

Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy

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Power, Politics, Autonomy

The Social-Historical, the Psyche, the Individual

The radical imaginary deploys itself as society and as history: as the social-historical. This it does, and it can only do, in and through the two dimensions of the *instituting* and the *instituted*.¹ The *institution* is an originary creation of the social-historical field—of the collective-anonymous—transcending, as form (*eidos*), any possible “production” of individuals or of subjectivity. The individual, and individuals, is an institution, both once and for all and different in each different

1. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Marxism and Revolutionary Theory,” *Socialisme ou Barbarie* 36–40 (April 1964–June 1965), since reprinted as the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975), tr. Kathleen Blamey (Oxford: Polity Press, and Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T., 1987). Cited here as *MRT* for the first part and *Institution* for the second part. See in particular *MRT*, pp. 111–14 as well as *Institution*, passim.

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society. It is the pole of regulated social imputation and allocation, without which society is impossible.² Subjectivity, as agent of reflection and deliberation (as thought and will) is a social-historical *project*; its origins, repeated twice with different modalities in Greece and in Western Europe, can be dated and located.³ The nucleus of both, of the individual and of subjectivity, is the psyche or psychical monad, which is irreducible to the social-historical but susceptible to almost limitless shaping by it, on condition that the institution satisfies certain minimal requirements of the psyche. Chief among these is that the institution must offer to the psyche *meaning for its waking life*. This is done by inducing and forcing the singular human being, during a period of schooling that starts with birth and which is reinforced till death, to invest (cathect) and make meaningful for him/herself the emerged parts of the magma of social imaginary significations instituted each time by society and which hold society together.⁴

Manifestly, the social-historical immensely transcends any “inter-subjectivity.” This term is the fig leaf used to conceal the nudity of inherited thought and its inability to confront the question of the social-historical. It fails in this task. Society is irreducible to “inter-subjectivity”—or to any sort of common action by individuals. Society is not a huge accumulation of face-to-face situations. Only already socialized individuals can enter into face-to-face, or back-to-back, situations. No conceivable “cooperation,” or “communicative action” of individuals could ever create language, for instance. Language, though leaning on biological properties of the human being, is not a biological datum either, it is a fundamental institution. And an assembly of unsocialized human beings, acting solely according to their deep psychical drives, would be unimaginably more Boschian than any ward for the mentally disturbed in an old psychiatric asylum. Society, as *always already instituted*, is self-creation and capacity for self-

2. *Institution*, ch. 6.

3. Cornelius Castoriadis, “The State of the Subject Today” (1986), tr. David Ames Curtis, *Thesis Eleven*, 24 (1989), pp. 5–43.

4. *Institution*, ch. 6 and *passim*; also, “Institution de la société et religion,” *Esprit*, May 1982, reprinted in *Domaines de l'homme. Les Carrefours du labyrinthe II* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), pp. 364–84.

alteration. It is the work of the radical imaginary as instituting, which brings itself into being as instituted society and as a given, and each time specified, social imaginary.

The individual as such is not, however, "contingent" in relation to society. Society can exist concretely only through the fragmentary and complementary incarnation and incorporation of its institution and its imaginary significations in the living, talking, and acting individuals of that society. Athenian society is, in a sense, nothing but the Athenians; without them, it is only the remnants of a transformed landscape, debris of marble and vases, indecipherable inscriptions, worn statues fished out some place in the Mediterranean. But the Athenians are Athenians only by means of the *nomos* of the *polis*. In this relationship between an instituted society—which infinitely transcends the totality of the individuals that "compose" it, but which can actually exist only by being "realized" in the individuals it manufactures—on the one hand, and these individuals, on the other hand, we witness an original, unprecedented type of relationship which cannot be thought under the categories of the whole and its parts, the set and its elements, the universal and the particular, etc. In and through its own creation, society creates the individual as such and the individuals in and through which alone it can actually exist. But society is not a property of composition; neither is it a whole containing something more than and different from its parts, if only because these "parts" are made to be, and to be thus and not otherwise, by this "whole" which, nevertheless, can only be in and through its "parts." This type of relationship, which has no analogy elsewhere, has to be reflected upon for itself, as principle and model of itself.⁵

In this respect, one can never be too careful. This state of affairs has nothing to do with "systems theory" or with "self-organization," "order from noise," etc. And it would be erroneous to say, as some do, that society produces individuals, which in turn produce society. Society is the work of the *instituting* imaginary. The individuals are made by the *instituted* society, at the same time as they make and remake it. The two mutually irreducible poles are the radical instituting

5. *MRT*; and *Institution*, ch. 4.

imaginary—the field of social-historical creation—on the one hand, the singular psyche, on the other. Starting with the psyche, using it, as it were, as a material, the instituted society each time makes the individuals—which, as such, can henceforth only make the society which has made them. It is only insofar as the radical imagination of the psyche seeps through the successive layers of the social armor, which cover and penetrate it up to an unfathomable limit-point, and which constitute the individual, that the singular human being can have, in return, an independent action on society. Let me note, in anticipation of what follows, that such an action is extremely rare and, at any rate, imperceptible wherever *instituted heteronomy*⁶ prevails—that is, in fact, in almost all known societies. In this case, apart from the bundle of predefined social roles, the only *ascertainable* ways in which the singular psyche can manifest itself are transgression and pathology. Things are different in the rare case of societies where the bursting of complete heteronomy makes a true *individuation of the individual* possible and thus allows the radical imagination of the singular psyche to find or create the social means of publicly expressing itself in an original manner and to contribute perceptibly to the self-alteration of the social world. A third aspect of this relation appears during manifest and marked epochs of social-historical alteration when society and individuals alter themselves together, those alterations entailing each other in this case.

Validity of Institutions and Primordial Power

The institution, and the imaginary significations borne by it and animating it, create a world. This is the world of the particular society considered: it is established in and through the articulation it performs between a “natural” and “supranatural”—more generally, an “extra-social”—world and a “human” world in a narrow sense. This articulation can take on an extraordinary variety of forms: from an imaginary virtual fusion of the two to their utmost separation, from the submission of society to the cosmic order or to God to the utmost frenzy of

6. *MRT*, pp. 108–10; and “Institution de la société et religion,” in *Domaines*.

control of and domination over nature. In all cases, “nature” and the “supranatural” are instituted in their meaning as such and in the innumerable articulations of this meaning; and these articulations maintain a complex network of relations with the articulations of society itself as they are posited each time by its institution.⁷

Society creates itself as form (*eidōs*) and each time as a singular form. (To be sure, influences, historical transmissions, continuities, similarities, etc., are always there. They are tremendous, and so are the questions they raise; but they do not modify in the least the essence of the situation, and their discussion need not detain us here.) In creating itself, society deploys itself in and through a multiplicity of particular organizing and organized forms. It deploys itself as creation of its own space and its own time (of its own spatiality and temporality), populated by innumerable objects and entities of “natural,” “supranatural,” and “human” character, all of them categorized and brought into relations posited each time by the given society. This work always leans on immanent properties of the being-thus of *the* world; but these properties are recreated, isolated, chosen, filtered, brought into relation, and, above all, *endowed with meaning* by the institution and the imaginary significations of the given society.⁸

Trivialities apart, a general discourse about these articulations is almost impossible. They are, each time, the work of the given society and permeated by its imaginary significations. In its “materiality,” or “concreteness,” this or that institution as found in two different societies may appear identical or highly similar; however, this apparent material identity is each time *immersed* in a different magma of different significations, and this suffices to transform such an apparent identity into an actual alterity from the social-historical point of view (for example, writing, with the same alphabet, in Athens, 450 B.C., and in Constantinople, 750 A.D.). Universals stretching across the boundaries of different societies—such as language, the production of material life, the regulation of sexual life and reproduction, norms and

7. *MRT*, pp. 149–50; and *Institution*, ch. 5.

