

HISTORY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF CORNELIUS CASTORIADIS

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Abstract

This dissertation is an introduction and presentation of the philosophy of the Greek-born French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997). It studies its aspects relevant to the theory of history, and to the history of ideas. The first part is devoted to the genesis of his philosophy, which through a critique of Marxism, posits the basis on an anti-rationalist and objectivist approach of history. It criticises the absolute determinist approach of traditional philosophy of history and proposes a mid-way between relativism and causality: the indeterminacy of human actions are always considered in their historical context. The second part of this work puts forward the original elements that form Castoriadis' philosophy of history: the notion of radical imaginary is the creative momentum for the emergence of the "other", of the new. As such a society which is always what it is in and by itself, in the channel through which the creative force of the radical imaginary can emerge. As such, social significations are always imagined, and in the closing commentary, it is explained how the tradition of critical approach and hence the tradition of democracy are never given, but are a necessary constant and self-regulated creative force. It concludes on the problems of adapting the theory to the history of ideas, as there is always a certain discrepancy between a theoretical corpus and its methodological application, and shows the relevance of an author like Castoriadis who, while acting outside the field of history, offers interesting perspectives of historical interpretation and is of major relevance to the debate on the philosophy of history of ideas.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the dissertation has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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I would like to thank the *Association Castoriadis* in Paris which provided with a free access to valuable sources.

I would finally like to thank my family and friends for all their support and belief.

Foreword

All translations, unless stated otherwise, are the present author's. For any wrong or false translation that would unwillingly appear, the present author is solely to blame.

The original *Socialisme ou Barbarie* journals were accessed at the Association Castoriadis research centre in Paris.

The writings of Cornelius Castoriadis are mentioned according to the editions mentioned in the bibliography. By commodity, references to these texts are given in the footnotes with the abbreviations listed below:

<i>CL</i>	<i>Les carrefours du labyrinthe</i>
<i>CMR 2</i>	<i>Capitalisme moderne et Révolution, t.2, Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne</i>
<i>DH</i>	<i>Domaines de l'homme. Les carrefours du labyrinthe II</i>
<i>FF</i>	<i>Fait et à Faire. Les carrefours du labyrinthe V</i>
<i>IIS</i>	<i>L'institution imaginaire de la société</i>
<i>MI</i>	<i>La montée de l'insignifiance. Les carrefours du labyrinthe IV</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Le monde morcelé. Les carrefours du labyrinthe III</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>La société bureaucratique</i>
<i>SD</i>	<i>Une société à la dérive. Entretiens et débats 1974-1997</i>
<i>SF</i>	<i>La société française</i>
<i>SouB</i>	<i>Socialisme ou Barbarie (journal)</i>
<i>SV</i>	<i>Sujet et vérité dans le monde social-historique. La création humaine I. Séminaires 1986-1987</i>

*Only by imagination [...] can the world be known.
And what is needed is [...] that the human mind
should become increasingly aware of his own creativity.*
Owen Barfield

Introduction

Cornelius Castoriadis was born in Constantinople in 1922 and died in Paris in 1997. He arrived in France in 1945, on board of the *Mataroa*, a military ship from New Zealand which became famous for bringing a generation of Greek intellectuals to France, including Kostas Axelos and Kostas Papaioannou¹.

This “Titan de l’esprit” (“Titan of the spirit”), quoting the words of his long time friend, Edgar Morin², is the author of a large and complex philosophical work, which is nevertheless not yet commonly considered in such a way³.

Explanations for this lack of recognition are twofold. First, Castoriadis’s first text published under his real name was published in 1968⁴. Before, he worked as an economist at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and in parallel co-founded in 1949 with Claude Lefort⁵ the now mythical ultra-left militant group and journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. It is after the dissolution of the group in 1967 and especially after his naturalisation that Castoriadis started to publish under his real name. Second, because of his critical approach and radical position against trends of his time, his work never reached a large public, nor were they debated and reacted to from prominent actors of the intellectual and political scene of post-war France⁶.

The production of Castoriadis is usually separated in two periods: 1949-1967 with texts concerned mainly with the political and economic analyses of capitalism and revolutionary theory; and 1968-1997 when Castoriadis abandoned militant action and concentrated on theoretical works at the “crossroads” of various disciplines, like philosophy, psychoanalysis (he started to practice as a psychoanalyst in 1973), science, anthropology, sociology, history and politics.

¹ “About Cornelius Castoriadis”. Available at: <http://www.agorainternational.org/> [Accessed 15 May 2006]; Kostas Axelos is a philosopher, specialist of Heraclites, friend of Edgar Morin and for a time of Gilles Deleuze; Kostas Papaioannou was an important philosopher and art historian in France from the 1950s to the 1970s, known for his works on Hegel, Marx and Greek art. Both were professors in la Sorbonne.

² Morin, E., obituary in *Le Monde*, 30 december 1997.

³ Noirier, P. *Castoriadis, l’imaginaire radical*. PUF, 2004, p.7.

⁴ “Epilégomènes à une théorie de l’âme que l’on a pu présenter comme science” was published in the psychoanalytical journal *L’Inconscient*, became in 1978 the first article in tome 1 of the series entitled *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, pp.33-80. His pseudonyms were Chaulieu, Cardan, Barjot, and only appeared in *SouB*.

⁵ Claude Lefort is a French Marxist philosopher, thinker of totalitarianism and democracy.

⁶ We can mention three reactions to Castoriadis’ thought: Jürgen Habermas in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne, 12 Vorlesungen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985 (pp.348-396 in the French translation, Gallimard, 1988); Richard Rorty, in *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge University Press, 1991 (pp.221-256 in the French translation, PUF, 1995); and Vincent Descombes in *Philosophie par gros temps*, Minuit, 1989 (pp.149-163).

The concept of crossroad is dear to him, as his longest series of works is entitled “the crossroads of the labyrinth”, referring to his understanding of his work as a “elucidation in progress” in the labyrinth of the human mind – the “crossroads” being the significant points in the endeavour to find a (never-ending) way through⁷.

Nonetheless Castoriadis became an intellectual reference in the 1970s when the Marxist vulgate could not stand its ground and give consistency to an anti-totalitarian discourse (given its general support to the “Stalinist imposture”)⁸.

The evolution of his own thought started from the political critique of Stalinism and the International Communist Party, to the critique of Trotskyism, to eventually, through a return to Marx, operate a critique of Marx himself. This critique led Castoriadis to re-think the traditional modes of reflection (which structuralism and post-structuralism were “absurd” extensions), and became what commentators will call the thinker of autonomy and of the radical imaginary⁹.

Castoriadis did not try to position himself on any fixed philosophical positions, objectivist or subjectivist, idealist or relativist, etc. but following Aristotle’s principle, always tried to find the “just mean”.¹⁰

It is in this perspective, of a philosophical middle ground, that we are interested in introducing Castoriadis to the debate in the philosophy of history and the possible application of his theory to the practice of history of ideas. It is moreover fundamentally important to introduce one of the first thinkers of the social imaginary (as a core element of the social and historical world) to a field where it has been only relatively recently introduced¹¹, and which is becoming increasingly aware how it is essential¹²:

The latest debates in this subject (and indeed since the 1950s) are much concerned with finding a middle ground¹³. Taking note that no theory is perfect in itself and applicable indefinitely, the original contribution to the history of ideas of Castoriadis will, we believe, be fruitful in this pursuit.

This dissertation will consequently be an introduction and presentation of Castoriadis’ philosophy, and more particularly its aspects relevant to his theory of history. The first

⁷ See the preface to *IIS*, pp.5-10.

⁸ Poirier, N., *op.cit.*, pp.9-10.

⁹ See e.g. David, G. *Cornelius Castoriadis, le projet d'autonomie*. Editions Michalon, 2000.

¹⁰ See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.6-7.

¹¹ With Anderson, B. *Imagined communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.

¹² See e.g. Lukacs J., *At the end of an Age*. Yale University Press, 2002.

¹³ See Bevir, M. *The Logic in the History of Ideas*. Cambridge university Press, 1999; and the ensuing debate in the *Journal History of European Ideas*, 28, Number 1, Elsevier, March 2002.

part will be devoted to the genesis of his philosophy, which as we said above, was prompted by his radical critique of Marx and Marxism and finds its germs in this critique as well as in Marxism itself. The second part of this work will put forward elements that form Castoriadis' philosophy of history. As Castoriadis very rarely thought of history independently, we have tried to draw a "road of history" from his labyrinth of crossroads. We will conclude on a commentary based on a possible adaptation of this philosophy to the history of ideas and show the relevance of Castoriadis in the reflection of history, not only for political philosophers, but for historians as well.

I. The Radical critique of Marxian ontology¹⁴

A. Premises

1. Motivations

Criticizing Marxism, and more particularly Marx, was a double imperative for Castoriadis: a political one and a philosophical one – although as we will see, it is hard to clearly dissociate the two. In fact, the latter follows the former. What we can point at for now are the reasons, or motivations, for those imperatives. The political reasoning Castoriadis reached when he decided upon taking his distance with Marx and Marxism, is based on his analysis of capitalism.

