Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads

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I am going to speak about the imaginary and the imagination from the standpoint of the crisis they are undergoing today in Western societies. This is a crisis of the social instituting imaginary, a crisis of the imagination of singular human beings. That is why the title of this presentation is "Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads."

And first of all, why *imaginary*? A few words undoubtedly must be said, at this festival, about this notion. I say *imaginary*, because the history of humanity is the history of the human imaginary and its works. I am talking about the history and the works of the radical imaginary, which appears as soon as there is a human collectivity: there is the instituting social imaginary, which creates the institution in general (the *form* institution) and the particular institutions of the society under consideration, and there is the radical imagination of the singular human being.

Just a few words about the notions destiny in the history of philosophy. Within this history, the notion of imaginary has been either ignored or mistreated. As for the imagination, it was recognized first by Aristotle, who so to speak discovered it and caught sight of its essential features—for example, that the soul n ever thinks without phantasm, that is to say, without imaginary representation —but who arrived at the question of the imagination nearly at the end of his treatise *On the Soul* and then abandoned it to carry on with the thread of his original presentation. The question returned a few times among the neo-Platonic philosophers in the first centuries of our era, but later on the imagination was treated more or less as a "psychological faculty," employing the most facile and banal features of Aristotle's presentation, and this up until the eighteenth century. During the second half of that century, and related to the interest evinced in that age for the questions of taste and art, the term began to appear often in the writings of a number of British and Scottish Enlightenment authors, then in Germany. In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant discovered what he called the *transcendental imagination*— that is to say, the imagination that is required so that there might be certain and not empirical knowledge. But in the second edition of this same *Critique*, he reduced its role and its importance considerably. The notion returned in force with Johann Gottlieb Fichte, then the question sank, philosophically speaking, into oblivion until 1928, when Martin Heidegger, in his book *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, rediscovered the notion of the imagination as a philosophical notion. He rediscovered Kant's discovery of the imagination, noted that, between the first and second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had recoiled from this question and occulted it himself, and tried to give anew to the imagination an essential place in the human beings relation to the world. And then, a third repetition in this history, after his 1928 book Heidegger no longer spoke of the imagination at all.

Yet ultimately it can be said that, for better or worse, there has been this treatment of the imagination in history of philosophy, with its successive coverings-over. But what one would search for in vain is what I call the instituting social imaginary, that is to say, the recognition of this fundamental fact that one can "explain" neither the birth of society nor the evolutions of history by natural, biological, or other such factors any more than by some "rational" activity of a "rational" being (man). One notices in history, from its origin, the emergence of the

radically new; and if one doesn't try to have recourse to transcendent factors in order to account for it, one really has to postulate a creative potential, a *vis formandi*, that is immanent to human collectivities as well as to singular human beings. From then on, it is entirely natural to call *imaginary* and *imagination* this faculty of radical novation, creation, and formation. Language, customs, norms, and technique cannot "be explained" by factors external to human collectivities. No natural, biological, or logical factor can account for them. At the very most, they can constitute their necessary (most of the time external and trivial) conditions, never their sufficient conditions.

We therefore must admit that there is in human collectivities a creative potential, a *vis formandi*, which I call *the instituting social imaginary*. Why has philosophy been unable to recognize this necessity, and why does it still now recoil with horror and irritation before this idea? I am always being asked, What is this instituting imaginary? Whose imagination is it? Show us the individuals who . . . or the factors that . . . , and so on. But we have here precisely a constitutive faculty of human beings and, more generally, of the social-historical field.

What in this affair ruffles and irritates the representatives of the inherited philosophy, as well as those of established science, is the need to recognize the collective imaginary, as well as the radical imagination of the singular human being, as a potential for creation. Here creation means creation *ex nihilo*, the making be of a form that wasn't there, the creation of new forms of being. Ontological creation: of forms like language, the institution, music, painting—or else of such and such a particular form, this or that musical, pictorial, poetical, etc. work. Why does the inherited philosophy find it impossible to recognize the fact of creation? Because this philosophy is either theological, therefore reserving creation for God—creation has taken place once and for all, or it is continual divine creation—or rationalist and deterministic and therefore has to deduce all that is on the basis of first principles (and upon what basis then will one deduce first principles?) or else produce it on the basis of causes (and upon what basis then does one produce first causes?). But creation appertains to being in general—I won’t go on at more length about that since today we are not in a philosophy seminar—and creation appertains in a dense and massive way to social-historical being, as is attested to by the creation of society as such, of different societies, and the slow or sudden incessant historical alteration of these societies.

How is one to detail this work of the instituting social imaginary? It consists, on the one hand, in institutions. But a look at these institutions shows that they are animated by—or are bearers and conveyors of—significations, signification s that refer neither to reality nor to logic; that's why I call them social imaginary significations. Thus, God, the God of monotheistic religions, is a social imaginary signification, borne and conveyed by a host of institutions—such as the Church. But so also are the gods of polytheistic religions or founding heroes, totems, taboos, fetishes, and so on. When we speak of the State, were talking about an institution animated by imaginary significations. The same goes for capital, commodities (Marx's "social hieroglyph"), and so on.

