§ The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain

I am going to speak about the social-historical domain. However, before embarking on my subject, I must begin with some very dogmatic assertions.

1. "Being" is not a system, is not a system of systems, and is not a great chain. Being is abyss, or chaos, or the groundless. It is a chaos with a nonregular stratification: that is, with partial "organizations" that are specific to the various strata we discover (discover/construct, discover/create) in being.

2. Being is not only "in" time, but is through (by means of, by virtue of) time. In essence, being is time. [Or else: Being is essentially to-be.]

3. Time either is nothing or is creation. Time, properly speaking, is unthinkable without creation; otherwise, time would be only a supernumerary fourth spatial dimension. Creation here means of course genuine, ontological creation, the creation of new forms, of new eide, to use the Platonic term. Incidentally, creation as such and proper was never considered in theology. Theological "creation" is just a word; philosophically speaking, it is a misnomer for what is in truth only production, fabrication, or construction. Theological "creation" always follows (and is bound to follow) the model of the Timaeus: God is a Maker or a Craftsman who looks at the preexisting eide (forms) and uses them as models or paradigms in shaping matter. But God does not create eidos, neither in Plato nor in any rational theology.1

4. These fundamental facts about being, time, and creation have been veiled by traditional ontology (and, in its wake, by science) because in its
dominant stream this ontology worked with the basic hypercategory of
determinacy (in Greek, **peras**; in German, **Bestimmtheit**). Determinacy
leads to the negation of time, to atemporality: if something is truly
determined, it is determined since always and forever. If it changes,
the ways in which it can change and the forms that this change can bring
about are already determined. Then “events” only realize laws, and “history”
is but the unfolding along a fourth dimension of a “succession” that,
for an Absolute Mind (or for the accomplished scientific theory), would
only be coexistence. Time is then sheer repetition, if not of “events,”
then of the instantiations of laws. It is a question of life and death, so to speak,
for this ontology to negate time as the permanent possibility of the
emergence of the Other. For reasons deeply connected with this frame­
work of determinacy, traditional ontology has to limit the possible types of
being to three and only three categories: substances (in fact, “things”),
subjects, and concepts or ideas—along with the possible sets, combina­
tions, systems, and hierarchies of sets of substances, subjects, and ideas.

5. From an ultimate point of view, the question “What is it, in what we
know, that comes from the observer (from us), and what is it that comes
from what there is?” is, and will forever remain, undecidable.

The link between what I have to say and the concerns of the “hard”
scientists can be found—so, at least, I hope—in my attempt to throw some
light on some aspects of these two, and twin, questions: What is a form
and how does it emerge? This I shall try to do by discussing these questions
as they appear in the social-historical domain, the domain of man (an­
thropos), the species, male as well as female.

Does this stand in need of justification? Man is perhaps no more, but
certainly no less of a being than galaxies or the species **Escherichia coli**. The
possible “oddities” of man ought not to lessen but rather to increase the
interest in his ways of being, if only because they may shake or falsify
general conceptions about “being” gathered from other domains. “Two” is
no less a prime number because it has the oddity of being the only even
prime number. And it is a very precious odd even prime number, if only
because, by virtue of its existence, we can falsify a statement that is true in a
denumerably infinite number of cases, namely: “every prime number is
odd.” So perhaps with man.

We are not interested in man only because we are men. We have to be
interested in man because, from all we know, the fantastic knot of prob-
lems linked with the existence of man, with the ontological type of being
that man represents, are not reducible to physics or to biology. If I may
attempt what is, to my mind, only half a joke, perhaps the time has come
to reverse the traditional way of proceeding. Perhaps, instead of trying to
see how far we can explain what happens with man through physics and
through biology by, for instance, continuing to assume that an idea, a
myth, a dream are but the epiphenomenal results of some state of the
nervous system, which would itself be reducible to, say, some arrange­
ment of electrons, we may try to reverse the procedure, for heuristic
purposes. Remember that philosophers almost always start by saying: “I
want to see what being is, what reality is. Now, here is a table. What does
this table show to me as characteristic of a real being?” No philosopher
ever started by saying: “I want to see what being is, what reality is. Now,
here is my memory of my dream of last night. What does this show to me
as characteristic of a real being?” No philosopher ever starts by saying:
“Let Mozart’s Requiem be a paradigm of being, let us start from that.”
Why could we not start by positing a dream, a poem, a symphony as paradigm­
atic of the fullness of being and by seeing in the physical world a deficient
mode of being, instead of looking at things the other way round, instead of
seeing in the imaginary—that is, human—mode of existence, a deficient or
secondary mode of being?

