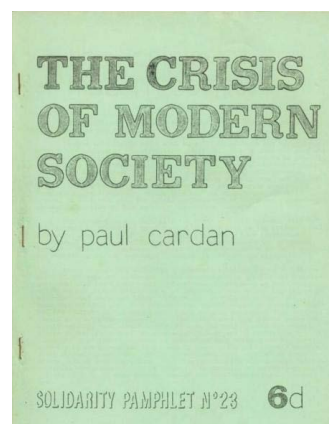


# Cornelius Castoriadis

## The Crisis of Modern Society

1965



### 1. Introduction

The theme of the discussion today is “the crisis of modern society.” I would like to start by evoking what appears to be a fantastic paradox concerning modern industrial society and the way people live and act in it. It is the contradiction between the apparent omnipotence of humanity over its physical environment (the fact that technique is becoming more and more powerful, that physical conditions are increasingly controlled, that we are able to extract more and more energy from matter) and, on the other hand, the tremendous chaos and sense of impotence concerning the proper affairs of society, the human affairs, the way social systems work, etc.

Let me give one or two examples. Today a scientist can tell you roughly how many galaxies exist within a radius of six billion light-years from the solar system. But Mr. MacMillan, then prime minister, did not know what was happening next door during the Profumo affair. This may seem just a joke but it epitomizes the whole situation in a rather striking manner. In the same way we are able to extract enormous amounts of energy out of tiny bits of matter, yet if in a factory or any other organization bosses try to extract one additional movement from the workers there is tremendous resistance, and eventually they may not succeed.

This is not to say that from the point of view of what one might call the “internal

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environment" of society there have not been changes, in some sense even big, progressive changes. So-called prosperity is more general than it was (though one ought to see more precisely what this prosperity consists of). There is a spreading of culture. There is an expanding society. There is better health, and so on. But here we meet a second paradox. It is that this society which produces so much—and where the population has, to some extent, a share in this expansion of wealth—that this society which has apparently created less cruel living conditions for most of the people who live in it does not present an image of greater satisfaction, of greater happiness for a greater number of people. People are dissatisfied, people are grumbling, people are protesting, constant conflicts exist. Even if dissatisfaction takes on different forms, this richer and more prosperous society possibly contains more tensions within it than most other societies we have known in history.

These paradoxes offer a first way of defining the crisis of modern society. But this is a superficial way of looking at the phenomena that confront us. If we go a bit deeper, we'll see that the crisis manifests itself at all levels of social life.

## 2. The Crisis of Values

Let's start with an aspect that traditional Marxists consider just part of the "super-structure" of society, as a derived and secondary phenomenon, but that we consider to be very important, namely, the crisis of social and human values.

No society can exist without a set of values that are recognized in practice and adhered to by the quasi totality of its members. The problem here is not to know if these values are right or wrong—or whether they conceal real mechanisms whereby some people succeed in exploiting others. For the cohesion, for the working of all the societies we have known—even of societies divided into classes—such a set of values has proved necessary. They are what constantly orients the actions and motives of people and makes them cohere into a social whole. This function cannot be ensured just by violence and coercion, nor even just by the penal law, which says "you ought not to do this, otherwise you go to prison." There must be something more. After all, the law only states what is prohibited. It cannot provide *positive* motives, a positive orientation enabling people to fill the content of social life.

Now we all know (it has been said for a long time but this does not diminish the importance of the phenomenon) that such a set of values, such a system of accepted goals and common beliefs as to what is right and what is wrong, what ought to be done or not done (irrespective of what the penal law says) hardly exists any more in today's society.

There was a problem in all societies, in all historical phases, about the place of man in the world and about the meaning of life in society and of life in general. Every period of history attempted to give an answer to these questions. The problem here is not whether these answers were right or wrong, but the mere fact that an answer was forthcoming gave a cohesion, a sense of purpose, a sense of meaning to the people living in these periods. But today there is no clear answer. We know very well that religious values are out, for all purposes practically finished. What used to be called moral values (inasmuch as they can be distinguished from religious

values) are also practically finished. Are there really any accepted moral standards left in today's society?