Once created, both social imaginary significations and institutions crystallize or solidify, and that's what I call the instituted social imaginary. The latter assures a society's continuity, the reproduction and repetition of the same forms, which thenceforth rule men's lives and remain there so long as a slow historical change or a massive new creation doesn't come to modify or radically replace them with other ones.

Let us consider the imagination of the singular human being. Here we have the essential determination (the essence) of the human psyche. This psyche is radical imagination first of all inasmuch as it is flux or incessant flow of representations, desires, and affects. This flow is continual emergence. You can try to close your eyes, stop up your ears—there will always be something. This thing happens "within": images, recollections, wishes, fears, "spiritual states [*états dâme*]" surge forth in a way that sometimes we can understand or even "explain," and other times absolutely not. There is here no "logical" thought, save by way of an exception and discontinuously. The elements are not bound together in a rational or even reasonable fashion; there is surging forth, indissociable mixture. There are above all representations without any functionality. One can think that animals, in any case higher animals, have a certain representation of their world, but this representation—and what composes this representation—is regulated in functional fashion; it contains essentially what is necessary for the animal to live and to continue its species. But in the human being, imagination is defunctionalized. Humans can be made to kill for glory. What's the "functionality" of glory? At most, it will be a name written on a monument, itself eminently perishable. Glory is the subjective corollary of a social imaginary value that constitutes one pole of the activity of humans, of some of them at least, and that brings into existence a desire directed toward it. Or, what are the various human affects, in particular the less banal affects—for example, the affect of nostalgia? This is a creation of the psyche's radical imagination.

If human beings were given over fully and exclusively to this radical imagination, they would not be able to survive; they would not have survived. This flow is not necessarily bound either to logic or to reality; at the outset, it is entirely alien to these, and the desires that surge forth don't bear the subject toward a life lived in common. One of the most powerful affects that is encountered there and that manifests itself or doesn't manifest itself for all to see, is for example the affect of hate, which can go as far as a desire for murder. I often say in joking that someone who hasn't felt at least once a year a death wish toward someone else is seriously ill and ought to go consult a psychoanalyst as soon as possible. The "natural" reaction when someone poses an obstacle to us is to wish for him to disappear—and that, as one knows, can go as far as ac ting upon the wish. This radical imagination of human beings must therefore be tamed, channeled, regulated, and made to conform to life in society and also to what we call "reality." That is done via their socialization, during which they absorb the institution of society and its significations, internalize them, learn language, the categorization of things, what is just and unjust, what can be done and what is not to be done, what must be adored and what must be hated. When this socialization takes place, the most important manifestations of radical imagination are, up to a certain point, stifled, its expression is made to conform and becomes repetitive. Under these conditions, society as a whole is heteronomous. But heteronomous, too, are the individuals o f such a society, who only in appearance exercise judgment; in fact, they judge according to social criteria. Besides, we shouldn't overly flatter ourselves. Even in our societies, a huge quantity of individuals are in fact heteronomous; they judge only according to conventions and "public opinion."

Societies in which the possibility of and the capacity for calling the established institutions and significations into question are a tiny exception in the history of humanity. In fact, we have only two examples of such societies: a first example in ancient Greece , with the birth of democracy and philosophy, and a second example in Western Europe , after the long period of the Middle Ages. A very important, and key, phenomenon for our discussion today is that the history of societies is marked by "pulsating" processes: phases of dense and strong creation alternate therein with phases of creative sluggishness and regression. Examples are numerous. Obviously, all these examples belong to historical societies , since we cannot say much about

the other ones. It’s possible that the disappearance of "Homeric"—Minoan and Mycenaean—civilization might not be due solely or even essentially to invasions or earthquakes but to processes of "domestic" disintegration. We don't know anything about that, at least for the moment.

One case where a society, after an epoch of rich and intense creativity, entered into a period of decline is that of ancient Greece and, notably, the city of Athens . The truly creative era unfolded until the end of the fifth century, until the end of the Peloponnesian War, when philosophy, democracy, and tragedy—not to mention the other arts and sciences—emerged. Then, starting in the fourth century, nothing much happened any longer.

Certainly, society continued to forge ahead with creation, and there is notably the paradox that two of the most important philosophers ever to have existed, Plato and Aristotle, belong to this same fourth century, yet they come after the great period of creation. T his is, moreover, the probably unique and, in any case, flagrant case that offers an illustration of Hegel's much-talked-about phrase that philosophy appears only when the works of the day are ended, like Minerva's bird taking flight only at nightfall. [1] (Literally speaking, this statement is false: philosophy took flight in Greece at nearly the same time that Greek political creation began, and things didn't happen otherwise in Modern Times. The phrase expresses only Hegel's wish that the history of humanity in the strong sense of the term might draw to a close with his own system.) In any case, after the victory of Macedonia, of Philip and of Alexander, came the appearance of Hellenistic or Alexandrian civilization—which is rather comparable, if I may be allowed to look ahead from there, to our own situation: no great creation, just eclecticism, endless commentaries (which are, moreover, quite precious); the philology and the art of the grammarians developed then, and various technical forms and forms of knowledge continued to "progress," but (with the remarkable exception of mathematics) there was no great manifestation of truly innovative radical imagination.

