

# CRISIS & CRITIQUE

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50 YEARS AFTER MAY 68  
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## 50 YEARS AFTER MAY 68

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# Introduction: 50 Years after May 68

For the Left, 2017 was a year of celebrations and reminiscences. It was the centenary of the Great October Revolution, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Karl Marx's first volume of *Capital*, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Shanghai Commune, during the Great Chinese Cultural Revolution, as well as the (now mostly forgotten) 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Che Guevara. This issue of *Crisis and Critique*, however, is not dedicated to what happened neither in 1917 nor in 1867 nor in 1967. The events we wish to examine took place in 1968, and we are hence 50 years after what happened. Yet, the current issue is not simply an attempt to commemorate a past event. It rather takes its cue from a very specific question that is linked to this very half-centenary which we are or might (not) be celebrating: what exactly do we commemorate if, or when, we commemorate May '68?

As has been stated, our attempt is not to merely commemorate, to think of the events which are commonly associated with "May 68". And the reason for this is quite simple. As soon as one starts commemorating a historical event of the past as a *past* event, as something that is constitutively gone and will always remain *past*, as something that happened once and is now a done deed, as Hegel's quip goes - translating *Geschehenes* (that which happened) into *Geschichte* (into something that was done, and can from a perspective afterwards, appear as a totality, can be totalized) - one may have trouble seeing what precisely made the *past* event an *event* in and for the past in the first place. Commemoration can mortify the very thing it tries to bring back to memory because of the very way in which it does so; if commemoration emphasizes the unalterable past-ness of what is commemorated, in the very act of emphasizing its significance it buries it again. This obviously raises a number of issues and questions, some of which will be directly addressed and confronted in the articles that follow. Perhaps the most pressing concern is whether May 68 was a real event: did something take place then and there, that changed the fundamental coordinates of the situation so profoundly, that afterwards nothing remains the same. If so, what precisely constituted the evental character of '68? What exactly changed? If things did *not* drastically change, in what sense, and in what manner, can a peculiar mass uprising - if this is what happened in '68 - fail to lead to a transformation of the social, historical, political and maybe even aesthetical sphere(s) - if we understand aesthetical here not even in the fundamental sense of Jacques Rancière, but in the sense of art-production?

Obviously, to answer such questions one first has to clarify what actually happened and how one can conceive of and think through the (series of) events. And even though this seems trivial, one should always remember that history is a battlefield - recall the almost endless battles surrounding the interpretations of the French Revolution: did it just begin with an assembly of the general estates and thus with an act that was



performed in conformity with the back-then existing constitution? Or is one is dealing here with a real Revolution, i.e. with acts that were not anchored in and preconfigured by the existing constitution? The same holds obviously for the debates around the Russian Revolution. Was it a real emancipatory event or a World Historical crime that started with a *coup d'état* performed by a small elite, etc.? And this insight - that history is a battlefield - is without a doubt also pertinent for the question of what happened in 1968 and how to read it. One may just recall that the former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, once harshly proclaimed that one of the goals of his politics is to liquidate the heritage of '68 - "turning the page on 68", was one of his phrasings - by which he meant to exorcise what he considered to be the founding act of the contemporary French - parliamentary - Left. So, surprisingly at least Sarkozy seems to have believed that 68 was an event that constituted or reconstituted something, notably the French Left and more specifically the possibility of a left-wing, emancipatory politics; he seems to have believed that '68 was an event that was still haunting the French state decades afterwards for the simple reason that its effects were still alive (and that he saw incorporated in the French parliamentary left - which itself is quite debatable obviously).

Tarrying with this peculiar incident for a moment, one might immediately detect a peculiar problem with '68 or more precisely what it stands for: on the one side we have a French president that identifies in and with "68" the foundation of a left radicalism that must be exorcised from the contemporary liberal or conservative (or both) state, simply because it is too radically left. On the other side - notably on the left side - we have a left that does, at least in France, but the same certainly holds true also for other countries, not stand for any left radicalism whatsoever, but conceded everything that was once identified with a left-wing position - and maybe precisely around "68" - to the liberal state. And maybe because of this very political weakness of the parliamentary left - a left that basically sticks to the signifier "Left" in the same way that around the time of the First World War in Europe people stuck to the signifier "social-democracy", both emptying it of any emancipatory significance whatsoever - there is a liberal state which starts to become less and less liberal everywhere and starts to identify with the left a position that does not exist any longer on the left. In short, in the former French setting, we have a left that is disappointing politically and is identified as a result, product or effect of '68 precisely by those who fear that there might more to it than there is. But it may also be that the left is disappointing and politically harmless precisely because it over-identifies itself with the idea of being an effect, product or result of '68. So, we have a politically harmless product of '68 - which is harmless because of what happened in '68 - which still seems dangerous because of '68 - and what happened in 68. There seems to be a peculiar - even ontological - ambiguity of "68":

it can serve as an emblem of a political emancipatory radicalism that never manifested, as if it were being a stand-in for a political possibility that was created back then but never actualized. A historically specific potentiality - that is not simply a missed chance but haunts all political parties, even though not in the same manner. And this complexities are part of the particular intricacy one has to face when one is dealing with the events of '68.

