

# BARBARISM WITHOUT BARBARIANS

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*Fabio Ciaramelli*

*Translated by David Ames Curtis*

For Danielle Lories,  
in memory of the first time we met in Louvain<sup>1</sup>

**1.**

I will start off by quoting “Waiting for the Barbarians,” a quite well-known and indeed famous poem by Constantine P. Cavafy, which begins with the following two lines:

—What is it that we are waiting for, gathered in the square?  
The barbarians are supposed to arrive today.<sup>2</sup>

Cavafy goes on to describe the lethargy of the Senate; the exhibitionism of

Translation of Fabio Ciaramelli, “Barbarie sans barbares,” 277–86.

1. I arrived at the University of Louvain in 1977–78. While following the courses and seminars of Jacques Taminiaux, I discovered, among other things, the work of Cornelius

Castoriadis, who serves as the backdrop for or the horizon of the present text.

2. [Translator: We use here Daniel Mendelsohn’s English-language translation of this poem in his *C. P. Cavafy: Poems*, 147–49.]

the emperor and of the consuls, decked out in their stately garments in order to astound the barbarians; and the embarrassed silence of the rhetors, whose eloquence and rants might perhaps have been able to bore these strangers to death. Then, suddenly, the scenario changes:

—Why is it that such uneasiness has seized us all at once,  
and such confusion? (How serious the faces have become.)  
Why is it that the streets and squares are emptying so quickly,  
and everyone's returning home in such deep contemplation?  
Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.  
And some people have arrived from the borderlands,  
and said there are no barbarians anymore.

Whence the dazzling conclusion to the poem:

And now what's to become of us without barbarians.  
Those people were a solution of a sort.<sup>3</sup>

It is legitimate to ask oneself: In what sense might the barbarians have been able to bring—or, more radically, as the poem says, might have been able *to be*—a solution (a solution whose absence weighs so heavily)?

In trying to respond to a question of this kind, it must not be forgotten that writing a poem is something quite other than relating some historical events. This point is banally obvious, but the implications of so self-evident a fact nevertheless deserve clarification. As Aristotle suggested in a passage from the *Poetics* that has been quoted over and over again, the difference between the historian and the poet “consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has happened, and the other a kind of thing that might have happened.”<sup>4</sup> On account precisely of this difference, poetry aims at what is most general or most universal in relation to the particular details related by history. This is why, as Aristotle also says, “poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history.”<sup>5</sup>

It may be concluded that it is not for the poet to chronicle the *fait accompli*, but it is up to the poet to imagine its possibilities—namely, to elucidate the signification or the meaning of “what might have happened.” In this way, the poet helps to enlarge and to deepen our understanding of the real by trying to delve into the human space of the possible. However, the possible that is of interest to

3. [Translator: Ciaramelli cites here Marguerite Yourcenar and Constantin Dimaras's French translation:

Mais alors, qu'allons-nous devenir sans les Barbares?  
Ces gens étaient en somme une solution.

Yourcenar and Dimaras's *Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafis*, with their complete translation of his poems, first appeared in 1958.]

4. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, 9.1451b4–5. [Translator: translation slightly revised to conform to the rendering of this passage in French used by Ciaramelli.]

5. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, 9.1451b5–6.

poetry is not the “potential” whose determinacy is already inscribed within the real but, on the contrary, the *power-to-be-otherwise*, which provides the frame for the human and whose horizon remains *indeterminacy*—namely, ontological contingency. A similar enlargement of *the possible*, which transgresses the *necessary* boundaries of the “potential,” is indispensable for poetry to be able to be considered as “something more philosophic . . . than history.”

In light of the foregoing, the waiting that is given voice here by Cavafy and, especially, the disappointment that follows therefore do not constitute a description of a factual state of affairs—all the more so as the historic event of the “barbarian invasions” belies in a radical way the factual scene being described in the poem. The feeling of malaise and the emotions running through this scene are aimed at sifting out the signification of a human situation starting from “what might have happened.”

“Poet of a lost world,” Cavafy in fact called himself, as Charles Simic reminds us: a “*poietes historikos*.”<sup>6</sup> Let us take these words to mean that the general content of his descriptions of the past were supplied to him by the imagination of “what might have happened” and by the effort to grasp from it a range of possible significations. Even the particular details he endeavors to add thereto merely elucidate the radicalness of the possibilities, their lack of ontological determinacy.

