

## THE LATER CASTORIADIS: INSTITUTION UNDER INTERROGATION

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In the first part of this essay, we sought to trace the trajectory of Cornelius Castoriadis' intellectual biography through the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>1</sup> We examined how, from a position originally within Marxism, he began to pull at the thread of bureaucracy, and kept on pulling, and pulling .... We saw how at first this movement led to a critique of the "real socialism" of the eastern regimes, and how it was then extended to the west, the "socialist" regimes having been revealed as a concentrated form of capitalism, accomplishing vertically what in the West was being realized horizontally. We then examined what in Castoriadis' eyes constituted the phenomenon of bureaucracy; the definition of the mechanisms by which it attempts to gain control over the social process, as well as of its "contradiction," that is, its ultimate inability to realize its ambition of total mastery. Finally we saw that as the critique was pushed ever further, its critical edge could not but turn on Marxism, considered not simply in terms of its historical practice, but in terms of the secret complicity of its theory with the object it claimed to criticize. This critique of "bureaucratic theory," as we then noted, would not restrict itself merely to one or more tenets of the Marxist corpus, but would eventually come to question the very viability of theory. Before such an interrogation, Marxism could only be left behind as an exemplary case of what in a sense was common to all "theory" and its "rationality." And yet if such an interrogation was to continue, and continue to be fruitful, beyond having to reject the pessimistic posturing of "the God that failed," it would have to avoid succumbing to the pleasures of a facile anti-intellectualism which holds all thought to be inherently oppressive. It had now placed itself under the obligation of coming up with an "anti-theory" that, in terms that were both rigorous and coherent, would seek to conceptualize that object which continually escaped theory's grasp, and yet constantly seemed to solicit it. That object, it was suggested, was "institution."

Between the break-up of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and the publication of *Imaginaire sociale et L'institution*,<sup>2</sup> there was a more or less uninterrupted public silence of almost ten years. And when this gestatory period finally ended, the resulting product could only have produced a certain bewilderment among Castoriadis' earlier audience. For the immediate concerns of the

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political struggle and the familiar markings of political economy had been replaced by a discourse whose domain was much broader, including the relatively exotic realms of linguistics and psychoanalysis, whose tone was more obviously philosophical, and whose aims were more indirect. And yet, in hindsight, it would appear that behind the public silence, in the obscurity of his own labours, the basic motifs that lay behind the continuous movement of his earlier writings, were still present. This observation applies not only, if most significantly, to the exigencies that drew his analysis forward, but even to a certain transposition of the basic categories between the two phases. Thus what had earlier been conceptualized as the bureaucratic rationality manifest in the contemplative dualism of Marxism, is now generalized to all "inherited thought" as embodying what Castoriadis will term the "identitarian-ensamblist logico-ontology." And just as he had formerly attempted to circumscribe what was simultaneously the limit and ground of such bureaucratic rationality, in, say for example, the daily activity of the work place, so he would now specify for parallel reasons a non-identitarian, alogical, "imaginary" dimension.

However, if the trajectory of Castoriadis' thinking still retains a certain coherence, the focus has not simply broadened but in a sense shifted. For while in the earlier period the critique of a certain regime and practice had led to a questioning of the theory that served to justify this regime and collided with this practice, the critique of all "inherited thought," of the "identitarian-ensamblist logico-ontology," in a reverse movement, leads to an attempt to situate the latter in the necessities internal to the "socio-historical."

When attempting to conceptualize society, "inherited thought" generally seeks to establish a series of invariant and separate elements (institutions in the flat sociological sense of the term — culture, the economy, the educational system, classes, *etc.*), which are linked together in distinct and univocally defined relations so as to form a determinate and ordered whole. This whole, then, is designated as society itself. This formulation immediately raises a number of problems. How can society be considered as the sum of its elements and their relations, when they exist only within and through society, when society in a sense precedes them?<sup>3</sup> And how can the elements be considered as invariant when they exist only within and through specific societies, when therefore they exist only as specific elements subject to the peripeties of a particular society? And in what sense are these elements to be considered separate, when, having emerged within a particular society out of what was formerly indistinct, they owe their existence to what remains fundamentally indivisible? What has been said about the invariable and separate nature of the elements, can be repeated with respect to their relations. In summary, what "inherited thought" fails to grasp is precisely the *instituted* character of society.

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This, however, is only half the matter. For presupposed behind the instituted character of society is the *instituting* character of history (and if Castoriadis speaks of the "socio-historical" it is in order to stress the inseparability of the synchronic from the diachronic, of the instituted from the instituting). The problem then arises for "inherited thought" of how society, without ceasing to be a particular society, can be considered as a determinate unity, or even a unity *per se*, when its components and their modes of coexistence are in continuous flux, when diachronically speaking, they slip through the imposition of any strict identity. It is the problem of how to think stability in change, the possibility of social coherence within the disorder of time. But beyond this problem, there lies the more basic issue of trying to conceptualize change itself. At this point "inherited thought" tries to reduce history to the schemas of either causality, finality or logical implication. In this sense "inherited thought" is unable to think the actuality and particularity of time, for it necessarily reduces time to a schema of order, a necessary succession of events, a material translation of what already pre-exists ideally. Time is conceptualized in the manner of a spatial arrangement (*e.g.*, points on a line), only displayed "longitudinally." For Castoriadis, however, history is discontinuous; it is the perpetual emergence of alterity, of that which is other, of that which escapes determination. In brief, history is "the eruption of instituting society into instituted society."

If "inherited thought" must decompose history in terms of either causality, finality or logical implication, this is because these schemas correspond to the conduct of three "primary essences" — things, subjects and ideas — which would lie beneath society's institutional surface,<sup>4</sup> and exist as its basic units or ultimate determinants. The "socio-historical" would then be understood in terms of either the mode of being of one of these primitive types (be it the laws of matter, the unfolding of an idea, the organicism of functionalism, or the logicism of structuralism, *etc.*) or their variations, combinations and synthesis (*e.g.*, the claim that society consists of "relations between people mediated by things"). The problem is, however, that society does not so much consist of things, subjects and ideas, as the very consistency of the latter emerges from the socio-historical (and thus they exist always as *social* subjects, things and ideas). It is Castoriadis' contention that there is a mode of being, more "primitive" and more elementary, a mode of being that exists as other and more than subjects, objects and ideas, and yet exists as the horizon of their possibility. It is this mode of being that he terms "*institution.*"

We have now reached the very heart of Castoriadis' inquiry, the concept of "*institution.*" Merleau-Ponty, in counterposing the concepts of "*institution*" and "*constitution,*" provides a certain backdrop to Castoriadis' analysis:

If the subject were taken not as a constituting but an

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instituting subject, it might be understood that the subject does not exist instantaneously and that the other person does not exist simply as a negative of myself. ... an instituting subject could coexist with another because the one instituted is not the immediate reflection of the activity of the former and can be regained by himself or by others without involving anything like total recreation. Thus the instituted subject exists between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to a common world.<sup>5</sup>

As this quote should make clear, the problem with the concept of "constitution" is that it supposes the notion of a subject considered as an autonomous consciousness for whom objects exist only as his own objectifications. As such the subject is necessarily suspended within the circle of his own self-enclosure; "there is nothing in the objects capable of throwing consciousness back toward other perspectives. There is no exchange, no interaction between consciousness and the object."<sup>6</sup> It is in this sense that the other, being himself a subject, can only be denied as a denial of the subject's own autarchic existence and its completion. We have begun to enter the fiction of a pure *logos* that would simultaneously absorb and recreate all being in the recovery of its own identity — a fiction than when transposed to the level of collectivity will be understood as the realization of absolute knowledge and total self-mastery at the end of history. It was in order to avoid this impasse that Merleau-Ponty came up with "institution" as a term that would lie between the subject and object (and thus allow the object to exist as an object, rather than as an objectification reducible to the subject) and between the subject and other (and thus allow the other to coexist with the subject rather than being his simple negation), as well as between the subject and himself (thus allowing him to exist beyond the necessity of having to continuously and "instantaneously" create himself out of his own nothingness).

