DEMOCRACY AS SOCIO-CULTURAL PROJECT OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE SOVEREIGNTY

Claude Lefort, Marcel Gauchet and the French Debate on Modern Autonomy

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ABSTRACT   French political philosophy has experienced a renewal over the last twenty years. One of its leading projects is Marcel Gauchet's reflection on democracy and religion. This project situates itself within the context of the French debate on modernity and autonomy launched by the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. Gauchet's work makes a significant contribution to this debate by building on the pioneering work of Lefort on the political self-instituting capacity of modern societies and the associated shift from religion to ideology. It thus explores the centrality of the notion of sovereignty in the advent of liberal democracy and conducts this reflection within an overall discussion of the role played by Christianity in the genesis of European modernity. It elaborates an anthropology of modernity which explores the relationship between individualism and democracy and redefines modernity as a project of sovereignty which aims at creating a radically new society, the society of individuals.

KEYWORDS   democracy • individualism • modernity • religion • sovereignty

French political philosophy has experienced a renewal over the last twenty years. One of its most significant projects has been Marcel Gauchet's reflection on democracy, grounded in an original social theory. Although

already foreshadowed in his major work *Le Désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion*, this social theory only revealed its full political significance in Gauchet's historical research on the French Revolution in *La Révolution des droits de l'homme et La Révolution des pouvoirs*. This offers a complete re-evaluation of Rousseau's thought and its Jacobin posterity, which highlights the radical novelty of Rousseau's political philosophy (Gauchet, 1985, 1989, 1995).[1]

In this respect, Gauchet's work renders fully explicit the underlying concern of the works of the writer that has most influenced him, Claude Lefort.[2] Lefort's work can indeed be seen to be motivated by the desire to re-assert the centrality of the notion of sovereignty in the problematic of democracy. Gauchet's writings demonstrate the fact that the notion of sovereignty must be recognised as a social process and how this in turn has significant implications for the very notion of democracy. Liberal democracy in particular can no longer be defined only as a political phenomenon but needs to be seen as part of a socio-cultural project.

Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort have each defined this project as the project of modern European culture to create a totally new type of society. It is radically new because for the first time in human history, apart from the significant Greek breakthrough stressed by Castoriadis, it attempts to formulate consciously its own ethical values and its own laws and limits, through collective deliberation and without subordination to a non-human mythical or divine sphere (Castoriadis, 1997). This project, Castoriadis argues, is rooted in both Greek history and Greek thought. Gauchet demonstrates in *Le Désenchantement* that it is equally associated with the emergence of Judeo-Christian monotheism.

In all likelihood, Gauchet's interest in the link between Christianity and modern sovereignty was fostered by his reading of Louis Dumont's reflection on the Christian genesis of European individualism and more specifically by Dumont's comments on the associated shift from an imperial notion of sovereignty to a territorial one (Dumont, 1986). In this article, I will not deal directly with the problematic of individualism raised by Dumont but concentrate on the debate on democracy and autonomy which originates in the work of Castoriadis and Lefort. My first objective will be to define the contribution of Lefort's political philosophy to Castoriadis's interpretation of modern European culture as project of autonomy, which will then allow me to present Gauchet's specific conception of modernity.[3]

My second objective will be to demonstrate how Gauchet's interest in Christianity led him to extend the parameters of both Castoriadis and Lefort's analyses and to formulate, through a reflection on the French revolution, a theory of democratic political representation. As we shall see, this theory cannot be dissociated from an overall redefinition of European modernity which situates liberal democracy within a general cultural project, the creation of a radically new type of society: the democratic society of *autonomous* individuals.

1. MODERNITY AS PROJECT OF AUTONOMY. DEMOCRACY AS INSTITUTION OF DISEMBODIED SOVEREIGNTY

Castoriadis's social theory and Lefort's political philosophy are bound by the intellectual dialogue, often tense and sometimes subterranean, which the two thinkers pursued in the days of their youthful involvement in the Trotskyist militancy of the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, strengthened subsequently by a common disenchantment with the failure of the Trotskyist movement to analyse the bureaucratic reality of the Soviet Union.[4] This disenchantment led both thinkers to reassess their commitment to Marxism-Leninism but they did so in rather different ways, leading to rather spectacular disagreements between them. Very crudely, it can be said that whereas Castoriadis totally repudiated Marxist social theory but retained the idea of revolution, Lefort questioned the very notion of revolution but continued to engage with aspects of Marxist theory, especially the problem of conflict in history.

The work of Castoriadis and Lefort is centred on a common problematic: alterity, difference and change, and the way it is accommodated in different types of society. Both thinkers have explored the contrast, first established by Castoriadis, between heteronomy as social strategy of containment of alterity and autonomy as its acceptance. Castoriadis focused on the question of alterity in the radical imaginary of the human psyche, which he approached from a psychoanalytical perspective. While this led him to deal with political issues of oppression such as racism and totalitarianism, his work did not explore the specifically political implications of the contrast between heteronomy and autonomy. These implications are theorised in Lefort's political philosophy, which led from the exploration of totalitarianism back to the question of liberal democracy, in an inquiry which has yielded insights into the social function of the political, notably the question of the symbolical representative function of political sovereignty. Lefort explored the instituting capacity of Castoriadis's social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987). In this respect, he dealt with a question not fully investigated by Castoriadis himself – the birth of ideology – in a way which adds to the understanding of the specificity of modern autonomous culture.

Through an original and idiosyncratic journey, Lefort arrived at the realisation that power is always the power of *representation*, the power to give a human community a symbolical representation of itself in an identity which subsumes its inner divisions. Lefort saw that this fundamental social function was traditionally performed by religion and that the radical novelty of European modernity resided in the way the political came to replace religion, a phenomenon which was most evident in the French revolution. As a result, Lefort's work involves a reappraisal of the significance of the French Revolution, in which, like Tocqueville before him, he sees the democratic revolution as a *social* revolution: the genesis of a radically new type of

society, which culminated in the establishment of liberal democracy, even if it cannot be reduced to it.[5] For Lefort as for Castoriadis, this democratic revolution is still unfolding in constant contest with attempts to re-establish the reassuring, determinate and closed meanings that characterise heteronomous culture. Lefort's work thus encounters that of Castoriadis on many levels but also departs from it in the significance it attributes to the genesis of liberal democracy as opposed to the Greek breakthrough stressed by Castoriadis. He adds to Castoriadis's social theory in three ways:

- in the anthropological analysis of the specificity of primitive societies and the problem of history, which reformulates and relativises Castoriadis's contrast between heteronomy and autonomy;
- in the exploration of early European modernity and the genesis of democratic sovereignty, an area rather neglected by Castoriadis and;
- in the exploration of the contrast between totalitarianism and liberal democracy.

The anthropological dimension of Lefort's work was inspired by the work of his philosophy teacher Merleau-Ponty.[6] In his early writings, Lefort set out to formulate a phenomenology of the social experience which would account for the fact that societies are not the conscious products of rational enterprise (nor, as Marxism would have it, passive reactions to necessities of production and reproduction) but coherent symbolical *projects*. These projects determine the forms of human co-existence and, more fundamentally, inform the way individuals think and behave, however unaware of this underlying logic they remain. To deepen his understanding of modern autonomy, Lefort chose to investigate American Indian society. In particular, Lefort built on Marcel Mauss's discussion of the custom of the potlatch to establish a fundamental contrast between historical and 'stagnant' societies in terms of the attitude they entertain towards difference and change. Lefort identified in the customs of the potlatch a 'total social fact', that is, a privileged entry point into the intentionality binding the diverse economic, juridicial, religious and artistic aspects of a community's social life (Lefort, 1978a).

