8.

to what, in any case, has to happen. We have only to play correctly the role the cosmic order, also called Providence, has assigned to us in the theater of the world, whether it be the role of slave (Epictetus) or that of Emperor (Marcus Aurelius).

We thus arrive at Christianity, an immense subject we can do no more than touch upon here. First and foremost, we must distinguish, and even oppose, early Christianity and Christianity as it was instituted starting in the fourth century.

On the level of interest to us here, early Christianity (that of the Gospels and Paul's *Epistles*) lies in a direct line of descent from Stoicism. For the former, there could be no question of getting mixed up in the order of *this* world: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's," Christ says [T/E: Matthew 22:21]; "There is no power but of God," says Paul (Romans [T/E: 13:1]). Any Stoic could sign his name to those statements. Yet in Christianity there was also something more than this lineage, for Christian acosmism was absolute. If one really wants to be Christian, what one has to do is crystal clear: sell everything one owns, distribute it among the poor, leave one's father and one's mother, and follow Christ. No "interpretation" can be affixed upon this, it is written black upon white, and "Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these [the interpretation] cometh of evil" [T/E: Matthew 5:37]. In this sense, true Christians are almost completely unknown—save for those who have followed the eremitic, that is to say, acosmic, path. Even among them, moreover, some sorting must be performed. How many monks (or monastic orders) show no concern for tomorrow? Now, it is written: "Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap…and God feedeth them" [T/E: Luke 12:24]. (Likewise, in the *Pater noster*, the word of Christ is not "Give

us this day our *daily* bread," but "Give us our bread *today*," *sēmeron*). Clearly, no society exists or ever could exist on such bases. At the same time, however, all this was addressed to the "inner man." And yet, in contrast to Stoicism, the main injunctions no longer were *ataraxia*, impassiveness, and a refusal to give our assent to what, in ourselves, might be a bad penchant (this assent or its rejection being, once again, the sole thing that lies within our power). The dual injunction of Christianity was of a completely different sort. On the one hand, the intention itself, the penchant, had to be pure (a theme we encounter again and again, all the way down to Kant). On adultery, Christ says: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5.27-28). It does not suffice not to commit adultery; one must not even desire it (for the Stoics, what we desire clearly does *not* depend upon us; what depends upon us is our possible assent to this desire). On the other hand, there was love: one must love one's neighbor as oneself, and certainly, above all, one must love Christ.

Some critical remarks about this first Christian ethics are unavoidable. The purity of the intention presupposes, at the very least, that the permitted and forbidden "objects" of the intention be fixed, determined. By whom, and how are they so? By God, by means of the Revelation of His will (for example, the Decalogue). One must neither commit nor desire adultery because God has forbidden it. Why has God forbidden adultery? The question itself is forbidden. Thus, the "moral law" is given to me by someone else and without my being able to raise any questions about it. This is what must very well be called a *heteronomous* ethic.

Second, the injunction to love one's neighbor as

oneself is doubly paradoxical. The very idea of loving someone because one *has to* love this person contradicts what we understand by love, whatever interpretation might be given of this term. And the fact that love of oneself is erected as the standard and the measure for the love due to one's neighbor seems at once a curious concession to egoism and logically quite unsatisfactory (how is one to analyze the situation in which one defends someone else at the cost of one's own life?).

Finally, we may ask ourselves about an ethics that presents human beings with unrealizable injunctions—to be brief: not control over their *acts* but, in fact, the elimination of desire, or the suppression of the Unconscious—and that thereby necessarily renders them perpetually and insurmountably guilty. We must ask whether such an ethics is acceptable and even whether it is not positively *immoral* (this assertion holding for Kantian ethics, as well). To imbue people with the awareness that they are forever damned, save for an intervention of divine grace (the common position of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Jansen), should, in good logic, have simply left them dumbfounded.

But all that, in a sense, matters little because this early brand of Christianity did not live very long. Things undoubtedly could not have been otherwise. As early as the fourth century, Christianity was institutionalized. It became state religion, and, with Theodosius, not only official religion but the obligatory religion of the inhabitants of the Empire. This institutionalization of Christianity could only have occurred by means of a tremendous compromise. Its initial acosmism was completely abandoned (save, in part, for anchorites and a few rare monastic orders), the Church became an institution highly present in its era, and for a long time to come it held very strong designs upon the temporal

power (at least until the moment it was discovered, in the fifteenth century, that the famous "Donation of Constantine" was a forgery). In any case, it became a main cog in each of the successively established social and political orders. In doing so, it watered down enormously the wine of the Gospels' ethics. Once again, let us recall "Thou shalt not kill."

The legacy of all this—which, despite its "secularization," still lies at the basis of Western civilization—is the separation between ethics and politics, between the inner man and the public man. Certainly, one can consult entire libraries of the Greek Fathers, as well as of the Latin Fathers, for an explanation of how and under what conditions a king may make war while remaining Christian, and so on. We need not trouble ourselves with such casuistry. Yet this separation spans the history of Western philosophy, interrupted only on rare occasions by a Spinoza, for example, or by a Hegel (but in the latter case, it is ethics itself that vanishes before the Reason of history, and politics becomes in fact adoration of the Real). It is this separation that we must overcome [*dépasser*].

We must overcome the ethics of heteronomy. And to do that, we must first overcome the politics of heteronomy. We need an ethics of autonomy, which can only become articulated along with a politics of autonomy. Autonomy is not Cartesian, still less Sartrean freedom, the lightning stroke without density or attachment. Autonomy on the individual level is the establishment of a new relationship between the self and its Unconscious—not in order to eliminate the latter but to succeed in filtering what of one's desires is to pass into acts and words. This individual autonomy arises only under heavily instituted conditions. We therefore need institutions that favor autonomy, institutions that grant to each person an

effective autonomy *qua* member of the collectivity and that allow that person to develop her individual autonomy. That can occur only through the instauration of a regime that is genuinely (and not just verbally) democratic. In such a regime, I effectively participate in the instauration of the laws under which I live. I participate therein fully, not by means of "representatives" or referenda about questions whose ins and outs I have been rendered incapable of knowing, but instead in full knowledge of the relevant facts, so that I may be able to recognize the laws that have been enacted as my laws, even when I am not in agreement with their content, because I have had the effective possibility of participating in the formation of what becomes the common opinion of the collectivity. Whether it is exercised on the individual or collective level, such an autonomy obviously furnishes no automatic response to all the questions posed by human existence. We will always still have to make our lives under the tragic conditions that characterize those lives, for we do not always know where good and evil lie, either on the individual level or on the collective level. And yet, neither are we condemned to evil, any more than we are to good, for we can, most of the time, turn back upon ourselves, both individually and collectively, reflect upon our acts, reexamine them, correct them, repair them.