8. *Ibid.*

values, etc.—certainly do exist; by no means, however, can their existence found a “theory” of society and history with substantive content. And, within these “formal” universals, more specific universals also exist (e.g., concerning language and certain phonological laws). But, like writing with the same alphabet, they work only at the border of the being of society, which deploys itself as meaning and signification. As soon as one considers “grammatical” or “syntactic” universals, much more redoubtable questions arise. For instance, Chomsky’s enterprise must face this impossible dilemma: either grammatical (syntactical) forms are totally indifferent as to meaning—a statement whose absurdity any translator would readily acknowledge—or they contain and carry with them potentially *since the advent of the first human language* and God knows how, all the significations which will ever appear in history—which entails a metaphysics of history both overladen and naive. To say that in each and every language it must be possible to express the idea “John gave an apple to Mary” is certainly true but also regrettably meager.

There is, however, one universal we can “deduce,” *once we know what society is and what the psyche is*. It concerns the effective validity (*Geltung*), the positive validity (in the sense of “positive law”) of the immense instituted edifice of society. How is it possible for the institution and for institutions (language, the definition of “reality” and “truth,” ways of doing things, work, sexual regulation, licit/illicit, calls to die for the tribe or the nation which are almost always greeted with enthusiasm, and so on) to compel recognition and acceptance on the part of the psyche, which in its essence can only ignore all this hodgepodge and would, if ever it perceived it, find it highly inimical and repugnant? There are two sides to this question: the psychical and the social.

From the psychical point of view, the social fabrication of the individual is the historical process by means of which the psyche is coerced (smoothly or brutally; in fact, the process always entails violence against the proper nature of the psyche) into giving up its initial objects and its initial world (this renunciation is never total, but almost always sufficient to fulfill social requirements) and into investing (cathecting) socially instituted objects, rules, and the world. This is the

true meaning of the process of sublimation.⁹ The minimal requirement for this process to unfold is that the institution provide the psyche with *meaning*—another type of meaning than the protomeaning of the psychical monad. The social individual is thus constituted by means of the internalization of the world and the imaginary significations created by society; it internalizes explicitly vast fragments of this world, it internalizes implicitly its virtual totality by virtue of the interminable reciprocal referrals which link, magmatically, each fragment of this social world to the rest of it.

The social side of this process concerns the whole complex of institutions in which the human being is steeped as soon as it is born and, first of all, the Other—generally, but not inevitably, the mother—who, already socialized in a determinate manner, takes care of the newborn and speaks a determinate language. More abstractly speaking, there is a “part” of almost all institutions that aims at the nurturing, the rearing, the education of the newcomers—what the Greeks called *paideia*: family, age groups, rites, school, customs, laws, etc.

The effective validity of the institutions is thus ensured, first and foremost, by the very process which makes a social individual out of the little screaming monster. The latter can only become an individual if it internalizes the institutions of its society.

If we define *power* as the capacity for a personal or impersonal instance (*Instanz*) to bring someone to do (or to abstain from doing) that which, left to him/herself, s/he would not necessarily have done (or would possibly have done), it is immediately obvious that the greatest conceivable power lies in the possibility of preforming someone in such a way that, *of his/her own accord*, s/he does what one wants him/her to do, without any need for *domination* (*Herrschaft*) or of *explicit power* (*Macht/Gewalt*) to bring him/her to . . . (do or abstain from doing something). Equally obvious, a being subject to such shaping will present at the same time the appearances of the fullest

9. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Epilegomena to a Theory of the Soul which has been presented as a Science” (1968), now in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (1978), tr. Martin H. Ryle and Kate Soper (Brighton: Harvester, and Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T., 1984); see pp. 34–40, and also *Institution*, pp. 311–20.

possible spontaneity, and the reality of a total heteronomy. Compared to this absolute power, any explicit power and any form of domination can be seen as deficient, for they betray the markings of an irreparable failure. (Henceforth, I will speak of “*explicit power*”; the term “domination” is better used for the specific social-historical situations in which an *asymmetric and antagonistic division* of the social body is instituted.)

Thus, before any explicit power and, even more, before any “domination,” the institution of society wields over the individuals it produces a *radical ground-power*. This ground-power, or primordial power, as manifestation of the instituting power of the radical imaginary, is not locatable. It is never the power of an individual or of a nameable instance. It is carried out by the instituted society, but in the background stands the instituting society; and “once this institution is set in place, the social as instituting slips away, puts itself at a distance, is already somewhere else.”¹⁰ In turn, the instituting society, however radical its creation may be, always works by starting from something already instituted and on the basis of what is already there. It is always historical—save for an inaccessible point of origin. It is always, and to an unmeasurable degree, also recovery of the given, and therefore burdened with an inheritance, even if under *beneficium inventorii*, the limits of which cannot be fixed either. We will discuss later the implications of this fundamental situation for the project of autonomy and for the idea of *effective* human freedom. Before that, however, we must come to understand that, to begin with, the institution of society wields a radical power over the individuals making it up, and that this power itself is grounded upon the instituting power of the radical imaginary and of the whole preceding history which finds, each time, in the institution as it is posited its transient outcome. Ultimately, therefore, we are dealing with the power of the social-historical field itself, the power of *outis*, of Nobody.¹¹

10. MRT, p. 112; *Institution*, pp. 369–73.

11. “Epilegomena,” in *Crossroads*, p. 40.

Limits of the Instituting Ground-Power

Considered in itself, therefore, the instituting ground-power and its realization by the institution should be absolute and should shape the individuals in such a fashion that they are bound to reproduce eternally the regime which has produced them. And this is, almost always, almost everywhere, manifestly the strict intention (or finality) of existing institutions. If this finality were strictly fulfilled, there would be no history. We know, however, that this is not true. Instituted society never succeeds in wielding its ground-power in an absolute fashion. The most it can attain—as we see in primitive societies and, more generally, in the whole class of what we must call traditional societies—is the instauration of a temporality of apparently essential repetition, beneath which its insurmountable historicity continues to work imperceptibly and over very long periods.¹² Seen as absolute and total, the ground-power of the instituted society and of tradition is therefore, sooner or later, bound to fail. This is a sheer fact which we are compelled to recognize: *there is* history, *there is* a plurality of essentially different societies. Nevertheless, we can try to elucidate it.