In the current issue of *Crisis and Critique*, we and our contributors set out to do the following: we want to undertake an investigation and examination of May '68's, often if not always, ambiguous, sometimes even contradictory, foundations, effects, and outcomes. This does not simply mean working through a historical contradiction, but first and foremost identifying the very form of the existence of this contradiction (if contradiction is still the appropriate term here). The events that took place during that period are undoubtedly one of the largest popular uprisings in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which brought together students, workers and intellectuals in a hitherto unforeseen manner. Yet, May '68 undoubtedly also produced unanticipated consequences that disappointed the hopes, desires and aspirations of whole generations. How can one and the same event be regarded as part of an emancipatory history - if it at all can be seen as this - and - maybe even at the same time - be part of a reactionary historical development, one that ultimately ensured the increasing productivity of capitalism? How could one and the same occurrence, therefore, appear as what Alain Badiou calls an event, yet simultaneously seem like a peculiar "simulacrum"<sup>1</sup> of an event?

If (some) historical events - notably if they are real events - demand a detailed and brutally honest balance sheet, this is true especially, and pressingly, for May '68. Its inner complexity demands that one examines that fact that one may very well not be able to say anything consistent about it if one does not take its multi-layered "ambiguity", contradiction, whatever might be the most adequate category, into account and avoids isolating aspects that one prefers or read it solely it from the months and years that succeeded it. This is why we feel justified in assuming that the following - in its totality maybe inconsistent - multiplicity of accesses and avenues to May '68 may very well be the most effective methodical way to address '68. For, we believe that its examination can be best undertaken from an array of different perspectives. Yet, we do not aim for a representative panorama of all the different groups involved or tendencies active in May '68, rather we assume that precisely by (even repeatedly) moving from one perspective to another one, and maybe back again, that something of the genuine nature of '68 can be captured - so, dear reader, be aware!: you have to read it all! It is precisely the pass and the passing through the series of different perspectives assembled here

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<sup>1</sup> Badiou 2005, p. 69

- that each in their own way propose a particular account of the totality of the events of '68; so you get to read a series of concrete universalities, as it were - which might allow to grasp for the truly conflictual and complex nature of the historical phenomenon most adequately. This especially holds - and here we can make our very own conviction explicit - because for now this phenomenon itself has no other consistency than that of an unresolved complex and multi-layered contradiction.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes one does not see a thing clearly because one's eyes are not well-adjusted, but sometimes one can only see clearly *what* one cannot see clearly; simply because the thing is (yet) opaque in itself. We have no doubt that the series of articles gathered here shed some clarity (adjusted or otherwise) - be it by demonstrating that what is and happened in '68 is much clearer than we thought, be it that it is much more somber than we would have ever imagined.

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza  
Dundee/Prishtina, November 2018

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<sup>2</sup> In this very sense, Alain Badiou once stated that "a large part" philosophy is "in reality" a gigantic attempt "fully to come to terms with... what happened" in 68. Cf. Badiou 2005a, p. 237

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# The Double Heritage of Communism to Come. 1917-1968-2018

Bini Adamczak

**Abstract:** The idea of Communism does not remain the same throughout history. This essay compares the revolutionary waves of 1917 and 1968 and their concepts of Communism. Both revolutionary waves aim to change the relations between the public and the private, between anonymity and intimacy. Hence, gender relations lie at the heart of both revolutions. But the relation of 1968 to 1917 is one of repetition and difference: from the 1960s on the dominant line of emancipation was no longer *no gender*, but *many genders*. This change of paradigms is true in general. The reconstruction of the revolutionary constructions of 1917 and 1968 allows us to superimpose the two historical lines of flight of emancipation. The Communism of 1917 stood under the sign of equality and unity, that of 1968 under the sign of freedom and difference. A possible communism of 2018 would have to take solidarity and association to the centre stage.

**Keywords:** Communism. Queerpolitics. Gender relations. Revolutions. 1917. 1968. Solidarity

Communism does not exist in the singular. The common is no unity that would encompass everything by subordinating it to an idea, will, or central committee. The common is rather that which the many share with one another, as equals and free in solidarity.

At the same time, communism was repeatedly understood like this: a final sublation of social divisions into an overarching harmony. Thousands of communist parties and factions of the past dreamt in this way of the future: the troublesome dispute with enemies as well as with comrades would finally find an end when the whole world would see that just *this one, one's own* party program is the right one. To be signed by everyone. Even, and especially, the Communist Party of the Soviet-Union (Bolsheviks), for a long time the largest and most influential communist party, followed this dream. In a spiraling movement that begins even before 1917 and finds its climax in the Stalinism of the late 1930s, it combatted initially the monarchist and bourgeois parties, then the allied social-democratic, social-revolutionary and anarchist parties and ultimately, when all other parties were prohibited, the oppositions, factions, currents and platforms within itself. As it had, according to its own conviction, a privileged insight into the truth of the social, it believed itself able to represent the common in all its parts: the population was represented in the working class, the class in the party, the party in the central committee, the central committee in the general secretary. The party line that was issued by the latter would lead into the communist future, no matter however much zigzag it would entail. Whoever would *deviate* from this deviating course was guilty. The counter term to *identity* was thus not difference, but *opposition*. "Other" became synonymous with "inimical". Until its demise, the

Soviet leadership saw itself surrounded by inner enemies. Wherever social initiatives cropped up, it was safer to oppress them. This mistrust worked as self-fulfilling prophecy. Eventually, the protesting people did (preponderantly in fact) not want a more democratic, more humanist or more friendly socialism, as was still the case in the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s, but rather no socialism at all.

The unity failed. Manifestly, the Soviet-Union collapsed in 1991. But not in order to give way to an assembly of the many, to liberate the common from a constrained unity, but to leave behind smaller fragments that purported themselves as *individual unities*: nation states, family households, individuals.

