

# Castoriadis, Arendt, and the Problem of the New

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Readers familiar with the work of Hannah Arendt will recognize in the title of this essay a phrase from *The Life of the Mind*. “The problem of the new” concerns the difficulty we have imagining an event that would not be what Kant called “the continuation of a preceding series.”<sup>1</sup> In Arendt’s telling, this problem haunts the entire spectrum of Western philosophy as well as political theory and praxis. At bottom, says Arendt, the new confronts us with the problem of freedom, with radical contingency: the “abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed that cannot be accounted for by a reliable chain of cause and effect and is inexplicable in Aristotelian categories of potentiality and actuality.”<sup>2</sup> Although thinkers like Kant knew that “an act can only be called free if it is not affected or caused by anything preceding it,” writes Arendt, they could not explain it within what they saw as the “unbreakable sequence of the time continuum,” within which every act appears as the continuation of a series.<sup>3</sup> So unable have philosophers been “to conceive of radical novelty and unpredictability,” says Arendt citing Henri Bergson, that

even those very few who believed in the *liberum arbitrium* have reduced it to a simple ‘choice’ between two or several options, as though these options were ‘possibilities’ . . . and the Will was restricted to ‘realizing’ one of them. Hence they still admitted . . . that everything is given. They never seemed to have had the slightest notion of an entirely new activity. . . . And such activity is after all called free action.<sup>4</sup>

According to Arendt, the problem of the new has confounded not only “professional thinkers” but “men of action, who ought to be committed to freedom because of the very nature of their activity, which consists in ‘changing the world,’ and not in interpreting or knowing it.” They too have covered over “the abyss of pure spontaneity” with “the device, typical of the Occidental tradition . . . of understanding the *new* as an improved restatement of the old.”<sup>5</sup> This device is at work in the paradigmatic act of freedom: the founding of a new body politic. Thus it was that the Romans turned to Virgil to explain the founding of their republic as a revival of Troy. Thus it was that the American Founding Fathers turned to the Romans when they too faced “the abyss of freedom.” Desperate to legitimate their free act, they anchored it in tradition. They tried to solve the “riddle of foundation – how to re-start time within an inexorable time continuum”<sup>6</sup> – in effect by denying that the sequence of temporality had been broken at

all. Covering over the abyss of freedom, they claimed to be founding “Rome anew,” when in truth, says Arendt, they were founding a “new Rome.”

It is in light of Arendt’s remarks on both the ambivalence that philosophers and political actors have had towards radical novelty and their temporal figuration of the problem of the new (the inexorability of the time continuum) that I come to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. Writing in a somewhat different idiom and to a different audience than Arendt’s, Castoriadis understands his project in the language of “autonomy.” Both thinkers, however, raise the same substantive political issue: namely, how to think – that is, produce meanings (Arendt) or significations (Castoriadis) for – democratic political action in terms other than those inherited from the Western philosophical tradition and what Castoriadis calls its “identitary logic and ontology.” According to this ontology, writes Castoriadis, “to be is to be determined.” “For there is no way within the logic-ontology of the same . . . to think of a creation,” he observes, “a genesis that is not a mere . . . engendering of the same by the same as a different exemplar of the same type.”<sup>7</sup>

The “ensemblistic-identitary logic” that Castoriadis uncovers in “inherited thought” brings with it a notion of time according to which nothing new can appear and, as Arendt put it, everything is already given. Working to develop an alternative ontology that would complement his political project of autonomy, Castoriadis counters the metaphysical conception of time as “what permits or realizes the return of the same” (e.g., “the unalterable cyclicity of becoming,” “repetition in and through causal determination,” etc.) with an alternative account of time as “an emergence of radical otherness, that is, absolute creation.”<sup>8</sup> In a variety of writings, then, he works out a way of thinking about time as “the very manifestation of the fact that something other than what exists is bringing itself into being, and bringing itself into being as new or as other.”<sup>9</sup> His vivid arguments against inherited notions of causality, being, determination, means-ends logic, etc. parallel, in intriguing and productive ways, Arendt’s critique of causality in human affairs and her account of action as spontaneous beginning.

