

No God, No Caesar, No Tribune! . . .

Cornelius Castoriadis Interviewed by Daniel Mermet¹

Translated by Gabriel Rockhill and the Villanova French Translation Workshop²

ABSTRACT: In this interview, Cornelius Castoriadis explains and develops many of the central themes in his later writings on politics and social criticism. In particular, he poignantly articulates his critique of contemporary pseudo-democracy, while advocating a form of democracy founded on collective education and self-government. He also explores how the “insignificance” in the current political arena relates to insignificance in other areas, such as the arts and philosophy, to form the core feature of our *Zeitgeist*. Finally, he seeks to break through the ideological fog of liberalism and privatization in order to voice a radical appeal for an autonomous, self-limiting society.

Daniel Mermet: Why this title, *The Rise of Insignificance*?³ Is this the defining characteristic of our age?

Cornelius Castoriadis: What characterizes the contemporary world is, of course, crises, contradictions, oppositions, fractures, etc., but what strikes me above all is precisely *insignificance*. Let’s take the quarrel between the right and the left. Presently, it has lost its meaning. It’s not because there’s not anything to fuel a political quarrel, and even a very extensive political quarrel, but because both sides say the same thing. As of 1983, the socialists established one policy; then Balladur came along. He had the same policy. Then the socialists returned; they had, with Bérégovoy, the same policy. Balladur [14] returned; he had the same policy.⁴ Chirac won the elections saying, “I’m going to do something different,” and he had the same policy. This distinction lacks meaning.

D.M.: By which mechanisms is this political class reduced to powerlessness? It’s a buzzword today, “powerlessness.”

C.C.: No it’s not a buzzword; they are powerless, that’s for sure. The only thing they can do is swim downstream, which is to say apply the ultraliberal policy that is in fashion. The socialists haven’t done anything different, and I don’t think they

would do anything different if they returned to power. They are not statesmen [*politiques*], in my opinion, but politicians [*politiciens*] in the sense of micro-politicians [*micropoliticiens*], people on the hunt for votes by any means.

D.M.: Political marketing?

C.C.: Yes, it's marketing. They have no program. Their aim is to stay in power or to return to power, and for that they're capable of anything. Clinton campaigned solely by following the polls—"If I say this, is it going [15] to fly?"—each time taking the winning option for public opinion. As they say: "I am their leader, therefore I'm led by them." What's fascinating in our age, as in all ages moreover, is the way things conspire. There is an intrinsic link between this type of political nullity, politics becoming worthless, and insignificance in other domains, in the arts, in philosophy, or in literature. This is the spirit of the times: without any conspiracy by some power that one could designate, everything conspires, in the sense of radiating in the same direction, for the same results, that is to say, insignificance.

D.M.: How should politics be done?

C.C.: Politics is a strange profession, even the aforementioned politics. Why? Because it presupposes two abilities that have no intrinsic relation. The first is to come to power. If you don't come to power, you can have the best ideas in the world, and it's of no use. There is thus an art of coming to power. The second ability is, once you come to power, to do something with it, that is to say, to govern. [16] Napoleon knew how to govern; Clemenceau knew how to govern; Churchill knew how to govern. These are people who aren't of the same political alignment as me, but what I'm describing here is a historical type. Nothing guarantees that someone who knows how to govern knows, for all that, how to come to power. In an absolute monarchy, what did it mean to come to power? It meant to flatter the king, to be in the good graces of Madame de Pompadour.⁵ Today, in our pseudo-democracy, to come to power means to be telegenic, to sniff out public opinion. Once in power, what do you do? What Mr. Chirac is currently doing: nothing. You swim downstream. As needs be, you change hats because you recognize that in order to come to power you told stories, and that these stories don't apply.

D.M.: You say "pseudo-democracy."

C.C.: I've always thought that so-called representative democracy is not a true democracy. Its representatives only minimally represent the people who elect them. First they represent themselves or represent particular interests, the lobbies, etc. And, even if that wasn't the case, to say that someone is going to represent me in an irrevocable manner for five years [17] amounts to saying that I divest myself of my sovereignty as part of the people. Rousseau already said this: the English

believe that they are free because they elect representatives every five years, but they are free only one day every five years: the day of the election.

