'WHAT OUGHT WE TO THINK?' CASTORIADIS' RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION FOR THINKING

Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos
La Trobe University

ABSTRACT: Castoriadis views the project of autonomy as central to both political action and philosophical thinking. Although he acknowledges that the political project has retreated, he insists on its thinkability as a viable project. We argue that this insistence gives rise to an unresolved tension. Specifically, Castoriadis' substantive response to the question 'what ought we to think?', which he gives in terms of the pursuit of the philosophical project of autonomy, ultimately fails to recognise the unavoidable effect of the political project's retreat on the thinker and this failure raises doubts as to whether Castoriadis' own thinking has the potential to move beyond a merely journalistic style of critique, which he finds objectionable.

KEYWORDS: Castoriadis, autonomy, philosophical critique, thinking

According to Castoriadis,

> […] the object of philosophy is the question: What ought I, what ought we, to think—about being, about knowledge of Being, about "I", about "we," about our polity, about justice etc..[1]

Our aim in this paper is to assess the implications of this formulation of the question for philosophy in the light of Castoriadis' commitment to the project of autonomy. Having been 'born in and through the polis' and being 'part of the same movement which brought about the first democracies', philosophy is, for Castoriadis, a 'central element of the Greco-Western project of individual and social autonomy' (Castoriadis, 1991: 13-15).[2] For Castoriadis the project of autonomy 'means that the collectivity, which can only exist as instituted, recognizes and recovers its instituting character explicitly, and questions itself and its own activities' (Castoriadis, 1991: 20). Castoriadis insists on the viability of the radical imaginary creation of a society that is knowingly self-instituting

1. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy Politics Autonomy: Essays in political philosophy*, NY Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991: 25.

2. For a discussion see Suzi Adams, 'Interpreting creation: Castoriadis and the birth of autonomy', *Thesis Eleven*, 2005, 83: 25-41.

in the sense that it creates and institutes its own norms, rather than receiving them from an extra-social source. Moreover, such a transformation of society from its current heteronomous mode of being is the work of individuals as members of 'the anonymous collective'.[3] The autonomous political action of the collective that can bring about a genuinely autonomous society is in turn constituted by 'thoughtful doing, and political thinking'.[4] Castoriadis thus attributes a similar role to autonomy as a mode of being in relation to both political action and the practice of genuine theorizing.

Granting Castoriadis' insistence on the centrality of the project of autonomy for both political action and philosophical thinking, what must such thinking involve, how does it begin and how should it develop? We want to suggest that, while the intensity involved in Castoriadis' elucidation of the subject matter of philosophy is powerful enough to render explicit the field and initial task for philosophical thinking (hereafter 'thinking'), paradoxically, in exposing the centrality of the question of *what* ought to be thought, it also reveals why this focus on the subject matter of philosophy does not exhaust the question of thought. At least implicitly and rather vaguely, Castoriadis shows some appreciation that the fundamental question of thinking points beyond its 'what' formulation. Nevertheless, precisely because the question "what ought we to think" is fundamental, his own formulation turns out to be rather limited and this in turn has certain negative implications for his particular response to the fundamental question. More specifically, we will argue: (1) that there is a tension in Castoriadis' acknowledgement of the retreat of the political project of autonomy, on the one hand, and its thinkability as a viable project, on the other; and (2) that this tension remains unresolved in so far as Castoriadis fails to recognize the effects of the project's retreat on the thinker who must be understood as the bearer of the place of the project's retreat.

In order to develop our argument in the first section we will examine Castoriadis' claims regarding the task of the philosopher against the background of the terms that are implied by his formulation of the question for philosophy. Then, through an examination of Castoriadis' discussion of the retreat of the political project of autonomy, in the second section we will identify the contours of a Castoriadian response to the fundamental question that acknowledges what we call its 'where' and 'when' dimensions. Here we will suggest that this acknowledgement also effectively commits the thinker to thinking the very (im)possibility of the autonomous collective as the more precisely defined subject matter for thinking.