At the level of officialty, of the powers that be, of the press, etc., there is just an official hypocrisy that almost explicitly recognizes itself as sheer hypocrisy and does not even take its own standards seriously. And in society at large there is an extremely widespread cynicism, constantly fed by the examples provided by social life (scandals and so on). The general idea is that you can do anything and that nothing is wrong, provided you can get away with it, provided that you are not caught.

What in Western Europe had appeared for some time to be a sort of universal value welding society together, namely the idea of the nation, of national power, of national grandeur, is no longer an accepted value. What was after all its real basis—or the pretence of a real basis—has disappeared. In the past it was often a mystification when great nations pretended that they were playing important roles in world affairs. But today no nation can claim this except for America and Russia. And even for them this "leading role in world affairs" is clearly seen as being just an entanglement in the impasse of nuclear power.

Could knowledge or art provide values for society today? First of all let us not forget that knowledge and art are important or have meaning, at least today, for only very limited strata of the population. More generally, in history, whenever art has played a role in social life, it has never been as an end in itself. It has been as part of a community that was expressing its life in this art. This was the case in the Elizabethan period. It was the case in the Renaissance. It was the case in ancient Greece. The Greeks or the people during the Renaissance did not live for art, but they put great value into their art because they recognized themselves and their problems in it. Their whole life had a meaning that was expressed in its highest forms in this artistic creation.

What about knowledge? Again in the strict sense, it is limited today to a small minority. And there is a tremendous crisis developing in science. This has followed the increasing division within particular spheres of knowledge, the increasing specialization, the fact that a scientist today is necessarily someone who knows more and more about less and less. At least among scientists who take a broad view there is a deep feeling of crisis in relation to what even yesterday was considered to be the solid basis of factual knowledge. Newton thought he was discovering eternal truth, that he was reading a page out of the eternal book of nature or of God's creation. Today no scientist believes that in discovering a "law" he is discovering an eternal truth. He only knows that he will perhaps be the object of three lines in a history of physics or of chemistry where it will be said "attempts to explain the peculiarities of this experiment by W. in 1965, provided some hopes that led to theory X. This however was later superseded by the construction of theories Y and Z."

Scientists themselves, like Oppenheimer, for instance, are dramatically aware of yet another aspect of the crisis. It is that with this specialization they have not only isolated themselves from the whole of society but that they have also isolated themselves *from each other*. There is no longer any scientific community with a common language. As soon as you go beyond the limits of a specialty people cannot really communicate, because there is so little common ground.

What is happening in these circumstances? What values today does society pro-



pose to its citizens? The only value that survives is consumption. The acquisition of more and more or newer and newer things is supposed completely to fill peoples' lives, to orient their effort, to make them stick to work, etc. I won't dwell much on all this, which you all know very well. I'll only stress how much all this—even as a mystification—is only a partial and unsatisfactory answer. Already today people cannot fill their lives just by working to earn more money, in order to buy more modern TV sets, and so on and so forth. This is felt more and more. The profound reason for this feeling is of course that in its content this consumption does not express organic human needs. It is more and more manipulated, so that purchases can become an outlet for the ever-growing mass production of consumer goods. This whole pattern of existence almost by definition becomes absurd. The value of having newer and more things is caught up in a process of perpetual self-refutation. It has no end. The only point is to have something more, something newer. People become aware of what in the United States is now called "the rat race." You just try to earn more so that you can consume more than the neighbors. You somehow value yourself more than the neighbors because you have a higher consumption standard, and so on.

### 3. Work

Now let us try to see how the crisis manifests itself in the sphere of people's activity. We can start first of all by examining what has happened to work.