The potlatch is fundamentally a complex system of mutual *recognition*, which does not allow individual difference itself any expressive outlet, because the assertion of commonality is predicated on a common opposition to an external Other, the Other of the Natural World, of matter. The only difference that is recognised is the absolute alterity that is *outside*, not within, the community. Human difference is recognised though the potlatch but also circumscribed and therefore refused any right to contest the inherited social order. This recognition of human subjectivity, and by extension human sovereignty as a whole, thus remains constrained in heteronomous culture by the collective need for a common identity.

This binding effect explains the stagnant nature of primitive societies as opposed to modern societies: the birth of new generations does not spell

the possibility of change, human individuals being totally caught up in their networks of kinship and their collective roots. Modern societies on the other hand are totally open to the radically new. They can integrate change because they allow a quasi-neutral relationship to the natural world to develop, that is, a relationship unmediated by the social bond. This mediation of human subjectivity which characterises primitive societies makes them blind to the historical dimension of human life and totally resistant to the idea of social change. Lefort's interpretation of Mauss's analysis of the potlatch thus re-contextualises Castoriadis's notion of autonomy within a discussion of the contrast between historical and 'stagnant' societies, which in turn, relativises Castoriadis's stark dichotomy between autonomy and heteronomy (Lefort, 1978b). What differentiates modern 'historical' societies from full heteronomous societies is the fact that they loosen social bonds by allowing a direct relationship to the outside world. In other words, they establish a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity.

Lefort further redefines Castoriadis's notion of heteronomy by suggesting that the non-historicity of primitive societies originates, in fact, in a desire to contain the conflictuality inherent in subjective difference. In this respect, Lefort touches upon a problematic that is not fully addressed by Castoriadis – that of the origin of history – although it is central to the contrast between autonomy and heteronomy. For Lefort, the harmonious configuration of non-historical societies is not to be seen as an essence but as a kind of solution which has come into being as an overall set of responses to the challenges of the new, whose meaning remains hidden from subsequent generations (Howard, 1974/5).

The problem to which primitive, stagnant societies respond without being conscious of it is the problem of difference, of social division and its associated indeterminacy. By binding past and future totally to the present and locking subjectivity into immutable social relationships, non-historical societies structure themselves so as to prevent the outbreak of social conflict. In the process, they give legitimacy to the forms of domination that give the community its specific identity. Historical societies on the other hand integrate the new within a kind of debate which they see men as pursuing among themselves. Change, for them, is not simply the transition from one state to another state. As Dick Howard translates it, it is seen as 'the progress of an intention which anticipates the future by tying it to the past' (Howard, 1974–1975: 8). Historical memory and the representation of the past thus become crucial. Historicity implies a reflection on the community's values and principles, through which a society becomes conscious of its own identity, that is, of its difference not only from the natural world but more fundamentally from *other* human communities.

For Lefort as for Castoriadis, modern thought is confronted by the puzzle of its *own* capacity to reflect on experiences of the world that are incommensurable to its own. By contrast, primitive thought has no perspective on

what is foreign to it. Through a unifying account of the customs of the potlatch, Lefort's anthropological reflection offers an analysis of the mechanisms through which identity in primitive societies is predicated on heteronomy. It shows how heteronomy controls the tension that exists between the radical imaginary of the individual psyche and the instituted meanings of the social imaginary and prevents this tension from leading to conflictuality. Premodern societies conceive themselves as organisms within a greater immutable cosmic order, in which each is assigned a place and a role that are defined as natural. Lefort's focus on division and potential conflictuality opens up a reflection on the link between identity, power and their *political* representation. Lefort's work, far more than Castoriadis', reveals the connection between the problematic of modernity and that of sovereignty. This leads him to a totally new conception of the political which highlights its social capacity not only to regulate conflict but to consciously *institute* society.

Lefort arrived at his radically new conception of the political through his re-reading of Machiavelli (Lefort, 1972). In Machiavelli's work, Lefort identified the idea that societies perceive themselves as unified only in reference to power, which provides them with a symbolical representation of themselves. Societies become unified precisely because they are divided. Political power, in its autonomy from society, provides society with a representation not only of its unity but also of its constitutive dividedness. Lefort's political philosophy thus posits an essential connection between subjection, the birth of subjectivity and the project of autonomy, which allows the individual to become the subject of his destiny. Political sovereignty first gives form to a notion of human identity which incorporates an inner division. Subjection to political sovereignty cannot be dissociated from the assertion of the cultural autonomy of humanity in relation to nature, which contained the possibility for the individual and the collectivity to exercise sovereignty over their destiny.

Conflictuality for Lefort is fundamentally irreducible. This led him to distance himself from Marxist theory: the origin of power in the reality of social division leads to a different understanding of its role, which is to interpose itself between the opponents. From this perspective, the problematic of history becomes that of the relationship societies entertain to their own inner division. With the institution of the social, the political necessarily emerges. The political, however, can be lived in a mode of non-recognition, through an effort to avoid the divisions that the political consecrates. Pierre Clastres' ethnography thus complements Lefort's analysis by showing how, in primitive societies, there is a tendency towards a principle of organization that is based on the denial of division. This denial asserts that difference originates in an absolute external realm. It also counters the separation of the different spheres of life, the economic and the political remaining totally inter-woven (Clastres, 1980). Such societies can be said to be organized around the refusal of the emergence of a power detached from the community, that is, a refusal

of both History and of the State. Human communities, in other words, can structure themselves around a denial of their inner division or around the recognition, implicit or explicit, that an end to division would be the end of society itself.

If conflict is central to human identity, the question of where this con-flictuality originates is never addressed explicitly by Lefort. An answer to the question, however, can be detected in the exploration of the role of ideology in modern societies, which became Lefort's focus after the work on Machiavelli (Lefort, 1978d, 1978e, 1986e).[7] Here, the question of conflictual-ity is shown to be linked to the *symbolic* logic which creates social unity and identity. In his writings on ideology, Lefort deepens his reformulation of Castoriadis's contrast of autonomy with heteronomy in terms of a contrast between religion and ideology.

Societies cannot function without a representation of unity. The representation of unity always requires the projection of an 'imaginary com-munity' which allows the social distinctions to be portrayed as 'natural', the particular to be diluted in the universal, and the historical concealed in refer-ences to atemporal essences. The act of social institution is always shadowed by another institution, which conceals the conditions of society's self-institution through a closed discourse which maintains the illusion of an essential social identity. The social space is instituted only in so far as it is articulated in a discourse of the social. In non-historical society, the creation of unity is grounded in a legitimacy which refers to a sacred non-earthly realm: religious discourse masks and sanctions concealment. In historical societies, this function is performed by ideology, which does so without appealing to another world. The concept of ideology does not apply to pre-modern societies, in which social division is concealed by the religious representation of an otherworldly order.

