

“Socialisme ou barbarie”

Claire Pagès: An Interview with Vincent Descombes

Claire Pagès

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Claire Pagès: I would like to ask you about your involvement in the “Socialisme ou barbarie” group, and invite you to perform a kind of “retrospection.” Before that, please clarify something. Could you recall for us the period when you were associated with the group, since it went through several phases, with several splits... Did you join after the split in 1963–1964 between a tendency led by Castoriadis and Mothé (who kept the name “Socialisme ou barbarie” and the journal) and a heterogeneous grouping that took the name “Pouvoir Ouvrier” (which included Philippe Guillaume, Jean-François Lyotard, Pierre Souyri, and Alberto Vêga)?

Vincent Descombes: At that time in the 1960s, “Socialisme ou barbarie” was somewhat known in the *Quartier Latin*, especially for its journal, which could be found at a few newsstands, or for the *Pouvoir ouvrier* bulletin, which was occasionally distributed, not without difficulty, at the door of the Sorbonne courtyard. The handful of students who were involved in it joined mostly through the influence of Lyotard, who at the time was teaching to first-year students in the context of what was called the “Propédeutique,” which was a requirement for all students in the humanities. I did not know Lyotard at the time, since I had been in *classe préparatoire*,¹ so I did not take the classes in the “Propédeutique.” The year I received my licence,² I was able to make contact with the group through a classmate. However, I was asked to wait until the split was complete before joining, which took some time. The “Socialisme ou barbarie” in which I participated was therefore already reduced to the “Tendency” that had followed Castoriadis, alias Cardan, or Chaulieu for the earliest members. So I got to know the group at the very end of its activity, but I was not present when it was dissolved, as I had withdrawn from active membership in order to fully concentrate on preparing the *agrégation*³ in philosophy.

C. Pagès: You were very young when you joined “Socialisme ou barbarie.” What form did your participation in the group’s work take? Did you work on the journal?

¹ Also known as les prépas, these are classes preparing students for entrance examinations to the elite Grandes Écoles, of which the *École Normale Supérieure* would be the most likely destination for a student in the humanities [translator’s note].

² The degree in the French university system that is essentially the equivalent of a Bachelor’s in the US system [translator’s note].

³ A series of competitive examinations in various disciplines that facilitates access to positions in *lycées* and universities, and guarantees a higher salary than teachers who have not passed them [translator’s note].

V . Descombes: It's interesting that you said "the group's work." Yes, the group worked, mainly in preparing the journal by discussing the texts for the issues to come. That was a consequence, perhaps an unexpected one, of the split. Technically, we were a political group, not a think tank. So we should have been spending most of our discussions defining our political line by examining current events, the perspectives they offered for the spread of our ideas, deciding on possible alliances, etc.

But in fact, we often functioned like a study group. The split was behind us, but we still had to successfully complete the critique of Marxist doctrine on which the group had based its activities up to that point. So we could spend an entire evening discussing questions such as whether or not it was possible to calculate a rate of exploitation, to give an operational definition of surplus value, or to formulate laws of economic dynamics. Sometimes, you would think we were in a sociology seminar devoted to the mutations of Western societies and to the new ways they were malfunctioning. I remember that one evening, some comrades complained that the meetings were getting too wrapped up in theory.

You could say it was a collaborative effort, to the extent that the theoretical texts that would appear in the journal were discussed within the group. Actually, we counted on Castoriadis to write these texts and put forward exciting ideas. For his part, Castoriadis needed interlocutors, and the group could only partially serve his needs, by the way.

C. Pagès: In my first two questions, to conjure up "Socialisme ou barbarie," I hesitated between the terms "group" and "movement." What kind of political "formation" was it exactly?

V. Descombes: We called it "the group" amongst ourselves. Could we have called it a "movement"? Maybe, if we had been able to find a solution to the problem that a real increase in our membership would have caused: the problem of organization, which "Socialisme ou barbarie" had already come up against in the 1950s.

C. Pagès: The members of "Socialisme ou barbarie" were not at all alone, in the 1960s, in working on a fusion of theory and practice. But what was the group's particular approach to the "theoretical practice" they wished to embody? What form did it take?