Since the beginning of capitalism the permanent tendency has been to destroy work as a meaningful activity. What previously might have been the relation of, say, the peasant to his land, or of the artisan to the object he was making, has been progressively destroyed with the industrial revolution, with the division of labor, with the chaining of people to extremely partial aspects of the production process. Together with this has developed the constant and ever-growing attempt by capitalist firms, and now by the managerial bureaucracy, to intervene more and more deeply in the labor process. They seek to direct it from the outside, not only to direct the final results of the work, the ends and the methods of production, but even precisely to define the gestures of the workers through time study, through motion study, and so forth. This has been established practice now, in Western industry, for over half a century. The meaning of work has not only been destroyed from, so to speak, the *objective* side. Nobody any longer produces a thing, an object. People just produce components, the precise destination of which is often unknown to them. The meaning of work has also been destroyed on the *subjective* side, in the sense that even when producing a bit, at least in the system as it exists, you are not supposed to have a say as to how to produce this particular bit.

Now this development, this destruction of the meaning of work (which is a necessary concomitant of the whole system) has very important effects. It manifests itself as a subjective alienation of the worker from the work process, through the fact that the worker feels both like an outsider and at the same time like a manipulated person. It also manifests itself socially, one could almost say objectively, because, despite all, modern production requires the active participation of men both as individuals and as groups.

The real subject of modern production is less and less the individual worker. It is the group, the team of workers. Now at this level you again have the same phenomenon. The existing management of production does not want to accept the fact that the real unit of the work is more and more a team, a collectivity, because the resistance of a group to imposed rules of work and to attempts to destroy the meaning of work is greater. It is much easier to manipulate people at the individual level. A contradiction is engendered.

The crisis of modern work is not only expressed as misery on the part of the worker, but as an objective impasse of the production process. Modern production requires the active participation of men both as individuals and as groups. Yet the methods that are *necessarily* established by the system as it functions today seek to destroy this very participation at the same time as they require it. The manifestations of this phenomenon are both an immense waste in production and a permanent conflict in industry between people who merely carry out instructions and those who direct them.

#### 4. Political Alienation

Now let us pass to another sphere: the sphere of politics. Everybody is familiar with the crisis of politics. It has been talked about for a long time, under the term "apathy." What is apathy and what are its roots?

After a certain historical development, both the State and various other institutions (like local government) became increasingly bureaucratized, like everything else in modern society. Political organizations—not only the bourgeois, conservative political organizations, but the political organizations created by the working class to struggle against the ruling class and their State—and even the trade unions were involved in this process. Irrespective of its other aspects, this bureaucratization meant that people were excluded from their own affairs.

The fate of trade unions is now more or less left to appointed officials, to people elected for long periods. These people act in such a way that the rank and file are prevented from expressing their views. They are prevented from having any genuine activity within the union. The rank and file serve as a sort of support, paying fees and obeying orders. From time to time they are even given orders to strike. But they aren't supposed to have a real say in all this. By a natural reaction the rank and file estranges itself from the organization, be it the trade union or the Party.

I don't know how far this has already gone in Britain, but on the Continent we are familiar with trade-union branch meetings where the two or three appointed officials turn up and perhaps half a dozen other persons, out of two hundred people who were supposed to be there. Now, of course, when this happens a sort of vicious circle is set up. The bureaucracy argues, "You see! We call upon people to come along and discuss their affairs. They don't! Somebody has to take over to solve all these problems. So we do it. We do it *for* them, not for our own sake." This is partly propaganda and self-justification by the bureaucracy, but it is also partly true. What is not usually seen is that this vicious circle always started at some specific point where the wish and tendency of people actively to participate, to take over their own

affairs, was opposed and finally destroyed by the will of the bureaucracy, using all the means at its disposal.