The capitalism that now expands, unhindered even onto the last third of the globe, connects people only by separating them. Through its central social mechanism of commodity relation, its inhabitants are not connected by cooperation but by competition; the social constitutes itself by innumerable splits. *But the common lives as little in isolation as it does in a forced unity.*

Even under post-communist conditions, political groups attempted to espouse communism. Against isolation, they attempted to spark movements of assembly or to gather social movements around themselves. Even long before the end of the Soviet-Union was officially confirmed, in 1991 and even before it was officially founded in 1922, communists renounced it. This process already had begun in October 1917 with the critique of the military seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, experienced its first pinnacle in 1921 when the end of the civil war did not bring the hoped for democratization but rather the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion and the prohibition of inner-party opposition, continued in the 1930s when Stalinism perverted into its contrary the communist promise with the Great Terror, the show trials, the purges and the gulag, spread out further when in 1939 the Hitler-Stalin pact defrauded socialism even of anti-fascism, and became internationally more influential when in 1953, despite Stalin's death, no real de-Stalinisation was instated and the revolts in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic were crushed with the help of the Red Army. With each disappointment, new groups and parties emerged that offered a new habitat-in-exile to communism. One "International" after the other claimed to incorporate the common and to represent the true intention of Trotsky, Lenin, Marx, or Bakunin against the historical betrayal. But in all these movements of disentanglement, the conditions of the political itself were also relocated. With the anti-colonial liberation movements and the Chinese Revolution in the midst of the twentieth century, the binary schema of politics that sought to identify left and right with the East and the West became more complicated. Everywhere new agents emerged: blacks, women, homosexuals. The communist learned, to her dismay, that no parties were able to represent the common. The party of the movement,

the citizens' initiative, the one-point-group supplanted the united party. For a second time in only one century, Communism became precarious [*prekarisiert*] - *once in its totality, then between the singularities.*

If Communism still waits for its realization, this waiting does not take place in an empty space, but rather in that of history – filled with experiences, hopeful attempts, bold experiments, and complex theoretical disputes. Communism has experienced defeats inflicted by overpowering and brutal enemies, but also and primarily a defeat from within. Time and again it has invaded *niches* in which it was able to hibernate, *but in which it could not unfold itself due to its universalist nature.*

### 1917...

The European nineteenth century had invented *progress*, the hope for a future in which the "the sun shines incessantly." Technological development was supposed to abolish hunger as well as labour and guarantee to everyone a life in peace and abundance. This hope nurtured phantasy, theory as well as art. It died in the fire trenches of the first European world-war. The productive forces had transformed into destructive forces, the poison of nationalism devoured the bourgeois democrats as well as the first socialist International. The modern barbarism that already rampaged cruelly in the colonies returned to the centres of self-declared civilization. In the midst of this mass mortality the twentieth century was born. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, one of the few intellectuals that was not infected with nationalist warmongering, demanded to transform the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war. He would not have to expressly make this proposal. "Peace!" was, beside "Bread!" and "Land!", the central demand with which the Russian Revolution entered the world, and mass desertion was the means of this entry. The peasant soldiers decided that the war between Germany and Russia was not their business and the bourgeois should carry out their feuds on their own. Everywhere at the front there were fraternizations [*Verschwisterungen*] between Russian and German soldiers: the war was interrupted, they drank together instead. Then the soldier peasants returned to the countryside to farm and – to dispossess it. The last hour of the big landowners had rung.

The Russian Revolution began in the fire trenches and in the countryside where eighty percent of the population lived. The revolution began before it was recognized as revolution. Almost none of the social-democratic, socialist, communist intellectuals foresaw it. Just one month before its actual outbreak Lenin predicted: "We elderly men perhaps will not live to see the coming revolution."<sup>1</sup> And Alexander Gavrilovich Shliapnikov, the leading Bolshevik of this time in Petrograd, lectured still on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1917, four days *after* its arrival: "There is no

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<sup>1</sup> Figs 1998, 349.

and there will be no revolution. We have to prepare for a long period of reaction.”<sup>2</sup>This view was shared also by the Menshevik Nicolai Sukhanov. He had indeed listened in on conversations between office workers who talked about an imminent revolution – but he had dismissed these rumours as gossip because of the female gender of those who disseminated them.<sup>3</sup> Maybe Nadezhda Krupskaya presented one of the few exceptions to the rule of failed revolution-prophecies because she did not share completely this sexist perspective. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February she requested to return to Russia to not miss “*the beginning*.”<sup>4</sup>

The long queues in which the workers responsible for reproduction – women – lined up for groceries became the public venue in which the news of imminent revolution was looming. Retrospectively, the outburst of the revolution which was so difficult to predict was dated by the majority of historians on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February – the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, according to the western calendar, International Women’s Day.<sup>5</sup> It was the sixth time that Women’s Day was solemnized, but by then always on different days. Only after 1917 did the 8<sup>th</sup> of March became the mandatory date of feminist protests – precisely because of the Russian Revolution which entered onto the world stage in Petrograd on this day. As the historians Jane McDermid and Anna Hillyar write, the protesters behaved initially precisely in the “irrational” way which was traditionally expected from “women”: they rioted, destroyed tramways, looted shops.<sup>6</sup> Not least because of this expected “indiscipline” and “spontaneity”, the bolshevist leadership demanded the protesters to not carry the protest too far.<sup>7</sup> But the women’s protest, which initially demanded bread and equality, increased by many workers, marched to the city centre, demanded an end to the war, and finally the resignation of the Tsar.