An analogous case is that of the Roman Empire after the first century of our era. Decisively conditioned by the internal evolution of imperial Roman society and by the decomposition of the social imaginary significations that underlay its institutions, its fall was merely facilitated by the Germanic invasions. The barbarians had been knocking at the gates of the Roman dominion from the first century before our era, but they had successfully been driven back until the end of the second century. The Empires domestic decline at that moment is too flagrant for one to contest its existence without a lot of quibbling.

Similar major instances will be found everywhere one knows about society’s evolution: in Egypt , in the Middle East, in India , in China , and as far away as Meso-America .

The important thing here, from the standpoint of elucidating history , is the failure of "explanations." That isn’t surprising. No more than there is any "explanation" of phases of creation in history, or of the moment they arise, or of the content of this creation can one "explain" the appearance of phases of decline, the moment they supervene, the content they take on. A host of partial facts can be assembled that seem to make these alternations more comprehensible, yet that wont furnish a true "explanation" of them. There are no "laws" governing the radical imaginary, it s phases of blossoming or the phases when it fades away. And obviously no "explanation" is furnished by Oswald Spengler's biological and botanical images.

I have already noted above that, during the Hellenistic period as well as during the late period of the Roman Empire, there continues to be a certain amount of technical development (and

also that this reminds us of what is going on today). We are thus led to posit a distinction that forces itself upon us for other reasons, as well. That is the distinct ion between culture in the strict sense of the term and the purely functional dimension of social life. Culture is the domain of the imaginary in the strict sense, the poietic domain, what in a society goes beyond what is merely instrumental. Obviously, there is no society that would be without culture. No society is reduced to the functional and the instrumental. No human society is known of that lives like bee or ant "societies."

We always find therein some songs, some dances, decorations, things that " serve no purpose." These primitives, who had so much difficulty just living, succeeded in finding time for such "stupid nonsense." As we know, some prehistoric paintings have just been found in Portugal on the walls of Paleolithic caves that are probably among the oldest known. [2] They whiled away their time in these ill-lit grottos doing cave paintings. That was more important for them than developing the forces of production or maximizing the yield of their capital.

The distinction between what I call the poietical and the functional is obviously not in things; it is to be found in the relationship between the way in which things are made and the goal assigned to them [*leur finalité*]. A vase can be simply functional—a plastic vase, for example, serves its purpose—but it can equally be an admirable art object, like so many ancient Chinese or African vases. In the latter case, an essential dimension of what constitutes the vase eludes finality or goes beyond it: the beauty of a vase is "useless." These two creations, the poietical and the functional, do not march at the same rhythm or in the same direction. Poietic creation can subside without that affecting creation in the functional domain: new inventions can be made, technical or even scientific development can continue. That's what, as was already said, happened during the Hellenistic period as well as after the end of the culturally creative phase of Roman history. In other cases, for example after the collapse of "Homeric" civilization or during the true European Middle Ages (from the fifth to eleventh century C.E.), poietical and functional regressions occur simultaneously. It is also possible for there to be periods of major poietic creation when the functional component of a society remains nearly stable; at least, that is what we are led to think in examining a number of archaic societies whose cultures are profoundly different, whereas the way they are functionally instrumented seems roughly identical.

This differentiation, which Hegelo-Marxism completely covers over, adds still another dimension to the immense question of the *unity* of a society. How is one to think through the fact that two parts of the same body can walk with different rhythms? How two— or several can—sectors of the life of one and the same society live with temporalities that are so different? I can only raise here these interrogatory questions, without attempting to elucidate them.

After Greece, the project of autonomy emerged anew with the birth of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe , this emergence starting to manifest itself in the eleventh to twelfth century. That was the beginning of the "modern" period in the broad sense. From that moment on, one notices that cultural creation gains, expands, and accelerates with richness and with rhythmic variations that render it incompressible and almost uninspectable. It is practically impossible to write a history of European culture. It takes place everywhere: in Italy , in Spain , in Portugal , in France , in England , in the Germanic countries, in the Scandinavian countries, in the Slavic societies of Central and Eastern Europe ; at different moments, different activities develop in different countries, and all that cross-pollinates and interbreeds. This extraordinary profusion reaches a sort of pinnacle during the two centuries stretching between 1750 and

1950. This is a very specific period because of the very great *density* of cultural creation but also because of its very strong *subversiveness*.

I connect this explosion to the fact that the socialhistorical project of autonomy invaded society and haunted all its aspects. It took the form of the democratic movement, the revolutions of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and twentieth centuries, the workers movement, more recently the movement of w omen and youth. But what really matters to us here is what happened in the properly cultural domain. There, one witnesses the creation of new forms and new contents that had the quite explicit intention of effecting change, and this at a pace hitherto practically unknown in history, except perhaps in ancient Greece during the period around the fifth century.