The emergence of a new relationship to the natural world, the notion of work and more generally capitalism severed the link with otherworldly authority and prepared the formation of ideology. The novelty of ideology resides in the way it both signals the existence of social division, hitherto concealed by religion, and at the same time conceals it by recourse to a dis-course grounded *in the social space itself*. Ideology is defined by Lefort as the attempt to re-institute closure at the very heart of historical society. It is fundamentally contradictory since it involves both the revelation of society's self-institution and concealment of the social division, involved in this self-institution. Human sovereignty is both revealed and obscured by ideology.

The birth of ideology is thus associated with the emergence of a *political* discourse on society in renaissance Italy. Modern ideology devel-oped as it accompanied the development of capitalism and reached its mature form in 19th century Europe by engendering a discourse on the social, in which universality seems to reveal itself. Modern ideology constructs an ideal

of positive knowledge, which calls into question religious transcendence. It does so by asserting another kind of transcendence, the rationalist transcendence of ideas of Humanity, Progress, Science, Property or Family. This transcendence defines modern society as above nature and establishes a fundamental opposition between sovereign rational subjects and their Others (workers, savages, madmen).

This transcendence to which modern ideology refers is quite different from the religious transcendence which structures non-historical societies. It is not seen to originate from a single distinct space beyond the earthly world and never assumes a coherent unified expression. It is seen almost as immanent to the many different institutions of society, and as a result assumes a diversity of forms, which mirror the differentiation of bourgeois society. This diversity prevents the complete assimilation of discourse to power. It preserves a gap which potentially counters closure. It is through this gap, through the autonomy of legal, philosophical, literary and artistic discourses, that democracy's project of autonomy can maintain itself and enter into conflict with established power and its ideology. Modern liberal ideology is trapped in an inescapable contradiction. It is forced to appeal to a transcendence beyond the social realm to cover over the existence of social oppositions, yet its very existence is predicated on the refusal of any world beyond the social empirical world.

The existence of this contradiction explains the genesis of totalitarianism, its debt to democracy but also its perversion of democracy (Lefort, 1981a, 1986f). Totalitarianism responded to the fact that democracy lacks, as its central value, a substantive definition of the community's identity and goals. Substantive identity had given way to an endless process of interrogation concerning the ends to be pursued by the collectivity and the means by which these should be pursued. Totalitarianism manifested the persistent need of human groups for a unitary identity, which after the democratic revolution could no longer be derived from beyond the social space. Both Nazism and Communism are thus characterized by their ideological claims to possess an absolute knowledge capable of reunifying a society fragmented by democratic culture. This quest for absolute social totalisation eradicates all the oppositions that are central to liberal ideology.

Most fundamentally, totalitarianism rejects the distinction between state and civil society. The mass party's task is to diffuse state power throughout society in order to maintain the fiction that power can be exercised without being divided from society (Lefort, 1981b). Totalitarianism thus represents an attempt to give the democratic political ideal of popular sovereignty a unitary embodiment in the social empirical realm itself, an attempt which reveals itself to be essentially oppressive in the way it enforces closure through the exclusion of 'enemies of the people'.[8] This self-destructive dimension of totalitarian terror highlights the contradictory attempt of totalitarian ideology to overcome, through the notion of the total state, the inner contradiction of

modern liberal ideology. It also highlights the failure of liberalism to give social conflict an explicit, direct recognition, that is, a fully democratic expression beyond the political mechanisms of liberal democracy. In this, modern liberal democratic society betrays the persistence of a heteronomous impulse despite the radical innovation of its political self-institution.

Lefort's analysis of the genesis of ideology thus opens onto a theory of modernity, which is underpinned by the belief, shared with Castoriadis, in its radical historical novelty. Lefort adds the idea that there is an essential connection between modernity and its political forms, since it is the political that institutes the social. In other words, the creativity of an epoch expresses itself most clearly in its political forms and the most characteristic political forms of modernity are liberal democracy and totalitarianism. The opposition between democracy and totalitarianism, however, is contextualised by Lefort in an historical reflection on the genesis of full modernity in the 19th century and its pre-history in the 17th and 18th centuries. Lefort highlights the specificity of the new type of society born with modernity. Against Castoriadis's insistence on the Greek model of direct democracy and its revolutionary reincarnations in modern Europe, Lefort argues that the institution of liberal democracy, understood properly, reveals the essential meaning of the democratic social revolution.

Lefort's political philosophy also adds to Castoriadis's social theory by exploring the symbolical representative function, which emanates from the social imaginary and its implications for the treatment of the notion of sovereignty. The institution of a social space cannot be dissociated from the institution of a symbolical mode of interaction with the natural world, which regulates co-existence by establishing the parameters of the world's intelligibility (real/ imaginary, true/wrong, fair/unfair). This institution also presupposes that the social space be given a representation of itself, otherwise these principles would not be operational: for the principles to inform the relationships of individuals, they must be known and understood by all. For Lefort, the creation of a social space always has a *representative*, self-reflective dimension. This means that social practices can never be divorced from their linguistic, ideological representations. A society's *mise en sens* (structuring of meaning, i.e. creation of identity) is both a *mise en forme* (creation of a specific form of human coexistence, of a 'regime') and a *mise en scène* (staging, in the sense of theatrical representation) (Lefort, 1986a/1988b).

In the essay 'Permanence of the theologico-political?' Lefort (1986a) reflects on the logic which has led political discourse to extricate itself from religion. He suggests the existence of a kind of anthropological continuity behind the discontinuity that separates heteronomous societies from autonomous societies. Religion and politics both attest to the symbolical logic which commands the relationship of humanity to the world outside itself and also its *social* organisation. The fact that political and religious institutions have separated and that religion is itself progressively being relegated to the

sphere of private beliefs must not be taken to mean that the religious impulse which has always been central to the establishment of a political order does not continue to exercise an influence. In fact it may simply be creating new beliefs, new representations, that is, another symbolic matrix of interaction. For Lefort, this symbolic representative function, which emanates from the social imaginary, is fundamentally *political,* whether it institutes society from outside the social or from within. In this respect, even religion is an expression of human sovereignty, albeit a confused one.

As we have already seen, the capacity of modern society to envisage itself as a unified space, with a common identity separate from its insertion in the natural world, implies the creation by society of an autonomous institution of power. This autonomy of modern political power illuminates the specificity of modern society: the institution of an autonomous political sphere delineated from other spheres, religious, judicial, economic, and scientific. The emergence of a separate political sphere in modern societies signals a fundamental modification in the underlying structure of society and produces a fundamental epistemological shift, which creates a new category, *la politique* (politics), distinct from the logic of human social organisation (*le politique*) in its fundamental symbolic dimension (Lefort, 1986a/1988b). Positivist political theory takes at face value the modern autonomy of political action and projects it onto all types of human society, Lefort's political philosophy by contrast involves a fundamental awareness of its own historicity and modern character. It aims at identifying universal principles of human social organization. Lefort realizes that this can only be achieved through a self-reflective anthropology of European modernity, which, like Castoriadis's social theory, highlights both its crucial difference from and its continuity with pre-modern culture.