For this elucidation, four factors have to be taken into account.

1. Society creates its world; it invests it with meaning; it provides itself with a store of significations designed in advance to deal with whatever may occur. The magma of the socially instituted imaginary significations resorbs, potentially, whatever may present itself, and it could not, in principle, be taken unawares or find itself helpless. In this respect, the role of religion and the essential function it fulfills for the *closure of meaning* have always been central.¹³ (For instance, the Holocaust becomes a proof of the singularity and the divine election of the Jewish people.) The “world in itself” bears within itself an ensemblistic-identitary organization that is sufficiently stable and “systematic” in its first layer to allow humans to live socially and at the same time sufficiently lacunar and incomplete to bear an

12. *Institution*, pp. 185–86 and 202–15.

13. *MRT*, pp. 130–31, 139–40, 143–44, and 147–48; *Institution*, pp. 361–62; and “Institution de la société et religion,” in *Domaines*.

indefinite number of social-historical creations of signification. *Both* aspects relate to ontological dimensions of the world in itself, which no transcendental subjectivity, no language, no pragmatics of communication could ever bring into existence.¹⁴ But also the world *qua* “presocial world”—a limit for any thought—though in itself signifying nothing, is always there as inexhaustible provision of alterity and as the always imminent risk of laceration of the web of significations with which society has lined it. The *a-meaning* of the world is always a possible threat for the meaning of society. Thus the ever-present risk that the social edifice of significations will totter.

2. Society fabricates individuals with the psyche as raw material. I do not know which of the two is more amazing: the almost total plasticity of the psyche with respect to the social formation that shapes it or its invincible capacity to preserve its monadic core and its radical imagination and to thwart, at least partially, the incessant schooling imposed upon it. However rigid or watertight the type of individual into which it has been transformed, the irreducible being proper to the singular psyche always manifests itself in the form of dreams, “psychical” illnesses, transgressions, contentions and querulent expressions, but also in the form of singular contributions to the more than slow alteration of our social modes of making/doing and representing. (In traditional societies, these singular contributions are rarely, if ever, locatable.)
3. Society is but exceptionally—or never—unique or isolated. *It just so happens (sumbainei)* that *there is* an indefinite plurality of human societies as well as synchronic coexistence and contact among them. The institution and the significations of the others are always a deadly threat to our own; what is sacred for us is for them abominable, what is meaning for us is for them the very figure of nonsense.¹⁵
4. Finally, and principally, society can never escape itself. The instituted society is always subject to the subterranean pressure of insti-

14. *Institution*, ch. 5; also, “Portée ontologique de l’histoire de la science,” in *Domaines*, pp. 419–55.

15. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Notations sur le racisme,” *Connexions*, 48 (1986), pp. 107–18.

tuting society. Beneath the established social imaginary, the flow of the radical imaginary continues steadily. Indeed, this primordial and raw fact of the radical imaginary allows us not to “solve,” but to phrase differently, the question implied by our previous expressions, *it just so happens*, and *there is*. That *there is* an essential plurality, synchronic and diachronic, of societies means just that: there is an instituting imaginary.

All these factors threaten society’s stability and self-perpetuation. And against all of them, the institution of society establishes in advance and contains defenses and protections. Principal among these is the virtual omnipotence, the capacity of universal covering, of its magma of significations. Any irruption of the raw world becomes for it *sign of something*, is interpreted away and thereby exorcised. Dreams, illnesses, transgressions, and deviance are also explained away. Alien societies and people are posited as strange, savage, impious. The enemy against which the defenses of society are feeblest is its own instituting imaginary, its own creativity. This is also why it is against this danger that the strongest protection has been set up; strongest, that is, as long as it lasts, and for all we know it has lasted at least 100,000 years. It is the denial and the covering up of the instituting dimension of society through the imputation of the origin of the institution and of its social significations to an extrasocial source.¹⁶ “Extrasocial” here means external to the actual, living society: gods or God, but also founding heroes or ancestors who are continually reincarnated in the newborn humans; in the latter case, society posits itself as literally *possessed* by another “itself,” one infinitely close and infinitely distant. In more agitated historical worlds, supplementary lines of defense are established. The denial of the alteration of society, or the covering up of the new by means of its attribution to mythical origins, may become impossible. In such cases, the new can be subjected to a fictitious but nevertheless efficient reduction with the help of “commentary” on and “interpretation” of the tradition. This is, typically, the case of the *Weltreligionen*, in particular of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worlds.

16. MRT, p. 131; *Institution*, pp. 213–15 and 371–73.

Explicit Power and the Political Dimension of the Institution of Society

All these defenses can fail, and, in a sense, they always eventually fail. Crimes, violent insuperable contentions, natural calamities destroying the functionality of existing institutions, wars are always there. This fact is one of the roots of *explicit power*. There always has been, and there always will be, a dimension of the social institution in charge of this essential function: to reestablish order, to ensure the life and the operation of society against whatever, actually or potentially, endangers them.

There is another, perhaps even more important, root of explicit power. The social institution, and the magma of imaginary significations it embodies, are much more than a heap of representations (or of "ideas"). Society institutes itself in and through the three inseparable dimensions of representation, affect, and intention. The "representational" (not necessarily representable and expressible) part of the magma of social imaginary significations is the least difficult to approach. But this approach would remain critically inadequate (as is, indeed, the case in almost all philosophies and theories of history and even in historiography) if, aiming only at a history and a hermeneutics of "representations" and "ideas," it ignored the *magma of affects* proper to each society—its *Stimmung*, its way of living itself and of living the world and life itself—or if it ignored the *intentional vectors* which weave together the institution and the life of society, what one may call its proper and characteristic *push and drive*, which are never reducible to its simple conservation.¹⁷ It is by means of this push and drive that the past/present of society is always inhabited by a future which is, perpetually, *to be made* and *to be done*. It is this push and drive that invest with meaning the biggest unknown of all: that which is not yet but will be, the future, by giving to those who are living the means to participate in the preservation or the constitution of a world that perpetuates the established meaning. It is also because of this push and drive that the innumerable plurality of social activities always transcends the sim-

17. *Institution*, passim.

ple biological “preservation” of the species and is, at the same time, subject to a hierarchization.

This unavoidable dimension of push and drive toward that which is to be made and done introduces another type of “disorder” within the social order. Even within the most rigid and repetitive setup, the facts of ignorance and uncertainty as to the future forbid a complete prior codification of *decisions*. *Explicit power* is thus also rooted in the necessity to decide what is and is not to be done with respect to the more or less explicit ends which are the objects of the push and drive of the society considered.