Although Castoriadis’s intervention into the ontological assumptions of the metaphysical tradition is intriguing and valuable, what interests me here is not so much the alternative ontology he offers but, rather, the way in which he grafts his political project of autonomy onto that alternative ontology without reducing the project to the ontology. What Castoriadis sees – and this is crucial – is that the institution of the social-historical and the creation of imaginary significations always involve both the creation of radical otherness (the new) and the workings of ensemblistic-identitary logic (the inscription of the new in terms of the old). Thus, as important as it is to articulate an alternative ontology that contests the logic of the same, an ontology that acknowledges and celebrates the fundamental indeterminacy of what is, the political question is how to develop democratic practices that attenuate the ensemblistic-identitary logic which denies the contingency of human action and thus freedom.

Insofar as to move in the political realm is to move in the realm of human plurality, any such attenuation of ensemblistic-identitary logic must entail more than a philosophical project of developing a radical ontology which, in principle, can be done in solitude. That is why Castoriadis's rejection of "inherited thought" and his ontology of radical indeterminacy were shaped by his political project of autonomy, a project which, unlike the quest for sovereignty that dominates the Western tradition, requires the presence of others.

[T]he fact that the problem of autonomy immediately refers to, is even identified with, the problem of the relation of one subject to another – or to others; the fact that the other or others do not appear as external obstacles or as a malediction to be suffered – 'Hell is other people' [Sartre] . . . – but instead as constituting the subject, the subject's problem and its possible solution; this fact recalls what, after all, was certain from the start for anyone not mystified by the ideology of a certain philosophy, namely that human existence is an existence with others.<sup>10</sup>

For Castoriadis, the sovereign individual is never autonomous.

We can better appreciate the aforementioned difference between autonomy and sovereignty if we turn to the distinction that Arendt, in her discussion of the new, draws between a political and a philosophical conception of freedom. If we think of freedom as sovereignty, she argues, that is because we have imported a philosophical conception of freedom, construed as a property of individual will, into the political realm. "The notion that freedom is an attribute of will and thought rather than of action," says Arendt, is based on the notion that " 'perfect liberty is incompatible with the existence of society,' that it can be tolerated in its perfection only outside the realm of human affairs." Occluded in this solipsistic ideal is a view of freedom as emerging in the context of plurality and as a practice of doing and acting: not simply "I-will" but "I-can." Dependent on others, the "I-can" is a public form of praxis in a public space that is at odds with the philosophically derived view of "freedom as sovereignty, the ideal of a free will, independent from others and eventually prevailing against them." Freedom as sovereignty is a fantasy – no one is ever truly sovereign – but a dangerous one: it affirms the subject's capacity to begin anew but at the expense of denying its embeddedness in all that is given. Contesting this nonworldly conception of freedom, Arendt protests: "If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce."<sup>11</sup>

Like Arendt's, Castoriadis's conception of autonomy or freedom is not limited to the notion of intersubjectivity. It is not simply a matter of positing intersubjectivity against the so-called 'pure' subjectivity posited by the philosophical tradition or what he calls "inherited thought." "This existence with others," he writes,

which appears in this way as an extended intersubjectivity, does not remain – and indeed is not from the start – mere intersubjectivity. It is social and historical existence and, to us, this is the essential dimension of the problem. In a way the intersubjective

is the material out of which the social is made but this material exists only as a part and a moment of the social, which it composes but which it also presupposes.<sup>12</sup>

The social-historical, according to Castoriadis, both includes and exceeds the “unending addition of intersubjective networks”:

The social-historical is the anonymous collective whole, the impersonal-human element that fills every given social formation but which also engulfs it, setting each society in the midst of others, inscribing them all within a continuity in which those who are no longer, those who are elsewhere and even those yet to be born are in a certain sense present. It is, on the one hand, given structures, and, on the other hand, *that which* structures, institutes, materializes. In short, it is the union *and* the tension of instituting society and of instituted society, of history made and of history in the making.<sup>13</sup>

Intersubjectivity is a necessary (first) moment in a critique of the “old philosophical idea of abstract freedom”<sup>14</sup> but not adequate to reconceptualizing autonomy outside the limits of inherited thought. For human relations themselves are embedded in what Castoriadis calls “the institution of a given society,” that is, “the norms, values, language, tools, procedures and methods of dealing with things and doing things.”<sup>15</sup> To understand the project of autonomy, then, one needs to recognize not only that “the actual subject [is] traversed through and through by the world and by others,” and that this traversal is the very condition of a nonsovereign project of autonomy, but also that heteronomy, rule by another, takes the form of impersonal institutions which seem to have a life of their own.