Man exists only in and through society—and society is always historical.
Society as such is a form, and each given society is a particular, even a
singular, form. Form entails organization, in other words, order (or, if you
wish, order/disorder). I shall not try to define the terms form, organization,
and order. Rather, I shall try to show that they acquire a nontrivially new
meaning in the social-historical domain and that the confrontation of this
meaning with the ones given to these terms in mathematics, physics, or
biology may be beneficial to all of the parties concerned.

Two fundamental questions arise in the social-historical domain. First,
“What is it that holds a society together?” In other words, what is the basis
of the unity, cohesion, and organized differentiation of the fantastically
complex web of phenomena we observe in any existing society? Yet we are
also confronted with the multiplicity and diversity of societies, and with
the historical dimension within each society, expressed as an alteration
of the given social order that possibly leads to a (sudden or not) end of the
"old order" and the establishment of a new one. Thus, we have to ask ourselves, second, "What is it that brings about other and new forms of society?"

Let me say, parenthetically, that I shall not deal here with the discussion and refutation of the traditional views about society and history, including the most recent ones (e.g., functionalism and structuralism; Marxism is, in fact, a variety of functionalism). These views virtually always conceive of society as an assembly or collection of "individuals" related to each other and all related to "things." This is a begging of the question, since individuals and things are social creations—both in general and in the particular form that they take in any given society. That which is not social in "things" is the stratum of the "natural world" that a "human ape" would perceive and as he would perceive it. Neither do we know this nor is it relevant to our problem. And that which is not social in the "individual"—apart from a clumsy and unfit-for-life degenerate animal—is the nucleus of the psyche, or the psychical monad, which also would be incapable of surviving (I mean, of surviving psychically) without the violent imposition upon it of the social form "individual." Neither permanent biological "needs" nor eternal psychical "drives," "mechanisms," or "desires" can account for society and history. Constant causes cannot give rise to variable effects.²

I come now to my first question. That which holds a society together is, of course, its institution, the whole complex of its particular institutions, what I call "the institution of a society as a whole"—the word "institution" being taken here in the broadest and most radical sense: norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things, and, of course, the individual itself both in general and in the particular type and form (and their differentiations: e.g., man/woman) given to it by the society considered.

How do institutions prevail or ensure their effective validity? Superficially, and only in some cases, through coercion and sanctions. Less superficially, and more broadly, through adherence, support, consensus, legitimacy, belief. But, in the last analysis, by and through the formation (fabrication) of the human raw material into a social individual, in which these institutions themselves as well as the "mechanisms" of their perpetuation are embedded. Do not ask yourselves: How is it that most people, even if hungry, do not steal? Do not even ask: How is it that they vote for such or such a party, even after repeated deception? Ask yourselves, rather: Which is the part of all your thinking and all your ways of looking at things and doing things that is not to a decisive degree conditioned and codetermined by the structure and the meanings of the English language, the organization of the world it carries with it, your first family environment, school, all the "do's" and "don'ts" to which you have been constantly exposed, the friends you have, the opinions in circulation, the ways forced on you by the innumerable artifacts that surround you, and so on? If you can in all sincerity truly answer, "About 1 percent," you are certainly the most original thinker ever to have lived. It is certainly not our merit (or demerit) if we do not "see" a nymph inhabiting every tree or every fountain. We are all, in the first place, walking and complementary fragments of the institution of our society—its "total parts," as a mathematician would say. The institution produces, in conformity with its norms, individuals that by construction are not only able but bound to reproduce the institution. The "law" produces the "elements" in such a way that their very functioning embodies, reproduces, and perpetuates the "law."

The institution of society in this general sense is of course made out of various particular institutions. And these institutions function as and form a coherent whole. Even in situations of crisis, in the most violent state of internal strife and internal war, a society is still this one society; if it were not, there would not and could not be struggle over the same, or common, objects. There is thus a unity of the total institution of society; and, upon further examination, we find that this unity is in the last resort the unity and internal cohesion of the immensely complex web of meanings that permeate, orient, and direct the whole life of the society considered, as well as the concrete individuals that bodily constitute society. This web of meanings is what I call the "magma" of social imaginary significations that are carried by and embodied in the institution of the given society and that, so to speak, animate it. Such social imaginary significations are, for instance: spirits, gods, God; polis, citizen, nation, state, party; commodity, money, capital, interest rate; taboo, virtue, sin; and so forth. But such are also man/woman/child, as they are specified in a given society; beyond sheer anatomical or biological definitions, man, woman, and child are what they are by virtue of the social imaginary significations which make them that. A Roman man and a Roman woman were and are something
totally different from today's American man and American woman. "Thing" is a social imaginary signification and so is "tool." The mere and naked "toolness" of the tool is a particular imaginary signification, specific mostly to modern Western societies. Few, if any, other societies have ever seen tools as sheer tools: think of Achilles' arms, or Siegfried's sword.