As one knows, there was at the same time an enormous acceleration in technical inventions, incomparable to what could have been experienced in other phases and in other regions of the history of humanity. I am speaking about this here independently of the many-sided destructive effects such technical development was able to have. But this technical progress could not have "caused" the cultural upheaval s that concern us. Such progress itself depended upon changes of capital importance in the scientific imaginary. It was during this period that the form chemistry, the form electricity, the theory of heat and thermodynamics, field theory (Michael Faraday, James Clerk Maxwell), as well as the theory of relativity and quantum theory were, in the main, "created"; likewise, progress in medicine and applied biology are to be correlated with the emergence of a new biological science. And certainly the creation of new disciplines in the human domain, like sociology and psychoanalysis, is connected with the movement of society as a whole, not with technical developments. This is even truer for the great philosophical movements of the Enlightenment and then of German Idealism. The general movement toward the liberation of society, the questioning and the overthrow of the old political forms didn't halt at the gates of particular activities and disciplines, in art as well as in philosophy and science.

One will perhaps be surprised if, in speaking of the deployment of the poietical, I include therein not only philosophy but also science. don't they both express a movement of "pure" Reason? I do so because, contrary to received ideas, the creative imagination plays a fundamental role in science as well as in philosophy.

Every great philosophical work is an imaginary creation; it is creation of these particular significations that are philosophical significations. The latter are not "rational" products. The idea of *idea*, for example, doesn't proceed from an empirical induction or from a logical induction—these latter two, rather, presuppose it. The same goes for ideas like *potentiality* and *actuality*, *cogito*, *monad*, or *transcendental*. These are great inventions, upon whose basis a set of facts concerning being, the world, nature, human thought and its relation to the other, and so on, are made clear. But the same goes for science. The great scientific advances proceed from the creation of new imaginary schemata; these are formed *under the constraint* of available experience but don't "follow" or "result" from that experience. By definition, a logical deduction cannot give birth to a new *hypothesis*. ("Induction" is only a nonrigorous deduction made on the basis of an incomplete set of facts combined with already existing rules, conclusions, and so on. A "new" fact can—though not necessarily—invalidate the prevailing hypotheses; it doesn't furnish even one ounce of new hypotheses. It’s in this respect that Karl Poppers conception of "falsification" is fundamentally flawed. Falsification by a new observation can simply "refute" an existing conception, and even that isn't always the case: "falsified" theories persist for a long time, sometimes wrongly and often rightly. The situation will

change only with the invention of a new hypothesis.) A physicist cannot formulate just any hypotheses; the new theories must account for known facts (that's the constraint) and, if possible, predict new categories of hitherto unknown facts. That s what happened when great new imaginary schemata were posited, such as the Newtonian image of the universe, Faraday and Maxwell's idea of field, the successive schemata formulated by Albert Einstein, and so on.

There exists a profound kinship between art on the one hand, philosophy and science on the other. Not only does one see here and there the creative imagination at work, but art as well as philosophy and science try to give a form to the chaos: to the chaos that underlies the cosmos, the world that is behind the successive strata of appearances. There is an indetermination to being in its depths that is the corollary of its creative potential, the infinite layers of the cosmos embodying its successive determinations.

The institution of society also aims at covering over this chaos and at creating a world *for* society, and it does create that world, but in this creation it is impossible to avoid there being some big holes, some large conduits, through which the chaos becomes evident. One of those conduits, for the human being, and no doubt the most difficult one to stop up, is death. All known institutions of society have tried to give it a signification: one dies for the fatherland; one dies in order to become one of the ancestors who will come to be reincarnated in the newborn child; one dies in order to attain the kingdom of heaven. And in this way the intrinsic non-sense of death is covered over.

Art on the one hand, philosophy and science on the other, try to give form to the chaos, a form that can be grasped by humans. Art does so in its own manner; philosophy and science do so in theirs. In both cases, we have a creation of forms. The difference is that art, in giving—in order to give—form to the chaos, creates a new world and new worlds, and this it does in relatively free fashion. It doesn't labor under the constraint of experience; the constraints to which it must face up are of another order, an internal order. But philosophy and science aim at elucidating the world such as it is given to us, and that imposes upon them a very strong constraint, the constraint of available experience. Of course, science does so in its own manner and in a restricted domain, that of our physical experience, and it attends to what in this experience offers an essential regularity and can be rendered explicable. For philosophy, it’s not a matter of explaining or even, truly speaking, of understanding (when it comes to disciplines involving the human domain); it’s a matter of elucidating. But a philosophy doesn't remain standing if it doesn't try to account for the totality of human experience. I note here, without being able to linger over it, that there exists a marvelously mixed domain, that of mathematics, which in the most important cases creates new world s, but in doing so contributes to the elucidation of the world as it is given to us.

I now come to what is, properly speaking, our topic today. It’s the contemporary period, starting from 1950—a date that obviously has no pretensions to exactitude. The brutal observation I make is that this great movement of creation is in the process of wearing out. This exhaustion extends beyond the domain of art. It touches both philosophy and, I think, even true theoretical creation in the scientific domain, whereas technical development and technoscientific development are accelerating and becoming autonomized. This evolution, this drop in creativity, goes hand in hand with the triumph, during this period, of the capitalist imaginary and an ever more marked drop in the democratic movement, in the movement toward autonomy, on the social and political plane.

I begin with the domain of philosophy. Heidegger seems to have succeeded in turning his—erroneous— diagnosis of the "end of philosophy" into a sort of selfrealizing prophecy. With but a few exceptions, there are no more philosophers; there are some very erudite commentators and very scholarly historians of philosophy, but hardly any new creation. The sole experience to which philosophy can henceforth face up is that of its own history. It is condemned to nourish itself by feeding upon itself, by devouring its own flesh.