Having worked as an economist, his analysis of contemporary capitalism made him see the Marxist approach as insufficient. While Marx described the functioning system of capitalism, and as a consequence to its inner contradictions, predicted its downfall¹⁵, Castoriadis saw capitalism as having “transcended” the original system described by Marx and his followers.

In his early and militant writings dating from the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* period (mainly the years from 1949 to 1958), one of the main interests of Castoriadis and perhaps of the whole group was the analysis of the nature of modern capitalism (correlatively, the other being the goals of the revolutionary movement). The first point on which Castoriadis produced a different analysis from Marx’s, is based on the evolution of capitalism. While capitalism was first understood as an economic regime of free competition based on private appropriation of means of production, by the turn of the 19th century, it evolved into a different type of system:

“[...] le capitalisme *concurrentiel* du XIX^{ème} siècle allait céder sa place à une forme de capitalisme *monopolistique* basée sur la rationalisation sans cesse accrue de la production, dont l’organisation et la direction devaient revenir à l’Etat lui-même et non plus aux seules personnes privées. L’entrepreneur de la période pionnière du capitalisme, celui qu’avait en vue Schumpeter, allait progressivement disparaître au profit d’une nouvelle classe dirigeante : la *bureaucratie* – composée de directeurs, ingénieurs, techniciens et administrateurs des grandes firmes d’Etat.”¹⁶

¹⁴ The expression is borrowed from Poirier, N. *op. cit.* p. 37.

¹⁵ See e.g. Chap. XXXII “Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation” : “But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation.” Marx, K. *Capital.*, Vol. I, Part VII, Chap. XXXII. Tr. Moore S. and Aveling, E.. Marx/Engels Internet Archive. Available from: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch32.htm> [Accessed 30 June 2006]

¹⁶ “[...] 19th century *competitive* capitalism was followed by a form of *monopolistic* capitalism based on an ever enhanced rationalisation of production, the organisation and the direction of which was to pass from private hands to the State itself. The entrepreneur of the pioneering period of capitalism, the one described by Schumpeter, was progressively disappearing to the benefit of a new ruling class:

This position, already made obvious in the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1949¹⁷, simply argued that the relationship that defined 19th century capitalist society, that is the struggle between capitalists and proletarians, was inadequate to the new form of regime. The new regime of “bureaucratic capitalism” was hence based on the struggle between managers and executers, changing in itself the nature of capitalist society¹⁸. In 1960, Castoriadis would sum the history of capitalism as such:

“[...] l'évolution du capitalisme est une histoire au sens fort du terme, à savoir un processus d'actions d'hommes et de classes qui modifient constamment et consciemment les conditions dans lesquelles il se déroule et au cours duquel surgit le nouveau. [...] C'est l'histoire de cette lutte, au cours de laquelle chacun des adversaires est amené à [...] inventer des réponses à la situation et des fins provisoires, qui ne sont nullement prédéterminées”¹⁹

Revising the Marxist economic theory led Castoriadis to eventually revise Marxism in general and Marx in particular. In the issue no. 31 of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Castoriadis published a piece entitled “Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne” (“The Revolutionary Movement under Modern Capitalism”)²⁰ where:

“[il] estime en substance qu'il est temps de repenser l'activité révolutionnaire. Celle-ci ne correspond plus à l'évolution du capitalisme moderne. Le marxisme ne répond plus aux nécessités de l'heure. Le capitalisme moderne est en mesure de faire croître le niveau de vie tout en satisfaisant les exigences salariales. Il est capable en outre de survivre en surmontant les crises. Le marxisme est ainsi devenu obsolète.”²¹

bureaucracy – composed of directors, engineers, technicians and administrators of big state firms.” in Poirier, N. *Castoriadis. L'imaginaire radical*. Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, pp.42-43.; see also *SB*, pp.115-123.

¹⁷ See the group manifesto published in *SB*, pp.106-143.

¹⁸ It is also this concept of “bureaucratic capitalism” that allowed Castoriadis to draw the similitudes between the political/economic regimes of the “socialist” and “capitalist” blocks of the post-WW2 period. These regimes represent two forms of bureaucratic capitalism, the first being a totalitarian (“capitalisme bureaucratique total”), the second a fragmentary form (“capitalisme bureaucratique fragmenté”). See the condensed text of the results of Castoriadis' analysis on the “Russian question” since 1949: “Le régime social de la Russie” (1977), in *CL*, pp.215-248. We may also note that this original and early distinction between the totalitarian and fragmentary forms of the same regime will echo in Guy Debord's distinction between the “concentrated” and “diffused” spectacles. See Debord, G. *La société du spectacle*. Buchet/Chastel, 1967; and Bourseiller C. *Histoire générale de l'ultra-gauche*. Editions Denoël, 2003, esp. pp.263-268.

¹⁹ “[...] the evolution of capitalism is a history in the strong sense of the word, i.e. a process of human and class actions that constantly and consciously modifies the conditions in which it evolves and in the process of which the *new* comes out. [...] It is the history of this struggle, throughout which each of the adversaries has to[...] invent answers to the given situation and provisional aims, none of which are all predetermined” *CMR* 2, p.113.

²⁰ The text published in the issue no. 31 of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (December 1960-January 1961) was the first in which Castoriadis made a clear cut between Marxism and his position. See also: “Recommencer la révolution” (“Restarting the Revolution”) (1964), in *EMO* 2, pp.307-365.

²¹ “The gist of [his] considerations is that it is time to rethink the revolutionary activity. It does not correspond anymore to the evolution of modern capitalism. Marxism does not anymore correspond to the necessities of the present time. Modern capitalism can increase standards of living as well as satisfy the expected salaries. It is furthermore capable of surviving the crises. Marxism has thus become obsolete.” Bourseiller, C. *op. cit.* p. 272.

The writings that followed came to form the first part of Castoriadis' master piece, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* (*The Imaginary Institution of Society*) published in 1975, under the title "Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire" ("Marxism and revolutionary theory"). Having ceased his militant activities in 1965 with the dissolution of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, Castoriadis broke off completely with Marxism. At that point, his revision of the Marxist approach to economic evolution brought him to the question of social evolution. This is when his political motivations – which remained essentially the same – opened up to his philosophical motivations which, as Noirier points out, were somewhat already present in his early writings²². Castoriadis could never completely adhere to the theory of historical materialism, and particularly to its determinist system. In 1960, he wrote:

“une conception déterministe et objectiviste [...] élimine de l'histoire l'action des hommes et des classes pour la remplacer par une « dynamique objective » et des « lois naturelles ». [...] [elle] ne peut être, et n'a été dans l'histoire, que le fondement d'une politique bureaucratique”²³

Castoriadis here rewrites the history of Marxism and performs a connection with serious consequences, between the genesis of Marxism and its historical and political evolution. To his mind, the genesis of Marxism and its historical fate cannot be separated:

“Vouloir retrouver le sens du marxisme exclusivement dans ce que Marx a écrit, en passant sous silence ce que la doctrine est devenue dans l'histoire, c'est prétendre, en contradiction directe avec les idées centrales de cette doctrine, que l'histoire réelle ne compte pas [...]”²⁴

In view of that, Castoriadis then set out on writing a strong critique of Marxism and particularly of historical materialism that led him to deepen his own approach of social change.

2. Relationship to Marx

Castoriadis' critique of Marx's theory of history consists in putting it in its historical context. His aim is to show how Marx's system of thought was imbedded in “the schemes of thought proper to the imaginary of its time”²⁵.

At first, Castoriadis does not completely discredit Marxist philosophy. Indeed, his major piece of Marxist critique²⁶ opens with the following paragraph:

²² Noirier, P. *op. cit.* p. 47.

²³ “a determinist and an objectivist conception [...] eliminates from history the action of men and classes to replace it with an “objective dynamic” and “natural laws”. [...] [It] can only be, and was in history, the foundation for bureaucratic politics.” *CMR* 2, p.49.

²⁴ “Willing to find the meaning of Marxism exclusively in the writings of Marx, it is claiming, in direct opposition with the central ideas of that doctrine, that real history does not count [...]” *IIS*, pp.14-15. ²⁵ “[...] les schèmes de pensée propres à l'imaginaire de son époque” Poirier N. *op. cit.* p.58.

²⁶ “Marxisme et théorie révolutionnaire”, *IIS*, part 1, pp.11-248.