Democracy as Procedure
and Democracy as Regime[*]

  The very subject of our discussion is a translation and expression of the crisis the democratic movement is currently undergoing. And our choice of this subject is indeed conditioned by the appearance of a conception of "democracy" that, breaking with all previous political thought, makes of democracy a mere set of "procedures." Political thought saw in democracy a *regime* that was indissociable from a substantive conception of the ends of the political institution and from a view, and from an aim, of the type of human being that corresponds to it. It is easy to see that, whatever the philosophical window dressing, a purely procedural conception of "democracy" itself originates in the crisis of the imaginary significations that concern the ultimate goals [*finalités*] of collective life and aims at covering over this crisis by dissociating all discussion relative to these goals from the political "form of the regime," and, ultimately, even by eliminating the very idea of such goals. The deep-seated connection between this conception and what is rather ridiculously called contemporary "individualism" is quite manifest and I shall return to it. But we must begin at the beginning.

I

To discuss democracy is to discuss politics. Now, politic*s*—*la* politique—does not exist everywhere and always; genuine politics is the result of a rare and fragile social-historical creation. What does necessarily exist in every society is "*the* political" [*le* politique]—the explicit, implicit, sometimes almost ungraspable dimension that deals with power, namely the instituted instance (or instances) that is (or are) capable of issuing sanction-bearing injunctions and that must always, and explicitly, include at least what we call a judicial power and a governmental power.[1] There can be, there has been, and we hope that there will again be societies without a State, namely, without a hierarchically organized bureaucratic apparatus separate from society and dominating it. The State is a historical creation that can be dated and localized: Mesopotamia, East and Southeast Asia, pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. A society without such a State is possible, conceivable, and desirable. But a society without explicit institutions of power is an absurdity into which both Marx and anarchism lapsed.

There is no such thing as an extrasocial human being; nor is there, either as reality or as coherent fiction, any human "individual" as an a-, -extra-, or presocial "substance." We cannot conceive of an individual that does not have language,

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[1]See my text, "Power, Politics, Autonomy" (1988), now in *CL3*. [T/E: The original (1996) version of *MI* (222, n. 1) references here a few pages of this *CL3* article (*MM*, 117-24) while the 2007 reprint (p. 268, n. 1) cites both this limited passage from the original version and the entire text for the reprint (*MM*, 137-71), as if they represented equivalent pagination. The point Castoriadis makes in the text—viz. that there must be an explicit judicial power and an explicit governmental power in any society—appears on p. 123 of the original version of *MM* and on p.150 of the reprint; see *CL3*, 258.]

for example, and there is language only as creation and social institution. Unless one wants to look ridiculous, one cannot see this creation and this institution as resulting from some deliberate cooperation among "individuals"—or from an addition of "intersubjective" networks: for there to be intersubjectivity, there must be human subjects as well as the possibility for these subjects to communicate—in other words, there must be already socialized human beings and a language they could not produce by themselves *qua* individuals (one or several "intersubjective networks") since they must receive language through their socialization. The same considerations hold for a thousand other facets of what we call *the individual*. Contemporary "political philosophy" —as well as the basics of what passes for economic science—is founded upon this incoherent fiction of an individual-substance, which is supposedly well defined in its essential determinations outside or prior to all society, and it is upon this absurdity that both the idea of democracy as mere "procedure" and contemporary pseudo-"individualism" are necessarily based. Outside society, however, the human being is neither beast nor God (as Aristotle said)[2] but quite simply *is not* and cannot exist, either physically or, what is more, psychically. Radically unfit for life, the "hopeful and dreadful monster" that is the newborn human baby must be humanized, and this process of humanization is its socialization, the labor of society mediated and instrumented by the *infans*'s immediate entourage. The being-society of society is the institutions and the social imaginary significations these institutions embody and make exist in effective social actuality. These are the significations that give a meaning—imaginary meaning, in the profound sense of the term, that is, spontaneous and unmotivated creation of

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[2]T/E: Aristotle *Politics* 1253a29.

humanity—to life, to activity, to choices, to the death of humans as well as to the world they create and in which humans must live and die. The polarity is not that between individual and society, since the individual *is* society, a fragment at the same time as a miniature—or, better, a sort of hologram—of the social world. Rather, the polarity is that between psyche and society. The psyche must somehow or other be tamed; it must accept a "reality" that is to begin with, and, in a sense, till the very end radically heterogeneous and foreign to it. This "reality" and its acceptance are the work of the institution. The Greeks knew it; the Moderns, in large part because of Christianity, have occulted this fact.

The institution—and the imaginary significations it bears and conveys—can exist only if it preserves itself, that is, only if it is fit enough to survive. The Darwinian tautology finds here another fertile ground of application. The institution preserves itself also by means of power—and this power exists, first of all, as a radical, always implicit, "infrapower." You were born in Italy in 1954, in France in 1930, in the United States in 1945, in Greece in 1922. You did not decide that, but this pure fact will decide the main part of your existence: your native tongue, your religion, 99% of your thought (in the best of cases), your reasons for desiring to live and for accepting (or not accepting) to die. This is much more, and indeed something quite other, than a mere "being in the world" that has not been chosen (Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*). That world is not one or *the* world; it is a social-historical world, fashioned by its institution and containing, in an indescribable fashion, innumerable transformed legacies [*transformés*] of previous history.

From birth, the human subject is caught in a social-historical field, is placed under the simultaneous grip of the instituting collective imaginary, instituted society, and history,

whose provisional culmination is this institution itself. In the first place, society can do nothing other than produce social individuals that conform to it and that in turn produce it. Even if one is born into a society riven by internal conflict, the terrain of such conflict, the stakes involved, and the options available are pregiven; even if one were to become a philosopher, it is *this* history of *this-here* philosophy that will be the point of departure for one's reflection, and not another. Here one is very much on the far side, or the near side, of all intention, will, maneuver, conspiracy, or predisposition of any assignable institution, law, group, or class.

Alongside—or "above"—this implicit infrapower, there always has been and there always will be an explicit power, instituted as such, with its particular arrangements, its definite functioning, the legitimate sanctions it can put into application.[3] The necessary existence of this power is the result of at least four key factors:

- the "presocial" world, as such, always threatens the meaning already instaurated by society;
- the psyche of each singular human being is not and can never be completely socialized and rendered exhaustively compliant with [*conforme à*] what institutions demand of it;
- other societies exist, and they pose a danger to the meaning already instaurated by the society under consideration;
- in its institutions and its imaginary significations, society always contains a push toward the future, and the future excludes a prior and exhaustive codification (or mechanization) of the decisions that are to be made.