I call these significations imaginary because they do not correspond to, or are not exhausted by, references to "rational" or "real" elements and because it is through a creation that they are posited. And I call them social because they are and they exist only if they are instituted and shared by an impersonal, anonymous collective. I shall return briefly to the term magma.

What is the source, the root, the origin of this magma and of its unity? Here, we can see clearly the limits of the traditional ontology. No "subject" or "individual" (or "group") of subjects and individuals could ever be this origin. Not only is the amount of ecological, sociological, psychoanalytical, etc., knowledge, both theoretical and applied, necessary to engineer totally different from today's American man and American woman. "Thing" is a social imaginary signification and so is "tool." The mere and naked "toolness" of the tool is a particular imaginary signification, specific mostly to modern Western societies. Few, if any, other societies have ever seen tools as sheer tools: think of Achilles' arms, or Siegfried's sword.

I call these significations imaginary because they do not correspond to, or are not exhausted by, references to "rational" or "real" elements and because it is through a creation that they are posited. And I call them social because they are and they exist only if they are instituted and shared by an impersonal, anonymous collective. I shall return briefly to the term magma.

What is the source, the root, the origin of this magma and of its unity? Here, we can see clearly the limits of the traditional ontology. No "subject" or "individual" (or "group") of subjects and individuals could ever be this origin. Not only is the amount of ecological, sociological, psychoanalytical, etc., knowledge, both theoretical and applied, necessary to engineer the organization of a primitive tribe, for instance, of such a complexity that it defies imagination and is, at any rate, far beyond our grasp; but, more radically, "subjects," "individuals," and their "groups" are themselves the products of a socialization process, for their existence presupposes the existence of an instituted society. Neither can we find this origin in "things"; the idea that myths or music are the (however roundabout) outcome of the operation of the laws of physics is just meaningless. Nor, finally, can we reduce the various institutions of the known societies and their corresponding significations to "concepts" or "ideas" [Hegel]. We have to recognize that the social-historical field is irreducible to the traditional types of being, that we observe here the works, the creation of what I call the social imaginary, or the instituting society (as opposed to the instituted society)—being careful not to make of it another "thing," another "subject," or another "idea."

If we consider how, for a given society, its magma of social imaginary significations and the corresponding institutions "operate," we can see a similarity between the social and the biological organization in one respect: that of closure, to use the term of Francisco Varela. Both social and biological organizations exhibit an organizational, informational, and cognitive closure.

Each society, like each living being or species, establishes, creates its own world, within which, of course, it includes "itself." In the same way as for the living being, it is the proper "organization" (significations and institutions) of society that posits and defines, for example, what is for that society "information," what is "noise," and what is nothing at all; or the "weight," "relevance," "value," and "meaning" of the "information"; or the "programs" for elaborating and responding to some given "information"; and so on. In brief, it is the institution of society that determines what is "real" and what is not, what is "meaningful" and what is meaningless. Sorcery was real in Salem three centuries ago, but it is not now. "The Delphic Apollo was in Greece a force as real as any other" (Marx). It would even be superficial and insufficient to say that each society "contains" a system of interpretation of the world. Each society is a system of interpretation of the world, and again, the term interpretation is here flat and inappropriate. Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world, of its own world. Its own identity is nothing but this "system of interpretation," this world it creates. And that is why (like every individual) it perceives as a mortal threat any attack upon this system of interpretation: it perceives such an attack as an attack upon its identity.

In this sense, the "self" of a society, its ecceitas as the scholastics would say, its being this society and not any other, can be likened to what Varela has called the "autonomy" of the living being, and to the specifications of this "autonomy." But the differences are also essential, not just descriptive. I will list some of them.