Like Arendt, Castoriadis is deeply concerned with our tendency to ascribe agency to the alien forces of the institution and to deny our own freedom. Critical at once of the denial of freedom and of the equation of freedom with sovereignty, both thinkers argue that human action is always conditioned but in no way determined. “Men are conditioned beings because everything they come into contact with turns into a condition of their existence,” writes Arendt. “The things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. . . . Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. That is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings.”<sup>16</sup> Castoriadis makes a similar point when he asks:

Which is the part of all your thinking and all your ways of looking at things and doing things that *is not* to a decisive degree conditioned and codetermined by the structure and the meanings of the English language, the organization of the world it carries with it, your first family environment, school, . . . the opinions in circulation, the ways forced on you by the innumerable artifacts that surround you, and so on? If you can in all sincerity truly answer, ‘About 1 percent,’ you are certainly the most

original thinker ever to have lived. It is certainly not our merit (or demerit) that we do not 'see' a nymph inhabiting every tree or every fountain.<sup>17</sup>

And yet, he reminds us, if being conditioned were tantamount to being determined, what could possibly bring about new forms of society? As Arendt says, the conditions of human existence "never condition us absolutely."<sup>18</sup>

For both Castoriadis and Arendt, then, the conditions of human existence are conditions of possibility, not necessity.<sup>19</sup> The tendency to think of what it means to be a conditioned being in terms of necessity not only forecloses the new but restricts politics itself to a mere actualization of that which is already given in advance and which can be known or predicted on the basis of a total theory. "To demand [as orthodox Marxism does] that the revolutionary project be founded on a complete theory," writes Castoriadis,

is . . . to assimilate politics to a technique, and to posit its sphere of action – history – as the possible object of a finished and exhaustive knowledge. To invert this reasoning and conclude on the basis of the impossibility of this sort of knowledge that all lucid, revolutionary politics is impossible amounts, finally, to a wholesale rejection of all human activity and history as unsatisfactory according to a fictitious standard.<sup>20</sup>

Theory, he argues, is not produced in advance of political action but emerges out of political action itself.<sup>21</sup>

Foregrounding political action, Castoriadis, like Arendt, understands the problem of the new or freedom in modern terms as having the structure of an abyss, that is, as being fundamentally groundless. Ensemblistic-identitary logic and causal determination cover over that abyss by reducing the new to some version of the old. Conceptualized in terms of the power of beginning spontaneously, the problem of autonomy or freedom leads Castoriadis to develop not only a strong critique of that logic but also a deep ambivalence towards political form. What may appear to be a lack of attentiveness to political institutions in his work is symptomatic of this ambivalence. Democracy, as Castoriadis understands it, is not a consolidated political form but an ongoing practice of creating new institutions and ways of living. "The very object of praxis is the new."<sup>22</sup> It follows that democracy for him is not reducible to a set of formal institutions, let alone a particular form of government, be it "popular sovereignty" or "representative democracy." Rather, democracy entails a mode of living according to which one strives to enact the project of autonomy, a project according to which one treats oneself and others not as an end but as a beginning.<sup>23</sup> Castoriadis sets the "constitution" of "new institutions and of new ways of living"<sup>24</sup> against all means-ends logic in politics and every form of technique.

It is crucial to recognize, and not try to resolve, what for Castoriadis is the irreducible tension between the act of beginning and the consolidation of a political form, between what he calls the "instituting society" and the "instituted society." On

the one hand, to make Castoriadis the spokesman of certain kinds of democratic institutions can lead to a resolution of this tension which emphasizes the instituted over the instituting society; on the other hand, to make him the spokesman of the radical contingency of human affairs can lead to a different resolution of the same tension, one which emphasizes the instituting over the instituted society. What is interesting in Castoriadis's thought, however, is the refusal to resolve this tension in either direction and the insistence that democracy and the practices of autonomy or freedom are played out in the space between what is new (the instituting society) and what is given (the instituted society). As I argue below, the irreducible tension between the instituting and the instituted society, between autonomy or freedom as event and autonomy or freedom as form, leads Castoriadis, as it led Arendt, to foreground the crucial role of political judgment. It is judgment that allows us to inhabit the aforementioned space and to affirm our capacity to begin anew without enacting a fantasy of sovereignty and denying what is given.