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[3]Legitimate sanctions in relation to positive right, not in the absolute.

For these reasons, there is a need for explicitly instituted instances or agencies that can make sanction-bearing decisions about what is to be done and not to be done, that can legislate, "execute" decisions, settle points of litigation, and govern. The first two functions can be (and, in most archaic societies, have been) buried beneath customary regulations, but the last two cannot. Finally, and above all, this explicit power is itself the instituted guarantee for the monopoly over legitimate significations in the society under consideration.

The political may be defined as everything that concerns this explicit power. This includes the modes of access to explicit power, the appropriate ways of managing it, and so on.

This type of institution of society covers almost all of human history. Here we are talking about heteronomous societies, which certainly create their own institutions and significations, but they also occult this self-creation by imputing it to an extrasocial source—in any case, one that is external to the effectively actual activity of the effectively existing collectivity: the ancestors, the heroes, the gods, God, the laws of history or those of the market. In these heteronomous societies, the institution of society takes place within a closure of meaning. All questions the society under consideration is capable of formulating can find a response within its imaginary significations, and those that cannot be formulated are not so much forbidden as mentally and psychically impossible for the members of that society.

This situation, as far as one knows, has been shattered but twice in history—in ancient Greece and in Western Europe—and we are the inheritors of this break. It is what allows us to speak as we are now speaking. The rupture that has occurred expresses itself through the creation of politic*s*

and philosophy (or reflection). Politics calls into question the established institutions. Philosophy calls into question what Bacon called the *idola tribus*, the collectively accepted representations.[4]

In these societies, the closure of meaning is broken or at least tends to be broken. This rupture—and the incessant activity of questioning that goes along with it—implies the rejection of any source of meaning other than the living activity of human beings. It therefore implies the rejection of all "authority" that would fail to render an account and provide reasons, that would not offer justifications for the *de jure* validity of its pronouncements. It follows from this, almost immediately, that there is:

•   an obligation on the part of all to give an account of and reasons for their deeds and their words (this is what the Greeks called *logon didonai*);
•   a rejection of preestablished "differences" or "alterities" (hierarchies) in individuals' respective positions, therefore a questioning of all power flowing therefrom;
•   an opening up of the question of what are the good (or best) institutions, insofar as these institutions depend upon the conscious and explicit activity of the collectivity—therefore also an opening up of the question of justice.

It is easy to see that these consequences lead one to consider politics as a labor that concerns all members of the collectivity under consideration. This presupposes the equality of all, and it aims at making such equality effectively

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[4]T/E: See, e.g., Aphorism 41 from his *Novum Organum*. "Idols of the Tribe" is the usual translation for this Latin expression.

actual. Therefore, it is also a labor aimed at transforming institutions in a democratic direction. We thus can define politics as explicit and lucid activity that concerns the instauration of desirable institutions and democracy as the regime of explicit and lucid self-institution, as far as is possible, of the social institutions that depend upon explicit collective activity.

It is hardly necessary to add that this self-institution is a movement that does not stop, that it does not aim at a "perfect society" (a perfectly meaningless expression) but, rather, at a society that is as free and as just as possible. It is this movement that I call the project of an autonomous society and that, if is it to succeed, has to establish a democratic society.

A prior question arises, one that actually has been posed in history: Why do we want, why ought we to want, a democratic regime? I shall not discuss this question but shall limit myself, instead, merely to observing that the raising of this question itself already implies that we have to (or ought to) be living in a regime in which all questions can be raised—and this is exactly what a democratic regime is.

But it is also immediately obvious that such an institution—one in which any question can be raised and in which no position, no status, is given or guaranteed in advance—defines democracy as a regime. I shall return to this point.

II

It has been objected that this view entails a substantive conception of citizens' happiness—and that, consequently, it inevitably leads to totalitarianism. This position is stated explicitly by Isaiah Berlin and implicitly by John Rawls and

Jürgen Habermas in their arguments.[5]

But nothing in what we have just said makes any allusion to citizens' "happiness." The historical motivations behind these objections—from Saint-Just's famous "Happiness is a new idea in Europe"[6] to the monstrous farce of Stalinist regimes, which claimed that they were working for, and achieving, people's happiness ("Life has become better, Comrades. Life has become merrier," Stalin declared at the height of misery and terror in Russia)[7]—are understandable. Nonetheless, these motivations do not of themselves justify adoption of the theoretical position; the latter appears as an almost epidermal reaction to a historical situation of colossal dimensions—the emergence of totalitarianism—that would require a much deeper analysis of the political question. The objective of politics is not happiness but freedom. Effectively actual freedom (I am not discussing here "philosophical" freedom) is what I call *autonomy*. The autonomy of the collectivity, which can be achieved only through explicit self-institution and self-governance, is inconceivable without the effectively actual autonomy of the individuals who make it up. Concrete society, the living and functioning one, is nothing other than the concrete, effectively actual, "real" individuals of that society.

The inverse, however, is equally true: The autonomy of individuals is inconceivable and impossible without the

[5]For Habermas, see his recent "Three Normative Models of Democracy," *Constellations*, 1:1 (April 1994): 1-10. [T/E: Reprinted in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, ed. Richard Bellamy (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006; Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).]

[6]T/E: In a speech to the French National Convention, March 3, 1794.

[7]T/E: During a November 17, 1935 conference of 300 Stakhanovite workers held at the Kremlin.

autonomy of the collectivity. For, what does the autonomy of individuals signify, how is it possible, and what does it presuppose? How can one be free if one is placed of necessity under the law of society? Here is a first condition: One must have the effectively actual possibility to participate in the formation of the law (of the institution). I can be free under the law only if I can say that this law is mine, only if I had the effectively actual possibility to participate in its formation and its positing (even if my preferences did not prevail). The law being necessarily universal in its content and, in a democracy, collective in its source (this is, in theory, not contested by the proceduralists), the result is that, in a democracy, the autonomy (the effectively actual freedom) of all is and has to be a fundamental concern of each. (The tendency to "forget" this self-evident fact is one of the innumerable ways in which contemporary "individualism" tries to stack the deck.) For, the quality of the collectivity that decides on our fate is of vital import to us—otherwise, our own freedom becomes politically irrelevant, Stoic, or ascetic. I have a basic positive (and even egoistical) interest to live in a society that is closer to that of the *Symposium* than to that of *The Godfather* or of *Dallas*. In its effectively actual realization, my own freedom is a function of the effectively actual freedom of others— though this idea is certainly incomprehensible to a Cartesian or a Kantian.