1. As is well known, the fixation of the "characters" of a society does not possess a physical basis (like the genome) that could guarantee (even "probabilistically") their conservation through time, their transmission: there is here no equivalent of any genetic code (even if, as Atlan said before, this code does not work in the way it was thought ten years ago). 4

2. For society, there is properly speaking no "noise." Whatever appears, whatever occurs to a society, has to mean something for it—or has to explicitly be declared to be "without meaning."

3. Although there seems to be, in the living being, a nonnegligible redundancy of the processes for fabricating information, in society this fabrication of information as well as its elaboration appear virtually limitless and go far beyond any characterization in terms of "functionality."

4. Finality (or, as the recent wave of scientific prudishness would call it,
“teleonomy”) seems to be an inescapable category when one is dealing with the living being as well as with society. But (and without forgetting that the final “finality” of the living being is shrouded in a thick mystery) it can be asserted that processes in the living being are governed by the “finality” of its conservation, which is itself governed by the “finality” of the conservation of the species—itself governed by the “finality” of the conservation of the biosphere, the biosystem as a whole. In the case of society, although most of the “finalities” we observe are of course governed by a sort of “principle of conservation,” this “conservation” is, ultimately, the conservation of “attributes” that are “arbitrary” and specific to each society—its social imaginary significations.

5. For everything that is for a living being, the metaobserver can find a physical correlate. Not so for society, which creates being without physical correlates in a massive and wholesale way: spirits, gods, virtues, sins, “rights of man,” and so on—and for which this type of being is always of a higher order than “sheer physical” being.

6. Society creates a new type of self-reference: it creates its own metaobservers (and all the awkward problems they create).

Of course there is not, and could never be, either biological or social “solipsism.” The living being organizes for itself a part or stratum of the physical world; it reconstructs this part or stratum to form a world of its own. It cannot transgress the physical laws of nature or ignore them, but it posits new laws of its own. Up to a point, the situation is the same with society. But the type of relation with the “presocial” world (what I call the first natural stratum) that society creates and institutes is different. It is an “anaclitic” relation, a “leaning on” (Anlehnung, étayage). The “logical/physical” operations through which every society relates itself to the first natural stratum, organizes it, and makes use of it are always under the sway of its social imaginary significations, which are at once “arbitrary” and radically different in different societies. The constraints that the physical world imposes on the organization of the living being supply an essential part of our understanding of this organization. That which the natural world as such insuperably dictates that society—and thereby, all societies—do or forbids society from doing is utterly trivial and teaches us nothing.

All this concerns the delineation of society from, and its opposition to, the living being. But the more important task is that of an intrinsic characterization of the organization of society.

Let us start with some banal facts. There is no society without arithmetic. There is no society without myth. In today’s society, arithmetic is, of course, one of the main myths. There is not and cannot be a “rational” basis for the domination of quantification in contemporary society. Quantification is merely the expression of one of its dominant imaginary significations: whatever cannot be counted does not exist. But we can go one step further. There is no myth without arithmetic—and no arithmetic without myth. Let me add parenthetically that the most important thing about myth is not, as structuralism holds, that through myth society logically organizes the world. Myth is not just “logic” (even if, of course, it contains logic), and even less the binary logic of the structuralists. Myth is essentially a way for society to vest with meaning both the world and its own life within the world—a world and a life that, otherwise, are obviously meaningless.

These remarks lead us to make a key statement relative to the organization of society, so that we may thereby characterize it in an intrinsic and positive way. The institution of society and the social imaginary significations embedded in it deploy themselves always along two, indissociable dimensions: the “ensemblistic-identitary” (“set-theoretical,” “logical”) dimension and the strictly or properly imaginary dimension. In the ensemblist-identitary dimension, society organizes (“acts” and “thinks”) in and through “elements,” “classes,” “properties,” and “relations” that are posited as “distinct” and “definite.” Here, the sovereign scheme is that of determination (determinacy or determinateness, peras, Bestimmtheit). The requirement here is that everything conceivable be brought under the rubric of determination and the implications or consequences that follow therefrom. From the point of view of this dimension, existence is determinacy.

In the imaginary dimension proper, existence is signification. Significations, though they can be “pointed to,” are not determinate. They are indefinitely related to one another in the basic mode of renvoi. (For this French word, an American friend of mine proposes the translation “referral”; each signification refers to an indefinite number of other significations.) Significations are neither “distinct” nor “definite” (the terms used by Georg Cantor in his “definition” of the elements of a set). They are not connected by necessary and sufficient conditions and reasons. The referral (the relation of referral), which here covers also a “quasi-equivalence” and a “quasi-belonging,” works mostly through a quid pro quo, an “x stands
for $y$, which in the nontrivial cases is "arbitrary"—that is, instituted. This quid pro quo is the kernel of what I call the signtive relation—which is the basis of language—the relation between the sign and that of which the sign is sign. As we all know, there is not, nor could there be, any necessary or sufficient reason why "dog" stands for canis or why "seven" has to do with God. But the quid pro quo relation also goes far beyond language proper.

