

Extrait du Revue du Mauss permanente

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The ambiguity of the modern conception of autonomy and the paradox of culture

- Supplément du MAUSS - Articles -

Date de mise en ligne : Thursday 20 December 2007

Description :

En s'appuyant sur une connaissance fine des débats français sur la question (Castoriadis, Dupuy, Gauchet, Caillé, Dumont, Morin etc.), Dominique Bouchet soutient l'idée - qui est au fond celle de Claude Lefort - qu'individus et société entretiennent une relation de transcendance mutuelle, ce que ne comprennent ni l'individualisme méthodologique, ni le holisme.

Revue du Mauss permanente

ABSTRACT Grounded in newer French socio-political philosophy, this text deals with the paradoxical situation in which the interpretation of society as well as the relation between the individual and the social remains ambiguous even though autonomy and interrogation of the social emerges : Autonomy remains trapped between transcendence and immanence. Modernity is when society claims to know that it has to produce its own myths. Traditional societies did not relate to their myths as if they were their own products. Nevertheless, as soon as the traditional religious points of reference are disclosed and disappear, the community gives itself new points of reference in order to put the social at a distance. Thus the social creates a distance to itself and a mirror for itself in order to perceive itself and work upon itself. The article explores the questions of why this is so and the difference between heteronomous and autonomous autotranscendence.

Cet article a paru initialement dans la revue [*Thesis Eleven*, n°88, vol. 88, pp. 31-54.](#)

There is no possibility of understanding the problematic of the representation if we seek the origin of representation outside of representation itself. (Castoriadis, 1987: 283)

Every question on the why and wherefore of signification is already situated in a space created by signification and can be formulated only if this space is presupposed as unquestionable. . . . The institution presupposes the institution : it can exist only if individuals fabricated by the institution make the institution exist. This primitive circle is the circle of creation. (Castoriadis, 1997b: 314-15)

In social science in general, it is a fallacy to claim, as is often done, that traits, elements, or individuals are more tangible than sets or wholes. (Dumont, 1992: 11)

Is the ontological dignity of the social really degraded when one admits that the unification and harmonization of private interests depends upon the intervention of a 'natural' mechanism, that escapes human consciousness and human will ? (Gauchet, 2005a: 420)

Arbitrariness is to modernity what the necessary order of things is to tradition: what escapes mastery, what one does not have to answer for, what one cannot take over, that is the scene of exteriority. (Dupuy, 2002:

89)

The paradox of meaning is a form among many others that generates the fusion-séparation of the interior and the exterior ... of immanence and transcendence. The paradox consists ... in the fact that it is at the same time necessary and impossible to choose between immanence and transcendence. Every individual, every group, every society produces and receives meaning as something that is at the same time coming from deep down inside him or it and from authority which is exterior and superior to him or it. (Barel, 1989)

Introduction : the aspiration for autonomy

The aim of this text is to introduce the modern conception of the relation between the individual and the social. The issue is not to figure out what comes first : the individual or the social. Neither is it to settle whether one should methodologically start with the individual or the social. Rather, it is to present a sociological interpretation of the reasons why those questions remain unanswered and unsettled. My intention is to establish the social significance of these very questions. I shall explain what occurred as it became normal to discuss them and how this discussion participated in a radical redéfinition of the social bond. I shall try to elucidate why the debate about the relation between the social and the individual - which hinges on the longing for autonomy and revolves around the possibility of autonomy - remains so significant although less ambiguous.

My approach is grounded in newer French socio-political philosophy which I wish to propagate. The arguments given in this text are mainly from contemporary French thinkers such as Yves Barel, Alain Caillé, Cornelius Castoriadis, Louis Dumont, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Michel Freitag, Marcel Gauchet, Claude Lefort, Pierre Manent, Edgar Morin, Louis Quéré and Pierre Rosanvallon.

As its Greek etymology denotes, the word autonomy signifies the condition of an individual or a group capable of self-determination (Laharière, 1990: 199). For a group this entails its right to govern itself. For an individual it presupposes he or she not being infantile or in a pathological state of mind.

Already here we encounter the utopian dimension of this definition. Whether at the individual or the group level, the ability to manage one's own resources depends deeply on these resources which at both levels are not necessarily to be identified as a separate external entity. Even the most critical individual relies on what he has learned to perceive and express. And any social group will have difficulty in identifying the ins and outs of its norms and laws. The critical individual will have to admit how much he owes to his culture and how much he depends on others in order to express psychological and moral autonomy. The most cohesive group will always wonder who among them has greater influence and why certain issues have greater priorities than others (and there will hopefully always be someone to challenge the one who claims to have the overview).

Such issues have of course been central to philosophical thoughts for centuries. I shall just mention a few. Kant in his *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* released our will from any law of nature (Kant, 2000 [1788]: 33 Part I, Book 1, Chapter 1 §5). Hegel in his *Phenomenologie des Geistes* (Hegel, 1941 [1807]) made it clear that any human being depends on the other in his own being. 'I am, he says, a being by itself that is by itself only through someone else' (Sartre, 1969 [1943]: 293). Sartre underscored the importance of the project for humans at the individual and collective level : Man is what he wills, 'man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself' (Sartre, 1968 [1946]: 22), and as every man fashions himself, he contributes to the fashioning of mankind (1968 [1946]: 27). However, according to sociology, living in a world of representations and ideas that are already there is constitutive of human agency. Also, Freud made it clear that our deeper inner motives are not easy to unveil. Many during the last century reflected upon the fact that many positive collective intentions had negative effects resulting precisely in the reverse of what was expected by the actors. And some, like Deleuze, wondered why men struggle for their servitude as if it were their salvation. Why does the slave consent to his slavery, the exploited to his exploitation? This is a problem posed according to Deleuze by Spinoza and one that he, Deleuze, considers to be the fundamental problem of political philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972; Descombes, 1979, 1980), and which Lacan treats with the help of the concept not of liberty but of desire, stating that desire has its beginnings in the impossible, and is condemned to find its satisfaction only in dreams.