No doubt, the deployment and realization of this kind of freedom presuppose certain specific institutional arrangements—including, certainly, some "formal" and "procedural" ones: individual rights (a "bill of rights"), legal guarantees ("due process of law," *nullum crimen nulla poena sine lege*), the separation of powers, and so on. But the liberties that result therefrom are strictly defensive in character. All these arrangements presuppose—and this is the

near-general tacit postulate in what passes for modern political philosophy—that there is, facing the collectivity, an alien power that is immovable, impenetrable, and, in its very essence, hostile and dangerous, whose might must, to the extent that is possible, have limits set upon it. This is but the tacit philosophy the English House of Commons maintained *vis-à-vis* the King, and it is the position explicitly articulated in the founding texts of the American Constitution. That, a few centuries later, the "political thinkers" of modernity still behave psychically and intellectually as "your Excellency's Most obedient Servant" (*Ew. Exzellenz untertänig-gehorsamster Diener*)[8] will surprise only those who have never reflected upon the strange relationship that exists between most intellectuals and the established powers.[9]

Freedom under law—autonomy—signifies participation in the positing of the law. It is tautologous to state that such participation achieves freedom only if it is equally possible for all, not in the letter of the law but in effective social actuality. The absurdity of opposing equality and liberty, the supposed opposition some people have been trying to drub into our ears for some decades now, follows immediately from this tautology. Unless their meanings are taken in a totally specious way, the two notions imply each other.[10] The equal effectively actual possibility of participation requires that everyone has effectively been granted all the conditions for such participation. Clearly, the implications of this requirement are immense; they embrace a considerable portion of the overall institution of society, but

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[8]This phrase appears as the closing of Kant's dedication for his *Critique of Pure Reason*, dated at Königsberg March 29, 1781, and is addressed to the Royal Minister of the State of Prussia, Freiherr (Baron) von Zedlitz.
[9]See my text, "Intellectuals and History" (1987), now in *CL3*.
[10]See my text, "The Nature and Value of Equality" (1982), now in *CL2*.

the Archimedean point here is obviously *paideia*, in the deepest and most permanent sense of the term, to which I shall return.

It is therefore not possible to achieve even a "procedural democracy" that is not a fraud unless one intervenes deeply in the substantive organization of social life.

III

The ancient Greek tongue and the political practice of the Athenians offer us a precious—and, in my opinion, universally valid—distinction among three spheres of human activities that the overall institution of society must both separate and articulate: the *oikos*, the *agora*, and the *ekklēsia*. A free translation would be: the private sphere, the private/public sphere, and the (formally and in the strong sense) public sphere, identical to what I above called explicit power. I note in passing that this fundamental distinction is there, on a factual level and in language, but was not rendered explicit as such during the classical era, not even, save in a partial way, by the classical thinker of democracy, Aristotle.

These spheres are clearly distinguished (and properly articulated) only under a democratic regime. Under a totalitarian regime, for example, the public sphere in principle absorbs everything. At the same time, this public sphere is in reality not at all public, for it has become the private property of the totalitarian Apparatus that holds and exercises power. In principle, traditional absolute monarchies respected the independence of the private sphere—the *oikos*—and intervened only moderately in the private/public sphere—the *agora*. Paradoxically, today's pseudodemocracies in the West have in fact rendered the public sphere in large part private: the decisions that really count are those made in secret or

behind the scenes (of the Government, the Parliament, and the party Apparatuses). A definition of democracy as good as any other is: It is the regime in which the public sphere becomes truly and effectively public—belongs to everyone, is effectively open to the participation of all.

The *oikos*—the family household, the private sphere—is the domain in which, formally and in principle, the political power neither can nor should intervene. As with all subjects in this domain, even this cannot and should not be taken absolutely: penal law prohibits assaults on the life or bodily integrity of the members of one's family; even under the most conservative governments, the education of children is made mandatory; and so forth.

The *agora*—the marketplace and meeting point—is the domain in which individuals come together freely, discuss matters, contract with one another, publish and buy books, and so on. Here again, formally and in principle, the political power neither can nor should intervene—and here again, as in all cases, this cannot be taken as absolute. The law prescribes respect for private contracts, prohibits child labor, and so on. In fact, one could never stop enumerating the points on which and the arrangements by which the political power, even in the most "liberal" States (in the sense of capitalist Liberalism), intervenes in this domain (for example, the formulation of governmental budgets, which will be mentioned again below).

The *ekklēsia*, a term I use here metaphorically,[11] is the site of the political power, the public/public domain. The political power includes powers, and these powers must be both separate and articulated. I have explained my position on

[11]I use this term symbolically (and not as an abuse of language). The Athenian Assembly did not exercise judicial power and only supervised the "executive" (in the sense I give here to this term, i.e., administration).

this elsewhere[12] and I shall limit myself here to a few points that are of importance for the present discussion.

When the activity of the different branches of power is considered in the concrete, one can clearly see that in no domain can decisions be conceived and adopted without taking into account considerations of a substantive character. This holds both for legislation and for government, for the "execution" of decisions as well as for the judiciary.

Indeed, it is impossible to imagine a law—except, precisely, a procedural one, and even then…—that does not touch on substantive questions. Even the prohibition of murder does not go without saying—as is shown by the many restrictions, exceptions, and qualifications that everywhere and always surround it. The same goes for that which relates to the "application" of these laws, whether it is a matter of the judiciary or of the "executive."[13] The judge cannot (and, in any case, should not) ever be a *Paragraphenautomat*, not only because there are always "holes in the law" (*Rechtslücken*) but especially because there always is a question of interpretation of the law and, at a deeper level, a question of equity.[14] Interpretation, like equity, is inconceivable without recourse to and invocation of the "mind of legislator," or his

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[12]See my text, "Done and to Be Done" (1989), now in *CL5*; see, in particular, the sections titled "Autonomy: Politics" and "Today."

[13]What is named the "executive" in modern philosophical and constitutional language is in fact divided in two: governmental power (or *function*) and administrative power (or *function*). The "Government," *qua* government, does not "execute" laws; in the main, it *acts* (governs) *within the framework* of the laws. To the extent that it cannot fully be "mechanized," administration, too, cannot escape questions of interpretation, such as those mentioned later in the text.

[14]See my analysis of Aristotle's ideas on this subject in "Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Us" (1975), now in *CL1*.