If Castoriadis uses the term "institution" for analogous reasons, he situates it not so much "between" as "behind." The shift is subtle, for both as it were provide the ground on which subjects and objects are delineated. And yet if in the first case "institution" supplies the common relation thereby allowing them to interact with each other, in the second case "institution" is the condition of their very existence. For Castoriadis, "institution" in its first and most fundamental sense, is that which is creative of an absolutely irreducible mode of being, a social mode of being, one that is both instituting and instituted, and that is, at least in part, presupposed in anything and everything

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that we might care to name. We must be careful here, for what is being said is that "institution" is at first the "institution" of the very possibility of "institution." The turn of phrase is no doubt circular, but it serves to emphasize the irreducible originality of "institution," that it is created *ex nihilo* — an effect that is its own cause. At this point, as if to respond to the apparent absurdity of such a position (or more precisely self-positioning), Castoriadis feels obliged to introduce another concept, that of the "*imaginaire radical*." The latter is given as the source of "institution," as that which institutes, accounting for the emergence of this unprecedented novelty, this capacity for "auto-institution." As such the "*imaginaire radical*" is in a sense the demiurge of Castoriadis' entire conceptual "system." And yet I find there is something futile about this concept, as if it were trying to establish a cause that would not be a cause, that would be the cause of all effects and which would simultaneously allow these effects to exceed any cause. Or, it is as if the concept of the *imaginaire radical* were an attempt to situate a subject that would not be a subject, having neither a will, motivation, nor design — a sort of subject "under erasure." Ultimately this concept seems to arise from the need to find terms to correspond to the positions left vacant by the "identitarian-ensamble logico-ontology" without however restoring this logico-ontology.

Another and more important way in which the "*imaginaire radical*" is "futile" lies in its "imaginary" character, a quality it has in common with "institution." (Let us not forget the title of the book, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*.) By "imaginary" is meant that "institution" is not "real" in any determinate sense, nor is it "unreal," nor does it conform to the distinctions between "true" and "false," "rational" and "irrational." Instead it is through the "*imaginaire radical*" as operative in the "imaginary institution" of society that these distinctions are acquired and acquire meaning. It is through institution that what for society, and for a particular society is real, unreal, irrational, and so on, comes to be defined. As such "institution" itself, considered in this fundamental "originary" sense, remains a-real and a-rational, and thus, by definition, one cannot speak of its logic or its ontological being. It would even appear to resist the very possibility of being identified — at least in any rigorous, positive sense. Being situated on the far frontiers of signification, it would *seem* that, at bottom, "institution" must always remain an enigma. This is all the more true since it is the very horizon of the emergence of signification, the condition and guarantee of society's capacity to define itself in its coherence and commonality, that is to say, in society's capacity to open up a meaningful world.

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At this point, in order to deepen our understanding of the problematic of "institution," we are going to have to alter our strategy. In the preceding

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section we attempted to reveal "institution's" mode of being by demonstrating how it remained fundamentally foreign to the regimen of the "identitarian-ensemblist logico-ontology"; we are now going to examine "institution's" *modus operandi* not so much by counterposing it to the "identitarian-ensemblist logic," as by having it embrace the latter as one of its own requisite dimensions.

This indispensable "identitarian-ensemblist" dimension of "institution" operates through what Castoriadis terms the *legein* and the *teukhein*; the former referring to "institution" as it involves social communication (*dire/representer social*), the latter, as it involves social activity (*faire social*). This "identitarian-ensemblist" dimension is exhaustive of neither social communication nor social activity. It must still be counterposed to an "imaginary" dimension, and must be seen as being itself an "imaginary" creation. If then Castoriadis admits the indispensability of the "identitarian ensemblist logic," the entire elaboration of the *legein* and *teukhein* should be seen as an attempt on his part to circumscribe what must be admitted, by grounding it in what it itself cannot pose, and by demonstrating its limits in what by itself it cannot say or do. This is neither simply a philosophical exercise, nor a mere continuation of the critique of "inherited thought" at another more basic level. Ultimately it points to a political project, one that is a direct continuation of the same political project that animates all his work. For it is Castoriadis' contention that in contemporary society the "identitarian-ensemblist logic," or its offspring, is endowed with a sort of imperialist myth whereby it is claimed that it alone is capable of posing what is truly real and truly rational, what can be really said and what can be rationally done. This logic, it would appear, has been assigned the desperate task of usurping the entirety of the "space" of "institution" in what Castoriadis will term the "social imaginary."

The *legein* is defined as "to distinguish-choose-pose-assemble-count-speak," and is that medium through which all must pass if it is to be present for society — *i.e.*, represented to and within society. As a result, it finds its primary and paradigmatic, but not exclusive, moment in language. For Castoriadis language is of singular importance, and not simply because of the recent popularity in France of semiology and structural linguistics. Rather, for Castoriadis language, as Merleau-Ponty already noted in 1945, "offers the chance to definitively transcend the classical dichotomy of subject and object,"<sup>8</sup> and thereby provides an entry into the problematic of "institution." A careful analysis of language serves to restate at a level that is less sweeping and more detailed, many of the principal themes encountered when interrogating "institution." Moreover, language has a privileged relation with what for Castoriadis was always the most important aspect of "institution," that is, its capacity to engender significations. This possibility of positioning significations

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in language brings us to a final point which, while absent from the surface of Castoriadis' analysis, is revelatory of the entire course of his thought. Significations exist as a "hinge" between the socio-historical and its theory, allowing the former to be folded back on itself in the latter's reflection. As such significations provide common ground on which society, the theory of society, and reflection on theory itself, can engage in multiple exchanges — exchanges that Castoriadis' manner of thinking not only supposes but exploits.

The *legein* serves to designate an "object" (in Saussure's terminology, a signified) both in its generality and as a particular object, as *this* object, and a "sign" (a signifier) as a sign and as *this* sign, and a "signitive relation" joining this object to this sign. The object, the sign and the signitive relation all have a double relation to "institution": they are instituted and thus presuppose the "institution" of the socio-historical; and they are agencies of "institution" and are thus presuppositions of the socio-historical. This is also to say that, as instituted, their emergence is not dependant on and cannot be explained by the "identitarian-ensemblist logic," even if, as will soon become apparent, their emergence is the sole condition under which this logic exists — and exists as a necessary dimension of "institution." This point is important, and even if by now it should be in some sense familiar, it is worth examining the instituted character of the signitive relation, the sign and the object, each in its turn.

The signitive relation cannot be considered as a logical relation since it relates two "things" that are not equivalent. Nor is it a "real" relation, and this because it exists as a supposition of all representation. For being in a sense above and below, independent yet interlinked to all individual representations, it has no specific location that one could "represent," or even point to, as its "reality." The signitive relation is not a necessary relation in any determinate sense; nor is it a contingent relation (insofar as the notion of contingency supposes that of determination). It exists irreducible to any "rationality" or "reality," and yet given that it is required for any talk of the necessary, the contingent, the real or the rational, it exists as essential. To admit this irreducible and essential character of the signitive relation, and therefore of all representing, is to recognize it as instituted, as a creation *ex nihilo* of the *imaginaire radical*.