Therefore, what we call “legislative” and “executive” power can be buried in the institution as custom and internalization of supposedly intangible norms. “Judicial” power and “governmental” power, however, must be explicitly present, under whatever form, as soon as there is society. The question of *nomos* (and of its, so to speak, “mechanical” implementation, the so-called executive power) may be covered up by a society; but this cannot be done as regards *dike*—the judiciary—and *telos*—the governmental.

Whatever its explicit articulation, explicit power can never, therefore, be thought exclusively in terms of “friend-foe” (Carl Schmitt). Neither can it (nor can domination) be reduced to the “monopoly of legitimate violence” (Engels). Beneath the monopoly of legitimate violence lies the monopoly of the legitimate word, and this is, in turn, ruled by the monopoly of the valid signification. The throne of the Lord of signification stands above the throne of the Lord of violence.¹⁸ The voice of the arms can only begin to be heard amid the crash of the collapsing edifice of institutions. And for violence to manifest itself effectively, the word—the injunctions of the existing power—has to keep its magic over the “groups of armed men” (Engels). The fourth company of the Pavlovsky regiment, guards to His Majesty the Czar, and the Semenovskiy regiment, were the strongest pillars of the throne, until those days of February 26 and 27, 1917 when they fraternized with the crowd and turned their guns against their own officers. The mightiest army in the world will not protect you if it is not loyal to

18. *Institution*, pp. 308–09.

you—and the ultimate foundation of its loyalty is its imaginary belief in your imaginary legitimacy.

There always is, thus, and there always will be, an *explicit power*, that is, unless a society were to succeed in transforming its subjects into automata that had completely internalized the instituted order and in constructing a temporality that took into account, in advance, all future time. Both aims are impossible to achieve, given what we know about the psyche, the instituting imaginary, the world.

On Some Confusions: “The Political”

There is, thus, a dimension of the institution of society pertaining to *explicit power*, that is, to the existence of *instances capable of formulating explicitly sanctionable injunctions*. This dimension is to be called the dimension of “*the political*.” It matters little, at this level, whether the instances in question are embodied by the whole tribe, by the elders, by the warriors, by a chief, by the *demos*, by a bureaucratic apparatus, etc.

We must try here to clear up three confusions.

The first is the identification of explicit power with the State. “Societies without the State” are by no means “societies without power.” Not only can we observe in these societies, as everywhere, the enormous ground-power of the established institution (which becomes that much the greater as explicit power is reduced), we also always find an *explicit power* of the collectivity (or of the males, the warriors, etc.) pertaining to *dike* and *telos*—to jurisdiction and to decisions. Explicit power *is not* identical to the State. We have to restrict the term and the notion of State to a specific *eidos*, the historical creation of which can almost be dated and localized. The State is an instance *separated from* the collectivity and it is instituted in a way that it continuously ensures this separation. The State is, typically, what I call an *institution of the second order*, belonging to a specific class of societies.¹⁹ I would insist, moreover, that the term “State” be restricted to the cases where there

19. On this term, see *Institution*, p. 371, and “The First Institution of Society and Second-Order Institutions” (1985), tr. David Ames Curtis, *Free Associations*, 12 (1988), pp. 39–51.

is an institution of a *State Apparatus*, which entails a separate civilian, military or priestly “bureaucracy,” even if it be rudimentary, that is, a hierarchal organization with a delimitation of regions of competence. This definition can cover the immense majority of known Statelike organizations; there are of course some rare borderline cases which can be left to the quibblings of those who forget that, in the social-historical domain, definitions are valid only *os epi to polu*, as Aristotle would say, only “for the most part and in most cases.” In this sense, the Greek democratic *polis* is not a “State,” since in it explicit power—the positing of *nomos*, *dike* and *telos*—belongs to the whole body of citizens. This explains also the difficulties encountered by a mind as powerful as Max Weber’s when faced with the democratic *polis*, difficulties rightly underlined and correctly commented upon in one of M. I. Finley’s last writings.²⁰ Hence the impossibility of grasping Athenian democracy by means of the ideal types of “traditional” or “rational” domination (remember that for Max Weber “rational domination” and “bureaucratic domination” are almost interchangeable terms), and his infelicitous attempts to present the Athenian “demagogues” as holders of charismatic power. Marxists and feminists would, no doubt, reply that the *demos* wielded power over slaves and women, and therefore “was the State.” Should one then say that in the South of the United States whites “were the State” vis-à-vis blacks until 1865? Or that French adult males “were the State” vis-à-vis women until 1945? Or that today, everywhere, adults “are the State” vis-à-vis nonadults? Neither explicit power, nor domination need take the form of the State.

The second confusion involves mixing up *the political*, the dimension of explicit power, with the overall institution of society. As is well known, the term “the political” was introduced by Carl Schmitt (*Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1928) with a restricted meaning which, if we accept the foregoing, should be found wanting. We witness today an attempt in the opposite direction, an attempt to expand the meaning of

20. M. I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), ch. 6: “Max Weber and the Greek City-State,” pp. 88–103, and Epilogue, pp. 106–8. See also my article, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,” ch. 5 of this book, pp. 109–10.

the term until it resorbs the overall institution of society. The distinguishing of the political from other “social phenomena” would stem, it seems, from a positivist attitude. (Of course, what we are dealing with here are not “phenomena” but rather ineliminable dimensions of the social institution: language, work, sexual reproduction, the raising of new generations, religion, mores, “culture” in the narrow sense, etc.) In this attempt, “the political” is presented as that which generates the relations of humans among themselves and with the world, the representation of nature and time, the mutual positions of religion and power. This is, of course, exactly what I have defined since 1965 as the imaginary institution of society.²¹ Personal tastes aside, the gains to be made by calling the overall institution of society “the political” are hard to see, but the damages are obvious. Either, in calling “the political” that which everybody would naturally call the institution of society, one merely attempts a change in vocabulary without substantive content, creating only confusion and violating the maxim *nomina non sunt praeter necessitatem multiplicanda*, or one attempts to preserve in this substitution the connotations linked with the word “political” since its creation by the Greeks, that is, whatever pertains to explicit and at least partially conscious and reflective decisions concerning the fate of the collectivity; but then, through a strange reversal, language, economy, religion, representation of the world, family, etc., have to be said to depend upon political decisions in a way that would win the approval of Charles Maurras as well as of Pol Pot. “Everything is political” either means nothing, or it means: everything ought to be political, ought to flow from an explicit decision of the Sovereign.