Exploring the interpretations of modern men's aspiration for autonomy, what seems at stake is the ability to act, the motive, intentions and results of action, the condition and factors of agency. Some call it freedom, but Castoriadis tells us that it is necessary to distinguish clearly and forcefully between the concept of autonomy and the old

philosophical idea of abstract freedom, which is more appropriately termed indeterminacy (Castoriadis, 1987). Autonomy, as Castoriadis sees it, leads directly to the political and social problem : 'one cannot want autonomy without wanting it for everyone and ... its realization cannot be conceived of in its full scope except as a collective enterprise' (Castoriadis, 1987: 107). This is because - as already stated - any person or any group always relies on the otherness in his, her or its thinking and actions. The other is in each case present even in the activity that ignores or eliminates it. We will always have to do with the other

if the problem of autonomy is that the subject meets in itself a sense that is not its own and that it must transform this sense in using it ; if autonomy is the relation in which others are always present as the otherness *and* as the self-ness of the subjects, then autonomy can be conceived of, even in philosophical terms, only as a social problem and as a social relation. (Castoriadis, 1987: 108)

The conceptualization of autonomy

Castoriadis's conception of autonomy is not only analytical but also political. He cannot conceive a discourse about autonomy that is not at the same time an affirmation of the democratic project. It is only in a democracy that people claim to make their own laws. Castoriadis calls that the *self-institution* of society. But since sociologists state that - even though in other societies men think of their laws as given - any given society in fact self-institutes itself, a distinction must be made between societies that do this in full awareness and those that don't. What characterizes a democratic society is that, at least in part, it self-institutes itself explicitly and reflectively. It recognizes in its rules, its norms, its values and its significations its own creations, whether deliberate or not (Castoriadis, 1997a: 340).

A radical distinction is introduced historically with the emergence of democratic societies and theoretically with the political philosophical reflection that goes with them. Castoriadis states that, in most places and times, societies lived in '*instituted heteronomy*' (Castoriadis, 1989, 1991). In those societies that believe in heteronomy and therefore do not seek autonomy, the reference to an external source of the law plays a central role. From this transcendental reference follows all the representations and significations about the world and the human condition. The most central political institution in such societies is a religious one, and the institutional dimension within society is negated and concealed. Society's members have, therefore, great difficulty in imagining any alternative order, whether political or cosmological. The question of the legitimacy of the social order in general - and of tradition in particular - cannot even be formulated.

Still, any social order in its being and becoming would be impossible if it was not for the creative imagination of humanity. Human society as a whole and its individual elements are inconceivable outside of what Castoriadis calls the *radical imaginary*. Humanity emerges from the Chaos, he says. Once society is established, representations appear at the collective and individual level. Without them neither individual nor collective creativity is possible. Those representations are called *significations* because they signify something : they make sense. They are not the reflection of what is perceived. They are not a necessary development of what is given before their emergence. They are arbitrary. The production of those significations can neither be reduced to one factor nor to all factors of their creation : the signification imposed on the world (which now includes society itself) escapes from determination. It is self-depositing because society is self-creation, because other questions could be asked and other answers could be given, in different ways, with other concepts and priorities. Other combinations of those could be chosen. Signification constitutes the world and organizes social life in a correlative fashion, enslaving it to specific ends. By so doing it covers over the chaos, positing itself as a negation of it, although it remains an expression and an interpretation of it and institutes a specific way of making sense. However, it is not chaos that expresses itself in a necessary way. The emergence of signification is self-creation.

The questions of origin, foundation, cause and end are posed in and through society, but society, like signification, 'has' no origin, foundation, cause, or end other than itself. It is its own origin - that is what self-creation means ; it does not have its genuine, essential origin in *something* that would be external to it, and it has no end other than its own existence as society positing *these* ends - which is merely a formal and ultimately an abusive use of the term *end* (Castoriadis, 1997b: 315).

Thus, as Suzi Adams stresses, 'Castoriadis does not speak in the sense of society encountering the world as such and articulating it ; instead the social imaginary significations bring it into being' (Adams, 2005: 32).

Not any more than a gravitational field can be said to have - or not to have - weight, can it be said that history has meaning. History is that in which and through which meaning emerges and evolves. There is no keystone to the edifice of significations, no answer to the question of the meaning of signification, to the question of the origin, cause, or end. 'Every question on the *why* and *wherefore* of signification is *already* situated in a space created by signification and can be formulated only if this space is presupposed as unquestionable' (Castoriadis, 1997b: 314). This is the modality of humanity's relation to the chaos which surrounds it and which it contains.

Of course there is the possibility to bind together the foundation of the world and the foundation of society in the social imaginary. However, this is not a necessity, but a creation. The social bond is then seen as the expression of a superior kind of bond. Humanity sees in its creations the expression of some rationality of some kind : a god, nature's laws, historical laws. Still, given when so doing, the specificity of the society and the modality of its creativity at the individual and collective level have to be qualified. Human agency, social institutions, individual preferences, the order imputed to things, culture, nature, gods and the like have to be differentiated and articulated within this bond.

The institution of society is the institution of social imaginary significations that have to confer meaning on everything. It is an unconscious general and special ontology as it does posit what is, what matters, what relates to what, what contains what and so forth. In so doing each society creating its signification system not only assigns meaning to each and everything, it registers and places at of this in a world correlative to and relying on this social imaginary.

However, even though society does institute its symbolism, it is not done with total freedom [1] and the world can never be totally tamed or enclosed by representation. It is always something else and something more. The question of the limits of that freedom remains. Signification has to face the question of the signification of the signification. It has to face 'the manifestation of the Chaos that its own creation constitutes' (Castoriadis, 1997b: 317).

The answer given in most societies has consisted of binding together the signification of being and the being of signification. It is the religious solution that postulates the homogeneity of being which subsumes everything under the same signification. Such a unitary ontology is consubstantial with the *heteronomy* of society, as it postulates an external source for the social thereby concealing the self-institution of society.