Let me illustrate what I mean with the example of language. In language, the ensemblistic-identitary dimension corresponds to what I call "code" (not to be confused with the Saussurian "code," which only means "system"). The imaginary dimension proper manifests itself through what I call "tongue" (tongue). Thus, in a certain context, sentences such as "Give me the hammer" or "In any triangle, the sum of the angles is equal to two right angles" belong to the "code." Sentences such as "In the night of the Absolute, all cows are black" or "I have seated Beauty on my knees, I found her bitter and insulted her" belong to the "tongue." The distinction between code and tongue—more generally, between the ensemblistic-identitary dimension and the imaginary dimension proper—is of course not a distinction of "substance" but one of use and operation. (Ever since I have known them, I have found the statements "All finite fields are commutative" and "The spectrum of any Hermitian operator is necessarily real" among the most beautiful verses ever written.) The two dimensions are, to use a topological metaphor, everywhere dense in language and in social life. That is to say, "arbitrarily near" to every "point" of language there is an "element" belonging to the ensemblistic-identitary dimension—and also an "element" belonging to the imaginary dimension proper. The most "crazy" surrealist poem still contains an indefinite amount of "logic"—but "through" this "logic," it materializes the Other of "logic." Arithmetic and mathematics are everywhere in Bach, but it is not because it contains arithmetic and mathematics that the Well-Tempered Clavier is what it is.

Thus, the social imaginary significations in a given society present us with a type of organization unknown until now in other domains. This type is what I call a "magma." A magma contains sets—even an indefinite number of sets—but is not reducible to sets or systems, however rich and complex, of sets. (This reduction is the hopeless endeavor of functionalism and structuralism, causalism and finalism, materialism and rationalism in the social-historical domain.) Neither can it be reconstituted "analytically," that is, by means of set-theoretical categories and operations. Social

"order" and "organization" are irreducible to the usual mathematical, physical, or even biological notions of order and organization—at least, as these have been thought of up to now. But the interesting point here is not this negation but the following positive assertion: the social-historical creates a new ontological type of order (unity, coherence, and organized differentiation).

Let me add a corollary. If one accepts the following (to my eyes obvious) lemma, namely, that deterministic theories can exist only as ensemblistic-identitary systems of sentences, capable of inducing an exhaustive ensemblistic-identitary organization of the "object-domain," then it is clear that no deterministic theory of the social-historical can claim more than a very partial and heavily conditioned validity. (By "deterministic" theories I mean also, of course, "probabilistic" theories in the proper sense, that is, theories that assign definite probabilities to occurrences or classes of occurrences.)

To come now to my second question: the social-historical does not only create, once and for all, a new ontological type of order characteristic of the genus "society." This type is each time "materialized" through different forms, each of which embodies a creation, a new eidos of society. Apart from the existence everywhere of institutions and of social imaginary significations, and apart from trivialities, there is nothing of substance common to, say, modern capitalist society and a "primitive" society. And if what I said before holds, there is not and cannot be any "law" or determinate "procedure" whereby a given form of society could "produce" another form or cause it to appear. The attempts to "derive" social forms from "physical conditions," from "antecedents," or from permanent characteristics of "man" are worse than failures: they are meaningless. Here, inherited ontology and logic are helpless: they are bound to ignore the proper being of the social-historical. Not only is creation for this ontology and logic a dirty word (except in a theological context, where, as I said before, only a pseudo-"creation" is considered) but also this ontology is inevitably driven to ask, "Creation by whom?" Yet creation, as the work of the social imaginary, of the instituting society (societas instituens, not societas instituta), is the mode of being of the social-historical field, by means of which this field is. Society is self-creation deployed as history. To recognize this and to stop asking meaningless questions about "sub-
jects" and "substances" or "causes" requires, to be sure, a radical ontological conversion.