Turning now to the sign, we know that the signitive relation requires a material-sensible figure as its representative support, and this figure, it is true, would certainly seem to be "real." However in itself it does not constitute the sign. For the concrete instances of a given material-sensible figure are never totally identical (*e.g.*, the pronunciation of a given syllable may vary according to tone, pitch, dialect, etc.), and thus if they are to be organized as exemplars of a particular sign, there must exist, for both each individual and society at large, an image of the sign, a sort of normative form that manifests itself through the sign's concrete instances and yet is separable from them. Con-

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sequently the material-sensible figure must also exist as an immaterial-sensible figure, *i.e.*, it must exist as "material-abstract,"<sup>9</sup> and thus what at first appeared to be "real" owes its reality as a sign to what is not "real." Signs thus exist as "imaginary" creations, a necessary product of "institution."

The object must also be instituted if it is to have a social existence. It must be created out of that which is not yet an object, which exists as it were in its pre-social immediacy. The object exists as an object only through the signitive relation, for the latter endows it with its identity as a particular object, identical in relation to itself (in spite of and through all its manifestations) and in relation to other objects of the same class, and different with respect to all other objects, be they in the same class or not. In this sense the object, like the sign, has a certain abstract formal quality to it. (For example, I will only recognize a given object as a chair if I already have an image of what a chair is.) However the object, unlike the sign or the signitive relation, is generally not instituted as a pure creation *ex nihilo*. The object generally has a referent — which is not so much "real" as "pre-real," given that it is through the establishment of objects that a "reality" comes to exist for society.

The *legein* then serves to designate the signitive relation, and with it, signs and objects. And such designation, as the preceding paragraph already intimated, immediately suggests the *identification* of the signs and objects, their *separation* from other signs and objects, their *combination* into various classes or ensembles, and the *substitution* of one sign or object for another sign or object in the same class. This is to say that the signitive relation, once instituted, directly implies and lends itself in multiple fashions to what Castoriadis terms the "operative schemas" of the *legein*. These schemas constitute the *legein's* properly identitarian-ensemblist aspect. One can continue further with their enumeration. Thus the substitutability of one sign for another (or one object for another) implies the *iteration* of the different as the same and same as different, and their combination within classes, and the combination of classes within a larger ensemble, suggest an *order*. Again, their substitutability suggests that each element is *valid as* an element of that class (Saussure's paradigmatic relation) and their position within an order renders them *valid for* the function inscribed in their combination (the syntagmatic relation).<sup>10</sup>

The operation of these schemas, the properly identitarian-ensemblist dimension of language, is most clearly manifest at the level of the sign or signifiers. As such the above paragraph could be rephrased, by stating that the *legein* designates and identifies a series of discrete and distinct material-abstract phonemes which it then constructs into new and determinate ensembles — lexemes, morphemes, grammatical classes, syntactic types — in accordance with the operative schemas just enumerated. (It is only in language, and above all in this aspect of language, that identitarian ensembles exist in a "real"

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sense, as opposed to being merely the formal elaboration of these fundamental operations within, for example, mathematical functions, scientific statements, etc.).<sup>11</sup>

At the level of the objects or signifieds, where the problem of signification proper must be confronted, the affair is more complex. It is true that at this level the identitarian-ensamblist dimension of language, what Castoriadis terms the *code*, is still in evidence. It constructs, or attempts to construct, a sort of identitarian pseudo-world, *coded* by signs and formed by distinct and definite "objects" and distinct and definite "relations" between these "objects."<sup>12</sup> In this sense it organizes and stabilizes the signifieds, insuring the existence of a common social world with a modicum of fixity and determinicity such that speech can be exchanged without giving way to total confusion. However, the code must be counterposed to the imaginary dimension of language, to what Castoriadis terms the *langue*.<sup>13</sup> For, as was already evident in the discussion of the "institution" of the object, the code cannot in and of itself pose the contents of signification. It will be remembered that the object, having no existence outside the signitive relation, is instituted as identical to itself and generic to a class. This is to say that, contrary to a certain semanticist dream, the object is neither fully determined by, nor completely identical to, its referent. The signified is not instituted as a universal form that fully grasps that to which it refers. Rather it exists as something less than its referent; as a simple reference point (*point de repere*) adequate for the use to which it is put. And yet, because of its very looseness, it also indicates something more than its referent, pointing to what is not immediately said, to what might be said, to what is implied or might be implied by the existence of other signifieds or referents. Considered in this light, denotation must dissolve in the face of connotation. Even a simple sentence like "I had a dream" is an aggregation of linguistic "abuses": "I, if not taken as a simple reference point, is only a fog hiding an abyss; one does not *have* a dream like one has a baby ...; and what does it mean to have *a* dream, in what sense and when is a dream singular?"<sup>14</sup>

When Castoriadis claims that significations exist as "an indefinite cluster of interminable referrals (*renvois*) to something *other*,"<sup>15</sup> he is arguing against not only the semanticist option of the signified's determination by the "real," but also the structuralist option of its determination in terms of its relation in a set of signifieds. The emphasis is on the terms "indefinite" and "interminable" — contrary to the tenets of structuralism, significations do not compose a discrete set of determinate relations, but a *magma* with neither distinct elements, determinate relations, nor definite limits.<sup>16</sup> Given their indeterminate and porous character, significations undermine the stability and organization with which the code would endow them. As such they cannot be conceived of as being locked into an airtight synchronic pattern, where a change in one relation would necessitate a change in them all, and where

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consequently a change in one synchronic pattern is equivalent to a change into another synchronic pattern that would be impenetrable and impervious to the first. If language is not confined to its particularity, if we can still read books written in the sixteenth century, it is not because there is a universal language in univocal correspondence with what exists outside it, and therefore immediately capable of saying everything. Rather it is because significations as "an indefinite cluster of referrals to something other," are implicitly and constantly open to diachrony. Language is neither a neutral and transparent instrument, nor an opaque entity enclosed within the parameters of its own utterances, it both provides access to history and is itself historical.

"Signification" refers not merely to language — *i.e.*, to matters of vocabulary and etymology — but to the very formation of the socio-historical as a process constitutive of meaning. In order that this be made clear, let us return to our discussion of the "institution" of the object, and take as an example the object "nature." The latter, for reasons already noted, is not determined by the referent nature (and for the same reasons, "institution" cannot be a natural process). This is not to say that the object nature, or the "institution" of society at large, can, as it were, ignore this referent. It must be taken into account, but the manner in which it is taken into account, or re-presented to society, is infinitely variable. Nature exists for society as indeterminate, as interminably capable of yielding to specific social representations. This is not simply to say that it is given here as "nature" and there as "*Natur*." The reference is to the meanings which are attached to it and of which it is a part, this cluster of referrals; for example, as embodying this or that cosmology, as having a specific relation to society, be it as something that is to be dominated, or that traverses society as a moral norm, or that is opposed to society as an aesthetic value. In short, the signification of nature is necessary for the institution of nature as an always social nature. If one then takes as an example an object whose referent does not have a pre-social existence and is itself instituted, the evidence of signification is of even greater import. For here signification concerns not only the referent's representation as an object and its implication in a world of sense, but, through the latter, is the referent's very condition of existence, if not its "materialization." Now such a case is exemplified by society itself, by its existence as a particular and identifiable society, as well as by the vast majority of the specific objects, institutions and activities existing within its parameters.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the relation of object to referent, the creation and organization of the socio-historical as implicating and implicated in a firmament of meaning, is given in and through "a magma of imaginary social significations"; the specific articulation of these significations in a given society composing what Castoriadis terms that society's "social imaginary." Now insofar as the social imaginary is fixed by the glue of the operative schemas of the *legein*, the latter

