

Postscript on Insignificance

Dialogues with
Cornelius Castoriadis

by
**Cornelius
Castoriadis**

Translated by
Gabriel Rockhill
and
John V. Garner



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¹ Chapters 3 to 5 had no specific titles in the original French publication. To help orient Anglophone readers, who might not be familiar with Castoriadis' interlocutors, we decided to add heuristic titles.—ED

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—Gabriel Rockhill and John V. Garner

Editor's Introduction

Eros of Inquiry: An Aperçu of Castoriadis' Life and Work

By Gabriel Rockhill

In relation to animals, humans are sick beings, because they can't live without making sense of what is and what they do. Everything must have meaning; everything must make sense. As a consequence, it is a shock to discover that nothing makes sense of itself.

—Cornelius Castoriadis

Cornelius Castoriadis audaciously defined philosophy as the act of “taking responsibility for the totality of the thinkable [*prise en charge de la totalité du pensable*].”¹ His life and work attest to the intensity with which he dedicated himself to this project. If he sometimes lamented the lack of major philosophic voices in an era when academic interpretations of the past had come to dominate “professional thinking,” he almost single-handedly made up for it himself.² A quintessential iconoclast who admitted suffering from an *éros du savoir*, he broke through the ideological torpor of French academic and political circles, and he established one of the most original and comprehensive bodies of work in twentieth-century European philosophy.

Born in 1922 to a Greek family that had immigrated to Constantinople, Castoriadis grew up in pre-war Athens and moved to Paris in 1945 to study philosophy. He co-founded, with Claude Lefort, the

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revolutionary group and journal *Socialisme ou barbarie* (published from 1949–1965). The journal distanced itself from Trotskyism and broke in more or less fundamental ways with Marxism. It provided a radical critique of bureaucracy, arguing in favor of a revolutionary socialism founded on workers' self-management, and many have argued that it had a significant impact on the events of 1968.³ Castoriadis, due to political concerns, wrote under pseudonyms until the 1970s, when he was naturalized as a French citizen. From 1948 until 1970, he had worked as an economist at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.⁴ In 1973, he began working as a trained psychoanalyst, and he was named *Directeur d'études* at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in 1981. He passed away in Paris in 1997.

The quintessential dissident, Castoriadis cut across the rigid structures of academic life and stalwartly refused the simple dividing lines between theoretical endeavors and practical engagements. His work impressively spans across the fields of philosophy, political theory, sociology, history, economics, psychoanalysis, and the philosophy of science. However, he did not aim to establish a system or unify the sciences under a single logic. On the contrary, he was keenly aware of the precarious and limited nature of the attempt to 'elucidate the world':

Theory as such is a doing, the always uncertain attempt to carry out the project of elucidating the world. And this is also the case for the supreme or extreme form of theory that is philosophy, i.e. the attempt to think the world without knowing, in advance or afterwards, whether the world is really thinkable, or even what thinking actually means.⁵

Philosophy, as the extreme form of theory, is neither a founding gesture nor a conceptual system of all systems. It is a form of total and absolute interrogation with no *a priori* limits, which simultaneously recognizes that there are things that we do not know and will never know. Moreover, philosophy, like all theoretical undertakings, is never the work of an isolated individual (Castoriadis was very critical of what he refers to as the egological tradition of modern philosophy). It is a specific type of social-historical activity that happened to be invented by the Greeks and, as we will see, is linked to the promotion of a new imaginary social signification: autonomy.

The autonomy exercised by Castoriadis himself in the elaboration of a unique theoretical enterprise has produced a singular project that cannot be comfortably situated within the standard models used to schematize twentieth-century French philosophy. Although there are striking similarities between some of his claims and the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, there are also significant divergences, particularly in their respective relationships to the Marxist tradition. Although Sartre is rumored to have claimed, "Castoriadis was right, but at the wrong time," Castoriadis' quip succinctly sums up their political disagreements: "Sartre had the honor of being wrong at the right time!"⁶ Regarding structuralism, which many perceive as the next major theoretical movement after the phenomenological existentialism promoted by Sartre and others, Castoriadis could not have been clearer in his condemnation. In attacking what he calls inherited ontologies, he highlights two essential types. The first is labeled "physicalist," and it consists in reducing society and history to nature, and particularly to the biological nature of man. Functionalism, he argues, is the best representative of this point of view since it posits a set of fixed human needs and explains social organization as the series of functions aiming to satisfy these needs. The second type of inherited ontology is called "logicist," and the poorest form of logicism is structuralism. It is based on the assumption that

The same logical operation, repeated a certain number of times, would [. . .] account for the totality of human history and the different forms of society, which would only be the different possible combinations of a finite number of the same discreet elements.⁷

Castoriadis not only lambasts structuralism's pseudo-scientific naivety⁸, but he also impugns the political orientation of the thinkers affiliated to a greater or lesser degree with the diverse avatars of structuralism (including what is called, in the Anglophone world, "post-structuralism"). In particular, he attacks the thesis formulated by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut concerning *la pensée '68* on the grounds that the major thinkers affiliated with it came into vogue after the failure of May 1968, and they "played no role even in the vaguest 'sociological' preparation of the movement, at once because their ideas were totally unknown to the participants and because these ideas were diametrically opposed to the participants' implicit and

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explicit aspirations.”⁹ He also eschews and derides the valorization of difference, which clearly demarcates him from a number of his French contemporaries:

It is quite obvious that, in defiance of the hardly enticing rose water being amply sprinkled about everywhere today, I do not respect others’ difference simply as difference and without regard to what they are and what they do. I do not respect the difference of the sadist, of Eichmann, or Beria—any more than of those who cut off people’s heads, or even their hands, even if they are not threatening me directly. Nothing in what I have said or written commits me to “respect differences” *for the sake of* respecting differences.¹⁰

Finally, he identifies deconstruction as one of the symptoms of the current social crisis because it limits critique to the pedantic dissection of historical texts.¹¹ He similarly assails the reduction of history to the endless proliferation of metaphysics as well as the theological turn of many of the post-Heideggerians.¹² Against the recognized movements and intellectual fashions of his day, Castoriadis unflinchingly asserted that he wanted to be part of

a tradition of radical critique, which also entails [a tradition] of responsibility (we cannot put the blame on God Almighty, etc.) and self-limitation (we cannot invoke any extra-historical norm to regulate our modes of action [*normer notre agir*], which nevertheless must be regulated).¹³

This short book of interviews is a testament to the originality as well as the breadth and depth of his thinking. Initially published in 1998 as *Post-scriptum sur l’insignifiance*, and then later combined with *Dialogue* (1999), the title of the original book echoes the title of the fourth volume of *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, published in 1996: *La montée de l’insignifiance* or *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*. The idea of a *Postscript on Insignificance* clearly indexes one of the central themes in Castoriadis’ thinking: the lack of absolute closure, the absence of a final resting point. Through the course of this book, the issue of insignificance or the general paucity of meaningful creations in contemporary society regularly punctuates a series of intense exchanges. A trenchant political intervention where Castoriadis lambasts false progressivism in the name of a truly revolutionary project is followed

by four engaging discussions with a poet (Octavio Paz), a psychoanalyst (Jean-Luc Donnet), a biologist (Francisco Varela), a mathematician (Alain Connes), and a philosopher (Robert Legros).¹⁴ These dialogues with representatives of so many different fields produce far-reaching discussions that serve to introduce the broad and deep concerns of a mode of critical thinking whose passion for knowledge could not be reigned in by preestablished categories. In order to introduce these discussions, I would like to provide a brief aperçu of Castoriadis' key philosophical and ontological claims before examining, with a critical eye, the primary facets of his work discussed in the dialogues: politics, art, psychoanalysis, and the philosophy of science.¹⁵

HISTORICAL ONTOLOGY

Let us begin with one of Castoriadis' most general claims: "being is creation."¹⁶ As he explains in *Figures of the Thinkable*, "creation means, above all, discontinuity, emergence of the radically new and stratification of what exists."¹⁷ Rather than the perpetual repetition of the same fundamental elements or structures, being attests to the appearance of the unprecedented. This is, in part, because being is temporal, or rather—in Castoriadis' dauntless formulation—"being is time (and not 'in the horizon' of time)."¹⁸ In short, "creation, being, time go together: being means to-be [*être signifie à-être*], time and creation require one another."¹⁹

"The imaginary and the imagination," Castoriadis writes, "are the mode of being that this *vis formandi* of Being in general takes in this offspring of overall Being-being [*l'être-étant global*] that is humanity."²⁰ The imaginary and the imagination are not simply reproductive or combinatory faculties. The imaginary is an "incessant and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images," and the imagination is "the capacity to give rise [*faire surgir*] to something that is not the 'real.'"²¹ Castoriadis tends to use the vocabulary of the imagination to refer to the creative capacity of the psyche, which he describes more specifically as a "radical imagination" because it is neither determined nor reproductive but is

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actually capable of producing “reality.” The terminology of the imaginary is commonly invoked to refer to the social imaginary and the “creative capacity of the anonymous collective.”²² Castoriadis uses these two poles of the *vis formandi* to dismantle the simplistic opposition between individual and society, thereby demonstrating that individuals are, and must be, social: “There is no ‘human individual.’ There is a psyche that is socialized and, in this socialization, in the final result, there is almost nothing individual in the true sense of the term.”²³ Moreover, since society only exists qua self-alteration, Castoriadis introduces the notion of the social-historical—defined as the “self-creation [*autocréation*] of society as such and of the historical field as such”—to emphasize the extent to which society and history are consubstantial in the creative production of social institutions:

The social makes itself and can only make itself as history; the social makes itself as temporality; and it makes itself in every instance as a specific mode of actual temporality, it establishes itself [*s’institue*] implicitly as a singular quality of temporality. [. . .] The historical *is* this very thing—the self-alteration of this specific mode of “coexistence” that is the social, and is nothing apart from this. The historical makes itself and can only make itself as social; the historical is, in an exemplary and pre-eminent manner, the emergence of the institution and the emergence of *another* institution [*une autre institution*].²⁴

Castoriadis further divides the social imaginary into the instituting social imaginary and the instituted social imaginary. The former refers to the creation of social imaginary significations by the anonymous collective and, more generally, the social-historical field. Once these are created, they solidify into the instituted social imaginary, which guarantees the continuation of society and the perpetuation of its forms. Every society is self-instituted, for Castoriadis, but most societies attempt to guarantee their own proper institution by instituting an extra-social origin of the social order itself. There are two important ramifications of this position. On the one hand, it means that history is understood as creation and is therefore undetermined (which does *not* mean that it is unconditioned):

History is creation: the creation of total forms of human life. Social-historical forms are not "determined" by natural or historical "laws." Society is self-creation. "That which" creates society and history is the instituting society, as opposed to the instituted society. The instituting society is the social imaginary in the radical sense.²⁵

On the other hand, since there is ultimately no guarantee to social institutions outside of the powers that created them, then societies can be separated according to whether they are heteronomous or autonomous. The former are founded on the belief that their institutions were not created by them but were instead bestowed upon them by an external force (spirits, ancestors, Gods, nature, etc.). Autonomous societies, which are relatively rare, recognize and assume responsibility for the creation of their institutions; they consciously and explicitly establish their own laws.

THE VICISSITUDES OF POLITICAL AUTONOMY

Castoriadis regularly invokes two prime examples of autonomous societies: ancient Greece and Europe as of the "first Renaissance" around the eleventh or twelfth century.²⁶ Greece is the social-historical locus in which both democracy and philosophy appear for the first time, and it is therefore the origin of modern Europe according to Castoriadis. These dual projects share a common interrogative orientation, a comparable critical stance. Philosophy, as we have seen, is not a systematic conceptual enterprise but is, instead, the passionate investigation of all things with no preestablished limits. Similarly, democracy is not the rule of law or the rights of man; it is rather the collective act of putting the law in question. Both philosophy and democracy are projects of autonomy insofar as they seek to create laws for themselves rather than accepting entrenched rules; they aim at deliberately investing in and reflexively clarifying the instituting power of the imagination. Their simultaneous appearance in ancient Greece therefore constituted a rupture that "inaugurated the explicit questioning by society of its own instituted imaginary."²⁷ The West attests to a powerful reemergence of the Greek project of autonomy

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as of approximately the twelfth century, and the “modern” era, beginning in the eighteenth century, is characterized by the mutual contamination of two imaginary significations: autonomy and “rational mastery.”²⁸ Since approximately the middle of the twentieth century, Castoriadis claims that the heteronomous forces of insignificance have been seriously encroaching on the project of autonomy.²⁹ Before taking a closer look at his analysis of the contemporary era of conformism, we should briefly discuss his overall conception of politics.

Politics, in the strict sense of the term, is not reducible to the various battles over governmental power, the multifarious plots of manipulation and control, or the motley attempts to defend the interests of groups or individuals. It is “a collective activity whose object is the institution of society as such.”³⁰ It therefore belongs to the human domain of creative production. There is no final form of politics or ultimate structure that can be determined once and for all, meaning that there is no end to the activity of politics itself. Moreover, there is no *episteme* or scientific knowledge of politics for Castoriadis; it exists in the realm of *doxa* or opinion.³¹ And he has gone to great lengths to dismantle the various determinist forms of history, teleology, and theodicy found in the Marxist and liberal traditions.³² Thus, it is not only impossible to deduce a particular type of politics from a specific form of theoretical expertise, but it is equally impossible to sanction political structures based on the supposed fatality of history.

In the contemporary era, politics has been taken over by self-proclaimed specialists. What is inappropriately called democracy is actually a liberal oligarchy in which the ruling elite maintains “democracy” as a propitious prop. The close correlation between democracy and the education of the citizenry has been replaced by a rampant stultification of the masses, and true sociopolitical tensions and struggles have given way to the fragmentation of lobbies and interest groups, not to mention the false opposition between the “right” and the “left.” Compared to the direct democracy of ancient Athens, the representative pseudo-democracy of the contemporary world has turned *rule of the people*, in the sense of *rule by the people*, into *rule over the people*. The public/public sphere, which Castoriadis identifies as the “first condition for the existence of an autonomous society—of a democratic society,” has been de facto privatized.³³ Although citizens

are not legally barred from participating in what the Greeks called the *ecclesia*, the latter is almost exclusively dominated by private interests:

On the factual level the essential features of public affairs are still the private affair of various groups and clans that share effective power, decisions are made behind closed doors, the little that is brought onto the public stage is masked, prefabricated, and belated to the point of irrelevancy.³⁴

In short, the autonomous political project of democracy, as it was once understood, has been gutted of its true content, leaving only the abject carcass of pseudodemocratic oligarchy.

The demise of the project of autonomy at a political level is closely tied to an overall crisis in social imaginary significations, that is, the significations that determine the prevailing representations, affects, and intentions of a society. The capitalist imaginary of unlimited expansion of production and consumption has become the “dominant, and nearly exclusive, imaginary signification of contemporary society.”³⁵ The consumer, who is content to cast votes on the political marketplace every few years, has more or less entirely replaced the citizen, once defined by Aristotle as “one who shares in governing and being governed.”³⁶ The unlimited world of endless consumption tends to engulf all other social significations in a sinister abyss where money—or its avatars, such as media notoriety and power—is the only value. Far from having the “freedom” naively presupposed by the apologists of neoliberal ideology, the unchecked consumer is plunged into a world of unbridled conformism and actually ends up thinking and acting in strict accordance with what the institution calls for. Heteronomy thereby establishes its hegemony in the heart of the supposed freedom of unlimited consumerism. Moreover, the dominant imaginary signification of unlimited expansion becomes a vortex in which other significations disappear, leading to an overall atrophy of the imagination and a retreat of creativity in all fields (philosophy, art, science, etc.). Insignificance comes to saturate almost everything in a determined world of blind narcissism and hedonism orchestrated by the Eleatic fatalities of neoliberalism. And the project of autonomy—a distinctive feature of the West—is relegated to the margins. Nevertheless, far from being a cynical and acquiescent condemnation of the

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present, Castoriadis' truculent criticisms of his historical conjuncture reveal his defiant repudiation of the dominant imaginary signification in the name of revolutionary praxis and the struggle to demonstrate that history is not a fatality because a "break" is always possible.

POETIC WINDOWS ONTO THE ABYSS

The institution of society has always aimed at covering over what Castoriadis calls Chaos, the Groundless, the Abyss, by producing a powerful and compelling web of meaning.³⁷ The core social imaginary significations, those produced by religion, present the Abyss at the same time that they occlude it. Art, on the contrary, particularly when it is honed into a masterpiece, is nothing short of the "presentation of the Abyss (of Chaos, of the Groundless) [*présentation de l'Abîme (du Chaos, du Sans-Fond)*]." ³⁸ In creatively giving form to chaos, which Castoriadis carefully distinguishes from the act of "imitation," it is closely related to both philosophy and science:

Not only does one see the creative imagination at work in all of them, but art, as well as philosophy and science, attempts to give form to chaos—to the chaos underlying the *cosmos*, the world, the chaos that is behind the successive strata of appearances.³⁹

The difference between these three ways of giving form to chaos is that—unlike philosophy and science, which attempt to elucidate the world that is given to us—art actually "creates a world and new worlds, and it does so relatively freely."⁴⁰

By giving form to chaos, the artist reminds society that it is living on the abyss:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.⁴¹

These notable lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* instantiate, for Castoriadis, the essential gesture of all art by opening a window onto chaos, thereby reminding society that the only true salvation is deliverance from the very idea of salvation itself. It is for this reason that art can and does play a critical role and is closely linked to the project of autonomy. By opening onto and giving form to chaos, art "calls into question the established significations, even the meaning [*signification*] of human life and its most indisputable contents."⁴² Indeed, the modern European era, from 1800 to 1950, was marked by the work of a series of artists for whom there was "no pre-given meaning."⁴³ Castoriadis highlights, moreover, the historical specificity of the avant-garde as a rupture between creative artists and established society dating from the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁴ As of the 1950s, however, the critical role of art has sharply declined, replaced by a pseudo-avant-garde that artificially produces the new and the "subversive" for their own sake, all the while sinking into an insipid conformism that quiescently accompanies the mummification of culture and the reduction of past icons to funerary monuments.⁴⁵

Although Castoriadis recognizes the sociohistorical specificity of cultural production as well as of certain "figures" of the art world ("pure art," avant-garde art, the accursed artist, the misunderstood genius, etc.), he nonetheless identifies a universal and transhistorical nature of art itself as a window onto the chaos of being.⁴⁶ In fact, unlike the project of autonomy, art extends well beyond the Western world and includes popular forms of creative production. From the caves of Lascaux to African masks, Mayan statues, and *The Art of the Fugue*, art has always sought to bring humanity to the border of the abyss from which it comes: "every culture [. . .] creates its own path toward the Abyss."⁴⁷ Moreover, Castoriadis believes in "great art" as the singular, unexplainable, timeless creation of an individual genius capable of halting the world and perching us on a novel precipice over the chasm of non-meaning. This is precisely why art is "intemporal" for him: great works of art act as timeless monuments demonstrating the sovereign ability to accept mortality and create signification while

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inhabiting the border of Chaos.⁴⁸ In short, art is not only universal and transhistorical in the sense of extending across the histories of all human cultures, but it is “intemporal” insofar as it bears witness to the dauntless creative power of humanity.

AUTONOMY OF THE PSYCHE

“The aim of psychoanalysis,” Castoriadis claims, “is consubstantial with the project of autonomy.”⁴⁹ Psychoanalysis ultimately belongs to the same emancipatory project as democracy and philosophy since it aims at helping the social individual become a creative source of possibilities who, instead of being trapped within the fatalities of psychic life, is an active participant in the construction of his or her own story (*histoire*). This does not amount to the victory of reason over the instincts or the conquest of the unconscious by the conscious mind, but rather the establishment of a new relationship between the conscious I and the unconscious in which the former opens itself up to the latter. Castoriadis jettisons, moreover, the more or less resolute individualism that has plagued much of the psychoanalytic tradition, and he insists on the central role played by society, institutions, and imaginary significations in the formation of the psyche.⁵⁰ As mentioned above, he rejects the reification of the distinction between individual and society in the name of thinking through the diverse ways in which the psychic and the social are “radically irreducible to one another and absolutely indissociable, impossible without one another.”⁵¹

This is evident in his account of the developmental trajectory of the psyche. Initially, we can postulate that it is in a monadic state of indifferentiation between self and other, as well as between affects, representations, and desires. This state, characterized by a conatus of perpetual identity, is prior the mother—prior to any distinction with the mother as well as any fusion with the mother— and precedes the existence of the partial object. There is, strictly speaking, no differentiation: “I am everything, I am being itself, being is me, and I am pleasure, pleasure is me.”⁵² This is what Freud meant, according to Castoriadis, by the expression “I am the breast [*Ich bin die Brust*].” The

“object” is not separate since I am the source of pleasure and the immediate satisfaction of all desire. This is, moreover, the root of the absolute egocentrism that will remain with the psyche and of what Freud called the “magical omnipotence of thought.” In Castoriadis’ interpretation, the newborn at the stage of the psychic monad expresses the radical imagination because even when the breast is not there, the baby imagines its existence, sometimes in conjunction with thumb sucking. This illustrates his distinction between *organ pleasure* and the *pleasure of representation* insofar as human beings are capable of feeling pleasure simply through the representations of their imagination. Indeed, he affirms that “the human is defined by the predominance of the pleasure of representation over organ pleasure, over the simple satisfaction of drives.”⁵³ It is not sexuality per se that characterizes human beings, for Castoriadis, but rather “the *distortion* of sexuality,” which includes this parting of ways between biological pleasure and imaginary pleasure.⁵⁴

The other ruptures the closed circuit of the psychic monad. In what Castoriadis calls the *triadic phase*, a new relation is established between the infant, the mother, and the partial object, the breast. The newborn, who believed that he or she was all powerful, discovers the truth and transfers this omnipotence to the mother. This is the beginning of the process of socialization. However, the exit from monadic life is in fact a false exit because the originary omnipotence is simply transferred to the mother. The child, in “normal” development, must overcome the mother’s all-powerfulness in recognizing it as incomplete, engaged with the other of the father. Yet the father is not omnipotent either because he is a father among other fathers; instead of being the source of the Law, he himself is subservient to the Law of society.

It is important to note that, for Castoriadis, the process of socialization is not simply a negative process of repression. By being socialized, the psyche enters into the instituted magma of social significations, for society itself is a magma of imaginary significations that gives meaning to collective and individual life. Society is therefore not simply repressive or prohibitive, but it provides a framework of meaning to the psyche. In fact, Castoriadis asserts that if the psyche does not emerge into a social space of meaning that replaces its originary, monadic meaning, it cannot survive. As he regularly claims, society

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can make almost anything out of the psyche (a Christian, a bourgeois, a Nazi, etc.), but it cannot *not* provide the psyche with meaning.⁵⁵ The psychic monad, through a series of ruptures, thus eventually develops into the social individual, that is, the subject split between a monadic pole tending toward self-enclosure and the pole of imposed social significations, which have been gradually integrated through a succession of syntheses.

The psychoanalytic cure does not lead to an end of analysis, nor does it provide the subject with a definitive understanding of the meaning of life. "The practical essence of psychoanalytic treatment," Castoriadis writes,

is that the individual rediscovers himself as the partial origin of his history [*histoire*], freely experiences the act of making himself, which was not initially known as such the first time around [*fait gratuitement l'expérience du se faire non su comme tel la première fois*], and becomes once again the origin of possibilities, as having had a history [*histoire*] that was a history [*histoire*] and not a fatality.⁵⁶

In fostering the autonomy of the social individual, psychoanalysis is simultaneously a *praxis*, that is, an action that encourages the autonomy of others, and a form of *poiesis* insofar as it aims at liberating the creative potential of the radical imagination.⁵⁷ Ultimately, psychoanalysis allows the subject to live "on the border of the abyss" by constructing a cosmos on the edge of chaos as a response to the double imperative: "live as a mortal, live as if you were immortal."⁵⁸

A PHILOSOPHICAL PASSION FOR THE SCIENCES

Castoriadis proclaims that "science is, should be, contrary to what has happened since Hegel, an object of passion for the philosopher."⁵⁹ Yet, he goes on to explain in the same passage that he does not have in mind a fetishization of the supposed certainties of scientific discourse. On the contrary, science should be an object of philosophical passion because it is an "endless fount of enigmas, an inextricable mixture of light and darkness, bearing witness to an incomprehensible meeting—always secured and always fleeting—between our imaginary

creations and what is."⁶⁰ Furthermore, science should be of central concern to philosophers because it is a glaring example of autonomy, that is, of the rejection of inherited beliefs in the name of our ability to create something new and transform ourselves.

Castoriadis lambasts the myths of scientific progress on numerous occasions. The evolution of the sciences is not cumulative in any sense of the term, be it the gradual addition, the spread, or the progressive perfection of scientific knowledge.⁶¹ Instead, the historical stages of science correspond to so many ruptures and breaks. However, Castoriadis distances himself from Kuhnian paradigms and Foucauldian *epistemes*—as well as epistemic breaks—on the grounds that they ignore the problem of the relationship between the “contents” of scientific knowledge at different stages. This problem, he claims, has come to the forefront in the twentieth century since the macroscopic world is still explained within the framework of classic Newtonian physics, and it is unclear exactly how this relates to the microscopic world of quantum mechanics.⁶² Moreover, he asserts that the Newtonian model is not a purely arbitrary construction but actually “corresponds” to an important class of elements and has been able to make predictions beyond what was originally in its purvey when it was established.⁶³ This does not, however, mean that he believes that there is a world of identifiable facts independent of scientific interpretation. Quite to the contrary, he insists on the ways in which experiential “facts” are rendered identifiable and observable by scientific theories:

We cannot therefore pretend to believe that there exists a world of facts in themselves, which are what they are prior to all scientific interpretation, and independently of it, with which we compare theories in order to see whether or not they are falsified by it. To be sure, a scientific theory cannot behave in an entirely arbitrary fashion, nor can it forego all empirical content; but this empirical content has always undergone an enormous degree of conceptual elaboration, precisely at the hands of the theory in which it is presented.⁶⁴

One of the major lessons of contemporary science is precisely that the separation between philosophy and science, between a conceptual base and empirical results, is absolutely untenable. Castoriadis refers to this situation as “the end of scientific tranquility.”⁶⁵ Henceforth, philosophy and science must proceed in concert with one another.

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Castoriadis' work is a testament to just such an orientation, but this is unfortunately not the place to explore the various positions he has taken on the different sciences. For our current purposes, let us concentrate on two fundamental claims related to his engagements with mathematics and biology, in anticipation of his dialogues with Alain Connes and Francisco Varela. Concerning mathematics, set theory serves as an essential reference point for his ontology insofar as he distinguishes between two dimensions of being. One dimension he refers to as "set-theoretical or ensemblistic (*ensembliste*)," that is, based on the logic of set theory (*la théorie des ensembles*). He also calls this dimension "identitary" and abbreviates these two adjectives in the neologism "ensidic (*ensidique*)." This dimension, which is an essential aspect of all language, life, and social activity, is characterized by "the logic of the principle of identity, of contradiction, and of the excluded third, the logic that is at the basis of arithmetic and mathematics in general and that is formally and effectively realized in set theory and its interminable ramifications."⁶⁶ According to Castoriadis, ensidic logic corresponds to an organizable stratum of being (the "first natural stratum"), and it deploys itself in social institutions via what he calls the *legein* (language as a purportedly univocal code) and the *teukhein* (practice in the functional and instrumental sense). This ensidic dimension does not exhaust being. There are what Castoriadis calls "magmas," which are irreducible to the formalization of ensidic logic. Indeed, the activity of formalization itself, insofar as *it* cannot be formalized, is a preliminary indication of the existence of magmas. More germane to our discussion here, we can take the example of society. For if there is an ensidic dimension of society, as we have just seen, society itself "is neither a set, nor a system or hierarchy of sets (or of structures); it is a magma and a magma of magmas."⁶⁷ Similarly, the psyche rebels against ensidic logic as radical imagination and undetermined creation.⁶⁸

Turning to Castoriadis' engagement with biology, we can begin with his description of living beings (*des vivants*) as those who support themselves on the ensidic being of non-living nature and create a world for themselves. More specifically, a living being is a self-constituting for-itself characterized by self-finality (conservation, reproduction, etc.) and the creation of a proper world of representations, affects, and intentions.⁶⁹ Autonomy, properly speaking, appears

to be a characteristic of humanity alone. "Man is the only animal," Castoriadis writes, "capable of breaking the closure in and through which every other living being *is*."⁷⁰ He also emphasizes the extent to which one of the major differences between humanity and the rest of the natural world is that the imagination of other living beings is "subservient to functionality and given once and for all," whereas for human beings "it is defunctionalized and perpetually creative."⁷¹ Indeed, this is one of the reasons that the human species, at a biological and psychological level, is incapable of life and probably would have disappeared if it wasn't for the invention of something without precedent in the natural world: the self-creation of society.⁷²

NOTHING IF NOT CRITICAL

It would be a twofold contradiction to remain at the level of pure exegetical commentary, even for this brief introduction. On the one hand, it would contradict my own work, where I have called into question the limitations of *exegetical thought* (where thinking is reduced to thinking within and through the canonical figures of the past) and charted out its historical emergence as the dominant *modus operandi* of professional philosophers in the "continental" tradition.⁷³ On the other hand, it would contradict Castoriadis' work insofar as he criticizes the philosophic cannibalism of the tradition of pure commentary and asserts that "for a philosopher, there *can* only be a critical history of philosophy."⁷⁴ In the name of pursuing the tradition of radical critique that Castoriadis himself identifies with, it is therefore indispensable to discuss some of the limitations and problems inherent in his project.