The question of the historical origin of the political forms of modern society is central to this anthropology of modernity. Lefort analyses the way medieval monarchy drew on a pre-modern representation of the social community as a unified and unitary entity to emancipate political power from religious discourse. By fundamentally altering the feudal conception of the links between individuals and their relationship to the land, medieval monarchy prepared the advent of both capitalism and democracy. The medieval prince occupies an intermediary position between the human community and its transcendent foundation. His power is derived from a power, over which neither he nor the community as whole has a hold: God's sovereignty over the world. The Prince's *body* provides the community with an incarnation of its identity but this identity is seen as conferred from above (Lefort, 1978c/1986d).

The genesis of modern power from medieval power involves a complete reversal of this symbolical logic. It involves the dis-incorporation of power, which for the first time allows a human community to exercise a conscious sovereignty over itself. Monarchical absolutism both prepared this

dis-incorporation of power and fell prey to it. It did so by strengthening its sovereignty over a territory, which became invested with a sacredness – that of the Nation – which the monarch was supposed to embody. By demanding the equal submission of all subjects, the king's power questioned the pre-existing rights of feudal lords. Monarchical absolutism thus prepared the birth of the two ideas that would become crucial to the advent of the modern nation-state, the nation and the people, in whose name the highly symbolic act of the French regicide was later committed.[9]

The French revolution, argues Lefort, signals the advent of this radically new definition of power. After the regicide, power for the first time in human history (apart from the Greek breakthrough) is seen to originate from within society itself. Modern power no longer refers to its origin in an Other. It claims to be born from the society above which it rises. As a result, human power no longer appears as inserted in the natural order but as self-regulated, as creator of its own limits. With the birth of human sovereignty, society for the first time assumes an existence independent from the natural world. Society no longer has any external principle. Society is no longer a body, in which all parts must find a place and a role. As a result, the parts acquire a certain autonomy, a freedom of manoeuvre and an openness to possibilities outside the norms inherited from the past. This translates into an openness to the new on the part of society as a whole. With modern power, the instituted order is seen as created, and, as a result, essentially transitory. Modern society is therefore the first society to be fully historical, a society that is totally open to change and for which nothing is beyond debate. A gap is created between society, which now consciously institutes itself, and the figures through which it represents itself to itself. This gap is accompanied by the genesis of a distinct sphere of political activity, the state, and the concurrent genesis of civil society, which the state allows to organise independently.

Through the new form assumed by modern power, the law acquires a fundamentally new status (Lefort, 1981b, 1986a/1988b). Modern power is subjected to an authority that escapes its control. The foundation of the law is fundamentally external to political power and those who occupy the place of authority do not possess it. They only occupy it for a determinate duration, which is subject to a process of political competition regulated by the law. Lefort's discussion of the place of law in modernity shows that modernity has a locus of sovereignty, which is external to political power and resists all attempts to give power a determinate incarnation. This is why the idea of human rights is so central to democracy. It signals the birth of a radically new public space where the exchange of ideas and opinions is – as a matter of principle – untouchable by political power, except in those specific cases identified by the law. In this respect, as Poltier points out, Lefort's political philosophy offers a novel approach to the problem of the origin and nature of right. Lefort posits a universality that is not predicated, as in liberalism, on the innate and largely fictitious dignity and autonomy of human nature

formulated by natural law, nor, as in positive law, on a substantive notion of the good that is tied to belonging to a specific tradition (Poltier, 1998: 281).

Liberal democracy can maintain an essential distance between the symbolic realm and empirical reality because it does not rely on a substantive notion of community, derived from an authority external to the social space of the community. In other words, liberal democracy resists any attempts to enclose the symbolic dimension of human identity in specific institutions. In this respect, it is important to stress that Lefort's fundamentally innovative conception of power contributes far more to the understanding of the project of autonomy than the Greek notion of democratic power so dear to Castoriadis. The Greek idea of power remained tied to a closed definition of the social community: it is through this community that individuals become subjects, and it is through their insertion in this community that they cannot claim power over one another. The Greek idea that 'power belongs to no one' really means that power belongs to 'none of us'. The power that cannot be monopolised by any member of the community does not emancipate itself from the idea that the community actually possesses a determinate identity (Lefort, 1986a/1988b). The liberal definition of power does not rely on a positive, unitary conception of community which power incarnates. This is what allowed a universal notion of human rights to emerge, outside of membership of a specific community. Modern democratic power thus remains a purely symbolic notion. Popular sovereignty is exercised by people who do not possess it but merely represent it for a limited duration. Modern sovereignty is *de jure* an indeterminate space: all are equal in the face of its fundamental indetermination.

To conclude, Lefort's reflection on the transformation wrought by absolutism concurs with Castoriadis's assertion that the birth of modernity in European cultures was associated with a radical transformation of the symbolical matrix of medieval European society. Whilst Lefort explores this symbolical transformation in greater depth than Castoriadis, it must be recognised that Lefort's discussion of medieval Europe only offers very sketchy indications as to which historical phenomena prepared the transformation that became fully apparent in the French Revolution (Poltier, 1998: 218). Lefort has remained primarily concerned with the immediate pre-history of the democratic revolution. He has not fully engaged with the question also neglected by Castoriadis: the question of what internal evolution within the symbolic matrix of medieval Christianity allowed the birth of the new?

This is where Gauchet continues on from Lefort. Gauchet analyses the paradoxical role played by the Christian monarchs in the genesis of a secular political notion of sovereignty. He broadens the question by situating the internal evolution of Christianity within an overall reflection on monotheism. In stressing the crucial role played by religion in its own overcoming, that is, in the birth of ideology, Gauchet's thought differs from Castoriadis's well-known disregard for religion. It also exceeds the parameters of Lefort's

discussion, which does not deal with religion as such, although it recognises the central role played by religious discourse in the institution of the symbolic realm.

Gauchet directly engages in a reflection on religion, which draws inspiration from both Weber and Durkheim. Gauchet highlights the debt to religion of the notion of sovereignty, which points to the existence of an implicit symbolical complex of sacred values at the heart of liberal democracy itself. In this respect, Gauchet's theory of religion can be said to address the fundamental, unresolved question of Castoriadis' account of democracy: if Greek culture sowed the first seed of a project of autonomy in the democracy of the Athenians, how did this Greek seed realise its full potential in Western culture, after so many centuries? In other words, how did the Christian and feudal past of European culture engender the new? Inspired by Louis Dumont's discussion of the role played by the Reformation in the development of European modernity, Gauchet has attempted to answer these questions by focusing on the relationship between Christianity and European monarchy. It must be stressed, however, that it is not Christian monotheism per se that produces the project of autonomy. As we shall see, a contingent combination of historical circumstances underpin the specificity of European culture. Alone among other cultures, Europe proclaimed the equality of all human beings within its social space, and by extension, the right of non-European cultures to their own instituted meaning.

2. GAUCHET'S POLITICAL HISTORY OF RELIGION: MODERNITY AS DISENCHANTMENT: DEMOCRACY AS THE CREATION OF A SOCIETY OF AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUALS

The central problematic of Gauchet's work has been the question of sovereignty. He has attempted to address the question left unanswered by both Castoriadis and Lefort, the question of the historical origin of autonomy. Gauchet states unequivocally that the key to this riddle lies in the study of pre-modern religious societies: to understand the way modern democratic collectivities have become the subjects of their own destinies, it is first necessary to understand the way pre-modern societies are subjected to a law seemingly not of their own making (Gauchet, 1997: 103). In *The Disenchantment of the World*, Gauchet thus investigates the socio-political role traditionally played by religion in the institution of society and in the process further elaborates Castoriadis's notion of heteronomy.