And even that isn't true. The election is rigged, not because the ballot boxes are being stuffed, but because the options are determined in advance. No one asked the people what they wanted to vote on. They are told, "vote for or against the Maastricht Treaty," for example. But who made the Maastricht Treaty? It wasn't us. There is Aristotle's wonderful phrase responding to the question, "Who is the citizen?": "The citizen is someone who is able to govern and to be governed."⁶ Are there forty million citizens in France at the moment? Why wouldn't they be able to govern? Because all political life aims precisely at making them forget how to govern. It aims at convincing them that there are experts to whom matters must be entrusted. There is thus a political counter-education. Whereas people should accustom themselves to exercising all sorts of responsibilities and taking initiatives, they accustom themselves to following the options that others present to them or voting for those options. And since people are far from being [18] stupid, the result is that they believe in it less and less, and they become cynical, in a kind of political apathy.

D.M.: Civic responsibility, democratic practice, do you think that it was better in the past? That elsewhere, today, it's better than in France?

C.C.: No, elsewhere, today, it's certainly not better. It can even be worse. Once again, the American elections illustrate this. But, in the past, it was better from two points of view.

In modern societies, let's say starting from the American and French Revolutions until about the Second World War, there was still a lively social and political conflict. People opposed one another. People demonstrated. They didn't demonstrate for a particular SNCF⁷ route—I'm not saying this is contemptible, it's at least a goal—but in the past the workers demonstrated or went on strike for political causes and not only for petty corporatist interests. There were major questions that concerned all salaried employees. These struggles marked the last two centuries. However, what we observe now is a decline in [19] people's activity. And there is a vicious circle. The more people withdraw from activity, the more some bureaucrats, politicians, so-called people in charge, take the lead. They have a good justification: "I take the initiative because people aren't doing anything." And the more those people dominate, the more the others say to themselves, "It's not worth it to get involved; there are enough of them dealing with it and, in any case, there's nothing one can do about it." That's the first point of view.

The second point of view, linked to the first, is that of the dissolution of the grand political ideologies—either revolutionary or truly reformist—that really wanted to change things in society. For a thousand and one reasons, these ideologies have been discredited; they have ceased to correspond to the times, to

correspond to people's aspirations, to the situation of society, to historical experience. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of communism was an enormous event. Can you show me one single person among the politicians—not to say political schemers—on the left, who has truly reflected on what has happened, on the reasons why this has happened, and who has, as we foolishly say, learned lessons from it? An evolution of this kind, first of all in its initial phase—the advent of [20] monstrosity, totalitarianism, the gulag, etc.—and then in its collapse, merited a very in-depth reflection and a conclusion regarding what a movement that wants to change society can do, must do, must not do, cannot do. Absolutely no reflection! How, then, do you want what one calls the people, the masses, to arrive at their proper conclusions, when they are not really enlightened?

You were talking to me about the role of intellectuals. What are these intellectuals doing? What have they done with Reagan, Thatcher, and with French socialism? They brought back the hard-line liberalism from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the one that we had been fighting against for one hundred and fifty years and that would have driven society to catastrophe because, in the end, old Marx wasn't entirely wrong. If capitalism had been left to itself, it would have collapsed a hundred times. There would have been a crisis of overproduction every year. Why hasn't it collapsed? Because the workers struggled. They imposed wage increases, thereby creating enormous markets of internal consumption. They imposed reductions in working hours, which absorbed all of the technological unemployment. Now we are surprised that there is unemployment. But since 1940 working hours haven't [21] noticeably diminished. Nowadays we quibble, "thirty-nine hours," "thirty-eight and a half," "thirty-seven and three quarters," it's grotesque! . . . So, there was this return of liberalism, and I don't see how Europe will be able to get out of this crisis. The liberals tell us, "it's necessary to have confidence in the market." But what these neo-liberals are telling us today, the academic economists themselves refuted in the thirties. They showed that there can be no equilibrium in capitalist societies. These economists were neither revolutionaries nor Marxists! They showed that everything the liberals relate concerning the virtues of the market that would guarantee the best possible allocation, that would guarantee resources, the most equitable distribution of income possible, they showed that all of this is nonsense! All of this has been demonstrated and never refuted. But there is this grand economico-political offensive by the dominating and ruling strata that can be symbolized by the names of Reagan and Thatcher, and even Mitterrand for that matter! He said, "Alright, you've laughed enough. Now we are going to fire you, we are going to slim down the industry—we are going to eliminate the 'excess fat,' as Mr. Juppé says—and then you will see that the market, in the long run, will guarantee you [22] well-being." In the long run, but in the meantime there is 12.5 percent of official unemployment in France.

