

CIARAMELLI'S "BARBARISM WITHOUT BARBARIANS"

Translator's Introduction

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Ever since I first encountered his writings in 1989,¹ I have been convinced that Fabio Ciaramelli is the most accomplished and most profound—not mere “commentator” or “interpreter,” but—*elucidator* of the properly philosophical work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997), the cofounder of the daring, immensely influential postwar French revolutionary group Socialisme ou Barbarie and a polymathic author on topics stretching from mathematics, physics, the history of science, biology, economics, law, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and sociology, to politics and philosophy proper, with a pronounced emphasis on creativity and the imagination, for whom I have translated and edited upward of two million words of his writings.² It is for this reason that, over the years since then, I have

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1. Ciaramelli and I both contributed to a Cornelius Castoriadis Festschrift edited by Giovanni Busino as a special issue of *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 86 (December 1989), which was published simultaneously as *Autonomie et autotransformation de la société: La philosophie militante de*

Cornelius Castoriadis (Droz, 1989). Ciaramelli's piece was titled “Le cercle de la création.”

2. See Curtis, “Cornelius Castoriadis: An Obituary” 118/119; repr. as “Cornelius Castoriadis: Philosopher of the Social Imagination.” For his part, Ciaramelli has edited and cotranslated Castoriadis's *L'istituzione immaginaria della società, parte seconda* (1995) as well as edited the translated Castoriadis volumes *L'enigma del soggetto: L'immaginario e le istituzioni* (1998) and *La rivoluzione democratica: Teoria e progetto dell'autogoverno* (2001); see

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chosen to publish, too, a number of translations of Ciaramelli's French-language texts.³ I now offer to the English-language reader another Ciaramelli translation: his brief, highly evocative examination of Constantine Cavafy's beautiful and disquieting poem of 1898, "Waiting for the Barbarians."

While making references to and reflecting on Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Werner Jaeger, among others, Ciaramelli here takes Castoriadis "as the backdrop for or the horizon of" his new text, "Barbarism Without Barbarians"—for several good reasons. Castoriadis and his *Socialisme ou Barbarie* journal (1949–65) and group (1948–67) had eponymously adopted the "socialism or barbarism" slogan formerly employed by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky. Castoriadis, however, introduced a decisive twist thereto by exploring this theme not in terms of two alternating, and mutually exclusive, projected future outcomes (as those prior authors had often done) but as what I have argued is a "present contending alternative" in which tendencies toward both "socialism" and "barbarism" could be read in the unfolding of his *contemporary* world, and even in the content and form of our very gestures, divided as they are, within the workplace and within society, between creative self-direction and self-invention, on the one hand, and repetitious execution of someone else's orders, on the other.⁴ Moreover, via Cavafy's image of a situation in which a drift toward barbarism makes itself felt even in the physical absence of barbarians (the "without barbarians" of the poem's penultimate line), Ciaramelli reflects on the barbarous features of our current state of affairs. He writes of "a civilized life that is tired of itself, people feeling their dissatisfaction therewith and sensing that it risked extinction,"⁵ and within which "shared significations, transmitted by the past, are collapsing without succeeding in renewing themselves," as was the case in the late Roman period as well as in Cavafy's time and now increasingly in ours. After Castoriadis left aside the term *socialism* from the "socialism or barbarism" alternative⁶—because of its decisive ruination under Brezhnevian "really existing socialism" (which, for his part, he had historically called "total and totalitarian bureaucratic capitalism")⁷—and replaced it with an "autonomy project" of meaningful social self-transformation, simultaneously

the Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website's Italian bibliography, last updated 2025. <https://www.agora-international.org/it/italianworks.html>.

3. See my Ciaramelli translations: Ciaramelli, "Self-Presupposition of the Origin"; "Castoriadis"; "Human Creation and the Paradox of the Originary." See also Ciaramelli, "Circle of the Origin."

4. See my contribution to Castoriadis's *Festschrift*: Curtis, "Socialism or Barbarism," mentioned in note 1, above.

5. One is tempted to note the contemporary pertinence of Cavafy's poetic query and response, "Why is there such great idleness inside the Senate house? / Why are the Senators sitting there, not passing any law? / Because the barbarians will arrive today." See Cavafy, *C. P. Cavafy: Poems*, 147–49.