The same thing happens in the purely political organizations. These are bureaucratized. They keep people away from active participation except in periods of "crisis" when the rulers may suddenly call on people to help. This is exactly what de Gaulle did in France, in 1960. He appealed over the radio: Help me against the revolt in Algiers! Of course, he had previously produced a constitution whereby the population would be kept firmly in place for seven years. Then, just like that, when a crisis arose, he called for help. Did he expect people to take the equivalent of their Morris Minors to the airport and help fight the parachutists from Algiers?<sup>1</sup>

There is a growing consciousness in the population at large that politics today is just a manipulation of people, a manipulation of society to serve specific interests. The phrase "they are all the same gang" (which you often hear "apathetic" or "non-political" people use) expresses first of all an objective truth. It also expresses, as a first approximation, a very correct attitude. It has been perceived, after all, that those who compete to rule society are all part of the same gang.

This was even recognized, during the 1959 general election, by the serious bourgeois press (papers like the *Economist* and the *Guardian*). They complained that there was no discernible difference between the Tory and Labor programs. This was very bad, because the beauty of British democracy was that it worked on a system of two parties. But in order to have *two* parties you must have *something* that makes the two parties really two, and not just two faces of the same gang. There must be *some* real differences, at least in what they say, if not in what they do. Today these "differences" are less and less.

What is the end result? Parties (and, in the case of the United States, presidents) cannot claim support on the basis of ideas or of programs. Presidents or parties are now sold to the population, like various brands of toothpaste. An "image" of Kennedy, or of Johnson, or Sir Alec or of Wilson is created. Public relations experts ask themselves, "Isn't Wilson coming over as too much of an egghead? Shouldn't he say something or other to correct this impression? What should he do to get support from that 5 percent sector of the electorate who really likes Sir Alec because he is rather stupid and who don't want a prime minister who is too clever? Shouldn't Wilson try to say something stupid next time?"

In the end politics becomes practically undistinguishable from any other form of advertising or sale of products. In this respect the products are immaterial, though they matter in other respects.

I will not dwell on the fact that all this does not just create a subjective crisis. It isn't just that we resent the fact that society is run this way. All this has objective repercussions. In an Italian town, during the Renaissance, a tyrant might have succeeded in keeping the population cowed. But a modern society, with its established rules and deep-seated institutions, cannot be managed on this basis, even from the point of view of the rulers themselves. It cannot be run with the total abstention of the population from *any* intervention or *any* control in politics, for there is then no control by reality on the politicians. They run amok and the result is, for instance, Suez. Here again the crisis impinges upon the workings of society itself.



### 5. Family Relationships

Another field in which the crisis manifests itself very deeply is that of family relationships. We all know the big changes that have been going on in this respect. The traditional standards, the morality, the behavior that characterized the patriarchal family and that prevailed in Western Europe till the turn of the century are breaking down. The pivotal factor, namely the authority of the man, of the father, is breaking down. Sex morals, as they existed, are disintegrating. The relations between parents and children, as they existed traditionally, are being more and more disrupted. And in a certain sense nothing is put in their place.

We ought to stop for a minute and seek to understand what this really means. I would like to be clearly understood. Of course the patriarchal family and the corresponding morals were, from our point of view, absurd, inhuman, alienated. That's one level of discussion. But at a deeper level, the question is not of our judgment. A society cannot function harmoniously unless relations between men and women and the upbringing of children are somehow regulated (I don't mean, of course, a mechanistic, legal regulation) in a manner that allows people to live their lives as individuals of one sex with the other, in a manner that allows new generations to be procreated and brought up without coming into conflict with the existing social arrangements.

This "functional" aspect of the family existed in the patriarchal family. It existed, or could have existed, in a matriarchal family. It exists in a Moslem polygamic family. The question here is not of making judgments. In these societies there were ways of solving—and not just legalistically solving—the problem of the relations between man and woman, between parents and children. These methods combined the legal aspects, the economic aspects, the sexual aspects, and deeper psychological (what one might call the Freudian) aspects of the creation of human beings, more or less adapted to the existing form of social life. But today what was providing this type of cohesion, namely, the traditional patriarchal family, is more and more broken down. And with it are broken down all its concomitants: traditional sex morals, traditional relations between the father and the mother, traditional relations between parents and children.