A few days later, the Tsar abdicated. The women demanded the right to vote, and less than a year later, the right to abort. Soon after, they got a divorce, which only needed a handwritten letter. The Russian Revolution created the most progressive, wholly gender-neutral marriage and family rights that the modern world has ever seen. Homosexuality, whose promotion is a punishable offense in 2018, was legalized in Russia in 1918. Four years after, a Soviet court declared the marriage between a trans-man / a butch and a cis-woman to be legal, whether it was seen as a transsexual or a homosexual marriage, with the simple and obvious

.....  
2 Ibid., 350.  
  
3 Cf. McDermid / Hillyar 1999, 155.  
  
4 Ibid., 3.  
  
5 Ibid., 147.  
  
6 Ibid.  
  
7 Ibid., 148ff.

argument that the marriage had been contracted mutually. The beginnings of the Russian Revolution were not only ahead of its time, but also of ours. Its dreams as well as its practices are not only *yet again actual* [*gegenwärtig*], rather they *are also still prospective* [*zukünftig*].

The revolution spurred phantasy as no other event did. It unleashed unimagined utopian desires by bringing their fulfillment from a distant dream into the scope of everyday life. The revolution made the future a part of the present. Soviet intellectuals, scientists, artists transgressed with fantastic courage as well as with logical rigour the borders between the times. Nikolai Fyodorov and the bio-cosmists confronted far-reaching implications of the thesis that socialism would sublimate all exploitation among human beings. They argued that if a socialist society could only be realized in the future, then all who fought for it in the past and present would not be able to enjoy it. Therefore, any socialism of the future would be based on an exploitation of the past, and would thus not be socialism. Instead of resigning, the bio-cosmists demanded the logically obvious: all those who fought for socialism and all those who were exploited must be resurrected when socialism is reached. By then, Earth would have become parochial, so space travel would have to be expanded and alternative possibilities of living developed. Hence, plans for the settlement on “red Mars” and furthermore to transform human bodies into machines, or even light, would become reasonable under the conditions of space.<sup>8</sup> In light of such plans and already undertaken attempts to make the old young and the young wise with the help of blood transfusion, the social and biological overcoming of the sexes must have seemed like a childish task.

The tasks to be carried out in the early Soviet Union were not predominantly in the discursive or symbolic order, but the social-economic sphere of production and reproduction. The sexual division of labour was understood as the material foundation of sexual separation and hierarchization. To end patriarchal exploitation and to realize the equality between the genders, the production-unit of the family had to be dissolved. The capitalist development of productive forces had already extracted essential labour from the frame of the family: nourishment, clothing, and tools were no longer produced by the family but were only prepared and repaired in it. The socialist model of emancipation planned to bring this historical process to its logical end. The aim consisted of letting go of the already obsolete family, and re-organizing all tasks in its frame according to the model of male coded wage labour. “The saucepan is the enemy of the party cell” was thus a central party slogan.<sup>9</sup> Nourishments should not be prepared in private kitchens but in cantinas,

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8 Cf. Hagemeister / Groys 2005.  
  
9 Cf. Sites 1978.



children and elderly should not be looked after by relatives but in public institutions, and apartments should not be cleaned individually but collectively. With this, the sexual division of labour and the separation of the sexes would be rendered moot. “Our task”, as Evgeni Preobrazhenskii formulated, “does not consist of striving for justice in the division of labour between the sexes. Our task is to free men and women from petty household labour.”<sup>10</sup>

The communism that appeared on the horizon of the Russian Revolution was the promise of a final journey to an all-encompassing equality. In the union of the socialist Soviet republics, for a long time the only confederation that did not entail any indication of territory, the separation of human beings according to religion, nation, class, and sex was supposed to be sublated. Yet, the movement towards equality implied a direction; *the universal was negated by a particular norm*. The common was determined by the universalization of one of its parts. Like agricultural labour, reproductive labour was to emulate the collectivization and mechanization of industrial labour. Peasants, as well as women, would thus tendentially disappear and assimilate the model of the factory worker. All men would be equal, all men would be brothers – male wage labourers. Ossip Mandelstam saw this era of the revolution as being shaped by an ideal of perfect manliness, and his colleague Andrej Platonov phrased succinctly that communism is essentially a society of men.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, this “communism” was, despite attempts to extend patriarchal relations of power, *no society of men*, but a revolutionary *society of masculinization*. Only five years after the revolution, the health commissioner, Nikolai Semashko noted that masculinized “women” had become a mass phenomenon. In his description, they wore unkempt, often dirty hair, had cheap cigarettes between their teeth, intentionally displayed bad manners, and spoke with rough voices. They had lost, as he noted, all female attributes, and had entirely transformed into men, even if they still wore skirts and culottes.<sup>12</sup> These revolutionaries, next to which the punks of Pussy Riots look old-fashioned, worked en masse in heavy industry and party cells, fought in the army or secret police, wore short hair and pants, and left the traditional home. *The new man was a drag king*.