The problem of the new, as both Castoriadis and Arendt see it, then, is not reducible to our failure to recognize contingency in human affairs but related to the difficulties that contingency raises for producing meaning. In "The Concept of History," Arendt explains these difficulties as follows:

Whoever begins to act knows that he has started something that he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable. That is what Kant had in mind when he spoke of the "melancholy haphazardness" (*trostlose Ungefähr*) which is so striking in the record of political history. "Action: one does not know its origin, one does not know its consequences: – therefore, does action possess any value at all?" Were not the old philosophers right, and was it not madness to expect any meaning to arise out of the realm of human affairs?<sup>25</sup>

Faced with the "frightening arbitrariness of action," observes Arendt, "mortal men" have sought meaning in "the process of history in its entirety."<sup>26</sup> For the modern age "nothing is meaningful in and by itself. . . . What the concept of process implies is that the concrete and the general, the single thing or event and the universal, have parted company. The process, which alone makes meaningful whatever it happens to carry along, has thus acquired a monopoly of universality and significance."<sup>27</sup>

In the wake of totalitarianism, however, the turn to history as process for producing meaning has collapsed. The problem of meaning for the late twentieth century, as Arendt explains, is twofold: (1) Totalitarian systems make facts, fabricate reality, in accordance with their own hypotheses, and this fabrication has created an epistemological crisis which renders traditional conceptions of objectivity meaningless and with them "the whole modern notion that meaning is contained in the process as a whole"; (2)

the moment man approaches this process in order to escape the haphazard character of the particular, in order to find meaning – order and necessity – his effort is

rebutted by the answer from all sides: Any order, any necessity, and meaning you will to impose will do. This is the clearest possible demonstration that under these conditions there is neither necessity nor meaning. It is as though the 'melancholy haphazardness' of the particular had now caught up with us and were pursuing us into the very region where generations before us had fled in order to escape it.<sup>28</sup>

Once "mastered" through the production of master narratives (progress, socialist revolution, etc.), which have collapsed under the weight, not of postmodern theory, but of the political history of the twentieth century, contingency now confronts us like an abyss: the abyss of freedom. The fact that it is no longer possible to cover over the abyss with those narratives, the fact that we are now face to face with the arbitrariness of human action, does not indicate a more hopeful future. Recognition of contingency is not the answer to a problem called closure, which, as both Arendt and Castoriadis show, goes under the name of traditional concepts of history. Contingency is a problem of meaning to which certain ways of thinking about history and thus producing closure have been seen as the "solution." What contingency confronts us with is the problem of the particular which, in the wake of totalitarianism, can no longer be made meaningful in terms of its place in an overarching process called progress.

Like Arendt, Castoriadis is concerned with the same "melancholy haphazardness" of the particular when he writes, in a polemical critique of postmodernism, that "the rejection of an overall vision of history as progress or liberation" has left us in a state where we are unable to adequately pose, let alone answer, the question: "Are . . . all historical periods and all social-historical regimes equivalent?"<sup>29</sup> Also like Arendt, he is deeply critical of past attempts to construe history as a process with a purpose or goal, for that response to the otherwise melancholy haphazardness of the particular denies creation, the emergence of otherness, the new. Castoriadis recognizes that the question, "To what extent . . . can society truly recognize in its institution its own self-creation?"<sup>30</sup> is a question – *the* question of revolution or political founding – that cannot be posed apart from the question of history. But the question of history and thus of the new, as both Castoriadis and Arendt understand it, is not simply an ontological one (i.e., history as creation, the emergence of radical otherness). It is a political question, a question of political judgment.