It must be stressed that what is involved is not an historical analysis of religious convictions but an examination of the way religion has functioned as the connecting bond between individuals. Gauchet identifies in religion the universal invariant dimension of human societies and, like Lefort, defines its socio-political function in relation to the problem of social division. Like Lefort, Gauchet stresses the way societies control division through a denial

of history but goes further by analysing the symbolical logic of this denial. To the notion of 'societies against history', Gauchet adds another notion, first elaborated by the anthropologist Dumont, the concept of holism. Holism stresses as a defining feature of pre-modern societies the value assigned to the individual's place in society (Gauchet, 1997: 27). According to Dumont, traditional holistic societies affirm the primacy of the social over the individual whereas modern societies take as the starting point the autonomous individual. Dumont's holism thus intersects with Castoriadis' heteronomy since the holistic primacy of the social is governed by a principle of subordination to a hierarchical order grounded in religion. As Gauchet shows, the authority of the religious in its fundamental conservatism guarantees the pre-eminence of collective identity over the individual components of the group; this authority is also the authority of the past, the authority of tradition.

Like Lefort, Gauchet defines heteronomous societies as societies, which contain conflict by agreeing to dispossess themselves through religion, of the truth of the social origin of their identity and modernity, as a new symbolic order. The new symbolic order is defined by Gauchet as the outcome of a process of disenchantment: in modernity, human beings attempt to take full possession of their collective destiny through a representation of division, which radically departs from the suppression of otherness in religion. This process of disenchantment is linked to the development of individualism. In modernity, alterity has been progressively brought back into the human social space in a way that has allowed the egalitarian dynamics of individualism to establish itself. Like Dumont, Gauchet considers that modern societies are radically novel in the way they value the autonomous individual. Dumont has investigated the debt of modern individualism to Christian dualism. Gauchet, as we shall see, broadens the debate to consider the question of the place of Christianity within the history of monotheism.

The disenchantment of the world as it is defined by Gauchet is not the secularisation of the Enlightenment. Gauchet stresses the fact that it is a *dialectical* process, which can only be understood *within* a religious logic (Gauchet, 1997: 21–2). The political history of religion in *The Disenchantment of the World* thus seeks to demonstrate the internal evolution of religion, from immanence to transcendence, which allowed the modern project to take form. Gauchet identifies in the historical evolution of religion three key factors:

- the emergence of the state;
- the birth of monotheism, which made possible the religious rejection of the world which informs individualism, and;
- European Christian dualism.

Disenchantment in Gauchet's work thus has a much broader meaning than in Weber's pioneering analysis (Gauchet, 1997: 78). The link between

Protestantism and capitalism first highlighted by Weber and further explored by Dumont is seen as only one aspect of a major transformation of the religious institution of the social.

In opposition to traditional understandings of religion, Gauchet identifies in primitive religions the essence of the religious. Probably inspired by Mircea Eliade's comparative philosophy of religion, Gauchet redefines heteronomy as the determination of human societies by a non-human principle, which grounds the origins of the human community in a timeless ontological anteriority and categorically denies the community's essential historicity in favour of a total identification with a mythical past. Heteronomy takes the form of an indebtedness to the divine. It asserts the dependency of individuals on the collective whole, itself defined by its insertion in an immanent order consecrated by tradition. Gauchet shows how the denial of history is characterised by the re-enactment of primal myths, which belong to an unreachable past, the past which Eliade defined as that of *illo tempore* (Gauchet, 1997: 12–13). In Lefort's footsteps, Gauchet highlights the existence of a theologico-sociological act which establishes the community's identity, an act performed by religion in the case of primitive societies and by the state in the case of modern or pre-modern societies (Gauchet, 1997: 33–7).

Drawing on the work of Clastres, Gauchet defines primitive societies as societies not only against history but also *against the state*, societies which, in other words, actively counter the threat of political domination through religion (Gauchet, 1975, 1977, 1997: 26). Thus, primitive religion is synonymous for Gauchet with a primitive form of egalitarianism, circumscribed by the hierarchical principle of tradition. Sacred immanence forbids any one from exercising a coercive form of authority detached from society. No one, not even chiefs or shamans, can rise above the group and dictate to it (Gauchet, 1997: 31–2). On the other hand, like Lefort, Gauchet relativises the radical opposition that Clastres drew between supposedly totally egalitarian and free societies against the State and essentially oppressive societies subject to the state (Lefort, 1987). A form of coercion is exercised by the community in primitive societies, even if it is with a view to equality. The real question therefore concerns the nature of the equality constructed by societies 'against the state'.

Gauchet shows that beyond the discontinuity between primitive and modern equality, there is nevertheless also a tremendous continuity, which his political history of religion explores. It is this continuity which alone can explain the genesis of the modern. The emergence of the state itself can only be understood within a structural evolution of the religious logic. With the state, divine otherness now penetrates the human world (Gauchet, 1997: 35–6). Whereas primitive religion separated human beings from their origins in a way that prevented any divisions taking hold, with the appearance of state domination, the religious divide now operates amongst human beings

themselves. Society is now structured around the opposition between those who are only humans and those who are quasi-gods. If some can speak on behalf of the gods, this also means also that the gods can become the objects of social dissent. The emergence of the state, Gauchet stresses, gives birth to a potential contradiction between the social structure and the religious: the religious authority of some over others opens the way for its reversal through questioning by all of the validity of divine decrees.

With the birth of the state, the gods now depend on what was supposed to depend on them: the hierarchical social order. Whilst society opens itself to change from within, the relationship to the world outside the social community is also transformed – the possibility of an imperialistic expansion of political domination is established. Imperialistic expansion had tremendous spiritual and intellectual implications. The axial age, from 800–200 BC, from Persia to China, and from India to Greece, saw the appearance of other-worldly subjectivized divinities and ontological dualism. By becoming transcendent rather than immanent, the authority of the divine opened up a gap between existence and essence, between being and moral norm, which potentially freed human consciousness and allowed for the development of individual autonomy.

The emergence of the state alone was not enough to question the principle of hierarchy and of the immutability of the social: the sacred still assigned every one and every thing its rightful place. It is Gauchet's thesis that monotheism was the crucial breakthrough, which allowed humanity to establish its sovereignty over its destiny and reappropriate what it had hitherto surrendered to the immanent sacred authority of the past. The advent of monotheism opened the way for a recognition of the historicity of human societies. Although it initially strengthened the religious foundations of the social, it brought the divine closer to the human by substituting for the temporal exteriority of primitive religion the concept of divine creation (Gauchet, 1997: 51–7, 82–3). The divine becomes in the process problematic: it has to be deciphered, interpreted.