“Pour celui que préoccupe la question de la société, la rencontre avec le marxisme est immédiate et inévitable. Parler même de rencontre dans ce cas est abusif, pour autant que ce mot dénote un événement contingent et extérieur. Cessant d’être une théorie particulière ou un programme politique professé par quelques-uns, le marxisme a imprégné le langage, les idées et la réalité au point qu’il est devenu partie de l’atmosphère que l’on respire en venant au monde social, du paysage historique qui fixe le cadre de nos allées et venues.”²⁷

Marx’s philosophy becomes in fact discredited for the contemporary time. During the first two decades Castoriadis spent in France, his position has produced an intriguing shift. The tone of the above quotation is indeed very different from what one could read in the first editorial of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* dating back from 1949:

“[...] nous pensons que nous représentons la continuation vivante du marxisme dans le cadre de la société contemporaine.”²⁸

What this tells us is not so much that Castoriadis has “switched sides”, but that what he undertakes in his critique of Marxism is more than simply the affair of an opposing figure. On the contrary, his task is much harder and clearly different: his critique is also his own and its aim is to convince himself and the revolutionary movement:

“Le ré- examen du marxisme que nous avons entrepris n’a pas lieu dans le vide, nous ne parlons pas en nous situant n’importe où et nulle part. Partis du marxisme révolutionnaire, nous sommes arrivés au point où il fallait choisir entre rester marxistes et rester révolutionnaires ; entre la fidélité à une doctrine qui n’anime plus depuis longtemps ni une réflexion ni une action, et la fidélité au projet d’une transformation radicale de la société, qui exige d’abord que l’on comprenne ce que l’on veut transformer, et que l’on identifie ce qui, dans la société, conteste vraiment cette société et est en lutte contre sa forme présente.”²⁹

Castoriadis was also conscious of the criticism he, as a Marxist, – and consequently other Marxists – would formulate against an attempt to make Marxism simply part of a legacy, of a background:

“[...] la bourgeoisie « reconnaît » le marxisme, essaie de l’émasculer en se l’appropriant, en en acceptant une part, en le réduisant au rang d’une conception parmi tant d’autres.”³⁰

²⁷ “For who is preoccupied with the question of society, the encounter with Marxism is immediate and unavoidable. Talking here of an encounter is abusive, in as much as this word denotes a contingent and external event. Having ceased to be a particular theory or a political programme professed by some, Marxism has impregnate language, ideas and reality to such a point that it has become part of the atmosphere one breathes when arriving in the social world, of the historical landscape that sets the frame of our comings and goings.” *IIS*, p.13.

²⁸ “[...] we think that we represent the living continuation of Marxism within contemporary society” in “Editorial”, *SouB*, 1 (March-April 1949), p.3.

²⁹ “The re-examination of Marxism we have begun is not devoid of meaning, it does not take place from anywhere or nowhere. From revolutionary Marxism, we have reached a point where we have to chose between remaining Marxists or remaining revolutionaries; between loyalty to a doctrine that has not animated any reflection nor action for a long time, and loyalty to the project of a radical transformation of society, which first requires the understanding what we want to transform, and the identification of what in society really contests this society and is in a struggle against its present form.” *IIS*, p.21.

³⁰ “[...] the bourgeoisie “recognizes” Marxism, tries to emasculate it by appropriating it, by accepting a part of it, by reducing it to the rank of a conception amongst other.” in “Editorial: bilan, perspectives, tâches” (“assessment, perspectives, tasks”), *SouB*, 21 (March-May 1957), p.7.

Castoriadis is trying to distinguish himself from the above stated position not only by giving a certain credit to Marxism (it is the essential language for the analysis of society³¹), but also in drawing a long and complex critique concerned with the practical and philosophical imperatives of a new radical approach.

His position in the ideological spectrum looked very confusing indeed, especially at a time when Marxism, official or not, was very popular with figures like Jean-Paul Sartre or Louis Althusser³². Moreover (and consequently), one is bound to ask: what could be more radical than Marxism, as it was *the* opposing ideology (at least its state-instituted Stalinist form³³) to the capitalist regime?³⁴

Castoriadis was convinced of the necessity of this re-examination regardless of this predicament and kept his ground throughout his life. And despite the fundamental criticism he formulated, he considered Marx, for himself and for others, of particular importance and quality, incorporating a critical teaching to Marx himself³⁵:

“[...] Marx est un grand auteur et, comme tout grand auteur, si on ne lit pas pour y trouver un dogme, une vérité toute faite, si on le lit en réfléchissant et de manière critique, on voit ce que c’est que penser, on découvre des manières de penser, et de critiquer la pensée.”³⁶

But he also drew attention on the difficulties and inner contradictions contained in Marx’s works:

“[...] [il] est un auteur particulièrement difficile et même particulièrement « dangereux », particulièrement « leurrant » - d’abord parce qu’il s’est leurré lui-même. [...] [il] apporte une inspiration, une intuition, une idée, une vue qui est relativement nouvelle : ce sont les hommes qui font leur propre histoire, « l’émancipation des travailleurs sera l’œuvre des travailleurs eux-mêmes ». Autrement dit, la source de la vérité [...] n’est pas à chercher dans le ciel ou dans les livres mais dans l’activité vivante des hommes existant dans la société. Cette idée [...] a une foule innombrable de conséquences capitales – mais que Marx n’a jamais tirées. Pourquoi ? Parce que en même temps [...] [il] est dominé par le

³¹ See note 27 p.13.

³² As the story goes, “Sartre was later heard to say “Castoriadis was right, but at the wrong time.” Castoriadis quipped that Sartre had the honor of being wrong at the right time.” Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website. Available from: <http://www.agorainternational.org/> [Accessed 5 May 2006]; against the political position of Althusser, see “De la langue de bois à la langue de caoutchouc” (“From clichés to patchwork”) (1978), in *SF*, pp.295-314.

³³ For Castoriadis’ political analysis of Marxism-Leninism just after the fall of the Soviet Union, see “Marxisme-léninisme : la pulvérisation” (“Marxism-Leninism: the pulverisation”) in *MI*, pp.38-49.

³⁴ Castoriadis, at least during the period of *SouB*, is considered to be part of what is called the “ultra-left”, an amalgamate of numerous and heterogeneous political factions on the left of the Communist Party, encompassing trends from Trotskyism to various anarchisms. See Bourseiller C. *op. cit.*

³⁵ See also *IIS*, p.17.

³⁶ “Marx is a great author and, like all great authors, if one does not read to find there a dogma, a set truth, if one reads it with a critical mind, one can find out what thinking is about, one discovers ways of thinking, and of criticizing this thought.” In “Marx aujourd’hui” (“Marx today”)(1983), p.90, in *DH*, pp.90-104.

phantasme de la théorie totale, achevée, complète. Non pas du *travail* théorique (évidemment indispensable), mais du *système* définitif.”³⁷

B. Idealism and Historical Materialism

1. Technique and Progress

Castoriadis does not rely on the evident and irreconcilable contradiction between the idea that men make their own history and that history is driven by immutable laws. He wants to show how historical materialism is not a tenable theory and proceeds with a consequent dissection.

The most concrete element of the Marxist theory of history is the economic analysis of capitalism³⁸, however Castoriadis is not only concerned with what he calls an “untenable content”³⁹, but also with the failure of an idealistic type of theory⁴⁰:

“[...] l’échec de la conception matérialiste de l’histoire est, beaucoup plus que la pertinence d’une idée quelconque appartenant au contenu de la théorie, le type même de la théorie, et ce qu’elle vise. Derrière la tentative d’ériger les forces productives en facteur autonome et déterminant de l’évolution historique, il y a l’idée de condenser dans un schéma simple les « forces » dont l’action a dominé cette évolution. Et la simplicité du schéma vient de ce que les mêmes forces agissant sur les mêmes objets doivent produire les mêmes enchaînements d’effets.”⁴¹

Castoriadis’ understanding of technique and technical evolution posits the basis of his conception of history. It is derived again from the criticism of historical materialism as

“[...] cette conception fait du développement de la technique le moteur de l’histoire « en dernière analyse », et lui attribue une évolution autonome et une signification close et bien définie”⁴²

³⁷ “[...] [he] is a particularly difficult author and even particularly “dangerous”, particularly “deceiving” – first of all because he deceived himself. [...] [he] brings an inspiration, an intuition, an idea, a view that is relatively new: it is men that make their own history, “the emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves”. In other words, the source of truth [...] is not to be found in the sky or in books but in the living activity of men existing in society. The idea [...] involves a whole mass of countless and capital consequences – nonetheless never drawn by Marx. Why? Because at the same time [...] [he] was dominated by the fantasy of total, finalized, complete theory. Not of the theoretical *work* (clearly indispensable), but of the definite *system*.” *ibid.* pp.90-91.

³⁸ For a precise criticism by Castoriadis of Marx’s economic theory, see “Le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne” (“The Revolutionary Movement under Modern Capitalism”), *CMR* 2, pp.75-105 (originally published in *SouB*, 31 (December 1960), pp.68-81); and “Pourquoi je ne suis plus marxiste” (“Why I am not Marxist anymore”), *SD*, pp.27-64 (esp. pp.45-53).

³⁹ *IIS*, p.21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁴¹ “[...] the failure of the materialist conception of history is, much more than the relevance of some or other idea contained in the theory, the type itself of theory, and what it aims at. Behind the attempt to establish the productive forces as an autonomous factor, determining for historical evolution, there is the idea of condensing in a simple scheme the “forces” which actions have dominated that evolution. And the simplicity of this scheme comes from the fact the same forces acting on the same objects have to produce the same chain of effects.” *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁴² “[...] this conception considers the development of technique as the engine of history “in fine”, and attributes to it an autonomous development and a closed and clearly defines signification” *IIS*, pp.42-43.