Politics

The root of the second confusion is perhaps to be found in a third one. One frequently hears it said nowadays: the Greeks invented (or “discovered”) the political.²² One may credit the Greeks with many things—

21. MRT, pp. 115–64; and *Institution*, passim.

22. The French translator of M. I. Finley’s *Politics in the Ancient World* was quite right not to give in to facile fashion, when she entitled her translation *L’Invention de la Politique*—“the invention of politics,” not “the invention of the political.”

and, mostly, with things other than the ones they are usually credited with—but certainly not with the invention of the institution of society, or even of explicit power. The Greeks did not invent “the” political, in the sense of the dimension of explicit power always present in any society. They invented—or, better, created—politics, which is something entirely different. People sometimes argue about whether and to what extent politics existed before the Greeks. A vain argument, framed in vague terms, muddled thinking. Before the Greeks (and after them) one sees intrigues, plots, machinations, conspiracies, influence peddling, silent or open struggles over explicit power. One observes an art of managing, or of “improving,” established power (fantastically developed in many places, e.g., in China). One can even observe explicit and deliberate changes in some institutions—or even, in rare cases, radical reinstitutions (“Moses,” or, certainly, Mohammed); but in these cases, the legislator, whether prophet or king, invokes an instituting power of divine origin, he produces or exhibits sacred books. Now, if the Greeks were able to create politics, democracy and philosophy it is also because they had neither sacred books nor prophets. They had poets, philosophers, legislators and *politai*—citizens.

Politics, such as it was created by the Greeks, amounts to the explicit putting into question of the established institution of society. This presupposes that at least important parts of this institution had nothing “sacred” or “natural” about them, but rather that they represented *nomos*. The democratic movement in the Greek cities took aim at the explicit power and tried to reinstitute it. As is known, in about half the *poleis* it failed (or did not succeed even in making a real start). Despite this, its emergence acted upon the totality of the *poleis*, since even the oligarchical or tyrannical regimes, in being confronted with it, had to define themselves as such and therefore *appear such as they were*. But the democratic movement is not confined to the struggle around explicit power, it aims potentially at the overall reinstitution of society, and this is materialized through the creation of philosophy. Greek thought is not a commentary on or an interpretation of sacred texts, it amounts *ipso facto* to the putting into question of the most important dimension of the institution of society: the representations and the

norms of the tribe, and the very notion of *truth*. To be sure, there is in all societies a socially instituted "truth," which amounts to the canonical conformity of representations and statements to what is socially instituted as the equivalent of "axioms" and "procedures of validation." This "truth" ought, properly speaking, to be called *correctness* (*Richtigkeit*). But the Greeks *create the truth* as the interminable movement of thought which constantly tests its bounds and looks back upon itself (reflectiveness), and they create it as democratic philosophy. Thinking ceases to be the business of rabbis, of priests, of mullahs, of courtiers, or of solitary monks, and becomes the business of citizens who want to discuss within a public space created by this very movement.

Greek politics, and politics properly conceived, can be defined as the explicit collective activity which aims at being lucid (reflective and deliberate) and whose object is the institution of society as such. It is, therefore, *a coming into light*, though certainly partial, of the instituting in person; a dramatic, though by no means exclusive, illustration of this is presented by the moments of revolution.²³ The creation of politics takes place when the established institution of society is put into question as such and in its various aspects and dimensions (which rapidly leads to the discovery and the explicit elaboration, but also *a new and different articulation*, of solidarity), that is to say, when *another relation*, previously unknown, is created between the instituting and the instituted.²⁴

True politics, therefore, is from the start potentially radical as well as global, and the same is true about its offspring, classical "political philosophy." I say "potentially" because, as is known, many explicit institutions in the democratic *poleis*, including some particularly repugnant to us (slavery, the inferior status of women), were never put into question on a practical basis. But this is irrelevant to our discussion. The creation of democracy and philosophy is truly the creation of *historical movement* in the strong sense—a movement which, in this

23. MRT, p. 112.

24. MRT, pp. 95–114. See also the General Introduction (1972) in the first volume of my *Political and Social Writings*, tr. David Ames Curtis, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 29–36; and *Institution*, pp. 371–73.

phase, deploys itself from the eighth to the fifth century, and is in fact brought to an end with the defeat of Athens in 404.

The radicality of this movement should not be underestimated. Leaving aside the activity of the legislators (*nomothetes*), on which trustworthy information is scant (though many reasonable inferences about it, especially in relation to the founding of colonies, starting in the eighth century, remain to be drawn), suffice it to mention the boldness of the Cleisthenean revolution, which subjected the traditional Athenian society to a far-going reorganization aimed at the equal and balanced participation of all citizens in political power. The discussions and projects to which the dispersed and mutilated torsos of the sixth and fifth century bear witness (Solon, Hippodamos, the Sophists, Democritus, Thucydides, Aristophanes, etc.) present a dazzling picture of this radicality. The institution of society is clearly seen in the fifth century as a human work (Democritus, the *Mikros Diakosmos* as handed down to us by Tzetzes, the Sophists, Sophocles in *Antigone*). The Greek also know from very early on that the human being will be such as the *nomoi* of the *polis* will make it (the idea, clearly formulated by the poet Simonides, is still repeated many times as obvious by Aristotle). They know, therefore, that there is no worthy human being without a worthy *polis*, without a *polis* ruled by the proper *nomos*. They also know, contrary to Leo Strauss, that there is no “natural” law (the expression would be self-contradictory in Greek). And the discovery of the “arbitrariness” of the *nomos* as well as of its constitutive character for the human being opens the interminable discussion about right, wrong, justice, and the “correct *politeia*.”²⁵

This same radicality, along with the awareness of the fabrication of the individual by the society in which it lives, stands behind the philosophical works of the period of decadence—of the fourth century, those of Plato and Aristotle—forces itself upon them as a self-evidence, and nourishes them. Thanks to it, Plato is able to think a radical utopia; because of it, Plato as well as Aristotle emphasizes the importance of *paideia* even more than of the “political constitution” in the narrow sense. And it is no accident that the renewal of political

25. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Ourselves” (1975), in *Crossroads*, pp. 278–330.

thought in Western Europe is quickly accompanied by the resurgence of radical “utopias.” These utopias manifest, first and foremost, awareness of this fundamental fact: institutions are human works. And it is no accident either that, contrary to the poverty in this respect of contemporary “political philosophy,” grand political philosophy from Plato to Rousseau has placed the question of *paideia* at the center of its interests. Even if, practically considered, the question of education has always remained a concern of modern times, this great tradition dies in fact with the French Revolution. And it takes a good deal of philistinism and hypocrisy to display surprise at the fact that Plato thought it proper to legislate about the musical *nomoi* or about poetry—forgetting that the State today decides about the poems children will learn in school. We will discuss later whether Plato was right to do it *as* he did and *to the degree* that he did.

The Greeks’ creation of politics and philosophy is the first historical emergence of the project of collective and individual autonomy. If we want to be free, we have to make our own *nomos*. If we want to be free, nobody should have the power to tell us what we should think.

But free how, and up to what point? These are the questions of true politics—precisely absent from the contemporary discourses about “the political,” “human rights,” or “natural law”—to which we must now turn.