First of all, he deploys a strategy that has now become commonplace among those philosophers seeking to accentuate the originality of their work. This strategy might be called *personal apotheosis via selective history*, and it consists in claiming that no one in the past—barring, perhaps, a few soothsayers—has thought what the philosopher in question has been able to think, and that all other philosophers have been trapped to a greater or lesser extent in an illusory mode of thinking. In Castoriadis' case, he regularly states that

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the quasi-totality of Western philosophy—which is philosophy proper for him⁷⁵—has thought being in terms of determinacy (*déterminité*) and ignored the radical imaginary. He therefore purports to be the first thinker to truly break with what he calls *inherited thought* by elucidating the creative imagination and asserting that being is undetermined.⁷⁶ He sometimes suggests at least partial exceptions,⁷⁷ and it is obviously necessary to examine his general claim as it plays itself out in the various interpretations he provides of individual philosophers. Since this is not the place for such an undertaking, let us simply state that it is highly unlikely that nearly the entire Western world would think in one way and that a single individual would suddenly think differently. It is much more likely that Castoriadis is reproducing an element of his own social world, and more specifically of the philosophical *habitus* that he shares with many of his compatriots. The professed singularity of his project would thereby actually confirm its conformity to an unoriginal strategy of personal apotheosis through historical promotion. The recognition of this conformity at a strategic level does not, of course, invalidate *in toto* his claims to originality, but it does relativize his self-promotional strategies and the crude logic of history they produce.

This is not the only strategy that Castoriadis shares with many twentieth-century European philosophers. He also employs the chiaroscuro technique for delineating history by contrasting the light and shadow of two fundamental tendencies: autonomy and heteronomy, the instituting imaginary and instituted social significations, the magmatic dimension and the ensidic dimension, and so on. In spite of a partial attempt to avoid a categorical valorization of one term over the other, and despite the insistence that both dimensions are necessary or inevitable (at least for certain of these terms), it is nonetheless a patent verity that Castoriadis is more enamored with the imaginative acts of creation than with the fixity and determinedness of what has already been instituted. Moreover, he runs the risk of treating these notions and values as transhistorical, as if there was a perennial conceptual and normative vocabulary allowing us to discuss *any* sociohistorical configuration. Indeed, he tends to assume that his conceptual arsenal—the imaginary, institution, heteronomy, etc.—is valid for any and all social and historical milieus, as if categories such as *the imagination, creation, or art* could have the same

purchase on the ancient Greeks, the Aztecs, Buddhists in the second century BC, Innuits in the fourteenth century AD, and ourselves.⁷⁸ Any differences that are recognized tend to be superficial differences situated at the level of varying definitions, misunderstandings, or unadulterated ignorance of the *same basic categories and values*, which therefore appear to *determine* the totality of phenomena. Insofar as these absolute categories seem to preclude the possibility of practices *undetermined* by Castoriadis' binary normative and conceptual edifice (i.e., that are neither simply autonomous nor heteronomous, neither "creative" nor determined, neither "art" nor "non-art," etc.⁷⁹), he risks slipping into an ontology of determinacy through the backdoor, so to speak, that is to say through the systematic valorization of creative indeterminacy. Of course, he historicizes autonomy and its various avatars in a certain sense by restricting them to the Greco-Western world, but this does not change the fact that the entire history of humanity can be conceived of with the categories of autonomy and heteronomy. His work thereby approximates a form of *selective socio-historicism* since he chooses what is part of society and history, as well as what escapes sociohistorical specificity in the strong sense of the term (his own systematic vocabulary). As a final note in this regard, it cannot go unnoticed that Castoriadis' conceptual and normative framework is largely, if not entirely, dependent on a modern European sensibility. The valorization of creation, novelty, and the imagination, in spite of occasional counter-claims, bears the indelible mark of the modern glorification of creativity (not to mention the rediscovery of the Greeks as of the late eighteenth century).⁸⁰ Furthermore, the identification of Greece as the politico-philosophic origin of Europe is a relatively recent trope rooted in a new codification of philosophic history that emerged at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁸¹

To his credit, Castoriadis recognizes that his schematization of history is situated *within* history:

When we speak of history, *who* is speaking? It is someone of a given period, society and class—in short, it is a historical being. And yet the very thing that founds the possibility of historical knowledge [*une connaissance historique*] (for only a historical being can have an experience of history and talk about it) prevents this knowledge

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[*connaissance*] from ever being able to acquire the status of complete and transparent knowledge [*savoir*]⁸²—since it is itself, in its essence, a historical phenomenon that demands to be apprehended and interpreted as such. The discourse on history is included within history.⁸²

This opens the door for a more generous reading of his work in terms of an attempt to lucidly and explicitly formulate a creative intervention from within a particular sociohistorical conjuncture.⁸³ On this reading, for which there is textual evidence, Castoriadis' appeal to certain universals would be a situated and reflexive appeal that aims at overcoming the risks of cultural relativism by proposing trans-cultural reference points. Instead of indiscriminately positing trans-historical concepts, he would be suggesting heuristic tools for making sense of sociohistorical developments while at the same time remaining open and transparent about his presuppositions.

While I certainly hope that this is the case, Castoriadis nevertheless regularly makes sweeping statements about the history of humanity that would need to be qualified. For instance, the claim that the entire history of the human race has been dominated by heteronomy and that there are only two “moments” of autonomy—Greece and the West—is a moot point at many levels.⁸⁴ To begin with, it presupposes the ability to know the inner workings of all cultures that have ever existed, or at least of all of those that have ever been known to exist.⁸⁵ This not only poses serious hermeneutic problems, but it is structurally impossible from our current position because there are cultures that have partially or totally disappeared, and to which we have little or no access. So the claim itself can only be advanced on hypothetical grounds. Moreover, there is something slightly patronizing, self-aggrandizing, and unduly simplistic about a Greek living in modern Europe who affirms that the only two moments of autonomy occurred in ancient Greece and Europe. Of course, Castoriadis claims that he does not want to elevate Greece to the status of a model, and he is extremely critical of his own sociohistorical conjuncture and the crisis of autonomy. However, it is nevertheless clear that he valorizes the Greco-Western project of autonomy and that no other cultures in the world are on par with it: “Before Greece and outside the

Greco-Western tradition, societies are instituted on the principle of a strict closure: our view of the world is the only one that is meaningful and true, the 'others' are bizarre, inferior, perverse, bad, disloyal, etc."⁸⁶ It is rather ironic, in this regard, that the Greco-Western break with the closure of "traditional societies" purportedly means a true openness to other cultures, for this "openness" actually implies, among other things, the ability to recognize the universal closure—and, hence, relative inferiority—of all other cultures.⁸⁷ In fact, the closure of traditional societies is a trait that the members of these societies share with the animal world, whereas the autonomy of the Greco-Western world is generally defined as a properly *human* invention.⁸⁸ When Castoriadis asserts that "the true interest in others was born with the Greeks" (a debatable claim in its own right⁸⁹), he means, moreover, that Greece is not only the privileged origin of philosophy, democracy, and politics proper, but also of true history and ethnology, as well as of what he calls "judging and choosing, in a radical sense."⁹⁰ When confronted with the criticism that he affirms and defends the superiority of Western culture, he retorts that he is actually only asserting the superiority of one dimension of this culture over another dimension of the same culture.⁹¹ Even if this point is granted, it is nonetheless the case that the West is apparently the only place where the closure of instituted societies has been ruptured by a creative project of critical inquiry aiming at taking on the task of the autonomous institution of society. Indeed, Castoriadis unabashedly declares that "Western humanity" is "the most advanced" part of humanity.⁹² This not only casts a long shadow over the rest of humanity and the deep history of cultures, but it also raises the issue of the desire to spread the project of autonomy and the simplicity of its implicit historiography: do other cultures have any choice other than to either remain in their arcane and archaic ways or recognize and embrace the superiority of one dimension of European culture?⁹³ Even if the project of autonomy could end up taking on different iterations in various cultures (if it spreads)⁹⁴, it is rather unfortunate that Castoriadis—who clearly has broad interests in other cultures—does not make ample room for the emergence of alternative cultural projects.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

When driven by an intense eros of inquiry that knows no *a priori* bounds, it is perhaps inevitable that you will occasionally falter. In the case of Castoriadis, there are plenty of aspects of his work that invite critical reflection. Nevertheless, the breadth, depth, and originality of his project need to be recognized in their own right. It is extremely rare, particularly in an era of increasing academic specialization, that a single thinker spans the fields of philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis, art theory, economics, sociology, history, and the philosophy of science. It is even more uncommon that he or she do so while establishing a unique and expansive philosophical project that does not fit comfortably within the dominant models and intellectual fashions of the times. It is a testament to the intensity of Castoriadis' eros of inquiry that his passion for critical reflection broke through the strictures of his intellectual milieu in order to establish a novel, unique and wide-ranging philosophical project. His passion for independent elucidation should serve as an open invitation to all of us to fervently pursue the tradition of radical critique.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Castoriadis Reader*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997, 362 / *Fait et à faire*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997, 11 (translation slightly modified).
- ² See *Figures of the Thinkable*, trans. Helen Arnold. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007, 81 / *Figures du pensable*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999, 104.
- ³ On *Socialisme ou barbarie*, see *The Castoriadis Reader*, 1–39.
- ⁴ Since there is significant fluctuation in the biographical information available regarding Castoriadis, I have decided to rely on the Association Castoriadis, whose members include many of his close friends and family members: <http://www.castoriadis.org/en/readText.asp?textID=40>. However, I decided to follow the bibliography provided by Éditions du Seuil for the date of employment at the OECD because 1945 (the date found on the Association Castoriadis' website) seemed premature due to the fact that Castoriadis had just arrived in Paris on a scholarship for a *doctorat d'État* in philosophy (which he never finished).
- ⁵ *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987, 74 / *L'institution imaginaire de la société*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975, 110–11 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁶ This rumored exchange is referred to in the Castoriadis obituary on the website: <http://www.agorainternational.org/about.html>.
- ⁷ *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 171 / *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 256–7 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁸ “It [structuralism] has nothing to say about the sets of elements it manipulates, about the reasons for their being-such, about their modifications in time” (ibid., 171/257). On the “pseudo-scientific ideology” of structuralism, see *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997, 51 / *La montée de l'insignifiance*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996, 35.
- ⁹ Ibid., 50–1/34 (translation slightly modified).
- ¹⁰ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 398 / *Fait et à faire*, 63. Also see the “Agora International Interview” available at <http://www.agorainternational.org/en/caiint.pdf>.

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- ¹¹ See *La montée de l'insignifiance*, 90–2 and *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 14/*Le monde morcelé*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990, 282.
- ¹² See *ibid.*, 16–17/285–6.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 4/128 (translation slightly modified).
- ¹⁴ The interview with Legros was not part of the original French publication and was first printed in *Cornelius Castoriadis: Réinventer l'autonomie*, ed. Blaise Bachofen, Sion Elbaz, and Nicolas Poirier. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, series “Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine,” 2008, 273–89. Since I wanted to add a discussion with a philosopher, I am very grateful that Éditions du Sandre let us translate the conversation with Legros, which fits perfectly within the purview of the book. Like the other interviews, it was a lively oral exchange that took place on France Culture in the 1990s.
- ¹⁵ Since the interviews are all from the 1990s, I have primarily concentrated on Castoriadis' later work, from approximately *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975) until the end of his life. Moreover, for the purposes of writing a synoptic overview in the limited space of this introduction, I have privileged a synchronic point of view for purely heuristic reasons. In doing so, it is important to highlight that it is by no means my intention to occlude the dynamism of Castoriadis' project, which obviously changed in diverse ways between 1975 and 1997.
- ¹⁶ *Fait et à faire*, 253 (all translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own). The entire quote reads: “being is creation, *vis formandi*: not the creation of ‘matter-energy,’ but the creation of forms.” Castoriadis also asserts that “being is creation/destruction” (*Figures of the Thinkable*, 190/*Figures du pensable*, 223)
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* (translation slightly modified).
- ¹⁸ *Fait et à faire*, 258.
- ¹⁹ *Domaines de l'homme*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986, 9.
- ²⁰ *World in Fragments*, 184/*Fait et à faire*, 116 (translation slightly modified). For reasons of clarity, I have exceptionally translated *l'être* as Being (in general) in order to distinguish it from *l'étant* (being in the sense of a specific entity or phenomenon).

- ²¹ *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 3/*L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 8 (translation slightly modified); *World in Fragments*, 181/*Fait et à faire*, 113 (also see *Domaines de l'homme*, 48).
- ²² *World in Fragments*, 131/*Le monde morcelé*, 182.
- ²³ *World in Fragments*, 190/*Fait et à faire*, 124 (translation slightly modified). Also see *ibid.*, 187/120; *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, 145/*Le monde morcelé*, 139, 187; *The Castoriadis Reader*, 332).
- ²⁴ *Domaines de l'homme*, 12; *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 215/*L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 319–20.
- ²⁵ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 269/*Domaines de l'homme*, 329.
- ²⁶ *World in Fragments*, 86/*La montée de l'insignifiance*, 194. Castoriadis has provided variable dates for this “first Renaissance,” ranging from about the eleventh to the fourteenth century.
- ²⁷ *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 215/*L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 319.
- ²⁸ See *Le monde morcelé*, 18–22.
- ²⁹ See *ibid.*, 22–4.
- ³⁰ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 272/*Domaines de l'homme*, 353.
- ³¹ See, for instance, *A Society Adrift: Interviews and Debates 1974–1997*, ed. Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, and Pascal Vernay, trans. Helen Arnold. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, 125; *Domaines de l'homme*, 356; *Figures du pensable*, 155.
- ³² See *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 9–70/*L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 13–104.
- ³³ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 407/*Fait et à faire*, 76.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Le monde morcelé*, 210.
- ³⁶ *Politics in The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, 2037 (1283b40–1284a1).
- ³⁷ See *The Castoriadis Reader*, 315/*Domaines de l'homme*, 521 and *Figures of the Thinkable*, 171/*Figures du pensable*, 203: “The chaos/abyss/groundless [*chaos/abîme/sans-fond*] is what is behind or under every concrete existent, and at the same time it is the creative force—what we would call the *vis formandi* in Latin—that causes the upsurge of forms, organized beings. The singular human being is a fragment of that chaos, and at the same time a fragment or an

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- agency of that *vis formandi*, of that force or that creativity of being as such" (translation slightly modified).
- ³⁸ *Domaines de l'homme*, 347.
- ³⁹ *Figures of the Thinkable*, 80/*Figures du pensable*, 102 (translation slightly modified). On the issue of imitation, see *Fenêtre sur le chaos*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007, particularly 152–3.
- ⁴⁰ *Figures of the Thinkable*, 80/*Figures du pensable*, 103 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁴¹ *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (Act 5, Scene 5) in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997, 2613. For Castoriadis' discussion of Shakespeare and *Macbeth*, see *Fenêtre sur le chaos*, 104–5, 155.
- ⁴² *La montée de l'insignifiance*, 75.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ See *Figures of the Thinkable*, 84/*Figures du pensable*, 107 (*l'avant-garde* should clearly be translated as "the avant-garde" instead of "the vanguard").
- ⁴⁵ See Ibid. 84–5/107–8 and *Fenêtre sur le chaos*, 17.
- ⁴⁶ See *Domaines de l'homme*, 344 and *Fenêtre sur le chaos*, 25.
- ⁴⁷ *Domaines de l'homme*, 347.
- ⁴⁸ See *La montée de l'insignifiance*, 76 and *Fenêtre sur le chaos*, 47.
- ⁴⁹ *World in Fragments*, 129/*Le monde morcelé*, 178 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁵⁰ See, for instance, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, trans. Kate Soper and Martin H. Ryle. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984, 103/*Les carrefours du labyrinthe 1*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978, 157; *Figures of the Thinkable*, 89, 197–8/*Figures du pensable*, 112–13, 232.
- ⁵¹ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 291/*Domaines de l'homme*, 482 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁵² *Figures of the Thinkable*, 170/*Figures du pensable*, 202.
- ⁵³ Ibid. 217/254 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁵⁴ *World in Fragments*, 150/*Le monde morcelé*, 250 (for a more detailed description of the various aspects of the distortion of sexuality, see the ensuing pages).
- ⁵⁵ See *Figures of the Thinkable*, 217/*Figures du pensable*, 254 and *Domaines de l'homme*, 125.

- ⁵⁶ *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, 26/*Les carrefours du labyrinthe 1*, 61–2 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁵⁷ Human beings, for Castoriadis, are not defined essentially by their rationality, but rather by “the continuous, uncontrolled and uncontrollable surge of our creative radical imagination in and through the flux of representations, affects, and desires” (*World in Fragments*, 127–8/*Le monde morcelé*, 177, translation slightly modified).
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 136/189.
- ⁵⁹ *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, 270/*Le monde morcelé*, 119 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.* (translation slightly modified).
- ⁶¹ See *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, 167/*Les carrefours du labyrinthe 1*, 218.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 168/219.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 171/223.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 176/228–9 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 178/231 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁶⁶ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 352/*Fait et à faire*, 174. Also see *The Castoriadis Reader*, 328: “Everything that is must contain an ensemblistic-identitary (‘logical,’ in the largest sense possible) dimension; otherwise it would be *absolutely* indeterminate, and (at least for us) nonexistent.”
- ⁶⁷ *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 228/*L’institution imaginaire de la société*, 336 (translation slightly modified). In *Fait et à faire*, Castoriadis asserts that “being is magmatic because it is creation and temporality” (258).
- ⁶⁸ See *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, 97/*Les carrefours du labyrinthe 1*, 149.
- ⁶⁹ *World in Fragments*, 145–50/*Le monde morcelé*, 243–9.
- ⁷⁰ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 314/*Domaines de l’homme*, 520.
- ⁷¹ *World in Fragments*, 178/*Fait et à faire*, 109 (translation slightly modified). Also see *Fait et à faire*, 16, 179–81/*The Castoriadis Reader*, 356–7). This is one of the reasons Castoriadis derides the definition of human beings as rational animals: “he [man] is much less reasonable than animals” (*World in Fragments*, 177/*Fait et à faire*, 108). “Man,” he states in an interview, “is a living, but monstrous,

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totally dysfunctional being" (*Conversations with French Philosophers*, trans. Gary E. Aylesworth. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1995, 33).

⁷² See *Domaines de l'homme*, 48–9, 542/*World in Fragments*, 354 (also see *The Castoriadis Reader*, 331).

⁷³ See *Logique de l'histoire: Pour une analytique des pratiques philosophiques*. Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2010.

⁷⁴ *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, 17/*Le monde morcelé*, 287 (also see 23 and *Figures of the Thinkable*, 81/*Figures du pensable*, 104).

⁷⁵ This stance gives rise to a series of important questions: why—and on what grounds—does Castoriadis classify all philosophic developments outside of the Greco-Western world as heteronomous, and therefore not true philosophy? Why does he accept as a more or less natural given the history of Western philosophy as it has been codified since approximately the early nineteenth century (with its supposed origin in Greece and the sequence of its canonical figures)? Why doesn't he recognize that philosophy, far from having a proper nature supposedly invented by the Greeks, is a variable socio-historical formation, a concept in struggle with no inherent essence (even a historical essence)? Isn't he ultimately naturalizing the contingent, contemporary edifice of the history of Western philosophy? Isn't he acting as if the instituted significations of the Western tradition as of only approximately 200 years were actually more or less natural significations stretching back to the Greeks? On these and related issues, see my book, *Logique de l'histoire*.

⁷⁶ See, for example, *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, 209–10/*Les carrefours du labyrinthe 1*, 268–9; *Fait et à faire*, 270; *Figures of the Thinkable*, 73/*Figures du pensable*, 95.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, *The Castoriadis Reader*, 371–2/*Fait et à faire*, 23–4.

⁷⁸ Here is one example among others: "Of this abyss, of this chaos, humanity has always had at once a sharp and confused perception. It has always felt its intolerable and insurmountable nature, and it responded to it by social institutions and above all by the institution that, almost everywhere, almost always, was its nuclear element: religion" (*Fenêtre sur le chaos*, 99–100).

⁷⁹ To take the flagrant example of the category of "art" (and, therefore, "non-art" as well as "great art"), which is culturally ubiquitous

ous for Castoriadis, there is excellent research that has demonstrated the extent to which it is a modern, European category that cannot and should not be indiscriminately applied to all time periods and all cultures. See, for instance, Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum Books, 2004 and Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

- ⁸⁰ On this issue, see Raymond Williams' historical account of the emergence of the idea of the creative imagination, particularly within the arts: "Donne spoke of poetry as a 'counterfeit Creation.' Mallet, in 1728, spoke of the 'companion of the Muse, Creative Power, Imagination.' By the end of the eighteenth century, this emphasis, with its key-word, 'imagination,' was becoming paramount. The main line runs as an emphasis on 'creative imagination' as a general human faculty, which is seen at its highest in the poet" (*The Long Revolution: An Analysis of the Democratic, Industrial, and Cultural Changes Transforming Our Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, 9). Also see Nathalie Heinich's work on the novel social imaginary that emerged around the turn of the nineteenth century, particularly *L'élite artiste: Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005 and *Être artiste: Les transformations du statut des peintres et des sculpteurs*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1996.
- ⁸¹ I have explored this issue in much greater detail in *Logique de l'histoire*.
- ⁸² *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 32–3/*L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 48–9 (translation slightly modified).
- ⁸³ Along these lines, Castoriadis writes that "we have to understand [. . .] that *there is* truth—and that *it is to be made*, that in order to *attain* it, we must *create* it, which means, first and foremost, to *imagine* it" (*World in Fragments*, 373/*Domaines de l'homme*, 570, translation slightly modified)
- ⁸⁴ It should be noted that Castoriadis occasionally suggests that there are *perhaps* other moments by using vocabulary such as "at least two moments."
- ⁸⁵ "The human domain appears, at the start, as a highly heteronomous domain [. . .]. Archaic societies, like traditional societies, are very highly closed societies informationally, cognitively, and organiza-

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tionally. In fact, this is the state of almost all societies we know of, almost everywhere, almost always" (*The Castoriadis Reader*, 311/*Domaines de l'homme*, 514).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 268/326–7 (translation slightly modified).

⁸⁷ It is worth noting that Castoriadis has nonetheless suggested that it is impossible to establish a hierarchy of the multiple social-historical worlds (see, for instance, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* 66/*Le monde morcelé*, 69).

⁸⁸ As we saw above: "Man is the only animal, capable of breaking the closure in and through which every other living being is." (*The Castoriadis Reader*, 314/*Domaines de l'homme*, 520). However, some men have apparently not been capable of this, so they remain within the closure of the animal world.

⁸⁹ Castoriadis tends to downplay the central role of slavery and imperialism in ancient Athens in favor of a relatively halcyon image of autonomous democracy. On the centrality and importance of slavery, imperialism and various forms of rigid social hierarchy in Athenian society, see Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998; Moses I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1985; Edmond Lévy, *La Grèce au Ve siècle: De Clithène à Socrate*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997.

⁹⁰ *The Castoriadis Reader*, 268/*Domaines de l'homme*, 327 (translation slightly modified); *ibid.*, 272/353.

⁹¹ See *The Castoriadis Reader*, 397–8/*Fait et à faire*, 63. In a revealing discussion between Castoriadis and the Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales (MAUSS), Alain Caillé astutely underscores the tension in Castoriadis' work between a "hyper-relativism" in which all societies are recognized as equal insofar as they are creations of the radical instituting imaginary and an extreme form of universalism in which one cultural dimension is unconditionally valorized over all others (Cornelius Castoriadis, Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas, Pascal Vernay, *Démocratie et relativisme: Débats avec le MAUSS*. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010, 51). In his response, Castoriadis distinguishes between a philosophical point of view and a political point of view. Philosophically and historically, he claims that "we have to admit

that all societies, in the same way, come from a movement of creation of institutions and significations" (ibid., 55). From this point of view, all cultures are equal, as he had asserted in his earlier debate with Daniel Cohn-Bendit (*De l'écologie à l'autonomie*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981). However, from a political point of view, one has the right to discuss and criticize societies, to stake out a position on the relative value of cultures. It is at this level that he supports and defends the project of autonomy, whose seed he finds in ancient Greece and the West (see *Démocratie et relativisme*, 56–7). It is rather unfortunate and culturally belittling, however, that he attempts to reinscribe this pragmatic position within a philosophic history by claiming that such a political point of view is itself the unique privilege of the Greco-Western world. Indeed, he asserts that "a Chinese, a traditional Indian does not consider it self-evident to take political positions, to judge his society. On the contrary, this would even appear inconceivable to him; he does not dispose of the mental framework for doing it" (ibid., 56).

⁹² *Le monde morcelé*, 212.

⁹³ In an interview with *Esprit*, Castoriadis claims that other cultures need to extricate themselves from their religious closure and accept Western universalism, and he bemoans the fact that the West is not currently able to have an emancipatory influence on these closed societies (see *La montée de l'insignifiance*, 70–1).

⁹⁴ Castoriadis does assert that the condition for the universalization of Western values is that other cultures appropriate them and that "appropriating them does not mean becoming Europeanized" (*Démocratie et relativisme*, 61). In fact, in a brief passage that could have been developed, he states that he is in favor of "a common overcoming that would combine the democratic culture of the West with steps that need to come, or that should come, that is to say a veritable individual and collective autonomy in society, with the preservation, recovery, development, in a different way, of values of sociality and community that survive—as far as they have survived—in third-world countries" (ibid.).

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PART I

POSTSCRIPT ON INSIGNIFICANCE

Translated by John V. Garner

In memory of Cornelius Castoriadis, who passed away on December 26, 1997, we have rebroadcast the interview which he granted to us one year beforehand.

Sometimes, people wish to take back words, to go back over ideas with a “rested ear.” Now, in making the script of this interview available for you to address, I did not presume, by any means, any respect, or any stretch, that one of the most fecund and most lucid thinkers of our time would be concerned by such things.

From across the divide we feel that all is not lost!

Daniel Mermet
Là-bas si j’y suis, France-Inter
<http://www.la-bas.org/>

Preface: Cornelius, Essential Dissident

Translated by John V. Garner

Missing is the voice of Cornelius Castoriadis; missing is that jubilation in his voice repeating “We who desire [*desirons*] or we who are deranged [*delirons*]?” Missing is the Bir-Hakeim bridge and the airport shuttle outside the window; missing is the light over the Seine that November morning in 1996.

What he was saying arrived at just the right moment in these “Trotsky-Balladurian”¹ times. He who dismissed both “anti-revolutionary communism” and neoliberalism as conformist thought, as “non-thought.”

At stake was not abdication for itself. He did not lapse into aesthetic renunciation, nor into cynicism à la Mitterand, nor into that sated apathy, which says: “It’s all the same, it’s all been done, all is vanity.”

He locates this rise of insignificance not only in an elite politics reduced to implementing neoliberal [12] fundamentalism but also, through its consequences, in the “citizen” who is detached from the life of the City by unemployment and generalized precariousness.² Unemployment leads to disintegration [*désinsertion*]; precariousness leads to submission. From this stems the dislocation of the community of destiny. Silently, we have consented, we have “collaborated” in this incredible regression, a non-thought producing this non-society, this rise of insignificance, this social racism. “The major problem is not unemployment; it is at first and always profit,” Cornelius repeated.

PREFACE: CORNELIUS, ESSENTIAL DISSIDENT

Confronting diversionists [*brouilleurs de pistes*] and pseudo-complexity, which places hope wholly in the social imaginary, Castoriadis was in search of a radicalness until the end. “I am a revolutionary in favor of radical changes,” he said a few weeks before his death³; “I do not think that one can make the French capitalist system work in a free, egalitarian, and just way as it [13] is.” He was a revolutionary who, through his life, went on to repeat, “We do not philosophize in order to save the Revolution but in order to save our thought and our coherence.”

But one cannot reduce Cornelius Castoriadis to a single register. A philosopher and a sociologist, he also worked as an economist and a psychoanalyst. “A titan of thought, enormous, outside of norms,” said Edgar Morin. An encyclopedic thinker with a jubilation for living and for fighting—corporeal, spiritual, infinite fighting, but constantly moving—he leaves us with much to work with and so much work to do . . .