These new men accordingly ingested the literature of the time. Mikhail Bulgakov, no friend of the communist revolution, attempted to ridicule them but could not avoid them. In his novella “Heart of a Dog” he was forced to realize that for the new communists one could not detect a sex. The communist delegates of a housing committee who

10 Cited from Goldman 1993, 6.

11 Cf. Borenstein 2000, Of.

12 Healey 2001, 61.

were introduced to a bourgeois professor refused the designation “Sirs” for themselves, not because it misrepresented the sexual reality, but because it was a bourgeois appellation. To the professor’s question “is the communist a man or a woman?”, they replied with the counter-question of “what difference does it make?”. Perforce, sexual difference is thus reduced to the professor’s demand that some must take off their cap.<sup>13</sup> Sergey Tretjakov described in his theatre piece “I want a Baby” a communist who does not only look as if she were a man, but who also organizes her reproduction with male rationality – without any romance. To the question if she does not even love nature, mountains, waterfalls, or the jungle, she replies: “At the waterfall, I love the turbines. In the mountains, the pits, in the jungle, the lumber mill and systematic afforestation.”<sup>14</sup> The same people also make up the heroines of Alexandra Kollontai’s stories. The first minister and first ambassador of the modern world created her literary figures after this model of reality. Kollontai transferred their emotional energy into politics, sexual desires she satisfied like thirst or hunger. Her relationship with men showed clearly gay signs and, with regard to abortions, she only found the forced loss of working hours bothersome.<sup>15</sup>

The world that the “workers of the hand, of the head and of the soul” – this is how one called writers – commenced to create together was a world of technological progress, of male rationality and limitless equality. This dream soon transformed into a nightmare. Already in the 30s abortion was again prohibited, homosexuality criminalized, and the nuclear family was reconstructed as the ideal of the state. Under the power of Stalinism, the utopia of equality perverted into the reality of uniformity. “The sexual counter-revolution” (Wilhelm Reich) did not interrupt all lines of emancipation, which entered the world in the revolution. Till the end of the Soviet Union, the female employment rate increased continually, and even in today’s Russia more women work for wages than in most countries of the world. But reproductive labour, which was not simply to be reformed but revolutionarily abolished, was till the decline of the Soviet Union conceded to the workers that were more social-economically and cultural-symbolically educated for it – so called women. A division of human beings into sexes and an institutional limitation of possibilities of sexual combination remained in existence for the time being. *In the rubble of Stalinist counter-revolution a departure was buried that awaits its continuation*.

13 Bulgakov 1994 , 30.

14Tretjakov 1995.

15 (cf. Kollontai 1992).

### ... and 1968. Restaging.

When the dream was excavated, half a century had passed. The rubble straightened into an ordered paving. Under it, as the graffiti of May 1968 declared, was supposed to be the beach. The conditions for communism had changed, and with them communism itself. In the place of an imagined unity of communist forces that was in a fundamental and binary opposition to its capitalist adversary, there was a multiplication of lines and battles. The schema of a central contradiction of labour and capital, apparently geographically materialized in the East and the West, got more complicated. Similar to the revolutionary wave of 1917, the wave of 1968 began in the periphery, but this time the liberation movements unfolded in the presence of a nominally communist confederation – following and in distance to the Soviet Union. China, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, who played an important role in 1968 were, to different extents, disengaged from the sphere of influence of Moscow. No doubt there was, apart from the first and the second world, *at least* a third one.

Both revolutionary waves, 1917 and 1968, exhibit a series of common presuppositions, parallel developments and analogue structures. Both combat cycles were international movements that began victoriously in the peripheries and expanded into imperialist centres where they suffered defeats. While the Russian Revolution emerged from World War I, the revolutionary wave of 1968 arose from a series of anti-colonial liberation wars whose origins reach back to World War II. When once this development was accompanied by Lenin's slogan to transform the imperialist world war into a revolutionary civil war, now it was Che Guevara's demand to "create two, three, many Vietnams". While both revolutionary waves were in their central emancipatory direction anti-capitalist, fed with Marxist vocabulary and directed against the social split of the division of labour, the national formations both played an ambivalent, even counter revolutionary, role in the revolutionary movements.

The return of the spectre of 1917 in the revolts of 1968 can be traced up to the political styles and dress codes. While the dress code of male members of the Russian intelligentsia – uncombed long hair, beard and glasses – also returned in the academic milieus of 1968<sup>16</sup>, the militant Bolsheviks created with boots, black leather jacket, short haircut and caps, the role model for the spontis, autonomists, and Antifa. The dogmatic splinter groups that dressed up in the blueys of Maoism or – as did the German Communist Party – oriented themselves by the philistine proletarity of post-Stalinist GDR-culture borrowed from past epochs "names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene

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16 Figes 1998, 125.