V . Descombes: "Theoretical practice": that oxymoron sounds somewhat Althusserian to my ears, and also pretty unclear. It's not enough to decide that theoretical activity is now called "theoretical practice" to resolve the problem of knowing to what extent good practice presupposes theoretical work.

In the 1960s in France, people used the term *praxis* instead. The leftist intellectual circles, partly under the influence of Merleau-Ponty, welcomed some of the concerns of "Western Marxism." The "Arguments" collection at the *Éditions de Minuit* published translations of Lukács, Marcuse and others.

Among the partisans of that kind of Marxism, the idea of combining theory and practice usually went hand in hand with the idea that philosophy was complete (thanks to Hegel), that it had accomplished its theoretical task (in an idealistic vein), that all it had left to do was to become reality. This young Hegelian theme of the end of philosophy could go well with Heideggerian motifs. I should say that I never heard anything of the kind in "Socialisme ou barbarie." Castoriadis took great care not to present himself to us as the philosopher that he was. In the group, he liked to think of himself as an intellectual specializing in the economic expertise that he put to use professionally at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Nevertheless, he would sometimes refer us to the great classics, for example to Plato (on the limits to government

through laws). The idea that emerged was not at all that theory (i.e., ultimately, philosophy) had had its day, but that we still had much to do in order to understand our era better.

Incidentally, at “Socialisme ou barbarie,” there was the idea that political theory always lagged behind historical practices and inventions. In particular, we strongly rejected the Leninist dogma of the political impotence of the working classes. Quite the contrary: the idea that drove us was that the workers’ movement, as such, had its own ideas and ethos, without which a radical transformation of the social order would be impossible. This is why we rejected the glorification of all the figures of passive victims that we saw in other circles: the Sartrean idea of a constitutive negativity of the proletarian condition, Third-Worldism, and so on, in short all forms of miserabilism.

C. Pagès: Concerning the positions of “Socialisme ou barbarie,” people have spoken of a spontaneism, associated with a refusal to lead struggles, either those of the workers or of colonized populations. I don’t know if we can say it so generally, as there was probably no agreement on this point. Souyri, who was the specialist on China in the group before the second split, seemed for example to differ from the others by his doubts about the emancipatory spontaneity of the masses and political spontaneism, for he felt that “the evil done by exploitation” went deep. Nevertheless, how did this faith in social movements and their efficacy interact with the group’s main focus on organization?

V. Descombes: Souyri’s remarkable articles on class struggle in China were extremely important: they kept the group (particularly the younger members like us) from giving in to the siren call of Maoism when it started to be heard in the 1960s.

To be honest, the idea of *leading* the struggles of people throughout the world from the back room of a café on the Place de la Bastille would have been considered ridiculous. I think that the group always knew how to avoid that and that it was a question of principle for us. Leading anything was out of the question. However, there was certainly an ambiguity in the definition of the role that it quietly gave itself, which was to coordinate movements, to bring them into contact with each other, first in trying to provide an overview of them, then in actually enabling them to establish mutual relations. But wasn’t coordinating, establishing relations, already a process of centralization, giving ourselves a leading role, while we claimed to be doing nothing more than offering an “orientation,” as the subtitle of the journal put it? And so we come to the question of organization.

C. Pagès: How would you express today the differences between Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort on this question of organization?

V. Descombes: Their discussion on this decisive question led to an impasse. I will return to this issue later on.

C. Pagès: The group gave itself the name of the journal it published, “Socialisme ou barbarie.” What was that barbarism identified with? Was it seen in the same way that Rosa Luxemburg saw it when she, alongside the Luxemburgists, used that expression for the first time to indicate the alternative facing humanity?

V. Descombes: To me it seems that there had been an evolution in this area. If you look at the first issues of the journal, one idea that stands out is that humanity was living under the threat of a third world war, bringing every atrocity imaginable in its wake, like the first two. Moreover, in everyday life, the inhumanity that the word “barbarism” evokes was the alienating organization of work.

In the 1960s, the focus was increasingly on denouncing the illusions of consumerism.

We had a discussion at one point. The question was: between Huxley and Orwell, which of the two provided the best representation of the barbarism threatening us? I remember Castoriadis saying that we tended to envision barbarism as repressive and authoritarian, like in 1984, but that the oppressive society that was taking shape (with affluence and the economy's new consumerist regime) looked rather like the one portrayed in *Brave New World*.