Still, it must be added that the poem titled “Waiting for the Barbarians” was written in Egyptian Alexandria in 1898 (when the Pax Britannica in the Near East was beginning to falter) by someone who did not conceal his intention to read the early signs of the death throes of the British Empire in light of the crisis that in the past had begun to strike the Roman Empire, leading ultimately to its collapse. In this respect, we know that, at the moment this poem was being written, Cavafy had just read the quite renowned work of Edward Gibbon on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and that he had not at all appreciated Gibbon’s “low opinion of Byzantium and Christianity.”<sup>7</sup>

## 2.

The image of the missed arrival of the barbarians, which had after the fact been perceived as a sort of “solution,” therefore presupposes the experience of a civilized life that is tired of itself, people feeling their dissatisfaction therewith and sensing that it risked extinction. In relation to all that, the barbarians whom one is awaiting, but who do not arrive, constitute the vital forces that might have been able to liberate this city from the Empire and its inhabitants from their malaise. In a swift allusion to this poem composed by Cavafy, Cornelius Castoriadis evokes this point at the same time that he summarizes its spirit: “Having

6. Simic, “Some Sort of a Solution.”

7. Simic, “Some Sort of a Solution.”

learned that the barbarians were going to arrive that very day, the townspeople of an Imperial city gathered in the Forum; they awaited the arrival of the barbarians, hoping that, at last, something was going to lift them out of their boredom, their *mal de siècle*.”<sup>8</sup>

The implication of the existence of this more or less irrational hope—which the poet imagines is shared at once by his contemporaries and by those who, in late Antiquity, had lived through the slow shipwreck of the *Pax Augusta*—is that an impotent civilization, one incapable of envisaging a way of exiting from its crisis, has closed upon itself.<sup>9</sup> It is in this way that the arrival of the barbarians can be regarded as a remedy resolving the impasses of a form of life whose shared significations, transmitted by the past, are collapsing without succeeding in renewing themselves.

Ultimately, however, the barbarians do not arrive. Cavafy’s poem invites one to think through the possibilities opened up by this unforeseen situation. From now on, one must survive, or rather make do and get by, “without barbarians” (χωρίς βαρβάρους), as the penultimate line of the poem says. Their absence is then a metaphor for an unfulfilled desire, that of finally being able to overcome the impasse of a civilization in crisis.

The retrospective perception of the barbarians as a solution seems motivated by the difficulties involved in a life lived in common that has now become self-referential, incapable of aiming at anything other than its self-reproduction. Within this context, civilization proves to exist in a weakened state, almost incapable of reproducing itself, decadent if you wish, and, in a certain way, already approaching barbarism. It is in relation to a collective identity discontent with itself but inapt for change, obsessed with continuing its own form of life, and no longer even having a desire to call itself into question, that the arrival of the barbarians might have been able to represent in some way a solution.

Such a form of life, enslaved as it is to the monotonous and incontestable repetition of its own identity, and in which it is ruled out that faits accomplis might be called upon to justify themselves, is a social condition that ultimately verges on barbarism. It is this possibility of barbarism “without barbarians” that Cavafy’s poem makes us think about.<sup>10</sup>

Be it formally civilized, a form of social life that aims only at the obsessive self-perpetuation of its identity while ruling out in advance any way of calling into

8. Castoriadis, “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality,’” 121.

9. See Christias, “La visione sociologica di Costantino Kavafis.” [Translator: The French original, “Le regard sociologique de Constantin Cavafy” was published in the same issue of *M@gm@*.]

10. In a wholly different way, Capella, in his *Entrada en la barbarie*—a remarkable and still topical book, in which the analysis of the present is preceded by four chapters devoted to Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Simone Weil, and Pier Paolo Pasolini—yields quite similar results.

question the fait accompli really deserves the name *barbarous*. The continuation without discontinuity that characterizes it erases the very space of possibilities.

However, an opening up to possibilities, which here must be rediscovered and safeguarded, stands out distinctly from any reduction of the possible to a “potential” that is already there within the real. This means that a radical understanding of the possible, one based on ontological contingency, has to abandon the model of Aristotelian *dunamis* that explains becoming as a *necessary* transition from potentiality to actuality, grounded on the primacy—and the precedence—of actuality. On the other hand, within the horizon of the ontological contingency that surrounds human action, the kind of possibility that is to be grasped is the phenomenal given of the *power-to-be-otherwise*, the sole genuine site for producing the meaning and signification that structure history’s human dimension.