Perhaps in this case at least one can discern an internal factor that has contributed to the way things have evolved—but without that sufficing, certainly, to "explain" it. I am talking about the influence of the two great philosophers of German Idealism, Kant and Hegel. The influence they have had has no doubt played a part here on the basis of considerations that are contradictory, yet ones that have led to the same result. The radical break Kant tried, under cover of critique of metaphysics, to instaurate between philosophy and science—philosophy being reduced, in the domain of knowledge, to a "critique of theoretical reason"—has led to the idea that the domains of science and of philosophy were separated by an abyss that could be cleared only under penalty of falling into the chasm of metaphysical speculation. In a symmetrical and opposite fashion, Hegel's elaboration of a "system" that claimed to encompass all knowledge, including sciences, and the proclamation that this (scientific as well as philosophical) knowledge has just found its completion in this system, seemed to demonstrate, via the failure of said system, that theoretical philosophy was thenceforth to be confined within the domain of the theory of knowledge if it didn't want pathetically to repeat this vain Hegelian bid.

Looking closely at the matter, one sees that the two effects are found again in Heidegger's proclamation of the "en d of philosophy in technicized science." But this watertight separation between philosophy and science, powerfully aided by the growing specialization and technicalness of contemporary science, couldn't help but have catastrophic results for philosophy. For, that separation condemned philosophy to leave aside an enormous patch of human experience (everything that concerns inanimate and living nature) and either to become itself a particular discipline of no great interest (as witness the domination of logic al positivism and "linguistic philosophy" in the Anglo-Saxon world) or to claim to be a pure "thought of Being," which is both empty and sterile, since one can say nothing of Being outside of beings.

Yet this factor was able to play only a secondary role , since an analogous evolution was noticeable in all other domains. Thus it was in the case of science itself. Some important scientific advances are certainly still being made, but in both cases—Relativity between 1905 and 1916, quantum theory between 1 900 and the 1930s—the major theoretical forms upon which science has relied were created more than three quarters of a century ago. Both of these theories are nevertheless at once contradictory with respect to each other and, each of them, full not of *puzzles,* to use the terminology of Thomas Kuhn, but of veritable aporias that should have challenged the theoretical paradigms themselves. It’s true that new schemata are being proposed (string theories and superstrings, an inflationary universe, and so on), but up till now none of them satisfy the constraints of experience.

The last great basic discovery in biology, that of DNA, took place in 1953, and besides it itself followed from Max Delbrück's research in molecular biology, which dates back to 1943. Perhaps, by way of a possible exception, we should mention the theories of selforganization —which are based, however, upon the theory of automata created by Alan Turing and John von Neumann between 1935 and 1955.

It is worth dwelling for a moment upon the situation created by the post-1900 advances in mathematics and in physics as these relate to philosophy. These advances have challenged categories until then (and still now) deemed basic for an intelligible understanding of the physical world: causality, locality, separation, and so on. Starting in 1930, astonishing results in mathematics—the theorems of Kurt Gödel, Turing, and Alonzo Church —pulverized hitherto prevailing conceptions about mathematical foundations and possibilities. This situation desperately calls for a philosophical elucidation. But there has been nearly nothing to that effect, as if philosophy had resigned its role as elucidator of our experience.

There is, then, this exhaustion of the imagination and of the imaginary in the domains of philosophy and of science, and there is also, manifestly, exhaustion of the political imagination and of the political imaginary. One cannot help but notice the degeneration of the workers movement and, more generally, of the democratic movement. Both on the "Right" and on the "Left," present-day political discourse is completely sterile and repetitive; one doesn't even know in what way "Right" and "Left" differ from each other. To take just the example of France (but one could under the same heading talk about the United States, England, Spain, and so forth), there are no remarkable differences between the successive governments during President François Mitterrand's two seven-year terms and the governments that have preceded or followed; certain details are different and not without their importance (for example, policy on the question of immigration), but the broad outlines remain the same. {Gaullist Prime Minister} Alain Juppé today {1997} does what {the Gaullist} Mr. Édouard Balladur did previously, who was doing only what {the Socialist} Mr. Pierre Bérégovoy did before him {when they were prime ministers under the French Socialist President Mitterrand}.

But what matters most for our point is the exhaustion of creativity in the domain of art. When I began to write about this question—my first formulations on this topic date back to 1960, in a text entitled "Modern Capitalism and Revolution,"[3] where I observed that the novel had arrived at an impasse, and then in a text from 1978, "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation," [4]—I was told, "You're exaggerating" or, "You are starting to get old; what's being done now isn't what was being done when you were young, so you hate the contemporary age and you look with nostalgia upon the time of your youth ." Almost twenty years have passed, and I have the sad pleasure of observing that even the "official" critics—who for a long time were devoted to the worship of the "avantgarde" —are saying the same thing, perhaps with the sole exception of the novel.