At first sight nothing emerges to replace the traditional concepts. This creates an enormous crisis that manifests itself in some readily discernible forms like the breaking up of families, the homeless children, the tremendous problem of youth today, the "*blousons noirs*" (mods and rockers), and so on. All this goes extremely deep. In a certain sense what is at stake here is the very problem of the continuation of society. I don't mean just biological reproduction, but the reproduction of personalities having a certain relation to their environment.

From the point of view of the whole nexus of problems that exist around the family, sex, parents, children, men and women, and so on, nobody knows for certain what he or she is expected to do. What is his or her role? What, for instance, is the place of the woman in today's society? You can make her one of fifteen wives in a harem, you can make her the Victorian matron, you can make her the Greek woman in the gynaeceum, but somehow or other she has to have a certain place in society. You can say, as Hitler did, that her place is in the kitchen with the children and/or

in church. This is coherent. It is inhuman, it is barbaric, but it is coherent. But what is the place of the woman in today's society? Is it to be just like a man, with a small physical difference? Is she to be a person who has to work most of the time? Or is she primarily a wife and mother? Or is she both? And can she be both? Is it feasible? Is society creating the conditions whereby this would become feasible? Total uncertainty about these matters creates a tremendous crisis concerning the status and even the personality of women. It creates a complete disorientation that literally and immediately affects men. Men have a sort of privilege in this respect, in the sense that they appear more or less to continue in their traditional role. They are outside, earning a living. But that's a fallacious appearance, because men and women in this respect are abstractions. What happens to women affects men. You can't define the two beings except in relation to each other.

The most dramatic effect of this uncertainty is upon the younger generations. Through largely unconscious mechanisms, about which we know something today, thanks to Sigmund Freud, children take models, identify themselves with this or that parental figure according to sex. Perhaps they even do this in a wider family context than just in relation to the biological father and mother. But this presupposes that developing children find before them a woman-mother and a man-father with patterns of behavior, attitudes, and roles that even if not defined in black and white nevertheless correspond to something fairly clear and certain. Inasmuch as all this is more and more questioned in today's society, children cannot grow up with the help of this process of identification, a process that is partly necessary, though it can be seen as alienating, as well. Development today is not, as before, helped by the parental figures.

The child was helped by these figures. In a certain sense it chose out of them what corresponded to its own nature. At any rate it used to find a structured character, a *person*, in the deepest sense of the word, in front of it. The child used to develop in relation to these persons even if, as in previous generations, it struggled against them. But today the situation is like a haze. There is increasing uncertainty as to what a man and a woman really are, in their reciprocal polar definitions, as to what their roles are, as to what the relations between them should be.

An immediate consequence is, of course, the total uncertainty that dominates relations between parents and children. There are still families where the old autarchic, patriarchal attitudes and habits prevail, where the remnants of the old ideas persist, where parents have a sort of master power over the children. Even more, the family is still sometimes seen as an object in the possession of the father, of the *paterfamilias*. This was the attitude of the Romans, but in fact it persisted in Western Europe for a very long time. In a certain sense, the children and even the wife existed *for* the father. He could do with them as he wanted, what he liked. With limitations, this attitude persists in some quarters. Of course it comes into conflict with the attitudes of children and young people today, of the teenagers, who are in revolt against it.

In other families, there is the opposite extreme: disintegration. Children just grow up. The parents play no role whatsoever, except perhaps providing pocket money, shelter, and food. One doesn't see what on earth they are there for, once they have procreated the children. In these conditions one might as well say, "Let us na-



tionalize the children as soon as they are born." In a certain sense the role of the parental couple in relation to the children has disappeared.

In the majority of instances conditions are somewhere in between. The parents are in perplexity, not knowing what to do and often giving brutal alternate strokes of the wheel to left or right, in their attempts to guide the education of the children. They are "liberal" one day. And the next day they are shouting, "This is enough. From tomorrow you will be in at 7 o'clock every evening." Then, of course, there is a crisis. And after the crisis they make concessions. And so on and so forth.