After examining Castoriadis' response to the question 'what ought we to think?', namely the project of collective autonomy, in terms of his response to the 'where' and 'when' dimensions of the fundamental question for philosophy in the third and final

3. Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis and the Imagination*, California: Stanford University Press, 1997: 84 (Hereafter 'Castoriadis, 1997b'); David Ames Curtis ed. *The Castoriadis Reader*, Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997: 322 (Hereafter 'Castoriadis, 1997a). For a discussion of the difference between Castoriadis' conception of the 'anonymous collective' and the political 'autonomous collective' in Castoriadis' thought see Andreas Kalyvas, 'The radical instituting power and democratic theory' *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 24(1), 1998: 9-29.

4. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 1987: 373.

section of our paper will argue that Castoriadis' acknowledgement of the retreat of the political project ultimately commits him to the view that the political retreat must be transformed into a *philosophical* retreat and this can be achieved when the retreat of the collective happens *in the thinker*, so to speak.

I

"What ought I, what ought we to think?" To be sure, when philosophical thinking emerges it seeks its proper subject matter. But the implication here is that genuine thinking always appears as if for the first time and thus encounters itself by asking the same fundamental question. Of course the question arises anew in the context of the given social-historical moment. Castoriadis' conception of philosophy, his response to the question of 'what self-reflective activity is about', is explicitly informed by the subject matter of his own philosophy, a philosophy of the social-historical that is formulated in part through his critical reading of the history of western philosophy (Castoriadis, 1991: 19-20). From this perspective the ancient philosophers' challenge is still very much with us today. Thus the proper focus of philosophy is neither the Heideggerian question of the meaning of being, nor the Cartesian practice of doubting, a practice that is undertaken by an insecure subjectivity overwhelmed by the instability and relativity of meanings. The focus of philosophy should not even be the Kantian question of the conditions of possibility for knowledge. None of these approaches can serve to formulate the proper question for thinking in so far as this latter is in the primordial state of encountering itself and attempting to identify its mission and place in the modern epoch. Instead the question, 'what ought we to think?' invokes an inquiry into fundamentals, which both springs from and points to a state of collective being shaped through the exercise of radical autonomous thinking and in relation to the thinker's activity of thinking in connection with the current condition of humanity. Indeed in focusing our attention on how the exercise of radical autonomy affects the very character of thinking, Castoriadis implies that the very asking of the question itself gives rise to a sceptical attitude toward the claim of any subject matter to be pre-given. In raising the question then, in seeking the proper subject matter of philosophy, the questioner is already at a distance from the subject-centred Cartesian tradition of piecemeal doubting; he/she encounters his/her thinking through the activity of having already rejected any predetermined grounding in some given subject matter. It is in this sense that for Castoriadis, 'philosophy is a reflective activity that deploys itself both freely *and* under the constraint of its own past' (Castoriadis, 1991: 17-18, our emphasis).

With this observation in mind and before turning to Castoriadis' response to the question as posed, let us consider the implied parameters of the question itself. Firstly, in asking 'what ought we to think', and in so far as the question invites a response, our attention is inevitably drawn to *that which matters*, the significant.[5] That is, on the face

5. We discuss Castoriadis' failure to give sufficient attention to the genuine source of significance in our paper, 'The time of radical autonomous thinking and socio-historical becoming in Castoriadis'.

of it we are invited to think something like: 'we ought to think what matters'. But, if we agree that thinking as thinking is the pure intentionality towards recognizing and embracing *what matters*, our response inevitably leads to further questions. Where, for instance, would thinking get its call, so to speak, to think what matters? In the absence of such a call, thinking would be at a loss; in seeking the subject matter for thinking, the thinker would be forced into a disoriented state of having *to think prior to thinking*. Whatever the idiosyncratic significance of such an effort for the thinker, in order for thinking to think *what matters* more broadly, for the collective, or universally in some suitable sense of this term, it must belong somehow to that which at the same time as informing thinking, is in a sense *beyond* the thinking in question given that it constitutes the object for thinking, the *that* which matters for thinking. So thinking must get its call to think *from what matters* itself. But now the relation we have just identified—of what matters as being beyond thinking—indicates clearly the question of a place for thinking as well as for what matters. It follows that thinking what matters, presupposes a relating to and acknowledgement of a 'where'. We must accordingly supplement Castoriadis' 'what' question with a reference to the implied 'where' question: 'What ought we to think and *where* ought we to be situated in order to think it?'