D.M.: Why isn't there opposition to this liberalism?

C.C.: I don't know; it's extraordinary. We spoke of a sort of terrorism of conformist thought, that is to say of non-thought. It is unique in its conformity in the sense that it is the first form of thought that is complete non-thought, liberal conformist thought that no one dares to oppose.⁸ Currently, there is a sort of victorious discourse of the right that is not a discourse but affirmations, empty discourses. And behind this discourse, there is something else, which is what is most grave.

What was liberal ideology in its heyday? Around 1850, it was a widespread ideology because there was a belief in progress: "Get rich!" These liberals thought that progress would bring about an elevation of economic well-being. But even when people weren't getting rich, in the exploited classes, there was a move toward less work, toward less arduous tasks, in order to be less stultified by industry. It was the great theme of the age. Benjamin Constant says as much: "the workers cannot vote because they are stultified by industry [23] (he says it straight out; people were honest back in the day!), thus a voting system based on the poll tax is necessary." But subsequently, working hours diminished, there was literacy, there was education, there was enlightenment, which was no longer the subversive Enlightenment of the eighteenth century but enlightenment all the same, which spread through society. Science develops, humanity becomes more humane, societies become more civilized, and little by little, asymptotically, we will arrive at a society where there will be practically no longer any exploitation: this representative democracy will tend to become a true democracy.

D.M.: Not bad?

C.C.: Not bad. Except that it didn't work, and it doesn't work like that. The rest happened, but men did not become more human, society did not become more civilized for all that. Capitalists did not soften up. We see that now. It's not the fault of men; it's the system. The result is that, from the inside, people no longer believe in this idea. The mood, the general frame of mind, is one of resignation. Today, what dominates is resignation, even among the representatives of liberalism. What's the major argument at the [24] moment? "Perhaps this is bad, but the alternative is worse." Everything boils down to this. And it's true that this has numbed quite a lot of people. They tell themselves: "If we change things too much, we're headed for a new Gulag." That's what's behind the ideological exhaustion of our age, and I think that we will get out of this only by a resurgence of a powerful critique of the system and a revival of people's activity, of their participation in communal affairs. It is a tautology to say that, but we must wait, we must hope, and we must work in this direction.

D.M.: The political elite reduced to serving as lackey for the World Company, guard-dog intellectuals, the media that has betrayed its role as an oppositional force, these are some of the causes and some of the symptoms of this rise of insignificance.

C.C.: But at present, we're feeling the tremors of a revival of civic activity. Here and there, we're nonetheless starting to understand that the "crisis" is not an inevitable outcome of modernity to which we must submit, "adapt," for fear of archaism. Thus the problem of the role of citizens is raised and the aptitude of each person to exercise rights and democratic duties with the aim—sweet and [25] beautiful utopia—of getting out of generalized conformism.

D.M.: Your colleague and accomplice, Edgar Morin, talks about the generalist and the specialist. Politics requires both: the generalist who knows next to nothing about a little of everything, and the specialist who knows everything about a single thing but not the rest. How is a good citizen made?