In fine means here that it is considered as the exclusive determining factor of the structure and evolution of society⁴³. The concept of technique is hence fundamental in the Marxian ontology as the development of technique is the only constant factor in Marx's theory of economics. While Castoriadis obviously agrees that technique is an important factor in human societies, it constitutes the core of his critique of the content of historical materialism.

Historical materialism is an idealistic conceptualisation because it considers certain objects in history to have a definite, clear and unambiguous signification. The objects in question are technical facts⁴⁴ (like the wheel or a factory), but their signification which we can wholly and directly understand are ideas. Furthermore, in Castoriadis' analysis of Marxism as an idealism, he shows that:

“Le caractère proprement idéaliste de la conception apparaît de façon encore plus profonde, lorsque l'on considère un autre aspect des catégories d'infrastructure et de superstructure dans leur utilisation par Marx. Ce n'est pas seulement que l'infrastructure a un poids déterminant, en fait qu'elle *seule* a du poids, puisque c'est elle qui entraîne le mouvement de l'histoire. C'est qu'elle possède une *vérité*, dont le reste est privé. [...] les choses peuvent être comprises en elles-mêmes, un fait technique signifie immédiatement et pleinement, il n'a aucune ambiguïté, il est ce qu'il « dit », et il dit ce qu'il est. Il dit même tout le reste : le moulin à bras dit la société féodale, le moulin à vapeur dit la société capitaliste.”⁴⁵

In other words, what Castoriadis points out in a rather extreme way, that a theory cannot pretend to find the ultimate explanation of historical phenomena in a *single* factor⁴⁶. If that assignable, comprehensible and single factor does not produce the same effects in two similar contexts, it is bound to be something more that engenders this difference.

“Aucun fait technique n'a un sens assignable s'il est isolé de la société où il se produit, et aucun n'impose un sens univoque et inéluctable aux activités humaines qu'il sous-tend, mêmes les plus proches. A quelques kilomètres l'une de l'autre, avec les mêmes armes et instruments, deux tribus primitives développent des structures sociales et des cultures aussi différentes que possible.”⁴⁷

⁴³ See *ibid.* p.30.

⁴⁴ “Technique”, in *CL* (pp.289-224), p.309.

⁴⁵ “The strictly idealist character of the conception appears to be even more profound when one considers another aspect of the categories of infrastructure and superstructure in the way Marx uses them. It is not only that the infrastructure carries a determining weight, due to the fact it is the *only thing* that is lent any weight, since it prompts the movement of history. It possesses a *truth* that the rest is deprived of.. [...] Objects can be understood as such, a technical fact bears a direct and whole meaning, there is no ambiguity, it is what it “says” and says what it is. It even says all the rest: the arm mill says feudal society, the steam mill says capitalist society.” *IIS*, p.33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.32.

⁴⁷ “No technical fact has an assignable meaning if it is isolated of the society where it appears, and none imposes a meaning univocal and ineluctable to the human activities it can set, no matter how close these are. Separated by a few kilometres in the same jungle, two primitive tribes, equipped with the same

The same analogy could be drawn for the situation in factories in two different towns or countries, and so on. While Castoriadis judiciously underlines the importance of the development of difference, he does not take into account the possibility, following the same example, that these two tribes can produce similar, or even identical forms of structure and culture. Either Castoriadis simply does not consider it a possibility (as even the slightest difference between the two societies would prove the point, the slightest and somewhat most important difference being the individuals), or these forms would appear out of nowhere and by sheer chance⁴⁸.

In any way, this does not compromise the critique of the Marxist position. Concerning the idea that technical facts “say” or rather define the society where they appear, it is evident on the one hand that there could be no capitalist economy without capitalist technique or technology, but it appears even more evidently that there could be no capitalist technique without capitalist economy⁴⁹.

There is consequently no reason to determine one category by the other as they are, at best, co-determining, inherent to one another. Not only is technique not an autonomous and self-defined category, but it also and as a consequence cannot possibly be the trigger of the movement of history. The technology of an economic regime, of a society or of an epoch is always to a certain extent a *selection* of techniques and technologies, which are often the results of research (it is evident in the contemporary world where vast sums of money are spent in technological research, with a multitude of “working” leftovers)⁵⁰.

2. Objectivist Rationalism

It is thus not only the content that is untenable, but the theory in itself. As a simple theory, it puts at the centre of its system the economic motivation, insinuating that human nature is essentially unalterable. As a consequence, it imposes to the whole of history categories that can bear a meaning only for developed capitalist societies, which in Castoriadis’ mind is highly problematic.

The Marxist theory of history, which claims to be a scientific theory, is based as such on a rationalist and objectivist approach. It is rationalist to the extent that the theory itself

weapons and tools will develop two social structures and cultures as different from one another as possible.” *IIS*, p.34.

⁴⁸ In his article “Technique” for the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, he nevertheless makes clear that cannot separate rigorously technical facts from others. in *CL* (pp.289-224), p. 312.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.310.

⁵⁰ *IIS*, p.28.

gives the solution to all the problems it considers in advance (having first defined these problems). The Marxist solution to the capitalist problem is the inevitable fall and the necessary corollary advent of the dictatorship of the working class. It is also objectivist in its application to past history which it sees as a natural object, in analogy to natural sciences. Both these approaches combine into an absolute and simple determinism: a large causal scheme. Considering that all past causes are accessible to us, and to “our reason as it is”, the past is necessarily in accordance with this reason and naturally forms a coherent and exhaustive system. Similarly, the future will become “what it has to be”, as it will realise – given its natural laws – a society in “miraculous” conformity with that reason⁵¹.

The analogy with Hegelianism is not fortuitous. Concerning Marxism, Castoriadis writes:

“L’hégélianisme [...] n’est pas en réalité dépassé. Tout ce qui est, et tout ce qui sera, est et sera rationnel.”⁵²

Moreover:

“Se dire « matérialiste » ne diffère en rien de se dire « spiritualiste » si par matière on entend une entité par ailleurs indéfinissable mais exhaustivement soumise à des lois consubstantielles et co-extensives à notre raison, et donc dès maintenant pénétrables par nous en droit [...]”⁵³

Both Hegel and Marx had to place a token of realisation of their rationality: Hegel stated the end of history, and Marx the advent of communism. The difference is that Hegel stopped his absolute knowledge as he could not produce the future forms of society in history as it would be a insolvable contradiction. Marx on the contrary, projected what he thought to be the positive evolution of society and determined it as necessary. Both the Hegelian end of history and the communist utopia are presuppositions of their systems of thought, as these are systems of absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge can only be real either if history is finished, or if it is rationally extended.

But both authors also expressed the flaw that makes their systems inconsistent: Hegel acknowledges that time does not stop (and that after the end of history, there will still be

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp.60-62.

⁵² “Hegelianism [...] is not in reality overcome. All that is, and all that will be, is and will be rational.” *ibid.*, p.62.

⁵³ “To say one is a “materialist” is no more different than to say that one is a “spiritualist” if matter is understood as an entity, and, while indefinable, exhaustively submitted to consubstantial laws co-extensive to our reason, and which we can from here and now understand by rights [...]” *ibid.*, p.81.

some empirical work to do)⁵⁴; and Marx begins in a sense with what we will see as the flaw of his system, the idea that men make their own history.

3. Determinism and Causality

“Dire que l’histoire passée est compréhensible, au sens de la conception marxiste de l’histoire, veut dire qu’il existe un déterminisme causal sans faille [...]”⁵⁵

Nonetheless, Castoriadis does not conclude that causality is devoid of meaning, on the contrary, it is essential to our understanding of history:

“[...] Il est certain que nous ne pouvons pas penser l’histoire sans la catégorie de la causalité, et même que [...] l’histoire est par excellence le domaine où la causalité a pour nous un sens, puisqu’elle y prend au départ la forme de la motivation et que donc nous pouvons comprendre un enchaînement « causal »[...]”⁵⁶

He sets a series of categories of causal relationship to explicit the modalities of causality at work in the historical world. Causality, he writes, is present in social and historical life first of all in regard to the “subjective rational” (“rationnel subjectif”), but also to the “objective rational” (“rationnel objectif”) and the “brute causality” (“causal brut”). The organisation of an army for instance is a consequence of the rational plan of its leader (or leaders). This type of causal relationship is what Castoriadis calls the “subjective rational”. The “objective rational” appears when natural causal relationships or simply logical necessities produce effects independent from a subjectivity: water and sun will make a plant grow, etc. Finally, “brute causality” concerns pure facts, when we are not able to reduce their rationality to a subjective or objective level⁵⁷.

While we can try to fit these relationships within “laws” or “objective dynamics”, those are always partial. Within certain limits, these laws can produce projections to a satisfactory degree of probability (just like the weather forecast), but it is impossible to fit them into a totally deterministic system⁵⁸: the “laws” of capitalism expressed by Marx are applicable neither to the situation of capitalism a century later, nor to other types of economic behaviour.