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establishes what for a given society is and is not, and is and is not valid. And yet because it is a matter of imaginary significations, what is fixed and determined always remains open to the potential historical alterations occasioned by the *imaginaire radical*, to the possible redefinition of what is real and what is valid. The operative schemas of the *legein*, its identitarian dimension, can only facilitate such transformations for "to dispose of the signitive relation is to dispose of it everywhere, in the face of all that can 'be presented' as 'real,' 'rational,' or 'imaginary'; ... and to dispose of the operative schemas that organize the *legein*, is to always be able to group in another manner, to define new classes or properties, and refine or modify the lexical-semantic grid of the given."<sup>18</sup>

It appears that in contemporary societies this imaginary dimension of the *legein*, or more precisely its elaboration at the level of signification, would not, metaphorically speaking, have itself limited to a merely instrumental role. Instead it would ascend the commanding heights of the social imaginary and represent itself as the source of signification, or of genuine signification, as alone capable of deciding on what is real, or rational, rejecting what falls on the wrong side of its critical blade as imaginary considered in a secondary and frivolous sense. And having reduced all criteria of validity to one of reality and rationality, it would then equate what is real with what is rational such that what is real would in principle be capable of being known, and fully known, and consequent to a given representation of the end of knowledge, what is real would, again in principle, be capable of being fully and rationally dominated.

Castoriadis' discussion of the *teukhein* is much less elaborate than his analysis of the *legein*. My own exposition of the *teukhein* will be limited to establishing certain parallels. The *teukhein* is defined as "to assemble-adjust-fabricate-construct" and its identitarian dimension functions by means of the operative schemas of "starting from ... in a manner appropriate to ... in view of." In a sense the *teukhein* presupposes the *legein*, for it assembles and adjusts the material-abstract elements established and encoded by the *legein*. And in another though lesser sense the opposite is true since the *teukhein* "materializes" these elements either directly or indirectly. Unlike the *legein* there is no signitive relation in the *teukhein*. Instead there is a relation of finality or instrumentality. Consequently the *teukhein*, under the pressure of its identitarian dimension institutes a division between what is and is not possible, that goes beyond the division instituted by the *legein* between what is and is not, placing the latter under the determination of final causes and thereby providing grounds for social activity. Obviously this "possibility" inscribed in the *teukhein* does not concern the alterity engendered by the *imaginaire radical*; the latter concerns precisely that which appears impossible. Nonetheless the *teukhein* is not only indispensable for organizing the creations of the

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*imaginaire radical*, but is itself inseparable from an imaginary dimension:

The *teukhein* as purely identitarian-ensamblist becomes the incoherent fiction of technique by and for the sake of technique. But quite obviously every *teukhein* and every technique are always *for* something else, and are referred to ends which do not result from their own intrinsic determination. Even in the case, for example, where technique would appear as an "end in itself" as it tends to appear in modern capitalist society, *this* state of technique as an end in itself is not something that technique as such could pose. It is itself an imaginary position: technique is valid today as this pure social delirium presenting the phantasm of omnipotence — a delirium that is, for a large part, the "reality" and "rationality" of modern capitalism.<sup>19</sup>

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There is for Castoriadis a third movement beyond the *legein* and *teukhein* necessary for the existence, reproduction and transformation of the socio-historical. This moment concerns the "institution" of the social individual. The latter is not instituted in the same manner as other social objects, which is to say that he/she is never simply an object or agent. If this was not the case, then the individual would be so flattened out against the socio-historical, that he/she would be incapable not only of attaining the distance necessary to tamper with it, but even of achieving the flexibility necessary to participate in it, and thus to reproduce it. In this sense one must pose an original kernel of subjectivity that renders the psyche irreducible to the socio-historical. As such the problem of socialization, at least at a first moment, is not so much one of how the socio-historical constitutes the individual, or even imposes itself on the individual, but of how the individual comes to have access to the socio-historical, of how for the individual other individuals, objects, a society and a world come to exist, and come to take on an existence that is both independent and meaningful. The analysis of this process proceeds by means of a critical reworking of Freud. However, Castoriadis, unlike Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*, is not interested in extracting from Freud a critique of traditional morality — though the possibility of such a critique is not excluded. Instead he is interested in Freud because the latter, in spite of occasional lapses, realized that the psyche cannot be understood in terms of the traditional logico-ontology. In Castoriadis' understanding, Freud situates the originality of the psyche as prior to the schemas of this logico-ontology, and thus places the latter not at the beginning of the analysis, as constitutive of the premises in terms of

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which it must unfold, but at the end of the analysis, as in part constitutive of the reality principle to which the psyche eventually accedes.

The analysis begins by attempting to understand the mode of being of the unconscious. The unconscious exists as a flux of representations that are "tied" to the instincts and thus accompanied by affects and inserted in an intentional process. The "representational-affective-intentional" flux knows neither time nor contradiction; it appears as continually fleeing determination, as indeterminate, indistinct, fused, interwoven, *etc.* In this sense, the unconscious exists as a *magma*, but in a much stronger sense than the *langue*. This is not to say that the unconscious is totally chaotic; it if were the interpretation of dreams would be impossible. Nevertheless such interpretation is inherently contradictory: "The meaning of the dream as desire is a condensation of that which cannot be grasped and an articulation of that which cannot be articulated."<sup>20</sup> The point to be stressed here is that the unconscious is unfamiliar with the schemas of the *legein* and *teukhein*. It is incapable of identifying and separating discrete elements in its phantasms; it is incapable even of differentiating its phantasms from a world that exists outside of these phantasms. It has neither an "indice" of "reality" or "rationality," nor a "proof" of "reality" or "rationality." According to Castoriadis it exists as a world in itself, and the great mystery is how the psyche comes to admit the existence of an independent other.

What has been said above is only partially true. The phantasms of the unconscious already contain a multiplicity of elements which in analysis can be separated and identified, and which, as such, bear witness to the existence of a highly differentiated experience. In other words the unconscious as we know it presupposes a mode of being that is already open to the world; it presupposes the division of subject and object, that is to say, it presupposes a reality principle. The problem of how others come to exist for the psyche cannot be approached at this level and Castoriadis is obliged to probe deeper; to postulate an "originary" and undifferentiated phantasm of which the phantasms of the unconscious are derivative.<sup>21</sup>

An originary phantasm: here we come up against another problem, namely the irreducibility of the psyche to any "real." As we noted the psyche exists as the emergence of representations (or of images), but from where does it obtain the "elements" of these representations, and how is it able to organize these "elements"? "If one says that it is able to borrow these elements from the representation of the real, one is advancing a meaningless assertion (how can it borrow something from what the latter does not possess? The real cannot be both real and a real representation of the real in the real)...."<sup>22</sup> One is forced to postulate the existence of a primordial psychic state capable of creating *ex nihilo* a "first" representation that "contains in itself the possibility of organizing all representations — that is, a formed-forming (*formé - formant*), a figure which will contain the germs of the schemas of figuration."<sup>23</sup> This

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primordial psychic state in which the first "representation" emerges, Castoriadis terms the monadic state. In it the psyche exists as an undifferentiated autism that represents everything as equivalent to the self and the self as equivalent to its phantasm. It is a state in which everything comes under the identity of a totalizing inclusion, and in which meaning is given as this "indestructible holding together ... (this) unlimited source of pleasure ... which leaves nothing to desire."<sup>24</sup>