Heteronomy is, thus, the covering over by humanity of its own being as self-creation. It is also 'the denial of the "contingency" of signification and of the institution'. It is the denial of what Castoriadis designates as 'the elsewhere of signification relative to necessity and contingency' (Castoriadis, 1997b: 318; emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, even though humans can never stop outside of their signification system, it allows them in principle to question everything, including that system itself and their relation to it. In other words, the potential of language is boundless. It is not language that limits the creativity of humans, but the answers given. 'None of the traits specific to symbolism [2] ineluctably imposes the domination of an autonomous institutional symbolism on social life; nothing, in institutional symbolism itself, excludes its lucid use by society' (Castoriadis, 1987: 126). Heteronomy, the submission of society to its symbolism, is thus a possibility, not a necessity.

Still, autonomy is not likely to emerge in a society that denies its instituting dimension. Individuals in heteronomous societies are socialized in such a way that prevents the question of the legitimacy of tradition arising. Yet why did this question arise ? That this kind of meta-question can only be asked from within an autonomous society is one of sociology's central issues. Within the sociological tradition, many factors have been put forward in various combinations to explain this conundrum : the emergence of markets, the development of individualism, the gradual leveling of inequalities, the conflict between religious interpretations, the conflicts between religious and earthly powers [3], the ethical reinterpretation of religious ideologies, the confrontation between different cultures [4], the debate between revelation and demonstration, demography, technological development, the emergence of the state, its changing role, the growth of larger states and more [5]. We cannot introduce all these in this text where we want to focus on the ambiguity of the modern conception of autonomy and the paradox of culture. Rather than the historical developments, we are more interested in *the paradoxical situation in which the interpretation of society as well as the relation between the individual and the social remains ambiguous even though autonomy and interrogation of the social emerges. Autonomy remains trapped between transcendence and immanence.*

Notwithstanding this, autonomy did emerge. Explicit and unlimited interrogation came to play a central role. Questions become more valued than answers (Bouchet, 1994). This new social-historical *eidos*, this new relation to representation and signification, ushers in a new type of society and a new type of individual. Social autonomy 'implies and at the same time presupposes the autonomy of the individuals' (Castoriadis, 1997a: 340). This emergence is a moment of *creation* : 'The rise of unlimited interrogation creates a ... self reflectiveness, as well as the individual and the institutions which embody it' (Castoriadis, 1991: 163). To put a clear historical date on this crucial moment when things changed dramatically, let me mention that Machiavelli was 'the first to carry suspicion to the strategic point of men's life : their political life' (Lefort, 1972; Manent, 1995 [1987]: 14). From Machiavelli on, the issue is no longer to *preach* transcendental norms but to *understand* what is going on among men [6].

The reversal of autonomy

However, the relation between individual autonomy and social autonomy is not that evident. Pierre Manent asks : 'How can political legitimacy be founded on the rights of the individual, if he never exists as such, if he is always necessarily linked to other individuals, to a family, class, profession or nation ?' (Manent, 1995 [1987]: xvi). He explains how 'the political development of Europe is understandable only as the history of answers to problems posed by the Church, which was a human association of a completely new kind' (Manent, 1995 [1987]: 4). Each institutional response to the problems faced shaped new problems calling for new responses, thereby boosting political creativity.

At the origin of these creative developments is the specificity of the Catholic model of heteronomy :

The remarkable contradiction embedded in the Catholic Church leaves men free to organize themselves within the temporal sphere as they see fit, it simultaneously tends to impose a theocracy on them. It brings a religious constraint of a previously unheard of scope, and at the same time offers the emancipation of secular life. Unlike Judaism and Islam, the Church does not provide a law that is supposed to govern concretely all of men's actions in the earthly dry. (Manent, 1995 [1987]: 5)

Louis Dumont makes a similar point. He submits that :

Something of modern individualism is present in the first Christians and in the surrounding world, but it is not exactly individualism as we know it. Actually, the old form and the new are separated by a transformation so radical and so complex that it took at least seventeen centuries of Christian history to be completed, if indeed it is not still going on in our times. In the generalization of the pattern in the first place, and in its subsequent evolution, religion has been the cardinal element. (Dumont, 1982: 1; 1992: 24)

This possibility of an individual relation with one god and the contradictions embedded in the Catholic Church ended up restructuring the traditional human social universe, resulting in what could be called *the reversal of heteronomy*.

Marcel Gauchet is another important thinker who invites us to recognize Christianity's specificity as a major factor in our relations with nature, our forms of thought, mode of human coexistence and political organization :

If our social order differs so radically from previous ones by having successfully reversed heteronomy on every level, the seeds of this development are to be found in the unusual dynamic potentialities of the spirit of Christianity. They provide a coherent focal point that allows us to grasp the fundamental interdependence of such seemingly unrelated phenomena as the rise of technology and the development of democracy. Christianity proves to have been a religion for departing from religion. (Gauchet, 1997: 3-4, emphasis in original)

Within traditional society, it is through the divine other - which is supposed to have instituted society as it should be - that society is mirrored and becomes conscious of itself. The feeling of belonging to a community goes hand in hand with the feeling that neither the community nor its leaders can influence the destiny of the world. Government is only concerned by tradition, not by creativity. Any attempt at knowledge of the organization of society has to take up and repeat the very discourse that legitimates society's organization and can never exceed its bounds. Thus, a science of the social is not conceivable. In all societies where the answers are given and believed in, all questions can only lead to the same given and unquestionable answers. The questions are only meant to reassert the evidence of the answers. It is as if everything is done within society itself to avoid the possibility of the questioning of the transcendental reference.

Nevertheless, interrogation eventually came into play. The Protestant reform was of course an important moment of the erosion process of the transcendental reference : the suppression of the institutionalized mediation, the distinction between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*, the passage from loyalty to faith, from submission to responsibility, paved the way to English utilitarian empiricism, the rationalism of the Enlightenment and German idealism, each of which contributed to the emergence of the social sciences (Freitag, 1995: 175).

The genesis of political economics (Dumont)

However, it is worth noting that the first social science to emerge - political economy - really began to garner some empirical truth only after it had shaped its object - the social - in accordance to its demiurgic speculations (Caillé, 1986).