Daniel Mermet
February 7, 1998
[14]

NOTES

- ¹ Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) was a Bolshevik, and later an anti-Stalinist, whose version of Marxism emphasized Permanent Revolution. Édouard Balladur (1929–) is a French right-wing politician who served as Prime Minister from 1993–1995 and failed in a run for President in 1995. —TR
- ² The numbers in brackets refer to the original pagination of the French text: *Post-scriptum sur l’insignifiance. Entretiens avec Daniel Mermet suivi de Dialogue*. La Tour d’Aigues: Éditions de l’Aube, 2007. —TR
- ³ Cornelius Castoriadis died on December 26, 1997. Born in Greece, he moved in 1945 to Paris where he created the now mythical review *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. In 1968, with Edgar Morin and Claude Lefort, he published *May ‘68: The Rupture*. In 1975, he published *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, his most important work.

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In 1978, he began working on the series *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*. It was following the publication of the fourth volume of this series, entitled *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*, published in *Éditions du Seuil*, that we met with him in November 1996.

CHAPTER ONE

No God, No Caesar, No Tribune! . . .

Cornelius Castoriadis Interviewed by Daniel Mermet

Translated by Gabriel Rockhill and the Villanova French
Translation Workshop¹

DANIEL MERMET: Why this title, *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*?² Is this the defining characteristic of our age?

CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS: What characterizes the contemporary world is of course crises, contradictions, oppositions, fractures, etc., but what strikes me above all is precisely *insignificance*. Let's take the quarrel between the right and the left. Presently, it has lost its meaning. It's not because there's not anything to fuel a political quarrel, and even a very extensive political quarrel, but because both sides say the same thing. As of 1983, the socialists established one policy; then Balladur came along. He had the same policy. Then the socialists returned; they had, with Bérégovoy, the same policy. Balladur [16] returned; he had the same policy. Chirac won the elections saying, "I'm going to do something different," and he had the same policy. This distinction lacks meaning.

D.M.: By which mechanisms is this political class reduced to powerlessness? It's a buzzword today, powerlessness.

C.C.: No it's not a buzzword; they are powerless, that's for sure. The only thing they can do is swim downstream, which is to say apply the ultraliberal policy that is in fashion. The socialists haven't done

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anything different, and I don't think they would do anything different if they returned to power. They are not statesmen [*politiques*], in my opinion, but politicians [*politiciens*] in the sense of micro-politicians [*micropoliticiens*], people on the hunt for votes by any means.

D.M.: Political marketing?

C.C.: Yes, it's marketing. They have no program. Their aim is to stay in power or to return to power, and for that they're capable of anything. Clinton campaigned solely by following the polls—"If I say this, is it going [17] to fly?"—each time taking the winning option for public opinion. As they say: "I am their leader, therefore I'm led by them." What's fascinating in our age, as in all ages moreover, is the way things conspire. There is an intrinsic link between this type of political nullity, politics becoming worthless, and insignificance in other domains, in the arts, in philosophy, or in literature. This is the spirit of the times: without any conspiracy by some power that one could designate, everything conspires, in the sense of radiating in the same direction, for the same results, that is to say, insignificance.

D.M.: How should politics be done?

C.C.: Politics is a strange profession, even the aforementioned politics. Why? Because it presupposes two abilities that have no intrinsic relation. The first is to come to power. If you don't come to power, you can have the best ideas in the world, and it's of no use. There is thus an art of coming to power. The second ability is, once you come to power, to do something with it, that is to say, to govern. [18] Napoleon knew how to govern; Clemenceau knew how to govern; Churchill knew how to govern. These are people who aren't of the same political alignment as me, but what I'm describing here is a historical type. Nothing guarantees that someone who knows how to govern knows, for all that, how to come to power. In an absolute monarchy, what did it mean to come to power? It meant to flatter the king, to be in the good graces of Madame de Pompadour.³ Today, in our pseudo-democracy, to come to power means to be telegenic, to sniff out public opinion. Once in power, what do you do? What Mr. Chirac is currently doing: nothing. You swim downstream. As needs be, you change hats because you recognize that in order to come to power you told stories, and that these stories don't apply.

D.M.: You say “pseudo-democracy” . . .

C.C.: I’ve always thought that so-called representative democracy is not a true democracy. Its representatives only minimally represent the people who elect them. First they represent themselves or represent particular interests, the lobbies, etc. And, even if that wasn’t the case, to say that someone is going to represent me in an irrevocable manner for 5 years [19] amounts to saying that I divest myself of my sovereignty as part of the people. Rousseau already said this: the English believe that they are free because they elect representatives every 5 years, but they are free only one day every 5 years: the day of the election.

And even that isn’t true. The election is rigged, not because the ballot boxes are being stuffed, but because the options are determined in advance. No one asked the people what they wanted to vote on. They are told, “vote for or against the Maastricht Treaty,” for example. But who made the Maastricht Treaty? It wasn’t us. There is Aristotle’s wonderful phrase responding to the question, “Who is the citizen?”: “The citizen is someone who is able to govern and to be governed.”⁴ Are there forty million citizens in France at the moment? Why wouldn’t they be able to govern? Because all political life aims precisely at making them forget how to govern. It aims at convincing them that there are experts to whom matters must be entrusted. There is thus a political countereducation. Whereas people should accustom themselves to exercising all sorts of responsibilities and taking initiatives, they accustom themselves to following the options that others present to them or voting for those options. And since people are far from being [20] stupid, the result is that they believe in it less and less, and they become cynical, in a kind of political apathy.

D.M.: Civic responsibility, democratic practice, do you think that it was better in the past? That elsewhere, today, it’s better than in France?

C.C.: No, elsewhere, today, it’s certainly not better. It can even be worse. Once again, the American elections illustrate this. But, in the past, it was better from two points of view.

In modern societies, let’s say starting from the American and French Revolutions until about the Second World War, there was still a lively

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social and political conflict. People opposed one another. People demonstrated. They didn't demonstrate for a particular SNCF⁵ route—I'm not saying this is contemptible, it's at least a goal—but in the past the workers demonstrated or went on strike for political causes and not only for petty corporatist interests. There were major questions that concerned all salaried employees. These struggles marked the last two centuries. However, what we observe now is a decline in [21] people's activity. And there is a vicious circle. The more people withdraw from activity, the more some bureaucrats, politicians, so-called people in charge, take the lead. They have a good justification: "I take the initiative because people aren't doing anything." And the more those people dominate, the more the others say to themselves, "it's not worth it to get involved; there are enough of them dealing with it and, in any case, there's nothing one can do about it." That's the first point of view.

The second point of view, linked to the first, is that of the dissolution of the grand political ideologies—either revolutionary or truly reformist—that really wanted to change things in society. For a thousand and one reasons, these ideologies have been discredited; they have ceased to correspond to the times, to correspond to people's aspirations, to the situation of society, to historical experience. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of communism was an enormous event. Can you show me one single person among the politicians—not to say political schemers—on the left, who has truly reflected on what has happened, on the reasons why this has happened, and who has, as we foolishly say, learned lessons from it? An evolution of this kind, first of all in its initial phase—the advent of [22] monstrosity, totalitarianism, the gulag etc.—and then in its collapse, merited a very in-depth reflection and a conclusion regarding what a movement that wants to change society can do, must do, must not do, cannot do. Absolutely no reflection! How, then, do you want what one calls the people, the masses, to arrive at their proper conclusions when they are not really enlightened?

You were talking to me about the role of intellectuals. What are these intellectuals doing? What have they done with Reagan, Thatcher, and with French socialism? They brought back the hard-line liberalism from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the one that we had been fighting against for 150 years and that would have

driven society to catastrophe because, in the end, old Marx wasn't entirely wrong. If capitalism had been left to itself, it would have collapsed a hundred times. There would have been a crisis of over-production every year. Why hasn't it collapsed? Because the workers struggled. They imposed wage increases, thereby creating enormous markets of internal consumption. They imposed reductions in working hours, which absorbed all of the technological unemployment. Now we are surprised that there is unemployment. But since 1940 working hours haven't [23] noticeably diminished. Nowadays we quibble, "thirty-nine hours," "thirty-eight and a half," "thirty-seven and three quarters," it's grotesque! . . . So, there was this return of liberalism, and I don't see how Europe will be able to get out of this crisis. The liberals tell us, "it's necessary to have confidence in the market." But what these neoliberals are telling us today, the academic economists themselves refuted in the 1930s. They showed that there can be no equilibrium in capitalist societies. These economists were neither revolutionaries nor Marxists! They showed that everything the liberals relate concerning the virtues of the market that would guarantee the best possible allocation, that would guarantee resources, the most equitable distribution of income possible, they showed that all of this is nonsense! All of this has been demonstrated and never refuted. But there is this grand economico-political offensive by the dominating and ruling strata that can be symbolized by the names of Reagan and Thatcher, and even Mitterrand for that matter! He said, "alright, you've laughed enough. Now we are going to fire you, we are going to slim down the industry—we are going to eliminate the "excess fat," as Mr. Juppé says—and then you will see that the market, in the long run, will guarantee you [24] well-being." In the long run, but in the meantime there is 12.5 percent of official unemployment in France.

D.M.: Why isn't there opposition to this liberalism?

C.C.: I don't know; it's extraordinary. We spoke of a sort of terrorism of conformist thought, that is to say of non-thought. It is unique in its conformity in the sense that it is the first form of thought that is complete non-thought, liberal conformist thought that no one dares to oppose.⁶ Currently, there is a sort of victorious discourse of the right that is not a discourse but affirmations, empty discourses. And behind this discourse, there is something else, which is what is most grave.

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What was liberal ideology in its heyday? Around 1850 it was a widespread ideology because there was a belief in progress: “get rich!” These liberals thought that progress would bring about an elevation of economic well-being. But even when people weren’t getting rich, in the exploited classes, there was a move toward less work, toward less arduous tasks, in order to be less stultified by industry. It was the great theme of the age. Benjamin Constant says as much: “the workers cannot vote because they are stultified by industry [25] (he says it straight out; people were honest back in the day!), thus a voting system based on the poll tax is necessary.” But subsequently, working hours diminished, there was literacy, there was education, there was enlightenment, which was no longer the subversive Enlightenment of the eighteenth century but enlightenment all the same, which spread through society. Science develops, humanity becomes more humane, societies become more civilized and little by little, asymptotically, we will arrive at a society where there will be practically no longer any exploitation: this representative democracy will tend to become a true democracy.

D.M.: Not bad?

C.C.: Not bad. Except that it didn’t work, and it doesn’t work like that. The rest happened, but men did not become more human, society did not become more civilized for all that. Capitalists did not soften up. We see that now. It’s not the fault of men; it’s the system. The result is that, from the inside, people no longer believe in this idea. The mood, the general frame of mind, is one of resignation. Today, what dominates is resignation, even among the representatives of liberalism. What’s the major argument at the [26] moment? “Perhaps this is bad, but the alternative is worse.” Everything boils down to this. And it’s true that this has numbed quite a lot of people. They tell themselves: “if we change things too much, we’re headed for a new Gulag.” That’s what’s behind the ideological exhaustion of our age, and I think that we will only get out of this by a resurgence of a powerful critique of the system and a revival of people’s activity, of their participation in communal affairs. It is a tautology to say that, but we must wait, we must hope and we must work in this direction.

D.M.: The political elite reduced to serving as lackey for the World Company, guard-dog intellectuals, the media that has betrayed its

role as an oppositional force, these are some of the causes and some of the symptoms of this rise of insignificance.

C.C.: But at present, we're feeling the tremors of a revival of civic activity. Here and there, we're nonetheless starting to understand that the "crisis" is not an inevitable outcome of modernity to which we must submit, "adapt," for fear of archaism. Thus the problem of the role of citizens is raised and the aptitude of each person to exercise rights and democratic duties with the aim—sweet and [27] beautiful utopia—of getting out of generalized conformism.

D.M.: Your colleague and accomplice, Edgar Morin, talks about the generalist and the specialist. Politics requires both: the generalist who knows next to nothing about a little of everything, and the specialist who knows everything about a single thing but not the rest. How is a good citizen made?

C.C.: This dilemma has been posed since Plato. Plato said that the philosophers, who are above the specialists, must rule. In Plato's theory, they have a view of everything. The other alternative was Athenian democracy. What were the Athenians up to? Indeed, something very interesting. It's the Greeks who invented elections. It's an historically attested fact. Perhaps they were wrong, but they invented elections! Who was being elected in Athens? The magistrates weren't being elected. The magistrates were being appointed by drawing lots or by rotation. For Aristotle, remember, a citizen is someone who is capable of governing and being governed. Everyone is capable of governing, so lots are drawn. Why? Because politics is not the business of specialists. There is no science of [28] politics. There is opinion, the *doxa* of the Greeks; there's no *episteme*.⁷ I'd like to point out, moreover, that the idea that there aren't specialists of politics and that all opinions are of equal worth is the only reasonable justification for the principle of the majority. Thus, for the Greeks, the people decide and the magistrates are chosen by drawing lots or appointed by rotation. There are specialized activities because the Athenians weren't crazy. Indeed, they did rather significant things; they made the Parthenon, etc. For these specialized activities—the setting up of shipyards, the construction of temples, the waging of war—specialists are necessary. Therefore, such specialists are elected. That's what an election is because election means election of the best. And what is the election

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of the best based on? Well, that's where the education of the people comes in, since they are led to choose. A first election takes place, a mistake is made, it's noticed, for example that Pericles is a deplorable strategist; well, then, he is not reelected, or he's even dismissed. But the postulate according to which *doxa*, opinion, is equally shared, is of course an entirely theoretical postulate. For this postulate to have a bit of substance, *doxa* must be cultivated. And [29] how can a *doxa* concerning the government be cultivated? Well, through governing. So democracy—this is what's important—is a matter of educating citizens, something that does not exist at all today.

Recently, a magazine published a statistic indicating that 60 percent of congressmen admit that they don't understand anything about the economy, congressmen, in France, who are going to make decisions, who are making decisions all of the time! They vote on the budget, they increase or decrease taxes, etc. In truth, these congressmen, just like cabinet members, are slaves to their specialized advisors. They have their experts, but they also have their prejudices or preferences. And if you closely follow how a government, a large bureaucracy, functions—as I have done in other circumstances—you see that those who are in charge trust the experts, but they choose experts who share their opinions. You will always find an economist who will tell you, "yes, yes, this must be done," or a military expert who will tell you, "yes, nuclear armament is necessary" or "nuclear armament is not necessary": anything and everything. This is an utterly insipid game, and this is how we are currently being governed. Hence the dilemma of Morin and Plato: [30] specialists or generalists. Specialists in the service of people, that is the question, not in the service of a few politicians. And people learning to govern by governing.

D.M.: You said "education," and you say, "this is not the case today." More generally, what mode of education do you envisage? What mode of distributing knowledge?

C.C.: There are many things that would need to be changed before we could talk about truly educational activity at the political level. The principle education in politics is active participation in affairs, which implies a transformation of institutions that encourages this participation and that makes it possible, whereas contemporary institutions repel, distance, dissuade people from participating in affairs.

But this is insufficient. It is necessary for the people to be educated, and to be educated for the governing of society. It is necessary for them to be educated in the *res publica*. And yet, if you take contemporary education, it has nothing whatsoever to do with this. We learn specialized things. Indeed, we learn to read and to write. This is very good; it is necessary that everyone know how to read and write. Moreover, among the Athenians, no one was illiterate; [31] almost everyone knew how to read, and it is because of this that they inscribed the laws in marble. Everyone could read them, and so the famous adage, “all are presumed to know the law,” had meaning. Today, you can be condemned because you committed an offense even though you can not know the law, and you are still told, “you are presumed to know the law.” Thus, education should be much more centered on communal matters. The mechanisms of the economy, the mechanisms of society, of politics, etc., should be made understandable. We are not capable of teaching history. History as we teach it to children bores them to death, whereas it could fascinate them. We should teach a true anatomy of contemporary society: how it is, how it functions.

D.M.: You have spoken and written a lot about the movement of May 1968 that, with Edgar Morin and Claude Lefort, you have called “the breach.” Today, this period is a golden age for the youth who regret not to have lived through it. If one thinks back to this period, one is struck by the blindness: this revolutionary, romantic, absolute, doctrinaire behavior without any basis, in complete ignorance. When I’m told today, “you’re lucky, you lived through 1968,” I [32] respond, “wait a minute, the cultural level, the level of knowledge was a lot lower than today.” Am I right?

C.C.: Yes, you’re right, from a certain point of view, which is very important. But it is not so much a question of the level of knowledge, I think. It’s the tremendous domination by ideology in the strict sense and, I would say, in the bad sense of the term. We can’t say the Maoists didn’t know; they had been indoctrinated or they indoctrinated themselves. Why did they accept indoctrination? Why did they indoctrinate themselves? Because they needed to be indoctrinated. They needed to believe. And this has been the great scourge of the revolutionary movement from the start.

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

C.C.: Man is a religious animal, and this is not at all a compliment. Aristotle, whom I venerate and never stop citing, only once said something that is really an enormous . . . well, we can't say blunder when it comes to Aristotle, but all the same. When he says, "man is an animal who desires knowledge," it's false.⁸ Man is not an [33] animal who desires knowledge. Man is an animal who desires belief, who desires the certainty of a belief, hence the grip of religions, hence the grip of political ideologies. In the worker's movement, at the outset, you find a very critical attitude. Take these two lines, the second verse of the Internationale, which is, to be sure, the hymn of the Paris Commune: "There is no supreme savior: no God"—exit *religion*—"no Caesar"—exit *Napoleon III*—"no tribune"—exit *Lenin*.⁹ Isn't this the case? People had this need for belief. They fulfilled it as they could, some with Maoism, others with Trotskyism and even with Stalinism, since one of the paradoxical results of May 1968 was not only to supply skin for the Maoist or Trotskyist skeleton but to increase, once more, the recruitment of the Communist Party, despite the absolutely hideous attitude of the Communist Party during the events of 1968 and the Grenelle Agreements.¹⁰ Today, how are we wiser than in May 1968? I think that perhaps the result, both of the consequences of May and of the evolution in the countries in Eastern Europe and of the evolution in general of society, is such that people have become much more critical. This is very important. To be sure, there is a fringe that still looks for faith [34] in Scientology, sects, or in fundamentalism, but this is in other countries, not so much in our own. However, people have become so much more critical, much more skeptical, which also inhibits them from acting, of course. Pericles, in the Funeral Oration delivered before the Athenians, said: "We are the only ones for whom reflection does not inhibit action." This is admirable! He adds: "The others either do not reflect and are reckless—they commit absurd acts—or, in reflecting, they do nothing because they say to themselves: this view and this speech are as good as their opposites."¹¹ Yet, that's just it: we are also currently, without a doubt, going through a phase of inhibition. Once bitten, twice shy. They had a taste of all this; they say to themselves, "that's enough of the lofty speeches and all the rest!" Indeed, lofty speeches aren't necessary,

true speeches are. This is what doesn't exist in a social projection [*projection sociale*], if I might say.

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

C.C.: I want to struggle along with practically everyone, with the entire population, or almost, and against the system, and therefore against the 3 percent, the 5 percent of people who are really [35] staunch and un-educatable defenders of the system. This is the division, in my opinion. I believe that currently everyone in society—apart from 3 or 5 percent—has a personal and fundamental interest in things changing.

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

C.C.: If you're putting it as a question of organization, I would say that there is no answer. Currently, this is also the question. One of my friends from the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Daniel Mothé—who is still my friend—wrote this extraordinary phrase: "Even the Roman Empire, in disappearing, left behind it ruins; the workers movement, in disappearing, only left refuse behind." How do we get organized now? The question is 'how can we get organized'? This question runs into the same obstacle, that is to say that people are not active enough at present to do something like that. In order to take up an organization of this kind, it's necessary to be ready to sacrifice more than one hour Saturday night. This implies a rather significant undertaking, and very few people are currently disposed to do this. This is why I describe the era since 1960 [36] as an era of privatization. People have withdrawn into their little milieu, the nuclear family, not even the extensive family. In May 1968, we used to say "subway-work-sleep," now it's "subway-work-TV-sleep."

D.M.: And no work? Can work be erased?

C.C.: Subway-work-TV-sleep and unemployment office.

D.M.: And the intense fear of losing one's job! The panic is widespread, as it's: "I don't have it anymore or I'm not going to have it anymore."

C.C.: Yes, absolutely.

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D.M.: What makes your thought so rich is also its psychoanalytic outlook on the world. It isn't that common to have, as such, several enlightening perspectives. Raoul Vaneigem published a book whose title is *We Who Desire Without End* [*Nous qui désirons sans fin*].

C.C.: We who are deranged [*Nous qui délirons*]? Oh that, yes! We who are deranged! (*laughter*)

D.M.: What do you think of this irreducible desire that makes it such that history continues? [37]

C.C.: Well, in any case, there is an irreducible desire. Indeed . . . It's a long story. Moreover, this wasn't always true; it's a relatively modern phenomenon. If you take archaic societies or traditional societies, there is no irreducible desire. We're not talking here about desire from a psychoanalytic point of view. We're talking about desire such as it is transformed by the socialization of peoples. These societies are societies of repetition. Yet, as it happens, in the modern era, there is a liberation in all senses of the term with respect to the constraints of the socialization of individuals. They say, for example, "you will take a wife from such a clan or such a family. You will have a woman in your life. If you have two of them, or two men, it will be in secret; it will be a transgression. You will have a social status, it will be this and not something else." There is a wonderful thing, in Proust, in the world of Combray. In Proust's family, someone—from the very proper bourgeoisie, the family he describes—who had married a duchesse or a princess had fallen in status. Even though he had money, even though he became someone who left his cast to climb higher, he became a gigolo. And to climb higher was to fall in status. But today we have entered into an era of illimitation [38] in all domains, and we have the desire for the infinite. Now this liberation is, in one sense, a great conquest. It's not a question of reverting to societies of repetition. But we must also learn—and this is one of my major themes—learn to self-limit ourselves, individually and collectively. And capitalist society today is a society that, in my eyes, is running into the abyss from every point of view because it's a society that doesn't know how to be self-limiting. And a truly free society, an autonomous society, as I call it, must know how to be self-limiting.

D.M.: To limit is to forbid. How does one forbid?

C.C.: No, not forbid in the repressive sense, but know that there are things we cannot do, or that we must not even try to do, or that we must not desire. Take, for example, the environment. We live in a free society on this marvelous planet that we're in the process of destroying. And as I utter this phrase, I have in mind the wonders of the planet. I'm thinking for example of the Aegean Sea, of snow-capped mountains, I'm thinking of the view of the Pacific from a spot in Australia, I'm thinking of Bali, of the Indies, of the French countryside [39] that we're in the process of demolishing and deserting. So many wonders are on the way to being demolished. I think that we should be the gardeners of the planet. We ought to cultivate it, cultivate it as it is and for itself, and find our life, our place relative to this. Here we have an enormous task. And all of this could take up a large part of people's free time, people liberated from work that is stupid, productive, repetitive, etc. Now this is clearly very far not only from the current system but from the dominant imagination of today. The imaginary of our age is the imaginary of unlimited expansion, it is the accumulation of junk: a TV in every bedroom, a microcomputer in every bedroom . . . this is what we must destroy. The system relies on this imaginary that is here and that functions.

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

C.C.: Yes.

D.M.: Difficult freedom?

C.C.: Oh yes! Freedom is very difficult. [40]

D.M.: Difficult democracy?

C.C.: Difficult democracy due to freedom, and difficult freedom due to democracy, yes, absolutely, because it is very easy to let oneself go: man is a lazy animal, it has been said. Here again, I return to my ancestors. There's a marvelous phrase from Thucydides: "it is necessary to choose: rest or be free." I think it's Pericles who says this to the Athenians: "if you want to be free, you have to work." You cannot rest. You cannot sit down in front of the TV. You are not free when you're in front of the TV. You believe you're free in zapping like an imbecile, but you aren't free; it's a false freedom. Freedom is not only Buridan's ass choosing between two piles of hay. Freedom is activity.

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And it's an activity that at the same time is self-limiting, that is to say, that knows that it can do anything but that *it mustn't do everything*. That's the great problem, for me, of democracy and of individualism.

D.M.: Freedom is made up of limits? Philosophizing is establishing limits?

C.C.: No, freedom is activity, the activity that knows how to set its own proper limits. [41] Philosophizing is thought. It is the type of thought that knows how to recognize that there are things we don't know and will never know . . .

NOTES

- ¹ The French Translation Workshop is run by Gabriel Rockhill at Villanova University's Philosophy Department. The participants in this translation included Derek Aggleton, Peter DeAngelis, Jessica Elkayam, Katherine Filbert, John V. Garner, Patricia Grosse, Alex Kratchman, Anna Luckini, Summer Renault-Steele, Adrienne St. Clair, and Richard Strong. This interview, like all of the other dialogues in this book, is a lively oral exchange that was transcribed into print as a relatively informal discussion, meaning that it was not polished to abrogate the signs of an oral conversation (the original interview can be listened to at http://www.la-bas.org/article.php3?id_article=1530&var_recherche=castoriadis). The English translation of this interview and the others in the book therefore aims at being faithful to the spry, colloquial nature of the discussions (sometimes at the expense of polished prose, like the original French text). —TR
- ² Cornelius Castoriadis published *La montée de l'insignifiance* in 1996 as the fourth volume of *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*. —TR
- ³ Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764) was an influential mistress of Louis XV. —TR
- ⁴ Aristotle opens Book III of his *Politics* with the question “who is the citizen?” (1274b40–1275a1), and he later answers: “a citizen is one who shares in governing and being governed” (1283b40–1284a1). See *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan

Barnes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, 2023 and 2037. —TR

- ⁵ *Société nationale des chemins de fer français*, or the French National Railways. —TR
- ⁶ We have done our best to capture Castoriadis' play on words and his suggestion that conformist thought (*la pensée unique*) is unique (*unique*) precisely because it is non-thought (*non-pensée*). —TR
- ⁷ Theoretically founded knowledge, science.
- ⁸ Castoriadis is surely referring to Aristotle's statement at the beginning of Book I (A) of the *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know" (980a22). See *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1552. —TR
- ⁹ This is literal translation of the original French lyrics (*Il n'est pas de sauveurs suprêmes / Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun*), which were transcribed in the singular in the printed version of this interview: "*Il n'est pas de sauveur suprême / Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun.*" In English, these lines of the *Internationale* are usually rendered as follows: "No savior from on high delivers / No faith have we in prince or peer." —TR
- ¹⁰ The Grenelle Agreements were negotiated between May 25 and 26, 1968, and led to a 25 percent increase in the minimum wage and a 10 percent increase in real wages. The base of the movement rejected these concessions, and the strikes continued. —TR
- ¹¹ Castoriadis appears to be referring to the following passage in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*: "The great impediment to action is, in our opinion, not discussion, but the want of that knowledge which is gained by discussion preparatory to action. For we have a peculiar power of thinking before we act and of acting too, whereas other men are courageous from ignorance but hesitate upon reflection" (2.40). The final lines of Castoriadis' sentence (*il y a ce discours et il y a le discours contraire*) suggest that reflection—for others—leads to hesitation because all views/speeches (*discours*) appear to be equivalent. —TR

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PART II
DIALOGUES

Preface: Introduction to Discussants

Translated by John V. Garner

The four “Dialogues” that are the subject of this little book, with Alain Connes (mathematician), Jean-Luc Donnet (psychoanalyst), Octavio Paz (poet), and Francisco Varela (biologist), are a modest testimony not simply to the passionate curiosity of Cornelius Castoriadis for all domains of knowledge, but above all to his philosophical determination to think all of what is thinkable.¹ It is a unique testimony, however, since these interviews were at first radio broadcasts, with the constraints and the limits—but also with the enthusiasm, polemical vigor, affinity, and friendship—that this implies. From time to time, thought drifts onto adventurous and precipitous paths, leaving itself open, in a way, to the test of the interlocutor. Several notes were added that will perhaps aid the reader to enhance his or her own course. But the transcription of the recordings was limited to a simple work of placement into a format, never seeking to smooth out the bumps, the approximations, much less the provocations.

It was Alain Finkielkraut who, in his broadcast “Rejoinders” (*France Culture*) from July 6, 1996, invited Octavio Paz and Cornelius Castoriadis, long-time friends for that matter, to have a dialogue concerning the theme “Facing Modernity.” As for the three other interviews, they are taken with the “good graces of . . . Cornelius Castoriadis,” and broadcast on [46] April 20 on *France Culture*. Several months before, Katharina von Bulow had proposed that he choose the persons with

whom he would like to share three hours of programming. Besides the three interlocutors present here, Castoriadis wished to meet with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jacques Lacarrière, Michaël Lévinas, and Théodore Monod.² All of the interviews, prepared by Katharina von Bulow, were recorded in November–December 1995. Only three were retained here, for reasons of space and also internal coherence. But the entire program has already been rebroadcast, and it is only necessary to write to *France Culture* in order to procure the tapes.