C.C.: This dilemma has been posed since Plato. Plato said that the philosophers, who are above the specialists, must rule. In Plato's theory, they have a view of everything. The other alternative was Athenian democracy. What were the Athenians up to? Indeed, something very interesting. It's the Greeks who invented elections. It's a historically attested fact. Perhaps they were wrong, but they invented elections! Who was being elected in Athens? The magistrates weren't being elected. The magistrates were being appointed by drawing lots or by rotation. For Aristotle, remember, a citizen is someone who is capable of governing and being governed. Everyone is capable of governing, so lots are drawn. Why? Because politics is not the business of specialists. There is no science of [26] politics. There is opinion, the *doxa* of the Greeks; there's no *episteme*.⁹ I'd like to point out, moreover, that the idea that there aren't specialists of politics and that all opinions are of equal worth is the only reasonable justification for the principle of the majority. Thus, for the Greeks, the people decide and the magistrates are chosen by drawing lots or appointed by rotation. There are specialized activities because the Athenians weren't crazy. Indeed, they did rather significant things; they made the Parthenon, etc. For these specialized activities—the setting up of shipyards, the construction of temples, the waging of war—specialists are necessary. Therefore, such specialists are elected. That's what an election is, because "election" means election of the best. And what is the election of the best based on? Well, that's where the education of the people comes in, since they are led to choose. A first election takes place, a mistake is made, it's noticed, for example, that Pericles is a deplorable strategist; well, then, he is not re-elected, or he's even dismissed. But the postulate according to which *doxa*, opinion, is equally shared, is of course an entirely theoretical postulate. For this postulate to have a bit of substance, *doxa* must be cultivated. And [27] how can a *doxa* concerning the government be cultivated? Well, through governing. So democracy—this is what's important—is a matter of educating citizens, something that does not exist at all today.

Recently, a magazine published a statistic indicating that 60 percent of congressmen admit that they don't understand anything about the economy,

congressmen, in France, who are going to make decisions, who are making decisions all of the time! They vote on the budget, they increase or decrease taxes, etc. In truth, these congressmen, just like cabinet members, are slaves to their specialized advisors. They have their experts, but they also have their prejudices or preferences. And if you closely follow how a government, a large bureaucracy, functions—as I have done in other circumstances—you see that those who are in charge trust the experts, but they choose experts who share their opinions. You will always find an economist who will tell you, “Yes, yes, this must be done,” or a military expert who will tell you, “Yes, nuclear armament is necessary” or “Nuclear armament is not necessary”: anything and everything. This is an utterly insipid game, and this is how we are currently being governed. Hence the dilemma of Morin and Plato: [28] specialists or generalists. Specialists in the service of people, that is the question, not in the service of a few politicians. And people learning to govern by governing.

D.M.: You said “education,” and you say, “this is not the case today.” More generally, what mode of education do you envisage? What mode of distributing knowledge?

C.C.: There are many things that would need to be changed before we could talk about truly educational activity at the political level. The principle education in politics is active participation in affairs, which implies a transformation of institutions that encourages this participation and that makes it possible, whereas contemporary institutions repel, distance, dissuade people from participating in affairs. But this is insufficient. It is necessary for the people to be educated, and to be educated for the governing of society. It is necessary for them to be educated in the *res publica*. And yet, if you take contemporary education, it has nothing whatsoever to do with this. We learn specialized things. Indeed, we learn to read and to write. This is very good; it is necessary that everyone know how to read and write. Moreover, among the Athenians, no one was illiterate; [29] almost everyone knew how to read, and it is because of this that they inscribed the laws in marble. Everyone could read them, and so the famous adage, “All are presumed to know the law,” had meaning. Today, you can be condemned because you committed an offence even though you can not know the law, and you are still told, “you are presumed to know the law.” Thus, education should be much more centered on communal matters. The mechanisms of the economy, the mechanisms of society, of politics, etc., should be made understandable. We are not capable of teaching history. History as we teach it to children bores them to death, whereas it could fascinate them. We should teach a true anatomy of contemporary society: how it is, how it functions.