in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language."<sup>17</sup> Gyorgi Lukács, who should not have had any interest in a confrontation with his own Stalinist past, was baffled by the precise knowledge that Rudi Dutschke revealed in 1966 with regard to the internal discussion of the Communist Party of Hungary of the 1920s. When Dutschke "suggested to analyse Stalinism Lukács was not enthusiastic.... The false paths of the past should be forgotten."<sup>18</sup> Yet, and not least because they had been forgotten, these false paths of the past repeated themselves, even if with lower death rates in most of the regions of the world because the communist movements did not have state power. The polyphonic departure of the revolution that marked the beginnings of the Russian Revolution characterized the self-understanding of the 68 revolt, in particular where it did not emerge from the military confrontation of the guerrilla war. But, as in the 1920s, the anti-authoritarian departure of the 1970s resulted in a re-dogmatisation movement. In Western Europe, mainly Germany, it is characterized by the formation of Stalinist, Trotskyite, Maoist party organisations, each of which claiming to inherit the Bolshevik party's unreserved hegemony.<sup>19</sup> In their book "Obsolete Communism. The Left-Wing Alternative" Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit develop, already in autumn of 1968, a polemical critique of this representational phantasm. They share the critique of sectarianism undertaken by Lenin in his "Left-Wing Communism: an infantile disorder", but at the same time apply it to Leninism itself. In France of the late sixties, as they describe it, thousands of militants appear who "either stubbornly resisted the arts of seduction of the bolshevist priests or – the peak of imprudence – moved from one revolutionary salvation army to the next and repeatedly deserted, without even knowing that there are five different wings to the Fourth International or that the PCMLF is in support of Mao Tse-Tung whereas the UJC(M-L) is in support of Mao Tse Tung. In this work of sabotage in the party or in the syndicates the mini-avant-gardes do not forget to distance themselves from one another, exclude one, and attack one another and to excommunicate the weak or the collaborators."<sup>20</sup> In this description Gabriel and Daniel Cohn-Bendit articulate implicitly the principal problem of splitting particularisms, and how it could be formulated if not from the particular perspective: "There is, as is well-known, only one truth and it is, as the republic, indivisible: each group expresses what the gagged proletariat thinks."<sup>21</sup> With this they

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17 Marx 1852.

18 Dutschke 1996, 92f.

19 Müller 2006, 35.

20 Cohn-Bendit 1968, 78.

21 Translated from Cohn-Bendit 1968, 85.

advised the many left, Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoist splinter groups who each claim to represent the proletariat or at least its most progressive parts in its totality, to advertise in the newspapers with high-circulation the following: “Revolutionary leadership group is looking for exploited working class or related class.”<sup>22</sup>

Socialist intellectuals reacted to the Maoist mass murders of the 70s in a similar way to how they in the 30s tried to deny or justify the Stalinist terror. Thomas Ebermann described in an autobiographical retrospect the motives which fed turnover in the SDS and dissolved the previous bond between culture and politics, everyday life and revolution. Because the state of the world was so serious, the continuation of “funky” politics is inappropriate, or “petit-bourgeois” respectively - instead one must rebuild a communist party and this means “to learn from the history of the German Communist Party and from Lenin.”<sup>23</sup>

The recourse to the last wave of revolution also manifests in publications. Already measured in its absolute amount of publication, the debate of the Western left with the Soviet Union was never as intensive as in the years succeeding 1968 till the 80s.<sup>24</sup> The history was actualized so far that it received an immediate political relevance for the present. Depending on if someone located the defeat of the Russian Revolution in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927 or 1936 or 1953, one was able to read off “what he thought about any other political question on the world: the essence of the Soviet Union, China, the essence of the CPs in the world, the essence of social-democracy, the essence of trade unions, the unity front, the people's front, national liberation movements, aesthetics and philosophy, the relationship of party and class, the significance of the soviets and the workers' councils and if concerning imperialism Luxemburg or Bucharin was right.”<sup>25</sup>

In these debates the relation of the sequence of 68 to the sequence of 17 does not prove to be one of repetition, re-establishment, of imitation and worshipping, but also as one of difference, displacement, delimitation, and critique. The 68 movement fed on the experience of the Russian Revolution as well as its defeats. It was not only a critique of the perpetuated domination by bureaucracy and capital, patriarchy and colonialism, but also a critique of the previous attempts of their abolishment. “In our time”, wrote the influential French Marxist Charles Bettelheim on the occasion of the Soviet invasion of Prague, “it is therefore vital that we understand the reasons why the first victorious

22 Ibid.

23 Eberman 2013.

24 Van der Linden 2007, 254.

25 Goldner, 9f.

socialist revolution has ultimately produced the Soviet realities of today.”<sup>26</sup>

The shock of the suppression of the Prague Spring effected a transformation and deepening of the western Marxist discussion of the Soviet Union. The thus far dominant approaches to its analysis and categorization (the theories of state capitalism, of the degenerated worker's state and of bureaucratic collectivism) were increasingly put into question. The unilinear schema according to which history develops along the sequence of slave society – feudalism – capitalism – socialism was perforated, and the dogma of historical materialism, according to which history in the last instance hinges on the development of the productive forces, was overcome.<sup>27</sup>

**Repetition and Difference**

The strike movement and the students' protests in Berkeley, Warsaw, Belgrade and many other cities of the shared globe<sup>28</sup> developed in close relation to one another but autonomously: the anti-colonial liberation war in Algeria, the guerrilla war in Cuba, the black civil right movement in the USA, and the movement for gender and sexual emancipation. Under the changing historical conditions of the 60s, in which the struggles against colonialism in the Third World and apartheid in the USA produced new autonomous actors and in which the binary opposition of capitalism-socialism was complicated by the rupture of Yugoslavia and China with the USSR, theoreticians from the tricontinentals like Samir Amin or André Gunder Frank radically critiqued the Marxist theory of liberation and questioned its centring on Europe, the industrial proletariat and a predetermined historical development. With this, the universal norm that had underlain the traditional socialist promise of equality and had instructed the construction of the revolution of 1917 became contentious. The peripheralization of the revolution led to a decentring of emancipation. While the revolutionary wave of 1917 was driven by the belief in the progress in history, of the development of productive forces from slaveholder-society through feudalism and capitalism finally to communism, this uni-linearity of historical development had lost its credibility in the middle of the twentieth century. Just as the movement of homosexuals referred to the role model of Black Panther, the women's movement referred to the anti-colonial liberation movement. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, a feminist Marxist from Italy, highlighted the connection

26 Bettelheim 1976, 18. In Charles Bettelheim's „Class Struggles in the USSR, Vol. I “one can witness how the libidinal energy is subtracted from one point – Stalinist Soviet union – and is immediately reinstated in another – Maoist China (ibid., 20f.). One could even ask if the disappointment 1968 did not inset too late – after the much greater crimes of the 1930s – because there is the possibility of a new love deception.