We warmly thank Katharina von Bulow and Alain Finkielkraut, first of all for their initiative as much as for the generosity with which they permitted us to use their work, and equally Pascal Vernay, without whom this edition would not have been able to appear. [47]

Octavio Paz (1914–1998), the most significant contemporary poet from Mexico, is one of the greatest Hispanic writers. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982. Among his numerous works are included *The Labyrinth of Solitude, the Other Mexico, and Other Essays*. New York: Grove Press, 1985; *The Tree Within*, trans. Eliot Weinberger. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1988; and *Itinerary: An Intellectual Journey*, trans. Jason Wilson. New York: Harcourt, 1999.

Jean-Luc Donnet, a psychoanalyst, published *L'Enfant de ça*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973; and *Surmoi*. Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1995.³

Francisco Varela (1946–2001), a biologist, has written many books, including Rosch, E., Thompson, E., and Varela, F., *The Embodied Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992; and Varela, F., *Invitation aux sciences cognitives*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999.

Alain Connes (1947–), a mathematician and professor at the College de France, has published Changeux, J.-P. and Connes, A., *Conversations on Mind, Matter, and Mathematics*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; and *Noncommutative Geometry, Quantum Fields and Motives*. Providence: American Mathematical Society, 2007. [48–9]

Robert Legros is a Belgian philosopher and a specialist in German Idealism and Romanticism. His works include *L'idée d'humanité*. Paris: Éditions Grasset, 1990; *L'avènement de la démocratie*. Paris: Éditions

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Grasset, 2000; and *La question de la souveraineté: Droit naturel et contrat sociale*. Paris: Éditions Ellipses, 2001.⁴

NOTES

- ¹ The fifth dialogue—Chapter 6 of this volume, entitled “Breaking the Closure”—was added to the English edition. —ED
- ² Daniel Cohn-Bendit (1945–) is a French-German politician who was a student leader during the May 1968 protests in Paris and who more recently founded the French political coalition Europe Écologie in 2009. Jacques Lacarrière (1925–2005) was a French philosopher and classicist, known for his work on the gnostics. Michaël Lévinas (1949–) is a French composer and pianist (and son of philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas). Théodore Monod (1902–2000) was a French naturalist, an explorer of the Saharah, and the founder of a Unitarian organization in France. —TR
- ³ One of Donnet’s works has been translated into English: *The Analyzing Situation*, trans. Andrew Weller. London: Karnac, 2009. —TR
- ⁴ This brief entry on Robert Legros has been added to the English edition along with the Legros dialogue itself. —ED

CHAPTER TWO

Rejoinders: Facing Modernity

Cornelius Castoriadis in Dialogue with Octavio Paz

Translated by John V. Garner

ALAIN FINKIELKRAUT: Octavio Paz is a poet from a continent where Europe left its mark, but one that is not solely European: Latin America. Cornelius Castoriadis is a philosopher who was born in Greece, the cradle of Europe and of philosophy. Through the Spanish Civil War for Octavio Paz, and through the Greek resistance for Cornelius Castoriadis, they have each participated in the great experiences and the great hopes of the twentieth century. Equally, each of them very quickly came to engage in self-inquiry. Their sojourn within what Octavio Paz calls the learned darkness of authoritarian socialism was short-lived; and today they have the ultimate point in common of not accompanying their passionate denunciations of totalitarian politics with an unconsidered praise of modern democracies. Castoriadis' latest book is entitled *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*,¹ a beautiful title that holds nothing back. And what Octavio Paz is currently publishing, *Itinerary*,² concludes with a disquieting description of the nihilism of our democracies. Insignificance, nihilism. If you like, we will start out from this shared disquietude and, more precisely, from a reflection from [50] Baudelaire that you, Octavio Paz, quote in another text:

The world is coming to an end. [. . .] I do not say that the world will be reduced to the expedients and the comic disorder of the South

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American Republics, that perhaps we shall return to the savage state [. . .]. No [. . .]. The mechanical will so have Americanized us, progress will so have atrophied all our spiritual side, that naught, in the sanguine, sacrilegious or unnatural dreams of the Utopians can be compared to the actual outcome. [. . .] But it is not particularly in political institutions that there will be manifest the universal ruin, or the universal progress; for the name matters little. It will be in the debasement of the heart.³

Now that we have finally been released from the struggle against totalitarian superstition and we can reflect more freely on the world in which we live, is it to the poet Baudelaire rather than to the philosophers of the *grand avènement* that we must give our support?

OCTAVIO PAZ: I think that Baudelaire was not mistaken. I am not saying that he was a prophet (I detest that title for poets), but he saw our situation with clarity. Democracy is founded on the plurality of opinions. At the same time, this plurality depends on the plurality of values. Advertising and the market destroy these pluralities by reducing all values to price. In my opinion, this is the complaisant nihilism of modern society. In this sense, Baudelaire was right: we are living in a complaisant nihilism, not in tragic nihilism as Dostoevsky or even Nietzsche thought. [51]

A.F.: Complaisant nihilism and not tragic nihilism. Cornelius Castoriadis, it is somewhat the same question that I would like to pose to you, but starting from this expression that you use as the title of an article and of your whole book: the rising tide of insignificance. What does it signify?

CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS: It means, first of all, that insignificance is not simply a state that settled in by itself but is like a kind of desert that is progressing within the contemporary world. To take up an expression from the book, the desert is, precisely, growing. The same is the case with insignificance, because, as Octavio Paz said, it is a kind of nihilism, pathetic nihilism. Furthermore, I was very happy to see in his book the frequent utilization of an expression that I myself had employed as the title of a text in *World in Fragments*, that of conformism.⁴ It is astonishing to think that there were ideologues and writers speaking of the contemporary age as an age of individualism, all

while, precisely, what we must deplore most of all in the present is the disappearance of true individuals, given this kind of generalized conformism.

A.F.: Concerning this generalized conformism, you quote Nietzsche: “The desert grows.” “Woe,” he added, “to him who harbours deserts!”⁵ In order to follow up on this quotation, does this have to do with people, is it men, [52] forces? Who is protecting the desert, according to you?

O.P.: It is difficult to respond to you. Who is protecting the desert? Nearly all of the institutions, I think; and above all the mechanism of modern societies. I spoke about the market. The market reduces values to a single price, to price. In this sense, it substitutes for the plurality of values a single value, and this value is not founded on a meta-historical or ethical notion, but on utility. This is a time of the deterioration of the West, which is contemporaneous with the development of science and technology. One of the most disturbing paradoxes in my opinion is this coincidence between the acquired knowledge of science, the development of technology (one can criticize it or not, but it is a fact that we are going to debate), and the profound nihilism, the profound deterioration of all values as subject to laws of economic exchange, of commercial exchange, of consumption. Modern society changed citizens into consumers.

A.F.: You are describing this change, therefore, starting from the market and technology, from their concomitant development, from their unhappy coincidence. But this appears a bit like a power without a face. As such, when I ask who is protecting the desert, it is difficult to designate responsibilities or culprits like that . . . [53]

C.C.: Yes, I think that it is necessary to modify Nietzsche’s expression. For me, I cited Nietzsche because it is a beautiful phrase; I am not at all Nietzschean. But it is not, *who is protecting the desert*; it is, *who is propagating the desert*, surely. That is the question. And I think, precisely, that we have a situation that provides a rebuttal to all the theories of history that we know of, above all to the history of this latest period. There is no conspiracy of large capital; there are no particular villains—even if there are villains in abundance, we see it everyday, again recently in France moreover . . .

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O.P.: Everywhere!

C.C.: Everywhere, certainly, but what there is, is a sort of historical Niagara. There is no conspiracy, but everything conspires [*conspire*] in the sense that everything radiates [*respire*] together, everything radiates in the same direction: the corruption that has become systematic; the autonomization of techno-scientific evolution that no one controls; the market, of course, the tendency of the economy; the fact that we no longer worry about knowing if what we produce serves whatever purpose it may be but solely about knowing if it can be sold (and not even about this, because if we produce it, we will make sure, by way of advertising, that it can be sold). We're acquainted with all of these phenomena. That is, we have, all at once, a kind of faceless inhuman power, an explosion of its institutional bearers, and even a servility of these institutional bearers to this historical tendency. [54]

O.P.: I would like to add something. Yes, there is no one in charge. This is not a class as Marx wanted it to be. It's not a group; it's not a tyrant. These are impersonal forces. Thus, we find ourselves confronting impersonal forces, nearly autonomous mechanisms; and, at the same time, what is confronting them is general passivity. Now, in my opinion, the disconcerting problem is not that of technology (in the end, I am not really against technology, why?). No, I think that the disturbing thing, the phenomenon that must preoccupy us, is the phenomenon of general passivity. Here, I see—and perhaps Cornelius Castoriadis is in agreement with me—that one of the factors, perhaps the decisive factor, was the great revolutionary failure of the twentieth century. At the end of the century, after the fall of communism, we find ourselves in a kind of historical pause, a kind of void. There is no historical project, and, at the same time, there is the acceptance of this situation, which, on the one hand, destroys values, and, on the other hand, transforms society into a society of consumption.

A.F.: You are certainly in agreement with that assessment, Cornelius Castoriadis . . .

C.C.: Yes, of course.

A.F.: It is the historical failure that explains the passivity?

C.C.: No, I think there is more than that, in one sense. I think that what Octavio Paz is mentioning is a [55] fundamental factor. There is this disappointment, this fantastic disillusionment regarding the transformation of the hopes of a large part of humanity, the intellectuals, the workers, and the ordinary people . . . Hopes are transformed into a totalitarian machine of extermination and oppression or, with social-democracy in the West, into a simple agency of accommodation to the existent order, small reforms, etc. Well, that's one thing. The second thing is that there was, nevertheless, an extraordinary adaptation of the regime—that is, of capitalism—to a new situation that translates, for example, directly into the society of consumption. This is to say that, starting from a certain moment, we understood what we had to do. Octavio Paz cites Fourier, saying that we have to manufacture, for people's consumption, indestructible products (I'm not talking about vegetables or fabrics but about other products). But what is precisely characteristic of modern production is what economists have called incorporated obsolescence. That is, products are manufactured in order to be used up very rapidly; all consumers know it. And what is the logic of this story? One of my friends—a worker in automobile distribution—said, in 1954, that a Rolls-Royce was becoming less expensive than a Renault 4CV. Everyone laughed, but he was right. A Rolls-Royce lasts almost indefinitely and it offers a lot more services because you don't have to repair it, while the Renault 4CV was something to throw away after 3 or 5 years. But that goes hand in hand with the fact that, effectively, in the current social and economic conditions, you can buy Renault 4CVs [56] with the politics of credit, monthly installments. It's a small price and so they sell, while the Rolls-Royce doesn't sell.

O.P.: I'm wondering if the passivity isn't also explained by the amelioration of the material living conditions of society. In this sense, capitalism won favor because it was able to offer better, less expensive products to the masses.

A.F.: To that end, I would like to simply illustrate what you are saying through a joke that was common in Poland during the totalitarian period. A customer goes into a shop, he asks for a cut of meat, and they say to him: "Oh no, mister, here there is no fish, there is no

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meat; that's the other side!" So, it's a joke concerning the shortage that effectively made it such that the capitalist system was able to present itself as—and to be relatively (vis-a-vis a system where nothing functioned)—a system where things function. One world of shortage, one world of abundance. Now, must this be credited—or not, and to what degree—to its account?

C.C.: That is not the problem, to credit it to its account or not. We must say first that this had all the more impact since Marxist ideology propagated the idea that capitalism can only condemn people to misery. But that was refuted day after day by the facts. Capitalism did not evolve spontaneously; there were the workers' struggles, there were the unions, there were pressures, strikes, etc. But, [57] at a certain point in time, it accommodated itself to all of that. I would like to add one thing, and we should, for that matter, be careful here, without making prophecies or renewing apocalyptic predictions: maybe this period of capitalism has already begun to be behind us. What we are seeing currently in the industrialized countries—in particular in Europe, less in the United States—is a crisis of a new type, one with this creation of exclusion, with an extraordinary unemployment level, with globalization that obligates the old industrial countries to enter into phases where there are no longer jobs for people. And all of this is, nevertheless, still the future—well, sure—it's not the future, it's the present, but I do not want to make predictions . . .

O.P.: But perhaps it isn't necessary to focus on these questions at the theoretical, or rather the technical, level. It is clear that the economy of the totalitarian countries was an economy of shortage and that the economy of capitalism is an economy of abundance.

C.C.: Of relative abundance, yes.

O.P.: Of abundance for the majority, for the majority in the developed countries. If you are speaking about my country, it's the opposite. The majority is poor and even sometimes miserable. But we are speaking right now of the most developed, most advanced sort of country. Now, the question arises of knowing how abundance (Marx was thinking of abundance) produced negative fruits, from the spiritual point of view, for the [58] population of the countries of the West and detrimental fruits for the underdeveloped countries. And

that is, for me, one of the great contemporary historical mysteries: how abundance, in producing conformity, neutered individuals, transformed people in masses, into satisfied masses without will and without direction.

C.C.: It transformed them into totally private or privatized individuals, as I have been saying for a long time (this has been one of the themes of my reflection since 1960). But I do not believe that it is necessary to incriminate abundance as such. I believe that it is necessary to incriminate the mentality that makes the economy the center of everything. In Marx's work, it was the center of everything because the capitalist economy was not going to be able to give people what they were waiting for; only the communists were able to provide it, communism such as he thought of it. For people in current society, it's the same idea: what's important is the economy, consumption. But, in fact, the crisis of the current society concerns the significations that hold this society together, what one calls values or what one could also call norms. It is not due to the diffusion of material abundance; it exists in a certain parallel way. What does the crisis stem from? On the one hand, it stems from what you mentioned, from the fall of revolutionary ideologies and, on the other hand, from the very profound crisis of the ideology of progress. For people in the nineteenth century—for the big liberals or the progressivists—progress was not only a question of the accumulation of wealth. [59] John Stuart Mill thought that progress was going to give people freedom, democracy, happiness, a better morality. But, today, no one, not even the incense-bearers for the current system, dare to say that there's nothing to do but let progress do its work and we will all be happy or better off. That is not true; everyone knows that perhaps we will have a better television and then that's all.

O.P.: Yes, which is to say that we are all facing a historical project that is fully tried and tested; it's progress. But Castoriadis said some things that are slightly different. The first, which touched me profoundly, is that we have reduced (modern society has reduced) the meaning of all values to their economic value. So, in order to renew society, it will be necessary to undertake a critique. The remedies are not solely of an economic character; they have a character that is more profound, moral, or spiritual, whatever you want to call it.

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A.F.: Now, I would like to ask a question that is symmetrical to the one that I asked just before. I asked you: how can this phenomenon of insignificance or of nihilism be localized? Are there guilty parties or people in charge? Who is behind it? And you said, Cornelius Castoriadis, that there is no “who,” but everything conspires; you, Octavio Paz, are going in the same direction. So, I can ask the other question. You advocate, you hope for, you dream of an exit from nihilism. An awakening [*réveil*], it’s a word you employ again and again Cornelius [60] Castoriadis. You say: we are living in a moment of lethargy, it can be stopped, it must be stopped. But is there a “who” who can be the bearer of this awakening now that we no longer have this myth of the proletariat, of a class, or of a redemptive people. On what and on whom can we count in order to escape from insignificance?

C.C.: This is precisely one of the great difficulties of the current political thinking, particularly of a political activity, because, as you said, we have come out of the era of privileged classes. Historically, the proletariat has become a minority (there are very few true proletariats currently), and there isn’t a privileged social class from the point of view of a political project. I think that what characterizes at once the depth of the current crisis and perhaps the depth of the hopes that we can have (it might seem funny, but so be it) is this disappearance of a privileged bearer. This is to say that the phenomenon affects all of society, all the social layers, except perhaps a small percentage of people who are at the summit. I am thinking, for example, about May 1968 (which is gone, for sure) when we saw that those who were extraordinarily active in the movement productive of ideas and significations were not really the workers. They were the technicians, they were the self-employed, they were the intellectuals (if you wish), the students . . .

O.P.: The students first of all. [61]

C.C.: The students, of course, and the youth first of all; and that’s very important even if it created great difficulties for action.

O.P.: Yes, 1968 was a flame that illuminated us during a very short period, but it showed us a certain direction. Something struck me in

the universal revolt: it came from a lot of countries, France, the United States, Germany, my country . . .

C.C.: Mexico . . .

O.P.: Yes. And, for all that, the demands were not economic in character, nor even social, but, rather, moral in character. And the predecessors, the prophets (vague prophets) of the movement were rather poets. Sometimes, in listening to our students or in reading the inscriptions on the walls, I thought of William Blake, of André Breton, of a lot of poets from the nineteenth century—the romantics—and from the twentieth century who were rebelling as Baudelaire had done. They were not making denunciations in the name of a class, nor in the name of an economy. What was in play was something completely different: the position, the place of the human person in society, I would say. I think that modern society eliminated values, the very center of the creativity that is the human person. Castoriadis spoke about the individual; I would like to substitute the word person for the word individual. [62]

A.F.: I would like to dwell properly for one second on May 1968 and on the uneasiness regarding the movement that might be the bearer of this awakening or of this exit from nihilism. Because this movement itself ought to remain ambiguous or ambivalent for us. Certainly, there has arisen an attempt to get out of economism, a severe and beautiful critique of the values of consumption. But the fact remains that one of the most severe symptoms of the spiritual crisis that you are both describing is the crisis of education, the crisis of transmission (moreover, you speak about this, Cornelius Castoriadis, in your book). And here, nevertheless, the movement of 1968 is also somewhat responsible, given that it had a way of presenting pedagogical mastery as a form of oppressive mastery; the master who teaches and the master who oppresses were somewhat identified with each other. And it is true that, today, the disappearance of culture or the humanities in instruction, in the name of profitability, is all the more easily achieved since this culture was delegitimated in the name of the revolution. Therefore, even this movement cannot be greeted or commemorated in a uniquely emphatic way.

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C.C.: No, but permit me to not be entirely in agreement with that analysis. I believe, precisely, that the contemporary crisis of production (which is, moreover, universal, and which is not limited to the countries that went through a phase like that of May 1968) has much deeper roots. It has roots in the crisis of values. Take these ridiculous changes in the educational program. [63] In France, each appointed official of the *Éducation nationale* introduces a new system by introducing new programs. Why? Precisely because they do not know what to transmit. They do not want to transmit (which is grotesque!) traditional culture any more, the inherited culture, which is, after all, an absolute base. They want to render education technical or instrumental so that those who are coming out of instruction can find a job. And, of course, that fails ridiculously because between the moment when the appointed official and his experts have put in place the programs that are supposed to be adapted to the demands of the industry and the moment when the people are coming out onto the market, the demands of the industry have already changed. . . . But there is something more. Namely, in the crisis of significations in our current societies, no one invests positively in education any more. Parents no longer invest in school, students and school children no longer invest in school, maybe we can also say that even the instructors can no longer invest in school. This is a serious problem.

O.P.: You are talking about education and, mostly, of education in France. These are subjects that are entirely foreign for me. But since we are speaking . . .

C.C.: I'm sorry; I believe that it is widespread. For example, in the United States . . .

O.P.: Yes, everywhere. You're talking about France in particular, but I was speaking primarily in general. It's an important subject, but difficult. All the [64] historical phenomena have a kind of double face. You spoke about the youth revolt in May 1968 against the professors, against the masters, and, in the end, against classical values. That's true, at least in part. But I think that there is another indicator of the ambiguity of all historical phenomena: that is, the aftermath of 1968 brought the terrorist groups out. But I think that what is most important is not to speak about the causes of the current crisis . . .

A.F.: Excuse me. I would like to say that this cult of youth, in my opinion, is interesting, and it extends far beyond the case of France. Youth was being affirmed very strongly in 1968 with a kind of potential for revolt. But this conformism, about which both of you tend to agree, is surely exemplified by the cult of youth.

C.C.: It is one of its manifestations.

A.F.: Another manifestation that seems interesting to me is, as Péguy⁶ said, this way of having a foot in all camps [*toucher à tous les guichets*]. That is, the more one is in the middle—the more one is really in the norm, the current norm, the norm of current affairs and of the media—the more one presents oneself as marginal, as subversive. Gay Pride⁷ can be described like this. You know, the large demonstration that took place several days ago. It was celebrated by all of the newspapers; it completely took on the appearance of radical subversion. . . . It seems to me that this is one of the modalities of contemporary conformism. [65]

C.C.: Sure, but there are several things here. There is the fact that, from the moment when the system's producers and vendors discovered that there was, as they say, an enormous youth *market*, it ceased to be simply a subversive value or a revolutionary value. And then, on the other hand, there is one fact that neither the classical revolutionaries, the reformers, nor the democrats really ever comprehended, realized, or predicted: the fantastic capacity of contemporary society to absorb everything. This is to say that everything becomes a means for the system. If there were today, for example, an Antonin Artaud—there are no more of them, but if there were one—it would be a spectacular curiosity if we were to provide funding for him. So, either he would commit suicide, put himself away in a psychiatric hospital, or he would, himself as well, become someone who would end up on television.

O.P.: A television star! I think that we agree in saying that we are living through—I would not say a crisis ("*Krisis*") because it is a very exaggerated word—but we are living in a kind of empty space where the great hope of the classical liberalisms with the idea of progress and the hopes of Marxism are defined as a serious historical failure. The important thing in my opinion will be to see how we can remake

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human society. On this subject, Castoriadis said something that I believe is important. He spoke about heteronomous societies and autonomous societies. It's an idea that is debatable, but quite fruitful. So he would like (as would I and [66] everyone) this thing that he calls an autonomous society, which is to say a society founded by itself and conscious that the founder is itself, and not an exterior agent, a god, an idea . . .

C.C.: Or the laws of history . . .

A.F.: Yes. But all societies, even autonomous societies, must found themselves on certain principles. And so, for some time now, I have been saying (it's something that I wrote about in the little book, *Itinerary*, and in others, primarily a book on love that I had published a bit before⁸) that what will furnish the possibility of founding Western society anew will be the rediscovery of the notion of the person. Yet, in the past, the notion of the person entailed a duality between soul and body. In all civilizations we have these dualities, these dialogues, sometimes these struggles between body and soul. But there is something important in the current world, namely, the advances, the discoveries of science. More and more, we are thinking that what we call mind [*esprit*] is a dimension of the body.

A.F.: So, there was something like an eclipse of the notion of the person. [67]

O.P.: I think that the old attributes of the person now take refuge in another conception of *esprit*, of "mind,"⁹ as the Americans say. A neurobiologist whom I admire, Edelman,¹⁰ said something very important in my opinion. For him, the human species (in particular the human mind) is a moment of general evolution; and he added that one cannot speak of a system of neurons, of a nervous system, as if it were identical for all individuals. It is different for each individual. Consequently, it is very difficult to formulate laws susceptible to generalization while coming to recognize, as is necessary, that each individual (he does not speak of the person, he speaks of man, but it's the same thing) is a unique individual. This is to say that even the most materialist modern science, let's say biology, admits that each person is unique, exceptional. And I think that all politics, all new political thought, must found itself on the recognition of the fact that the person, each person, is unique.

C.C.: This is why I do not restrict myself to speaking of an autonomous society. I say: an autonomous society where there are autonomous individuals, and I stress the fact that the two are inseparable. Because those whom you call persons—well, in France the word would not see a big success because it has Christian connotations, personalists. . . . I know very well that you are not using it in that sense, but . . . [68]

O.P.: No, but I am not afraid of . . .

C.C.: For good reason, me neither.

O.P.: Because Christianity forms a part of our heritage.

C.C.: Of course, of course. But, in the end, I prefer to speak of autonomous individuals (or, if you wish, of autonomous personalities). And we can reproach our contemporary society precisely for killing personality, individuals, the true individuality of people. Now, if we want to move on to something different, for me, this is what strikes me as a problem (and here we are facing the abyss): basically, what does this require? It requires a new historical creation with new significations, new values, a new type of human being, all of which has, more or less, to be done at the same time, transcending, by definition, all possibility of foresight and of forward planning.

A.F.: A new historical creation that would be a radical alternative . . .

C.C.: Absolutely.

A.F.: Is it necessary to think in terms of a radical alternative . . . ? [69]

O.P.: If we think in terms of a radical alternative, we are thinking in terms of creation . . . ?

C.C.: Yes.

O.P.: But there it is; I'm a bit indecisive concerning the word creation. If the word person has Christian echoes, the word creation has even more theological tonalities (*laughs*). It confronts us with the idea of a creator God who takes the world and makes it emerge from nothing. Historical creation must base itself on already existing givens. We cannot do something purely unheard-of. In each period of history,

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historical creations are not simply combinations, but also transformations of preexisting elements. That's why the theory of evolution seems particularly fertile to me. Thanks to it, we are able, without betraying the rationality of the universe, to arrive at this strange being, at this strange appearance in the history of the universe, which is the human mind.

C.C.: Here, there would be an entire philosophical discussion that I will abstain from approaching now because it would lead us too far afield. In any case, I agree with you in saying that there is, in effect, a theological past behind this word creation; but we are not obliged to adopt it, any more than you adopt the theological past that is there behind the word person. I would say, simply, that when the *polis*, the Greek city, emerges, when modernity emerges, etc., there's no God behind it. It's a creation of men; and it is not a simple [70] reprisal of elements that were in existence. There is a new form that is not limited to combination. When you write a poem, you use the words of the language, but what you are doing is not a combination of these words. It's a new form that you impose on them, through their linkage, through a sense [*esprit*] that pervades a poem. This is your creative side [*côté créateur*] qua poet.

O.P.: Yes, but you are already speaking of a philosophical definition of the word creation in saying that it is not like a combination (but if it is not a combination, what is it?). But that is not what is important. The interesting idea, in my opinion, is that creation is only comprehensible as transformation, a transformation that can be radical, like the transformation from animal to man.

C.C.: . . . For example.

A.F.: But perhaps one can make another objection to the utilization of this term creation, specifically for this period we live in. Each of you spoke of the failure of a certain hopefulness, and of the consequences that this failure was able to have, in terms of passivity. But is there not, is it not necessary to take into account, quite simply, a failure of or a critique of the "principle of hope"¹¹? And here—I'm making reference to the book of Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*¹²— basically [71] the modern program (or paradigm) was always founded on the surpassing of the given toward something

better, and creation also presents itself as a surpassing and sometimes as an abolition of the given. Now, I would like to cite a phrase of Hans Jonas that seems to me to define our current situation well, when we live under the threat of a more and more powerful technology. He said,

That which had always been the most elementary of the givens, taken for granted as the background of all acting and never requiring action itself—that there are men, that there is life, that there is a world for both—this suddenly stands forth, as if lit up by lightning, in its stark peril through human deed. In this very light the new responsibility appears. Born of danger, its first urging is necessarily an ethics of preservation and prevention, not of progress and perfection. (Jonas, 1994, p. 139)

This kind of revolution or existential conversion that obliges us to conserve, to preserve, to safeguard the planet, to manage it—as you say elsewhere as well, Cornelius Castoriadis—as good caretakers [*en bons pères de famille*], mustn't all of this lead us away from a paradigm of all-too-heroic creation?

C.C.: No. I think that there is a misunderstanding here because we are situating ourselves at different levels and at levels that are heterogeneous. When I speak of creation, I am speaking qua philosopher. Take the “principle of hope,” must we hope, [72] etc. One of the most considerable creations that I know of in history, which still enlightens us today (I think that everyone will be in agreement here), is that of the Greeks. The ancient Greeks hoped for nothing, nothing, nothing, and, in my opinion, that is why they were so free in their creation. The tragedies already said, “you’re going to die.” The famous choir of *Oedipus* said that the best thing is to not be born; and second in quality is, once one is born, to die as soon as possible. That is not hope.

O.P.: The ancients were not acquainted with the notion of progress. It's a notion that comes from the Bible; it predates the adoption of Christianity. It's not possible to imagine it earlier. It's true that the Greeks did not hope; it's clear that this is why they invented tragedy. But you spoke, in the quotation that you made, of the world that we have in plain view. I would like to speak about the notion of the person by trying to integrate it into new conceptions of thought and

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of modern science. Here, I am also speaking (since every new ethic, every new politics must find itself here) of the discovery of others, of our fellow creatures [*semblables*]. On this subject, in the first place, it really seems that self-consciousness [*conscience de soi*], in children, comes only after the consciousness of others [*conscience des autres*]. This is to say that solidarity is an innate given. In the second place, I believe that, more than philosophical thought, modern scientific theories (which are physics on the one side and biology on the other) have—through being combined with this modern reality, with the [73] destruction of the material world, of the atmosphere, etc.—shown us that we are products of nature. We are sons of the cosmos. We are brothers not only of living beings, from the simple to the most complex, but also brothers of the elementary particles, and at the same time of the stars and of the sun. I think that we can find here the base upon which to construct a new society.