"intentions"[15] and the substantive values at which these intentions are supposed to aim. It is the same for that which relates to administration, to the extent that the latter cannot simply "apply" laws and decrees without interpreting them. And it is, *par excellence*, the same for the Government. The governmental function is "arbitrary." It takes place within the framework of the law, and it is bound by the law (obviously, I am speaking here of what is supposed to be the case in Western "democratic" regimes), but in general it neither applies nor executes laws. The law (in general, a country's Constitution) says that the Government must submit a budget proposal to the parliamentary branch every year and that the latter (which, in this case, shares a governmental and not a "legislative" function) must vote on it, as is or with amendments; but the law does not say, and could never say, what should be in this budget. Quite obviously, it is impossible to imagine a budget that would not be totally drenched, as much on the revenue side as on the expenditure side, in substantive decisions, that would not be inspired by objectives and "values" it aims at achieving. More generally, we can say that all nontrivial governmental decisions concern and commit the future in a sort of radical, and radically inevitable, obscurity. To the extent that society depends upon them, these decisions tend to orient a society's evolution in one direction in preference to another. How could they be made without having recourse, be it only tacitly, to substantive options?

It might be objected: But all these explicit decisions (and notably legislative and governmental ones) could very well merely aim at preserving the present state of things—or

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[15]It is obviously not a matter of "historically documented" intentions but of the necessary—and problematic—insertion of every particular clause into the overall legal system, which in principle is continually evolving.

at preserving society's (non-"political") freedom to give rise to and to deploy whatever "substantive lifestyles" it might wish to adopt. However, this argument itself contains, be it only implicitly, a positive evaluation of the already existing forms and contents of social life—be they the legacy of times immemorial or the product of society's present activity. To take the example most familiar to today's reader, extreme "Liberalism"[16] boils down to a substantive affirmation that whatever the "mechanisms of the market," "free individual initiative," and so on produce is "good" or "the least-bad thing possible," or else to the affirmation that no value judgment can be made on this matter. (The two affirmations, which are obviously contradictory, are simultaneously or successively maintained by such people as Friedrich von Hayek.) To say that no value judgment can be made about what society "spontaneously" produces leads to total historical nihilism and boils down, for example, to affirming that any regime (Stalinist, Nazi, or other) is as worthwhile as any other. Saying that what tradition or (this boils down to the same thing) society produces "spontaneously" is good or the least-bad thing possible obviously obliges one to show, each time and with each specific example, in what respect and why this is so and therefore obliges one to enter into a substantive discussion.

As no one in his right mind would challenge these assertions, the duplicity of the procedural position becomes quite clear: it is not a matter of denying that decisions affecting questions of substance must in any case be made, whatever the type of regime under consideration, but of affirming that, in a "democratic" regime, the "form" or the

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[16]T/E: As Castoriadis parenthetically explained above, "Liberalism" is meant here in the Continental sense of a conservative "free-market" or "laissez-faire" ideology.

"procedure" according to which these decisions are made alone really matters—or else that this "form" or "procedure" by itself identifies a regime as "democratic."

Let us grant that it is so. Still, every "procedure" must be applied—by human beings. And these humans have to be such that they could, should, and, as a strict rule, would apply this procedure according to its "spirit." What are these beings, and where do they come from? Only a metaphysical illusion—that of an individual-substance, preformed in its essential determinations, whose belonging to any definite social-historical environment would be as accidental as the color of its eyes—would enable one to duck this question. We are in the realm of effectively actual politics, not in Habermasian "counterfactual" fictions; therefore, one must postulate effectively actual existence, the existence of human atoms—ones already endowed not only with "rights," etc., but with a perfect knowledge of legal arrangements (barring that, we would have to legitimate a division of labor, established once and for all, between "mere citizens" and judges, administrators, legislators, etc.)—that would tend on their own, ineluctably, and independently of all education or training, their singular histories, and so forth, to behave as juridico-political atoms. This fiction of *homo juridicus* is as ridiculous and inconsistent as that of *homo œconomicus*, and the anthropological metaphysics presupposed by both is the same.

For the "procedural" view, humans (or a sufficient proportion of them) would each have to be a pure legal Understanding. Effectively actual individuals, however, are something else entirely. And one is indeed obliged to take them such as they are, always already fashioned by society, with their histories, their passions, their particular allegiances, commitments, and memberships of all sorts, and such as the social-historical process and the given institution of society

have already fabricated them. In order for these effectively actual individuals to be other than they are now, it would be necessary for this institution, too, to be other in substantial and substantive respects. Let us even suppose that a democracy, as complete, perfect, etc. as one might wish, might fall upon us from the heavens: this sort of democracy will not be able to endure for more than a few years if it does not engender individuals that correspond to it, ones that, first and foremost, are capable of making it function and reproducing it. There can be no democratic society without democratic *paideia*.

Short of lapsing into incoherency, the procedural conception of democracy is obliged to introduce surreptitiously—or culminate in—at least two *de facto* and simultaneous judgments of substance:

•   that the effectively actual, given institutions of society are, such as they are, compatible with the functioning of "truly" democratic procedures;
•   that the individuals of this society, such as they are fabricated by this society, can make the established procedures function in accordance with the "spirit" of those procedures and can defend them.

These judgments include multiple presuppositions and entail numerous consequences. I shall mention but two.

The first is that one encounters anew here the fundamental question of equity, not in the substantive sense but, first of all, in its strictly logical sense, as already laid down by Plato and Aristotle.[17] There is always a mismatch or lack of exact correspondence [*inadéquation*] between the matter to be judged and the very form of the law—the former

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[17]See again my text "Value, Equality, Justice, Politics," in *CL1*.

being necessarily concrete and singular, the latter abstract and universal. This inadequacy [*inadéquation*] can be overcome only by the creative work of the judge who "puts herself in the place of the legislator"—which implies that she has recourse to considerations of a substantive nature. This necessarily goes beyond all proceduralism.

The second is that, for individuals to be capable of making democratic procedures function in accordance with their "spirit," a large part of the labor of society and of its institutions must be directed toward engendering individuals that correspond to this definition—that is, women and men who are democratic even in the strictly procedural sense of the term. But then one has to face up to a dilemma: Either this education of individuals is dogmatic, authoritarian, heteronomous—and the alleged democracy then becomes the political equivalent of a religious ritual—or the individuals who are to "apply the procedures" (e.g., voting, legislating, execution of laws, governance) have been educated in a critical manner. In the latter case, the institution of society must endow critical thinking as such with positive value—and then the Pandora's box of calling existing institutions into question is opened up and democracy again becomes society's movement of self-institution—that is to say, a new type of regime in the full sense of the term.