⁵⁴ Castoriadis C. “A Criação Histórica e a Instituição da Sociedade” (“Historical Creation and Institution of Society”), Conference in Porto Alegre, 1991. Available from: <http://www.caosmose.net/castoriadis/> [Accessed 2 August 2006]

⁵⁵ “To state that past history is understandable, in the sense of the Marxist historical conception, means that there exists a flawless causal determinism [...]” *IIS*, p. 63

⁵⁶ “[...] It is certain that we cannot think about history without the category of causality, and that moreover, history is par excellence the field where causality means something to us, as it takes at first the form of motivation allowing us thus to understand a “causal” sequence [...]” *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.63-64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

“L'impossibilité en question ne tient pas à la complexité de la matière sociale, elle tient à sa nature même. Elle tient à ce que le social (ou l'historique) contient le non-causal comme moment essentiel.”⁵⁹

The problem we are faced with now is the question of the modalities of the non-causal or undetermined nature of the social and the historical. Acknowledging that there are certain observable and relatively rational dynamics, but also that historical development is nonetheless not reducible to these, how can we understand the latter without risking to lapse into relativism?

⁵⁹ “The impossibility mentioned above is not based on the complexity of the social matter, but on its nature itself. It is based on the fact that the social (or the historical) contains the non-causal as an essential moment.” *Ibid.*, p.65.

II. The Road of History and its Crossroads

A. The Social-Historical

1. Traditional Answers

For Castoriadis the question of the social and the question of the historical go necessarily together. We have seen how in Marx, the relationship between the two is based on the determination of the former by the latter. Castoriadis wants to consider the social-historical as an indivisible unity, and as such it cannot be analysed within the framework of traditional categories.

For Castoriadis, the challenge is to reunite in the question of the social-historical the two traditional questions:

“Qu’est-ce que la société; notamment, qu’est-ce que l’unité et l’identité [...] d’une société, ou, qu’est-ce qui tient une société ensemble ?/ Qu’est-ce que l’histoire ; notamment, comment et pourquoi y a-t-il altération temporelle d’une société, en quoi est-elle altération, y a-t-il émergence du nouveau dans cette histoire, et que signifie-t-elle ?/ On peut éclairer d’avantage le sens et l’unité de ces deux questions en se demandant : en quoi et pourquoi y a-t-il différence entre sociétés ? Dirait-on que la différence des sociétés et leur histoire sont seulement apparentes, il subsisterait, comme toujours, la question : pourquoi donc y a-t-il cette apparence, pourquoi l’identique apparaît comme différent ?”⁶⁰

At the end of the quotation, Castoriadis makes a direct reference to structuralism, given the fact that, as we will see, it considers that what matters are profound structures relegating to the surface the problem of change and consequently of the passing of time. Castoriadis reduces the immense variety of approaches to these questions to two general *types*: the one he calls the “physicalist” type and the second the “logician” type.

The physicalist type condenses society and history to nature, biological and physical (as in the case of Aristotle), or generic (the case of Marxism, and more precisely of Hegelianism with its concept of *Gattungswesen*, “generic being”, quoted by Castoriadis⁶¹).⁶² The typical approach to society and history is the functionalist approach, which, he writes:

⁶⁰ “What is society; especially, what is unity and identity of a society, or, what holds a society together?/ What is history; especially, how and why is there temporal alteration of a society, in what sense is it alteration, does something new emerge in this history, and what does it mean?/ The meaning and unity of these questions can be clarified in the following interrogation: how and why are there various societies and not only one, and how and why are there differences between societies? Even if the difference between societies and their histories would be considered to appear only in surface, the question would remain as always: why then do they appear as such, why does the identical appear as different?” *IIS*, p.254-255.

⁶¹ Castoriadis refers to Hegel’s *Wissenschaft der Logik*, vol.2, Lasson, pp.426-429. ⁶² *IIS*, p.255.

“[...] se donne des besoins humains fixes et explique l’organisation sociale comme l’ensemble des fonctions visant à les satisfaire.”⁶³

As it concerns the systematic explanation of human behaviour like in Marxism, there is no reason to linger on with a deeper critical explanation of this type.

In the second approach, Castoriadis mainly attacks structuralism as the poorest form of logicism⁶⁴. In his mind, structuralism eliminates the question of history. For instance it considers that, instead of “stages”, only structures have an importance. The problem appears when we cannot know how and if these structures follow each other⁶⁵.

“[...] pour que l’on puisse prendre au sérieux le structuralisme il faut supposer que dans chaque société, partout où il y a des êtres humains, il existe en effet un « alphabet » élémentaire, partout identique, [...] comme on peut supposer que la phonologie en découvre pour tous les phonèmes possibles de toutes les langues, lettres d’où sont composés des mots d’où sont composées des phrases d’où sont composées des significations. Ces lettres sont le haut et le bas, le droit et le gauche, l’avant et l’arrière, l’homme et la femme [...]. C’est l’idée que pour qu’il y ait distinction, il faut qu’il y ait opposition [...]. Ce qu’un « primitif » peut en effet *poser* en s’opposant [...], on veut en faire des éléments éternels de la société – et cela suivant des règles pseudo-mathématiques. Mathématique ultraélémentaire : la théorie des groupes sous sa forme la plus pauvre, ce qui revient à traiter donc les phénomènes sociaux comme simples apparences, épiphénomènes, déterminés par des structures profondes, en fait de petits groupes dotés de quelques opérations élémentaires.”⁶⁶

Castoriadis concludes that the “naivety” of structuralism is “disarming” as it has nothing to say about the categories and groups it manipulates: the opposition cluster seems to be natural and consequently, there is no need to explain its reason of being⁶⁷.

While the question of history is for Castoriadis the question of “the emergence of temporal alteration produced in and by society”, he sees traditional causality as:

“[...] [la] négation de l’altérité, position d’une double identité: identité dans la répétition des mêmes causes produisant les mêmes effets, identité ultime de la cause et de l’effet puisque chacun appartient nécessairement à l’autre [...]. Ce n’est donc pas un hasard si l’élément même dans et par lequel se déploie éminemment le social-historique, à savoir les significations, est ignoré, ou bien transformé en épiphénomène, accompagnement

⁶³ “It provides itself with stable human needs and explains social organisation as all the functions that aim at satisfying these needs.” *IIS*, p.256.

⁶⁴ *IIS*, p.256.

⁶⁵ It is evident with Lacan in psychoanalysis, and with Lévi-Strauss when in *Race et histoire*, and in *Anthropologie structurale*, 2, he considers a “universal structure” from which each society would have “chosen” elements with a throw of dice. *SV*, p.19.

⁶⁶ “[...] to take structuralism seriously, one has to assume that in each society, everywhere where there are human beings, there exists an elementary “alphabet”, everywhere identical, [...] as one can assume that phonology finds one for all possible phonemes in all languages; letters composed in words, themselves composed in sentences, themselves composed in significations. The letters the high and the low, the front and the back, the man and the woman [...]. The idea is that to have a distinction, there needs to be an opposition [...]. What a “primitive” man can in fact *lay down* by opposition [...], is turned into eternal elements of society – moreover, by following pseudo-mathematical rules. Ultra elementary mathematics indeed: the poorest form of the theory of groups, which consequently comes down to consider social phenomena like simple appearances, epiphenomena, determined by deep structures, which are in fact small groups provided with a few elementary operations.” *Ibid.* pp.19-20.

⁶⁷ *IIS*, p.257.

redondant de ce qui se passerait réellement. Comment, en effet, une signification pourrait-elle être cause d'une autre signification, et comment des significations pourraient-elles être effets de non-significations ?”⁶⁸

The signification of the social-historical is his notion of “altérité”: it contains both the traditional ideas of evolution and change. The social-historical alters itself necessarily given its historical, i.e. temporal aspect, and is altered by the societal aspect: the radical imaginary.

2. New Definitions

a) Society

For Castoriadis, the problem of conceptualising society with traditional categories is related to the conceptualisation of coexistence: society, he writes, reveals itself as the coexistence of a variety of terms and entities of multiple kinds.⁶⁹

Inherited thought (traditional thought in Castoriadis' terms) either considers societal coexistence as a real global system in which the sub-systems and sub-categories are clearly distinct and defined, and tied together by similarly clear and defined relationships (causal, linear, cyclique determination, etc.); or as a logical system in which the positioning of necessarily defined elements is again produced through univocal relationships (like in mathematics)⁷⁰. All in all, both modes of understanding society come to the same: if society is a compound of systematic and univocal entities and relationships, there should be no reasons for its alteration.

Moreover, from Aristotle to Marx and beyond, there is the problem of the determination:

“[...] pour [Aristote] « la cité est première selon la nature », par rapport à l'homme individuel, mais aussi l'être de la cité est déterminé par sa fin, et cette fin est le bien-vivre référé à l'homme individuel.”⁷¹

Castoriadis draws the same problematic analogy in the case of Marx and Freud: the determinist logic chases its tale. Castoriadis then asks:

⁶⁸ “[...] negation of *altérité*, position of a double identity: identity in the repeating that the same causes produce the same effects, and ultimate identity between the cause and the effect as each necessarily belongs to the other [...]. It is therefore not a coincidence if the element, that is the significations, in and through which the social-historical eminently unfolds, is ignored, or simply transformed into an epiphenomenon, repetitively accompanying what would be really happening. How, indeed, a signification could be the cause of another signification, and how significations could be the effects of non-significations?” *IIS*, p259.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.264.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.264-265.