C. Pagès: Did the "socialism" toward which the members of "Socialisme ou barbarie" were working have a clear definition? This question leads to a second one: What kind of theory of capitalism could the group develop?

V. Descombes: Actually, the comrades following Castoriadis had agreed to give up interpreting the flow of history in the light of historical materialism, while maintaining the idea that the existing social system was plagued by a fundamental contradiction. According to Marxist dogma, that contradiction is infrastructural: the conflict between the growth of productive forces and the form of the relations of production must trigger an ultimate crisis of the entire system sooner or later. The new overall analysis that Castoriadis put forward in 1963 extended the group's diagnosis to the process of bureaucratization in large organizations and mass production: there was a conflict, which was insoluble within the framework of the system, between, on the one hand, the need to call on people's own activity (their inventiveness, their practical sense), and on the other, the need to prevent them from developing that activity independently, which would have destroyed the system.

In these days of "new management"⁴ and uberization, it seems to me that this analysis by Castoriadis has remained quite relevant. Nevertheless, the contemporary context is different, due to factors such as the globalization of the job market or the development of new technologies. In the 1960s, it still went without saying that the basic economic unit – for which we supported the idea of management by the workers – was the company in the sense of the factory (a factory that could not be offshored), or even the workshop (in which everyone has a complete view of the whole process of production assigned to that unit).

C. Pagès: The group and its journal languished in relative obscurity at the time. Probably as a result of the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the group gained new members attracted by the analysis that the journal had made of workers' councils. But its availability remained quite limited. Later, May 1968 and its repercussions probably popularized some of "Socialisme ou barbarie"'s ideas, introducing a wider audience to what the group had been or, at least, contributing to the reputation of some of its former protagonists. Today, interest in the group is growing again. But can we really say that it is relevant to the current situation? In other words, do the political questions we have really correspond to those the group had at the time, and do those questions really endure today? Weren't our current political questions impossible or unthinkable at the time, to such a degree that despite our interest in, our attachment to, or even our fascination for "Socialisme ou barbarie," its work remains largely obsolete?

V. Descombes: Of the questions that came up at the time, which ones still remain relevant for us? I see at least two.

First, the question of "organization," as it is called.

How can we build a militant organization promoting associative socialism rather than state socialism? One of the group's guiding principles was that a political party should make sure to organize itself according to the model it advocates for the society as a whole. It must therefore

⁴ In English in the text [translator's note].

be exemplary. The idea is that the way in which parties or organizations function prefigures the way in which they will govern society if they come to power. If they function bureaucratically, the society they are preparing – the one they ardently desire – will be bureaucratic. Behind this question we asked of our own activity, there was therefore in reality the question of whether or not a regime based on direct democracy was possible.

The question of organization was one of the topics that were regularly discussed, but no answer was found for it either in the group, or later in Lefort's or Castoriadis's own writings.

Lefort's position has some coherence. He refused the very idea of forming a (new) party. As our fundamental critique of the existing system concerned the impossible separation between the tasks of leading and those of implementing, we had to avoid anything that would amount to setting ourselves up as the self-proclaimed leadership of the revolutionary movement. Therefore the group forbid itself from taking the form of a political party.

And yet, if we take this principle to its logical conclusion, this would amount to giving up on independent action, letting other collectives take the initiative. A group that would refuse to give itself a form of organization should limit its activity to promoting the circulation of ideas or projects developed within the society itself. All that would be left for that group was to wait for that society to find its own motive force.

Castoriadis's position also has some coherence, at least if you accept his idea, which is that the category of the political is defined by the fact that there are situations in which a group must become a political community, must present a particular decision as a group decision. It therefore needs an organization.

Another question that remains relevant today is the relationship between, on the one hand, "social issues" (unemployment, salaries, working conditions, etc.) and on the other, what we now call "societal issues" (fighting for the "recognition" of minorities instead of for added purchasing power). When you look at what topics were covered in the journal, you notice that it gave more and more column space to the contemporary phenomena (in France and abroad) that prefigured May '68: the generation gap ("the student rebellion," as it was called at the time), the women's movement, "crises of transmission" (malaise in the universities, educational disputes), the reassessment of psychiatric institutions, etc.