The journalists, as well as some political philosophers who seem completely unaware of the long disputes over the "philosophy of right" during the last two centuries, constantly talk to us about the "State of right." If, however, the "State of right" (*Rechtsstaat*) is something other than a "State of law" (*Gesetzesstaat*),[18] it is so only insofar as the former goes

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[18]For many long centuries before the French Revolution, the monarchy, whether absolute or "enlightened," had achieved a "State of law" in most countries of Western Europe. "There are judges in Potsdam," replied the

beyond mere conformity with "procedures"—that is, only insofar as the question of justice is posed and affects even the legal rules that have already been laid down [*posées*]. But the question of justice becomes the question of politics as soon as the institution of society has ceased to be sacred or based upon tradition. Appeals to the "rule of law" thenceforth can serve only to dodge the questions: Which law? Why this law and not another? Even the "formally democratic" response—the law is law because it is the decision of the greatest number (I leave aside here the question of whether it is really so)—cannot close off the question: And why, then, does it have to be so? If the justification for the rule of the majority is strictly procedural in character—for example, the fact that all discussions must at some point come to an end—then any old rule would enjoy the same amount of justification: we could decide by lot, for example. Majority rule can be justified only if one grants equal value, in the domain of the contingent and the probable, to the *doxai* of free individuals.[19] But if this equality of value among opinions is not to remain a "counterfactual principle," some sort of pseudotranscendental gadget, then the permanent labor of the institution of society must be to render individuals such that one might reasonably postulate that their opinions have the same weight in the political domain. Once again, the question of *paideia* proves ineliminable.

The idea that one might separate "positive right" and its procedures from substantive values is but a mirage. The idea that a democratic regime could receive history "ready made" from democratic individuals who would make it function is just as much so. Such individuals can be formed

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Prussian miller to Frederick the Great.

[19]This is pretty much how Aristotle justified it in *The Constitution of the Athenians* 41.

only in and through a democratic *paideia*, which does not grow up like a plant but instead has to be one of the main objects of a society's political concerns.

Democratic procedures comprise one—certainly important, but only one—part of a democratic regime. And these procedures must be truly democratic in their spirit. In the first regime that, despite everything, might be called democratic—that is, the Athenian regime—these procedures were instituted not as a mere "means" but as a moment in the embodiment and facilitation of the processes that brought that regime into being. Rotation in office, sortition, decision-making after deliberation by the entire body politic, elections, and popular courts did not rest solely on a postulate that everyone has an equal capacity to assume public responsibilities: these procedures were themselves pieces of an educational political process, of an active *paideia*, which aimed at exercising—and, therefore, at developing in all—the corresponding abilities and, thereby, at rendering the postulate of political equality as close to the effective reality of that society as possible.

IV

The roots of these confusions certainly are not solely "ideal" in origin—in the sense that they should be sought essentially or exclusively in "false ideas"—any more than they are merely "material"—in the sense that they would express, consciously or not, interests, drives, social positions, and so on. Their roots plunge deep into the social-historical imaginary of the modern "political" period, already into its prehistory but especially into its basically antinomical character. It is not possible to undertake here an elucidation of these roots. I shall limit myself to picking out a few salient

points among the constellation of ideas in and through which this imaginary has expressed itself in the political sphere.

I shall begin *in media res*. Marxism (and this goes back, whatever one might say, to Marx himself) judged "bourgeois" rights and liberties in light of the following standard of criticism: that they were merely "formal" and were established more or less in the interest of capitalism. This critical standard was faulty in multiple ways.

First of all, these rights and liberties did not arise with capitalism, nor were they granted by the latter. Demanded at the outset by the protobourgeoisie of what became the free towns [*communes*], they began to be wrested, conquered, imposed as early as the tenth century through the people's centuries-old struggles (in which an important role was played not only by underprivileged strata but also very often by the petite bourgeoisie). Where they were merely imported, for example, they have almost always been lackluster as well as fragile (as in the countries of Latin America or Japan). Next, it is not these rights and liberties that correspond to the "spirit" of capitalism: the latter demands, rather, the Taylorist "one best way" or the "iron cage" of Max Weber. The idea that they might be the political counterpart of and presupposition for competition in the economic market is equally false; the latter is only one moment, neither spontaneous (see Karl Polanyi) nor permanent, of capitalism. When we consider the inner tendency of capitalism, we see that capitalism culminates in monopoly, oligopoly, or alliances among capitalists. Nor are they a presupposition for capitalism's development (see again Japan or the Asian "dragons").

Finally, and especially, they are in no way "formal" in character: they correspond to vitally necessary traits of every democratic regime. But they are partial and, as indicated at

the beginning of this text, essentially defensive in character. Even Isaiah Berlin's qualification that they are "negative" is inadequate. The right to assemble, to seek redress of grievances [*manifester*], to publish a newspaper or a book is not "negative": the exercise of such rights comprises one component of social and political life and can have, and even necessarily does have, important effects on the latter. It is something else if their exercise might be hindered by effectively actual conditions or, as today in the rich countries, rendered more or less futile by the general process of political desertification. As a matter of fact, a major part of the struggle for democracy is aimed at instaurating real conditions that would permit everyone effectively to exercise these rights. Reciprocally, this fallacious Marxist denunciation of the so-called formal character of "bourgeois" rights and liberties has had catastrophic effects, serving as a springboard for the instauration of Leninist totalitarianism and as a cover for its continuation under Stalinism.

These liberties and these rights are therefore not "formal" in character: they are partial and, in effective social reality, essentially defensive. For the same reason, they are not "negative." Isaiah Berlin's expression belongs within the context and social-historical legacy to which I alluded at the outset. It corresponds to the underlying, near-permanent attitude toward power of European[20] societies and populations (and certainly not just them, but these are the ones we are talking about here). When the millennial imaginary of kingship by divine right was finally, at least partially, shattered (this imaginary was ratified and reinforced by Christianity, with Paul's "There is no power but of God"),[21]

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[20]T/E: As Castoriadis has stated elsewhere, "European" is meant in a broad, not geographical or ethnic, sense.
[21]T/E: Romans 13:1.

the representation of power as something other than society, opposite it and opposed to it, nevertheless continued. Power is "them" ("us-and-them," as the English continue to say); it is in principle hostile; and it is a matter of keeping it within strict limits and of defending oneself against it. It was only during revolutionary periods, in the former Thirteen Colonies [*Nouvelle-Angleterre*] or in France, that phrases such as "We the people" or the term *Nation* acquired some political meaning, that sovereignty was declared to belong to the nation—in a phrase that was, moreover, rapidly emptied of its content by means of "representation." In this context, it is understandable that rights and liberties have come to be considered as a means of defense against an all-powerful and essentially alien State.