Heteronomy and Autonomy

Almost always, almost everywhere societies have lived in a state of *instituted heteronomy*.²⁶ An essential constituent of this state is the instituted representation of an extrasocial source of *nomos*. In this respect, religion plays a central role. It supplies a representation of this source and of its attributes, it ensures that all significations—those pertaining to the world as well as those pertaining to human affairs—spring from the same origin, it cements the whole by means of a belief that musters the support of essential tendencies of the psyche. Let me add parenthetically that the contemporary fashion—for which Max

26. MRT, pp. 108–10, and the texts cited in note 24.

Weber is partly responsible—of presenting religion as a set of “ideas” or as a “religious ideology” leads to a catastrophic misunderstanding, for it fails to recognize that the religious *affect* and the religious *drive* are as important, and as variable, as religious “representations.”

The denial of the instituting dimension of society, the covering up of the instituting imaginary by the instituted imaginary, goes hand in hand with the creation of true-to-form individuals, whose thought and life are dominated by repetition (whatever else they may do, they do very little), whose radical imagination is bridled to the utmost degree possible, and who are hardly truly individualized. To see this, it is enough to compare the similitude of sculptures dating from the same Egyptian dynasty to the difference between Sappho and Archilochus or Bach and Handel. It also goes hand in hand with the peremptory exclusion of any questioning about the ultimate grounds of the beliefs and the laws of the tribe, thus also of the “legitimacy” of the instituted explicit power. In this sense, the very term “legitimacy” becomes anachronistic (and Eurocentric, or Sinocentric) when applied to most traditional societies. *Tradition means that the question of the legitimacy of tradition shall not be raised.* Individuals in these societies are fabricated in such a way that this question remains for them mentally and psychically inconceivable.

As a germ, autonomy emerges when explicit and unlimited interrogation explodes on the scene—an interrogation that has bearing not on “facts” but on the social imaginary significations and their possible grounding. This is a moment of creation, and it ushers in a new type of society and a new type of individuals. I am speaking intentionally of *germ*, for autonomy, social as well as individual, is a *project*. The rise of unlimited interrogation creates a new social-historical *eidos*: reflectiveness in the full sense, or self-reflectiveness, as well as the individual and the institutions which embody it. The questions raised are, on the social level: Are our laws good? Are they just? Which laws *ought we* to make? And, on the individual level: Is what I think true? Can I know if it is true—and if so, how? The moment of philosophy’s birth is not the appearance of the “question of Being” but rather the emergence of the question: *What is it that we ought to think?* The “question of Being” is only a component of this more general question: What ought we to think about Being (or about justice, or about ourselves, etc.)? The

“question of Being” has been, for instance, both raised and solved in the Pentateuch, as in most sacred books. The moment of democracy’s birth, and that of politics, *is not* the reign of law or of right, nor that of the “rights of man,” nor even the equality of citizens as such, but rather the emergence of the questioning of the law in and through the actual activity of the community. Which are the laws we ought to make? At that moment *politics* is born; that is to say, freedom is born as social-historically *effective* freedom. And this birth is inseparable from the birth of philosophy. (Heidegger’s systematic and not accidental blindness to their inseparability is the main factor distorting his view of the Greeks and of all the rest.)

Autonomy comes from *autos-nomos*: (to give to) oneself one’s laws. After what has been said about heteronomy it is hardly necessary to add: to make one’s own laws, knowing that one is doing so. This is a new *eidos* within the overall history of being: a type of being that reflectively gives to itself the laws of its being.

Thus conceived, autonomy bears little relation to Kant’s “autonomy” for many reasons, of which it will suffice to mention one. Autonomy does not consist in acting according to a law discovered in an immutable Reason and given once and for all. It is the unlimited self-questioning about the law and its foundations as well as the capacity, in light of this interrogation, *to make, to do* and *to institute* (therefore also, *to say*). Autonomy is the reflective activity of a reason creating itself in an endless movement, both as individual and social reason.

Autonomy and Politics

Let us return now to politics, and start, so as to facilitate understanding, with what is *proteron pros hemas*, first with respect to ourselves: the individual. In what sense can an individual be autonomous? There are two sides to this question, the internal and the external.

The internal side: the nucleus of the individual is the psyche (the Unconscious, the drives). Any idea of eliminating or “mastering” this nucleus would be plainly ridiculous; that task is not only impossible, it would amount to a murder of the human being. Also, at any given

moment, the individual carries with itself, in itself, a history which cannot and should not be “eliminated,” since the individual’s very reflectiveness and lucidity are the products of this history. The autonomy of the individual consists in the instauration of an *other* relationship between the reflective instance and the other psychical instances as well as between the present and the history which made the individual such as it is. This relationship makes it possible for the individual to escape the enslavement of repetition, to look back upon itself, to reflect on the reason for its thoughts and the motives of its acts, guided by the elucidation of its desire and aiming at the truth. This autonomy can effectively alter the behavior of the individual, as we positively know. This means that the individual is no longer a pure and passive product of its psyche and history and of the institution. In other words, the formation of a reflective and deliberative instance, that is, of true *subjectivity*, frees the radical imagination of the singular human being as source of creation and alteration and allows this being to attain an effective freedom. This freedom presupposes, of course, the indeterminacy of the psychical world as well as its permeability to meaning. But it also entails that the simply given meaning has ceased to be a cause (which is also always the case in the social-historical world) and that there is the effective possibility of the *choice of meaning* not dictated in advance. In other words, once formed, the reflective instance plays an active and not predetermined role in the deployment and the formation of meaning, whatever its source (be it the radical creative imagination of the singular being or the reception of a socially created meaning).²⁷ In turn, this presupposes again a specific psychical mechanism: to be autonomous implies that one has *psychically invested* freedom and the aiming at truth.²⁸ If such were not the case, one could not understand why Kant toiled over the *Critiques* instead of having fun with something else. And this psychical investment—“an empirical determination”—does not diminish in the least the possible validity of the ideas in the *Critiques*, the deserved admiration we feel

27. MRT, pp. 101–7; “The State of the Subject Today,” *Thesis Eleven*, pp. 24–43.

28. “Epilegomena,” in *Crossroads*, pp. 36–40.

toward the daring old man, the *moral* value of his endeavor. Because it neglects all these considerations, the “freedom” of the inherited philosophy is bound to remain a sheer fiction, a fleshless phantom, a *constructum* void of interest *für uns Menschen*, to use the same phrase Kant obsessively repeats.

The external side of the question throws us into the deepest waters of the social-historical ocean. I cannot be free alone; neither can I be free in each and every type of society. Here again we encounter philosophical self-delusion, exemplified this time by Descartes—though he is far from alone in this respect—when he pretends that he can forget he is sitting upon twenty-two centuries of interrogation and doubt and that he lives in a society where, for centuries, Revelation as well as naive faith by no means suffice any longer, since a “proof” of the existence of God is henceforth required by those who think, even if they believe.