D.M.: You have spoken and written a lot about the movement of May ’68 that, with Edgar Morin and Claude Lefort, you have called “the breach.” Today, this period

is a golden age for the youth who regret not to have lived through it. If one thinks back to this period, one is struck by the blindness: this revolutionary, romantic, absolute, doctrinaire behavior without any basis, in complete ignorance. When I'm told today, "You're lucky, you lived through '68," I [30] respond, "Wait a minute, the cultural level, the level of knowledge was a lot lower than today." Am I right?

C.C.: Yes, you're right, from a certain point of view, which is very important. But it is not so much a question of the level of knowledge, I think. It's the tremendous domination by ideology in the strict sense and, I would say, in the bad sense of the term. We can't say the Maoists didn't know; they had been indoctrinated or they indoctrinated themselves. Why did they accept indoctrination? Why did they indoctrinate themselves? Because they needed to be indoctrinated. They needed to believe. And this has been the great scourge of the revolutionary movement from the start.

D.M.: But man is a religious animal.

C.C.: Man is a religious animal, and this is not at all a compliment. Aristotle, whom I venerate and never stop citing, only once said something that is really an enormous, well, we can't say blunder when it comes to Aristotle, but all the same. When he says, "man is an animal who desires knowledge," it's false.¹⁰ Man is not an [31] animal who desires knowledge. Man is an animal who desires belief, who desires the certainty of a belief, hence the grip of religions, hence the grip of political ideologies. In the worker's movement, at the outset, you find a very critical attitude. Take these two lines, the second verse of the "Internationale," which is, to be sure, the hymn of the Paris Commune: "There is no supreme savior: no God"—exit *religion*—"no Caesar"—exit *Napoleon III*—"no tribune"—exit *Lenin*.¹¹ Isn't this the case? People had this need for belief. They fulfilled it as they could, some with Maoism, others with Trotskyism and even with Stalinism, since one of the paradoxical results of May '68 was not only to supply skin for the Maoist or Trotskyist skeleton but to increase, once more, the recruitment of the Communist Party, despite the absolutely hideous attitude of the Communist Party during the events of '68 and the Grenelle Agreements.¹² Today, how are we wiser than in May 1968? I think that perhaps the result, both of the consequences of May and of the evolution in the countries in Eastern Europe and of the evolution in general of society, is such that people have become much more critical. This is very important. To be sure, there is a fringe that still looks for faith [32] in Scientology, sects, or in fundamentalism, but this is in other countries, not so much in our own. However, people have become so much more critical, much more skeptical, which also inhibits them from acting, of course. Pericles, in the Funeral Oration delivered before the Athenians, said: "We are the only ones for whom reflection does not inhibit action." This is admirable! He adds: "The others either do not reflect and are reckless—they commit absurd acts—or, in reflecting,

they do nothing because they say to themselves: this view and this speech are as good as their opposites.”¹³ Yet, that’s just it: we are also currently, without a doubt, going through a phase of inhibition. Once bitten, twice shy. They had a taste of all this; they say to themselves, “that’s enough of the lofty speeches and all the rest!” Indeed, lofty speeches aren’t necessary, true speeches are. This is what doesn’t exist in a social projection [*projection sociale*], if I might say.

D.M.: With whom do you want to struggle? And against whom and against what?

C.C.: I want to struggle along with practically everyone, with the entire population, or almost, and against the system, and therefore against the 3 percent, the 5 percent of people who are really [33] staunch and un-educatable defenders of the system. This is the division, in my opinion. I believe that currently everyone in society—apart from 3 or 5 percent—has a personal and fundamental interest in things changing.

D.M.: But what would you say to the younger generation?

C.C.: If you’re putting it as a question of organization, I would say that there is no answer. Currently, this is also the question. One of my friends from the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Daniel Mothé—who is still my friend—wrote this extraordinary phrase: “Even the Roman Empire, in disappearing, left behind it ruins; the workers’ movement, in disappearing, only left refuse behind.” How do we get organized now? The question is “how can we get organized?” This question runs into the same obstacle, that is to say that people are not active enough at present to do something like that. In order to take up an organization of this kind, it’s necessary to be ready to sacrifice more than one hour Saturday night. This implies a rather significant undertaking, and very few people are currently disposed to do this. This is why I describe the era since 1960 [34] as an era of privatization. People have withdrawn into their little milieu, the nuclear family, not even the extensive family. In May ’68, we used to say “subway-work-sleep,” now it’s “subway-work-TV-sleep.”