Isaiah Berlin contrasted these "negative" liberties, the sole ones acceptable to him, with an idea of "positive" liberty that is closely related to the ancient (Greek) democratic conception that all citizens are to participate in power. According to him, the latter kind of liberty is potentially totalitarian, since it would presuppose the imposition of a positive and collectively (politically) determinate conception of the common good, or of what it is to live well. The flaws in this argument are multiple. The effective (rather than "positive") liberty of all via everyone's participation in power implies no more of a conception of the common good than any legislative, governmental, or even judicial decision made by "representatives," cabinet ministers, or professional judges. As was stated earlier, there can never be a system of right, for example, that would be completely (or even essentially) *wertfrei*, neutral as to its values. The recognition of a free sphere of "private activity"—whatever its boundaries might be—itself proceeds from the affirmation of a substantive value claiming universal validity: It is good for

everyone that individuals move freely within spheres of private activity that are recognized and guaranteed by law. The delimitation of these spheres and the content of eventual sanctions against others who would transgress them must necessarily have recourse to something other than a formal conception of law, as could easily be shown with any system of positive right. (To take only one example, it is impossible to define a yardstick of seriousness for misdemeanors and criminal penalties without making "comparisons" among the values of life, liberty—e.g., prison—money, and so on.)

Implicit in Berlin's argument is another confusion: that between the common good and happiness. The end of politics is not happiness, which can only be a private matter;[22] it is freedom, or individual and collective autonomy. Nevertheless, it cannot *solely* be autonomy, for then one would lapse into Kantian formalism and be open to all the justified criticisms leveled against Kantian formalism since it was first formulated. As I have already written elsewhere,[23] we want freedom both for itself and in order to make something of it, in order to be able to do things. Now, as for a vast portion of these things, either we cannot do them all alone or they depend to a high degree upon the overall institution of society—and, generally, both simultaneously. This necessarily implies a conception—be it only minimal—of the common good.

Certainly, as I recalled at the outset, Berlin did not create this confusion himself; he simply shared it. It comes from the distant past, and it is thus all the more necessary to

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[22]See the section titled "Subjective Roots of the Revolutionary Project" in the first part (1964-1965) of my book *IIS* (1975; English-language edition 1987), especially 91-92.

[23]See my text, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy" (1983), now in *CL2*, in particular 235-47.

dissipate it. The distinction to be reestablished is ancient in vintage (and for this reason it is all the more inexcusable that modern theorists have forgotten it). It is the distinction between happiness, a strictly private affair, and the common good (or the good life), which is unthinkable without recourse to the public domain and even the public/public domain (power). It is, in different terms—ones that, however, will enrich the discussion—the distinction between *eudaimonia*, felicity, which is not *eph' hēmin*, not dependent upon us, and *eu zēn*, living well, which in great part depends upon us, individually and collectively (for, it depends upon our acts as well as upon that which and those who surround us—and, at a more abstract and more profound level, upon the institutions of society). The two distinctions can be contracted into one by stating that the realization of the common good is the condition for living well.

And yet, who determines or defines what it is to live well? Perhaps one of the principal reasons for the confusion surrounding this question is that philosophy has claimed that it can provide this determination or definition. It has done so because the role of thinkers of politics has most often been played by philosophers, and they, by profession, would like to determine once and for all both "happiness" and a "common good," and also, if possible, to make them coincide. Within the framework of inherited thought, this determination could not help but, in effect, be universal, valid for everyone in all times and places, and, in the same stroke, established somehow or other *a priori*. This is the root of the "error" committed by most philosophers who have written on politics, and of the symmetrical error committed by others who, in order to avoid the absurd consequences of this solution (as when Plato, for example, legislates which musical modes are permissible or prohibited for every "good"

society), have come to reject the question itself, abandoning it to the free will of each.

No philosophy can define for everyone what happiness is and, above all, try to impose it through political decisions. Happiness belongs to the private sphere and to the private/public sphere. It does not belong to the public/public sphere as such. Democracy, as regime of freedom, certainly excludes any sort of "happiness" that could be rendered, in itself or in its "means," politically obligatory. Yet, even more than this can be said: No philosophy can define at any moment a substantive "common good"—and no politics can wait for philosophy to define such a common good before acting.[24]

Nonetheless, the questions confronting the public/public sphere (confronting legislation and government) cannot even be discussed without a view about the common good. The common good both is a condition for individual happiness and, beyond that, pertains to the works [*les œuvres*] and the undertakings society wants to see achieved, happiness aside.

This does not concern the democratic regime alone. Ontological analysis shows that no society can exist without a more or less certain definition of shared substantive values, common social goods (the "public goods" of the economists constitute only a portion thereof). These values make up an essential part of the social imaginary significations as they are

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[24]It would be difficult, certainly, for a philosopher to maintain that a society in which philosophy would be impossible is, in his view, as worthy as another one in which it is practiced. But, barring an additional (and long) elucidation of the content of the term *philosophy*, this does not define for us a class of societies. There was (at least a certain kind of) philosophy in India and in China—not to mention Islamic countries and medieval Europe. It does not follow from this that a caste society or one ruled by mandarins is as politically valid as a democratic society.

each time instituted. They define the push of each society; they provide norms and criteria that are not formally instituted (for example, the Greeks distinguished in this way between *dikaion,* just, and *kalon*, beautiful); finally, they underlie the explicit institutional labor of a society. A political regime cannot be totally agnostic when it comes to values (or morals, or ethics). For example, right [*le droit*] cannot help but express a common (or dominant and, somehow or other, socially accepted) conception about the "moral minimum" implied by life in society.

But these values and this morality are an anonymous-collective and "spontaneous" creation. They can be modified under the influence of reflective and deliberate action—but the latter must reach other strata of social-historical being than those concerned with explicit political action. In any event, the question of the common good belongs to the domain of social-historical making/doing, not to theory. The substantial conception of the common good is created, each time, social-historically—and it is this conception, obviously, that stands behind all law [*tout droit*] and all procedure. This does not lead us into mere "relativism" if we live in a democratic regime, where questioning effectively remains open on a permanent basis—which presupposes the social creation of individuals who are effectively capable of questioning themselves. We rediscover here at least one component of the democratic common good, which is both substantive and nonrelative: The city must do everything possible to aid citizens in becoming effectively autonomous. This is, first of all, a condition for its existence *qua* democratic city: a city is made up of citizens, and a citizen is someone who is "capable of governing and being governed," as Aristotle said.[25] But this is also, as has already been said,

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[25]T/E: Aristotle *Politics* 1252a16.

a positive condition for each person to live well, this living well depending upon the "quality" of the others. And the achievement of this objective—aiding individuals to become autonomous, or *paideia* in the strongest and most profound meaning of the term—is impossible without substantive political decisions (which, moreover, must be made in every type of regime and in any event).

Democracy as a regime is therefore the regime that tries to achieve, as far as it possibly can, both individual and collective autonomy and the common good such as it is conceived by the collectivity concerned in each particular case.