C.C.: Yes. Nonetheless, I would like to recapture some points of this discussion, which are tending somewhat to spread themselves out in all directions. If, today, a social-historical movement were advancing itself and, allow me to use the expression, were creating a new society, why would there be a radical rupture here? Precisely because it would only be able to create it by breaking with this idea that God created the world and gave it to man (Genesis, etc.). God did not create the world; in any case, he did not give it to man. As for Descartes' idea, according to which we are advancing in knowledge in order to become masters and possessors of nature, it is the greatest absurdity that a philosopher has ever been able to say (it explains itself historically). We will never be masters and possessors of nature. We will, for sure, never be able to invert the rotational direction of the galaxy. So, we cannot be that. It's the same with Marx's idea, according to which mythology relies on human ignorance. No, mythology is an attempt to give meaning to the world; it does not result simply from ignorance. There is a necessary rupture with all of these principles of the domination of [74] nature, of rationality transformed, from an instrument of man or an instrument of thought, into a final dominating principal. And there is a value to substitute for all of that. I agree with what Octavio Paz said; I would formulate it a bit differently. What would an autonomous society be able to propose for itself as an

objective? The freedom of all and justice. (Not happiness, because happiness is not a political question, but an individual question.) But what else, substantively? Well, I think that what an autonomous society would propose for itself, as an objective, is to help human beings to become the most autonomous and the most creative possible. In a way that is parallel, if I may, to the culture of good caretakers [*en bons pères de famille*] in our natural garden, there is also the bringing up of the new generations in a spirit of the development of their capacities, of respect for others, of respect for nature.

A.F.: Octavio Paz, are you in agreement with that program? [75]

O.P.: I agree, but I think that it is necessary to formulate it in a somewhat different way. I would say that this program, this historical project (and this is why I do not believe that this is a creation, a radical rupture), has roots in the past and that the primary exigency is to recuperate, to recreate the notion of the person, or, if you wish, of the individual.

C.C.: Yes, absolutely.

O.P.: And I also say that, in this notion of the person, there is always, in an implicit way, a notion of the other; and, consequently, the second concept that we must cite is the notion of fraternity, a fraternity that does not found itself on the idea that we are sons of God, but on the consciousness that we are products of nature, of the universe. I also think that this project must take into consideration a lot of other things that we are not able to speak about now, for example the purely quantitative problem, the multitude, this difficulty of modern societies. Our listeners are a multitude. Cornelius Castoriadis spoke about Greek democracy; but Greek democracy was made for small countries, for cities, and currently we are dealing with enormous nations with millions and millions of inhabitants . . .

C.C.: . . . And even the whole planet.

A.F.: Hence the necessity to resolve, as well, the imposing question of the multitude.

C.C.: Of course. I think, as I wrote in the past, that this question is manageable for human beings [*à la mesure des êtres humains*].

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Humanity can do better; we are not obliged to always swing between small, self-governed cities and empires submitted to alienating and oppressing powers. We can invent, create forms of collective government at scales much greater than those that we have known up to now. [76]

A.F.: Good. So, allow me to say something as well, precisely in order to reconcile poetry and philosophy, since I had the chance to listen to a philosopher and a poet. I find it—this something—once again in the work of Hans Jonas, who maintains that we are led not simply to manage the planet as good caretakers [*en bons pères de famille*] but, he says, to become those responsible for nature, for which we have not been prepared. And, he adds, “a silent plea for sparing its integrity seems to issue from the threatened plenitude of the living world” (Jonas, 1994, p. 8). It seems to me that poetry has, for a long time, made comprehensible this silent call and has prepared us for this role of those responsible, from Ronsard to Octavio Paz, passing through Yves Bonnefoy, René Char, etc. So, there I have come to an end. I would like to thank you for this discussion and to refer back to your works with all due seriousness because I believe that these are important books and that it is necessary to read them and to take them along on vacation because this age is in need of that.¹³ [77]

NOTES

- ¹ *La montée de l'insignifiance. Carrefours du labyrinthe, Volume 4.* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996.
- ² *Itinerary: An Intellectual Journey*, trans. Jason Wilson. New York: Harcourt, 2001.
- ³ See Baudelaire, C., “Rockets,” in *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*, trans. Joseph T. Shipley. New York: Modern Library, 1919, 222.
- ⁴ “Post-modernism as Generalized Conformism,” in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, trans. David A. Curtis. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- ⁵ See Nietzsche, F., “Among Daughters of the Desert,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 252. —TR

- ⁶ The reference is surely to French poet Charles Péguy (1873–1914). —TR
- ⁷ In English in the text. —TR
- ⁸ The reference is to *An Erotic Beyond: Sade*, trans. Jason Wilson. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998.
- ⁹ In English in the text. —TR
- ¹⁰ The reference seems to be to Gerald Edelman, the American biologist and winner of the 1972 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. —TR
- ¹¹ Bloch, E., *The Principle of Hope, Vol. 1–3*, trans. Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight. Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1995.
- ¹² Jonas, H., *The Imperative of Responsibility*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- ¹³ A.F. closes the discussion with the following editorial remark: “So, Octavio Paz, you published *Itenéraire*, with Gallimard, and also with Gallimard another book to which you made reference during our conversation: *La flamme double, amour et érotisme*. Your latest work, Cornelius Castoriadis, is entitled *La montée de cl’insignifiance*, and it is published with Éditions du Seuil.” —TR

CHAPTER THREE

The Meaning of Psychoanalysis

*Cornelius Castoriadis in Dialogue with
Jean-Luc Donnet*

Translated by John V. Garner

KATHARINA VON BULOW: I would like to ask Jean-Luc Donnet what memories he retains from his initial encounter with Cornelius Castoriadis, who was known at the time primarily as a political thinker in an age when Lacan and Lacanianism was starting to find a major place in the analytic milieu.

JEAN-LUC DONNET: What strikes me, when I think back on the way that I met Cornelius Castoriadis, is that he appeared in the psychiatric and psychoanalytic milieu, which was my own at the time, as someone from somewhere else. There was a shock effect, and also an effect of fascination, before the expanse of what he was able to encompass in his human experience and in his political experience, just as much as in his encyclopedic knowledge. For me, what was doubtless most striking in the first readings I was able to make of his texts was precisely this freedom, this acuity, that he gave to his position, his epistemological cognizance. And there was also this distance in the way he looked at analysis, a look from outside (at the time I didn't exactly know what his position was as an analyst-practitioner). But also, [78] profoundly informed, he immediately situated psychoanalysis within a whole ensemble of scientific and, of course, philosophical domains. He stood out beyond the fetishism of science,

beyond narrow specificities, and this was obviously something very impressive. As for the political dimension, it is, of course, primarily through the crisis of May 1968 and the tumult that it instigated in the analytic institutions that Castoriadis' political position—that is, the questioning of institution—interested me.

CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS: Perhaps it would be good to say something about the reasons that made me come to psychoanalysis. I was always interested by the work of Freud but, in the beginning, as a work among others. And this interest turned into a passionate and privileged study at a point in time when two processes came together: a personal analysis that I had begun in 1960 and, on the other hand, the profound reconsideration [*remise en cause*] of the theoretical edifice of Marx that I had undertaken, notably of the aspects that seemed unacceptable to me at the time, like a certain determinism or rationalism of Marx, etc. And for me the junction was achieved with my discovery, or my rediscovery, of the imagination and of the imaginary, of the imagination on the plane of the singular human person—what I call the radical imagination—and of the imagination on the social and historical plane as the founder, the creator of social institutions. And, obviously, one immediately picks up on the incompatibility with any [79] Marxist, Marxian, or Marxisant position. As a result, I dove into Freud, I frequented certain psychoanalytic circles in Paris, including Lacan's seminars. One thing led to another; I married Piera Aulagnier,¹ as you know, with whom I lived for 15 years. Then I started working as a psychoanalyst; that's still what I do. And this interest in Freud has maintained, prolonged, deepened itself since. These last three years, my seminars at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*² were exclusively devoted to the problem of the psyche. It was an attempt, it is an attempt in progress—I am in the process of composing it—to take back up and reconstruct (the terms are doubtless too pretentious), to reexamine as radically as possible the Freudian edifice, and, notably, the imagination and the imaginary within it.

So, why has the fascination continued? First of all because the psyche is "fascinating" in itself. Heraclitus already said, "You will find no limits of the psyche even if you traverse all paths."³ It is this overflowing of psychic creativity that always fascinates me, this

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extraordinary *poéticité*, such as it appears in dreams, for example. This is a platitude, but it is nevertheless truly necessary to pay close attention to them in the first [80] person, if you will, in order to see the treasures of inventiveness and creativity that dreams contain. Or, take the psychic phenomena which are, for the common perception, much more rare, but which one does observe in analytic practice, notably psychosis. Psychic delirium as creation is a fantastic thing. And, for that matter, you and Green spoke about this in your book on psychosis, since the very title, you recall, is a phrase from a psychotic person who said that he was “the child of that” [*l’enfant de ça*].⁴ Of course, there is also the other side of the human psyche, that of repetition, without which there is neither psychic life nor life *tout court* and without which there is no analysis, of course.

There it is. We could continue, because once we go into this we are entering into the whole of the theory of the human. For could this psyche, left to itself, produce anything other than feral children? There is Freud’s attempt to respond, *Totem and Taboo*, and so on. . . . The unsatisfactory character of this attempt at response, at least in my eyes, stems perhaps above all from Freud’s will or a desire to reduce to the psychic that which is irreducible in the very fact of institution. And then there are other issues such as, for example, what the psyche is from the philosophical point of view. In fact we have never talked about it. In philosophy we do not know what the psyche is; or, rather, we have talked about it all the time and at the same time we do not know what it is. And with Freud, obviously, we get a first great look at what I call his *discovery* [81] of an ontological domain, of a domain of being. Freud did not refer to it in that way because he had something of an extraordinary reservation or a fear of philosophy or a detestation, I don’t know; but he makes us see, with the psyche, a level of being that did not exist before him: the psyche is not a thing and it is not a concept. And it is necessary to lend weight to that phrase. What is it then?

J.-L.D.: I made my own discovery of psychoanalysis as a psychiatrist, thus within a much narrower perspective than yours. But what you just said reminds me again of why your texts on the radical imaginary really struck me at that time, though I did not comprehend all the implications of it. For what I experienced first hand with Freud and through clinical practice is in effect the proper consistency of psychic

reality. Only, at the time, I was approaching this psychic reality as a psychiatric doctor, and, through Freud, from the perspective of its determination, since, precisely, what this first approach brought to light was meaning in free association, sequences of meanings, where there could only have been disorder. And yet, I then found myself trapped, facing something aporetic (the juxtaposition: the proper consistency of psychic reality / emergence of meaning). And this turn around that you managed, returning, against all Western metaphysics, against “inherited philosophy,” to a causality of being as creation, and thus indeterminacy, permitted me to pass beyond the aporia that I found myself facing. And I notice that, now [82], even “classical” psychoanalysis conceives the transfer from the perspective of repetition, of determinism, and, simultaneously, from the perspective of creation, of eruption, of emergence. And it is profoundly there in Freud’s work when he speaks of the “spontaneity of the transfer”; it is certainly determined, but the institution of the cure, the frame permitting the phenomenon to arise, emerges in its radically creative dimension *ex nihilo*, you say, and not *cum nihilo*.

K.v.B.: The lay person that I am would like to ask you, after this first exchange, a perhaps somewhat provocative question. Couldn’t one suspect that there is an hidden danger, for a poet, a writer, a musician—thus someone who is living off of an imaginary in disorder, in permanent suffering and transgression—of being healed by a psychoanalytic cure to the point of seeing this creativity disappear? Is analysis not a form of castration for the imaginary in disorder?

C.C.: I will respond to the provocation with a super-provocation, if you will. Because I believe, on the contrary, that the task of analysis is to liberate the imagination. Not such that the subject does just whatever, that he ignores every law, every limit, etc. Besides, autonomy means: I lay down a law for myself. *Nomos* is the law, and autonomy is the law that comes from me. Now, the social extensions, that’s another story. But what is psychic illness in the end, and I’m not talking about psychosis, now, nor about neurosis, essentially . . . ? [83]

K.v.B.: What they used to call hysteria . . .

C.C.: Not only that. Obsessional neurosis and the new forms of psychic pathology that we meet today, well, they are a blockage of the

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imagination, they are essentially that. Of course! It means that there is an imaginary construction existing there, stopping everything else. Here is an example: woman or man, it is these and nothing else. It is necessary have these, solely these and nothing else . . .

K.v.B.: This ends up calling into question all artistic creation prior to psychoanalysis!

C.C.: But why?

K.v.B.: In a certain manner, the imaginary that played into art with the appearance of psychoanalysis was neither disturbed, nor limited, nor, annihilated by the absence of psychoanalysis.

C.C.: Of course; but that is not what I am trying to say. That is the exceptional case and the privilege of artists, of creators, prominent or small, etc. But psychoanalysis aims also at reestablishing in the subject another relationship with its unconscious. Permit me to express myself by way of a formulation about which I would like to know what Jean-Luc thinks. What was the procedure of society with respect to the drives that it was able neither to accept nor to control? It did not consist only of saying (and this is the Superego, moreover, among other things), "you shall not do [84] that." But it cannot say, for example, "you shall never voluntarily think about the death of your nearest. . . ." Let's be serious: neurosis or not, we all think ten times per year about the death of someone. And, generally, the common individual makes himself feel guilty for that. I'm taking a very simple example. However, it is necessary that I know that my psychic life is this way, which is to say simultaneously libidinal drives, destructive drives, self-destructive drives. . . . That I cannot eradicate this, that I can never eliminate it, that it is even necessary that I let it come to the surface—this is what the cure tries to produce. But it is necessary that I also know, of course, that between desiring a thing and doing it, between wishing for a thing and acting such that it comes about, there is a distance, which is the distance of the diurnal world, of the social world, of the world of relatively conscious, reflected activity, etc.

J.-L.D.: In effect, this is a classical question that you are posing, and in one sense a false question. It is difficult to respond in a quick and economical way, but the cure itself stems, in a certain fashion, from a practical-poetic activity. This is to say, to speak properly,

that it comprises a dimension that is, if not artistic, then in any case creative. When you evoke this problem, it is as if you were suggesting that artistic creation or all other creation would be able to not have form. However, the whole problem of artistic creation is obviously that the creative movement [*le mouvement créateur*] ties itself to and takes on a form that must, for that matter, find its social [85] mediation. In a certain way, it is the same thing for free association on a couch. It is not a disorganization, nor a “you must think this” or “you desire this.” It is a regulated disorganization, organized, as such, with an eye to a more free reorganization, more autonomous and more creative. Now, obviously, what is typical is that there are quite a few people, creators for whom the capacity for artistic creation is tied to a certain equilibrium of their functioning, who, in reaching a point of inhibition, naturally dread the redistribution of their psychic economy. But when they do their analysis, I have never seen a disappearance of the creative capacity.

K.v.B.: I am going to formulate the question differently in order to restart you on the theme of desire.

C.C.: We could have spoken of Rilke, repeatedly tempted by psychoanalysis but who was afraid of losing his sincerity through it.

K.v.B.: Sartre is another celebrated case, who had an extremely troubled relationship with psychoanalysis.

C.C.: I would say that Sartre, in any case, did not lose out on anything . . .

K.v.B.: Between the transfer and the ban, the freedom of the subject, his or her autonomy, are they not going to be confronted with frustration, with a sort of castration? [86]

C.C.: I will say a few words, and Jean-Luc, who has a clinical experience much more considerable than mine, will respond more lengthily. What fascinates me in the history of the ban, which goes along with the transfer, is that it is precisely a totally free ban. One could say that there are social but not biological—that would be an absurdity—reasons such that children do not sleep with their parents, nor brothers with sisters. In one sense, one could not say the same thing about psychoanalysis. If, during the analytic cure, there is

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a transition into the sexual act, for example, the cure is dead. There is no difficulty here; the experiences are there and the consequences for the patient are very serious, that's for sure. And this can no longer be a psychoanalytic cure.

K.v.B.: Could you specify why?

C.C.: It is precisely because the analyst is a distant, if not impersonal, authority that he represents a projection surface onto which the patient can project all his phantasms, the good as well as the bad. He is the all powerful object. To cite a phrase of Lacan that deserves to be preserved, he is the "subject supposed to know"!⁵ And one sees this with patients. But at the same time, perhaps, inasmuch as he deprives the patient of certain satisfactions, notably erotic, he can be a very bad figure, the foil. In this sense, in both cases, there is, in the transfer, a certain repetition of the infantile relation. But there is also, of course, something else. Once the cure is finished, what [87] happens? What one observes is that a completed cure goes through the transfer solution. That is to say, the subject drops the analyst, and in a way that is almost inhuman.

J.-L.D.: I have a comparison in mind. Not long ago, I did some research on childbirth without [postpartum] sadness, and I went on nights to observe deliveries. I found myself wrapped up in the drama that it can be, in the crisis. And the women were turning to me. I found myself to be positioned to help them psychologically and sometimes it created a link with an extreme intensity. However, once the baby was there, it was as if I no longer existed. The deliverers know well about this. Obviously, the analytic cure, which Freud compared on occasion to a gestation, certainly poses more complex problems. Cornelius stressed well the fact that what ruins all curative projects whenever there is a transition to the sexual act is precisely that the transfer is no longer analyzable. And the wager of the cure is that the transfer is analyzable and that, being analyzed, it dissolves "sufficiently according to the needs." I quote that for you, and it is a formula that matters a lot for me because it permits one to get out of theoretical schemas. And this is translated through the fact that, whenever one meets his or her patients, for example in analytic societies, one avoids establishing immediate relations with them, one

honors, in some sense, temporal distances in a way that lets the transfer disappear little by little in life. [88]

C.C.: If I may put a word in, this is a problem that has a particular importance, but not for the analysis of subjects in general. Because, either the analysis obtains and the transfer is analyzable, for better or worse, sufficiently according to needs, or else one does not manage to analyze it and one ends up with interminable cures, because the patient cannot handle being removed from this link and because the analyst does not know how to help him remove himself from it. But there, where it becomes serious—and this is one of the problems of the psychoanalytic institution—this distancing, in effect, becomes a lot more difficult if the patient does an analysis in order to become an analyst himself, in which case the investment of the analyst as “subject supposed to know” acquires a double depth: it is not only the emotional ties, but it is what allowed me to become an analyst . . .

K.v.B.: We are coming back to childbirth . . .

C.C.: Yes, my being an analyst depends upon him; thus a tie is created. And if the analyst who was the analyst of this patient does not know how to do this, he can create entirely intolerable situations that disturb life in analytic societies.

K.v.B.: Doesn't the subject always need a tutelary reference exterior to himself? Can one lay down a law for oneself?

J.-L.D.: This is just the founding ambiguity that Freud detects within the agency that he is led to free up [89] as the Superego (ideal). The differentiation Ego/Superego within the Ego conveys, primarily and simultaneously, the genesis of the Superego, starting from the outside, through the internalization of the parental authority, and the perpetuation of the conditions (dependency, need for love, threat of loss) of this infantile origin through the internalization itself.

But the work proper to the psychic space of this differentiation permits the Ego to autonomize itself (“to subtract itself from the authority of the Superego,” according to Freud) by de-personalizing it. But the impulsive alimentation [*l'alimentation pulsionnelle*] of the Superego (notably in aggression) makes it such that its regression and

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its re-projection are constantly solicited. Thus we see, for example, a sick person hide an aggravation from his doctor because he is more afraid of the disappointment of the doctor than his illness. That is what Freud has in mind when he points out that few men have the capacity to entirely de-sexualize the figure of destiny; religious projection is always attractive in one form or another. This brief digression serves as an echo of your interrogation concerning the analytical institution. The risk that you highlight is quite real and it has come about that the analytical institution is unaware of it. But has it not thus reproduced the institutional forms of its time? In what way would an analyst outside of the institution be more free with respect to the received heritage of the tradition? It seems to me that the conflict of the subject and of the institution—in the sense that there is something collective about it—is alone able to support a true process of autonomization. As you have conceived it, autonomy has nothing to do with the abstract liberty of an abstract subject but is a permanent process of differentiation, which supposes resemblance. [90]

C.C.: I am entirely in agreement with what Jean-Luc has just said. And I would say that your question is perhaps the most important of those that we have discussed up to now because it cuts across, at once, the problem of individual psychoanalysis and the political problem. To say it in Freudian language, will we ever be able to have a humanity that does not need the totem? The historical exactness of totemism matters less. Jehovah, from this perspective, is a totem. Freud lets it pass in part because he considers Judaical law to be precisely among the most impersonal laws.

K.v.B.: Something about which he is greatly mistaken.

C.C.: That's another story. In my opinion, one of the lacunae in the psychoanalytic conception of this question, which also links back to the problem of interminable analyses, is that we only look at the libidinal side of the issue—that is to say, at the fear of being reproached or of no longer being enlivened (God will no longer love you if you do this thing) by a figure who is a substitute for the father or mother figure (moreover, very often maternal)—and we do not see the other side. The other side is death and mortality. Freud, in *The Future of an Illusion*, associated the roots of religion with the feeling of

powerlessness before the world. Science is replaced by psychology as one anthropomorphizes destiny, the forces of nature, etc. God loves me or does not love me. I will act such that he loves me as if he were a woman, [91] a man, or a lover or a mistress. That is the response to the most important enigma of all, the enigma of death. Yet, the ultimate castration, if we wish to use the term, is to comprehend that there is no response to this question, which is the question of death. This is to say that it is the radical acceptance by the subject of his or her mortality as a personal figure and even as an historical figure. And this is what is very difficult to accept as much by the individual patient in analysis as by societies. One component of the turmoil in contemporary society is the attempt, after the fall of religion—I am speaking of the West now—to replace this religious mythology with an immanent mythology, which is that of indefinite progress.

J.-L.D.: The religion of history . . .

C.C.: The religion of history, whether it is in the liberal form or the Marxist form, fails to see that these are mythological constructions that do not hold up rationally. Why on earth is it necessary to augment the productive forces indefinitely? So, with the collapse of the ideology of progress as well as Marxist ideology, there is currently an enormous void; and it is the void of meaning, because humanity is abandoning the meaning of death that was provided for Western humanity by the Christian religion. And it still cannot and perhaps never will be able—but this is the most profound question of politics in my opinion—to accept that we are mortal just as much qua individuals as [92] qua a civilization, and that this does not abolish the meaning of our lives.

J.-L.D.: It does not abolish the meaning of our lives, because, as B. Thom said, “life is the love of life,” and because this is sufficient as far as meaning goes. This could be sufficient, but, let’s not forget, rare are those who are capable of totally de-sexualizing the figure of destiny. It is the same Freud who asks M. Schur⁶ to give him one last injection because “it makes no sense any more.”⁷ To de-sexualize the figures of destiny is not to de-sexualize one’s life; it is to no longer need to abstractly confer on it a goal “beyond” the desire for the other. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud writes that the pride of man is

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necessary in order that human life be supposed to have a goal, and that religion alone puts itself in the position of contributing it.

That said, it is true that, starting from the moment when he puts himself in position to take into account the set of methods through which man attempts to render life bearable for himself, Freud finds the umbilicus of illusion in the incontrovertible character of judgments of value, "which always derive from our needs for happiness and are thus in the service of our illusions."⁸ The recognition of the structural link between the principle of pleasure and judgments of value leads right to asserting the necessity of the recourse to illusion, which leads Freud to a complex and almost embarrassed dialogue with himself in "the future of an illusion," where the unconscious truth of the religious turns out to be comparable to the grotesque truth included in the theories of infantile sexuality. In sum, Freud encounters the aporetic side [93] of his rationalism in its positivity. He opens up the dialectic of illusion-disillusion, which, Winnicott⁹ will show, conditions the impulsive (aggressive erotic) introjection, which constructs the validity of the relation to reality. It would be tempting to compare these developments with those suggesting the notion of the radical imaginary, which I had wanted to link back to the concept of the "Id," despite the non-representational character of the Freudian "Id."

K.v.B.: It is not the immanence of the law, but it is quite simply the transmission through the interposed child.

C.C.: What has always made me cringe in Christianity is the idea of this God who could love me. What is it, this infinite Being who concerns himself to know if I ate my soup or if I didn't eat my soup, if I masturbated or if I didn't masturbate, if I desired my mother or if I didn't desire my mother, who forbids sodomy, this, that, etc. Are these the subjects worthy of a God? No. Why does God have all these attributes? Because he is there as substitute precisely for the interdictive stage, with the bonus: "If you do that, God will love you." And that is re-sexualization. Of course, it is not sublimated but idealized sexualization. This is to say that we don't want to make love with God, but we'll be in his bosom.

J.-L.D.: Nuns make love with God. . . . [94]

C.C.: Let's leave aside the extreme cases; let's say that we'll be in his bosom. Who has a bosom? It's the mommy, is it not? Therefore, I do not accept that idea. And I would like to say something more. It is true that this is a very hard problem in reality. Like Jean-Luc said, meaning is the activity of the creation of meaning, and for me moreover, it is a whole reinterpretation of the philosophical idea of truth that goes into it. Because truth is not correspondence, is not adequation; it is the constant effort to break the closure in which we exist, and to think something other, and to think not only quantitatively, but more profoundly, to think better. This movement is truth. That is why there are great philosophies that are true, even if they are false, and other philosophies that may be correct and have no interest.

J.-L.D.: That's the retying of ties.

C.C.: It is, in effect, the retying of ties. What is the phrase from Freud to Schur at the moment when he asks him to make the fatal injection? "It makes no sense any more." Now, up until then, for Freud, his life made sense. Why? Because he could work and think. And when he is taken by an incessant pain, he is in a state of incapacity and he says that "it makes no sense any more."

But, to finish, must we rely upon a radical, ultimate, or positivist nationalism in order to accept the possibility of an autonomy for individuals? I will take a case, which is not crystal clear, [95] but which generates thought all the same: ancient Greece and, in particular, the democratic city. In the democratic city, there is a religion, but this religion is a civil affair. It's the civil religion, as Rousseau said. There is no belief in the immortality of the soul. The first funeral inscriptions where one sees the hope of another life and where, in a certain way, one prays to the gods to be favorable to the departed, date from after the end of the fifth century, that is, in a phase of decadence. Until then, either there was no immortality or there was what Achilles said to Ulysses when he was visited by him in the land of the dead: "I would prefer to be the slave of a poor peasant on the earth than to be king of all the underworld."¹⁰ Death is worse than life; there is no hope. This does not prevent the Greeks from creating, in particular, a democracy where it is clear that the law is laid down by the people. For sure, this is not pure as an example because there is the rest of religiosity, a religiosity that doesn't have the same character. We see it

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in contemporary society. Even if there was not a total de-Christianization with the French Revolution, modern democracies established themselves on the principle of the secular.

J.-L.D.: I want to return to the ethic, to the specificity of the psychoanalytic position, which manifests itself fully only in practice, and which experiences inevitable interferences from the moment that there is a theorization effort (but the cure is never an “application” of the theory). This specificity follows from a capacity to listen that privileges, above all, [96] psychic evenementality in its processural flux, in its contextuality, in its dynamic. This privilege conferred upon the primary processes transfers the representational contents to the second plane insofar as they can be appreciated in their validity from the viewpoint of the secondary processes, and from an ordinary line of argumentation.

Utilized in applied psychoanalysis, this privilege permits one to interpret the ensemble of the human mind’s major constructions (religions, metaphysics) and even scientific systems, without placing oneself on the terrain of their validation. All these systems can, in effect, appear as projections in the external world of certain endo-perceptions of psychic functioning, and can therefore contribute to its knowledge. This is why, echoing back to the choice of the term “meta-psychology,” I proposed to speak of the “meta operation.”

It seems important to me, at least initially, to situate well the specificity of this approach. It could not aim to “reduce” these systems, any more than the other productions of civilization for that matter, because it in no way purports to substitute itself for them. Even if, in the last instance, it proves untenable, this point of view corresponds, for psychoanalysis, to a refusal to produce a “conception of the world.”

Thus, when Freud, in *Moses and Monotheism*,¹¹ speaks of Christianity as a “regression” to polytheism and, at the same time, figuratively as a progression in the confession of the father’s murder (a rewarded confession!), he is referring to psychic functioning; regression or progression do not take on normative value. However, [97] within his logic itself, it is indispensable to him to assert the material-historical reality of the murder of the dominant male in the primitive hoard. There is a need to construct a myth—scientific perhaps—in order to approach the unknown.

K.v.B.: The unknown is?

C.C.: The unknown is the horizon, the myth, the groundless.

K.v.B.: The groundless, the famous *Uhr* of German philosophy.