The full import of what has just been said can perhaps be clarified by comparing it with Freud's analysis. For Freud imaginary representations originate as a response to an absence, and in particular the absence resulting from the removal of the first satisfaction, the breast. However, in order for there to be something absent, the psyche must represent that something as absent and as absent to someone. In other words, Freud, in order to derive representations, has to presume the existence of representations, and the existence of a particular representation, one in which the subject and object are already represented as separate — when in fact it is precisely this separation that has to be explained. In short he has short-circuited his own analysis by adhering to the inherited logico-ontology. His analysis, however, contains other elements that point to the mode of existence of this originary psychic state. In particular there is the idea that satisfaction is primarily representational or phantasmic; that representations exist not so much as wish-fulfillments but as fulfilled wishes. In the psychic monad "the breast can only be apprehended as the self: I am the breast, *Ich bin die Brust* ...."<sup>25</sup> Satisfaction is hallucinated; the originary phantasm is omnipotent, is always-already-satisfied. Again the problem is posed: how can the psyche be torn out of its monadic madness? Hunger, the absence of the breast, can be at most a necessary, but never determinant, condition of this separation. The actual rupture remains an enigma. One can only postulate its emergence and note the successive reorganizations of the psyche to which it gives rise. It remains irreducible and this irreducibility is that of "institution."

This rupture, or more precisely, series of ruptures, is to be seen as the imposition on the psychic monad of a relation with other or others, by means of which the psyche is progressively socialized, *i.e.*, constituted as a social individual for whom a "reality" exists that is "independent, malleable and participable."<sup>26</sup> The successive reorganizations to which the psyche is submitted, being tied to the "institution" of the socio-historical, remain at bottom heterogeneous to the psyche. And being heteronomous, the socio-historical is never able, as it were, to substitute itself for the psyche. For the social individual is inconceivable without the unconscious — an unconscious that bears the trace of its originary phantasm and as such "always tends to close up and short-circuit everything in order to bring it back to the impossible monadic 'state' and, failing that, to its substitutes, hallucinatory satisfaction and phantasmization."<sup>27</sup>

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Given then this first rupture of the monadic closure, what are these successive alterations that the psyche undergoes? The following is only a brief sketch. There is first of all, the apprehension of the removal of the breast, not as the cause of hunger, but as the negation of all meaning. Thus a border of non-being, of that which escapes inclusion, is sketched on the frontiers of representation. And this border will eventually be represented as an exterior onto which the breast that is the source of displeasure will be projected. At the same time the breast which remains a source of gratification will still be submitted to the schema of inclusion, but given that the alterity of the breast can no longer be ignored, this identification will no longer be intransitive, but will be introjected as an attribute of the self. The constitution of the object, however, cannot occur until the projected and introjected breast coincide, and this requires the representation of another to whom the breast belongs. The representation of the latter marks the triadic phase (the representation of a subject, object and other), but this phase does not in itself mark the constitution of a reality principle. For the phantasm of omnipotence originally attached to the self, is simply transposed to the other such that he/she is perceived as the sole source of signification, and of pleasure and displeasure. Nonetheless, because the omnipotent other appears as a cause separate from the subject and to which the subject must react if he/she is to avoid displeasure, the triadic phase provides a rough draft of the socialization of the psyche. In this sense we can speak of the first "conscious" awareness of a still unformed "reality" that must be taken into account, and of a norm that must be obeyed. And once this norm is introjected, we have the establishment of a sort of pre-Oedipal super-ego, and subsequently the establishment or repression of an unconscious in the dynamic sense.

The breakdown of the phantasm of the other's omnipotence can only occur when the other is denuded of his power over signification; or more precisely, when it is understood that the other is not the master of signification; that there is no master, that significations have a social existence independent of any particular person. This for Castoriadis is the profound significance of the Oedipal complex: "(it) erects before the child, in an uncontrollable manner, the fact of institution as the foundation of institution and *vice versa*, and forces him to recognize the other and others as autonomous subjects of desire, who can be linked to each other independently of him/her, and can even exclude him/her from their circuit."<sup>28</sup> It is through this "final rupture that the child becomes capable of perceiving and identifying other individuals and objects, and of identifying a self-identity and self-image; that he/she gains access to real-rational linkages as instrumented through the *legein* and *teukhein*, as well as to significations in the full sense of the term; that he/she accedes through the process of sublimation to the socially instituted forms. It is to be understood that sublimation implies not only a change in the individual's drives,

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but a change in the object of these desires — the former “private” objects of libidinal investment being replaced by “public” and socially instituted objects — as well as a change in the intentions and affects that accompany these desires and objects. Moreover, the concept of sublimation suggests that society not only imposes on the individual psyche what the latter cannot pose by itself, but that the individual psyche has the capacity — or the imagination — to find a personal signification within the socially instituted significations such that the private and public worlds always intersect, but never more than tangentially.

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Beyond the irreducibility of the individual to the “institution” of the socio-historical, there lies a commonality that brings us to the heart of Castoriadis’ “ontological” problematic: both the individual and the socio-historical remain, in principle, essentially open. That is to say, both are prey to the possible eruption of what appears beyond the parameters of possibility, and thus exist as a potentially infinite variety of types and forms of societies, social objects and social individuals. For the individual this creative “spontaneity”<sup>29</sup> is given by the “radical imagination,” by that which is the source of representations, and in particular, of the first “originary” representation. The latter, which can never be understood or reproduced, but which is the necessary basis of all other representations and thus of the representation of others, impels the individual forward in his or her continuous, but always partial and incomplete, contact with the socially instituted world. For the socio-historical, this possibility is given by the *imaginaire radical*, by that which is creative of imaginary social significations and of that in and through which they emerge, the signitive relation and the operative schemas of the *legein* and *teukhein*. In particular the *imaginaire radical* is creative of an “originary,” a — real and a — rational signification by means of which what, for a particular society, is “real” and “rational” is given, and by means of which what is given has meaning for that society. This is not to say that the *imaginaire radical* is restricted to the creation of originary significations, or to the possibility of the signitive relation; rather it is institutive of the signitive relation itself, and of what the signitive relation makes available — that is the *magma* of imaginary social significations which is for each society “constitutive” of its institution.

Now, in order to conceptualize what gives society its coherence, and thus what makes society a society, reference to the identitarian operations of the *legein* and *teukhein* are not sufficient. The latter can only fix what in a sense already exists as social signification. Thus Castoriadis must seek a solution to this problem on the side of the imaginary, in what he terms “primary significations.” He never really explores this concept in depth, but nonetheless he lets it be known that it refers to a signification which is not really present in

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society as a locatable object, but whose presence is felt throughout society, organizing and conditioning secondary significations such that analogous effects are produced at the level of the "totality." It is that which "establishes the common conditions and orientations of what can be done and represented, and as such holds together the indefinite and essentially *open* crowd of individuals, acts, objects, functions and institutions ... that is each time a concrete society."<sup>30</sup> Such a signification is evidenced in the extra-social sphere of transcendence, that a society may represent as the source of its institution. Or, to take an example from the secular capitalist world, the term can be applied to the signification of the "economic," the latter being constructive of and elaborated within a series of objects, institutions, functions, activities, *etc.*, which come to make up the "economy," and which extend their influence beyond the economy to society's deepest recesses. Primary significations, however, because they involve the "holding together of an indefinite and essentially *open* crowd," refer us back to the mystery of society as a unity within a diversity, a totalization without determinate elements or definite limits, one that is never complete in itself, always having a relation to what it is not, or is not yet — even as it would try to deny this relation. "What escapes [society] is nothing other than the enigma of a world that lies behind the social world held in common ... as the inexhaustible provision of alterity, as the irreducible threat to all established signification. What also escapes society is its very being as an instituting society, that is to say, as the source and origin of alterity, or as perpetual self-alteration."<sup>31</sup> Once again, faced with the openness of institution, we are placed on the threshold of history, and ultimately of a possible other history, another radically different society. The *imaginaire radical*, this origin of alterity, easily becomes a source of hope, a utopian moment in what remains a basically demystifying discourse.<sup>32</sup>