The problem that both Arendt and Castoriadis recognize, then, is not simply that the history of Western philosophy and politics amounts to a denial of creation, otherness, the new – and thus human freedom or autonomy. The problem rather is that, in order to recognize the new as such, one must be in a position to judge it. That is why Arendt so strongly opposed every attempt to assimilate the phenomenon of totalitarianism to previous forms of tyranny.<sup>31</sup> She also insisted that "for those engaged in the quest for meaning and understanding, what is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new [which it clearly is], but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment."<sup>32</sup> We are left

in the situation where our inherited categories of judgment have been destroyed by the very phenomenon of the new that demands our judgment. What Arendt saw in that situation was both a threat and a promise. The threat was that, confronted with this new phenomenon, we would not judge but attempt to explain it in terms of the old, especially through the use of inherited ideas of causality, which, like logical reasoning, deduces what is from what was. The promise was that the very loss of the “yardsticks by which to measure, and rules under which to subsume the particular”<sup>33</sup> would prompt us to recognize what is new in the phenomenon of totalitarianism, which is to say, prompt us to judge it, for the rules under which to subsume that phenomenon no longer exist.

According to both Castoriadis and Arendt, the practice of judgment excludes logical reasoning and its mode of deductive explanation in the historical sciences. In Castoriadis’s account, the inherited framework for understanding time (cause and effect, means and ends) is structured in precisely the same way as the syllogism, in which “conclusion and premises go with one another” – necessarily. “Causes go with effects, means go with ends. This *going with* is explicitly present at least since the Aristotelian definition of the syllogism: ‘a discourse in which, some things being posited, another thing . . . necessarily goes with them . . . by reason of the being of the former.’”<sup>34</sup> Syllogistic logic thus models a certain temporality, namely time as determination: everything is already given. To reason or judge in accordance with this logic is to blind oneself precisely to that which calls out for judgment: the new. For nothing new can emerge in the domain of a temporality construed on the order of logic. Insofar as “the question of history is the question of the emergence of radical otherness,” says Castoriadis, causal explanations in the historical domain “eliminate the question.”<sup>35</sup> Arendt makes the same point when she writes: “Newness is the realm of the historian. . . . Whoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality actually denies the subject matter of his own science.”<sup>36</sup>

History for both thinkers, then, is not a chain of cause and effect, in which an event “is the end and culmination of everything that happened before.” The problem, however, as Arendt sees and Castoriadis explains, is that, these intellectual arguments about contingency notwithstanding, we seem “unable to conceive of history without employing the category of causality.”<sup>37</sup> Causality is the mode we use to make sense of what has happened; indeed, “we think and we constantly make our own life, and the lives of others, in the mode of causality”<sup>38</sup> and thus necessity. Is this an intellectual or moral failure on our part? Is it a social “fact” of our nature as human creatures, a feature of our need (or desire) to produce some sort of unity or meaning out of past events? Is it intrinsic to the very practice of thinking itself (as Kant, among other philosophers, held)?

In Arendt’s telling, this tendency to think about what is in causal terms leads to a sense of fatalism and determinism. Following Bergson, however, she argues that the difficulty here is related to

the equally valid experience of the mind and of common sense telling us that actually we live in a factual world of *necessity*. A thing may have happened quite at random, but, once it has come into existence and assumed reality, it loses its aspect of contingency and presents itself to us in the guise of necessity. And even if the event is of our own making, or at least one of its contributing causes – as in contracting marriage or committing a crime – the simple existential fact that it now is as it has become (for whatever reasons) is likely to withstand all reflections on its original randomness. Once the contingent has happened, we can no longer unravel the strands that entangled it until it became an *event* – as though it could still be or not be.<sup>39</sup>

The difficulty we experience reflecting on this original randomness, then, does not amount to a failure on our part, which could be corrected by better ‘knowledge’ of contingency. As Arendt explains: “The impact of reality is overwhelming to the point where we are unable to ‘think it away’; the act appears to us now in the guise of necessity, a necessity that is by no means a mere delusion of consciousness or due only to our limited ability to imagine possible alternatives.”<sup>40</sup>

“At the root of many of the paradoxes of freedom,” writes Arendt, our tendency to assume that “everything real must be preceded by a potentiality as one of its causes implicitly denies the future as an authentic tense”<sup>41</sup>; and yet that assumption and denial seem to be part of the fabric of human reality itself. Indeed, the difficulty of recognizing the contingency of something that exists and that has “*become* the necessary condition of my existence,” says Arendt, points, on the one hand, to the fatal flaw in the notion of causality.