The greatness of God thus consecrates human rationality, and revelation further strengthens humanity's capacity for autonomy. What is thus instituted is the intelligibility of the world. From there, the relationship of human beings to the natural world is fundamentally transformed, as Lefort was the first to perceive. The development of technology, facilitated by the emergence of the state (which worked towards the accumulation and the production of surplus) can be translated into a global project, the conquest and mastery of nature (Gauchet, 1997: 87–8). The relationship of human beings to each other is, as a result, also revolutionised: the economic mastery of nature coincides with an attempt to consciously establish society. Gauchet's analysis therefore suggests the existence of a close but complex relationship between the genesis of the project of autonomy and that of capitalism.

There is, as Gauchet puts it, a kind of law which governs this birth of sovereignty from religious subservience: the greater the Gods, the freer human beings become (Gauchet, 1997: 51). This law informs the dynamics of transcendence, which gave birth to the project of autonomy and allowed the holistic or heteronomous universe to evolve into something radically different. Christianity, Gauchet asserts, is the decisive moment of rupture. It overcomes the fundamental contradiction of monotheism between the exaltation of human submission to God and the legitimation of spiritual rebellion against the sinful world (Gauchet, 1997: 767–78). The divine is so Other that it can only reveal itself in human form. In Christianity, otherness, the non-coincidence of the divine and the human, is accepted and radicalised: the refusal of the world such as it is becomes the basis of the need to act in the world. Salvation is to be gained through the transformation of reality. Material existence is now integrated in the religious experience. For Gauchet, the Reformation in fact fulfilled what was latent from the start. Christianity must therefore be seen as 'the religion of the exit from religion', the religion which made possible the birth of modern sovereignty.

Gauchet's political history of religion not only adds to Lefort's theory of the symbolical transformation underpinning modernity, it also opens onto an analysis of the beginnings of this transformation in early medieval Europe. As the Church evolved into a centralized and specialized organization with aspirations to the global spiritual leadership of society, it worked in fact towards its own demise by facilitating the emancipation of earthly kingly power. Against the universalism of papal ambitions another type of legitimacy, directly consecrated by God, was asserted, that of the *nation* (Gauchet, 1997: 90, 156). This other legitimacy reversed the imperialistic logic of global expansion. The principle of universality was redirected inwards and deepened: primitive universal sovereignty gave way to the sovereignty of the modern state, which subordinates universality to the territorial particularity of the nation. The human community thus acquired an invisible form of permanence, which was represented through the king's 'two bodies': the king is dead, long live the king! (Kantorowicz, 1955).

The monarch ceased to be the living incarnation of the unity of heaven and earth. Although his power was based on the idea of divine right, his presence in fact attested to the separation of the human sphere from the divine. Imposing a social order from above, the monarch now symbolically represented the internal identity of the collective body outside of any reference to divine otherness. Building on this significant break, monarchical absolutism then paradoxically facilitated the emergence of a new egalitarian dynamics. As Gauchet points out, it is no coincidence that contract theories appeared when power defined itself as absolute: the absolute state established the principle of a voluntary creation of society by itself, which radically subverted pre-modern hierarchy (Gauchet, 1997: 58).

For Gauchet, as for Castoriadis and Lefort, modernity is to be

understood as a shift away from the subordination inscribed in heteronomy, to the fulfilment of human sovereignty in autonomy. If the project of autonomy has for Gauchet, as for Castoriadis, both a collective and individual dimension, for Gauchet it also specifically incorporates the historical constitution of the self as a rational subject. His argument is that the Christian dynamics of transcendence which separated the human realm from the realm of the divine, transformed both the representation of political power and the conception of the human subject. Whilst *The Disenchantment of the World* focuses mainly on the birth of the state, it also discusses the connection that exists between it and the birth of the individual as subject.[10] Thus Gauchet formulates a dynamic conception of modernity as a tension between processes of individual emancipation and socialisation, which leads him to define the project of autonomy differently from Castoriadis, as the project of a radically new society, the society of individuals. For Gauchet, modernity is the advent of a new form of humanity which is moving away from the gregarious humanity of heteronomous culture.

Gauchet stresses the paradox that the promotion of the individual's inner freedom of thought was predicated on his outward subjection. It was the king's rule that first created *subjects*, that is, individuals who acquired a sense of autonomy through the simple fact that they were seen to acquiesce in their subjection. This leads Gauchet to assert that Hobbes's approach is equivalent to that of Descartes: the freedom to doubt is predicated on the discovery of the freedom to acquiesce (Gauchet, 1997: 173). The absolute monarch becomes exclusively responsible for the existence of society by becoming the representative of a collectivity, which is defined as the product of *human* will and no longer seen as possessing a natural cohesion. In this respect, French absolutism is particularly representative in the way it stated explicitly that the French nation had no existence outside its representation in the body of the king ('*la Nation ne fait pas corps en France. Elle réside toute entière dans la personne du roi*') (Gauchet, 1989 : 23). Like the state, however, the figure of the unitary individualistic subject still partakes of holistic culture. Gauchet suggests that individualism was the outcome of a process which saw the essential unity of the holistic totality reinvested in the individual fragment. The individual therefore became the object of an attempt at quasi self-deification. In this respect, within the overall process of modern disenchantment, individualism is evidence of humanity's *continued* state of enchantment, which prevents the full realisation of human sovereignty.

In *La Révolution des droits de l'homme*, Gauchet (1989) concentrated his attention on the specific question of the impact of modern individualism on *political* culture. In this book, Gauchet discusses the attempt by the French Revolution to assert democratic sovereignty against the claims of absolutism by recourse to Rousseau's political philosophy and to a notion of the people's *will*. This emphasis on the people's will constituted the people as a kind of meta-individual (Gauchet, 1989: xvi-xvii). It contributed to the obfuscation of

the social origin of human sovereignty and trapped the French revolution-
aries in the ambiguities associated with the individualistic logic of natural law
and the fiction of a pre-social natural individual (Gauchet, 1989: 15–16).
These ambiguities are the legacy of absolutism's blend of the archaic and the
modern. Gauchet argues that the French Revolution needs to be re-evaluated
in the light of this problematic legacy. The French Revolution was an essen-
tially contradictory project but also an experience from which the meaning
of the modern project can be retrieved, a meaning which transcends its cog-
nitive self-interpretative moment, constrained by rationalism and individual-
ism. Here lies the significance of the theoretical debates of the French
Revolution, which Gauchet examines closely. Because they reflected upon
the attempt to create a modern society *ex nihilo*, rather than try to explain
what was already an empirical reality as in the case of British liberalism, they
came closer to the essence of the problem.

   The 'genius' of French political culture, Gauchet argues in *La Révolu-
tion des droits de l'homme*, resides, not in its actual political realisations, but
in its 'intellectualism', which raised the questions which British and American
liberalism could not clearly conceptualise even though they were pragmati-
cally resolving some of them. French political universalism, exemplified by
the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man', thus reveals most clearly the implicit
but essential social project at the heart of European modernity, even if the
Revolution failed to translate it into workable political practice (Gauchet,
1989: xxiii-xxv). Here lies the fundamental paradox of the French Revolution
as emblematic entry point into modernity, the paradox of the manifestation
of a radical democratic project in a country without democrats, that is, in a
country still profoundly dominated by holistic structures of social authority.
Combining a radical form of individualism with an equally radical concep-
tion of the power of the collective of individuals, French political culture
demonstrates in all its difficulty the birth of the modern from the pre-modern,
not as a conscious, rational project but as the outcome of the specific theo-
logico-political logic of European culture as it unfolded from the Middle Ages
to Absolutism (Gauchet, 1989: xv).