### 3.

In one of his minor texts, devoted to the origins of the philosophy of law in Hellenic thought, Werner Jaeger, the famous author of *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*,<sup>11</sup> starts from the idea that in the Archaic period the Greeks “saw law in its organic connection with human civilization at large”—so much so that, for example, “in Homeric thought, *dikē* was the line between savagery and civilization.”<sup>12</sup>

As concerns the meaning of the word *dikē*, let us, to be brief, confine our attention to the gist of what Émile Benveniste has to say about it in his *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*.<sup>13</sup> In the historical and etymological analysis he devotes to this term, Benveniste dates it back to an ancient Indo-European root *\*deik-*, which yields the Greek verb *deiknumi*, signifying, as a matter of fact, “to indicate” or “to show.” However, what *dikē* is supposed to indicate or to bring into view is not some visible thing or existing object; on the contrary, it is a matter of showing, through speech, what is and, consequently, has to be done. In this way, the word *dikē* takes on the meaning of “justice.”

Henceforth, all that has been done—that is to say, all that has taken place because it has been implemented through the *power-to-be-otherwise* of human actions—thereby proves liable to be judged, evaluated, called into question. All

11. [Translator: The German title of this three-volume book, *Paideia: Die Formung des griechischen Menschen* (1933–1947), could more literally, and perhaps better, be translated as “Paideia: The Forming/Shaping/Education of Greek Man.” The English-language translation by Gilbert Highet was published by Oxford University Press (1939–44).]

12. Jaeger, “Praise of Law,” 353–54. [Translator: Using Cacciari and Irti’s Italian translation, *Elogio del diritto*, 12

and 14, Ciaramelli’s French-language paper has “barbarie et civilisation,” whereas Jaeger’s original reads “savagery and civilization,” which we include here. Below, we translate Ciaramelli’s reprise of this phrase, based on this Italian translation, as “barbarism and civilization.” See note 14 of the Translator’s Introduction.]

13. Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, 391–94.

that is not simply given but that exists because it has been instituted by human action, is no longer to be considered as a *fait accompli* but can and has to be *discussed* and *justified*. This opening up to discussion and to the justification of human acts and of their effects proves to be essential to the very advent of civilization.

According to Jaeger, therefore, Homeric thought invites one to comprehend this civilization, with respect to how it differs from barbarism, as being born out of the requirement [*l'exigence*] to give an account of and a reason for (*logon didonai*) the results of human acts—that is to say, the requirement to interrogate these same results in such a way that they can be called into question. Thus, what is peculiar to civilization would be the institution of a reflective and interrogative attitude that considers every human act to be responsible for its effects and therefore always liable to be interrogated as to its justice.

Quite evidently, what has just been said implies a stubborn refusal to consider the effects of human acts, like natural givens, as unquestionable facts to which social life would inevitably be enslaved, without any need to justify them and to justify oneself with respect to them.

When Jaeger underscores the existence of an “organic connection” between law and “civilization at large,” he is inviting one to think that law itself—that is to say, instituted lawfulness—is, on account of its very institution, radically distinguishable from unquestionable givens: Law itself can and should, in turn, be called into question. This means that law must be understood as a social phenomenon that does not, of itself, coincide with justice. However, the exigency of justice—and therefore the requirement of or request for a justification of instituted law—cannot be considered, either, as an exigency wholly unrelated to the sphere of law proper. This is due precisely to the “organic connection” between law itself and “civilization at large,” therefore law’s connection with a form of life that is characterized by self-reflection and by the requirement that it always be possible to call into question its works [*œuvres*]. In short, although law may not be identical with justice, one must rule out that the two might be radically extraneous, the one from the other.

#### 4.

Let us return now to the capital role attributed to *dikē*, in its most general sense of “justice,” as the line between barbarism and civilization. It must be recognized that such a line has always been—and still remains—in fact very fluid, indeed evanescent. As Walter Benjamin says in his *Theses on the Concept of History* (1940), “the cultural treasures” (*Kulturgüter*) in which the transition from barbarism to civilization culminate have, as a whole, “an origin which [one] cannot contemplate without horror.” From then on, these same “cultural treasures,” qua historical works or effects of civilization, “owe their existence not only to the efforts of

the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries (*sondern auch der namenlosen Fron ihrer Zeitgenossen*).” And Benjamin concludes: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.”<sup>14</sup>

The most widespread form of human beings’ submission to the yoke of chores deemed necessary for the establishment of civilization, whose immediate consequence is obviously their reduction to a state of anonymity, has been slavery.