Here, Louis Dumont's seminal analysis of the genesis and triumph of economic thought cannot be ignored. In Charles Taylor's words, Dumont has shown 'what a shift of outlook was required before it could become conceivable that there be an independent science of this "economic" aspect of social existence' (Taylor, 1989: 286). The isolation of the economic domain cannot be seen just as a scientific discovery that people stumbled on. 'It reflects the higher value put on this dimension of human existence, the affirmation of ordinary life' (1989: 286). In other words : transcendence is no longer the focal point.

The transformation of English political philosophy into political economics would not be conceivable if people's ways had not changed, or - to be more specific and as Dumont puts it - if interpersonal relations had not already been

overridden by the relation between individuals and things. [7]What Dumont and a few others have demonstrated is the irruption of a radically new social world, that of market relationships : the radical segregation of the economic aspects of the social fabric and their establishment as an autonomous domain (Dumont, 1977: 6). A radical change such as the emergence of the sacrosanct market relationships means not only a transfer of focal point (even if it did not eliminate transcendence), but also the emergence of a new social logic, a logic that confines human relations to utilitarian issues, a logic that might mean the erosion not necessarily of the transcendental, but of the social. This is what Karl Polanyi pointed out 60 years ago, saying that if we allowed the mechanisms of the market to rule alone over the fate of human beings and their natural environment, it would actually destroy society (Polanyi, 1980 [1944]). It is not only ecological prerequisites and conflictual relations that are referred to here, but the complexity of social symbolics. Alain Caillé refers to this tendency in those terms : 'if economics and the market do aim at something, it is at the end of the symbolic' (Caillé, 1986: 27). However, before we get to that point, let me quote Karl Polanyi on 'the great transformation' of solidarity forms :

To the bewilderment of thinking minds, unheard-of wealth turned out to be inseparable from unheard-of poverty. Scholars proclaimed in unison that a science had been discovered which put the laws governing man's world beyond any doubt. It was at the behest of these laws that compassion was removed from the hearts, and a stoic determination to renounce human solidarity in the name of the greatest happiness of the greatest number gained the dignity of secular religion. The mechanism of the market was asserting itself and clamoring for its completion: human labor had to be made a commodity. Reactionary paternalism had in vain to resist this necessity. Out of the horrors of Speenhamland men rushed blindly for the shelter of a utopian market economy. (Polanyi, 1980 [1944]: 102)

That full promotion of the individual disclosed by Tocqueville (1969) as it emerged is concomitant, says Dumont, with this detachment within Society of a specialized sector of production and exchange acknowledged as emancipated and coming under its own regulation laws. The market is a moment of this process of dissolution of the ancient categories of subordination and dependence that Tocqueville revealed, ending up in 'the independent, autonomous, and thus (essentially) non social moral being ... found primarily in our modern ideology of man and society' (Dumont, 1977: 8, emphasis in original). Here is Dumont's thesis :

On the whole, economics seems to be one of two alternatives : it stands in opposition to the valorization of relation between men, which entails in one way or another the paramountcy of the social whole as against the individual, that is, holism, and hence - again in some manner - hierarchy, that is, the recognition of subordination, transcendence, etc., as rooted in man's nature. In brief, from Locke to Smith, and from Smith to Marx, it is a matter of property, of value, or labor - against subordination, a willed order, the State. It is economics, not by the side of politics, but superseding it. (Dumont, 1977: 168)

This breaking away within society of an autonomous sector of activity granted own regulation authority which is given power to regulate relations between men within society witnesses a new kind of social bond : a brand new kind of representation of the way society holds together emerges, along with a brand new way of letting actors manage material objects and undertakings. It is an inextricably linked two-faced process. The social imaginary and the social practices radically changed and - mind you, Mr Engels - it is impossible to say that one was more decisive than the other. However, it became possible to point out a spontaneous order factor obeying its own laws, developing itself independently of social actors' will and consciousness, thereby acting upon the social bond.

The identification - or designation - of an autonomous factor operating within the social does not necessarily mean a true mutation from transcendence to immanence. The fact that this factor is given almost a natural status tells how ambiguous the shift from heteronomy to autonomy has been. Even though the focus of attention shifted from the other of society to society itself, that is to say from transcendence to immanence, what was pointed out had more in common with natural phenomena than with contractual action and the will to establish one's own collective norms.

Nevertheless, it can be said that the social contract and the market are but two related answers to the same question concerning the nature of the social bond and the forces at stake in it (Rosanvallon, 1979). With those questions we witness the genesis of social awareness. However, the creation of the market [8] and the advance of economic ideology represent a significant change in the discovery of society. Once the market and political economy emerge, the main issue of politics is no longer an ethical one. The issue is no longer to regulate the passions by means of reason and power, as in the times of Descartes and Hobbes. It is the understanding of the functioning of the social that becomes the focus of interest. And the now established representation of society as some kind of entity with *internal* mechanisms that impose themselves upon everyone and that can be studied by anyone who wishes to do so was indeed an important shift in the social imaginary. That something internal can be considered as a powerful instance independently of an external will definitely indicates that the old ideology of domination and subordination no longer is in force. When it was current, it was impossible to consider seriously such an internal mechanism. Society could only hold together because of the will and workings of a transcendental being and the unquestioning and unconditional submission of its worldly subjects.

The advent of the individual and of the social proceeded from the same breakthrough as that scheme of will. The concept of God's will lost its power to explain the ins and outs of the social bond. The transcendental that predefined and imposed order gave way. An immanent organization, developing from within, emerged. *This new perceived order developed independently of individual wills but it nevertheless originated from individual actions.*

A brief summary of the theoretical developments of political economics illustrates this tremendous mutation. Quesnay (1694-1774) was the first to provide this idea of the economic domain as a consistent whole, as a whole made up of interrelated parts. With him the general conception of the universe as an ordered whole was projected on the economic plane. Still, even though the economic domain can now be thought of as a whole, it has not yet acquired autonomy. Man as free agent is not separated from natural laws and depends on their assent. 'With Quesnay order commands property, and property commands freedom' (Dumont, 1977: 46).