Even this expanded version of the question, however, is still not broad enough to capture the full significance of the fundamental question for philosophy in the Castoriadian frame. As already noted, Castoriadis emphasises the social *and historical* situatedness of the thinker:

> I cannot ignore the fact that my own thought, however, original I may deem it to be, is but a ripple, at best a wave, in the huge social historical stream which welled up in Ionia twenty-five centuries ago. I am under the double imperative: think freely and to think under the constraint of history (Castoriadis, 1991: 19).

So we must add at least one further dimension: 'What ought we to think? Where and *when* ought we to think it?' But if the 'what', the 'where' and the 'when' of the question of philosophy are not givens for the autonomous thinker that Castoriadis aspires to be, then, following this approach the thinking in question cannot allow itself to be subject to the limits of the identitary logic and ontology that govern the inherited philosophical tradition. For Castoriadis, as we have argued elsewhere, inherited thought—this includes thinkers from Plato to Descartes, Marx and Heidegger—is incapable of thinking by reference to the terms of an essentially indeterminate world.[6]

It follows that from Castoriadis' perspective the thinker's *mode of thinking*, the 'how' of the activity of thought, is no less implicated in the formulation of the fundamental question for philosophy.

From our preliminary exploration of Castoriadis' formulation of the fundamental question we have arrived at a more complicated formulation, which we can refer to as 'the what-where-when-how question'. The 'what', 'where', 'when', and 'how' of thinking

6. T. Nicolacopoulos and G. Vassilacopoulos, 'The time of radical autonomous thinking and socio-historical becoming in Castoriadis'. On the concept of essential indeterminacy see also Jeff Klooger, *Castoriadis: Psyche, Society, Autonomy*, Leiden, Boston: Brill: 2009.

constitute four indispensable dimensions of the question that activates genuine thinking. They are unavoidably implicated in the task that Castoriadis assigns the philosopher qua philosopher, namely 'the task of thinking what is to be thought' (Castoriadis, 1987: 222). Taking this multidimensional question as the question for thinking, in the sense of the philosophical question that opens the field of radical autonomous (self)reflection in Castoriadis' terms, enables us to examine Castoriadis' response in the light of the awareness that: 'The challenge for thinking is to think what matters in a manner that matters in a place and time that matter.' (In the remainder of this paper we leave aside the examination of Castoriadis' response to the 'how' dimension of the fundamental question.)

Before proceeding to examine Castoriadis' response, one more observation is in order concerning the terms in which Castoriadis raises the fundamental question for philosophy. We noted above that if we are to think what matters in a manner that matters then our thinking must somehow belong to what is to be thought; it must be activated by and in it as the thinking that itself matters. We might say that thinking is the intensification, the deepening or expansion of this very belonging, which is articulated by the 'what-where-when-how' of thinking. If so, then the 'what-where-when-how question' already presupposes an affirmative answer to the prior question: 'ought we to think at all?' (hereafter 'the 'ought' question'). An affirmative answer to the 'ought' question is implied by the very act of asking the 'what' question. That is, to ask Castoriadis' question is to imply a response to the 'ought' question; it is to position oneself in relation to a single affirmative answer. The 'ought' question is unavoidably prior because, unlike the 'what-where-when-how' question, it invokes the singular being of the thinker and his/her relation to what matters. This is the fundamental pre-condition for the activation of thinking as that whose questioning is concerned with what matters in a manner that matters. In other words, the 'ought' question affirms genuine thinking as that of the impersonal in the personal and thus presupposes the singularity of the thinker as a field of commitment and associated willingness to think in a way that takes the thinker's political and philosophical commitment beyond its grounding in a strictly personal willing. That is, it situates the thinker in the happening of the radical affirmation of his significant singularity qua participant of the collective. One implication of this is that, as Castoriadis acknowledges, the activity of the thinker cannot justifiably remain within the limits of a pure decisionism.[7]