The phenomenon of slavery runs through the entire history of civilization and demonstrates therein the presence and the permanence of barbarism—which confirms Benjamin’s observation about the disquieting coexistence of the two. Since the Roman era and until the end of the nineteenth century, slavery had even been granted the status of a legal institution. If one follows Sigmund Freud, who defined *Kultur* as “the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes—namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations,”<sup>15</sup> one can conclude from this that the greatest challenge and the greatest threat for civilization are probably not so much the animality—the life of our animal ancestors—from which civilization proceeds and from which it breaks free, as the barbarism that runs through it and destabilizes it.

Thenceforth, to consider as a natural given a social institution such as slavery or in general the reification of human beings, the reduction of their *dignity* to their price, and therefore—to take up Immanuel Kant’s phrases—of their “inner value” to their “relative value,”<sup>16</sup> represents one obvious instance of the intersection between civilization and barbarism to which Benjamin was referring. After all, in this regard, it is undoubtedly not by chance that, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud notes that the “decisive step of civilization” lies in substituting for the “power of the individual” the “power of a community,” where the “brute

14. Published in translation as “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 256. [Translator: We quote the English translation directly, which includes “civilization” here, whereas the German original has *Kultur* at this point. The French translation used by Ciaramelli has *culture*, Ciaramelli adding immediately afterward his own commentary (translated here into English): “*Kultur*, in the obvious sense of civilization.”]

15. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 21:89. [Translator: What the *Standard Edition* translates here as “the achievements and the regulations” of “civilization” appears in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (*Gesammelte Werke* [14:448]) as “Leistungen und Einrichtungen” and “Kultur,” while the French edition Ciaramelli uses speaks of

“des œuvres et des institutions,” with Ciaramelli referencing “Kultur” here. The *Standard Edition* (21:4) regularly translates “Kultur” as “civilization” (James Strachey: “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”).] A similar phrase is found in *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 14:326 (*The Future of an Illusion*, in *Standard Edition*, 21:5–6).]

16. [Translator: Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 42 (4:435).]

17. This passage from Freud, summarized in the text, reads as follows:

force” of the former is condemned and is replaced by the institution of “right [*Recht*].”<sup>17</sup>

## 5.

Shortly after the abovementioned swift allusion to Cavafy’s quite beautiful poem, Castoriadis added that, if now the barbarians were to appear in flesh and blood, there would be only two possibilities: either violence, “in which case the only question that would arise is that of the relation of forces,” or discussion with them, “and in that case one must obey certain rules for the use of language, seeking in this discussion not victory via violence, via the violence of one’s discourse, but the elucidation of questions. *And ‘civilization’ is nothing other than that.*”<sup>18</sup>

In light of this passage, it can be said that what is peculiar to civilization in relation to barbarism would consist precisely in discussion aiming at the justification of one’s own acts, instead of considering those acts as unquestioned and, furthermore, unquestionable. It happens to be the case, however, that enslavement to the fait accompli and to the unquestionable power of the strongest constitutes a very widespread form of behavior—which attests to the permanency of barbarism within many civilized attitudes that, through their refusal to be called into question, ultimately end up disavowing themselves. Thereby, civilization and barbarism ultimately overlap.

In this sense, for example, the dialogue between the Athenians and the Melians found in Thucydides (5.85–113)—which Castoriadis analyzes at length in one of his seminars on ancient Greece<sup>19</sup>—constitutes an exemplary instance of the permanency of barbarism within civilization (even within one of its most elevated achievements). And yet, before analyzing the details of this dialogue, Castoriadis focuses his attention on what constitutes human nature in the Greek world, which he sees in the will to dominate the other. Thus, he writes, “As a first approximation, among the Greeks, *anthrōpeia phusis*, that’s human nature: to dominate the other when one can do so”<sup>20</sup>—that is to say, when one has the strength [*force*] to do so.