The decisive breakthrough came with Locke, who turned this line of command upside down. Thereby,

a holistic view centering on subordination and encompassing what we call economic phenomena was replaced by a view centering on property - that is, on the individual and on economics - and reducing politics to an ontologically marginal adjunct to be constructed by men according to their lights. (Dumont, 1977: 49)

In Locke (1632-1704), Dumont tells us, 'politics as such is *reduced to an adjunct of morality and economics*. Morality and economics provide, in the 'law of nature', the basis on which political society should be constructed' (Dumont, 1977: 54, emphasis in original). In Locke, subordination as a social principle disappears to be replaced by moral obligation, and this event embodies a sea change in the very essence of the political.

When we say that subordination is functionally replaced by moral obligation, we hint at a procédure for comparing holistic and individualistic values ; in some way, morality must provide an équivalent of social order : it may be considered from one angle as an internalization of directly social values. A process of this kind has been - and still is - at work all through the transformation : and, regarding Locke, I think the view is confirmed by the whole of his philosophy, general as well as political. Thus the 'true and solid happiness' that should be preferred by the free and rational creature is finally human order (or what remains of cosmic order) as it appears to the individuel, who is bound to think in terms of hedonism. (Dumont, 1977: 54, emphasis in original)

Mandeville (1670-1733) goes further and refers norms to observed facts. With him, *déduction* is replaced by empiricism.

Where Hobbes deduces subordination, Mandeville induces economic harmony. Contrary to the artificialism of Hobbes (and Descartes), we are invited to admit the existence in human society of an involuntary automatism, a natural fact. (Dumont, 1977: 80)

Thus, throughout the whole 18th century, there is a growing recognition of society. Still, the nature of the social bond is identified with a mere natural phenomenon. The symbolic is demoted from creativity, representation and consciousness to necessity, obligation and automatism. There is a shift from a transcendental point of reference to an immanent one. An immanent phenomenon is identified as the vital thing for the social bond. Still it is thought as a thing - that is to say, as having a physical nature, not as a 'fact of consciousness' or a 'symbolic system'. This is why Caillé, as we mentioned earlier, speaks of the end of the symbolic.

Nevertheless, this is also the advent of the individual : the individual is freed (or extricated) as he becomes an economic actor. Dumont remarks:

Everything points to the supremacy of the Individual having been bought at the price of the degrading relations between men to the status of brute natural facts. This change is consonant with the primacy of relations to things. (Dumont, 1977: 79)

The advent of individual society and the revelation of the social (Gauchet)

That the individual gets a supreme importance in the representation of the social does not mean that the social is forgotten. The advent of individual society means the recognition that human beings have direct access to the organization of their society. It means that this organization is their own doing and responsibility. It means the end of heteronomy. With the supremacy and self-sufficiency of the individual the deciphering of the social as a specific object of perception and analysis can begin. The social gets its own consistency. It becomes obvious that what each individual member of the community perceives of the functioning of society has little to do with actual social operations. Or, as the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) put it, the collective order is the result of human *action*, not of human *design* [9].

With the individual in the foreground the social gets more careful attention, but a specific form of attention. In other words, the supremacy of the individual corresponds to a specific understanding of the social. With the representation of civil society as a market, society does not get less attention either. To the contra, in their relation to the social human beings are no longer just asked to follow ethical *mies*, but to try to understand the unwanted results of their moral or immoral actions, those that do not seem to fit with what was intended.

Still, the identification of market mechanisms and the marking out of individuals as social actors raised - in relation to the identification of the factors of social harmony - the issue of the transparency and autonomy of the social. Is social harmony best attended with the submission to market regulatory mechanisms? Is it impossible for the social

community to govern itself knowingly and intentionally ?

Even though the disclosure of man's role in shaping society seems to be 'at the price of the degrading relations between men to the status of brute natural facts' (Dumont, 1977: 79), the search for regulation principles, factors and links hidden to the consciousness of social actors represents an autonomous attempt to clear up what actually holds society together, and to elucidate the relation between the individuals participating in society and the society as a whole.

Yes, this autonomous attempt somehow reproduced a heteronomous figure in the social, that of 'brute natural facts', as if society were still governed by something outside of itself, by some kind of law of nature, by some kind of alien implanted virus. Still, one does not have to maintain the heteronomous virus picture and still accept that indeed society holds together - and develops - independently of the deliberate support of its individual members. The 'design' of Adam Ferguson does not have to be *fate*.

In other words, the identification within the social of a space beyond intentionality means the possibility to reflect upon the complexity of the social bond. It is now possible to ask questions like : what is it individuals owe to their culture? What is it that cultures owe to their members ? And such questions can be dealt with without having to make reference to the outside of culture.

With the separation of the individual and with the autonomization of the market, a beyond of the individual and of the market is revealed and can be discussed without having to resort to the outside of society, without having to start by the re-assertion of tradition and its norms. This *political* recognition that society holds together by itself shapes a distance between society and its members. The social actors are now able to look at their objectified society from a distance, and that was the necessary condition for the scientific inquiry of society to appear. Today we can easily point out the misappreciation of the complexity of the social that goes with the postulate of such a being originally detached from the social. Nevertheless, the advent of the individual at the ideological level paradoxically means the advent of a critical investigation of the social. Being critical and not muzzled by a normative perspective, this investigation can actually lead to the denunciation of any conception of the social including that of the concept of the detached individual (Gauchet, 2005a: 424).