   In his historical analysis of the genesis and evolution of the 'Declaration
of the Rights of Man' Gauchet shows how theoretical radicalism imposed
itself in the French Revolution, despite the initial political moderation of the
deputies of the Constituting Assembly. The first origins of the Declaration are
to be found in an attempt by the representatives of the Assembly of the
General Estates to defend individual liberties within the constraints of the
existing monarchy. As the absolute monarchy still appeared unshakeable in
its ideological foundations, what the deputies first sought to establish was a
legislative countervailing power, as had been won in Britain, but *within* the
framework of the existing Bourbon monarchy. To do so, however, they had
to claim their own symbolical legitimacy as the direct representatives of the
individuals that composed the nation, which the monarch had hitherto

claimed to embody. The 'Declaration of the Rights of Man', in its radical individualism, thus played a key role in the revolutionaries' ideological battle with the King's claims to embody the nation. The universalism of the Declaration can only be thought of in relation to this strategic imperative: the document had to be grounded in a higher truth with absolute and therefore general authority, applicable to all human beings and to all countries. In the process, Gauchet argues, the French revolutionaries were directly confronted with a fundamental problem of modernity: its incapacity to render explicit the social project which underpins it, a project which must remain implicit in the individualistic discourse of human rights (Gauchet, 1989: xi).

The discussions of the French revolutionary deputies brought into focus the question of the right to social assistance but also its converse, the duties of the individual towards the community, the only expression of the collective imperative possible within the consistently individualistic parameters of the Declaration. In essence, the problem resided in the fact that the endpoint of the social process – autonomous individuals – was taken for its origin: the society of individuals first envisaged by the authors of the Declaration is not so much a society that brings together pre-existing autonomous individuals as a society whose purpose is to *create* autonomous individuals (Gauchet, 1989: 60–74). The debates surrounding the Declaration of the Rights of Man unwittingly highlighted the real source of the rights of individuals. Not nature, but the duty of the collectivity served to construct the context which – through education and social assistance – would allow individuals to become the independent and self-sufficient beings the Declaration posited them to be. The liberal notion of individual rights already contained its reversal, the necessity of transforming society to guarantee the liberty and equality it proclaimed, a necessity which in the 19th century gave birth to the rival project of socialism (Gauchet, 1989: 99–100).

In *La Révolution des droits de l'homme*, the project of democracy, redefined by Gauchet as the creation of the society of individuals, is shown to be inextricably linked to the problematic of sovereignty, which leads to a fundamental reappraisal of Rousseau's legacy. This reappraisal aims at freeing Rousseau's notion of sovereignty from his notion of the general will or more precisely, its revolutionary interpretation. The revolutionary interpretation of Rousseau's thought in fact reactivated an archaic imaginary representation of power inherited from absolutism, which gave to society, under the guise of nation, the status of a unitary individual embodied in the state (Gauchet, 1989: 28–29).

Within the scope of this article, it is not possible to discuss in depth Gauchet's historical analysis of the revolutionary reappropriation of Rousseau's political philosophy and the birth of French republicanism. Suffice to say that it trapped French revolutionaries in an inescapable contradiction inherited from Rousseau: direct democracy to be established by elected *representatives*, all vying for the ideological legitimacy of the nation, all claiming

in other words to be speaking for the 'true' people (Gauchet, 1989: xii–xvi, 133–4). This engendered an ultra-democratic terror that prefigured 20th century totalitarianism. In a seminal article that followed *La Déclaration des droits de l'homme*, Gauchet went on to analyse the way French political culture, in the 19th century, succeeded in reconciling the reality of social division with the unitary definition of the nation imposed by the revolution, by incorporating into the French nation's identity the idea of an eternal contest between Left and Right (Gauchet, 1992b). The article signalled Gauchet's growing interest in the specific question of political *representation*.

In *La Révolution des pouvoirs*, Gauchet (1995) drew on the full implications of his historical assessment of the French Revolution to put forward a redefinition of Rousseau's notion of democratic sovereignty. Gauchet stresses the essentially *representative* dimension of popular sovereignty, representative not only of the social community's unity but more importantly of its *inner* divisions. *La Révolution des pouvoirs* analyses the ultimate convergence of the American and French paths to political liberalism, which opens onto an overall account of the evolution of European democracy as an unconscious emancipation from the theological-political quest for absolute unity (Gauchet, 1995: 27–42). This evolution established not only political pluralism but more importantly the *de jure* separation of society from its political representation, that is, the acceptance of social division. The totalitarian episode represented a form of regressive reaction against this loss of substantive unity. It made clear the need for the state to remain autonomous from society. A further step was the post-war consolidation of the project of collective control. The establishment of the Welfare State, with a personalised executive accountable to public opinion, countered the danger of anonymous bureaucratic control. Pluralism acquired a fundamentally new significance: while political pluralism still presupposed fixed and stable collective identities, a broader form of pluralism established the acceptance of individual difference as the very basis of collective cohesion in liberal democracies.

Gauchet's analysis of the evolution of Western democracies led him to deepen Lefort's initial redefinition of liberal democracy as a new symbolical articulation of social relations. Gauchet goes beyond Lefort's somewhat content-less definition of democracy as institutional recognition of indeterminacy. His reformulation of Lefort's analysis in terms of sovereignty allows him to formulate a defence of liberal democracy that incorporates both the idea of the autonomous individual and the goal of a self-determining community. It also allows him to deepen Lefort's analysis of modern sovereignty and bring out its specifically political implications. Lefort radically questioned the liberal definition of power as delegation and stressed the sociologically necessary 'staging' of the social in the political, evident in the persistent need for a personalised executive. Gauchet extends the notion of democratic representation to put forward the notion of a 'meta-representation' at play in democratic sovereignty, a representation of representation, which goes

beyond Lefort's exclusive emphasis on the disembodied rule of law and the idea of rights. Modern liberal democracy involves the representation of a symbolic identity and the representation of this power of symbolic representation, that is, the representation of humanity's ideological *sovereignty* over its destiny, its autonomy.

This fulfilment of human sovereignty through the symbolic representation of its symbolic creativity implies what Gauchet calls a 'constitutive dispossession'. Unlike the dispossession involved in heteronomy, it signals the acceptance of alterity and indeterminacy, most specifically through the acceptance of the non-coincidence of the parts with the whole, of individuals with society and of the people with their representatives. According to Gauchet, the key to understanding the development within liberal democracies of an independent constitutional authority (which became apparent in the 1970s) lies within this new symbolical, structural necessity. The meta-power of the constitutional judge, which safeguards the universal rights of individuals against public abuse or the tyranny of the majority, implies, along with the fluctuations of public opinion, a sovereignty that transcends the simple here and now. Sovereignty – to really be the sovereignty of all – must not be allowed to concretise itself, either in a generation or in a single being. To put it differently, democracy is not only the exercise of popular sovereignty, it is also the representation of the ideal of a full exercise of sovereignty, without which there can be no effective exercise of sovereignty (Gauchet, 1995: 42–49). In this respect, Rousseau's general will must be recognised for what it is, an ideal, and freed from the monism with which it has historically been associated and which gave birth to the totalitarian attempts to give it an institutional embodiment. In the influence of judges, constitutional courts and public opinion, Gauchet therefore does not see simply the development of new procedures but the unfolding of a structural transformation of human relations, the development of a new social imaginary.