Today, we may wonder if all of these societal struggles did not contribute to the atomization of society and its fragmentation. Moreover, in this competition between the social and the societal, what space is left for the questions concerning the quality of life, standards of living, the reign of technique (we read Jacques Ellul attentively)? We are not talking here about the usual union demands, or demands pertaining to minorities, but issues concerning everyone that should interest everyone.

C. Pagès: Despite the time that has gone by since the dissolution of "Socialisme ou barbarie," which marked the dissolution of a militant revolutionary group but not the end of the political discussions it initiated or of the intellectual production of its best writers, what still connects you today to this experience of your youth? Is it the form of activism? The encounter with the figure of Cornelius Castoriadis? Other things?

V. Descombes: It would be hard for me to distinguish in my head the things I learned in the group from what I received from Castoriadis himself, when I saw him again later. After leaving Paris in 1967 to take up my position in the provinces and then to fulfill my military obligation

through the cooperation program,⁵ I lost touch with him, but I reestablished contact in 1979, when he responded to a package I had sent him containing a book in which I had devoted a few pages to him – too few for his liking, incidentally (*Le Même et l'autre*, 1979).⁶

From all of these encounters, what I retained was that thanks to the group, I had the opportunity to consider questions that I would put into three classes.

First, there are the questions that were asked within the group and that received an answer, or at least the start of an answer, in the analyses published in the journal. These were mainly questions that needed to be asked at the time on the nature of the Soviet or Chinese regime: to put it more generally, on the content of a given socialist program. The analyses in terms of social classes that Castoriadis and Lefort put forward at the end of the 1940s will live on, even though they were only partial assessments of the totalitarian phenomena in Europe, or even just the Soviet system. For the group, the events in 1956 in Poland and Hungary were, first and foremost, episodes in the history of the worldwide workers' movement. We thought that the collapse of the communist regimes, when it came, would be due to an insurrection by the workers. The national dimension of these 1956 revolts was insufficiently taken into account. Furthermore, I think that there is something to be said for the idea that the capitalist system puts people in a kind of double bind. Be independent and inventive, but under the conditions imposed on you: in other words, submit yourselves to the demands of productivity. Here we come up against a contradiction that is inherent in a social system that must function as a system while being based upon the principle of individualism.

Second, there are the questions that were asked within the group, but that the group could not answer: above all, the question of "organization" mentioned previously. This means: the question of the need for a group, considered as a collective, to give itself a structure that makes it a political group, i.e. a group that, in a given situation (that it has not chosen itself), must set a course of action for itself or else disappear. This is the question of *the political as such*, i.e. of the necessities that anyone who wants to pursue political activity must accept.

"Socialisme ou barbarie" never managed to give a satisfactory answer to this question, which means that it left its considerations on political matters unfinished. In my opinion, the extraordinary episode of May '68 fully confirmed this diagnosis. First, the dispersed members of the group thought that this was it, that the uprising we had heralded was taking place. Then, we had to revise this initial judgment, and account in one way or another for the generalized decline of the May movement and, ultimately, its failure.

Regarding the necessities that are inherent in the political as such, it is true that Castoriadis put forward more convincing ideas in his seminars on Greece, in particular when he insisted on the difference between an *executive power* (administration) and a *governmental power* (see his 1984–1985 seminar, published as *Thucydide, la force et le droit*). Unlike what some theoreticians profess, and what the very term "executive power" suggests, it is strictly impossible for a governmental power to limit itself to carrying out the laws and injunctions of the legislative power that is established as the absolute sovereign.

⁵ This seems to be a reference to the program called *La Coopération du service national à l'étranger*, which was put in place for French draftees in 1965 as an alternative to military service, while requiring a longer tour of duty. It would appear to be roughly equivalent to the American Peace Corps [translator's note].

⁶ In English translation: *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. Lorna Scott-Fox and Jeremy M. Harding (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980) [translator's note].

It should be noted that the recent social movements (“Les indignés,”⁷ “Nuit debout,”⁸ “Les gilets jaunes”⁹) have not found the way to escape from the curse of horizontality established as the principle of collective action. And the contemporary theoreticians of direct democracy are not the ones who can give them a way, as they seem to be content with reducing political action to protesting. Finally, there are the questions that were not asked, or not asked seriously enough, perhaps because they were hard to imagine at the time, perhaps because the group could not manage to rid itself of its ideological prejudices.