Those who recognize the negative results of all this on the social fabric today will easily understand that unless something happens the effects will be multiplied to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  degree, when the children of today will have to produce and bring up children of their own.

## 6. Education

There is an equivalent to all this in the problem of education. The traditional relationship, well expressed in the words "master" and "pupil," is being disrupted. It is less and less tolerated by young people. The teacher or professor is no longer in the real position of master toward the class, as he still was thirty years ago. But in the existing system it is impossible to shift over to another relationship. It is impossible really to admit a new relationship between adults and children.

Although the adult is necessary for the education of the children, the relationship must be shaped in a completely new way. The children's community ought to be able to acquire the capacity to manage its own affairs, and even in a certain sense to manage its own process of education, only having adults there to learn from, to borrow from, and, in a sense, to use. Some attempts at modern pedagogy recognize all this, but their attempts are limited by the whole social framework. We have a crisis in education in this respect.

We also have a crisis in education in another respect, namely in relation to the content of education. This is not just the crisis in the relations between educator and educated. It is a crisis concerning what education is about.

In the nineteenth century there was something in the conduct and content of education that corresponded more or less to a neat division of society into classes. For the children of the "higher" classes you had the humanities and secondary education. For the children of the "lower" classes there was elementary education, just enough to enable them to understand factory work, the bare minimum. Today, both these objectives are in crisis.

In a certain sense the humanities are out-of-date. There has been a tremendous degradation of "classical" education. No one is capable of showing the relevance of humanities to life today. Is there any relevance? Perhaps there is, but only a really living society could restore for itself the meaning of the past. Otherwise the meaning of the past becomes something completely external. It becomes, "Let us look at the Renaissance, let us look at the Elizabethans or at the Greeks. They were living in a harmonious world, contrary to our own." And that's all. It is not really possible to translate into today's terms the meaning of past cultures.

On the other hand, it is impossible for the expanding and exploding technology

of today to leave general education at the present level. People who are going to enter modern industry must have technical skills, must know more, even if only about techniques. Their educational needs are increasing at a tremendous rate. How is this to be dealt with? The solutions found in today's society are all internally contradictory. One solution consists in trying to give to the children an essentially technical education. For reasons that concern the whole setup of society and that are partly economic, you have to start this specialization very early. But this is not only extremely destructive for the personality of the children, it is also self-destructive. It is self-destructive in the sense that given today's rate of technological development and change, you cannot have people whom you have, so to speak, allocated once and for all to a very limited specialty. This type of educational crisis expresses itself in industry through the increasing demand for programs for adult re-education, in the demand for what's now called a "permanent educational process." But in order to be able to absorb in later life whatever this "permanent educational process" may offer (if it ever materializes), you must have as general a grounding as possible. It is obvious that if the basis on which you start is extremely narrow, then further education becomes an impossible proposition. Here again there is a sort of internal conflict that illustrates the crisis [at] this level.

### 7. Some Conclusions

Let us try to sum up. All that we have discussed impinges upon the two basic concepts, the two polar categories that create society: the personality of man and the structure of the social fabric and its cohesion.

At the *personal* level the crisis manifests itself as a sort of radical crisis in the meaning of life and of human motives. It is no accident that modern art and literature are more and more, if I may use the expression, "full of the void." In the *social* attitudes of people, the crisis shows itself in the destruction and disappearance of responsibility. There is a tremendous crisis of socialization. There is the phenomenon that we call privatization: people are, so to speak, withdrawing into themselves. There is practically no community life, ties become extremely disrupted, and so on. As a reaction to this there are new phenomena, for instance youth gangs, that express the need for positive socialization. But socialization in the more general sense, that is, the feeling that what is going on at large is, after all, our own affair, that we do have to do something about it, that we ought to be responsible, all this is deeply disturbing. This disruption contributes to a vicious circle. It increases apathy and multiplies its effects.