D.M.: And no work? Can work be erased?

C.C.: Subway-work-TV-sleep and unemployment office.

D.M.: And the intense fear of losing one’s job! The panic is widespread, as it’s: “I don’t have it anymore or I’m not going to have it anymore.”

C.C.: Yes, absolutely.

D.M.: What makes your thought so rich is also its psychoanalytic outlook on the world. It isn’t that common to have, as such, several enlightening perspectives. Raoul Vaneigem published a book whose title is *We Who Are Desiring Without End* [*Nous qui désirons sans fin*].

C.C.: We who are deranged [*Nous qui délirons*]? Oh that, yes! We who are deranged! (laughter)

D.M.: What do you think of this irreducible desire that makes it such that history continues? [35]

C.C.: Well, in any case, there is an irreducible desire. Indeed. . . . It's a long story. Moreover, this wasn't always true; it's a relatively modern phenomenon. If you take archaic societies or traditional societies, there is no irreducible desire. We're not talking here about desire from a psychoanalytic point of view. We're talking about desire such as it is transformed by the socialization of peoples. These societies are societies of repetition. Yet, as it happens, in the modern era, there is a liberation in all senses of the term with respect to the constraints of the socialization of individuals. They say, for example, "you will take a wife from such a clan or such a family. You will have a woman in your life. If you have two of them, or two men, it will be in secret; it will be a transgression. You will have a social status, it will be this and not something else." There is a wonderful thing, in Proust, in the world of Combray. In Proust's family, someone—from the very proper bourgeoisie, the family he describes—who had married a duchesse or a princess, had fallen in status. Even though he had money, even though he became someone who left his caste to climb higher, he became a gigolo. And to climb higher was to fall in status. But today, we have entered into an era of illimitation [36] in all domains, and we have the desire for the infinite. Now this liberation is, in one sense, a great conquest. It's not a question of reverting to societies of repetition. But we must also learn—and this is one of my major themes—learn to self-limit ourselves, individually and collectively. And capitalist society today is a society that, in my eyes, is running into the abyss from every point of view because it's a society that doesn't know how to be self-limiting. And a truly free society, an autonomous society, as I call it, must know how to be self-limiting.

D.M.: To limit is to forbid. How does one forbid?

C.C.: No, not forbid in the repressive sense, but know that there are things we cannot do, or that we must not even try to do, or that we must not desire. Take, for example, the environment. We live in a free society on this marvelous planet that we're in the process of destroying. And as I utter this phrase, I have in mind the wonders of the planet. I'm thinking, for example, of the Aegean Sea, of snow-capped mountains, I'm thinking of the view of the Pacific from a spot in Australia, I'm thinking of Bali, of the Indies, of the French countryside [37] that we're in the process of demolishing and deserting. So many wonders are on the way to being demolished. I think that we should be the gardeners of the planet. We ought to cultivate it, cultivate it as it is and for itself, and find our life, our place, relative to this. Here we have an enormous task. And all of this could take up a large part of people's free time, people liberated from work that is stupid, productive, repeti-

tive, etc. Now this is clearly very far not only from the current system but from the dominant imagination of today. The imaginary of our age is the imaginary of unlimited expansion, it is the accumulation of junk: a TV in every bedroom, a microcomputer in every bedroom . . . this is what we must destroy. The system relies on this imaginary that is here and that functions.

D.M.: What you're continually talking about here is freedom?

C.C.: Yes.

D.M.: Difficult freedom?

C.C.: Oh yes! Freedom is very difficult. [38]

D.M.: Difficult democracy?