So thinking and its questioning presuppose the situatedness and emergence of the singularity of the thinker in what matters, or more precisely, they presuppose the singular subject's *transformation* into one who matters qua thinker precisely because this is what it would mean for one's thinking to belong to what matters. So what matters also has the power to transform the singular subject into one who matters as a thinker and who is in turn empowered, in this capacity of a significant thinker, to transform what matters into a subject matter for thinking. An implied affirmative response to the 'ought' question

7. See Andreas Kalyvas, 'The radical instituting power and democratic theory'. See also our 'The time of radical autonomous thinking and socio-historical becoming in Castoriadis'.

gives rise to what we will refer to as 'the committed thinker', the one who emerges in his/her capacity as already associated with what matters in the appropriate way. In focusing his/her thinking on developing a response to the what-where-when-how question, the committed thinker is already claimed by what matters and is on the way to thinking in this very capacity. The commitment, 'yes, we must think' thus frames Castoriadis' fundamental question accordingly: 'Since we ought to think (what matters), what ought we to think and where, when and how ought we to think it?'

So far we have suggested that in recognizing Castoriadis' aspiration to be as a committed thinker, we can attribute to him an affirmative response to the 'ought' question, which is implied by a certain formulation of the 'what' question, a view about what is appropriate as the subject matter of philosophy. Being claimed by what matters provides thinking with its significance because to think is to recognize the belonging of the thinker's singularity to what matters. Being claimed as a thinker by what matters, one is posited as a *significant* thinker, one who receives the call to think and hence as already positioned to think what matters in the appropriate place and time. If, however, what matters does indeed render the thinker as significant—if what matters claims the thinker and his/her activity as belonging to what matters—then there is a sense in which this relation already provides thinking with its subject matter, including the place, time and mode of its happening. That is, if and when thinking is to take up the challenge to think, it would already appear to have been drawn to do so, not by awareness of the fundamental questions in the abstract but by the answers, which they elicit. This is why, in spite of any appearances to the contrary, Castoriadis' prior commitment to the political project of autonomy does not thereby commit his thinking to treating the project of autonomy as a given. When, for example Castoriadis inists that:

> It is *as political, and not philosophical*, ideas that autonomy, […] the creativity of the masses, what today I would have called the irruption of the instituting imaginary in and through the activity of the anonymous collective, made their appearance in my writings (Castoriadis, 1997a: 371-372, our emphasis).

Castoriadis could be charged with the criticism that he takes for granted the political project of autonomy. But this would be a mistake. Although his formulation of the question for philosophy follows from and as a development of his commitment to the political project of autonomy, from the perspective we are exploring, the question that the thinker raises comes *after* the answer as a way of reminding one that the real challenge springs from the answer which must be *thinkingly articulated*. In other words, the thinker is already familiar with the answer, albeit as the project of autonomy to be thinkingly elaborated. Let us turn now to Castoriadis' response to the 'what' question.

As already suggested, in Castoriadis' case the combined effect of what we referred to above as the 'ought' and the 'what' questions is the emergence of the thinker as one who is committed to the project of autonomy. Castoriadis' trajectory has been consistently informed by an unwavering commitment to the radical imaginary creation of society as explicitly self-instituting. As he affirms at the conclusion of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, the radical transformation of society is something:

> which we are aiming at because we will it and because we know that others will it as well, not because such are the laws of history, the interests of the proletariat or the destiny of being (Castoriadis, 1987: 373).

From Castoriadis' perspective this sort of *radical willing* is the only genuine self-presencing that the singular subject can enact, provided that he/she does so as a participant in the political collective. When thinking, understood as 'thoughtful doing and political thinking', is genuinely informed by these two aspects—the subject's prior commitment and by the mutual informing of the individual and the collective—it functions as 'society's thinking as making itself' precisely because society's transformation from heteronomy to autonomy 'concerns social doing—and so also politics, in the profound sense of the term—the doing of men and women in society, and nothing else'. (Castoriadis, 1987: 373). For Castoriadis, it is this sort of autonomous, yet mostly implicit, transformative becoming that the committed thinker is called upon to elucidate in the appropriate ontological-political terms, the terms of creation/destruction of *eidos* or form as a response to otherness (Castoriadis, 1997b: 399-400).