6. See Castoriadis, "Socialism and Autonomous Society" (1979), now in the third volume of my translations of Castoriadis's *Political and Social Writings*.

7. Castoriadis, "Social Transformation and Cultural Creation," 302.

individual and collective in character, he began speaking of a "rising tide of insignificance" as the other pole, that of contemporary barbarism.⁸

Today, the term *barbarism* raises questions for us and, moreover, hackles among those engaged with or sympathetic to or fearful of what is now called *identity politics*, especially in the case of those who confuse real politics with mere posturing, for instance, over the "Dead White Males" of ancient Greece.⁹ Ciaramelli himself elegantly sidesteps this entire practice and way of thinking when he explains that "barbarism pertains not to some sort of identity character trait but to one's attitude toward the other," thus circumventing the fashionable but uncritical celebration of "the Other" (which, along with "difference," is identity politics' go-to flip side). As Castoriadis himself almost tautologically stated yet also eloquently warned: "Persistence in identity is death."¹⁰

A brief excursus from the point of view of translators, faced as they often are with terms that have different *meanings* (which Castoriadis calls "social imaginary significations") as well as *histories* within multiple languages and social groupings, all at the same time, may be helpful. In this respect, we may note that the main contrast in Ciaramelli's piece is between civilization—*civilizzazione* or *civiltà* in his native Italian; *civilisation* in the French he employs here—and barbarism: *barbarie*, in both Italian and French, or *barbarismo* as the Italian alternative. Yet Ciaramelli wishes to call upon German authors, as well—in particular, Freud and Benjamin. As context, let us note the well-known distinction in German thought between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur*, extending over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and exemplifying political reaction to the French Revolution as well as a Romantic intellectual and artistic response to the Enlightenment, which must be taken into account when translating both of these German authors.¹¹

We glimpse the complications at issue in Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History* (1940), where his quoted use of *Kultur* has to be glossed by Ciaramelli: "*Kultur*, in the obvious sense of civilization" (see note 14 of the translation). Moreover, Freud's book of 1930, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, masks, when translated into English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*, both *Kultur* (culture) and *Unbehagen* ("unease" or "malaise"), whereas the French title *Malaise dans la civilisation*, cited by Ciaramelli, succeeds at least in splitting the difference. As mentioned in note

8. See my lecture, Curtis, "Theme of 'The Rising Tide of Insignificance,'" which has been presented in French, German, Greek, Italian, Korean, and Spanish.

9. See, by way of contrast, Cornel West and Jeremy Tate's robust defense of the classics and of their capacity for fostering change, "Howard University's Removal of Classics."

10. "La permanence dans l'identité, c'est la mort" (from Stéphane Barbery's interview with Castoriadis, "Psychanalyse et société"). Rafael Miranda Redondo, the orga-

nizer of the Chiapas-based Cátedra Interinstitucional Cornelius Castoriadis, has made this pithy expression a sort of motto for his educational project with nontraditional, including Native Mexican, students.

11. Anglo-French *Zivilisation*, said to be imperialistic and individualistic, was often contrasted with the traditional and community-oriented *Kultur* of Central Europe. Freud and Benjamin were writing at the end of this period, at a time when German civilization, if we may label it such, was collapsing into Nazi barbarism.

15 of the Ciaramelli translation, James Strachey, the English-language translator and editor of Freud, splits another difference on this issue: “It seems unnecessary to embark on the tiresome problem of the proper translation of the German word ‘Kultur.’ We have usually, but not invariably, chosen ‘civilization’ for the noun and ‘cultural’ for the adjective.” Strachey bolsters his translator decision with a quotation from near the start of Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) that short-circuits this whole, characteristically German distinction: “I scorn to distinguish between culture [*Kultur*] and civilization [*Zivilisation*].”¹² Indeed, for Freud (in English translation), “Human civilization [*menschliche Kultur*]” encompasses “all those respects in which human life has raised itself above its animal status and differs from the life of beasts.”¹³ However, without such a distinction, Freud—whose scientific rationalism nevertheless incorporated Romantic themes, such as dreams and other “irrational” human elements—may stymie efforts to articulate the difference between the initial emergence of humanity and the various “civilizations” that, according to conventions in a number of languages, historically arise much later.¹⁴