In other words, the Aristotelian understanding of actuality as necessarily growing out of a preceding potentiality would be verifiable only if it were possible to revolve the process back from actuality into potentiality, at least mentally; but this cannot be done. All we can say about the actual is that it obviously was *not* impossible; we can never prove that it was necessary just because it now turns out to be impossible for us to imagine a state of affairs in which it had not happened.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, even if we *know* that truth claims are out of place when it comes to causality – a point Arendt herself never tires of repeating – that does not mean we will stop making them or thinking of human affairs in terms of causality. The tension between what we know and how we act, according to Arendt, reflects the deep tension between the faculties of willing and thinking.

That is what made John Stuart Mill say that ‘our internal consciousness tells us that we have a power [i.e., freedom], which the whole outward experience of the human race tells us we never use’; for what does this ‘outward experience of the human race consist of but the record of historians, whose backward-directed glance looks toward what *has been* – *factum est* – and has therefore already become necessary?<sup>43</sup>

Every story (i.e., not just ‘fiction’ but every account of what is) eliminates as the condition of its telling the ‘accidental elements,’ says Arendt. It is not just that no one storyteller could possibly enumerate all the elements that composed an event, but also that, “without an a priori assumption of some unilinear sequence of events having been caused necessarily and not contingently, no explanation of any coherence would be possible.”<sup>44</sup> The question would be: Could one tell a story which recognizes contingency, which shows not just what has been – *factum est* – but that ‘it could have been otherwise’? If Arendt is right, we cannot eliminate causality from the telling of a story, but perhaps we can give an account of what has happened which, though it recognizes causality, shows causality itself to be contingent. This possibility is suggested in Arendt’s turn to the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus, who, in contradistinction to the entire philosophical tradition before him, affirms “the contingent character of processes”: “the theory that all change occurs because a plurality of causes happens to coincide, and the coincidence engenders the texture of reality.” This coincidence of causes, as Arendt explains, saves both freedom and necessity. To say something “is caused contingently,” as Scotus does, is to affirm that “it is precisely the causative element in human affairs that condemns them to contingency and unpredictability.”<sup>45</sup>

Like Arendt, Castoriadis sees how the simple fact of one’s existence in a given reality makes it difficult to recognize in what is anything other than what was meant to be. That Castoriadis recognizes the complexity of the problem described by Arendt can be seen in his critique of Marx’s view of history. On the one hand, Marx clearly recognizes the “historical relativity of capitalist categories”; on the other hand, “he projects them (or retro-jects them) onto the whole of human history.” This is a criticism not of Marx, says Castoriadis, but of “historical knowledge in general. *The paradox in question is constitutive of any effort to think history.*” Although we should try to eliminate the sociocentric elements in our approach to the past, which tend to be accompanied by causal reasoning, we cannot treat our rootedness as only negative, for that would be to indulge in the rationalist fantasy of pure objectivity. Our rootedness is not only the condition of knowledge but also

a positive condition, for it is our own particularity which allows us access to the universal. It is because we are attached to a given view, categorical structure, and project that we can say something meaningful about the past. It is only when the present is intensely present that it makes us see in the past something different and something more than the past saw in itself. In a certain way, it is because Marx projected something onto the past that he saw something in it.<sup>46</sup>

This is an important insight.

Castoriadis criticizes the idea that we can get back to the past as it really was (the “effort to ‘think each society for itself and from its own point of view’”) and endorses instead a rather different conception of historical truth: “What can be

termed the truth of each society is its truth in history, for itself but also for all the others, for the paradox of history consists in the fact that every civilization and every epoch, because it is particular and dominated by its own obsessions, manages to evoke and to unveil new meanings in the societies that preceded or surround it." No individual or collective account of the past is ever definitive, adds Castoriadis, for every account is subject to future judgments.<sup>47</sup> The central point here is that every account of the past attempts to create a unity – "the universal" – out of the haphazardness of particulars. That attempt to create meaning does not necessarily entail the denial of contingency or indeterminacy; on the contrary, it is the very condition of recognizing what is new. Marx saw what was new because he projected present and thus foreign elements into the past. If the emergence of the new defines history, the new only emerges in the form of a story. Understood in this way, then, history is what Arendt calls the emergence of an event that "illuminates its own past."<sup>48</sup> Illumination is not deduction but the production of meaning through judgment and understanding.