The committed thinker who embraces the project autonomy must also engage in the radical *critique* of heteronomous society, a critique that exposes antinomies and takes one beyond the given state of affairs and the ideological distortions characteristic of the heteronomous modes of being with which humanity has been associated for the most part. Because the heteronomous societies, which have dominated human history, have been instituted 'in and through the closure of meaning', the work of both philosophy and democratic politics is the breaking of such closure:

> Democracy is the project of breaking the closure [of meaning imposed by heteronomous modes of being] at the collective level. Philosophy, creating self-reflecting subjectivity, is the project of breaking the closure at the level of thought (Castoriadis, 1991: 20).[8]

Moreover, for those living in modern western societies the radical critique of their own heteronomous societies/modes of being is possible, through history's breaking of the closure of meaning within western modernity. As a result,

> [p]artially open societies have emerged, together with self-reflective individuals. The main carriers of this new historical creation were politics as collective emancipatory movement and philosophy as self-reflecting, uninhibitedly critical thought, […] a new type of human being: reflective and deliberating subjectivity. And this is what allows us to take some distance from our own society' (Castoriadis, 1997a: 336-337).

For Castoriadis, then, just as in political activity or social doing, so too in philosophical thinking, critique takes place as the radical imaginary creation/destruction of self-reflective subjectivities. In order to be effective,

> Critique entails a distance relative to the object; if philosophy is to go beyond

8. For a recent discussion of the significance of closure in Castoriadis' theory see Jeff Klooger, 'Plurality and indeterminacy: Revisiting Castoriadis' overly homogeneous conception of society', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2011: 1-17.

> journalism, this critique presupposes the creation of new ideas, new standards, new forms of thought that establish this distance (Castoriadis, 1997b: 36).

The task of elucidating new ideas, standards and forms—the task in other words of elaborating one's response to the fundamental question—cannot be undertaken from the perspective of some neutral observer, given that new forms are themselves rooted in the human condition; they are always a response to otherness, what Castoriadis refers to as the 'Chaos, Abyss, Groundlessness' of the world (Castoriadis, 1997b: 314). This is the case even for the more abstract philosophical questions.[9] Such questions can only be asked appropriately when they are informed by the thinker's unwavering commitment, as is evidenced, for example, by love for the polity. Accordingly, the committed thinker aspires to taking up two viewpoints simultaneously. For Castoriadis, 'the two animals of the thinker are the eagle and the snake; he himself is a flying eagle and a creeping snake'.[10] On the one hand, like the eagle, the committed thinker strives to maintain a distance from the subject matter of thinking but, on the other, as Karagiannis and Wagner (2012) note, because events belong to their era, 'when striving to reflect upon them, we too, belong precisely to the same era' (Karagiannis and Wagner, 2012: 2). Anything less results in journalistic philosophy, a non-committed pseudo-reading of supposed facts that presumes that the thinker is not implicated in any deep way.

II

Let us grant for the purposes of our discussion: that the project of autonomy—the creation of explicitly self-instituting society—is the proper subject matter for the committed thinker; that the thought in question—autonomous thinking—also *belongs to* such a (partially open) society, or to the collective, rather than to the thinker in his/her uniqueness; and that the thinker's critical distance from the heteronomy of his/her society's mode of being is made possible in and through his/her activity as a self-reflecting subjectivity and creator of new ideas. This approach permits us to ask the question, in the light of the discussion so far: 'when and where is the autonomous collective manifested in the critical thought of the thinker as that which matters?' To put the same question in a different way: 'How does Castoriadis address the 'where' and 'when' dimensions of the fundamental question for thinking?' 'What is the *topos* of the response he offers?'

We want to suggest next that we can identify the contours of a response to the 'where' and 'when' aspects of the question for thinking in Castoriadis' discussion of the situation of the fate and prospects of the political project of autonomy in the 'modern' period. In 'The retreat from autonomy: postmodernism as generalized conformism'[11] Castoriadis discusses the prospects for the realization of the project of autonomy in the

9. See for example, Castoriadis' discussion of the concept of time in 'Time and Creation', 1997b: 374-404.

10. Cited in Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner, 'What is to be thought? What is to be done? The polyscopic thought of Kostas Axelos and Cornelius Castoriadis', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2012: 13 footnote 1.