What has been the situation of art during the last forty years? There first was a false "avant-garde" and a simulacrum of subversion. What is the avant-garde? There was, during the prior two centuries, already with Romanticism but in any case with Charles Baudelaire and with Édouard Manet, a large-scale and new phenomenon: a rupture between the creative artists and the established society, "bourgeois" society. Official opinion begins by rejecting for a long period novations of form and content created by art in all domains. Contrary to what some might have told you, this phenomenon was historically new. Young creators might have had some difficulties in other periods; such difficulties remained phenomena of clans and of jealousy. But starting in the nineteenth century, there really was a rupture in almost all domains. I have mentioned Baudelaire; one can add Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Lautréamont in France as well as similar cases in other countries. In painting, there's the gap created by Manet , the Impressionist, and all that followed. In music, this began already with Richard Wagner, then Igor Stravinsky and the Vienna School .

Now, this avant-garde really seems to have exhausted itself after the Second World War. And one is witness, in a first phase, to the appearance of a fake avantgarde, a succession of artificial efforts to do something new for the sake of the new, to subvert for the sake of subversion, whereas one has nothing new to say. This is flagrantly the case in painting and music. Then, in a second phase, there are no longer even these gesticulations of subversion. Already before Postmodernism, but especially with it, one enters into the era of conformism, that is to say, the unscrupulous practice of eclecticism and collage. One imitates the creations of previous times by mixing them up; one puts together the most heteroclite kinds of plagiarism. So, too, in the domain in philosophy, does one see "weak thought" glorified, that is to say, the glorification of resignation before the task of philosophy. Sterility triumphs.

Postmodernism is the ideology that attempts to theorize and glorify these practices; more generally, it tries to present the stagnation and regression of the contemporary era as the expression of maturity, of an end to our illusions. It expressly champions the rejection of novation and originality, and even of the coherency of form. In 1986, in New York , I heard one of the most famous postmodern architects pronounce, during a speech, this memorable line, "Postmodern ism has delivered us from the tyranny of style." [5] In peoples mind, style is a tyranny, whereas style is the coherency of form, without which there is no work of art, at the same time that it is the expression of the creator's individuality.

Let's try to give all this a bit of detail. Let's take a look at what happened for example in music. After the atonal and twelve-tone school, there were various experimentations that didn't culminate in anything viable. Presently, the music that is produced (that's the word that fits) boils down to imitations and compilations of the music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Luciano Berio, for example, has been seen inserting long citations of Beethoven symphonies into his music.

The first half of the twentieth century had seen the marvelous creation of two new and popular forms of art, jazz and cinema. Now, the creative period of jazz in my view—or in my ears, if you prefer—ends with the deaths of Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk. Afterward, rock, rap, dance music and techno are certainly important social phenomena, but they are unrelated to musical creation, for they display a total rhythmic monotony and a harmonic and melodic stereotypy that is pathetically impoverished.

The other great creation of the twentieth century, cinema, is in the process of losing itself in industrialization, facileness, and vulgarity. One can easily cite dozens of great directors of the previous period, but almost none of the recent period.

In the domain of painting, the basic w ay of innovating today, it seems, is to represent in quasi photographic fashion Campbell's soup cans and ketchup bottles, to return toward different variants of realism, or to offer poor imitations of Marcel Duchamp's provocations when, in 1920 (therefore, more than three quarters of a century ago), he exhibited a bidet. Recently, at the Pompidou Center in Paris , one could go see Joseph Beuys's piano wrapped in felt presented as a work of art.

The case of the novel is more debatable. There are no doubt always a good number of excellent novelists. But do these novels truly contribute something new and important in comparison with the great novel as we knew it? Can one place these novelists on the same crest line as Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Henry James, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner . . . ? Might the *novel form* itself be exhausted? I shall cite only the case of Milan Kunde-

ra, who, after having written a certain number of more or less classically crafted novels, felt the need in his last two or three books to experiment with new forms. But I shall leave the question of the novel open.

This return to conformism is a general return to heteronomy. I defined heteronomy as the fact of thinking and acting as the institution and the social milieu require (overtly or in subterranean fashion). Now, at present, just as there is a "uniform thought [*pensée unique*]" in economics, no one daring to challenge the absurdities of neoliberalism which are leading to the ruination of the European economies, no one seems to be able to call into question the "end of philosophy" or to say that what is being presented as painting is, in the majority of cases, worthless trash—of null value, and not mediocre or merely acceptable. If you do so, you'll hear the response that you're a Boeotian who doesn't understand anything about art, or else an old man who refuses to accept the evolution of history.

If one accepts these facts as a whole and agrees even roughly with the interpretation I'm giving of them, they give expression to a crisis of the institution of society as a whole and of social imaginary significations. As I have already indicated, this crisis is not incompatible with continued technical "progress" and continued "progress" on the levels of production, scholarship, and even science. For my part, and for reasons I don't have the time to expound upon now, I doubt that even these sorts of "progress" would be able to continue for long without the roots that had nourished them.

I think that we are at a crossing in the roads of history, history in the grand sense. One road already appears clearly laid out, at least in its general orientation. That's the road of the loss of meaning, of the repetition of empty forms, of conformism, apathy, irresponsibility, and cynicism at the same time as it is that of the tightening grip of the capitalist imaginary of unlimited expansion of "rational mastery," pseudorational pseudomastery, of an unlimited expansion of consumption for the sake of consumption, that is t o say, for nothing, and of a technoscience that has become autonomized along its path and that is evidently involved in the domination of this capitalist imaginary.