V

The singular human being as resorbed in "its" collectivity—where, obviously, it finds itself only by chance (the chance of its birth in such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time)—and this same being as detached from every collectivity, contemplating society at a distance and trying in an illusory way to deal with society both as an artifact and as a necessary evil: these are but two outcomes of the same process of misrecognition, which unfolds on two levels:

- as misrecognition of what both the singular human being and society are. This is what is shown by an analysis of the human being's humanization *qua* its socialization and of the "embodiment"-materialization of the social in the individual;
- as misrecognition of what politics is *qua* ontological creation in general—the creation of a type of being that, be it only in part, explicitly gives itself the laws of its own existence—and, at the same time, *qua* project of individual and collective autonomy.

Democratic politics is, on the factual level, the kind of activity that endeavors to reduce, as much as it possibly can, the contingent character of our social-historical existence as far as its substantive determinations are concerned. Obviously, neither democratic politics on the factual level nor philosophy on the ideal level can eliminate what, from the standpoint of the singular human being and even of humanity in general, appears as the radical accident (this is what Heidegger was aiming at in part, though he bizarrely confined it to the singular human being, with the term *Geworfenheit*, dereliction or thrownness) that makes there be being, that makes this being manifest itself as a world, that makes there be life in this world, a human species in this life, such-and-such a social-historical formation in this species, and that within this formation, at such-and-such a moment and at such and such a place, emerging from one womb among millions of others, makes this tiny bit of screaming flesh, and not another one, appear. But both of these, democratic politics as well as philosophy, *praxis* as well as thought, can aid us in limiting—or, better, in transforming—through free action the enormous portion of contingency that determines our life. It would be illusory to say that they aid us in "freely assuming" circumstances that we never have, and never could have, chosen. The very fact that a philosopher might think and write that freedom is the consciousness of necessity (independent of all substantive considerations as to the meaning of this statement) is conditioned by innumerable myriads of other contingent facts. The mere consciousness of the infinite mixture of contingency and necessity—of necessary contingency and of ultimately contingent necessity—that conditions what we are, what we do, and what we think is far from being what freedom truly is. But it is a condition for this freedom, a requisite condition for lucidly undertaking actions

that are capable of leading us to effectively actual autonomy on the individual as well as on the collective level.

Appendix: Potential Errata

N.B.: Despite having in their possession, for a period of four months, a list of potential *errata* for the first volume in the *Carrefours du labyrinthe* series, the Castoriadis Estate, which has a moral obligation to cooperate, and the Association Cornelius Castoriadis, which has a legal obligation, according to its statutes, to cooperate, have not responded to the request to correct and/or to amend this first list and have shown no indication that they will cooperate in examining and confirming or revising *errata* lists for the other five volumes in the series. This, despite the fact that it is standard professional operating procedure, in the case of a translation, to work from such corrected versions of the originals, a process in which the owners of the originals have a clear responsibility. Without the establishment of definitive versions of the French originals, we are unfortunately unable to ensure that the present translations are indeed the best renditions possible.

In order to be fully transparent to the reader, the potential *errata* listed below reference the page numbers of the January 2007 reprint of *La Montée de l'insignifiance*, the (uncorrected) French source for the present *CL4* translation.

24   Il manque, avant : les conditions de fabrication des individus sociaux ... ces mots qui se trouve dans version *Politique internationale*, p. 143:
les conditions d'une socialisation adéquate des êtres humains,

54   Restaurer, après : la notion du totalitarisme, la phrase, omise par *Le Monde*, qui se trouve dans la page 14 du tapuscrit originale: (je ne parle pas du *Reader's Digest* ou de Mme Kirkpatrick)

56n6   avril = mars

88   en même temps = *en même temps* {voir la version en *Esprit*, p. 52}

92   Il manque, avant "Quant à moi", une question d'*Esprit* (voir les épreuves corrigées par CC), ainsi qu'un premier paragraphe de la dernière échange *Esprit*/CC. Dans la traduction de *Thesis Eleven* :
Esprit: Added up, your position seems rather pessimistic.

C.C.: Why would that be pessimism rather than an attempt to see things as they really are? One certainly could be mistaken, which is another matter. But there is also another way of being mistaken, one practiced to the full by everyone and that I have always avoided like the devil: it is to postulate the existence of a "good solution." This is the way the Marxists reasoned morning, noon, and night: Since the revolution must be inevitable, such and such an analysis of the present situation is "true" while another is "false."

98   Après : "... pas de passage direct de la philosophie à la politique" une phrase a disparu :
"Par exemple, dans le marxisme ou le prétendu marxisme, il y a une fausse déduction d'une mauvaise politique à partir d'une philosophie absurde."

117   se « personnalisent » = se « personnalisent » (!) {Voir la version dans *La République des Lettres*}

131   La création de ... de ... ou de ... sont des *positions* = La création de ... de ... ou de ... est une *position*

148   Quand aux = Quant aux

177   *man fülht sich heimlich im Unheimlichen = man…fülht sich heimisch im Unheimlichen*

185   167. = 162.

186   E. Mones, = E. Jones,

186   Mother Right = Mother-Right

186   (1951), = (1950),

206   avec le mouvement ouvrier comme {cette phrase, juste devant "avec le mouvement des femmes", qui se trouve dans la version imprimée dans *Les Grecs, les Romains et nous. L'Antiquité est-elle moderne?* ne se trouve plus dans *MI*. C'est exprès ou par erreur ?}

229   *eidola = eidôla*

234   Il faut ajouter, après : Madrid (1994) :
et New York University (1995).
comme dans la version du *Castoriadis Reader*, 338.

247   monte ou : *re*monte ? {Aussi, où se trouve-t-elle cette citation de Hugo ?}

248   On a éliminé "Paris, octobre 1991-avril 1994" qui se trouvait à la fin de "Mal de culture"

251   McIntyre = MacIntyre

256   la dimension tragique…qui nous placent = la dimension tragique…qui nous place

258   l'éthique de la *Critique de la raison pratique* ignore = l'éthique et la *Critique de la raison pratique* ignorent {voir la version dans *Lettre internationale*, p. 5}

261   *bios théorétikos = bios theôrètikos*

267   Harvard University de New York, = Columbia University,

268   117-124 {?? l'article en entier, pourtant, est cité pour la réédition}

275   *Eu. Excellenz untertänig gehorsamster = Ew. Exzellenz untertänig-gehorsamster*

283   *Gesetzstaat = Gesetzesstaat*

287   *Wertfrei = wertfrei*

288   *eu zein = eu zèn* {Voir *DH*, 320}