This is not to say that historical creation takes place upon a tabula rasa—neither need René Thom fear that I am advising laziness. On the contrary, as the very principles of "economy of thought" and "simplicity" show, determinism is the methodology of laziness. You do not need to think about this particular occurrence if you are in possession of its general "law." And if we could write down the ultimate, overall hyperequation of the Universe, we could sleep happily ever after. There is always a fantastic and fantastically complex amount of existing things and partial conditions within which historical creation takes place. There is also an immense, indeed interminable, useful, and meaningful research around the question, What was there in the "old" that was somehow or other "preparing the new" or related to it? But here again, the principle of closure heavily intervenes. Briefly speaking, the old enters the new with the signification given to it by the new and could not enter otherwise. We need only remember how ancient Greek or early Christian ideas and elements have for centuries now been continuously "rediscovered" and remodelled (reinterpreted) in the Western world to fit what we wrongly call the "needs," or, in truth, the imaginary schemes, of the "present." For a long time, we had the philologists and researchers of classical antiquity, and now we have a new scientific discipline [which is sometimes called historiography] that is inquiring into the West's changing views of classical antiquity. Needless to say, these inquiries teach us much more about the Western sixteenth, eighteenth, or twentieth centuries than about classical antiquity.

Nor can we refrain from establishing, as far as possible, "causal" or "quasi-causal" connections and regularities that appear in the social-historical domain and are carried by its ensemblistic-identitary dimension. But one needs only to mention, in this respect, the state and fate of economics in order to show the very narrow limits of this type of approach, even in what would be its "natural" and privileged domain, and the need to take seriously into account, if one is to understand anything at all, the whole magma of the social-historical reality in which quantifiable and determinate economic relations are immersed.

Our second question was, "How do new social-historical forms emerge?" The answer is, flatly, through creation. To this, the traditionally minded would respond, with a sneer, "You are just supplying a word." I am supplying a word for a fact—a class of facts—that has been, until now, covered up and that henceforth has to be recognized. Of these facts, we do have, up to a point, a "direct" experience: we have been witnessing, so to speak—that is, indirectly or directly—the emergence of new social-historical forms, such as the creation of the democratic polis in ancient Greece, or, to a much greater extent, of modern Western capitalism, and to an even greater extent than that—de visu—of the totalitarian bureaucracy in Russia after 1917. In each of these cases, there are lots of meaningful things to be said, interminable work to be done, on the conditions preceding and surrounding this emergence. We can elucidate these processes, not "explain" them. An "explanation" would entail either the derivation of significations from nonsignifications, which is meaningless, or the reduction of all magmas of significations appearing in history to various combinations of a few "elements of signification" already present "from the start" in human history, which is patently impossible (and would again lead to the question, "How did these 'first elements' arise?").

To take a particular example, that of a specific (and fashionable) explanatory scheme, let us consider the emergence of capitalism and a possible "neo-Darwinian" approach to it. In Western Europe, between say the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries, we do not observe a "random" production of a huge number of social varieties and the elimination of all but one of them as "unfit," a selection of capitalism as the only "fit" social form. What we do observe is the emergence of a new social imaginary signification, the unlimited expansion of "rational" mastery (instrumented, to begin with, in the unlimited expansion of productive forces), simultaneously with the work of a great number of factors of extreme diversity. Ex post, and once we are in possession of the outcome, we cannot help but admire the (incredible and enigmatic) synergy of these factors in "producing" a form—capitalism—that was not "intended" by any actor or group of actors and that could certainly not be "constructed" through a random assembly of preexisting "elements." But once we focus on this new emerging social imaginary signification, the unlimited expansion of "rational" mastery, we can understand much more: these "elements" and these "factors" enter the capitalist institution of society if and when they can be "used" by it or become instrumental for it—and this happens as often as not through their being attracted, so to speak, into the capitalist sphere of significations and thereby invested with a new meaning. A beautiful example is the creation of the modern, centralized state apparatus by the absolute monarchy, described by Tocqueville in L'Ancien Régime.
et la révolution: designed and constructed to serve the absolute power of the monarch, it became the ideal carrier of the impervious rule of capitalist “rationality.”