We have heretofore left Jaeger aside. In the 1947 text Ciaramelli cites, Jaeger, a Prussian in American exile since 1936 because of his anti-Nazi views, writes directly in English, without equivocations or afterthoughts but perhaps somewhat pleonastically, of “human civilization at large,” but also of “human culture,” in their relation to the advent of law and *dikē* (justice in Greek). A new complication arises, however, when Jaeger explains that “in Homeric thought *diké* was the line between savagery and civilization.”¹⁵ Again, the posturing opponents of ancient Greek “Dead White Males” may flinch or cringe at such politically incorrect language. It is interesting to point out, though, that, in Jaeger’s translation, the wandering Greek Odysseus three times (*Odyssey* 6.119–21, 9.175–76, 13.200–2) “asks himself with some anxiety”: “Who may be the inhabitants of this land? Are they evil-doers and savages without justice, or do they honor the stranger and fear the gods?” “Savages” here are *agrioi*, “fierce, . . . wild, uncultivated,”¹⁶ who are not *philoxeinoi*—that is, those not practicing the Greek moral imperative of hospitality (*xenia*) toward foreigners and toward guests from other *poleis*. Again, the relation to the Other is closely tied to a nonbarbarous sense of justice. Jaeger makes unapologetic negative reference to the “barbarous world of the Cyclopes,

12. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 6.

13. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 5–6.

14. Castoriadis takes a more nuanced position: “I take here the term ‘culture’ as intermediate between its current sense in French (*œuvres de l’esprit* and the individual’s access to these works of the spirit) and its meaning in American anthropology (which covers the entirety of the institution of society, everything that differentiates and

opposes society, on the one hand, [man’s] animal nature and nature [in general] on the other).” In Castoriadis, “Social Transformation and Cultural Creation,” 301.

15. In a 1949 French translation of this somewhat obscure Jaeger article, “savagery” was translated as *l’État sauvage*, whereas the 2019 Italian version to which Ciaramelli had recourse uses *barbarie*.

16. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*.

who still live in a state of primitive nature, . . . a world without law (*themis*)." In particular, he reminds readers of Homer's epic spinoff series that each Cyclops, lacking a sense of community justice, is an absolute "ruler and judge over his wife and children."

For the translator, but also for the reader and for all of us, things and the words they designate, problematic or seemingly straightforward—and, a fortiori, the social imaginary significations that endow them with temporarily secure skeins of meaning—are moving and changing targets we aim at (this is the partial truth of first-person phenomenological *intentionality*), but they are ones that we, without benefit of Muskian brain implants, are collectively displacing, constantly renaming, rewriting, reimagining them, sometimes with us altering them beyond recognition or even obliterating them within one language and perforce between languages, such that each attempt to pin them down is but a stopgap measure, as the figure fleetingly fixed to a seemingly immovable ground sees that ground itself continually shifting, the figure ever rising up otherwise and elsewhere and anew, no longer fastened as it was before.¹⁷

To be sure, the exact nature of "barbarism" and of the "civilization" Ciaramelli contrasts therewith do and must remain up in the air in a short piece such as his. Indeed, Ciaramelli's purpose here is not to resolve, once and for all, all technical issues of definition (should such an identitary endeavor even be possible, given the historically created and self-altering nature of this and all definitions)¹⁸ but to inquire further into extant historical and, especially, poetical usages, and to search for deeper meanings and changes, as well as to discover where contemporary "social imaginary significations" may indeed be starting to unravel.

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17. See my reflections on "the abyss of thought" in relation to its historical creation and to historical creations: Curtis, "Translator/Editor's Foreword," pp. lxix–lxxxvi of the Translator/Editor's Foreword to the first volume of Castoriadis's now seven-volume *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* series; August 2022. *NotBored!* website (<http://www.notbored.org/cornelius-castoriadis-crossroads-1.pdf>).

18. Jaeger's "Praise of Law," 353–54, notes that even the Greek word for "law" changed from *themis* to *nomos*, which itself was initially "custom" and "convention," as opposed to "nature" (*phusis*) but increasingly became "codified" and abstract "law" in the civic, medical, and natural realms.

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