I will bring up one that seems very relevant today in my opinion. What is the *moral psychology* presupposed by the project of autonomy we were fighting for? The moral psychology means the set of psychological impulses, habitual motives and qualities presupposed by the political and personal commitment to an overall project of self-government, whether collective or individual. This psychology seems very demanding: in order for the need for external leadership to disappear, you need extremely socialized individuals, capable of imposing a strict discipline on themselves. Are today’s individuals up to the task? Were we ourselves up to the task? Already, before ’68, we wondered why people preferred consumerism, entertainment and “gadget civilization” over the thrilling perspectives of liberty that we were championing (basically, self-management, the term used after ’68). We would say: the fault lies with “privatization,” which is an effect of alienation by the system. But saying “alienation” meant applying a word to the phenomenon to be explained (i.e. the gap between what people should have been thinking and what they really thought), it didn’t mean explaining it. It is true that some of us thought that the explanation would come from Freudian psychoanalysis, which amounted to considering the gap in question as an anomaly and not as an aspect of human nature. Castoriadis liked to quote Rousseau on the English nation, which was only free “during the election of members of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, it is enslaved and counts for nothing.”¹⁰ But can real individuals be sovereign 24 hours a day? The same Rousseau wrote: “It is impossible to imagine the people remaining in perpetual assembly to attend to public affairs.”¹¹ Direct democracy can only be intermittent: it is impossible to attend general assemblies, or even commissions, all the time. When they go on and on, they tend to be given over to scheming. People are tired, they go home, and the way is clear for any and all manipulations, as we experienced first-hand at the time in the general assemblies of the UNEF,¹² which were quickly infiltrated by the Communists or the Trotskyists.

Finally, what should we retain from the group’s ideas on democracy? I think Castoriadis said it best when he offered this definition of a democratic regime: it is the regime for those who have understood that there is no possible recourse against oneself. “Democracy is the political regime

⁷ “The Outraged”: Anti-austerity protests that began in Spain in 2011 (where it was known as *Movimiento 15-M*) in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, in parallel with the Occupy movement in the US [translator’s note].

⁸ “Up All Night”: Protests in France in 2016 that started as a contestation of the “El Khomri law” limiting job security, and that briefly turned the Place de la République in Paris into an all-night political forum [translator’s note].

⁹ “Yellow vests”: A movement beginning in 2018 against the increase in French fuel taxes, rapidly growing to encompass the rising cost of living in general and many other issues [translator’s note].

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Le Contrat social*, book 3, chapter 15 [“The Social Contract,” trans. Henry J. Tozer and Susan Dunn, in *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven / London, Yale University Press: 2002), 221].

¹¹ J.-J. Rousseau, *ibid.*, [Ibid.,” 201].

¹² *Union nationale des étudiants de France* (National Union of Students of France), still in existence today, a student union with several thousand members that considers itself similarly to a workers’ union and acts like one, defending the rights of students and representing them in contacts with the government and other institutions [translator’s note].

where the only thing to fear is one's own mistakes and where one has given up complaining about one's misfortunes.”¹³ In other words, democracy is the regime in which you agree to be responsible for yourself, and therefore the one in which you can give yourself the means to do so.

This definition is eminently relevant today, for we live in oligarchic times. Everywhere in Europe, we observe the phenomenon of what has rightly been called “the secession of elites,” hence the opposition between those who are “somewhere” and those who are “anywhere,”¹⁴ to use David Goodhart's expressions. Our politicians seem to find it normal to tell us that the important decisions are made elsewhere than in our Parliament or our government. When situations arise that call for a political decision on the part of our government – the unemployment crisis, the migrant crisis – we hear politicians that we have elected say that these problems are not their responsibility, that they must be handled on the level of European institutions. But under these conditions, who is responsible for the policies that are actually pursued (including when that policy consists in deciding nothing, as is often the case)? Hence the current situation, that is sometimes presented as a crisis of *representation* (people would not accept being represented) whereas it is really a crisis of *democracy* (people complain about not being represented where real decisions are made).

¹³ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce*, Tome 2: *La Cité et les lois – Séminaires 1983–1984*, ed. Enrique Escobar, Myrto Gondicas and Pascal Vernay (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2008), 203.

¹⁴ “Somewhere,” “anywhere”: in English in the text [translator's note].

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