Similarly, I doubt whether the principles of “order from noise” or “organization from noise” can help elucidate the emergence of new social forms. As I said before, I do not think one can properly speak of “noise” in relation to a society. Even the term “disorder” is, if I may say so, out of order here. What appears as “disorder” within a society is, in reality, something internal to its institution, meaningful and negatively valued—and that is a totally different thing. The only cases where we could speak genuinely of “disorder” are, I think, those of “old systems that are in crisis” or “crumbling.” So, for instance, with the late Roman World—or many Third World societies today. In the first case, a new “unifying principle,” a new magma of social imaginary significations, eventually emerged with Christianity. I do not see any relation of the preceding “disorder” to this, except that of a “negative condition.” In the second case—that of the Third World countries—no new “unifying principle” seems to emerge, and the crumbling of the old order simply goes on, except where “unifying principles” are successfully imported from abroad (which is not the most frequent case). To take another example, which sheds light on another aspect of the question: when the protobourgeoisie starts emerging within the general framework of feudal society in the twelfth century, it does not make much sense to treat this phenomenon as “noise” or “disorder”; this would be, at most, legitimate from a “feudal” point of view. For this “noise” or “disorder” is, from its very beginning, a carrier of a (new) order and of (new) significations, and can materially exist only by being such a carrier.

But what seems to me to establish, above all, the radical difference between the biological and the social-historical world is the emergence, in the latter, of autonome—or of a new meaning of autonomy. In Varela’s use of the word (which, as I have taken the liberty of telling him, I regret), the “autonomy” of the living being is its closure—organizational, informational, cognitive closure. Closure here means that the functioning of the living “self” and its correspondence with the various outside “its” or “things” is governed by rules, principles, laws, and meanings that are posited by the living being but that, once posited, are given once and for all, and the change of which, whenever it occurs, is presumably “random.” But this is exactly what we would call—and what I call—heteronome in the

human and the social-historical domain: the state where laws, principles, norms, values, and meanings are given once and for all and where the society or the individual, as the case may be, has no action upon them. An extreme but very telling example of what would be the fullest “autonomy” in Varela’s sense, and the fullest heteronomy in my sense, is that of the psychotic person suffering from paranoia. This person has created once and for all his own all-encompassing and totally rigid interpretative system, and nothing can ever enter his world without being transformed according to the rules of this system. (Of course, without some dose of paranoia, none of us could survive.) But a much more common and massive example is given by all “primitive” societies, and also by all religious societies, where rules, principles, laws, meanings, etc., are posited as given once and for all, and their unquestioned and unquestionable character is institutionally guaranteed by the instituted representation of an extrasocial source, foundation, and guarantee of law, meaning, and so on: obviously, you cannot change the law of God or say that this law is unjust. (The sentence would just be unthinkable and incomprehensible in such a society—like “Big Brother is ungood” in the final stage of Newspeak.) Here we have (as in totalitarianism) the fullest possible “autonomy,” the fullest possible “closure” of meaning and interpretation—that is, the fullest possible heteronomy from our point of view.

And what is the origin of “our point of view”? It is another historical creation, a historical break or rupture that first took place in ancient Greece, and then again in Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, whereby autonomy in the proper sense is created for the first time: autonomy not as closure but as openness. These societies represent again a new form of social-historical being—and, indeed, of being tout court: for the first time in the history of humanity, of life, and, for all we know, of the Universe, we have here a being that brings openly into question its proper law of existence, its proper existing order.

These societies call into question their own institution, their representation of the world, their social imaginary significations. This is, of course, what is entailed by the creation of democracy and philosophy, both of which break up the closure of the hitherto prevailing instituted society and open up a space where the activities of thinking and of politics lead to putting again and again into question not only the given forms of the social institution and of the social representation of the world but the possible ground for any such forms. Autonomy here takes the meaning of a self-
institution of society that is, from now on, more or less *explicit*: we make the laws, we know it, and thus we are responsible for our laws and have to ask ourselves every time, “Why this law rather than another one?” And this, of course, entails the appearance of a new type of historical being on the individual level, that is, of an autonomous individual, who can *ask himself*—and also *say aloud*—“Is this law just?” All this does not go without struggle against the old heteronomous order and orders, a struggle that is, to say the least, far from finished.

It is this historical creation of autonomy and, I repeat, of a new type of being capable of calling into question the very laws of its existence, that has conditioned for us the possibility both of a discussion such as the one we are having today and, more important, of genuine political action, of action toward a new institution of society, fully realizing the project of autonomy. But that is another story.

§ Reflections on Racism

We are here, it goes without saying, because we want to combat racism, xenophobia, chauvinism, and everything relating to them. We do this in the name of a basic stand: we recognize the equal value of all human beings qua human beings and we affirm the duty of the collectivity to grant them all the same effective possibilities to develop their faculties. Far from being able to remain comfortably ensconced on some alleged self-evident set of “human rights” or a transcendental necessity of the “rights of man,” this affirmation engenders paradoxes of the first magnitude, and notably an antinomy I have already emphasized a thousand times, which we may define in abstract terms as the antinomy between universalism as regards human beings and universalism as regards human beings’ “cultures” (their imaginary institutions of society). I shall return to this point at the end of my presentation.