11. Castoriadis, 1997b: 32-46.

context of a diagnosis of the modern period, which he defines in terms of:

> the conflict, but also the mutual contamination and entanglement, of two imaginary significations: autonomy, on the one hand, unlimited expansion of "rational mastery", on the other' (Castoriadis, 1997b: 37).

As regards the fate and prospects of the project of autonomy in the last two centuries, he concludes that this period:

> has proved the radical inadequacy […] of the programs in which it [the project of autonomy] had been embodied […] That the demonstration of this inadequacy in actual historical fact is one of the roots of present political apathy and privatization hardly needs stressing. For the resurgence of the project of autonomy, new political objectives and new human attitudes are required. (Castoriadis, 1997b: 43).

Here Castoriadis identifies the failure of the political project of autonomy with the shortcomings of the various political programs that have embodied it over time. But a resurgence of the project is not just a matter of calling for participation in more viable political programs. In acknowledging the retreat of the political project of autonomy, Castoriadis does not also claim to identify any viable political program for the project's re-activation. Indeed, if such genuine options were still available within the modern heteronomous world of global capitalism, one would rather be focused on the strictly political question of how best to exploit them. Castoriadis insists that the demand upon the committed thinker is to create 'new political objectives'. Here the emphasis appears to be on the question: 'what are we to do?' But this is the question that follows from 'what are we to think?' (Castoriadis, 1991: 25). It is the question for the thinker qua activist. Nevertheless, paradoxically in the light of the retreat that he recognizes, we can infer that given Castoriadis' recognition of the gravity and the extent of the failure of the political programs to date, even reflecting upon the creation of new political programs appears premature. So, the challenge arising for the thinker qua philosopher, the challenge for the thinker in thinking autonomy *philosophically,* is to follow through the implications of acknowledging the absence of any visible options for a re-activation of the political project. Ultimately, this is the social-historical context that gives rise to the challenge that the committed thinker of autonomy must face. Being committed to the political project in the current conditions, one must *thinkingly create* the (idea of the) autonomous collective, the social-historical gathering of free individuals as creators of their society, and this thinking must be enacted as integral to the realization of the project of autonomy itself.

To repeat, Castoriadis situates this philosophical task of thinking autonomy, not just within the context of the political project's retreat but at the very historical moment when such retreat has confirmed the absence of any visible political alternatives. It would seem then that the depth and the extent of the political failure forces the thinker to ask the philosophical question of *the possibility as such* of the project of autonomy. Castoriadis seems to acknowledge as much when at the conclusion of the *Imaginary Institution of Society* he dismisses as 'fictive' the suggestion that the project of autonomy might be impossible:

> As far as our eyes can see, nothing allows us to affirm that a self-transformation of history such as this is impossible; no place—except the fictive and finally incoherent non-place of identitary logic-ontology—exists where the one who could assert this could possibly stand (Castoriadis, 1987: 373.

What is interesting to note here is that he distinguishes between the 'place/non-place' of autonomy and identitary logic-ontology respectively. These two modes of thought are not contrasted in the abstract. Rather, they belong to two different ways of experiencing the social-historical gathering that situates them respectively in their 'place' and 'non-place'. That is, in the current historical moment, the imaginary significations of autonomy and the unlimited expansion of rational mastery are respectively related to the collapse of the project of autonomy and to the triumph of heteronomy. Nevertheless, despite the appearance that the project of rational mastery has been victorious over that of autonomy and just when history shows itself to be resistant to self-transformation, Castoriadis insists that it is the thinking of autonomy that is appropriately placed to affirm this possibility.