Louis Dumont's insistence in pointing out the degradation of social relations 'to the status of brute natural facts' can be questioned. Was this extricating of an autonomous sector of activity within society and this naturalization of historicity really a kind of *degradation*, or was it but a moment of *transition* from heteronomy to autonomy ? Shouldn't we focus more on the merits of this transitory representation than on its epistemological deficit ? This lack of understanding we now can perceive in this reduction of the symbolic to a natural phenomenon: isn't it precisely thanks to this momentary simplification that we have been able to identify it ? Wasn't it necessary to isolate something within society to get rid of heteronomy ? Wasn't it better, at least at first, to consider this isolated mechanism as something having more in common with natural phenomena than with the heteronomous entities in use then ? Didn't it help the transition from heteronomy to autonomy precisely by showing that another kind of rationality was needed to understand the nature of the social bond and the forces at stake in it ? Let us answer with Marcel Gauchet that no, it does not have to be 'a degradation of the ontological dignity of the social to admit that the unification and harmonization of private interests depends upon the intervention of a "natural" mechanism, that escapes human consciousness and human will' (Gauchet, 2005a: 420) and this is mainly because 'one cannot separate the coming up of the individualistic fiction and the advent of the conditions of the possibility of its critique' (2005a: 423).

The society of individuals is the same society that clearly perceives itself as being historical. That means : aware that some process is at work in its womb, a process - or processes - whose logic - or logics - is hard to grasp but is nevertheless worth trying to understand.

It is of course outlandish that at a moment when industrial capitalism requested so much collaboration and reorientation (it would be wrong to call it retraining) from so many human beings that the knowledge in use for government should be so false and precisely ignore the importance of collaboration in order to focus on individual passions and interests. But there was nothing new about that ; a concealing ideology replaced another.

It is also strange that once the symbolic revealed social facts, those facts had to be reduced to mere things. However, when Durkheim said we should treat social facts as things, he implicitly emphasized that they actually *were not* things. And even though Marx established that capital is not a thing but a social relation, he also made explicit the reification process of this social relation. The *ambiguity of the social* is not that easy to understand. *Even today we still lack concepts that would enable us to name and analyze the specificity of social faces without any reference to other kind of faces like natural facts or inanimate things.*

The problem of degrading relations between men 'to the status of brute natural facts' would be that it negates the specificity of the social bond and reintroduces the heteronomous point of view in the form of nature instead of gods. *Rather than a problem, it is a paradox* as it actually both reintroduces and extracts at the same time the figure of heteronomy. *It emancipates* - as it makes it possible to consider the cohesion of the social as not necessarily proceeding from a deliberate will, and even less from an external deliberate will. But *it reintroduces the figure of heteronomy* - when the representation of the automatism within society is given attributes similar to those of the former heteronomous mechanisms such as fate, faith and deity (understood as non-human).

It is worth noting that this ambiguity was at stake during the whole period of emancipation - as the concept of *contract* which gave mankind the initiative of its own ways precisely still maintained the idea of explicit will inherited from heteronomy. In fact, it was the *market* concept that made it possible for political philosophy to free itself from the idea that the institution of the social bond is the result of an explicit will to establish this bond (Rosanvallon, 1979). It is also worth noting that economy as the science of the market from the beginning did not delimit any boundaries for its object of investigation. Adam Smith, for instance, views economy as the solid ground on which social relations and society as a whole can be thought and dealt with (Rosanvallon, 1979: 41). A science without any boundaries can both aim at hegemony - as it tends to consider everything as being of its domain - and to open - mindedness, as there are no frontiers to open up. In other words : the degree of ambition of the new science is precisely what keeps it within range of critique.

The epistemological ambiguity of autonomy (Dupuy, Barrel)

Nevertheless, modern political thought was confronted with a paradoxical situation. Even though modern men claimed to be free from the heteronomous bond, they had to recreate a distance to their society. Within traditional society there was no distance between politics and religion. Now that such a distance was established, a new distance appeared which was no longer outside of society but within. What's the difference ?

According to Gauchet, this internal split is a necessary condition for any society to exist as society, modern or not. Without distance and regardless of whether this logic of the mediation of the point of reference is external or internal, no society can refer to itself as society. Society establishes (institutes) itself by creating this split that makes it possible to decide what kind of creativity and power is possible within society. Religion, he says, is at the same time an expression of this split and a neutralization of it (Gauchet, 2005b: 48). [\[10\]](#). This refers to a more radical issue than the 'there is something eternal in religion' of Durkheim. [\[11\]](#). It is not just about belonging, but about power and meaning. The split marks the premier institution of society as a political and symbolic society, its 'mirror stage' so to speak. Just as - as already mentioned - 'the others' are the sources of the self, as they provide the mirrors necessary to its constitution (Taylor, 1989) [\[12\]](#), the split provides the scene from which society is able to identify itself, think

itself, and provide itself with meaning. This political distance that society sets up for itself, the embodiment of a transcendence where power can be staged, is the root of *'la dette du sens'* (the meaning debt), explains Gauchet. It is by rejecting and projecting outside this point of reference - this scene-screen - from which it can look back at itself that society provides itself some landmarks and the capacity to make sense.

Also, just as it is the case with individual identities, where 'the others' are always already there, society is always already there. Social actors are always already together on an already set stage. The ontological unity of the socio-symbolic is such that all of its moments and elements are always already mediated by 'the others' (Freitag, 1994: 191). Every symbolism is built on earlier symbolic edifices and uses its material.

Yves Barel explains that there is a tangled hierarchy at work when one tries to figure out what governs a society : its 'basis', its 'superstructure', individuals, institutions. Those tangled hierarchies [13] are put to work in the tormented relation between the 'interior' and the 'exterior' of society. A never ending oscillatory movement is in operation. The paradox is that one has to get out of self-reference, but that it cannot be done. Nevertheless, explains Barel, *human beings are in many ways actually practicing what is supposed to be impossible* (Bard, 1989).

This auto-production of exteriority, this outsourcing of collective responsibility, this movement of self-separation, self-externalization, Jean-Pierre Dupuy calls auto-externalization, *bootstrapping* [14] or *autotranscendence* and states that 'autonomy and heteronomy have the same form, that of autotranscendence' (Dupuy, 1992: 220). In human societies where the symbolic and the political have emerged [15], there will always be an endogenous production of an exteriority of the social. Dupuy refers to its logic with the concept of a *fixed endogenous point* (Dupuy, 1992: 13).