This combat, however, like all the other ones, has in our epoch often been deflected and twisted round in the most incredibly cynical ways. Take just one example, the Russian State proclaims that it is against racism and chauvinism, whereas in fact anti-Semitism, underhandedly encouraged by the powers that be, is alive and kicking in Russia and dozens of nations and ethnic groups still remain by force within the great prison of peoples. There is still talk—and rightly so—about the extermination of the American Indians. I have never seen anyone pose the question “How has one language, which five centuries ago was spoken only from Moscow to Nizhni-Novgorod, been able to reach the shores of the Pacific. Has this occurred with the enthusiastic applause of Tatars, Buriats, Sameyeds, Tunguses, and various other peoples?”
33. Ibid., p. 173. The words added within brackets are my explanations.
34. Ibid., p. 183.
35. Ibid., p. 178. I have restored the word “region,” which did not appear in the Ryle and Soper translation.
  In “Epilegomena,” Castoriadis was already insisting that the discipline of psychoanalysis, whose object is the human psyche, cannot of itself account for or explain *social* phenomena and *social* objects, as is the case with theology and of every logical relation as well as the affirmation of the created character of “eternal truths” is a desparate recourse on the part of rational theology that is incompatible with everything this kind of theology aims at establishing. I shall return to this point in the first part of *La Création humaine* (forthcoming). In Plato, God is artisan (demierre) of intermediary forms—the “bed” in the Republic 10.597a–c, the entire world and all it contains in the Timaeus—but He is not and could not be the creator of the eschaton, as Aristotle will later say (Metaphysics 12.3.1069b37–38)—of naked matter and of ultimate forms, *eidos*, of mathematical elements in the Timaeus—any more than of “Etat Living Being.” Not, moreover, is the God of Genesis, who gives form to the *tikhubhu* that is already there.
  This is Alastair Davidson’s translation of a 1980 joint talk Castoriadis delivered in Belgium with German Green party member and former May 1968 student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit, which will be retranslated for the *Castoriadis Reader*. See also “Reflections on ‘Rationality’ and ‘Development’” (1974) and “Dead End?” (1987) in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*.
40. See “Modern Capitalism and Revolution,” *PSW* 1.
42. *Domaines de l’homme*, p. 102.

**The Imaginary**

Based on a speech given to the International Symposium on “Disorder and Order” at Stanford University, September 14–16, 1981, which was originally published in *Disorder and Order*, ed. Paisley Livingston, Stanford Literary Series, no. 1 (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1984), pp. 146–61, and then reprinted in *Identity: The Real Me* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), pp. 39–43. My own French translation of this lecture appeared in *Domaines de l’homme*, pp. 209–37. All additions in braces, as well as notes 3 and 3–5, first appeared there; translation of these additions and these supplemental notes by David Ames Curtis. (To conform with the French translation, which should be considered more definitive because of a later date, I have italicized some additional English words and adapted some English phrases. I have also made some slight editorial changes in the English version for clarity’s sake.—Trans.)

1. I say *rational* theology expressly. I am maintaining, in effect, that the idea of the absolute “contingency” of every *eidos* and of every logical relation as well as the affirmation of the created character of “eternal truths” is a desperate recourse on the part of rational theology that is incompatible with everything this kind of theology aims at establishing. I shall return to this point in the first part of *La Création humaine* (forthcoming). In Plato, God is artisan (demierre) of intermediary forms—the “bed” in the Republic 10.597a–c, the entire world and all it contains in the Timaeus—but He is not and could not be the creator of the eschaton, as Aristotle will later say (Metaphysics 12.3.1069b37–38)—of naked matter and of ultimate forms, *eidos*, of mathematical elements in the Timaeus—any more than of “Etat Living Being.” Not, moreover, is the God of Genesis, who gives form to the *tikhubhu* that is already there.


**Reflections on Racism**


1. This lecture was delivered in 1987, when the “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” (“four words, four lies,” Castoriadis has remarked elsewhere) was still in existence. Soon after the failure of the August 1991 coup d’état, and a few days after Boris Yeltsin hinted that Russia’s national borders might have to be renegotiated for the “protection” of Russians living in the other republics, Castoriadis had