The other road should be opened: it is not at all laid out. It can be opened only through a social and political awakening, a resurgence of the project of individual and collective autonomy, that is to say, of the will to freedom. This would require an awakening of the imagination and of the creative imaginary. For reasons I have tried to formulate, such an awakening is by definition unforeseeable. It is synonymous with a social and political awakening. The two can only proceed together. All we can do is prepare it as we can, where we find ourselves.

Responses to Questions

Mr. Helenos question was as follows: In the distinction between the poietical and the functional, would not the functional be the "badly" poietical? No. It is important to discuss some criteria in order to distinguish between the poietical and the functional. But as such, the functional cannot be "bad." It’s the domain of ensemblistic-identitary (ensidic) logic, *legein* and *teukhein*. [6] There can be no society without arithmetic, nor any society where tools don't have determinate effects upon the matter being worked upon, where its institutions don't have a certain functionality, an ensemblistic-identitary coherence. What is "bad," what is to be combated, is what is going on in contemporary society, under capitalism: the autonomization of the functional, the irrationality that consists in positing everything within "rational mastery," which obviously leads to unmitigated absurdities. As for the distinction between the poietical

and the functional, it isn't difficult to see. The functional is all that obeys vital or physical necessities and observes logical constraints. Production as such belongs in general to the functional. But the ultimate objectives of production are never "functional," since there is no human society that would produce solely for purposes of self-preservation. Christians build churches. Primitives often painted designs on their bodies or faces. These churches, paintings, or designs serve no purpose; they belong to the poietical. Certainly, they "serve" for much more than "serving for something": that for which they serve, much more important than all the rest, is that humans might be able to give a meaning to the world and to their lives. That's the "role" of the poietical.

"Descending" in logical order, I believe that Mr. Cometti must now be answered. He posed an important question to which the two of us would probably give different answers. I think that you are completely right to say that philosophy very quickly, especially starting from the moment when there were great thinkers who constructed systems, played a role of obstruction as much as a role of opening. But I wouldn't say that philosophy has especially blocked things. Let’s take the example of Plato. He's the philosopher who without a doubt has most dominated Western thought (and not only thought) for the past twenty-five centuries, and he continues, moreover, to do so. We still think in more or less Platonic terms, and even when one revolts against Plato, it’s against Plato that one is revolting, which is again a form of domination. A t the same time, he's the philosopher who played a very "negative" role, and first of all via his hatred of democracy, which led him to give an entirely false image of the ancient world. He succeeded in pulling off a fantastic operation whereby he imposed upon posterity an invidious image [*représentation détestable*] of democracy, describing its political men as demagogues and its thinkers as "Sophists," in a sense of this term that he created all by himself and that has prevailed since then, claiming that it's poets were telling absurd fables and had nothing but a corrupting influence, and so on and so forth. At the same time, he fed—through misunderstandings; but at the root of these misunderstandings, there is nonetheless what he actually wrote—a whole "idealist" current, in the bad sense of this term, within Western philosophy. All that must be smashed, broken up. But is that Plato's only contribution? There have been tens of thousands of young people who have been awakened to philosophy by reading Plato, m any of whom have become great scientists (like Werner Heisenberg, for example).

But the question also has another feature. All thought, and all great thought, tends toward a certain closure; it tends to close upon itself. It tends to close upon itself perhaps through its own near-necessities. The obsession with unity, which becomes obsession with the system, is one manifestation of the continued hold of the ensemblistic-identitarian upon philosophical thought. The infinite objective of philosophical thought, that everything is to be elucidated, becomes: Everything has to be organized. That one has to account for and to provide a reason for what one has advanced becomes: Everything must be "grounded," and must be so on the basis of a "unique" foundation. Here we have some almost invincible tendencies of thought, but they have to be combated as much as possible by an internal critique. It is possible to have an open philosophy without falling thereby into eclecticism, still less into what is now called *weak thought*, rhapsodic thought that goes all over the place without being able to say why it goes one way rather than the other. Philosophy can be sustained by this effort at elucidation, which can find fulfillment only in a certain coherency, but it doesn't have to fall into the illusion that it can close and be closed as a system. Upon this condition, there is still an essential role for philosophy to play, which after all is but one of the principal ways in which our freedom is embodied. And this isn't the role played by certain tendencies today, which indulge in an eclecticism that becomes a form of irresponsibility.