C.C.: The *Uhr* that Freud employs often. [98–9]

NOTES

- ¹ She published, among other things: Aulagnier, P., *The Violence of Interpretation*, trans. Alan Sheridan. Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis, 2001.
- ² Cornelius Castoriadis began teaching at *EHESS* in November 1980. The “last three years” of which he is speaking are 1992–1993, 1993–1994, and 1994–1995, following which he provisionally suspended his seminars.
- ³ This is Castoriadis’ paraphrase of Heraclitus. In the Patrick translation, the passage reads, “The limits of the soul you would not find out though you traverse every way.” See Patrick, G. T. W., *Heraclitus of Ephesus*. Chicago: Argonaut, Inc., 2006, 102. —TR
- ⁴ Donnet, J.-L., *L’enfant de ça, psychanalyse d’un entretien: la psychose blanche*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1973.
- ⁵ Lacan, J., *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977, 232. —TR
- ⁶ Max Schur (1897–1969) was Freud’s doctor who, in 1939, assisted Freud in committing suicide. —TR
- ⁷ Freud’s statement to Schur just before his death in 1939. —TR
- ⁸ Donnet appears to be paraphrasing generally from *Civilization and its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1961. —TR
- ⁹ Donnet seems to be referring to Donald Woods Winnicott (1896–1971), theorist of object-relations. —TR
- ¹⁰ Castoriadis is paraphrasing the passage from Book 11, line 486 of Homer’s *Odyssey*. —TR
- ¹¹ Donnet references the text by Freud simply with the title “*Moïse*” in the manuscript. —TR

CHAPTER FOUR

Life and Creation

Cornelius Castoriadis in Dialogue with Francisco Varela

Translated by John V. Garner

KATHARINA VON BULOW: First of all, I would like to ask Francisco Varela how he discovered Cornelius Castoriadis, why he became interested in him, how he was “useful” to him in his own works . . . ?

FRANCISCO VARELA: We’ve known each other for many years, more than 15 years, certainly. And the connections between our works are of various sorts and have evolved and changed historically. In the beginning, I believe that what interested me in reading his work¹—and, in parallel, what Cornelius found in my writings—is that we were each reflecting on the question of autonomy. For me, this was more from the position of living things, since I am a biologist and, for him, from the position of the imaginary and the social. However, these are problematics, each of which obviously refers to the other.

K.v.B.: And the psychoanalytic aspect as well?

F.V.: It was not the psychoanalyst that I read, but rather the theorist of society and the thinker of the imaginary. For me, that is not the same thing. [100]

K.v.B.: And from your position, Cornelius, what interested you in the work of Francisco Varela?

CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS: I really was working for no short length of time on the question of autonomy, which had first a political signification in my writings. It was a political project for an autonomous society made by autonomous individuals, a project that is still my own, moreover. And, from a certain moment, when I began to criticize Marx, to reject his conception of history, it quickly occurred to me that history and the institution of society were the work of an instituting imaginary, of a radical collective imaginary, parallel to the radical creative imaginary of the individual and thus that each society creates itself for itself and, in creating itself, creates a proper world. From 1964 to 1965 onwards it is there, in the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, and I elaborated on it a lot in the second part of that book, published in 1975. When I discovered the work of Francisco, above all this tremendous book that I read in English, *Principles of Biological Autonomy*,² which was translated³ into French with the title *Autonomie et Connaissance*⁴ (a revised version, for that matter, which is enriched from the conceptual perspective but lightly abridged in its [101] mathematics), I immediately discovered an enormous kinship. Since 1973, Francisco's work (as well as that of another Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana⁵), which I had not known before then, circled around the same problematic as that upon which I was reflecting. How is it that a unity can arise, can emerge—this latter term is not fitting for me, but we will discuss that, I'm sure—a unity that, in my old philosophical terms, I called "being for-itself"? A being for itself—that is to say, just as much a living being, which is, in a sense, self-centered (that is, aims for its conservation, its reproduction) as a psychic being or a social being, since all of society aims at conserving itself, at reproducing itself—how does this emerge and in what does its specificity consist? And that's just where Maturana and Francisco were placing at the fore the concept of the autonomy of the living organism, a concept that is intricately elaborated in *Autonomie et connaissance* and that is radically opposed to the idea that one could give an account of the living organism solely beginning from external actions. In the same way, these principles that Francisco formulated, which I approve of entirely, and which I utilize myself, are in opposition to cognitive closure and informational closure.

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What does this mean, briefly, for our listeners? I can say a bit about it; you will correct me if I have badly understood you. In any case, as for me, I [102] now use the notion of closure a lot.⁶ Which is to say that, for a for-itself, a psychic subject or a living being or a society, there is creation of a proper world (*Eignewelt*, one would say in German), and nothing can enter into this proper world if it is not transformed according to the principles of this world. That's easy enough to comprehend. Let's take the example of the living being: it is sensitive to a certain category of exterior shocks, but these shocks are never presented to it as "they are." Thus, higher living beings have a perception of colors but, to use a radical albeit entirely correct expression, the world of the physicist does not have colors; it has wavelengths. Color is a quality that shows up with certain categories of living beings, those which do not perceive luminous vibrations as such, like electromagnetic vibrations, but perceive blue, red, etc. Furthermore—and this is a point that Francisco has himself stressed as well— not only is there this transformation of what Freud very rightly called masses of energy, masses of matter in motion, into qualities for the subject, but there is evidently also the fact that there is never a term for term correspondence. This means, for example, that perception of color is always a function of a perceptual context and, I would also add, always a subjective one, but that's another story. . . . So, we have this [example]. And the same thing is true in the psychic system. This is my domain rather than that of Francisco, but let's take an extreme case, if you will. A paranoiac will interpret all motion as aiming to destroy him or to persecute him. For example, this microphone that you are holding [103] in front of me is at this moment emitting fragrances that aim squarely at derailing my nervous system. . . . He makes everything come back into his system of interpretation. It is the same for a society, where this closure [*clôture*] appears more explicitly in closed [*fermée*—for example primitive or traditional—societies. For a genuine Hebraic mindset, an event as catastrophic as the Holocaust will be interpreted as a supplementary test inflicted on the Jewish people and on it alone, which proves its election. The Holocaust is going to enter into the system of interpretation that is the proper world of this imaginary Jewish universe. It is with these ideas, above all, that I came together with Francisco and that I even used him. . . .

F.V.: We should recall, here, the Cerisy Colloquium on self-organization. . . .⁷ For me, the motivation for this type of reflection was in no way coming from the psychoanalytic, or the social-thinker, side of Castoriadis. On the subject of autonomy, I remained a biologist. Why? Because, originally, this investigation on autopoiesis—which means, literally, self-construction, self-production . . .

C.C.: . . . or self-creation . . .

F.V.: . . . or self-creation, yes. That's a Greek neologism invented in order to designate what Cornelius was just speaking about. Now, there was, thus, back when we were [104] working on this theme, the will to be in opposition to what was, toward the 1970s, the dominant way of thinking. It envisioned in the living being a system that was pretty much a collector of information, capturing information, the shocks coming from outside in order to impose on them a certain unitary manipulation. This model, founded on the metaphor of the computer, seemed to us to be entirely unsatisfactory. But it is necessary to understand well that we were, at the time, really going against the current and were more or less isolated. Today . . .

C.C.: . . . are we not still, more or less?

F.V.: In my opinion, it has evolved enormously, and this model of thinking the living being—this outrageous representationalism—nevertheless has a much more weakened existence now. Thus, we forged this concept of self-production or self-creation or autopoiesis in order to express this fact founded on the very biology of the organism, on biochemistry and cellular life. Why? Because—and this is the second important point for me—it is a gesture that is at the origin, at the very root of life. It is not even necessary to think it at the level of mammals, of humans, or of social beings. Life, qua self-constituting process, already contains this distinctness of a for-itself, as Cornelius would say, the source of—from—which the imaginary emerges, capable of giving sense to what is only masses of physical objects. This rootedness of sense in the origin of life is the novelty of this concept of autonomy, or autopoiesis. Whence came its popularity, at least its success, I think, [105] in the following years. And what I was just saying—that there is an excess of the imaginary that comes from this self-construction of the living being—this is something that I learned

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from reading Cornelius. And I would never have dared to speak of the imaginary in the origin of life if I had not had use of this kind of continuity between biological phenomena of the origin of life and the social domain. I am clearly saying continuity; I am not saying identity.

K.v.B: In your book, Francisco Varela,⁸ you talk about philosophy right from the start. You bring up the importance of phenomenology. You mention Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty in order to point out that they at least placed in the body the beginning of their philosophy, the beginning of their reflection on perception, the imaginary, the constitution of the subject, etc. But for you, what is not pertinent in philosophy is precisely that what is at stake therein is a process that falls under biology, therefore a science, and that everything we have thought about mind, the soul, psychoanalysis, etc., seems to be called into question by this scientific approach.

F.V.: By no means! What I am trying to say in my book is, in a certain way, the opposite, but in the following sense. Already—as a first side point—I wrote *The Embodied Mind* nearly 20 years after that theorization of [106] autopoiesis. Many things happened in the meantime, and you cannot pass right over the whole evolution of my work. But, above all, what is the fundamental goal of this reflection in *The Embodied Mind*? It is to raise a question that seems to me still to be very badly thought out in the sciences that concern themselves with thought or cognitive and mental phenomena. And, here, I'm envisioning the neurosciences, linguistics, what one calls, roughly speaking, the cognitive sciences.⁹ The open question is the abyss that exists between the mechanisms proposed by the sciences and the incarnate, lived experience [*vécu incarné*] of every individual. Short of clarifying the transition and the complication of these two poles, every effort at a common reflection on the autonomy of the living being and the social can only remain a dead letter. It is here that phenomenology, in the Merleau-Pontian tradition, is greatly helpful.

C.C.: I am totally in agreement with what you have just said. I would simply like to bring to the fore a certain number of points. And, first, what is striking when one looks at the tendency that we called cognitivism, and even connectionism, is that—I am brutal, as

usual!—these people are idealists who are completely unaware of each other. What is the human being for them? It's a computational apparatus, a system that calculates. It's the model of the computer. The current arrives, a contact is made or is not made, [107] it is 0 or it is 1, it is no or it is yes. And the final result is an enormous accumulation of yes and no, of 0 and 1, very summarily and briefly speaking. Yet, what is essential in the human being, and what plays an enormous role in cognition as well, is not there. One cannot consider cognitive activities detached from other elements that are entirely decisive. As a psychoanalyst, I would say, first of all, that there is a psychic flux, which is a flux of representations, of representations not in the sense of cognitivism (that is, of photographs that I would have in me of what is happening on the outside), which would be more or less adequate. That is an entirely false and contrived image, even if philosophers have shared it for a long time. But [I mean] representation in the sense that there is always an image of the world (which is not an image in the sense of impressions), the creation of an imaginary world at each moment when I speak; and [I mean] imaginary in the strong sense of the term, which does not mean fictional. And this representation is always accompanied by two other vectors: an affective vector, and a vector that I call intentional in the classical sense of the term, which is to say desiring, if one is speaking of the human being. To put it succinctly, all the ideas concerning the possibility for a computer to replace human thought—beyond calculations, computation—can be made clearer by putting forward a question: will there one day be a computer, by itself and without instructions, which is sufficiently impassioned by the question of the infinitude of primary numbers or by the famous last theorem of Fermat to embark upon a study of it? [108] As for me, I say no. Because what is necessary, here, is a passion for the thing. And, in addition, it is necessary to have an orientation for the study, which cannot be given by simple calculation. Passion is of the order of affect, and it is mixed with a desire to know [*savoir*], to experience [*connaître*]. . . . This first facet is, I believe, very important. A second facet, which I was happy to observe in Francisco's latest book, which was entirely conceived by him, is naturally the social component. One cannot speak of a human machine, even if it is not entirely a machine, as an ego that functions all alone. Already in perception, when I function, social schemas are implicated, language is implicated, I apprehended the

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separation of objects little by little following the organization of the world created by my society. . . . This social component is in no way secondary; it is entirely essential.

The third point—and, here, I believe that we are stuck out in the middle of the ocean of our ignorance—is the bodily involvement. And, here as well, there is a new approach that I have tried to elaborate for 2 or 3 years concerning the Freudian unconscious. What is at issue here? Freud, certainly, speaks of drives in order to say that they are the boundaries between the psychic and the somatic, but he does not envision a dimension according to which the unconscious would be very profoundly anchored in the body, independently, even, of the fact that there are drives. The latter formulation is bad because there always is, following precisely from what I was saying just before, a “tending towards,” a drive of the living organism. . . . But, nevertheless, there [109] is something other than the canonical drives explored by Freud. There is a semi-permeable boundary in both directions between the body and the soul; this way of distinguishing between the body and the soul is simultaneously inevitable and false. There is no soul without body, but there is no body without soul, as Aristotle said: the cadaver of Socrates is not Socrates; the soul is no longer there, there is no more Socrates, it’s finished. Underneath the infrastructure of the Freudian unconscious, therefore, there is, in my opinion, something worth pursuing: at least a profound—and certainly *sui generis*—relationship [*liaison*] between the human psychic and biological aspects.

F.V.: In what you have just said, there is one facet about which we are clearly and profoundly in agreement: the question of this rootedness of the imaginary, of the connection with corporeality. It is an equally great, open-ended question for me; I haven’t a response to propose. But I would not confuse this question with the description that you make of the computational model in the cognitive sciences, deprived of emotions, drives. Personally, I can perfectly envision the construction, the development, by the new cognitive schools, of technological objects that would be truly full of emotions. Now, one would need to conceive them on a non-computational model, for example, that of a dynamic system inseparably integrating history and its constraints, such that intentionality and desire appear as its objects. Now, perhaps

it will not be impassioned for Fermat's theorem, [110] but perhaps it will be impassioned for other things. . . . This is, in any case, the implication of the new robotics: having desiring robots in order to do a "good robot job." It's an implication that exists today. At least the question is being asked.

C.C.: Do you think this task is realizable?

F.V.: In principle, yes.

C.C.: Beyond the trivialities, I mean.

F.V.: Certainly, beyond the trivialities. There remains an empirical problem, of course, but in principle I do not see the impossibility of having machines or technological objects wherein what is impulsive or what is emotional is tied, in a way, to what is cognitive (I'm not saying identically but analogically to that of the living being). But this in no way responds to the second part of the question you were raising, which is precisely the problem of the specificity of the mode of human experience and what that means for man. This is not the same thing.

C.C.: No, of course not.

F.V.: And it is true that we have, today, more and more proofs of the possibility of theorizing the emotional in a way such that it is not a type of residual centrifugation of true consciousness, which would only exist at the order of abstraction and of [111] logic. And we currently have models on hand wherein, precisely, what is impulsive, what is rational, and what is historical are entirely intermingled. This is similar to what I am trying to designate with this neologism—another one!—of *enactive*, the *enactive* vision of consciousness. This word is, for me, like a flag for signaling this possibility of seeing this through. It remains to be seen if it is entirely realizable or not.

K.v.B.: Can you enlighten the layman listener a bit?

F.V.: You are right to ask for a few words of explanation.¹⁰ *Enactive* is not a neologism of Greek origin; it is an appropriation of the English word *enaction*, which designates the gestures that accompany the making-something-emerge [*le faire-émerger de quelque chose*]. For

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example, we say that President Clinton “enacted” his economic program; he set it in motion. What is at stake is a gesture, a task, and it is also a conception and also a history. All of this comes together in the word enactment. For example, also, we say that someone “enacted” a theater piece.

K.v.B.: But if man is already so complicated that even the philosopher, the sociologist, the psychoanalyst, the biologist, the mathematician, scientists, and philosophers since Aristotle have not succeeded in explaining him, why is it necessary, in addition, to invent a robot? [112]

C.C.: But the response here is easy here. We construct robots in order to try and understand. In the beginning they are horribly simple models, now they are more complex, and they will, without doubt, be more and more complex. . . . As a side note, the first models, as Francisco pointed out, were restrained by the architecture of the computers at the time, which one calls von Neumann architecture. All the operations were sequential. Having to respond to question B, it was necessary to respond to question A, and before question A, it was necessary to respond to question W. . . . Whereas, now, thanks to “vectorial” architecture, we envision the possibility—partially realized, for that matter—of what is called a treatment “in parallel.” Here, relatively independent centers—without being totally independent (otherwise it would not be a computer)—are able to accomplish certain tasks while other centers accomplish other tasks, etc. And the machine is made such that the results converge in the accomplishment of a task.

However, I believe the problem is nevertheless more difficult than this, because the question is not to know if we will one day manufacture a computer that will know how to simulate the passions, but if we will ever be able to formalize what we know as desires and as passions and, above all, as imagination. Here, it seems to me that there is a contradiction in terms. Why? Because, in any event, all formalization is, as I call it, identitarian. Starting out from a certain number of axioms, it constructs, with a syntax and a determined semantics, a [113] sequence of propositions or, let’s say, of operations of the machine. Yet, human psychic and social life is not identitarian; it is magmatic. One cannot separate it into well-constructed, well-defined sets [*ensembles*], etc. It is a totality wherein everything

interacts, though we are not able to simply say that everything interacts with everything, because there is the localizable, there are partial sets [*des ensembles par parties*]. . . . And what also characterizes the social imaginary as well as the radical imaginary of the subject and the theoretical imaginary is, in the cognitive domain for example, the capacity to create new axioms, in the most abstract sense of the term (not necessarily in the mathematical sense), from new bases. All of a sudden, a new base is created, which, precisely, because it is of this sort, is not foundable. It is perhaps justifiable if it is an issue of a rational system, but it is not foundable because it is a creation. And a creation is neither deducible nor producible. It is the real sense of the new. If it is deducible and producible, it is not new, it exists potentially in the anterior system.

F.V.: Absolutely, of course.

C.C.: And this, therefore, is the genuine question. The idea that one can simulate creation seems to me to be contradictory in the terms. Currently, our friend Henri Atlan, for example, is talking about networks of connected automaton by saying that there is an “aleatory emergence of meaning.” I do not dispute to what extent this is true or not, but I would say that [114] positive scientists, when all is said and done, are no longer able to do anything except call aleatory that which is a creation. Since a creation, by definition, is neither deducible nor producible, it is perceived as something that appears in a radically aleatory fashion. What is false in this idea is that the word aleatory has mathematical meaning—or, otherwise, it is simply a word—only for a predetermined set of possibles. Yet, precisely, what is proper to creation is to bring about possibles which did not exist beforehand. The first living cell that emerges creates, in a sense, possibilities of life, which only existed beforehand in an entirely empty and sophisticated way.

F.V.: I am perfectly in agreement that the profound question is truly this one. Up to what point can one think creation, at least make a description of it? But where I am no longer in agreement with Cornelius is with respect to what he quite rightly calls identitarian logic. And, as he knows very well, here we are touching on a profound debate, a point of great profundity, at the core of the sciences and

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modern mathematics: is this identitarian logic a good basis, a good foundation? Yet, insofar as the proof has not been brought about and, so far as I know, this proof is not yet there, I do not feel like I am limited to these *two options*: either identitarian logic wherein, as such, I am absolutely constrained to deduce these primary principles—and thus, from a predetermined set—or the recourse to this aleatory, about which you have just exhibited the inadequacy. Because there is this radically different notion [115], introduced by the theorization of dynamic systems and so-called non-linear mathematics, which is the notion of emergence. It is not the aleatory, since, precisely, it is relatively formalizable, not formalizable qua deducible, in the sense of “ensemblist-identitarian,” but qua the conditions of the possibility of emergence. Thus, to bring back up the example of the first living cell that you just mentioned, it is true that before the origin of life there was a whole heap of possibilities, which were not existing, and which, all of a sudden, it inaugurated. But how does it inaugurate them? One could say, from the point of view of non-linear mathematics, that there is a heap of conditions of possibility, then this phenomenon of self-constitution surfaces, which is itself strongly non-linear, or at least non-calculable, because it results in part from non-linearity. But, at the same time, it is not aleatory since I can describe the essential processes that it is necessary to put into action in order that there be autopoiesis. I can reproduce them in the laboratory, in particular, and make, anew and in a repetitive way, autopoieses; if need be, [I can] invent a style of “implementation” of life different from those which have taken place on earth. This is, in my opinion, if not a proof, then at least a good argument in favor of this option, which is neither the aleatory nor the calculable, but which is properly this possibility of creation as the conditions of the possibility of emergence through non-linear systems.

C.C.: Here, we are perhaps coming to the heart of the problem, where there is, in the end, a radical philosophical option [116]. . . . First, I do not like this term emergence, which lets one understand that there is a property that emerges within what is global and that is not contained in the parts. But it is not only this. When the life of higher living organisms makes appear, for example, color, no one, apart from being crazy, can qualify this phenomenon as illusory, as secondary in quality,

etc. We live in a world of colors, which we create, but which we do not create entirely arbitrarily because there corresponds to them something: shocks that we receive from the outside world. And this creation would not be reducible to the simple gathering of a lot of local things. Precisely, the fact that numerous objects and their local connections are conditions leads us to this idea (in my opinion entirely elementary but surprisingly forgotten in this discussion) of the distinction between necessary conditions and sufficient conditions. In order that the Greeks create the *polis*—democracy, philosophy, demonstrative research, etc.—there is a hoard, an infinity, of necessary conditions. These include the big bang, the galaxies, the formation of the solar system, the emergence of life. . . . Certain of them are trivial, and it would be idle chatter to emphasize them; others are not. Thus, Greek mythology, which is a necessary condition, is not sufficient. There is a kinship of signification, but something else was required in order to create the *polis* and the rest. Yet, precisely, creation never takes place *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. With respect to form, it is *ex nihilo*. This is the *hic*, and this is why I think that non-linear mathematics can do no more [117] than furnish an *ex post facto* description of the thing. . . . This is somewhat what René Thom is trying to do with the theory of catastrophes, as well.¹¹

F.V.: This is a way of looking at things, but it is not the only one. And here, I find that you prejudice the decision of the jury . . .

K.v.B.: Excuse me, but I don't understand . . .

F.V.: It's a question of knowing if non-linear mathematics is always *post factum*.

C.C.: . . . therefore descriptive . . .

F.V.: . . . yes, descriptive or not. And it is too early to tell. I would like to stress this problem in the following way. A small, preliminary side-note: the word emergence—I agree with you—I do not like it too much either; it's muddy. . . . It would be necessary to invent a new word. But what I intend by the word emergence is precisely this non-separability between the globality and the phenomenon, which is therefore dependent on all parties, and the specificity of each locality. That is what is rich.

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C.C.: Of course. [118]

F.V.: And thus, for example, in the case of the origin of life, of autopoiesis, I cannot separate the particular properties of nucleic acids, of proteins, and of lipids that participate in the constitution of cells, any more than I can separate the global aspects of this constitution, for example the fact that there is a boundary, and thus conditions of diffusion that are not by definition local but global. And, here, one can see that the local and the global go hand and hand. And this non-separability is the symptom, precisely, of non-linearity. The word perhaps does not fit, but it is what I am designating. And in the case of autopoiesis, we have an example speaking particularly about something that I can nevertheless give as descriptive frame, which is *pre factum*. Why? Because this description *pre factum* permits me to reconstitute it in the laboratory; it is not solely *post factum*. That said, we are still too much in the prehistory of these theoretical tools to know if they would permit us to go farther ahead. Thus, you see, I remain prudent but at the same time I am not as radical as you, saying that it is always *post factum*. For we have examples wherein this description is “productive,” in the sense that it puts into place the conditions of generation, following which the emergence of the phenomenon is neither a surprise nor an *a posteriori* explanation. Nor is it a kind of calculation, which would permit me to know exactly what is going to happen.

C.C.: Yes, I agree . . . [119]

K.v.B.: Beware, it is necessary to arrive at a decision, because, sadly, time is going to run out. . . .

F.V.: That is too bad. . . .

K.v.B.: And now I would like to ask you a very stupid question, but one which, perhaps, clarifies a bit the stakes of your debate. What do you each hope to get from your research for the future of society? You, for example, Cornelius: at the end of this article, which is somewhat your autobiographical intellectual trajectory, published in your book,¹² you conclude, following a severe criticism of Marxism, with a vision that I would qualify as relatively utopian, of a society to come, therefore with this idea, nevertheless, that there will one day be a

new man, an autonomous man, an autonomous society wherein the subject will be capable of escaping all of the constraints of a society that makes him suffer and against which we have struggled. I presume that you as well, Francisco, are a biologist sufficiently “human” to make the distinction between an entirely scientific society and a human society. Now, what are you hoping for society in your works?

C.C.: It is perhaps up to Francisco to respond first. . . . [120]

F.V.: Your question catches me a bit unprepared because, I confess to you rather naively, my motivation arises, first of all, from what Cornelius analyzed in one of his latest articles.¹³ It is epistemic passion, the desire to know. And if the social consequences of what I am doing are not indifferent to me—how could they ever be?—that is not why I work. I let myself go into this erotic pull of knowledge [*érotisme du savoir*] and of understanding. And then, obviously, I try to give things to my fellow citizens that I judge important. But it is more qua citizen that I am a political man, that I have always been. I also have a passion for everything that is happening around me, but not qua biologist. Qua biologist, what leads me, what gives me that “gut feeling,” is this epistemic drive. I really can tell you nothing else. It is perhaps not very good for politics, but if I want to be sincere, this is my truth.

K.v.B.: I like very much the erotic pull of knowledge. As for you, Cornelius?

C.C.: There, Francisco is . . . Platonic! And me, I am a bit more divided than Francisco, though I do not feel divided. I also have, within the range of my capacities, this eros for knowledge; I am capable of staying up a whole night in order to comprehend a theorem, to study a new physics book (as far [121] as I comprehend it) or to read a history book, quite simply. But, at the same time, I feel profoundly concerned by the destiny of the society in which I live. And for me, the two things are not without relation, in a certain meaning of the term. But I do not think that one can deduce a politics from a philosophy or from a knowledge. Because there is, here still, an ultimate decision. . . . Thus, in contemporary knowledge, there is this great division between, on the one hand, those for whom all of this fantastic luxuriance of

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forms that being has created, from the galaxies to the flowers and to the symphonies of musicians, is reducible, can be brought back to diverse combinations of a form or of several very simple forms (which is the case with the neuro-psychologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, for example, in France) and, on the other hand, the idea that being is creation, that the propriety of being is to make surface new forms. Now, in what sense does this have a link with politics? I think, quite simply, that this latter philosophical option liberates us to think politics. It liberates us from social determinisms, from the idea that one could never do otherwise, that history will never be able to get out of this circle where it rolls around constantly: oppression, a bit of freedom, re-oppression, etc. It affirms that nothing, in knowledge, is opposed to the idea that we can one day create a society in which autonomous human beings can collectively govern themselves in autonomy. From this point of view, it is not a deduction from philosophy to politics, but it is nevertheless a [122] certain complementarity. And here, I believe that Francisco will probably agree.

F.V.: I agree, entirely even. But grant me that you reflect at the social level more explicitly than I do. And the possibly deducible relation between what I do at the level of the living being and mathematics and politics is less direct. I therefore place more confidence in my intuition as a citizen than in my intuition as a scientist for my political engagements. Even if these are, of course, things multiply linked together.¹⁴ But such as you phrased your question, I had the impression that you expected something like finalized product from me, which would have found its place, so to speak, in some sort of utopia, ideality. And I obviously have nothing of the sort to propose to you. [123]

NOTES

- ¹ An allusion to Castoriadis, C., *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.
- ² A work that Cornelius Castoriadis had first reviewed in [the journal] *Debat*, No. XXX, in 1982, following the work's appearance in

English as: *Principles of Biological Autonomy*. New York: Elsevier Science Ltd., 1979.