The important point in this respect is not the existence or nonexistence of formal coercion (“oppression”) but the inescapable internalization of the social institution, without which there can be no individuals. Freedom and truth cannot be objects of investment if they have not already emerged as social imaginary significations. Individuals aiming at autonomy cannot appear unless the social-historical field has already altered itself in such a way that it opens a space of interrogation without bounds (without an instituted or revealed truth, for instance). For someone to be able to find in him/herself the psychical resources and, in his environment the actual possibility, to stand up and say: “Our laws are unjust, our gods are false,” a self-alteration of the social institution is required, and this can only be the work of the instituting imaginary. For instance, the statement: “The Law is unjust” is linguistically impossible, or at least absurd, for a classical Hebrew, since the Law is given by God and Justice is but one of the names and attributes of God. The institution must have changed to the point that it allows itself to be put into question by the collectivity it enables to exist and by the individuals belonging to it. But the concrete embodiment of the institution are those very same individuals who walk, talk, and act. It is therefore essentially with the same stroke that a new type of society and a new type of individual, each presupposing the other,

must emerge, and do emerge, in Greece from the eighth century B.C. onward and in Western Europe from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries onward. No phalanx without hoplites, no hoplites without phalanx. No Archilochus capable of boasting, soon after 700 B.C., that in flight he threw away his shield and that little damage was done because he could always buy another one, without a society of warrior-citizens capable of honoring above all else both bravery and a poet who holds this quality up, for once, to derision.

The necessary simultaneity of these two elements during a social-historical alteration produces a state of affairs which is unthinkable from the point of view of the inherited logic of determinacy. How could one compose a free society unless free individuals are already available? And where could one find these individuals if they have not already been raised in freedom? (Could freedom be inherent in human nature? Why then has it been sleeping over millennia of despotism, whether oriental or otherwise?) But this apparent impossibility has been surmounted several times in actual history. In this we see, once more, the creative work of the instituting imaginary, as radical imaginary of the anonymous collectivity.

Thus, the inescapable internalization of the institution refers the individual to the social world. He who says that he wants to be free and, at the same time, proclaims his lack of interest in his society's institutions (or, another name for the same thing, in politics), should be sent back to grammar school. But the same link can also be established starting from the very meaning of *nomos*, of the law. To posit one's own law for oneself has meaning for certain dimensions of life only, and it is totally meaningless for many others: not only the dimensions along which I meet the others (I can reach an understanding with them, or fight them, or simply ignore them), but those along which I encounter society as such, the social law—the institution.

Can I say that I posit my own law when I am living, necessarily, under the law of society? Yes, if and only if I can say, reflectively and lucidly, that *this law is also mine*. To be able to say this, I need not approve of it; it is sufficient that I have had the effective possibility of participating actively in the formation and the implementation of the

law.²⁹ If I accept the idea of autonomy *as such* (and not only because “it is good for me”)—and this, obviously, no proof can force me to do, no more than any proof can force me to square my words with my deeds—then the existence of an indefinite plurality of individuals belonging to society entails immediately the idea of democracy defined as the effective possibility of equal participation of all in instituting activities as well as in explicit power. I will not delve here into the necessary reciprocal implication of equality and freedom when the two ideas are thought rigorously, nor into the sophistries by means of which, for a long time now, various people have tried to make the two terms appear antithetical.

And yet, we seem now to be back at square one, for the fundamental “power” in a society, the prime power upon which all the others depend, what I have already called the ground-power, is the *instituting power*. And unless one is under the spell of the “constitutional delusion,” this power is neither locatable nor formalizable, for it pertains to the instituting imaginary. Language, family, mores, “ideas,” “art,” a host of social activities as well as their evolution are beyond the scope of legislation in their essential part. At most, to the degree that this power can be participated in, it is participated in by all. Everybody is, potentially, a coauthor of the evolution of language, of the family, of customs, and so on.

To make our ideas on this matter clear, let us revert for a moment to the Greek case and ask: What was the radical character of the political creation of the Greeks? The answer is twofold:

1. A part of the instituting power has been made explicit and has been formalized: this is the part concerning legislation properly speaking, public—“constitutional”—legislation as well as private law.

29. The speech of the Laws in the *Crito*—which I take to be a simple, though certainly admirable, transcription of the *Topoi* of the democratic thinking of the Athenians—says everything that there is to say about the matter: *e peithein e poiein a an keleuei* (51b), either persuade it (the country, the collectivity which posits the laws) or do that which it commands. The Laws add: you are always free to leave, with all that you possess (51d–e), which, strictly speaking, is not the case in *any* modern “democratic” State.

2. Specific institutions were created in order to render the explicit part of power (including “political power” in the sense defined earlier) *open to participation*. This led to the equal participation of all the members of the body politic in the determination of *nomos*, of *dike* and of *telos*—of legislation, of jurisdiction, and of government. Rigorously speaking, there is no such thing as “executive power.” (Its functions, which were in the hands of slaves in ancient Athens, are performed today by people acting more or less as “vocal animals,” and they may one day be performed by machines.)

As soon as the question has been posed in these terms, politics has absorbed, at least *de jure*, “the” political. The structure and the operation of explicit power have become, in principle and in fact, in Athens as well as in the European West, objects of collective deliberation and decision. This collectivity is self-positing and, *de facto* and *de jure*, *always necessarily self-positing*. But more than that, and much more importantly, the putting into question of the institution *in toto* became, potentially, radical and unbounded. When Cleisthenes reorganizes, for political purposes, the Athenian tribes, this can perhaps be laid to rest as ancient history. But we are supposed to be living in a republic. Presumably, therefore, we need a republican education. But where does “education”—republican or not—start, and where does it end? The modern emancipatory movements, notably the workers’ movement but also the women’s movement, have raised the question: Is democracy possible, is it possible for all those who want it to obtain the equal effective opportunity to participate in power, when they live in a society where tremendous inequalities of economic power, which are immediately translatable into political power, prevail? Or in a society where women, though granted some decades ago “political rights,” continue in fact to be treated as “passive citizens”? Are the laws of property (whether private or “State-owned”) and of sex God-given, where is the Sinai on which they have been delivered?

Politics is a project of autonomy. Politics is the reflective and lucid collective activity that aims at the overall institution of society. It pertains to everything in society that is participable and shareable.³⁰

30. See the text cited in note 25.

De jure, this self-instituting activity does not take into account and does not recognize any limit (physical and biological laws are not of concern to us here). Nothing can escape its interrogation, nothing, in and of itself, stands outside its province.

But can we stop at that?

The Limits of Self-Institution and the Object of Politics

The answer is in the negative, both from the ontological point of view—before any *de jure* consideration—and from the political point of view—after all such considerations.

The ontological point of view leads to the most weighty reflections, ones which, however, are almost totally irrelevant from the political point of view. In all cases, the explicit self-institution of society will always encounter the bounds I have already mentioned. However lucid, reflective, willed it may be, the instituting activity of society and individuals springs from the instituting imaginary, which is neither locatable nor formalizable. Every institution, as well as the most radical revolution one could conceive of, must always take place within an already given history. Should it have the crazy project of clearing the ground totally, such a revolution still would have to use what it finds on the ground in order to make a clean sweep. The present, to be sure, always transforms the past into a *present past*, that is, a past relevant for the now, if only by continually “reinterpreting” it by means of that which is being created, thought, posited *now*; but it is always *that given past*, not a past in general, that the present shapes according to its own imaginary. Every society must project itself into a future which is essentially uncertain and risky. Every society must socialize the psyche of the human beings belonging to it; but the nature of this psyche imposes upon the modes and the content of this socialization constraints which are as indefinite as they are decisive.