⁷¹ “[...] for [Aristotle] “according to nature the city-state comes first”, against the human individual, but the being of the city-state is also determined by its end, and this end is the well-being referred to the human individual.” *Ibid.*, p.266.

“[...] comment penser la société comme coexistence ou composition d’éléments qui lui préexisteraient ou qui seraient déterminés – réellement, logiquement ou téléologiquement – par ailleurs, lorsque ces prétendus éléments ne sont en général et ne sont ce qu’ils sont que dans et par la société? On ne pourrait composer une société – si l’expression avait un sens – qu’à partir d’individus déjà sociaux, qui portent déjà le social en eux-mêmes”⁷²

Here, he forces the question for his own purpose, as we could suppose that the categories of inherited thought do not answer the question of society as Castoriadis puts it, despite what seems obvious to us: the components of society are, and are what they are necessarily in and by the society they are comprised in, and which they compose. It is most probable that the authors he mentions (and others who contributed and contribute to the reproduction of traditional inherited thought) did not ask the question of society in the same way, or even did not ask the same question. This would of course need an analysis of its own, but if this was the case, we could evidently assume that their answers could not be applied to Castoriadis’ formulation: to what extent would it be evident for a Christian believer (or any believer) to think that the meaning and relationships in human societies are self-provided (not necessarily consciously)? If we follow the example of the Judeo-Christian faith, there are forms pre-existing the human form, and what is more, life, death and laws are believed to be given (or taken) by God. Again, we could draw similar analyses in the case of Marx (who, as we have seen, places economic development as the determining factor of human behaviour and organisation) and Freud (who, as Castoriadis mentions, places the psyche before the social, etc.). The ensuing problematic of “composing” a society with “already social individuals” is not really explicit, but we can assume that what he means is that it either presupposes that these individuals already bear a given societal signification (the problematic would continue as each one of them could bear a different signification, etc.), a situation that relates to the historical development of actual societies (and in this case, it is just a description); or that these “newly arrived” individuals would be pre-formatted as components of the pre-defined society they are the components *to be*, hence the questions: by who? Where? And so forth, leading to mythical or religious, or to a rationally absurd explanation, devoid of the time (or historical) factor.

In any way, the problematic he puts forward leads him to define what he understands society to be:

“La société n’est ni chose, ni sujet, ni idée – et pas davantage collection ou système de sujets, de choses et d’idées. Cette constatation semble facilement banale à ceux qui

⁷² “[...] how can we reflect on society as a coexistence or composition of elements that would exist beforehand or that would be determined – in reality, logically or in a teleological way – while this supposed elements are what they are, and are in general only in and by society?” *Ibid.*

facilement oublie de se demander comment et pourquoi peut-on alors parler d'une société et de cette société. Car dans le langage établi et dans la logique qu'il porte, « un » et « ceci » ne s'appliquent qu'à ce que nous savons nommer, et nous ne savons nommer que des choses, des sujets, des concepts, et leurs collections ou réunions, relations, attributs, états, etc. Mais l'unité d'une société comme son [identité] – le fait qu'elle est cette société-ci et non pas n'importe qu'elle autre – ne peuvent pas être analysées en relations entre sujets médiatisées par des choses, puisque toute relation entre sujets est relation sociale entre sujets sociaux, toute relation à des choses est relation sociale à des objets sociaux, et que sujets, choses et relations ne sont ici ce qu'ils sont et tels qu'ils sont que parce qu'ils sont ainsi institués par la société considérée (ou par une société en général).”⁷³

We cannot consequently reflect on society with traditional categories as a well structured whole, firstly because it again does not combine society and history, and secondly because its logic cannot comprehend society as a “unity of pluralities”⁷⁴.

Castoriadis then proposes the category of “magma”:

“[C]est ce dont on peut extraire (ou : dans quoi on peut construire) des organisations ensemblistes en nombre indéfini, mais qui ne peut jamais être reconstitué (idéalement) par composition ensembliste (finie ou infinie) de ces organisations.”⁷⁵

The complex and blurred category of magma is a constant to and fro between our representation of the social-historical world and our rational understanding of it. It is what allows Castoriadis to say that society is at the same time a unity containing a multitude of pluralities (the most evident example being the singular character of each individual).

b) History

“History exposes itself immediately as a succession”⁷⁶, but inherited thought, because of its determinism, cannot provide for the tools applicable to history:

“[...] pas plus que la société ne peut être pensée sous aucun des schèmes traditionnels de la coexistence, l'histoire ne peut être pensée sous aucun des schèmes traditionnels de la succession. Car ce qui se donne dans et par l'histoire n'est pas séquence déterminée du déterminé, mais émergence de l'altérité radicale, création immanente, nouveauté non triviale. C'est cela que manifestent aussi bien l'existence d'une histoire *in toto* que l'apparition de nouvelles sociétés (de nouveaux types de sociétés) et l'autotransformation incessante de chaque société. Et ce n'est qu'à partir de cette altérité radicale ou création que

⁷³ “Society is not an object, nor a subject, nor an idea – and neither a collection or a system of subjects, objects and ideas. This observation seems an easy commonplace for those who readily forget to ask how and why they can talk about a society and about this society. For in the established language and in the logic it contains, “a” and “this” can only be applied to what we can name, and we can only name objects, subjects, concepts, and their collections or reunions, relationships, attributes, states, etc. But the unity of society just like its [identity] – the fact that it is this precise society and no other – cannot be analysed with relationships between subjects mediated by objects, for any relationship between subjects is a social relationship between social subjects, any relationship to objects is a social relationship to social objects, and subjects, objects and relationships are in this case what they are and the way they are only because they are thusly instituted by the given society (or by any society in general).” *Ibid.*, p.267.

⁷⁴ “unité d'une pluralité” *ibid.*, p.272.

⁷⁵ “[It] is that where we can extract (or: in which we can construct) an indefinite amount of *ensemblist* organisations, but that cannot be reconstituted (ideally) by an *ensemblist* composition (finite or infinite) of these organisations.” *Ibid.*, p.499.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p.273.

nous pouvons penser vraiment la temporalité et le temps, dont nous trouvons dans l'histoire l'effectivité excellente et éminente.”⁷⁷

The strength of this argument comes from its consequent observation: if time is not the manifestation of an alteration (change or novelty), “that something else that is comes into being”, it is an psychological illusion, which hides a timeless and fundamental relationship of order. Any myth or legend could be as rational as any understanding we could have, lapsing everything into absolute relativism.

There nevertheless exist determinist understandings that are legitimate, that are used as explanations not only in history but also more generally. We construct for instance “series of ideal-type actions” (a rational relationship between the means and the end) to understand certain situations and contexts. Referring to the Weberian concept, Castoriadis gives the example of a 16th century Venetian usurer who needs, in order to earn money and if he acts rationally, with the supposed knowledge he has, according to the circumstances, to take definite steps to reach his goal⁷⁸.

What is not comprised – and cannot be comprised – in this explanation, is the undetermined element: human beings “contain an enormous component of indeterminacy.”⁷⁹ And because Castoriadis, as we have seen, states with the young Marx that “men make their own history”, the *determining* factor of indeterminacy is necessarily men themselves, as no rational theory or explanation, abstract or factual, can encompass, list and define all imaginable human behaviours (and obviously, even less those we cannot imagine).

The importance of the creative essence of the social-historical world is evident in the definition of history he gives in an article entitled “Les intellectuels et l'histoire” (“Intellectuals and History”) which also explains the foundations of his ontology of history:

“Histoire: je ne comprends pas par là seulement l'histoire faite, mais aussi l'histoire se faisant et l'histoire à faire. Cette histoire est, essentiellement, création – création *et* destruction. [...] L'histoire est le domaine où l'être humain crée des formes ontologiques – l'histoire et la société elles-mêmes étant les premières de ces formes. Création ne signifie pas nécessairement (ni même généralement) création « bonne » ou création de « valeurs

⁷⁷ “[...] just like society cannot be considered with any traditional scheme of coexistence, history cannot be thought of with any traditional scheme of succession. For what is given in and by history is not a determined sequence of the determined, but the appearance of radical *altérité*, of immanent creation, of non trivial novelty. This is what the existence of a history *in toto*, the appearance of new societies (of new types of society) and the ceaseless self-transforming of each society manifest. And it is only with the radical *altérité* or creation that we can really consider temporality and time, which excellent and eminent effectiveness we find in history.” *Ibid.*

p.276. ⁷⁸ *SV*, p.31.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.30.

positives ». Auschwitz et le Goulag sont des créations tout autant que le Parthénon ou les *Principia Mathematica*.”⁸⁰

B. The Radical Imaginary

1. Creation

Human beings contain in fact the only component of social-historical indeterminacy, for their mode of being is the mode of creation, which is not indeterminacy, but “the position of new determination, of new laws”⁸¹ :

“Création ne signifie pas indétermination. [Elle] *présuppose*, certes, une certaine indétermination dans l’être, au sens que ce qui est n’est jamais tel qu’il exclue le surgissement de nouvelles formes, de nouvelles déterminations. Autrement dit, ce qui est n’est pas clos du point de vue le plus essentiel ; ce qui est ouvert, ce qui est toujours aussi à-être.”⁸²

Hence, Castoriadis’ idea of creation opposes on the one hand the idea of absolute indeterminacy (which would lead to absolute relativism), but also the idea of absolute and integral determinism. It is conceived as the mode of being of the social-historical to which it belongs and in which it lays down new forms of its determinacy⁸³.