In fact the entire problematic of "institution" is directed towards the admission of the radical creativity of history. The turn towards an investigation of the "ontology" of social being seeks to render available what is not ontology, what is profoundly subversive of ontology, hollowing out the letters "Being" and splintering it into an infinite plurality of beings extended in time. And yet, if such a "negative ontology" is so constructed as to make history possible, it allows us to say very little that is substantive about that history, whether it be the history of the past ("negative ontology" is situated at too general a level to grasp what always remains a specific history) or the history of the future (the possible "terrain of the creativity of history" is in principle situated "beyond the frontiers of the theorizable").<sup>33</sup> And what is even more important, it positively prevents us from making certain kinds of statements about history. For not only is the position of Castoriadis subversive of the concept of "ontology," it undermines a certain notion of "history," one that would capitalize itself, enclose itself in its own totalizations, and associate, if only

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furtively and shamefacedly, with properly ontological predications, revealing itself as the gradual realization of man's essence, the unfolding of material laws, *etc.* The point is worth emphasizing, particularly for those who believe that any discussion directed at such an apparently abstruse level of analysis is largely exhausted in its own abstractions and thus has little to say. As a sort of counter-demonstration, let us stop and briefly show how Castoriadis' position differs from, and must necessarily be critical of, that of another thinker whose analysis also bears witness to certain historical-ontological concerns.

Habermas' distinction between the technical and communicative interest might appear at first glance to be similar to the distinction between the *legein* and *teukheim*. However, on closer analysis the technical interest proves to be entirely constructed out of an identitarian logic (it constitutes, as it were, a "rationality of means") and thus has no relation to an imaginary dimension. As such, if as Habermas admits, in the contemporary world technical means have become ends in themselves, this is seen not as a problem of signification, but as stemming from the unfolding of a logic implicit in the act of the first man who threw the first stone. The same can be said of the communicative interest. It too is entirely identitarian, constituting a "rationality of ends," or more particularly, the rationality of a specific end, that of attaining the truth — the truth being defined not as an identity of the subject's statements with the object of knowledge, but as an identity of statements amongst different subjects, that is, agreement. Not only does such a conception neglect the technical aspects of communication — which are quite useful for procuring agreement — but it ignores the fact that the concept of truth, and the desire for truth, are the historical creations of specific societies.<sup>34</sup> Entire peoples have been (and can still be) in agreement about the existence and attributes of, for example, invisible beings, not because they were prey to collective delusions but because, in a fundamental sense, the "truth" as it has meaning for us, was not at issue. Needless to say what was at issue, be it a matter of mythical or religious discourse, or even of aesthetics, has no place in Habermas' system and must thus be considered as "contingent." This, however is only half the matter. For if the technical and communicative interests are grounded "quasi-transcendentally" relative to history, and if the technical interest is simultaneously situated at the beginning of history as the source of our suffering, the communicative interest is in the "ideal speech situation," situated at the end of history, of an ideal history, as our salvation. History is then seen as the result of an "ontological" imbalance akin to the movement of a teeter-totter, where the weight of one interest causes the other interest to hover precariously above a reassuring *terra firma*, but where a harmonious future would restore the lost equilibrium. And what does this harmonious future suppose? It supposes a series of institutions for the organization of the "ideal speech situation" — institutions that would be non-problematic, purely

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technical, having no density of their own. It supposes a single undivided society capable of achieving the agreement of all and sundry, as if all social divisions were the result of domination, or as if social differentiation stemming from other causes would not lead to a differentiation of opinions. And it also supposes a discourse that would be non-problematic, as if all obstacles to communication were due to reasons external to communication, as if once the obstacles were removed the truth would be revealed, simply lying there, waiting ... as if the truth would itself not be a source of dissension, as if it could be immediately recognized, and once recognized, immediately appropriated in a universal discourse.... We have entered the fantastic realm of social transparency.

A caricature of Habermas to be sure, but one that demonstrates how much he owes to inherited thought, in particular to Kant, and above all to Marx. In direct contrast to Habermas, the entire critique of Castoriadis is targeted at the belief that the future, socialism, the ideal speech situation ... is something that can be theoretically *deduced*, and whose realization would be the externalization of this deduction. What is being attacked is the presumption that the truth of society's future — and it makes little difference here whether this truth concerns the realm of the "will be" or the "ought to be," or whether it involves the truth concerning the nature of matter or of reason, the truth of the laws of history or, as in the case of Habermas, the truth of truth itself, *i.e.*, of its requirements. Whatever the case, what is being concealed here is not just the problem of signification, of "institution," "auto-institution" or the creativity of history, but, in simpler but not unsimilar terms, "the actual movement of history in the lived activity of human beings."<sup>35</sup> With all the talk about signification, Castoriadis is sure to be accused by some of the unholy sin of "idealism." And yet because of the status given to the openness of history, and because history must therefore refuse any closure given by theory, the accusation tends to rebound on the accusers in terms reminiscent of the theses on Feuerbach.<sup>36</sup> It need hardly be added that if for Castoriadis the openness of history is a cause for hope, it is in part because it gives history the capacity to elude the solutions of those who would preach the desirability of any such closure.

To say, however, that the future lies "beyond the frontiers of the theorizable" is not to say that before the future and its exigencies theory must remain silent. Similarly to say that the problematic of "institution" can bring little of substance to bear on questions concerning the nature of society's past and present considered in their positivity, is not to say that nothing can or should be said about the latter. It is true that when, for example, Castoriadis asserts that "everything that can be effectively given — representations, nature, signification — exists in the mode of magma,"<sup>37</sup> he is not saying all that much; he is merely claiming things are neither totally rational nor totally

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chaotic, that they exist as indeterminate. Yet such a statement, even as it appears monolithically simple and even empty, places us on the threshold of an infinitely more complex plenitude. For it places us before the exigency of a "new mode of thought," one precisely that would be capable of thinking this indeterminacy, both in relation to itself and its object, and in terms of its relation to the object. Such a mode of thought would have to be constantly aware of its own nature as thought, and thus of its internal necessities without converting these necessities into an imperial myth. It would in a sense have to self-consciously interiorize the demands of its own historicity.<sup>38</sup> But what such a mode of thought would look like, its positivity, cannot be described by a "negative ontology." It is not simply that "negative ontology" is aimed at another level, but that it forbids the specification of an *a priori* method or logic that would be immediately adequate to its object, completely embracing the latter within the confines of its own universality. Such a mode of thought would as it were exist only in the always specific act of thinking, and of thinking its relation to something. And if such a mode of thought is possible, it is because thought, not being purely identitarian, already prefigures this possibility. And if such thought can exist as a possible historical creation, it is because a mode of thought was instituted in the past, one that established what for us is called "thinking," and that allow us, who lie in its wake, to have access to the problem of the universal, and thus to interrogate the nature of thought, of society and of institution.