Now there is another very important side to all these phenomena of crisis. The time left does not allow me to do more than mention it. When we talk of crisis, we should understand that it is not a physical calamity that has fallen upon contemporary society. If there is a crisis, it is because people do *not* submit passively to the present organization of society but react and struggle against it, in a great many ways. And, equally important, this reaction, this struggle of the people, contains the seeds of the new. It inevitably produces new forms of life and of social relations.

In this sense, the crisis we have been describing is but the by-product of struggle.

Take, for instance, the changing position of women. Certainly, at the origin of

the disruption of the old patriarchal order, there had been the technical and economic development of modern society, industrialization, etc. Capitalism had destroyed the old family pattern by drawing women into the factory, then taking them out of it, etc. But this is only part of the story. All this could very well have left the old order unchanged, if women had not reacted in a given way to the new situation. And that is precisely what happened. Women, after a while, started demanding another sort of place in society. They did not accept the old patriarchal state of affairs. And I don't mean the suffragettes, Lady Astor, etc. There had been a silent pushing and struggle going on over fifty years or more. Women have finally conquered a sort of equivalence to men in the home. Girls have conquered the right to do as they like with themselves without being considered "prostitutes," etc.

The same is true about youth. The revolt of youth has been conditioned by the whole development of society. At a certain stage the teenagers no longer accepted treatment as mere objects of the father, of the parents, of the persons who were their "masters" till they were twenty-one, till they were married, till they earned a living, etc. Young people more or less conquered this position.

In these fields of the family, of relations between sexes, and of the parent-child relationship, something new is emerging. People are struggling to define for themselves (although not in explicit terms) a sort of recognition of the autonomy of the other person, of the responsibility of each one for his own life. There is an attempt to understand the other person, to accept people as they are, irrespective of legal obligations or of the absence of legal obligations (of whether adultery is forbidden or not forbidden, for instance). People are trying to materialize this in their lives. They are attempting to construct the couple's relationship on the concrete reality of the two persons involved, on their real will and desires and not on the basis of external constraints.

I think that there are also hopes when you look at the development of relationships between parents and children. There is a sort of recognition that the children exist for themselves, now, and not only when they are twenty-one. There is a gradual realization that if you have produced children, you have not produced them only to extend your own personality (just as you have been dominated all day by the boss at work), where you can say "I am master here. Shut up." There is an awareness that if you are procreating children, you are procreating them for themselves, that they have a right to as much freedom as they can exert at each and every stage, that you don't make them obey formal rules or your own arbitrary will.

The same thing is true about work. If there is a crisis in modern industry, it is not just because the system is irrational or even because it exploits people. It is because people *react*. They react in two ways. First of all they constitute what industrial sociologists have long known as "informal groups and organizations." That is, they constitute teams of work, they establish informal connections in order to get the work done. These cut across official channels and undermine the official mechanisms for transmitting orders. Workers find ways and means of doing their work that are not only different from but often even opposed to the official ones. More and more, in modern industrial societies, workers react through open struggle. This is the meaning of unofficial strikes concerning conditions of work, conditions of life in the factory, and control of the production process. However minor



these issues may appear, they are really very important. Their meaning is that people refuse to be dominated and that they manifest a will to take their lives into their own hands.

So we see that the crisis of modern society is not without issue. It contains the seeds of something new, which is emerging even now. But the new will not come about automatically. Its emergence will be assisted by the actions of people in society, by their permanent resistance and struggle, and by their often unconscious activity. But the new will not complete itself, will not be able to establish itself as a new social system, as a new pattern of social life, unless at some stage it becomes a *conscious* activity, a *conscious* action of the mass of the people. For us, to help initiate this conscious action and to help it develop, whenever it may manifest itself, is the real new meaning to be given to the words "revolutionary politics."

### Note

1. T/E: A Morris Minor is the British equivalent to the Renault 2CV (the term Castoriadis uses in his French translation of this article), a small automobile affordable for people of limited means. The "parachutists from Algiers" refers to the revolt of the OAS (Secret Army Organization) against President Charles de Gaulle's government.

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