As for interdisciplinarity, I've been asked if it has its place in this kind of modern dislocation. Indeed, the fragmentation of disciplines is one factor of decadence and even of heteronomy because it boils down to breaking up the universe of research and thought into domains that don't communicate with one another, each of which tends to develop its own dogmatism and to be blind to the rest. And this can be connected back to Mr. Pereira's question about psychoanalysis. If there is something striking about the human sciences today, it's what I have called the psychoanalytic deafness of the sociologists and the sociological deafness of the psychoanalysts. [7] Both groups speak while forgetting that the human being includes two indissociable dimensions, the psychical dimension and the social dimension. Each takes one half and speaks about that half as if the other half didn't exist. And as it's not a question of two separable "halves," the "half" about which each one believes to be speaking becomes a caricature. The effects this attitude has had are particularly devastating in sociology. Political theory, economic theory, sociology—which, moreover, is dominated by a methodological individualism of indescribable naiveté— continue to talk on and on as if Freud had never existed, as if human beings motivations were trivially simple and "rational." If, however, it was humans "rational" motivations that determined, for example, all of economic life, economic life would be foreseeable—which is evidently not the case. The same thing goes for "political theories." Psychoanalysis's contribution to the understanding of the human world, which is quite fundamental, shows us clearly that it isn't considerations of economic "interest" or "rational" factors that dominate human's motivations and that would allow one to understand their behavior. Conversely, psychoanalysis continues to try to ignore the fundamental role of the social institution in the socialization of humans and to claim to be able to derive institutions and social significations on the basis of the psyches underlying [*profondes*] tendencies, which is multiply nonsensical.

Nevertheless, psychoanalysis can and should make a basic contribution to a politics of autonomy. For, each person's self-understanding is a necessary condition for autonomy. One cannot have an autonomous society that would fail to turn back upon itself, that would not interrogate itself about its motives, its reasons for acting, its deep-seated [*profondes*] tendencies. Considered in concrete terms, however, society doesn't exist outside the individuals making it up. The self-reflective activity of an autonomous society depends essentially upon the self-reflective activity of the humans who form that society. A politics of autonomy, if one doesn't want to be naive, can exist only by taking into account the human beings psychical dimension; it therefore presupposes a high degree of understanding of this being—even if, for the moment, the contribution of psychoanalysis to this comprehension is not sufficiently developed. The democratic individual cannot exist if it is not lucid, and lucid in the first place about itself. That doesn't mean that everyone must be psychoanalyzed. But a radical reform of education undoubtedly must be carried out, which would consist among other things in taking much more into account the question of the autonomy of one's pupils, including in its psychoanalytic dimensions (which isn't the case today).

As for the question of the relations between democracy and the State, it must first of all be emphasized that there is here a confusion, knowingly maintained by reactionary writers, between the State and power. There can be no society without power: there will always be a need to settle disputes or to decide, in this or that case, that there has been a transgression of the social law, just as there will always be a need to make decisions that affect the totality of the members of society as to what is to be done and not to be done, that is to say, a need to establish laws and govern. The utopia of anarchism and Marxism (Marx's conception of the "higher phase of communism") is an incoherent utopia. Given what we know about the human psyche and about the questions raised by this psyches process of maturation, there will always

be a need for laws, for collectively decided limitations upon human action, which can no doubt be internalized by the individual in the course of its socialization but can never completely be internalized to the point of becoming intransgressible, for then we would no longer have a society of autonomous individuals but, rather, a society of automatons. There is always therefore some power. But *power* doesn't mean *State*. The State is an instance of power separate from society, constituted in a hierarchical and bureaucratic apparatus that stands opposite society and dominates it (even if it cannot remain impervious to its influence). Such a State is incompatible with a democratic society. The few indispensable functions the present-day State fulfills can and should be restituted to the political community.

Paris , November 1996 — Tinos , August 1997

[1]G. W. F. Hegel, "Preface," *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21: "the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk."

[2]This is the site at Foz Côa, on the upper Douro River. —French Editors

[3]See *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 31 (December 1960-February 1961), now available in *PSW2*.

[4]Now in *PSW3*.

[5]With the prefacing phrase, "At last," this "April 1986 . . . proclamation" of a "well-known architect" is cited in English in the first note of "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism" (1992), *WIF*, p. 415. —T/E

[6]Regarding *legein* and *teukhein*, see chapter 5 of *IIS*. —T/E

[7]In "Done and To Be Done" (*CR*, p. 379), Castoriadis responds as follows to objections from the psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook and from others (including Jürgen Habermas) that he has not provided for sufficient "mediations" between psyche and society: The mother is society plus three million years of hominization. Anyone who does not see that and asks for mediations shows he does not understand what is at issue. To have shown, in a relatively precise manner (beyond *anthrõpos anthrõpon genna* {man begets man}), the unfolding of this process while taking into account the irreducible specificity of the psyche is the decisive contribution a correctly interpreted psychoanalytic theory can offer to the comprehension not only of the psychical world but also of a central dimension of society. I flatter myself in thinking that, against the sociological lethargy of the psychoanalysts and the psychoanalytic lethargy of the sociologists, I have furnished this correct interpretation in chapter six of *IIS*. He states that "psychoanalysts are deaf" in "Psyche and Education," below. in the present volume —T/E

[*]"Institution première de la société et institutions secondes," a lecture presented on December 15, 1985, the sixth day of a Paris conference sponsored by the Centre dÉtude de la Famille Association and entitled "Psychanalyse et approche familiale systémique," was published as part of a pamphlet under the title of the topic discussed at the conference that day: "Y a-t-il une théorie de linstitution?" (Is there a theory of the institution?), pp. 107-12, and was posthumously reprinted in *FP*, 115-26. An English-language translation by David Ames Curtis first appeared in *Free Associations*, 12 (1988): 39-51.