These considerations carry tremendous weight—and no political relevance. The analogy with personal life is very strong—and this is no accident. I am making myself within a history which has always already made me. My most maturely reflected projects can be ruined in a second by what just happens. As long as I live, I must remain for myself one of the mightiest causes of astonishment and a puzzle not

comparable to any other—because so near. I can—a task by no means easy—come to an understanding with my imagination, my affects, my desires; I cannot master them, and I ought not to. I ought to master my words and my deeds, a wholly different affair. And all these considerations cannot tell me anything of substance about what I ought to do—since I can do whatever I can do, but I ought not to do whatever crosses my mind. On the question: “What ought I to do?”, the analysis of the ontological structure of my personal temporality does not help me in the least.

In the same way, the possibility for a society to establish another relationship between the instituting and the instituted is confined within bounds, which are at once indisputable and undefinable, by the very nature of the social-historical. But this tells us nothing about what we ought to will as the effective institution of the society in which we live. It is certain, for instance, that, as Marx remarked, “*le mort saisit le vif*”—the dead take hold of the living. But no politics can be drawn from that. The living would not be living if they were not in the hold of the dead—but neither would they be living if this hold were total. What can I infer from this concerning the relationship a society *ought to will* to establish with its past, in as far as this relationship is subject to willing? I cannot even say that a politics that would try to ignore the dead totally, and even to obliterate their memory, and thus a politics so contrary to the nature of things, would be “bound to fail” or “crazy”; its total self-delusion, its complete inability to attain its proclaimed aim, would not wipe it out of reality. To be crazy does not prevent one from existing. Totalitarianism has existed, it still exists, it still tries to reform the “past” according to the “present.” Let us recall, in passing, that in this it has only pushed to the extreme, systematically and monstrously, an operation which everybody performs every second and which is done every day by the newspapers, the history books, and even the philosophers. And if you were to say that totalitarianism could not succeed because it is contrary to the nature of things (which here can only mean “to human nature”), you would only be mixing up the levels of discourse and positing as an essential necessity that which is a sheer fact. Hitler has been defeated, communism has not succeeded, for the time being. *That is all*. These are sheer facts, and the partial explanations one could supply for them, far from unveiling a

transcendental necessity or a “meaning of history,” also have to do only with sheer facts.

Things are different, from the political point of view and once we have accepted that we are unable to define on a principled basis nontrivial bounds for the explicit self-institution of society. For, *if* politics is a project of individual and social autonomy (these being two sides of the same coin), consequences of substantive import certainly do follow. To be sure, the project of autonomy has to be posited (“accepted,” “postulated”). The idea of autonomy can be neither founded nor proved since it is presupposed by any foundation or proof. (Any attempt to “found” reflectiveness presupposes reflectiveness itself.) Once posited, it can be *reasonably argued for* and *argued about* on the basis of its implications and consequences. But it can also, and more importantly, be *made explicit*. Then, substantive consequences can be drawn from it, which give a *content*, albeit partial, to a politics of autonomy, but which also subject it to *limitations*. For, from this perspective, two requirements arise: to open the way as much as possible to the manifestation of the instituting imaginary; but, *equally important*, to introduce the greatest possible reflectiveness in our explicit instituting activity as well as in the exercise of explicit power. We must not forget, indeed, that the instituting imaginary *as such* as well as its works are neither “good” nor “bad”—or rather that, from the reflective point of view, they can be either the one or the other to the most extreme degree (the same being true of the imagination of the singular human being and its works). It is therefore necessary to shape institutions that make this collective reflectiveness effectively possible as well as to supply it with the adequate instruments. I will not delve here into the innumerable consequences that follow from these statements. And it is also necessary to give to all individuals the maximal effective opportunity to participate in any explicit power, and to ensure for them the greatest possible sphere of autonomous individual life. If we remember that the institution of society exists only insofar as it is embodied in its social individuals, we can evidently, on the basis of the project of autonomy, justify (found, if you prefer) “human rights,” and much more. More importantly, we can also abandon the shallow discourses of contemporary “political philosophy,” and, remembering Aristotle—for whom the law aims at the “creation of total virtue” by means of its prescriptions *peri paideian ten pros*

to *koinon*, relative to the *paideia* pertaining to public affairs (civic education)³¹—understand that *paideia*, education from birth to death, is a central dimension of any politics of autonomy. We can then reformulate, by correcting it, the problem posed by Rousseau: “Some form of association must be found as a result of which the whole strength of the community will be enlisted for the protection of the person and property of each constituent member, in such a way that each, when united to his fellows, renders obedience to his own will, and remains as free as he was before.”³² No need to comment upon Rousseau’s formula nor upon its heavy dependence upon a metaphysics of the individual—substance and its “properties.” But here is the true formulation, the true object of politics:

Create the institutions which, by being internalized by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all forms of explicit power existing in society.

This formulation will appear paradoxical only to those who believe in thunderlike freedom and in a free-floating being-for-itself disconnected from everything, including its own history.

It also becomes apparent—this is, in fact, a tautology—that autonomy is, *ipso facto*, *self-limitation*. Any limitation of democracy can only be, *de facto* as well as *de jure*, self-limitation.³³ This self-limitation can be more than and different from exhortation if it is embodied in the creation of free and responsible individuals. There are no “guarantees” for and of democracy other than relative and contingent ones. The least contingent of all lies in the *paideia* of the citizens, in the formation (always a *social* process) of individuals who have internalized both the necessity of laws and the possibility of putting the laws into question, of individuals capable of interrogation, reflec-

31. *Nicomachean Ethics* E, 4, 1130 b 4–5, 25–26.

32. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, bk. I, ch. 6. English translation taken from *Social Contract. Essays by Locke, Hume, Rousseau* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

33. Castoriadis, “La Logique des magmas et la question de l’autonomie,” in *Domaines*, pp. 417–18; also “The Greek *Polis* . . .” ch. 5 of this book, pp. 114–20.

tiveness, and deliberation, of individuals loving freedom and accepting responsibility.

Autonomy is, therefore, the project—and now we are adopting both the ontological and the political point of view—that aims:

- in the broad sense, at bringing to light society's instituting power and at rendering it explicit in reflection (both of which can only be partial); and
- in the narrow sense, at resorbing *the political*, as explicit power, into politics, as the lucid and deliberate activity whose object is the explicit institution of society (and thus, also, of any explicit power), and its working as *nomos*, *dike*, *telos*—legislation, jurisdiction, government—in view of the *common ends* and the *public endeavors* the society deliberately proposes to itself.

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