I suggested earlier that the illusion that we could access the past as it really was is linked to the idea that every attempt to judge a society must be from a 'native' perspective. Should an ethnologist wish to study the Bororo, to take Castoriadis's example, he or she should try to see their world through their eyes. "The historian or ethnologist is obliged to try to understand the universes of the Babylonians or the Bororos, both their natural and their social world, as they lived it and, in attempting to explain it, to refrain from introducing into it determinations that did not exist for this culture (consciously or unconsciously)."<sup>49</sup> Although this may sound like an endorsement of relativism in judgment, Castoriadis is equally adamant that

the ethnologist who has so thoroughly assimilated the Bororo's view of the world that he or she can no longer see the world any other way, is no longer an ethnologist but a Bororo. . . . The ethnologist's *raison d'être* is not to be assimilated to the Bororo's but to explain to the Parisians, the Londoners, and the New Yorkers in 1965 the other humanity represented by the Bororos. And this he can do only through the *language*, in the deepest sense of the term, through the categorial system of the Parisians, Londoners, and so forth.<sup>50</sup>

Judgment requires striking a balance between the tendency to project our own values onto the past, on the one side, and the fantasy that one could 'go native,' on the other. "History is always history as it is for us – this does not mean that we can truncate it however we may wish or naively submit it to our projections, since what interests us in history is precisely our authentic *otherness*, other human possibilities in their absolute singularity."<sup>51</sup> What interests, in other words, is the emergence of what is new.

Judgment, then, is crucial to Castoriadis's understanding of the problem of the new: the recognition that "the social (or the historical) contains the non-causal as one of its essential moments" *and* the stubborn fact that "we think and we

constantly make our life, and the lives of others, in the mode of causality.” If it is at once true that “history cannot be thought in accordance with the determinist schema . . . because it is the domain of creation, *and* that “we cannot conceive of history without employing the category of causality,”<sup>52</sup> then the problem of the new is not merely one of developing another ontology. The project of articulating alternative ontologies is surely important – and Castoriadis has much to contribute to it. But the genuine challenge that he presents us with is how to affirm, in the context of our quotidian public practices, what that ontology asserts – the continual bursting forth of the new. Such affirmation will not get off the ground without the practice of judgment understood, not as the task of the professional historian, but as a central feature of the political project of autonomy.

## NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B478. Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, “Willing,” one-volume edition (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 205. According to Kant, phenomena must be reproducible in successive moments, for a representation takes time to be completed in my consciousness. But “if I were always to drop out of the thought the preceding representations (the first part of a line, the antecedent parts of the time period, or the units in the order represented), and did not reproduce them while advancing to those that follow, a complete representation would never be obtained” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A102). Furthermore, the reproduced representation must belong to the same whole as the present representations to which it is added. “If we were not conscious that what we think is the same as what we thought a moment before, all reproduction in the series of representations would be useless. For it would in its present state be a new representation which would not in any way belong to the act whereby it was to be gradually generated. The manifold of the representation would never, therefore, form a whole since it would lack that unity which only consciousness can impart to it” (B134, my italics).

2. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 208.

3. *Ibid.*, 210.

4. *Ibid.*, 32.

5. *Ibid.*, 198, 208, 216.

6. *Ibid.*, 214.

7. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 181.

8. *Ibid.*, 188, 190.

9. *Ibid.*, 185.

10. *Ibid.*, 108.

11. Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?,” *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 155, 163, 165. “This identification of freedom with sovereignty is perhaps the most pernicious and dangerous consequence of the philosophical equation of freedom and free will. For it leads either to a denial of human freedom – namely, if it is realized that whatever men may be, they are never sovereign – or to the insight that the freedom of one man, or group, or a body politic can be purchased only at the price of the freedom of, i.e., the sovereignty, of all others. Actually it is as unrealistic to deny freedom because of the fact of human non-sovereignty as it is dangerous to believe that one can be free – as an individual or as a group – only if he is sovereign” (164). Since freedom is no attribute of the will but only possible in the sphere of human plurality, according to Arendt, the free act is never that of a sovereign subject.

12. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 108.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 106, 107.

15. Castoriadis, "The Imaginary: Creation in the Social-Historical Domain," *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, tr. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 6.

16. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 9.

17. Castoriadis, "The Imaginary," 7.

18. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 11.

19. An important reason for this is given in Arendt's turn to the Christian philosopher Duns Scotus, who affirms that causality itself is contingent. A number of causes are at play in any event, but their coincidence in itself contingent. Thus even if we could know all the causes at work in any particular event – an impossibility when it comes to explaining human behavior – we are still left with the contingent fact of those causes coinciding. The conditions of human existence, then, are always coming together in new configurations which, though we may speak of them as causes, are themselves formed contingently, not necessarily. I discuss Arendt's reading of Duns Scotus below.

20. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 75.

21. Arendt once described action in terms of the biblical phrase, "Lord, forgive them for what they do," because in her view action has consequences that cannot be foreseen (which does not make it blind). Praxis is not blind in Castoriadis account either, but entails a form of "doing" that is inassimilable to both absolute knowledge and technique.

22. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 77.

23. *Ibid.*, 75.

24. *Ibid.*, 133.

25. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 84–85.

26. *Ibid.*, 85.

27. Arendt compares this modern notion of process to the Greek and Roman idea "that the meaning or . . . the lesson of each event, deed, or occurrence is revealed in and by itself. This . . . does not exclude either causality or the context in which something occurs; . . . But causality and context were seen in a light provided by the event itself, illuminating a specific segment of human affairs; they were not envisaged as having an independent existence of which the event would be only the more or less accidental though adequate expression. Everything that was done or happened contained and disclosed its share of 'general' meaning within the confines of its individual shape and did not need a developing and engulfing process to become significant. . . . Our notion of historical process overrules both concepts, bestowing upon mere time sequence an importance and dignity it never had before." *Ibid.*, 64–65.

28. *Ibid.*, 89.

29. Castoriadis, "The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Conformism," *World in Fragments*, 41.

30. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 215.

31. In addition to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, see Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 307–27, esp. 311–14.

32. *Ibid.*, 318.

33. *Ibid.*, 321.

34. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 184.

35. *Ibid.*, 172.

36. Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 319.

37. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 43.

38. *Ibid.*, 43.

39. Arendt, *Life of the Mind, Willing*, 138, see also 31. Arendt takes this point from Henri Bergson, who says: "For the possible is only the real with the addition of an act of mind which throws its image back into the past, once it has been enacted. But that is exactly what our intellectual habits prevent us from seeing." *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. Mabelle L. Anderson (New York: Citadel Press, 1992), 100. Although Arendt seems to be saying that the past presents itself to us in a certain way, e.g. as necessity, her view is different from empiricist accounts

that put meaning in the object. Whether we see an object under multiple aspects depends not on something in the object but on the space in which the object is seen. Totalitarian societies and mass societies, for example, are ones in which objects are seen only under one aspect, for the space between people, which those views both constitute and are constituted by, has disappeared.

40. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 30.

41. *Ibid.*, 15.

42. *Ibid.*, 139. Oddly enough, says Arendt, this simple point, according to which “not freedom but necessity . . . appears as an illusion,” has never played any role in the endless discussions of necessity versus freedom,” with the exception of Henri Bergson and the Christian philosopher Duns Scotus (31). Although fatalism is an outright denial of the future tense and, as Cicero showed, leads in any case to an infinite regress, its appeal lies in the serenity it offers the thinking ego: “the mind is released from any all necessity of motion.” See 139, 36.

43. *Ibid.*, 139.

44. *Ibid.*, 140.

45. *Ibid.*, 138.

46. Castoriadis, “The Retreat from Autonomy,” 34.

47. *Ibid.*, 34–35.

48. Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 319.

49. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution of Society*, 163.

50. *Ibid.*, 168.

51. *Ibid.*, 163.

52. *Ibid.*, 43.