But if, as we have argued above, the thinking in question must be an integral part of the project of autonomy then it must be integral to the project's historical collapse. This raises the question: 'what is the place of a thinking that is sufficiently empowered to affirm the meaning and possibility of the project of autonomy despite history's apparent verdict?' It seems that the only available historically informed place from which to undertake the autonomous thinking of autonomy is the site of the very failure of the project itself. Where other than at the site of the project's retreat and, hence, of the associated acknowledgement of the project of autonomy as having retreated, might the thinker situate himself/herself in order to enact the philosophical project? If the thinker is to elucidate the very meaning of the possibility (or impossibility) of autonomy as such he/she must do so at the site of the complete failure of all empirical possibilities for the radical emancipation of humanity that the last two centuries have witnessed. For it is here that the committed thinker must aspire to encounter the autonomous collective as such.

The place of the retreat of the autonomous collective is a place in which it becomes possible for the gathering to take place, so to speak, as something not reducible to a mere empirical observation about failed political programs. As such it would no longer be rendered invisible through its identification with the various historically failed political programs. Moreover, it is at this point that the committed thinker might face the most radical of historical challenges to the project of autonomy, namely the possibility of having to affirm *the impossibility* of history's radical self-transformative capacity.

III

So far we have argued that the thinker must ultimately respond to the challenge of history's apparent verdict—the claim that the project of autonomy is impossible—in so far as he, himself, is a politically committed bearer of this project and is therefore

implicated in the project's retreat. Next we want to argue that it is precisely at this point, where Castoriadis acknowledges the gravity of the retreat from the standpoint of the thinker qua political activist, that his thinking falls short of the demands of the scope of the fundamental question for thinking. Firstly, the thinker of the project of autonomy who enacts its thinkability and, hence, demonstrates the justifiedness of its possibility, cannot simply refer descriptively to the political retreat of autonomy independently and prior to any acknowledgement of the need for a philosophical explanation of the empirical phenomenon. For this would be to reduce the difference between the thinker who affirms the possibility of autonomy and the one who rejects this possibility to two different interpretations of one and the same phenomenon—the fact of the project's historical failure—rather than to insist, as Castoriadis does, on a crucial difference between them in terms of the genuine place/fictive non-place distinction that he makes. Secondly, because Castoriadis takes his thinking to be integral to the project of autonomy in that it is itself an *autonomous thinking*, the project must be able to supply the justification for such thinking, and, at the same time, such thinking must be able to affirm the possibility of the political project. In other words, these two aspects must be mutually informing. The combination of Castoriadis' philosophical approach and his political commitment—the commitment to the autonomous collective as the proper subject matter of thinking—must make it possible for him to acknowledge the full scope of the question of thinking and, for present purposes, to specify the 'when and 'where' aspects of this question. Within Castoriadis' discourse that the thinking of autonomy is non-fictive in the sense that it has a genuine place must mean that its appropriate place within the project of autonomy is the very place within which the thinker encounters the pure possibility of its thinkabiltiy. This is why Castoriadis cannot just declare the justifiedness of the project; just as politically he must position himself to practice autonomy effectively, so too qua thinker he must do position himself to act thinkingly. The very meaning of thinking autonomously is at issue here.

Next we want to suggest that the appropriate response to the 'where' question holds that awareness of the political retreat must be transformed into a *philosophical* retreat and this can be achieved when the retreat of the collective happens *in the thinker*, so to speak. That is the thinker has to make the retreat happen in himself as the thinking of the autonomous collective. This is the only way to make the thinking in question that of the collective, which is the retreating gathering in the sense we have explained. We might say that in order to raise the question of the possibility of the autonomous collective as such, the gathering must retreat *in its retreat*. This is a second level of retreat that is itself implied by Castoriadis' acknowledgement of the retreat of the project of autonomy, the first level of retreat that he identifies in the failed political programs together with the absence of visible viable alternatives. Let us explain.

First, having retreated through the failure of specific political programs the autonomous collective must be liberated from being identified with such particular manifestations and the associated defeats. This is necessary precisely because the historical and theoretical verdict of the impossibility of autonomy implicates autonomy

as such and not merely the specific failed programs. Second, because the thinker is called up to affirm the justifiedness of the possibility of autonomy as such it will not suffice to challenge the verdict of history by elaborating another political program for the advancement of autonomy. To address the issue of whether the impossibility of autonomy can be justified theoretically, and not just as an inferred conclusion from the specific historical defeats of political programs, calls for a consideration of whether those failures are not the result of the impossibility of the project itself. But in such a case it is the project of autonomy as such that must be disassociated from its particular historical manifestations.