Now the interrogation of society can never be an explanation of an already constituted object, of an object complete in itself, existing out there, independent of the fact of its interrogation and of the interrogating subject. And if theory is in this sense implicated in society, it is because theory as it has come to exist for us, is both a relation to and a moment of society and its historical creation. As such, what is required of a "new mode of thought" is a capacity to think the significance of this implication, to recognize its relation to society, and to society as a signifying entity, as something more than the latter's reflection and something less than its pure invention. Such a mode of thought would have to understand itself as a moment of a process that is certainly able to elucidate, but over which it is neither capable of nor willing to gain complete knowledge, mastery or control. In short it would have to realize that it is dependent on and embedded in "institution," and that it exists as an unceasing interrogation of that "institution." But what then are the implications of Castoriadis' "ontological" project as regards "institution" itself, as regards as it were a "new mode of institution"?

The alienation of heteronomy of society is self-alienation;  
the masking of society's being as self-institution .... This  
self-alienation, sustained up to now by the responses

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historically contributing to the requirements of psychic functioning, by the tendency proper to institution, and by the almost unavoidable domination of the identitarian logico-ontology — are manifested in the social representation of an extra-social origin of society's institution (an origin imputed to supernatural beings, God, nature, reason, the laws of history, or the being-thus of Being)....

Obviously the self-alienation or heteronomy of society is not a "simple representation." Nor is it due to society's capacity to represent itself except as instituted from the outside. It is forcefully incarnated and heavily materialized in the concrete institution of society, incorporated into its conflictive diversion, borne and mediated by its entire organization, and interminably reproduced in and by its social functioning, the being-thus of its objects, activities and social individuals. Similarly its transcendence — which we aim at because *we want it* and because we know that other people want it, not because these are the laws of history, the interest of the proletariat or the destiny of being — the establishment of a history where society not only knows itself but *makes itself* as explicitly self-instituting, implies a radical destruction of the known forms of society, up to its most unsuspected corners, which can only be the position/creation of not only new institutions, but of a new mode of instituting and of a new relation of society and men to institution.<sup>39</sup>

The above, which appears on the very last pages of "*L'imaginaire social et l'institution*," is one of the few passages, indeed it is almost the only passage, in which Castoriadis attempts to confront the political implications of his "negative ontology." If the outcome seems rather brief, it is because the idea of autonomy, of "explicit self-institution," is at most a beginning and not an end; it is a direction without determinate forms nor contents, one that in and of itself tends to be purely formal, failing to pose substantive questions concerning what kind of institution and institution for what purpose. However, as suggested by this quote, a society that explicitly institutes itself, that is open to the active interrogation of its order and to the active reception of the figures of its alterity, is very different — and this in a positive, substantive sense — from a society that does not. This is not simply a theoretical projection but an historical observation. For the reference to reason, the laws of history, or the being-thus of Being, does not function in the same manner as that to God or

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supernatural beings. The former, unlike the latter, are represented as being within the realm of the intelligible, and thus as grounding the social within the possibility of its own explicit self-understanding. As such they suggested a heteronomy of a second order, one that exists in a society that situates itself in history, and can thus potentially reflect on its mundane, temporal nature and question the validity of its grounds — even as such representations would seek to exorcize the menace of time and the challenge of critique. What is being said here, and what I have tried to suggest earlier, is that what Castoriadis terms “self-institution” is something not only for the future, but something that has been instituted, if only partially, or if only to be covered up partially, in the past.

I am not at this point trying to rob Castoriadis of the originality of his project. Rather I am trying to tease out a possible direction for further investigation of the problematic of “institution,” a direction that can be glimpsed, if in a still spotty and prefatory manner, in a number of articles that have only been recently published.<sup>40</sup> These articles, by their constant reference to ancient Greece, bear witness to a growing realization that the posing of the problematic of institution is central to the constitution of our “Greco-occidental” tradition; that the establishment of this tradition in ancient Greece, the birthplace not only of philosophy, but of democracy, of a public space in which the question of the origin and foundation of the law can be debated in word and deed, is simultaneously the establishment of a sphere of politics, a sphere in which institution is, as it were, folded back on itself, in which the instituted social imaginary is open to critique. It would then seem that a further investigation of institution, its “ontology” and its political implications, promises, at least potentially, to situate the possibility of interrogating institution, and the possibility of “ontology” and politics, within history, as being themselves specific historical creations. And in the same moment it promises to provide a new perspective on history, a new understanding of history.

In a sense, “negative ontology,” if it is to make good its promise, has to return to history. Not simply because if it does not, Castoriadis remains vulnerable to his own criticism of the *nouveau philosophes* for not having concepts capable of thinking “the difference between Asiatic monarchies, Athens and Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, parliamentary regimes and modern totalitarianism.”<sup>41</sup> But because there is something ambiguous, even paradoxical, about the attempt to elaborate a “negative ontology” — as if, should it remain a “negative ontology,” it would threaten to take away what it wants to render available. For while claiming to reveal the openness of history, it would itself not be open to history; and while denying the possibility of a position of knowledge outside history, it would be forced to adopt such a position by the very dictates of its “ontological” level of analysis. And what is

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one to think of the attempt to demonstrate with rigorous certitude the partial, limited and uncertain nature of all possible knowledge? Such objections are in part purely rhetorical, and yet they indicate the need to ground "negative ontology" in what is essentially groundless, to root it within a historical creation, one that is creative of the very existence of "history" as an imaginary social signification, and that lies in the background of our modernity and its forms of heteronomy. Another development in the exchange between theory and history, which we had noted earlier as being typical of Castoriadis' thinking and supportive of its dynamism, would seem only fitting...

However, if this development is to be fecund, if a new new historical understanding is to be opened up, a more subtle and extensive array of concepts will be required. In particular, the concept of "imaginary significations," a concept so broad as to be almost worthless for historical investigation, will have to be differentiated. For example, the capacity of certain societies to pose the problem of their own institution already supposes an initial bifurcation between those significations which are constructive of society's institution, by means of which society presents itself as it were, and those significations which, while being a moment of institution, simultaneously provide a representation of that institution, a representation within and through which a society can reflect and act on its institution. This doubling of signification, this creation of a distance between society and itself, suggests that in such societies the significations of the first order are incapable of giving a complete presentation of their "real," that there is an experience of a reality behind this presentation, that there is an experience of alterity not only on the outer limits of society, but actively traversing society as an absence that solicits interrogation. A further distinction could then be drawn between significations of a second order which serve to mask such an interrogation, even while participating in it — let us call them "ideology" — and those which seek to further it. This is only an example, one that seeks to demonstrate that the domain of meaning is given not only in the contents of signification, but also by the articulation of levels of signification, or that certain significations may suppose and give evidence of a certain articulation.

One such signification, one that is both constitutive of a space of interrogation and presupposes this space, is that of "truth." Now the accusation will no doubt be made that Castoriadis denies the concept of truth, that he reduces it to history, or that in a manner reminiscent of the historicism of Dilthey, he postulates a series of societies, each with its own truth, and each of which is impermeable to the truth of other societies. This, however, is not really the case, or at least is not the case as potentially reconstituted within this new investigation. For if the claim is that every society constructs its own "reality" or "rationality," this is not to say that every society institutes the signification of "truth." For example, one cannot pose the question of the truth of a given

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myth from within a primitive society. Not only would such a question pose the possible untruth of the myth, and thus immediately place one outside the belief structures that support the myth, but such a question is, strictly speaking, unthinkable within mythical thought. For within the latter, one cannot speak of myths, rather myths speak through one and "between themselves"; that is to say, there is no distance between the myth and the one who speaks or listens to it, no absence which a concept of truth, or a search for truth, would seek to fill. If then one has to admit that "truth" is an imaginary social signification, this is not to say that it is "unreal" or has no "real" effects; on the contrary its existence within a given society is in a sense constitutive of what that society considers as real, and it thus implicates and is implicated in that society's global institution. Nor is it to say that "truth" has no value or that its value is circumscribed within the society within which it is instituted; instead it is precisely this institution of this signification that gives access, or at least partial access, to an understanding of other societies — and what is equally important, the desire to understand other societies. It is, however, to deny the possibility of "rationally grounding" truth in either an extra-social or trans-historical instance, which is to say that there can be complete or total truth which knowledge could approximate or society realize. For truth does not exist ideally, outside of society and history, but emerges in the distance between what society is and could be, and between what it knows and does not yet know. And it exists in continual re-creation of this distance. If the truth were to be completely known, there would be no truth; its response would be so overwhelming, that its concept would become obsolete, eliminated along with the space in which alone its question can be raised. And if we could not narrow this distance, if we could not continually test it by means of a knowledge which while partial is not negligible, the "truth" would not only be beyond our grasp, but our very capacity to perceive it. To claim then that the "truth" is socially instituted, is to claim that it is not determined once and for all, but that it exists as an exigency of the present, as a constant appeal to interrogation.