Dupuy also refers to the logical theorems of incompleteness and the interpretation that John von Neumann gave of it in his theory of complexity : The object is infinitely more complex than the mechanism generating it. Thus, a mechanism can be infinitely exceeded by what it produces (Dupuy, 1992: 221). Moreover, if this social order is lifting itself by its own hair so to speak, one does not necessarily have to look for the foundation of social order. Rather than taking power and laws for a *cause*, one can see them as the expression of social order. Benjamin Constant (1767-1830) made this point long before system theory had been developed : 'Laws are nothing but those relations observed and expressed. They are not the cause of these relations which on the contrary are prior to them. They declare that these relations are' (Constant, 1980 118101: 57) [16].

The ambiguity of social autonomy can thus be expressed in these terms : We have to admit that *two apparently paradoxical assertions coexist*. The first assertion says that individuals act the society. The second one says that collective phenomena are infinitely more complex than the individuals that generate them (Dupuy, 1992: 15). According to Dupuy this means that one should not reduce social phenomena to individual actions and that one should not make society an individual subject. It means also that sociology should neither be reduced to psychology nor biology or physics.

This does not mean that one cannot study collective phenomena but that the specificity of the form of creativity at stake in them has to be respected and studied. The market and public opinion (which emerged at the same time) are phenomena requiring special attention. In fact the position of Dupuy claiming that 'one should never make a substance or a subject of collective beings' (Dupuy, 1992: 15) is not contradictory to that of Dumont stating that 'in social science in general, it is a fallacy to claim, as is often done, that traits, elements, or individuals are more tangible than sets or wholes' (Dumont, 1992: 11). Individuals convey meaning, and although it is much easier to isolate their creativity and identify their actions and decisions, we never know which factors carried the day. Within the individual, one never knows what speaks. *'I am in the world that is in me'*, says Edgar Morin.

It is pretty banal to stress that society is not a subject or a person, and that when one tries to look for society one never finds it whereas one can actually find every single individual. It is so banal that it is much too simplistic, argues

Bard. Those who utter this platitude cannot help talking about what is not supposed to exist. Botter, it so happens that society does produce meaning and does express it (Bard, 1989).

The individual subject is one form of articulation of the biological with the social, and the collective subject is another form of this very same articulation, says Bard. The issue of the subject arises in the same way at the level of the individual and at the level of the social, and this is because it is at once a collective issue. The only thing that is true regarding the critique of anthropomorphism is that social subjects are not distinct from the individuals that compose them. Not any more than those individuals are distinct from the social wholes they belong to (Barel, 1979: 273).

In fact, what we learn from modernity, says Barel, is that we cannot do without autotranscendence. Somehow, *modernity is when society claims to know that it has to produce its own myths*. Traditional societies did not relate to their myths as if they were their own products. Nevertheless, as soon as the traditional points of reference are disclosed and disappear, the community 'has to give itself new points of reference to put the social at a distance thanks to which the social creates a distance to itself in order to keep being able to understand itself or to bear with itself' (Barel, 1984: 238),

Conclusion : the condition of creation

This 'Progression from an order to which we are *subjected* to one which we increasingly *will*' (Gauchet, 1997: 6) has not resulted in the removal of the autonomy paradox. Simmel had already warned us a long time ago : 'the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating' (Simmel, 1997 [1911]: 174). The human condition is not that easy. 'Caught between the *désire* for autonomy (for an autonomous source of all that is moral, lawful, legitimate) and the realities of his condition (the plurality of separated existences), modern man is torn by a contradiction with no solution' (Manent, 1977: 208). Thus, it becomes clear that 'a society that masters itself expresses in so doing the very limits of its mastery' (Barel, 1979: 271). 'Power never really coincides with the position it is represented at. Its mastery of the functioning of the social organization is never effective' (Quére, 1982: 86). In order to perceive itself and work upon itself, a society has to produce a representation of itself and create a distance to itself. This is paradoxical. Society produces a mirror to look at itself, but it is this mirror that sees itself. Or as Castoriadis put it, a democratic society recognizes in its cules, its norms, its values, and its significations its own creations, 'whether deliberate or not' (Castoriadis, 1997a: 340).

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[1] We have to remember that we are not referring to the individual level here. Even though there is some similarity with the way one can talk of individual freedom, the category of the individual cannot be the point of departure for an analysis of the signification. The young child submits to society's culture, organization and language. Symbolism is the order of the signifiers (Ortigues, 1962). As psychoanalysts know, if the infant does not constrain himself to it, he is bound to fall seriously ill. In that sense, as for instance Jacques Lacan knew, an individual human being is more an effect of the signifier rather than its cause (Rifflet-Lemaire, 1977).

[2] Even though they deal with similar theoretical issues and build on the same sociological, linguistic and psychoanalytic traditions, the conceptual distinction introduced by Castoriadis should not be mixed up with the Lacanian distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary and the real (Rifflet-Lemaire, 1977; Wilden, 1972). The imaginary that Lacan refers to is individual. It represents the unconscious space of illusion and