Now given that the experience of the project of autonomy is situated in the project's retreat via its association with the failed programs and awareness of the absence of viable alternatives, to thinkingly retrieve the project as such is to acknowledge the operation of what we referred to above as the 'second level of retreat', namely that from any and all specific programs. That is, in order to fully open himself to the challenge of the categorical verdict of history, Castoriadis must retrieve from history that which history has already brought forth, namely the question of the impossibility of autonomy as such as something over and above the specific/failed political programs. The only place available to the thinker in which to pursue the encounter of autonomy as such is the *topos* of retreat. This then is the place that the thinker must radicalize if the project of autonomy is to be resituated beyond the heteronomous spaces associated with the verdict of history.

If the above analysis is correct then it would appear that in order to recapture the project of autonomy philosophically, or, in its own pure possibility, the only option for the committed thinker is to make the project of autonomy retreat from the very spaces of the first retreat. From this perspective, to be a thinker is to treat one's thinking as the activity of the autonomous collective, which, in its retreating from the retreat of the political project, gathers itself in its own thinking activity and in doing so gives rise to its own historical possibility, albeit as visionary. So it is by facing the challenge of enacting this second level of retreat that the thinker enacts his/her autonomy qua thinker or, in other words, he/she becomes the thinker of the autonomous collective.

If, as Castoriadis appears to acknowledge, the political possibilities for the re-activation of the project of autonomy are currently non-existent, then in seeking thinkingly to affirm the possibility of re-activating the project of autonomy, the thinker must hold together *the gathering in its retreat*. For it is this sort of radicalization of the retreat of the project that immanently disengages the investigation of the pure possibility of autonomy from that of the available political possibilities for the project's resurgence. Within such a framework, the very retreating of the autonomous collective is itself lost from view. After all, in attempting to engage the very *retreatingness* of the autonomous collective, for the reasons explained above, the thinker cannot simply identify this aspect of the gathering with the weaknesses of the failed programs. Nor, however, can he identify the collective's retreatingness with anything like the thinker's anticipation qua activist of meaningful future opportunities for the resurgence of the political project. For, to do so would be to

render meaningless the task of thinking the project's reactivation.

It follows that the thinker can encounter the autonomous gathering as the subject matter of thinking only in the spaces of the gathering's *unconditional* retreat. In other words, since there is no adequate point of comparison between the state of the retreat of the project and the possibility of overcoming the retreat via the resurgence of a future program, the fact of the radical absence of possibilities for a future resurgence of the retreating gathering not only renders the latter invisible giving rise to a second level of retreat. It also calls upon the thinker to recognise his/her own being as the place of the happening of this second level of retreat. Ultimately, the awareness of the absence of empirical possibilities for the project's reactivation must lead the thinker to situate himself/herself in this relation in order to enable him/her to think the pure possibility of the reactivation of the project of autonomy. It is in this sense that the retreating gathering must retreat in the thinker. It is only through the thinker's self-transformation into such a place of thinking the autonomous collective in its retreatedness that thinker might hope to enact the possibility of the autonomous collective or, in other words, to justifiably reject the claim that the project of autonomy has been historically eliminated.

In the light of the above analysis and despite his best efforts, Castoriadis' recognition of the retreat of the project of autonomy appears as a merely journalistic intervention of the kind that he objects to, rather than as critique in the mode that he advocates. By limiting himself to what we identified above as the first level of retreat of the political project of autonomy, Castoriadis confines himself to the perspective of 'the creeping snake'and thus gives up the opportunity to engage with the project as the project of thinking. He merely reports on the rather obvious fact, that of the project's political retreat, without however relating to this retreat as the place of dwelling of the thinker, that is, as the genuine non-fictive place of the autonomous collective and thus as the *topos* in which the autonomous gathering might be retrievable from the spaces of its historical rejection.