- ³ In the French text, following Castoriadis' citation of the title of Varela's book title in English, he then translates the English title literally into French for the French audience: "*les principes de l'autonomie biologique.*" —TR
- ⁴ Varela, F., *Autonomie et connaissance: essai sur le vivant*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989.
- ⁵ Maturana, H. and Varela, F., *De Maquinas y Seres Vivos: una teoría de la organización biológica*. Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, Santiago de Chile, 1973.
- ⁶ Cf. "Breaking the Closure," Chapter 6 in this volume. —TR
- ⁷ Dumouchel, P., and Dupuy, J.-P., *Colloque de Cerisy – L'auto-organisation: de la physique au politique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983.
- ⁸ Rosch, E., Thompson, E., and Varela, F., *The Embodied Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.
- ⁹ Varela, F., *Invitation aux sciences cognitives*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999.
- ¹⁰ Cf. the definition of the concept in *The Embodied Mind*, 173.
- ¹¹ *Predire n'est pas expliquer*. Paris: Champs Flammarion, 1993.
- ¹² This concerns *Faite et à faire*, published in the book of the same title as volume five of *Carrefours du labyrinthe*. [For the English translation of the article, see "Done and to be Done," in *The Castoriadis Reader*, trans. David Ames Curtis. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997. —TR]
- ¹³ Castoriadis, C. and Epstein, T., "Passion and Knowledge," in *Diogones*, 40 (160), 1992, pp. 75–93.
- ¹⁴ Varela, F., *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom, and Cognition*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Limits of Formalization

Cornelius Castoriadis in Dialogue with Alain Connes

Translated by John V. Garner

CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS: I am very happy that you agreed to come to this broadcast, and for at least two reasons. First of all, while I am not a mathematician, I have always, since my adolescence, been attracted by mathematics, and my fascination still endures to this day. Now, for me, to encounter an important mathematician is a bit like the excitement of standing in front of the Chartres cathedral and encountering a “master-builder” who is explaining to you how it was constructed. And then, through reading the book that you wrote with Jean-Pierre Changeux, *Conversations on Mind, Matter, and Mathematics*¹ (a very nice title, for that matter²), I came to realize that we have very close positions concerning what is essential for mathematics (which is to say, for doing mathematics), what it presupposes, in what it consists, and, finally, this mystery of the possible and, in my eyes, almost certain encounter of mathematical constructions with something that we rediscover, we recreate, of course, but which also constrains us like an objective reality—ideal, certainly—but with [124] an amazing internal coherence, a richness, and an extraordinary range.

To tell the truth, I do not know which subject to ask you about. They are in fact very numerous, but many are excluded by the necessity of being understood by every “honest man.” Now, perhaps we could commence with the celebrated question of “thinking” machines. To begin, I am going to say what I think about it, and next

we will see if we are in agreement or not. These machines, to be sure, are a prodigious human creation and can do things of which man is incapable. But, for the time being, at least, they are incapable of operations to the extent of an . . . earthworm, in which the cells, for example, know how to recognize the stereochemical forms of molecules that they have to accept, to reject, to process. It is necessary, thus, to take into account these limits, all while knowing that they are certainly provisional, able to be pushed back, at least. But to what point? What can we say, *a priori*, about their limits? In my eyes, there would never be a genuine thinking machine. And in order to justify this affirmation, I will reinvoké the fortunate distinction that you employed, in your discussion with Jean-Pierre Changeux, concerning the three stages of the mathematician's work. The first stage, about which everyone will agree, is calculus, algorithms, which, according to Church's celebrated thesis on mathematical logic, can be entrusted to a machine, to what one calls a universal Turing machine. There are obvious reservations, since someone must construct this machine, give it a program and tasks to resolve; the machine does not invent the task to [125] resolve, nor even the methods. This allows me to pass immediately to the third stage, which you call intuition, which I myself call the creative imagination. It is this faculty of the human being, of the human soul—but of the socialized soul, of course, disposed of language and a historical heritage—to arbitrarily invent tasks for itself, to arbitrarily invent forms (when I say arbitrarily, it is an initial approximation), and also to invent this particular domain of mathematics wherein, precisely, it creates this thing that, in my opinion, arises just as much from the imagination: the process of demonstration. And there is, finally, an intermediate stage, which is this capacity, not entirely creative, but evaluative rather, of coming back to the path that one has taken, of comparing its method with other possible methods, of redefining, as such, a tactic, perhaps even a strategy, a capacity that, after some hesitation in your discussion with Changeux, you call reflection, a term with which I am in perfect agreement.

ALAIN CONNES: We can, in effect, ask ourselves *a priori* the question of knowing if, effectively, there exist limits to the potential capacity of a machine. Qua mathematician, I would gladly place the limit in the distinction between what has a meaning, what is interesting, in

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opposition to what has no interest, no pertinence. It is really this notion of meaning, of interest, which is the most difficult to formalize, to define in such a way that a machine can have access to it. But before discussing this question further, I would like to come back to the different levels of mathematical work that you mentioned. In particular, to this idea—to my mind false—that since calculus is now entirely accessible to the machine, it is a level that we comprehend perfectly. I think that we would be wrong to say that. When we have, for example, a very complicated calculation to do, we can certainly entrust it to a computer, but this assumes, first of all, as you specified, that we give to it the program that is necessary. And then, what is much more frustrating is knowing how to correctly read the result. Because, if the computer provides you with ten pages of formulas, we are not, now, truly advanced, in the sense that such a result precisely . . .

C.C.: . . . is not comprehensible . . .

A.C.: Is not comprehensible, that's it. And my second remark, still on this first level of calculation, is that, in fact, when the human mind learns to do calculations, however simple and mechanical they are, in doing so it acquires all sorts of mechanisms that, if they are not acquired, are ultimately going to render intuition dumb, impotent. It's a bit as if a pedestrian, going from a point A to a point B, were to lower his head in order not to see the path that he is traveling, the people he encounters. . . . Here I am thinking, of course, of children at school. It would be a very grave error to let them use calculators too early, because learning to do multiplications, additions, etc., inscribing these very simple operations [127] in the brain, is fundamental in order that, next to the mechanism itself, an intuition and a sense of magnitude develops itself progressively. It's an issue that we would be very wrong to evade.

C.C.: Absolutely!

A.C.: As for the level of reflection, it's true that we can now formalize a vague schema of turning back [*retour en arrière*], of the genre of those that were discussed with Changeux in our book, which begins to resemble a genuine reflection. But such a description leaves me wanting for more in the sense that what is missing is the sort of polarization toward a goal that is relatively badly defined while one is

reflecting on a problem. In this sense, moreover, the distinction between the second and the third level is quite fuzzy; we do not know how to specify it well.

Now, in order to arrive fully at the third level, that of intuition, of the creative imagination according to you (which, in any case, permits access to that mathematical reality independent of our proper existence), one follows, whenever one is studying certain objects through such an axiomatic, a kind of Ariadne's thread. It is extremely difficult to define, but it permits one to displace oneself into that "geography" of mathematics. And I would like to try to polarize this displacement by giving two examples of problems, enigmas, that are my principle motivations in mathematics. The first enigma is that of the space in which we live, an enigma that wouldn't obviously be disconnected from relations between mathematics and physics, [128] since we cannot separate the perception of that space from physics and from what it teaches us about it either. And the second enigma is, let's say, the sequence of primary numbers, those which subtend arithmetics, the numbers, this whole system constantly present to our eyes whenever we reflect on arithmetic, and even on simple things. Now, we perceive something truly surprising when we venture out sufficiently far in the elucidation of these two mysteries: they have an enormous amount of common points; the concepts developed for one are applicable to the other, etc.; and, in the end, we cannot really disjoin the perception that we have of the physical world from this research on the enigmas. Thus, we arrive—at least I arrive (perhaps I am an extremist?)—at this certainty: mathematical reality is the only reality that is precisely, correctly defined. And we arrive at this challenge, essential for me: to comprehend in what sense physical reality aligns itself with, specifies itself within mathematical reality.

C.C.: I am almost entirely in agreement with you, even if my agreement or disagreement is of no great interest. Above all, I was very happy that, by mentioning these two enigmas, you put your finger on questions that have always filled me with admiration and fascination as well; we will come back to them. Beforehand, let me add something about your first stage of calculation, which is not first in time, for that matter, but is logically anterior, if I may speak so. It is

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always necessary to go back to this stage. That is, a mathematician has a brilliant intuition. He tries, [129] or others try, to put it on paper. If it then contradicts well-established things, and the contradiction stems from the first level (something is A or is not-A, is the contradictory of A), then, well, the brilliant intuition falls. There are quite a few examples in the history of mathematics.

A.C.: It is exactly that. And one could compare the period of calculation, of verification, almost of demonstration to the work of the experimenter who, so to speak, goes back to his drawing board. One can have an idea, and this is what replaces experience in mathematics.

C.C.: Absolutely.

KATHARINA VON BULOW: That's why a book of philosophy, despite the base intuition, needs a thousand pages to explain the idea at the origin.

A.C.: Most of all, there is a need to return to an experimentation; and, in mathematics, this experimentation is the proof, the demonstration.

C.C.: Yes. With this difference, that in philosophy we do not have rigorous demonstrations. We cannot reduce what we say to a small group of axioms from which we deduce the rest. We do not have a direct reference to experience. Philosophy works under the constraint of experience, but, then, it's a question of the constraint of human experience in its totality. And we precisely do not have that hardness, that [130] crystalline character, which is what is proper to mathematics. That is the enormous difference.

But let's return to our question and to your three stages. I myself also believe that it is not possible to totally separate reflection from intuition (for you) or from imagination (for me). Let me explain. Let's suppose that we integrate into a machine what you very correctly call a function of evaluation, which, as a function in the vulgar sense (for example, the respiratory function), will permit the machine little by little, as it effectuates calculations, to see if it approaches a goal or not, a goal defined in advance, since the machine would not know, itself, how to set it. But this function of evaluation, if it is itself able to be

rendered as an algorithm, will be capable of operating only upon possibilities defined in advance.

A.C.: Absolutely.

C.C.: Whereas the genuine work of reflection is indissociable from imaginary creation, in the sense that during this work one can make surface criteria for choices, for example, or other elements that were not given in advance.

A.C.: I agree, entirely.

C.C.: On the other hand, of course, and for the same reason, at the moment of such a work of “machinal” evaluation, one can never see in it the meaning, as you say, or the fecundity, as I would say. The meaning is, here again, a contribution of the imagination, without which the invention [131] of a demonstrative method would lose an enormous portion of its criteria. Let’s take the example of one of the great methods of demonstration, already there in Euclid and Archimedes, the method of exhaustion,³ which is the foundation of an enormous number of things in modern mathematics, in the theory of limits. . . . What does it allow me to do? To approach as closely as I can, and to ideally exhaust, that which remains. It was, of course, invented in the beginning for a precise application, but they realized at some point in time that it had a fecundity that transcended by far the objects for whose functioning it was constructed. And, here again, the imagination is necessary.

A.C.: Absolutely. This method is, furthermore, a very good example, because in it we see clearly what differentiates the mathematician from a computer. Exhaustion will give him access to the infinite, carry him to the limit. Thus, despite an infinite number of operations, he will be able, in his mind, to imagine the number π , while the computer, it . . .

C.C.: . . . will produce decimals.

A.C.: That’s it; it will accumulate the operations but will never have that direct access. And that is what is entirely remarkable in mathematics. It gives man an access to the infinite, that’s to say, an access beyond a number of finite operations. Let’s take up the same problem

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through another point. [132] In mathematics, things that are quite paradoxical occur often: thus, in order to study entirely finite groups, we use tools that were conceived in order to study infinite groups, which one calls Lie groups, which are in fact a lot simpler to analyze than finite groups because their structure, subtended by the continuum, permits using algebraic means. Thus, pose for yourself a very present philosophical problem: is the universe that surrounds us, our mind, etc. *a priori* finite, *a priori* limited by finitude? Or, as I hope, does there exist in a certain manner, beyond the finite, beyond the real, the tangible, and the material, a reality that one can call mathematical (but the denomination matters little), the characteristic of which is precisely the infinite? It would exercise an attraction upon us, like a calling, in order to give us access, despite our human condition, to something that has to do with a certain eternity, a certain atemporality, a certain independence from space, from the point of space in which one exists.

C.C.: By the way, this passage already obtains at the level of the simple living being, which, curiously, utilizes mathematics, utilizes the results of it: when a dog pursues a rabbit, it solves a differential equation. . . .

A.C.: It does not solve it; it seeks a solution. . . .

C.C.: Yes, it applies a solution for the equation, which is called the pursuit curve, but it does not know it; it does it like that. . . . [133]

A.C.: I will take another example. Whenever we do an addition, we use retention. And retention, it is what mathematicians call a co-cycle number. . . .⁴ But, of course, a good knowledge of the terminology will not help us make correct additions!

C.C.: Of course. Therefore, it is not the living being in general but the specificity of the mind or of the human psyche and, in particular, the enormous innovation in the order of being constituted by the imagination and the imaginary. I believe this is entirely essential. But, to return to the two enigmas about which you spoke, I myself also appreciated and worked through the enormous problems that space poses, Zeno's paradoxes, which have lost none of their relevance, the question of the discrete and the continuous,⁵ the approach to the continuum through the discrete. . . . And, here, we

are bordering on contemporary physics, with the quantification of space. . . . As for the primary numbers, one of the things that excited me the most during my brief studies of mathematics (at my adult age, alas!) was noticing that a foundational theorem, and even practically all of the theorems concerning the true arithmetic of the prime numbers (that is, the numbers that have no other divisor than themselves and one), utilizes analysis, the chapter of mathematics that concerns itself with limits and continuity. And [134] they demonstrate, for example, that the frequency of primary numbers within the set of natural numbers diminishes following a logarithmic function that has nothing to do with arithmetic, of course. But these demonstrations, those of Hadamard and La Vallée-Poussin, are replete with integrals! One thus gets the impression—I do not like this word but, well, I will use it in order to move quickly—of a certain transcendence of the object of mathematics, because one begins with the primary numbers, one opens a completely different chapter of analysis, and with it, by another path, one arrives back at results concerning the primary numbers. A bit like little Marcel who takes a walk with his parents in Combray. The path seems long, he does not recognize the countryside anymore, he feels lost, and, then, in the midst of a byway that seems to him to be the end of the world, suddenly there he is in front of “the little door at the back of the yard” of his home. . . .⁶

A.C.: Later, thanks to Atle Selberg, there was an elementary demonstration of that theorem concerning the frequency of the primary numbers. From a somewhat naive point of view, one could say that the primary numbers play somewhat the same role as the elementary particles in physics. That is, in fact, these are the elementary components of the whole numbers from the perspective of multiplication. The starting point of the theory we owe to Euler is that if one forms a series of the powers of the whole numbers, [135] one obtains a function that factors into products of terms indexed by the primary numbers.

C.C.: Happily, for physicists, the number of the elementary particles is finite, at least they believe. I do not know what they would do with an infinite number of elementary particles; doubtless, they would be obliged to change methods!

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A.C.: In fact, they are already confronted with this problem. The diverse categories of elementary particles are of a finite number, but if one looks at their possible states, those are of an infinite number.

C.C.: That is true. Now, there is a bifurcation that immediately appears here, since you spoke about physics, which opens two paths. A first one, which I would like to eliminate immediately, is that of reductionism. It begins from an observation of evidence: our brain, with which we do mathematics, among other things, is a physical object and, in particular, a living object, a biological object. And here is where the biologists come in to affirm: mathematics is in the brain, end of story. But, as for me, I do not manage to comprehend how the infinite is *within* the brain! The infinite is precisely an ideality created by the human imagination, for the functioning of which the brain is a necessary condition, but by no means sufficient. And we too often forget that distinction.

The other path leads to what an American physicist, Wigner, has called the [136] “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics” when one applies it to the real world.⁷ An enormous problem! In your book with Changeux, you make a very important remark to which I adhere entirely, to the effect that physics is not reducible to mathematics. Likewise, mathematics is not reducible to physics. There are whole branches of mathematics . . .

A.C.: Of course, like arithmetics, for example . . .

C.C.: . . . —yes— which do not have physical reality, including the primary numbers of course, but also the space of infinite dimension. . . . They become tools but do not have physical reality. Thus, there is, in mathematical language, a non-empty intersection between the physical universe and the mathematical universe; there is a part wherein they cross over, and within that part, the effectiveness of mathematics is really diabolical. And, then, there is a part of physics (perhaps it is the most essential part, in a sense) which is outside of the rest, just as there is a part of mathematics which is also outside of the rest and is just as essential. And this is, in my eyes, a very strong argument against all reductionisms.

A.C.: Absolutely. Moreover, with respect to the human brain, the materialist point of view is very limited, not only because, of course,

the brain is a material, finite object, but, above all, because it purports to comprehend what matter is, because it is [137] mistaken and shams us. Certainly, as long as one takes interest in biological phenomena at the level of the molecule, one can, in effect, have an approximately valid idea of what one is dealing with. But as soon as one changes levels in order to be concerned with the elementary particles of quantum mechanics, this very notion of matter, of the material world, becomes evanescent. Nevertheless, this really is the essential question that is necessary for us to face: what is external reality? And one can take the same argument that localizes mathematics in the brain, “paraphrase” it for external reality, and end up at exactly the same conclusion, which is that external reality exists only in the brain. That hardly advances us.

For me, external reality—everything that is outside of us—is essentially, and first, an inexhaustible source of information and, secondly, something not able to be bypassed [*quelque chose d’incontournable*], in a certain way. Yet, mathematical reality—when one is talking about the primary numbers, the infinity of primary numbers—has exactly the characteristics of being a source of information that is, on the one hand, unpredictable, unfailing, and, on the other hand, not able to be bypassed, inevitable. Such is the primary experience that one gets with mathematics; it is impossible both to capture it all at once and to bypass the bulk of information that it represents. If someone, one day, comes along with a very powerful computer and says, I produced the greatest primary number, we know that he is mistaken because we have the demonstration of the infinitude of primary numbers. [138]

C.C.: Which is, moreover, an admirable demonstration already present in Euclid, and which a normally intelligent, ten-year-old child must be able to comprehend.

A.C.: But which absolutely would not work on a computer, since you take the numbers, you take the product of all the preceding numbers, and you tag on one; and it is something absolutely impossible to do with a machine. But that’s how it is: mathematics is a reality that is truly unable to be bypassed, perfectly well-defined, and an inexhaustible source of information. While external reality, even in a somewhat intuitive sense of the material world that surrounds us, is something that is much more difficult to define and perceive. Because, whatever

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be the progress of physics, we are only ever disposed of models of the external world. In order to apprehend space, for example, a child has, up to the age of one, one and a half, a sort of archaic model of the external world that permits him to move around, to not fall in a hole. He will refine this model, ameliorate it through the course of his existence, but it will only ever remain a model. And while, just before, we were talking about the problem of the discrete and the continuous, this shows once again that we perceive the material world that surrounds us in an intuitive way, without being able to approach it otherwise than step by step, and by models, which are obviously mathematical models.

K.v.B.: I would like to return to the pretension of the materialists to localize mathematics in the brain. . . . [139]

A.C.: But we are not denying that they are present in the brain; we deny that it is their only site of "existence". . . .

K.v.B.: I know that both of you rebut this materialist reduction and that my question is somewhat provocative. I will pose it again differently. The body is material. It contains biologically, physically a mind (I am thinking of Varela's book, *The Embodied Mind*) that makes use, unbeknown to itself, of the infinite possibilities of mathematics, of biology, of the human sciences, of philosophy, for example. But, in fact, everything is already there, and it is only necessary to repeat the same research without ever coming to an end. What do you think?

C.C.: A coherent materialist or rationalist or determinist thesis should affirm that everything was already there, not only in the human mind, but from the big bang. All the mathematical theorems were virtually there, but also Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* or Manet's *Olympia*. In one sense, this thesis is irrefutable, but, at the same time, it is what Plato would have called an "abyss of idle chatter." It has no meaning.

A.C.: I believe that we cannot discuss this problem of materialism without coming back to the question of time. One of the reasons for the virulence of the materialist is Darwinism and its supposed explicative power. But there is, here, an enormous deception, because this explicative power [140] exists only to the extent that one comprehends

the passage of time. Just a few words on this. In contemporary physics, we make time one of the coordinates of space-time, and we thus believe we understand what it is. But, in fact, there is a total illusion here. Physics does not explain and never says why time passes, why time flows. It is a coordinate, but the coordinates of space do not flow. Time, it flows. For as long as we have not reflected in a sufficiently precise way on this flowing of time, the Darwinian explanation will remain a vicious circle. Species disappear because time passes; but why does time pass? What does this passage of time signify? What does our perception of this passage signify?

On this essential problem of the relations between the physical world, the material world, and this access to the infinite, this space of "transcendence" that makes for the originality of the human soul, I admit that I have a rather radical view. I trust only in things that exist independently of time, in order thus to assign to the sole mathematical reality this independence, this atemporality. This allows us to ensure its existence independently of our comprehension of the flowing of time. And I place in it the founding stone upon which to construct my conception of reality. Now, take the question of integration with the interior of the reality of the physical universe that we know about, that of the big bang, of the temporality that characterizes us and that characterizes the universe we live in. And by working on this problem, by discussing it with physicists [141], I ended up more or less at the conclusion that the flowing of time has nothing to do with a coordinate in space-time, has nothing to do with this somewhat naive model that we have of space-time and of physics, but, in fact, it had something to do with thermodynamics. In a paradoxical, provocative way, I will say that if time passes, it is because we are bathing in 3° Kelvin rays, this fossil ray that stems from the big bang. For me, time passes because we are incapable of experiencing [*connaître*] the microscopic distributions of what is happening in the universe that surrounds us, and because this lack of information, this kind of macroscopic perception that we have of it, makes it such that gradually our body is destroyed, our genetic precision erodes. And in order to struggle against it, we are disposed of only this discrete phenomenon, which is the transmission of life, the transmission to other generations of this sort of bible contained in our genetic information, which, because it is discrete and rigid, will be very difficult to diminish and,

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on the contrary, will be able to fight and thrive against this flowing of time about which we can do nothing because it is due to destruction, to friction, and to our incapacity to experience [*connaître*] all the details of the microscopic world that surrounds us.

C.C.: I would like to come back to some of the subjects that you just mentioned and, first, to what you said about Darwin and Darwinism, which is entirely correct but insufficient. The core of the question is that there is no Darwinian explanation [142], there is only a grandiose tautology: survival only to those that are suitable for survivable.

A.C.: But we agree!

C.C.: Now, the essential question is twofold: first, why are there different living beings? Secondly, and above all, why do these differences go in the direction of a growing complexification of the living being? Here, Darwin had no response. He relied upon examples that had very little value: variations within a species, etc. Then, with mutations, they found not a response, but a stone that was missing for making the fact of evolution comprehensible: there is evolution because there is mutation. But these mutations are aleatory, come about by chance, and the enigma reappears: how is it that aleatory mutations so often—not always because some of them that are deadly and impair the being that carries them—produce coherent forms, capable of living and even of being the seat of new mutations that will lead further along on the scale of complexity? On this issue, modern neo-Darwinism has no response in my view. They speak, here again, of the aleatory, but in my mind this aleatory—not the trivial aleatory of the dice throw or of the card one pulls—is a pseudonym that deterministic and positivistic scientists give to the fact of creation. Because it's an either/or: either something is a production starting from what exists, and one can explain it, say how it was manufactured, or it is not. And determinism calls aleatory that which it cannot explain, that is to say, the fact of creation.

A.C.: We are entirely in agreement here.

C.C.: And there is the growing complexification, about which Stephen Jay Gould tried to give an explanation. It starts with a zero-complexity. A first living form appears, which obviously cannot come

from this side of zero. If, thus, it goes somewhere, it will be toward complexity, and after a million years there will be very complex forms. . . . But thermodynamics does not authorize such a reasoning, which teaches us that there are many chances for these forms to lose complexity rather than to continue to become more complex. What they do not see here is that life is a creation, and a permanent creation of new forms, and that the human species is such a creation with that which characterizes it in particular, namely, the creative imagination.

Before coming to the famous question of the universality of mathematics, just a word on what Alain Connes said about time just now. I do not believe that thermodynamics can explain time to us. The great problem that it faces up to is obviously the arrow of time, why there is before and after, why it flows. But, here again, it is necessary to distinguish two times.

A.C.: Absolutely. [144]

C.C.: There is a time that I will call ensemblist-identitarian, or algorithmic, for which thermodynamics is valuable. But if this time were alone, there would have been several initial forms that would have degraded themselves at the end of about fifteen million years. Yet, what we observe is that there is always the emergence of new forms. There is thus another time, which is not the simple time of deterioration but the time of creation, that I call poetic time, because *poiesis* means creation. And the true before/after is marked under this. Do you agree?

A.C.: Entirely. Certainly, this would necessitate a lot more explanation, but let's say that I was speaking here of the flowing of time in the naive sense of the term. And it is quite evident that it would be necessary to make the distinction between at least three or four forms of time. . . .

K.v.B.: If one reads the absolutely superb pages of St. Augustine or other great philosophers on time, one observes that what gave them the greatest fear is the time that flows, deterioration, death, forgetting. . . .

A.C. & C.C.: Obviously, that's the big issue!

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K.v.B.: Now, Christianity, through the intermediary of Christ and of St. Paul, very astutely introduced the concept of a cessation of time, a redemption of time. For all eternity, it has already arrived and is already redeemed, for all Christians. And you also speak of eternity and [145] of the infinite. Whence comes my question: the sciences, and above all mathematics, are they not a language that simultaneously opens up the infinite and leaves traces such that man can imagine himself to be eternal . . . ?

C.C.: By no means; there is an enormous logical leap there.

A.C.: Of course, and the difference is that, all while knowing very well that one is not eternal, this flowing of time prevents us from conceiving our being as independent of time. For me, the ideal would be to have a consciousness of one's own existence, of one's birth up to the present moment, that would be identical to that which we have as limited, physical being living in space. The fact that our arms have such a length has never bothered us. The limited size of our body in space leaves us perfectly indifferent. But the limitation of the dimension of our being in time obviously anguishes us. And the reason for which it anguishes us is that we impotently witness this flowing of time, without being really capable of perceiving ourselves, of perceiving our totality, independently of time. Now, I think that one can have experiences that run counter to this, in particular through the practice of mathematics. Because the objects that one deals with there, to which one has access, have precisely this character of atemporality, of independence with respect to space and time, which makes it such that the perception that one has allows access to something eternal. This does not signify that the person who goes through such an experience is [146] eternal, of course; it can simply shine over the whole life of an individual, thicken the present instant in both directions, simultaneously in the past and in the future. This is, for me, the essential counterpart to the fact that mathematics is precisely not a physical object, is not localizable in the physical world.

C.C.: That's entirely fair. And one can remark, with respect to what Katharina said, that Christianity in particular—but also the majority of religions, nearly all—invented this amazing “quirk” in

order to respond to this anguish of death. There is an eternity somewhere, elsewhere, and in this eternity we personally participate. And there is an infinite, which is not only like the infinite number of infinities in mathematics, but which is a person, who is good, who loves us, etc. And it was for centuries that this worked.

As for this experience of eternity, of atemporality, mathematics opens it up for us, for sure, but so do great works of art, for example. Once again, the *St. Matthew Passion* was created in Leipzig, in such and such a year, by an individual who had 20 children. . . . But all of that is totally non-pertinent to the meaning and the musical content of the *St. Matthew Passion*. Man creates and has access to a world of idealities—of the imperceptible, certainly—which are nevertheless immanent, and which he manages to let into his proper world. Mathematics is an excellent manifestation of it, but so is art and even great thinking. [147]

Just one more word on matter, about which you were very correctly saying that it became evanescent with modern physics. But there is more: the categories themselves of our ordinary perception became evanescent with it, for example, the separability in quanta, or identity. And I am not talking about causality. Physics thus makes us discover strata of being that are different from the habitual stratum in which we live, and this is one of the reasons for the fascination that it exerts.

Last point before coming to the question of intemporality. I was very happy to observe our agreement on that. One does not work on mathematics solely with one's brain in the trivial sense. The psyche, the human soul, can do nothing if there is not simultaneously representation, desire, or affect. One does mathematics because one desires to do mathematics and because doing mathematics procures pleasure.

A.C.: Absolutely. And also because one is attracted by a mystery. . . .

C.C.: Yes, but this is the case with all three at once; the fascination exerts the question of meaning. But, in the end, the whole human being is implicated. And this remains a reason why I do not believe a machine will ever be able to think. I do not see a machine becoming passionate for the demonstration of the infinitude of the primary numbers. Why would that interest it?

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Now, on the question of universality and of intemporality, or of atemporality, how does it [148] manifest itself? First, I believe, it does do through a fantastic permanence in the time of our creations. Secondly, it does so through the certitude that we have—and to which, for that matter, physics brings a sort of corroboration—that the Pythagorean theorem is not simply valid starting from 540 years before Jesus Christ, when Pythagoras, in Samos or in South Italy, invented it, created the demonstration for it, but that it was already there from the formation of the solar system . . .

A.C.: Exactly.

C.C.: . . . qua something intrinsic in the functioning of the physical world, that, there already, the square of the hypotenuse was equal to the sum of the two squares of the sides. Thirdly, and this is the most important point, it does so because we know how [*savons pouvoir*] to teach and to make any human being concede the mathematical truths. This is not the case with other human, cultural creations, etc., for which it is impossible, extremely difficult. If I take a banally intelligent “primitive” and bring him to the Opera to make him listen to *Tristan and Isolde*, will he fall out in ecstasy? That’s not obvious at all. In order that he understand something, that he should have an access to that work, a very long process of accumulation would be necessary. By contrast, I would know how to teach him, bring him to comprehend, what . . . the Banach spaces⁸ are and make him concede them. That seems to me to be obvious and capital. And [149] that is also why I disagree with your “associate” Jean-Pierre Changeux who writes, in your book in common, that perhaps beings on other planets have other mathematics. He does not realize the consequences of what he is saying, because if there are other mathematics, there is also another physics . . .