“[Mais] ni dans le domaine social-historique, ni nulle part ailleurs, la création ne signifie pas que n’importe quoi peut arriver n’importe où, n’importe quand et n’importe comment.”⁸⁴

The creativity of the social-historical is determined by itself: not only is a society ceaselessly self-altered, but it is self-altered within the limits of sanity, as it is conditioned (and not determined) by what already is (or at least a part of it).

2. Imagination and Institution

The social imaginary evolves in the realm of social-historical creation. As such it is the instituting imaginary that lays down social significations: institutions of power,

⁸⁰ “History: by which I understand not only history that is done, but also history in progress and history to be done. This history is essentially creation – creation *and* destruction. [...] History is the field where human beings create ontological forms – history and society themselves being the first of these forms. Creation does not necessarily (nor in general) mean “good” creation, or creation of “positive values”. Auschwitz and the gulag are creations just like the Parthenon or the *Principia Mathematica*.” “Les intellectuels et l’histoire”, in *MM* (pp.127-136), p.127.

⁸¹ “Temps et création” in *ibid.* (pp.307-348), p.333.

⁸² “Creation does not mean indeterminacy. [It] *presupposes* indeed a certain indeterminacy in being, in the sense that what is does never exclude the appearance of new forms, of new determinations. In other words, what is not closed up from the most essential point of view; what is open, what is also always *to be*.” “Anthropologie, philosophie, politique” in *MI* (pp.105-124), pp.109-110.

⁸³ See *FF*, pp.18-20.

⁸⁴ “[but] neither in the social-historical nor anywhere else does creation mean that anything can happen anywhere, anytime and anyhow.” *Ibid.*, p.20.

economic institutions, familial institutions, religious, etc. Language itself is a social institution.⁸⁵

According to Castoriadis (and the following reasoning can be applied to other institutions):

“[...] toute production primordiale, individuelle ou « contractuelle », du langage est une absurdité historique aussi bien que logique. Le langage ne peut être que la création spontanée d’un collectif humain. La même chose est vraie de toutes les institutions primordiales, sans lesquelles il n’y a pas de vie sociale, donc pas d’êtres humains non plus.”⁸⁶

To think of language, and indeed of any other social institution, “outside” society is an absurdity, as neither language nor for instance tombstones or a marital status would have any meaning but that which it is given by the society it appears in.

In the previous subchapter, we mentioned the limits and conditioning of creation, hence of the instituting power of the anonymous collective.

“Puisqu’elles ne sont ni productibles causalement, ni deductibles rationnellement, les institutions et les significations imaginaires sociales de chaque société sont des créations libres et immotivés du collectif anonyme concerné. Ce sont des créations *ex nihilo*, mais pas *in nihilo*, ni *cum nihilo*. Cela veut dire qu’elles sont des créations *sous contrainte*.”⁸⁷

Castoriadis lists a number of constraints of different types that can be integrated into the conditions of creation.

The first type are what he calls “external” constraints to which correspond the necessary functionality of institutions, like the production of material wealth or sexual reproduction.

This type of constraints is mainly imposed by what Castoriadis calls:

“[...] la première strate du vivant [...], y compris la constitution biologique de l’être humain. Ces contraintes sont essentiellement triviales (ce qui ne veut pas dire qu’elles sont sans importance) ; la société est, chaque fois, conditionnée par son habitat naturel, par exemple, mais elle n’est pas « causée » par celui-ci.”⁸⁸

The second type of constraints are “internal” constraints, which follow from the psyche, i.e. the “raw material” from which society creates itself. The psyche needs to be “socialised”, which means it has to incorporate the human and natural world (external, or “public” in Castoriadis’ terms).

⁸⁵ SV, p.26.

⁸⁶ “[...] any primordial production, individual or “contractual”, of language is a historical and a logical absurdity. Language can only come from the spontaneous creation of a human collective. The same is true for any primordial institution without which there would be no social life or in fact human beings.” “Imagination, imaginaire, réflexion” in *FF* (pp.263-271), p.265.

⁸⁷ “Because they are neither causally producible nor rationally deducible, social institutions and significations of each society are free and unmotivated creations of the anonymous collective in question. They are creations *ex nihilo*, and not *in nihilo* or *cum nihilo*. It means that they are creations *under constraint*.” *Ibid.*, p.268.

⁸⁸ “[...] the first stratum of the living [...], including the biological constitution of human beings. These constraints are essentially trivial (which does not mean that they are unimportant); society is, for instance, always conditioned by its natural habitat, but it is never “caused” by it.” *Ibid.*

“Lorsque nous considérons la variété incroyable de sociétés que nous connaissons (et qui ne sont, sans doute, qu’une infime partie des sociétés qui pourraient et qui pourront être), nous sommes presque conduits à penser que la société peut faire de la psyché ce qu’elle veut [...] pourvu qu’une condition soit remplie : que l’institution donne à la psyché du sens [...]. Cela est accompli par les significations imaginaires sociales, presque toujours religieuses, qui tissent ensemble le sens de la vie et de la mort de l’individu, le sens de l’existence et des manières de faire de la société considérée, et le sens du monde comme totalité.”⁸⁹

There also are “historical” constraints, as all societies have a past and a tradition. But the relationship to this past is itself part of the institution of society. Hence, some societies called “archaic” will tend to repeat their past. On the other hand, societies construct a legacy of re-interpretations, etc.⁹⁰

Finally, there are the “intrinsic” constraints that Castoriadis considers as the most interesting. While he suggests that there are more, he only considers two of such constraints. On the one hand, social institutions and imaginary significations need to be “coherent”:

“La construction de pyramides à côté de paysans mourant de faim est cohérente lorsqu’elle est rapportée à l’ensemble de l’organisation sociale et des significations imaginaires sociales de l’Egypte pharaonique [...]”⁹¹

And coherence as such, he continues, does not exclude “divisions, oppositions or internal struggles”, although there is no clear suggestion of the relationship taking place between a coherent whole and an opposition (these relationships would necessarily be distinct for each case in each society).

On the other hand, these institutions and imaginary significations need to be “complete”, to be provided with a certain “validity” within the magma, by closing its signification (which by transcendence, religious signification can replace). The consequence of a closed signification is that any answer can be found within the magma.⁹²

⁸⁹ “When we consider the amazing variety of societies we know about (which without doubt are only a portion of societies that could be and that will be), we can almost think that society can do anything with the psyche [...] under one condition: for the psyche to be provided with a *meaning* by the institution. [...] This is accomplished with social imaginary significations, mostly religious, that weave the meaning of life and death together, the meaning of the being and the mores of the considered society, and the meaning of the world as a whole.” *Ibid.*, p.269.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.270.

⁹¹ “The building of pyramids while peasants were starving of hunger at their side is coherent if it is considered within the whole of the social organisation and imaginary significations of pharaoh Egypt.”

Ibid.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.271.

All these categories or groups provide clearer elements to understand both the concept of magma and the complexity of the social-historical mode of being, although we still need to assume and accept some contradictions and some grey areas. But “by definition,” Castoriadis writes, “a great author thinks beyond his means”⁹³

⁹³ *IIS*, p.261.

Conclusion: Commentary on the Project of Autonomy

The whole ontology of creation and alteration in the philosophy of Castoriadis is linked with what he calls “the project of societal and individual autonomy”⁹⁴, which has been done, is in the making and is to be done, to use the same words as in his definition of history.

The project of autonomy (literally self-legislation), is the project of the conscious self-institution of society, i.e. of democracy. For Castoriadis, democracy and philosophy are linked because they presuppose the questioning of social institutions and imaginaries.