It is here that we must situate our own relation to Castoriadis. For ultimately what is important is not whether we agree or disagree with his analysis, or whether or not we find it useful — though such matters are not without consequence — but whether, in the face of his interrogation, we can embrace its challenge as an incentive to further our own interrogations.

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### Notes

1. See "The Early Castoriadis: Socialism, Barbarism and the Bureaucratic Thread," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 3, No. 3.
2. The larger part of *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris: Seuil, 1975 (henceforth referred to as IIS).
3. It is true that a certain organicism (or functionalism) tries to avoid this problem by having the part be created by the whole. But inasmuch as the whole exists only for its own reproduction, and the parts exist only to fulfill the functions necessitated by the reproduction of the whole, this conception is unable to account for the specificity of either the whole or the parts, and history becomes a perturbation relative to the normality embedded in the reproduction of the same.
4. "Institutional" being used here in the empirical, sociological sense.
5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960*, Evanston; Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 40.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
7. Castoriadis' concept of the "imaginary" should not be confused with Jacques Lacan's use of the same term, considered as a stage in the individual's growth through which he must pass if he is to attain the realm of the "symbolic." For Castoriadis the "imaginary" serves to refute the need for any "mirror stage."
8. This quote from Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* is cited in an article by Castoriadis' entitled "Le dicible et l'indicible," *l'Arc*, 46 (1971), p. 67, reprinted in *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, Paris, Seuil, 1978. This latter book contains a series of essays that serve to explore some of the themes of "L'Imaginaire social et l'institution," often in terms of more specifically disciplinary problematics.
9. The term is taken from Roman Jakobson.
10. The above is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely illustrative, of the manner in which Castoriadis elaborates the operative schemas.
11. For a discussion of the use of such identitarian-ensamble models in mathematics and in the sciences, the antinomies to which they give rise, and their relation to "scientific revolutions," see "Science moderne et interrogation philosophique," in *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*.
12. IIS, p. 350.
13. The terme *langue* is not used in the Saussurian sense where it denotes a language in its ideality stripped of all the deviant qualities constituted by particular variations. The concept was originally introduced in order to shelter the study of language from the consideration of diachrony. For Castoriadis, on the other hand, the existence of the *langue* is, as will be seen, that which opens language up to the possibility of history.
14. IIS, p. 467.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 332.
16. The term *magma* is central to Castoriadis' work and designates an open totality opposed to the concept of "ensemble."

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17. As will be discussed later, there are significations without any real referent, as for example in the case of "God." Here the signified is represented without being re-presented, which is to say that it is not directly present for society, or that its presence is given only indirectly by its effects on the creation of other significations.
18. *IIS.*, p. 356.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 360. For an extended discussion on technique, see "Technique," *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 15 (1973), pp. 803-809, reprinted in *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, pp. 221-248.
20. *IIS*, pp. 379-80.
21. In this sense those phantasms that Freud perceived as primary, e.g., castration, seduction, the primitive scene, are, for Castoriadis, secondary.
22. *IIS*, p. 383.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 384. This creation *ex nihilo* of the first representation is ascribed to the "radical imagination," the latter being the individual equivalent of the *imaginaire radical* (which manifests itself in and through "institution").
24. *Ibid.*, p. 397.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 408.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 407. The influence of the originary phantasm extends to "the requirement of ... universal signification, of the world and desire and of knowledge ...." *Ibid.*, p. 404.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 418. This is not an attempt to plead the necessity of the patriarchal family. Aside from the fact that Castoriadis has argued since the early 1960s for the latter's modification and even abolition, the terms of the argument are sufficiently large that the patriarchal family appears as both "exemplary and accidental." See pp. 418-20.
29. "There is no 'spontaneous' historical action, if by 'spontaneous' is meant that it emerges from within a vacuum, or that it has absolutely no relation with its conditions, milieu and past. However, every great historical action is spontaneous in the original sense of the word — *spons* [source]." History is creation, that is to say, the emergence of what is not already inscribed in its 'causes,' 'conditions,' etc., ... spontaneity is the excess of the 'effect' over its 'causes.' " "*La source hongroise*," reprinted in *Le contenu du socialisme*, Paris: 10/18, 1979, pp. 382-383. Since I wrote the first part of this essay, four more volumes, gathering together Castoriadis' writings from the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* period and some more recent conjunctural pieces, have been published. Besides *Le contenu du socialisme*, they are *La société française*, Paris, 10/18; 1979, *Capitalisme moderne et révolution. T.I: L'Impérialisme et la guerre*, Paris, 10/18; 1979, and *Capitalisme moderne et révolution. T. II: Le mouvement révolutionnaire dans le capitalisme moderne*, Paris: 10/18, 1979.
30. *IIS*, p. 492.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 495.
32. It is interesting to note that barbarism is now defined as decadence, the absence in a given society of historical productivity.
33. *IIS*, p. 296.

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34. This will be discussed in greater detail.
  35. "*Illusion du système, illusion de la spécialisation*," *Espirit*, No. 9-10 (September-October 1979), p. 32. This issue contains a three-part interview with Castoriadis; the other two parts are "*La Barbarie, c'est l'absence de productivité historique*," pp. 131-133 and "*Une interrogation sans fin*," pp. 242-248.
  36. One might still object that Castoriadis, because he sees the "actual movement of history" as emerging through the creation of imaginary significations, is still an "idealist," failing to privilege being over consciousness. However, if "consciousness" is not referred to a notion of the "constitutive subject," and if it is not taken in the narrow sense of pious wishes, opinions, ideology or ideas, but is enlarged to embrace everything touched by the signitive relation, the question then becomes whether the "being" of the socio-historical can be deprived of its "consciousness," such that there would be two separate and discrete entities, one termed "being," the other "consciousness," and one of which would then determine the other.
  37. *IIS*, op. cit., p. 462.
  38. The discussion of a "new mode of thought" is becoming increasingly common amongst a certain intellectual avant-garde. One thinks of Jacques Derrida's "deconstruction of logocentricism" in *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, John Hopkins, 1976; or Edgar Morin's discussion of modern science in *La Méthode: La nature de la nature*, Paris, Seuil, 1977; or, to draw an example from an entirely different field, Samuel Delaney's "meta-logic" in his futuristic novel *Triton*, New York: Bantam, 1976.
  39. *IIS*, op. cit., pp. 497-498.
  40. I am referring here to the interview in *Espirit* mentioned in note 35, and to "*Socialisme et société autonome*," which introduces *Le contenu du socialisme*, pp. 11-46.
  41. "*Les divertisseurs*" in *La société française*, p. 229.
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