27 Cf. van der Linden 2007.

28 Cf. Roesler 2010, Gehrke / Horn 2007.

between economic and gender emancipation when she remarked that the Third World is offered “‘to develop’, which means to suffer not only through the present hell but also through industrial hell. Women in the metropolises are offered the same ‘help’.”<sup>29</sup> So Dalla Costa refused at once the emancipatory perspective of industrialization and employment.

The second wave of feminism allied itself to the first, but was soon inundated by it, and broke out as an autonomous movement from the revolutionary pool. It became possible to remark on the conspicuous borders of the previous discourse of gender liberation. For example, in the emancipatory texts of Alexandra Kollontai almost any criticism of masculinity is missing: masculinity was not identified as one-sided and authoritative but rather declared an ideal by which femininity, coming from a technologically less developed sphere of housework, was considered backward. In comparison, Mariarosa Dalla Costa insisted that the “slavery of the assembly line” is no “liberation of the slavery of the sink.”<sup>30</sup> German Marxists of the “Bielefeld school” went a step further. They developed a utopia that looks like a mirror image of traditional communism. While the latter wanted to merge the female coded home and farm work into male coded wage labour of the urban factory, the Bielefelders projected a use-value oriented subsistence economy as rural-feminine counter-model to patriarchal capitalism.<sup>31</sup> The rural and household subsistence economy is on one side declared immediately capitalist against the romantic fantasy of a pre-capitalist, but at the same time it is considered to be the bearer of an emancipatory-utopian potential. Implicitly, housework is not supposed to be reorganized according to the model of factory labour, but rather public wage labour should be reorganized as rural and smallholder subsistence labour. In the place of liberation *through* growth there is the liberation *from* growth. Insofar as a “life producing” peasant subsistence economy is counter posed, not only as sustainable to an environmentally harmful industry, but also as pacifist to an economy of war, this perspective leads into the development of difference- and eco-feminism that works with essentializing models of gender-duality and female naturalness.<sup>32</sup> The Bielefeld approach can be regarded as antipode to the socialist model of emancipation of the 1917 sequence because it counters the universal (industrial) masculinization with a universal (rural) feminisation. But its proposal of a universal feminisation will no longer be able to prevail because subsequently, the mode of liberation changes.

The second wave of feminism that set in with 1968 is followed by

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29 Dalla Costa 1976, 294.

30 Ibid., 277.

31 Werlhof 1978, Vennholdt-Thomsen 1981, Mies, 1983.

32 Critically: Notz 2011.

an increased entry of the private and the personal into the spheres of the male, rational, impersonally coded public and can be seen in the popular press, talk shows and women's magazines. Sexualized and aestheticized mass-media spectacularizing expands beyond the female body. The media representation of health, care and especially aesthetics of the body gains a significance which was unimaginable in the first half of the twentieth century. The increase of public discourse about the private, one's relationship-status, children, and childhood marks a softening of the borders between the gender-binary coded spheres. In this, the movement takes a direction opposite to that of 1917. This politico-cultural development is at the same time supported by an equiprimordial politico-economic movement. At that time, the development of productive forces reaches a crisis point of Fordism's mode of production and of regulation. Under these new conditions, the disciplined, soldierly-male subjectivity with money-sock-mentality is no longer tenable and will be – catalysed by the struggles of 1968 – superseded by a hedonist mentality. Capitalism does not transform as an automatic subject but in reaction to the struggles that it integrates. In this historical process the (mass) consumption sphere reaches an unparalleled significance for market as well as state capitalism. But within the framework of hetero-sexist labour division which was not fractured even in real socialism the sphere of consumption is coded female.<sup>33</sup> Because the buyer is subjectivized as female, femininity appears increasingly on the representational surfaces of billboards, as message (object) as well as addressee (subject). Insofar as a femininely construed desire as a monetary one moves into capital's field of interest. In an extended sale, with the supply of commodities also the image of the public transforms itself. The feminizing movement appears also in the terrain of fashion. The 30s to 50s are characterized, similar to the 90s, by a cementing reconstruction of the gender dualism which is enforced by state power. In the USA, anti-cross-dressing-laws demand that people who are cismotatively imputed as female wear at least three female coded articles of clothing. As obscure as this law, as violent its enforcement.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the 20s as well as the 60s to 80s are more characterized by androgyny. However, this androgyny has in one case an androcentric colour, gynocentric in the other. While “Garçon” and “lad” characterize the fashion of the 20s, the miniskirt is the characteristic garment of 68, which is then undercut a year later by the micro-skirt. Flared pants – as allegorical combination of pants and skirt – and wide blouses stand for feminine androgyny. The body sign characterizing the 60s and 70s is long hair – hair that already distinguished the Russian intellectuals of the turn of the century but were

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33 McRobbie 1999.

34 Feinberg 1993.



expelled by the male outfits of the Bolsheviks.