Liberal democracy is significant in so far as it is part of the history of the evolving constitution of humanity as subject. There is, however, an inherent danger in this evolution. The power of the judge can take a regressive turn and lead to a confiscation of power by 'professional' experts, who lay claim to be the sole interpreters of a new mythical version of the community's origin in the constitution. Similarly, the rise of the media, associated with the influence of public opinion, can empty political debates of their substance to the point where the image of popular sovereignty takes the place of its effective realisation (Gauchet, 1992: 50). The danger no longer resides in the revival of an old revolutionary mystique of direct democracy but in the possibility that the symbolical dimension will take over and neutralise the active participation of citizens. The threat of totalitarianism for Western liberal societies is past. The new danger is civic desertion (Gauchet, 1991).

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Gauchet's theory of the genesis of European democracy demonstrates how liberal political philosophy cannot account for the genesis of liberal democracy as a social project. Modern political institutions are more than pragmatic arrangements designed to manage conflict and regulate social life, they are part of a general cultural project of human sovereignty.[11] Gauchet also points to the danger of the rebirth of heteronomy in the contemporary fetishistic cult of human rights which erases their essential link to democracy's original project of sovereignty (Gauchet, 2002).

This contemporary relevance of Gauchet's theory is linked to the strong contribution it makes to an anthropological understanding of modernity, which highlights the historical contingency of its association with democracy in the original European paradigm. It sheds light on the birth of modernity and the fundamental problematic of state formation, as defined by Johann Arnason in *The Peripheral Centre* (Arnason, 2002). Gauchet reveals the profoundly religious character of the changes involved in primary state formation, that is, the radical changes associated with the emergence of the state in primitive societies. In this respect, Gauchet's work has revitalised the French sociological tradition of Durkheim and Mauss and demonstrated what it could contribute to the problematic of civilization such as it has been explored by S.N. Eisenstadt. It has added to the understanding of the meaning of the 'axial transformation' experienced by the particularly formative cultures of Ancient Greece, Ancient Israel, China and India, a transformation which introduced a hitherto unknown distinction between transcendental and earthly levels of order (Eisenstadt, 1982).

Gauchet shows how this transformation prepared the birth of a notion of human sovereignty central to democracy but also how this birth only unfolded in the civilization born of the contact between the cultures inherited from Greece and Israel: European civilisation. Here Gauchet stresses the crucial role played by the European appropriation of Christianity. In the process he sheds light on the problematic of secondary European state formation after the collapse of the Roman empire and the regression to less sophisticated forms of political organization: Christianity prepared the emergence of modernity from feudalism. In this respect, Gauchet's political history of religion suggests a continuity between the two stages of state formation involved in the birth of European civilization. This continuity does not clash with Castoriadis's emphasis on the seminal contribution of Greek culture to the Western World's project of autonomy but rather strengthens it considerably by stressing the contingency of its historical genesis.

It is true of course that Gauchet's analysis of European modernity downplays the Greek contribution to modern democracy in favour of Christianity's role and does not really deal with the question of the Greek version of axial transformation. The Greek heritage and the Christian influence are not

mutually exclusive however and can be seen as fundamentally convergent variants of the axial transformation. In this respect, Remi Brague's recent thesis on the specificity of European culture is particularly promising. Brague stresses a structural analogy between the relationship of European culture to the Greek and Jewish pasts (Brague, 2001), both central elements in its essentially derivative or 'eccentric' nature.

European culture is characterised by a lack of self-closure – an extension of the Romans' relationship to the Greek precursors, just as Greek culture itself was imbued with the strong sense of its lack of 'originality' in the dual sense of the word. This original openness was later strengthened by the derivative nature of Christianity in relation to the original Judaism. For Brague, what unified the various sources of European culture was Roman Catholicism, understood not as a dogmatic 'content' but as a 'form': a fundamental mode of engagement with the world, which encouraged a totally new attitude to the foreign and the recognition of a shared humanity with the foreign.

The Catholic variant favoured the maximisation of Christian dualism, the refusal of the synthesis in the human sphere of divine and earthly power. This refusal put a stop to the development of Europe along imperial lines and allowed, as we have seen with Gauchet, the reinvestment of imperial impulses into the relationship of European culture to the natural world. Central to the specificity of Roman Catholicism was its non-iconoclastic interpretation of the Christian notion of incarnation. As Alain Besançon has demonstrated, it allowed Roman Catholicism to appropriate the Greek artistic legacy and to entertain a positive relationship to the material world (Besançon, 1991). In this respect, the contribution of the European institution of art to the project of autonomy, defined by Castoriadis and redefined by Gauchet as project of sovereignty, still remains to be investigated.

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Notes
1. *The Disenchantment of the World* published in France in 1985 was only published in English in 1997. Gauchet's other major works remain unavailable in English. Useful bibliographical information on the evolution of Gauchet's thought can be found in Marc-Olivier Padis' (1996) book, *Marcel Gauchet et la Genèse de la démocratie*.
2. This debt to Lefort is only apparent to well-informed French readers of *The Disenchantment of the World*. In the French tradition, it provides little bibliographical information: Castoriadis is not mentioned; Lefort only once, even though both authors have been crucial to Gauchet's intellectual development.

3. Lefort's writings have not been as widely discussed as those of Castoriadis and selectively translated in English. Where possible, I will give both the French and English references. For my discussion, I have drawn on Dick Howard's (1974/1975) article 'Introduction to Lefort' and on Hughes Poltier's (1998) comprehensive discussion of Lefort's writings, *Passion du politique: La pensée de Claude Lefort.*

4. For Lefort's analysis of Communist bureaucracy, see Lefort (1986c).

5. Lefort has devoted several essays to Tocqueville. In particular, see Lefort (1986a/1988a, 2000b)

6. Some of Lefort's early essays on anthropology have been re-edited in *Les Formes de l'Histoire* (Lefort, 1978). To the best of my knowledge, they are not available in English translation.

7. Lefort's conception of ideology has been discussed in English by John B. Thompson (1984a and b). Within the constraints of this paper, I cannot address Thompson's critique of Lefort's analysis, as it would require an extensive discussion of the notion of domination on which it is based.

8. Most recently, Lefort has returned to this question of the relationship of totalitarianism to modernity in an analysis of the historical significance of Communism (Lefort, 1999).

9. Lefort has returned to this question in the context of globalization in 'Nation et Souveraineté' (Lefort, 2000a)

10. Gauchet has explored the question of the link between the birth of modern subjectivity and the democratic revolution in his study (co-authored with Gladys Swain) of the development of psychiatry (Gauchet, 1980) and also through a reflection on the birth of the notion of the unconscious (Gauchet, 1992a). This has led him to examine the question of modern personality and argue for a radical re-evaluation of Freud's legacy (Gauchet, 2000, 2002c).

11. In his review of Gauchet's work, Kalyvas puts forward the view that Gauchet's theory of democracy is limited to one of liberalism. It goes without saying that my analysis aims at demonstrating the exact opposite (Kalyvas, 1999).

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