A.C.: . . . and another chemistry, of course . . .

C.C.: . . . and other molecules. Thus, what we say on the earth is false, the laws of physics are not universal, etc. That is not possible! Are you in agreement with this distinction between an intemporality specific to mathematics and an intemporality merely *de jure*, which is valid only for some of our other creations?

A.C.: Entirely. I will even add that mathematics appeals, according to me, to a sense that is different from those which one puts into action in the other domains of human creation. Of course, one utilizes vision as well, hearing, etc., but these senses have access to something about which, precisely, the universality is much greater, much stronger, much more communicable.

K.v.B.: It is certainly going to be necessary to stop . . .

C.C.: One last point, since we have already passed beyond our limits. . . . To come back the “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics,” their applicability to [150] physics, I will formulate the thing thusly, by soliciting one last time the opinion of Alain Connes, because it is “my” ontological thesis. There is, in being in general, a dimension that is, as one says in mathematics, everywhere dense, everywhere present, which falls under what I call “ensemblist-identitarian” logic, that is, a part of mathematics.

A.C.: Absolutely. And that part of mathematics is present even in language.

C.C.: Of course, in language, in human creations, in a poem as well, in a fugue by Bach, in *Tristan and Isolde*, in a painting, everywhere, and in particles, etc. But that it is everywhere does not mean that it exhausts being. And to the extent that it does not exhaust being, it does not exhaust physical existence, nor human existence, nor mathematical creation itself. That is the reason for which there is this intersection, this extremely important partial crossing-over between the physical world and the mathematical world.

A.C.: I believe that I am entirely in agreement with that.

NOTES

¹ Changeux, J.-P. and Connes, A., *Conversations on Mind, Matter, and Mathematics*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

² The French title is *Matière à penser*, or “matter for thinking.” —TR

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- ³ That is, through more and more precise approximations.
- ⁴ This is said of points situated on the same circle.
- ⁵ Cf. Castoriadis, C., "Remarks on Space and Number," in *Figures of the Thinkable*, trans. Helen Arnold. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- ⁶ Proust, M., *Remembrance of Things Past, Volume 1*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. Ware: Wadsworth Editions, 2006.
- ⁷ Wigner, E., "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences," in *Communications on Pure and Applied Mathematics* 13 (1), 1960, pp. 1–14. —TR
- ⁸ Banach spaces are the objects studied by functional analysis and are named after the founder of that discipline, Polish mathematician Stephan Banach (1892–1945). —TR

CHAPTER SIX

Breaking the Closure

Cornelius Castoriadis in Dialogue with Robert Legros

Translated by John V. Garner

The discussion between Cornelius Castoriadis and Robert Legros reproduced here took place in March of 1990, within the framework of the broadcast "Rejoinders" on France Culture, hosted by Alain Finkielkraut. We thank the latter for having kindly authorized for publication the re-transcription of this interview.¹

ALAIN FINKIELKRAUT: We will start off with an expression from Castoriadis that one finds as a *leitmotif* in Robert Legros' book *The Idea of Humanity*.² "Up until the Greeks," writes Castoriadis in his book entitled *Domains of Man*, "and outside of the Greco-Western tradition, societies were instituted according to the principle of a strict closure."³ What does this expression mean? What is this principle of a strict closure? And if the Greeks made themselves capable of breaking the closure in accordance with which the majority of societies have instituted themselves, what is the meaning, for us, of this grand inaugural gesture?

CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS: There is one thing that we have to establish first. In nearly all of the cultures that we know of, it is not merely that what is valid for each one is its institutions and its own tradition, but, in addition, for each, the others are not valid. The rupture of closure, the breaking of closure, begins when the first Greek philosophers, or the geographers, or the historians realized that what regulates Greek

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societies and other societies does not belong to the nature of things—to a *physis*—but to a *nomos*, which is to say to an institution, convention, social law. This yields histories, for example in Herodotus, that ridicule the customs of the Greeks by depicting the king of the Persians who displays to the Greeks the [274] funeral customs of the Indians and to the Indians the customs of the Greeks. For each of these two peoples, the customs of the others are a pure and simple abomination. But the break also, and above all, takes form starting from the moment when the philosophers began to demolish the mythological traditions and to search for a principle of truth and of reflection within their own activity of thinking. And also, this break immediately extends itself into the sphere of politics with democracy, the question of the law, the question of justice. Certainly, the putting into question of the law as falling under *physis* remains—in particular in the plane of politics—limited in Greece (with slavery, the status of women, etc). But it was reborn in modern times. It is not at all a copy. It is something else. It is a new departure that enacts itself in Europe, which, starting from a certain moment, is re-inspired by the Greeks. It culminates there, as we know, in the Enlightenment, with the French Revolution, simultaneously with the will for a self-institution of society (we make our laws) and for an autonomy of human reflection, of knowledge. Religion is a private affair; the Scriptures contain, perhaps, a revelation or do not contain it, but even this revelation must pass through the filter of reason. This is already Descartes trying to demonstrate the existence of God, it is Kant, etc. Yet it continued, lasting for a certain amount of time. The question that is being posed today is this one: the rise of another tendency, which is very important, which manifests itself in modern times—this is the tendency toward the rational mastery of the world and, in particular, the placing of the economy at the center of everything, the expansion of productive forces (it is in this sense that Marx participated in the capitalist universe), and something that is translated to the level of concrete individuals (who cannot each be a capitalist or an entrepreneur) as a flight behind a purportedly ever more elevated level of life—to what extent is the development of this tendency in the process of eliminating the value of autonomy?

What I mean to say, here, is that we were wrong, lately, to speak of individualism or of narcissism. Individualism [275] is an empty

formulation behind which there is a content. Individuals do not valorize the individual as individual; they valorize a content, and this content is a certain life of that individual. And this life is what we are accustomed to call the society of consumption.

A.F.: Robert Legros, what is the meaning for you of this formulation about the rupture of closure?

ROBERT LEGROS: If you will, I will begin with what Cornelius Castoriadis just said by saying that, in our modernity, there are, at bottom, two antagonistic projects: on the one hand, the project of autonomy, and, on the other hand, the project of mastery linked to the idea of individualism. Yet, it seems to me, for my part (and this is a disputed subject that could incite a discussion) that these two projects are not so independent; and the search for autonomy can be (I am not saying must be) at the origin of this society of consumption's search for mastery. But to introduce this debate, I'll go back, thus, to the expression "the rupture of closure," since my book, in effect, claims to be a reflection on the meaning of this rupture. The question is: in what sense is there a rupture? Let us immediately highlight that if there should not have been the possibility of rupture, what we do as philosophers, our very interrogation would lose all meaning. To introduce this question, I would like to begin in the way that Kant presents the problem, which brings us back to asking about the way the problem is presented in the Enlightenment.⁴ Kant says this to us: man—and it is this definition which is expressed, in his eyes, by the Enlightenment—is "naturally superior." Which signifies that he is originally autonomous, or, to retrieve an expression of Fichte, "only man is originally nothing." Which means that man is a being who does not have a nature, who, on the one hand, is not destined to imitate an ideal nature and who, on the other hand, is not reducible to immediate inclinations [276] that would be natural. And it is precisely because he is nothing, because he has no nature, that he is autonomous. This is, Kant tells us, what man originally is: he is "naturally superior," thus autonomous by nature, thus "naturally" without nature. But, Kant adds as well, throughout human history, man believed that he was not superior, that he was inferior, which is to say, in sum, that throughout history, man accepted the principle of heteronomy rather than that of autonomy. And, in addition, throughout history, men "basked" in a

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certain state of inferiority, and this state of inferiority, says Kant, has thus “become almost a nature,” which signifies, basically (which rejoins a theme often developed by Castoriadis), that the principle of heteronomy naturalizes attitudes. It naturalizes attitudes first in the sense that it makes them (nearly) spontaneously inferior, submissive. It is through a certain spontaneity that individuals come to submit themselves, and thus the attitude is natural (or naturalized) in the sense that it has something spontaneous. The principle of heteronomy equally naturalizes attitudes in the sense that the principles that command the attitudes are outside of what could be decided upon by them, that they pertain to *physis*. Norms are not decided by us, they are transcendent, pertain to *physis* and not to *nomos*. And, finally, the attitude is naturalized to the extent that the meaning of things appears as natural, familiar; it is self-evident. What does Kant draw as a conclusion? He draws as a conclusion that since man is nothing by nature, naturalization is an illusion and that, as a consequence, that which pertains to the properly human is the extraction from naturalization. What interested me is the objection that the romantics make to this idea from Kant. This seems to me quite strong. It consists in saying, if man is nothing by nature, one thus cannot even say that autonomy is original. What is necessary to say is that naturalization is original, meaning that man becomes human through his inscription in a particular humanity, which has its norms, which has its practices [*usages*], which has its customs. In other words, [277] man is first of all naturalized and it is thanks to this naturalization that he has an opportunity to be human, that is, to singularize himself, to autonomize himself, to invent himself.

The argument seems strong to me, but the conclusion drawn by the romantics from this argument seems to me to be false. If naturalization is original, say the romantics, then (here is the conclusion that is abusively drawn in my eyes) the extraction from nature is a dehumanization. This means that the fact of wanting to autonomize oneself, of wanting to make oneself independent of the tradition, culminates in an abstract humanism, in a humanism that dehumanizes, in the end, since abstract man is no longer anything. How would abstracted man (from all tradition, from all culture) be something if man is nothing by nature? And if abstract man is nothing, has nothing human left, mustn't we understand that the

profound meaning of the human is to insert oneself in a tradition, in a culture?

C.C.: That is the fallacy . . .

R.L.: That is, without doubt, the fallacy; but the difficulty arrives, it seems to me, in that it is supported by an argument that is very strong: if abstract man is an empty universality, how would there not be the threat of a dehumanization in the universalist project, in the extraction from concrete particulars?

C.C.: The argument is very strong, and it has been misunderstood by the entire rationalist current in the history of philosophy. The human being becomes a human being in socializing himself, and there is no society in the abstract; there is a concrete sociality. And if we inspect the history of humanity we see that we are little Western provincials. Everybody among us, whether it be the French person or the American [278] of today, believes that it is self-evident that no one can stop him, that he is free, that he has rights, etc. All of that is by no means self-evident and is only true for a little period of history and for a little extension of geography. Most of the time, societies have lived in heteronomy, in domination, etc., and it was within this that men socialized themselves, which did not mean that works—moreover, very considerable ones—were prevented from being able to be created: religions, poems, and all the rest. Only, there is a rupture in history, and it is this that the romantics do not see. More precisely, what the romantics do not see are two things. First, that if one remains in their point of view, one is obligated to place all traditions on the same footing. Any critical perspective, any political perspective, any perspective of value [*valeur*] is forcibly eliminated because all traditions are equivalent [*se valent*]. Moreover, this contains an internal contradiction because no tradition would ever accept this. Go and tell, for example, an Islamic fundamentalist—or not even a fundamentalist—that all traditions are equivalent. That is not true, there is only his tradition which is valid . . .

A.F.: And it is there that we come back to the principle of a strict closure . . .

C.C.: Exactly.

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A.F.: For a tradition to function as tradition, it is necessary that it be founded on this principle: only my tradition is valid.

C.C.: Only my tradition is valid. Yet, at this point here, we are simply approaching the idea that this naturalization of man in a particular tradition makes—cannot but make—universal [279] history a history of sound and fury wherein everything is equivalent. That is the internal contradiction. But, secondly, what the romantics misunderstand, which is in the very foundation of the possibility of their attitude, is that starting from a certain point is born, appears, emerges a critical point of view, a point of view that asks the question, precisely as Kant said, *quid juris*, what right is there in this. In fact, religion could be admirable. There are very beautiful temples, etc. There is social organization, wagers, why not? But if the question appears: is this what we want, is this just, is what the *Rigveda* tells us true, etc.? At this point, a point of view emerges that we cannot ignore.

We cannot—and this is the error of all rationalist foundationalism, in my opinion—found this point of view rationally, because its rational foundation would presuppose Reason once again, and I cannot impose Reason on Kierkegaard or Pascal if they do not want it, if they tell me that they have their revelation. But, starting from the point where I accept the critical point of view, the question “what right is there in this, what truth is there in this?”—starting from this point, I must recognize that, in fact, men exist only in socializing themselves in a given tradition, but that all traditions are not equivalent, and starting from a certain point, we break or we try to break this closure. And this is the project of autonomy.

R.L.: I agree entirely in saying that one cannot draw the conclusion that all traditions are equivalent, the conclusion that the romantics tend to draw. But what interests me in the argument is basically this: if we are creations of our society, or if we are manufactured by an institution that tends to manufacture individuals who reinforce the norms of the institution—if things are like this, is the rupture possible? Isn't it an apparent rupture? Isn't our desire for autonomy itself instituted by a form [280] of society? In short, how can one understand the idea of autonomy if the taste for conquering it is itself socially, politically, historically engendered? These questions were raised by romantic thinking, which aims at rejecting the idea of

individual autonomy by bringing to light the fact that the human is the fruit and the creation of a tradition, a culture, a history. Furthermore, romantic thought does not limit itself to suggesting that individual autonomy is only ever an appearance of autonomy. It goes so far as to maintain that the project of autonomy, to the extent that it goes hand in hand with a definition of man as universal being (abstract from all tradition), can lead to the threat of alienation. In a society where the idea of human universality expresses itself, the danger can arise that this idea ends up designating the biological universality of man, that men are brought to define themselves by their belonging to a space (human space), to no longer recognize themselves as anything but consumers.

A.F.: Yes, here it seems to me that this is the essential point of your debate with Castoriadis, because, basically, for him, there are two projects that do not intersect: the project of the rational mastery of the world, which opens up this society of consumption that we know about, caught in the vertiginous cycle of manufacture, of the endless machination of modern technology. And there is, on the other hand, for Castoriadis, the project of autonomy, which is precisely that which is covered over, annulled, or caricatured by the project of rational mastery. Robert Legros, it seems to me, by contrast, that you are taking up the argument of the romantics, all while reworking this thinking from inside out, while pulling back from the apology for the tradition in which it culminates. For you, in effect, these two projects are linked. There is a relation between this desire for autonomy, this foundation of man as an abstract being, as universal being, and the society of consumption. This relation, the romantics, as well as Tocqueville, tried to think (I hope that we will have the time to return to this, because the rapprochement between Tocqueville and the romantics, at least [281] on this point, is one of the most novel, the most original, and the most subversive aspects of your book). Now, I would like for us to try to go further with this divergence that places you in opposition.

C.C.: There would be several things to say. First, I believe that the objection that Robert Legros presents does not hold. To say that men would have in common only being consumers does not boil down to saying that man is reduced to the universality of his biological being,

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because, from the biological point of view, man, like all living species, does not seek to indefinitely expand the object and the dimensions of consumption. He would have a level of consumption that would saturate him and then it would end. The madness of the consumption of the modern world stems from the purest imaginary; it has nothing natural about it, it is a historical artifact. What is more, this masks something else, which is much more important. I do not want to get into the question of the universality of man. But, in the end, what the inspection of history and of ethnology reveals to us is not the universality of man qua consumer. It is the universality of man qua creator, qua producer of imaginary identities, of religions, of significations, of values, of norms, etc. Yet, evidently, the difficulties start here because his productions are different. The question is, where can one recognize oneself, and to what extent can this rupture of closure—which opened itself with Greece, which is so amplified in the West—to what extent can this opening allow for another type of universality in which human creativity frees itself [*se dégage*], and at the same time maintain the criteria that permit it to eliminate that which, in this creativity, can just as well surface as monstrous? For the monstrousness engendered by our creativity, this also exists. The second thing that I would like to say is that it is incontestable that, in the modern era (and already in the ancient era, but in another way than for the modern era), the project of autonomy and the [282] project of an indefinite expansion of a so-called mastery have contaminated each other. The most flagrant case being that of the revolutionary movement, which, under the grip of Marxism, supposed that there was nothing to do but realize the mastery over nature in order to hand over autonomy to man, which is a total illusion. As for me, I think, on the contrary, that today, that which we need is not a mastery, but a control of this desire for mastery, a self-limitation. Autonomy means self-limitation. We need to eliminate this madness of expansion without limit; we need an ideal of frugal life, of a management of the resources of the planet with due care and attention [*de bons pères de familles*]. If the two projects have contaminated each other, it is necessary to know how to begin, and this beginning is obviously not easy. No one is proposing stopping scientific research under the pretext that it can bring out very dangerous things; but there are, nevertheless, very dangerous zones: the passage from research

to application, then to the economical application, which raises questions, and which must be controlled by society.

R.L.: The frenzied pursuit of consumption is obviously instituted; it has nothing natural about it. But what I would like to say is this: can society institute itself while explicitly recognizing that it is founded on the abyss? Put differently, is there a possible social life without conformism? The romantics tell us: there is no social life that does not secrete an image of what man is, a positive, apparently natural image. And if it is so, isn't the wrenching away from all tradition going to lead to the image of the *homme consommateur*? How can one grasp man in his quotidian life if we understand ourselves only as autonomous beings? Isn't social life led to create the image of man as consumer if there is no rootedness in a certain tradition? The romantics claimed this, and, in the end, did not history prove them right in part? Has it not been since men liked to think of themselves as autonomous subjects, [283] in the sense that this was understood historically and socially, that they have claimed to be possessors and masters of nature, to take up the expression of Descartes; and isn't it since then that the society of consumption has developed itself?

A.F.: History would demand of us that we take account of the argument of the romantics since, precisely, they prophesied the reality in which we exist.

R.L.: They in effect announced that the project of autonomy and the project of mastery could only be contaminated with one another, to take up Castoriadis' expression. The same prediction is found in Tocqueville, who is not, however, a romantic. The more that leveling out [*egalization*] will be achieved, the more the desire for autonomy will spread and, simultaneously, the greater will be the threat of a generalized submission to the passion for well-being.

C.C.: I believe, and you show this sufficiently well in your book, that Tocqueville saw precisely that there was a principle danger there. He did not talk like this, but one could refer to it by speaking of a degeneration or of a complete flattening of democracy, of an evacuation of all true democratic content. This idea of simple desire for well-being is entirely wedded with the somber perspectives, which Tocqueville traces out often enough, about what he calls despotic democracy, or

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of the emergence of a tutelary state (the term despotic democracy does not work). He again shows the profoundness of his vision, which was, for that matter, anticipated in a certain way 15 years before by Constant, when he characterized moderns with a dreadful and brilliant phrase: "From political life, the ancients asked for freedom; we ask of the State only the guarantee of our pleasures."⁵ This is the contemporary French person. All that he asks of society and of the State is the guarantee of his pleasures; he asks for nothing else. Which pleasures, that's another story. . . . [284]

I would like to say one more thing about the rupture of closure. It does not mean the detachment from all tradition but the establishment of another relation to the tradition. Tradition, as it is in a truly traditional society, when it is considered valid without any contest, signifies very precisely that the question of the legitimacy of the tradition will not be posed. As they say in tribunals, it is forbidden to pose it. End of story; that's all. Yet, for us, precisely, the question posed is that of another relation with the tradition; and this other relation was sketched in Greece. If you consider the way in which the tragic writers treated mythology, there is a different relation to tradition. They do not content themselves with repeating; each interprets the myths, gives it a content completely different. When the moderns come along, they take back medieval tradition, they take up the tradition of Faust, if you will, but they also create a new relation to them. And for us, the problem is precisely one of establishing another relation with our tradition and the tradition of humanity in general. In a traditional society, this relation is one of blind obedience. In contemporary society, it is the museum-touristic relation. You spend a half-hour on the Parthenon, you wait in line for forty-five minutes in front of Musée d'Orsay and, there it is, you've done some historical tourism; that's the relation to the tradition. But there are much more profound things in our past which can nourish us and provide us with a horizon. The only common thing that we have would be to be consumers. No, it's our participation in this human history to which we owe nearly all of what we are, to which we also owe this capacity for breaking the closure, which none of us here—not Immanuel Kant himself—would be capable of causing to emerge from himself, if he were born in the Dahomey in the twentieth century. We owe this capacity to history. We must therefore maintain it. We have an

historical debt and we pay this debt through pushing further along this tradition of freedom, this exigency of freedom, through transmitting it to new generations. [285]

A.F.: Before Robert Legros responds, I will provide you with several impressions concerning the relation that we have today with the tradition and with creation. What strikes me is that the richness of the heritage [*patrimoine*] and the vitality of contemporary art are glorified from now on in the language of consumption. I am thinking here of an edition of the *Nouvel Observateur*, which celebrates what it calls the “the feast of culture.” To speak of culture, its proliferation, its variety, and the taste of the public for it, they are speaking spontaneously in culinary terms. Everything is eaten today, even culture. The society of consumption knows no limit. The highest and the most rewarding activities are brought down to the pleasure of feeding oneself.

R.L.: Isn't it here alone that man understand himself as universal and abstract being who *can* establish a museum-touristic relation to the tradition and a relation of consumption with tradition? To throw the question back out, we could return to Kant and start, this time, no longer from the text on the *Aufklärung* but from what Kant calls genius. Because what Kant calls genius is no longer the subject in the sense of the conscious and voluntary subject but a being that is transcended by what it does. It is at once transcended by the meaning of what it elaborates and overwhelmed by the questions that arise from what it creates. The artist creates and is even so much the creator that he does not himself will the origin of what he does. He wants to give expression to something that transcends him. This could lead one to think that it is not because we have knowledge that we are in a society that self-institutes itself, it is not because we would have this knowledge that we would be more creative [*plus createur*]. Doesn't creation (or, let's say, in order to generalize, invention, the faculty to start off, to singularize oneself, to render oneself autonomous) go hand in hand with a certain absence of lucidity? Doesn't the greatest lucidity, namely that we know ourselves creators of our norms, go hand in hand with a certain sterility? Isn't there the danger in contemporary art of producing only to express creation? The art of a traditional society is [286] certainly a lot less lucid since it does not recognize itself as art and believes that applied norms are norms that

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result from *physis* and have nothing to do with *nomos*. But wasn't it sometimes more inventive than an art that claims to be entirely lucid with respect to its own origin?

C.C.: You are posing very important and complex questions. There is, notably, the question of contemporary art or alleged contemporary art, which must, perhaps, be set apart. But I would not say at all that we can make general the idea that the work of genius—as Kant says, of the great work of art—necessarily consists of an enormous portion of non-lucidity in the habitual sense. Here, again, it is necessary to be understood [*s'entendre*]. It consists of an enormous share of creation—that is, of the radical imaginary, of something that arises—and at the same time it is never a great work of art (this Kant knew very well, everyone knows it well), if in this imagination, in this arising, a fantastic quantity of logic and lucidity is not combined. We should not believe that Chopin, applying himself to piano in order to improvise, did just whatever. In his fingers, there are entire volumes of arithmetic and in his head as well. Otherwise, he would not improvise as he improvises. It is evident. It's a separate question.

There are two questions here. I think that modern art is not a victim of its lucidity but of its will to create the new for the new. When I speak of self-institution, I do not at all mean [*s'entendre*] that we regather all the citizens every morning saying, that's it, we're changing the laws because these are the laws of yesterday. . . . No, I understand simply that it is not necessary to have, each time, a revolution in order to change the laws, whatever they are. It can be that the laws are tacitly ratified, if not indefinitely during long periods of time, quite simply because they are good, because no one is thinking of others that are better. Let's take the example of philosophy. Is it that, if there is a philosopher who has original ideas, lucidity prevents him from being original? I think this is false. I think that lucidity is an essential ingredient so that [287] he is precisely able to get started between what is original and what is not or simply doesn't hold. I think, therefore, that it is necessary to distinguish the domains. And it is above all necessary to understand one thing. An autonomous society, a society that gives itself its laws and knows that it gives itself its laws, such a society can exist only with autonomous individuals. These are two sides of the same coin. Without autonomous individuals there is no

autonomous society. That seems clear to me. What is an autonomous individual? It is someone socialized; he has, in a certain way, internalized the institutions of society. But which institutions has he internalized? He has internalized the institutions of autonomy. He internalizes free inquiry, as you say at the University of Brussels, free reflection, free research, and this is internalized as much as the blind obedience to the Scriptures is internalized. This has to be learned [*s'apprend*] as well. There is an education in autonomy—that's for sure—and there is a tradition of autonomy, which must always be reflexive, meaning being able to go back on oneself. Now, beyond what I just said, there is an enormous problem. I am not saying that, in an autonomous society, the content of the life of everyone must be an artistic creation; that would be madness. But these are the questions of the content of life that an autonomous society will have to resolve for itself. Autonomy does not suffice: we want autonomy for itself, but we also want it in order to do things?

To do what? Everyone is not going to write *The Art of Fugue*; that is obvious. And it would be perhaps terrible if everyone could create *The Art of Fugue*. There is thus a question of the contents of human life that a thinker, a philosopher, cannot get out of his head, because these contents can only be the fact of a collective historical creation.

A.F.: Basically, to craft autonomy and not the tradition, the supreme norm, the supreme value of society, this means to consider that the properly human in the human is the capacity to invent, to create something new, to think by [288] oneself. It's the phrase that Arendt borrows from St. Augustine: "Before men there was no beginning; it is in order that there be beginning that man was created."⁶ An entirely naive and doubtless hardly philosophical question poses itself: beginning with an aim for what? One begins, one thinks by oneself, but one can think stupidities, one can create things that are not worth the effort. Can the definition of the properly human avoid what Castoriadis calls substantive values?

R.L.: I do not think that we can avoid the question of substantive values. Effectively, we cannot desire autonomy for itself. However, we attach a price to the substantive values that we wish to defend only to the extent that they preserve autonomy, that is, to the extent that they preserve autonomy in the sense of the capacity to think and

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to act by oneself, the faculty to invent and to create. In truth, I think that the opposition between an attitude subjected to substantive values, which renounces autonomy, and an attitude that aims only at autonomy for itself is a false opposition. For the meaning (of our actions, of our works, of our words, of what we undergo, the meaning of suffering, of death, of life) is irreducible to the substantial. It is not natural, transcendent, given, exterior, because it is always the fruit of a creation. But it is also irreducible to the conventional; we make decisions about it not sovereignly or arbitrarily because, in a certain way, it decides upon us. I mean that we ourselves are what we are due to [*en raison de*] our inscription in an already meaningful [*sensé*] world. Art shows us that the greatest creations are by no means linked to a will to create with an aim to create. And the society of consumption shows us that a certain search for autonomy can go hand in hand with the most lifeless conformism.

C.C.: It is necessary to repeat with the greatest possible force that the contemporary society of 1990, the society in which we live, believes itself to be innovative, but it is perhaps [289] one of the most conformist societies that has existed in history. The society of generalized conformism, what one calls postmodernism, this is generalized conformism.

Furthermore, there is an enormous problem, which is obviously the end of religion, which is to say the fall of the veils with which men have always covered over the brutal fact of their mortality. Everything we are saying here, which makes explicit the creation by man (by collective men, including the contribution of individuals) of the significations in which man lives, signifies that there is no transcendence. Or, if there is transcendence, there is, for that matter, no socially instituted representative of this transcendence. That we live in a world that hasn't in itself any meaning; and that we cannot live except through creating meaning. We know that in creating meaning, it depends on us, and that in another way it does not depend on us. That's the abyss; that's where genius is not especially genius. Genius—or, quite simply, the boy and the girl who are in love—brings about something that comes from elsewhere; that is certain. But learning to live with this profound consciousness [*conscience*] of our mortality, of the very mortality of our works and of the meaning that

we have been able to create, that is the prerequisite for all true democracy. And this is why democracy is the most difficult and most tragic regime of all.

R.L.: We are indeed aware [*conscience*] of the mortality of our works and of meaning, but with the consciousness, as well, that we are not the masters of the meaning that we make or create, with the consciousness that we make or create meaning only through being overcome by it and by being led to the infinite questions that it provokes.

NOTES

- ¹ This dialogue was originally published in *Cornelius Castoriadis: Réinventer l'autonomie*, ed. Blaise Bachofen, Sion Elbaz, and Nicolas Poirier. Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2008, 273–89. I would like to thank Editions du Sandre for giving us the rights for the English translation.—ED
- ² *L'Idée d'humanité*. Paris: Éditions Grasset, 1990.—TR
- ³ Cf. Castoriadis, C., *Domaines de l'homme. Les Carrefours du labyrinthe II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. —TR
- ⁴ Legros is paraphrasing from Kant, I., “What is enlightenment?” in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Beck, L. W. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959. —TR
- ⁵ Castoriadis is paraphrasing from Constant, B., “The Liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns,” in *Political Writings*, trans. Fontana Biancamaria. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. —TR
- ⁶ Finkelkraut is paraphrasing the citation of St. Augustine by Hannah Arendt in *Love and Saint Augustine*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 55. The actual quote is: “In order that there be such a beginning, man was created, before whom nobody was.” —TR

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