European history (or “Greco-occidental” as he puts it, as Ancient Greece saw the historical *germ* of democracy) can be understood to be the history of the tension between two heterogeneous principles: the project of autonomy and the project of unlimited expansion of rational control. This is in fact obvious in modern history:

“Il est impossible de comprendre la société capitaliste occidentale des deux derniers siècles sans y reconnaître la coexistence et le travail parallèle à la fois et entrecroisé de ces deux principes hétérogènes et, en toute rigueur, incompatibles : l’expansion illimitée de la « maîtrise rationnelle » ne peut que supprimer l’autonomie, laquelle, à son tour, en tant qu’autolimitation, ne saurait coexister avec une expansion illimitée de quoi que ce soit, fût-ce d’une prétendue « rationalité ».”⁹⁵

But it would be too easy to understand the project of autonomy as the “positive” project and the rational expansionist project as the “negative” project. It is easily understood that capitalism for instance can have a positive “function”: the certain production of material wealth (while it is not reducible to this). The tradition of questioning, of critique, which is the essence of the project of autonomy, contains the problematic of choice and judgement inherent to this tradition:

“[...] cette tradition ne nous permet pas non plus de nous reposer. Car elle a engendré la démocratie et la philosophie, les révolutions américaines et françaises, [...] le Parthénon et *Macbeth* ; mais elle a aussi produit [...] l’Inquisition, Auschwitz, le Goulag et la bombe H. [...] Et ces possibilités extrêmes de l’humanité dans le domaine du monstrueux se sont réalisés, par excellence, dans notre tradition. Le problème du jugement et du choix surgit donc aussi dans cette tradition que nous ne saurions, ne fût-ce qu’un instant valider *en bloc*. Et, bien entendu, ce problème ne se pose pas comme une simple possibilité intellectuelle. L’histoire même du monde gréco-occidental peut être interprétée comme l’histoire de la lutte entre l’autonomie et l’hétéronomie.”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ “It is impossible to understand occidental capitalist society of the past two centuries without recognizing in it the coexistence and both parallel and intermingled work of those two heterogeneous and strictly incompatible principles: the unlimited expansion of “rational control” can only but suppress autonomy, which, in turn, as a self-limitation, could not coexist with an unlimited expansion of anything at all, were it of a so-called “rationality”.” “Complexité, magma, histoire” in *FF* (pp.209-226), p.219.

⁹⁶ “This tradition does not allow us to remain idle. For it has engendered democracy and philosophy, the French and the American revolutions, [...] the Parthenon and *Macbeth*; but it has also produced [...] the Inquisition, Auschwitz, the Gulag and the H-bomb. [...] And these extreme possibilities of humanity in

This interpretation of the history of ideas places the historical ontology of creation in its centre, making this more precisely the history of the imaginary significations and institutions of a “European” society.

Despite the complexity of this framework, it remains a philosophy not always made precise in its application, notably to history. We can note a certain discrepancy between the theory and what can be observed in (our) history *as a whole*. The interpretation that Castoriadis develops on radical creations as instituting creations posits the problem of the how and when the new creation is *in fact* instituted the way it was *at first* imagined. Taking the French Revolution as an example, the radical imaginary that was emerging in the movement (“equality, liberty, fraternity”, for instance) has not produced an institution *equal* in facts to what the imaginary presupposed (and that to a certain extent it still presupposes). Of course, the radical imaginary can be accessed to us only through the institutions, and through the sources we have. Again, it brings the problem of interpretation up, although we will not discuss it here.

What we are here concerned with is the direct application of Castoriadis’ theory. Aside of the constraints he mentioned, we could wonder whether the *investiture* by the instituting imaginary (i.e. when it produces a new signification) of the instituted imaginary is immediate, or mediated, and how or why.

The philosopher could argue that there is no systematic approach, as these questions could only be answered, and answered differently, for each “case”. Taking the example of nationalism for instance, i.e. what is since Benedict Anderson called an “imagined community”⁹⁷, its imagination is indeed a social institution. And returning now to the French example, the signification of “equality, liberty, fraternity” is still not *practically* real (it is nevertheless a real imaginary signification, etc.): the democratic debates do not really concern the whole nation (or citizens), just like after the Revolution, when they only concerned a certain elite.

Naturally, the contemporary situation has “improved” or evolved, and one cannot say they are identical. But the instituting imaginary at work in the development of democracy which partly emerged from the radical imaginary of the revolution, partly in the traditional culture of humanism, remains essentially the same. And the situation has “improved” a posteriori because it was

the field of monstrosities have been realised, par excellence, in our tradition. The issue of judgment and choice also occurs in this tradition that we could not, even for a moment, *wholly* ratify. Also, naturally, this issue does not appear as a simple intellectual possibility. The very history of the Greco-occidental world could be interpreted as the history of the struggle between autonomy and heteronomy.”

Ibid., p.221.

⁹⁷ Anderson, B. *op.cit.*

not invested immediately and consequently remained “radical”. While the democratic means of governance have not really evolved, the definition of citizen has changed, especially through the social (workers, feminist and youth) movements of the 20th century. It has become to a certain extent *by rights*, what it was already announced to be two centuries ago. As such, one could indeed say “the French Revolution changed everything and nothing”...⁹⁸

Of course, we cannot say that some changes were not immediate. The sole fact that new institutions appeared already in 1789, just like the “Declaration of rights of men and citizens” that opens in the first French constitution⁹⁹, bearing new significations, proves that some elements of the radical imaginary can be invested without (or with little) mediation of time.

But even here we can notice contradicting formulations and significations that allow a blurred and delayed investiture of the “original” imaginary. The first article of the “Déclaration” reads:

“Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l’utilité commune.”¹⁰⁰

The first sentence of this article went down in history and sustained a French national imaginary (and most probably also the “democratic” imaginary in general). But as it reads, it is evident that the closing sentence is in direct contradiction with the first: if men remain *equal*, how can any distinction be applied? Of course, one could pin down that they are equal in *rights*, meaning that reality is always a different matter. But the contradiction appears on two levels: it is through the same “law”, in a text that by definition edicts *rights*, and in the name of the “common good” (which belongs here to the imaginary and rhetoric of nationalism) that those equal rights at first granted are immediately put into disarray. The rhetoric of the “common good” is sloppy enough to allow any sort of preceding discriminatory behaviour and unequal organisation (consequently of social significations).

Interestingly enough, this confusing juxtaposition of a right and a law (in the sense that the first is a principle and the second a pseudo-regulating rule) was used a century and a half later when the French fourth republic was drafting a new constitution in April 1946.

⁹⁸ Geary, P.J. *The Myth of Nations, the Medieval Origins of Europe*. Princeton University Press, p.21.

⁹⁹ See Jaume, L. (Ed.) *Les déclarations des droits de l’homme*. GF-Flammarion, 1989.

¹⁰⁰ “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Social distinctions can only be based according to the common purpose.” *Ibid.* p.12.

But only the first sentence, which introduces the text, granted equal rights to women, stating the “fidelity to the principles of 1789”¹⁰¹. Strangely enough, the sentence disappeared in the actual constitution later the same year, but the “loyalty” remained the same¹⁰².

The “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” from 1948 goes even further referring in the same article to all three pillars of the French Revolution:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”¹⁰³

What emerges from this historical approach of the idea of creation and institution is that despite a radical imaginary and an immediate creation of signification, the investiture of meaning in social organisation is a historical process in itself.

This comment on the philosophy of history of Castoriadis does not cancel it out. It tried on the contrary to involve a “concrete” application of this theory to the history of ideas. If history is creation, to draw on a formulation Castoriadis used for the history of mathematics, history is the history of human creations (of their radical imaginary and significations).

This philosophy does not only entail interesting possibilities for historical debate and historiography, it also proposes a more general “attitude” (or ethics) for all who are interested in the question of human society and its history. Starting with the tradition of democracy and philosophy:

“Nous reprenons, réaffirmons et voulons prolonger cette création. Nous sommes et voulons être dans une tradition de critique radicale, ce qui implique aussi : de responsabilité (nous ne pouvons pas rejeter la faute sur Dieu tout-puissant, etc.) et d'autolimitation (nous ne pouvons invoquer aucune norme extra-historique pour normer notre agir, qui cependant doit être normé). Il en résulte que nous nous situons à l'égard de ce qui est, de ce qui pourra ou devra être, et même de ce qui a été, comme acteurs critiques. Nous pouvons contribuer à ce que ce qui est soit autrement. Nous ne pouvons contribuer à ce qui a été, mais nous pouvons changer le regard sur ce qui a été – regard qui est ingrédient essentiel [...] des attitudes présentes. En particulier nous n'accordons, en première approximation, aucun privilège philosophique à la réalité historique passée et présente. Passé et présent ne sont autre chose que masses de faits bruts (ou de matériaux empiriques) que pour autant qu'ils ont été ré-avalisés critiqueusement par nous. En deuxième approximation, puisque nous sommes en aval de ce passé et que donc il a pu entrer dans les présupposés de ce que nous pensons et de ce que nous sommes, ce passé acquiert une sorte d'importance transcendante car sa connaissance et sa critique font partie de notre autoréflexion.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p.326

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p.333.

¹⁰³ “Article 1” in *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Paris, 1948. Available at: <http://www.lexilogos.com/declaration/index.htm> [Accessed 28 August 2006]

¹⁰⁴ “We take up, reaffirm and wish to extend that creation. We are and want to be part of a tradition of radical criticism, which also implies: of responsibility (we can not blame God all mighty, etc.) and of self-limitation (we can not refer to any extra-historical standard to norm our action, which however has to be normed). As a result, we situate ourselves in relation to what is, to what could or should be, and even to

what has been, as critical actors. We can contribute to what is so that it is different. We can not contribute to what has been, but we can change the way we look at what has been – the latter being an essential ingredient to present attitudes. In particular we do not grant, in a first approximation, any philosophical privilege to past and present historical reality. Past and present are nothing but masses of raw facts (or empirical materials) had they been critically re-condoned by us. In a second approximation, as we situate ourselves after this past and that it could thus have entered the presuppositions of what we think and what we are, this past acquires a sort of transcendental importance, because its knowledge and its critics are part of our self-reflection.”“Les intellectuels et l’histoire”, *op.cit.* p.128.

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