C.C.: Difficult democracy due to freedom, and difficult freedom due to democracy, yes, absolutely, because it is very easy to let oneself go: man is a lazy animal, it has been said. Here again, I return to my ancestors. There's a marvelous phrase from Thucydides: "It is necessary to choose: rest or be free." I think it's Pericles who says this to the Athenians: "If you want to be free, you have to work." You cannot rest. You cannot sit down in front of the TV. You are not free when you're in front of the TV. You believe you're free in zapping like an imbecile, but you aren't free; it's a false freedom. Freedom is not only Buridan's ass choosing between two piles of hay. Freedom is activity. And it's an activity that at the same time is self-limiting, that is to say, that knows that it can do anything but that *it mustn't do everything*. That's the great problem, for me, of democracy and of individualism.

D.M.: Freedom is made up of limits? Philosophizing is establishing limits?

C.C.: No, freedom is activity, the activity that knows how to set its own proper limits. [39] Philosophizing is thought. It is the type of thought that knows how to recognize that there are things we don't know and will never know.

NOTES

1. This interview took place in November 1996 and was published in the book *Post-scriptum sur l'insignifiance* suivi de *Dialogue* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube), 2004. The English translation of the entire book is forthcoming as *Postscript on Insignificance: Dialogues with Cornelius Castoriadis*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill, trans. John V. Garner, Gabriel Rockhill et alii (London: Continuum Books).—Translator
2. The French Translation Workshop is run by Gabriel Rockhill at Villanova University's Philosophy Department. The participants in this translation included Derek Aggleton, Peter DeAngelis, Jessica Elkayam, Katherine Filbert, John Garner, Patricia Grosse, Alex Kratchman, Anna Luckini, Summer Renault-Steele, Adrienne St. Clair, and Richard Strong. This interview is a lively oral exchange that was transcribed into print as a relatively informal discussion, meaning that it was not polished to

- abrogate the signs of an oral conversation (the original interview can be listened to at http://www.la-bas.org/article.php3?id_article=1530&var_recherche=castoriadis). The English translation aims at being faithful to the spry, colloquial nature of the discussion colloquial nature of the discussion (sometimes at the expense of polished prose, like the original French text).—Translator
3. Cornelius Castoriadis published *La montée de l'insignifiance* in 1996 as the fourth volume of *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*.—Translator
 4. The numbers in brackets refer to the original French pagination of the book referenced in note 1.—Translator
 5. Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764) was an influential mistress of Louis XV.—Translator
 6. Aristotle opens Book III of his *Politics* with the question “who is the citizen?” (1274b40–1275a1), and he later answers: “a citizen is one who shares in governing and being governed” (1283b40–1284a1). See *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2023, 2037.—Translator
 7. *Société nationale des chemins de fer français*, or the French National Railway.—Translator
 8. We have done our best to capture Castoriadis’s play on words and his suggestion that conformist thought (*la pensée unique*) is unique (*unique*) precisely because it is non-thought (*non-pensée*).—Translator
 9. Theoretically founded knowledge, science.
 10. Castoriadis is surely referring to Aristotle’s statement at the beginning of Book I (A) of the *Metaphysics*: “All men by nature desire to know” (980a22). See *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1552.—Translator
 11. This is a literal translation of the original French lyrics (*Il n’est pas de sauveurs suprêmes / Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun*), which were transcribed in the singular in the printed version of this interview: “*Il n’est pas de sauveur suprême / Ni Dieu, ni César, ni tribun*.” In English, these lines of the “Internationale” are usually rendered as follows: “No savior from on high delivers / No faith have we in prince or peer.”—Translator
 12. The Grenelle Agreements were negotiated May 25th and 26th, 1968, and led to a 25 percent increase in the minimum wage and a 10 percent increase in real wages. The base of the movement rejected these concessions, and the strikes continued.—Translator.
 13. Castoriadis appears to be referring to the following passage in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “The great impediment to action is, in our opinion, not discussion, but the want of that knowledge which is gained by discussion preparatory to action. For we have a peculiar power of thinking before we act and of acting too, whereas other men are courageous from ignorance but hesitate upon reflection” (2.40). The final lines of Castoriadis’s sentence (*il y a ce discours et il y a le discours contraire*) suggest that reflection—for others—leads to hesitation because all views/speeches (*discours*) appear to be equivalent.—Translator