Of course, this observation is solely the *point of departure* for his analysis. While this point of departure is of fundamental importance and is eloquently

Das menschliche Zusammenleben wird ermöglicht, wenn sich eine Mehrheit zusammenfindet, die stärker ist als jeder Einzelne und gegen jeden Einzelnen zusammenhält. Die Macht dieser Gemeinschaft stellt sich nun als ‘Recht’ der Macht des Einzelnen, die als ‘rohe Gewalt’ verurteilt wird, entgegen. Diese Ersetzung der Macht des Einzelnen durch die der Gemeinschaft ist der entscheidende kulturelle Schritt.

(*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 14:454–55; *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *Standard Edition*, 21:95)

18. Castoriadis, “Reflections on ‘Development’ and ‘Rationality,’” 122 (emphasis added).

19. Castoriadis, *Thucydide*.

20. Castoriadis, *Thucydide*, 187.

illustrated, moreover, in the wars of the time, it does not exhaust the reality of the situation. Castoriadis goes on to say:

In human history, another reality emerges, one whose trace is to be found in these same speeches from Thucydides: We're talking about the idea of *dikē* and of *dikaion*, justice or the just. . . . The very frequency with which the question of justice is posed in the speeches [related by Thucydides] shows quite well that it is present in the debates of the fifth century. No need, indeed, for speeches if naked force sufficed: The strong massacre or enslave the weak, and that's all. That there are such speeches is not only because the Greeks liked to talk; it's that they feel the need to *justify themselves*.<sup>21</sup>

The analysis as it has been conducted until now offers a confirmation of the idea that the transition from barbarism to civilization includes rejection of the fait accompli, a requirement that one justify one's acts, and a recognition of the socially instituted character of those acts.

It nonetheless happens that, at the loftiest moment in the speech the Athenians address to the Melians, the attitude taken by the Athenians radically belies the very foundations of civilization. The need to justify themselves, which in principle the Athenians should feel, is truly disavowed—which, ultimately, is to be likened to a betrayal of the very essence of civilization. In reality, the Athenians, in their dialogue with the Melians, end up resorting, in a completely self-contradictory way, to a stubborn refusal to offer any justification of their own acts. It is precisely around this refusal that they center their main contribution to the discussion, which is another way of declaring this very discussion to be quite simply useless and of making the relation of forces speak in its stead.

During the course of chapter 105 of book 5 of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, “the longest dialogue, which is at once admirable and horrible,”<sup>22</sup> the Athenians actually say to the Melians that the subjection of the weakest to the strongest is a natural given, therefore as such unquestionable and ultimately ineliminable. With this avowal devoid of hypocrisy but full of hubris,<sup>23</sup> which is aimed at denying and contradicting the instituted character of domination, the Athenians totally rule out that their acts might require justification. Thereby, the difference between civilization and barbarism becomes blurred. Human and social work [*œuvre*] is presented there as a natural given for which no one is responsible.

The Athenians' attitude toward the Melians very well demonstrates the advent—or the return—of barbarism within civilization itself. Obviously, this instance is not the only one in which a civilized form of life becomes barbarous. The advent of barbarism occurs within civilization itself, without any need to be

21. Castoriadis, *Thucydide*, 188.

23. Castoriadis, *Thucydide*, 196.

22. Castoriadis, *Thucydide*, 199.

triggered from without, for example by the arrival of barbarians. Indeed, according to the Sophist Antiphon—or, rather, according to the interpretation of his work offered by Aldo Schiavone, who discovers in one of Antiphon’s fragments an affirmation of the natural equality of all men<sup>24</sup>—the Greeks themselves become barbarous when they act in such a way as to consider the institution of inequalities among human beings as something natural, going without saying, and therefore ineliminable. In this case, barbarism pertains not to some sort of identity trait but to one’s attitude toward the other.

Each time there is submission of the weakest to the intimidation of the strongest, and a fortiori if the act being accomplished claims that, like a natural given, it need not justify itself, civilization gives way to barbarism. To the extent that the unchecked persistence of the violent impulse of domination takes it upon itself to render civilized life barbarous through the disappearance or neutralization of the effort to call the instituted into question, we have here, without any doubt, a case of *barbarism without barbarians*.

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24. See Schiavone, *Pursuit of Equality in the West*. See also Antiphon’s *On Truth*. [Translator: Ciaramelli cites here Barbara Cassin’s translation, with notes; Antiphon, “Sur la vérité.”]

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