frustration. His approach is psychological, not sociological. Castoriadis's imaginary is social. It is a further development of symbolic theory. One of the founding fathers of symbolic theory is Ernst Cassirer, according to whom the symbolic is the mediation which confers sense upon the sensuous (Cassirer, 1923-9, 1944, 1946). Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on perception and that of Edmond Ortigues on the symbol are also more sociological (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 [1945]; Ortigues, 1962). Reflections on politics and symbolics intertwine after the Second World War. Also, anthropology and linguistics came into play. Reflecting on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and Marcel Mauss's anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss concludes that the social is an autonomous reality - the same as language, he writes. He states that the signifier precedes and determines the signified (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Before him, Marx, Weber and Durkheim had also introduced different concepts about this autonomy of the representations : Weber used the concepts of 'cultural humanity' and 'Zeitgeist' and Durkheim that of the 'collective anonymous'. It is true that Castoriadis, as Suzi Adams wrote, can be read as a synthesis of Weberian and Durkheimian correctives to Marx, and that Castoriadis lends social imaginary signification an even more radical autonomy than we find in Durkheim (Adams, 2005: 33). Also, Castoriadis distinguishes between the actual and the radical imaginary. This last term designates the capacity to make arise (as an image) something that does not exist and has never existed. The radical imaginary is the common root of the actual imaginary and of the symbolic. The actual imaginary can be said to be a product of it. Thanks to the symbolic order, the real acquires a certain order in the mind which releases it from a primary confusion. The paradox is that the imaginary has to use the symbolic in order to exist and express itself and that, conversely, symbolism presupposes an imaginary capacity. The following quote by Émile Durkheim illustrates the kind of inspiration Castoriadis might have received from him : *Since the world expressed by the entire system of concepts is the one that society regards, society alone can furnish the most general notions with which it should be represented. Such an object can be embraced only by a subject which contains all the individual subjects within it. Since the universe does not exist except in so far as it is thought of, and since it is not completely thought of except by society, it takes a place in this latter ; it becomes a part of society's interior life, while this is the totality, outside of which nothing exists. The concept of totality is only the abstract of the concept of society: it is the whole which includes all things, the supreme class which embraces all other classes,* (Durkheim, 1968 [1912]: 441-2)

[3] I am here alluding to the centennial struggles for influence between the European monarchies and the Catholic clergy resulting in creative solutions concerning the way communities should organize. Here is a quote that illustrates this process: *Whereas in the Middle Ages political bodies were enveloped or incorporated by the Church, every monarchy heading toward absolutism tended to incorporate the Church within its Borders. The kingdom became the supreme political body, the human association par excellence. Once this supremacy was permanently established, the kingdom became the 'nation,' and its 'représentatives' imposed on the clergy the 'civil constitution,' establishing the Church's complete subordination to the body politic. Thus monarchy appeared to be less a regime than a process.* (Manent, 1995 [1987]: 8, my emphasis)

[4] Although it was not obvious to adopt Montaigne's positive attitude towards contradiction (he saw it as an opportunity for attention and reflection rather than for irritation and wrath), the confrontation with other ways to make sense did shake the rule of Truth. From Humanism to Romanticism, it became clear that human beings are never disembodied and do not live in a homogeneous space but in non-substitutable places.

[5] Here again many interesting theoreticians (Werner Sombart, Max Weber, etc.) studied the emergence of modernity. Johan P. Arnason stresses one of the main differences between many of them and Castoriadis : 'The earlier theorists emphasize patterns of conduct and tend to concretize them in models of man, whereas Castoriadis is primarily concerned with a global interpretive and practical relation to the world' (Arnason, 1989: 328).

[6] Machiavelli (1469-1527), identifying the violent conditions of the city-state and pointing out the political evils produced by Christianity's intrusion into civic life, was the first to adopt the scientific viewpoint for studying politics and to assert the self-sufficiency of the earthly order. Machiavelli depicts the political order as a closed circle having its own foundation within itself. Claude Lefort reminds us, though, that the question of law hardly interests Machiavelli who 'does not maintain that the law as such is the product of men' (Lefort, 2000: 132, emphasis in original). What matters to him is 'to show that in a genuine Republic, men have a hold upon the laws and that their dissensions, far from being destructive of all civil life, are generative thereof' (2000: 132). Furthermore, 'Machiavelli is far from yielding to the vertigo of a freedom of action that would open up the Subject, at every moment and in every place, to the entire field of possibilities' (2000: 138). One has to wait for a whole development of thought from Machiavelli to Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx, to experience the emergence of the project of the total mastery of nature. Nevertheless, Machiavelli did facilitate the blooming of one of the most deeply-rooted traits of the modern soul : 'the doubt of the good, the smile of superiority and mockery, the passion for losing one's innocence' (Manent, 1995 [1987]: 14). And as Manent says: 'to understand how modern politics was set in motion and developed, one must have previously grasped the change in what has to be called the status of the good' (1995: 14).

[7] In traditional societies the relations between men are more highly valued than the relations between men and things. This primacy is reversed in the modern type of society, in which relations between men become subordinated to relations between men and things (Dumont, 1977: 5).

[8] I write 'creation' because I believe it to be a fact that it was the result of political actions such as those recommended by the first economists. Examples are William Petty (1623-87) inventing 'political arithmetick', Pierre de Boisguilbert (1646-1714) urging Louis XIV to change the tax

system and remove internal custom duties, and Adam Smith (1723-90) denouncing the Act of Settlement and the poor laws.

[9] 'Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future ; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design' (Ferguson, 1767: Part III, Section II). This appears in Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* from 1767, where he added this note of interest for our nature/culture discussion here :

Our notion of order in civil society is frequently false: it is taken from the analogy of subjects inanimate and dead ; we consider commotion and action as contrary to its nature ; we think it consistent only with obedience, secrecy and the silent passing of affairs through the hands of a few. The good order of stones in a wall is their being properly fixed in the places for which they are hewn; were they to stir the building must fall : but the order of men in society is their being placed where they are properly qualified to act. The first is a fabric made of dead and inanimate parts, the second is made of living and active members. When we seek in society for the order of more inaction and tranquility, we forget the nature of our subject, and find the order of slaves, not that of free men. (Ferguson, 1767: Part III, Section II, note 8)

[10] Claude Lefort pins down the generality of this fact in those terms : 'The political is thus revealed, not in what we call political activity, but is the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured' (Lefort, 1988: 11).

[11] 'There is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself. There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality' (Durkheim, 1968 [1912]: 427).

[12] 'One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it' (Taylor, 1989: 35).

[13] The concept of 'tangled hierarchy' was introduced by Hofstadter (1980: 10).

[14] The term 'bootstrapping' alludes to the legend of Baron Munchausen who was able to lift himself out of a swamp by pulling himself up by his own hair. Dupuy uses both terms in a text discussing Derrida and Dumont (Dupuy, 1990).

[15] 'No animal society - even and especially the enormous insect societies - have a central institution' (Morin, 1980: 240).

[16] Both Dupuy and Gauchet refer to Constant, but Dupuy through Gauchet (Gauchet, 1980: 57-8).