The transformation of critique as well as that of molar forms of socialization linked to difference capitalism also influenced the mode in which gender is processed. The transformed focus can be made comprehensible by grasping the social relations from which the revolution-wave of 1968 arose and against which it opposed; relations in which the failure and the integrative recuperation of the revolution-wave of 1917 are identifiable. They are relations characterized by bureaucratic organisation, Fordist production, cultural homogeneity and low social mobility. Adorno summarized them in the telling concept of the “administered world”. Against this world, in which the relation between the universal and the particular, of objective and subjective were statically organized in linear subordination, the onslaught of 1968 directed itself. It was directed against the social relations in which families, schools, psychiatries, prisons, nations and the gender, sexual and racist regimes related to them produced, selected and disciplined subjects to distribute them according to the social demand of labour forces. In these struggles, the norm of equality is superseded by a norm of difference. While it is still binarily interpreted in much of difference-feminist politics, the general pluralization of lifestyles will generate together with queer-feminism a multiplied re-orientation in the field of gender in opposition to the monist model of universality. Monique Wittig proclaimed, already in the 70s, that there are as many genders as people. The formation of the queer-feminist movement can thereby be interpreted as a late effect of 1968 insofar as the criticisms of the exclusions of white feminism acting like universalists by black feminists, as well as the transgender critique of the exclusions of the self-integrating homosexual movement, take up and radicalize the radical impulse of 1968ff.<sup>35</sup> In both revolution-waves, the attempt was to sublimate the split into private and public sphere, in production- and reproduction sphere, yet from opposite directions. The central demand of second-wave-feminism *to politicize the private* means less to expand public discourse of politics into the private, but rather to feed the contents, affects and logics of privacy into the political discourse of the public. In the universal discourse of emancipation, the perspective of care, educated in reproductive labour, was taken in as well as that of a rural agriculture gained subsistence. But under the new conditions of multiplication, no particular voice could inflate itself to the universal choir. In the place of the emancipation model of 1917 of a universal masculinization, there was, after 1968, *no universal feminization, but a differential one*. The drag-queen became an icon of the stonewall-riots of 1969, but not the allegory of a new humanity.

Still, and repeatedly, the radical movements of gender emancipation demand an abolishment of gender. But the illustration of this abolishment

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35 Cf. Adamczak / Laufenberg 2012.

have changed. If the third wave of feminism beginning in the 90s, queer-feminism, is understood as a prolongation or consolidation of the second wave, then it reveals a fundamental transformation of its basic premises. The dominant line of emancipation was no longer *no gender* because this still revealed itself to be one, but *many genders*.

Where 1917 emphasized the centrality of unity, 1968 enforced the dynamic of difference. In place of discipline, there was creativity, in place of the collective plan, the autonomy of self-management. In this process, the search for a solidary common cannot remain the same. The condition and shape of communism changes.

### Double Image

The reconstruction of the revolutionary constructions of 1917 and 1968 allows us to superimpose the two historical lines of flight of emancipation. But one has to avoid the common mistake<sup>36</sup> of identifying the new with the better. The task does not consist in being state of the art but rather in retrieving the unfulfilled potentiality of history that awaits its appropriation in world-historical waves of revolution. There is no singular something the world has “long dreamt of possessing”<sup>37</sup>, recurrent in the same images, concept and desires from the matriarchy through early Christianity, slave- and peasants-upheavals up to the industrial proletariat, new social movements and multitude. Rather, the technique of double exposure of two historical virtual communisms is supposed to show the image of a more encompassing communism. Over half a century after the departure of 1968, one can see that its demands of freedom and difference are as co-optable as the demands of equality and unity half a century before. While the invocation of *equality and unity* led the Stalinist and general Fordist bureaucracy into *totalization and homogenization*, the invocation of *freedom and difference* was turned neoliberally into individualization and commodified sub-culturization. The movement that began in 1968 and turned in neoliberalism to a new social differentiation which the catchword “postmodernity” tried to capture. It did not only make impossible the formulation of a unity, but also the production of a common. In this situation, the critical self-reflection of the new left that has already been introduced years ago<sup>38</sup> became necessary. Yet, these self-critiques often overstep the mark in their search for a pure position when they directly make “the left” (or optionally “the artists”, “the feminists”, “the queers”) responsible for the authoritative effects of the Stalinist reign or of the neoliberal regime of accumulation. This is only made possible by a twofold denial: *Stalinism is an expression of the failure*

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36 For example of Laclau / Mouffe 1985.

37 Marx 1843.

38 Boltanski / Chiapello 2005.

of the left, neoliberalism an expression of its defeat. Both are not copies, but historical caricatures of past attempts of emancipation.

From the historical glance at Stalinism and neoliberalism, one can bring the communisms of 1917 and 1968 into a relation of mutual criticism. One can then understand equality not as a foundation for unity, or even unification, but of the democratic common. Difference thereby does not appear as irreducible, but as materially reducible. It can, however, not be sublated into a unifying subject that would precisely make impossible the common.<sup>39</sup> If social equality that would equalize the life conditions is taken into the canon of utopia against the background of the postmodern experience, then the critical question is displaced. The equality of the Communism [*des Kommunistischen*] of 1917 had a norm inscribed which repeated the subordination of femininity under masculinity, agricultural work under industrial labour, the global south under the global north. This universal was indeed the generalization of the particular. But this was not the part of no-part the way Marx imagined it. The proletariat did constitute itself in distinction to the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, as well as to the peasants and the petit-bourgeoisie, and especially to the Lumpenproletariat, the slaves, the house workers, the leaseholders.<sup>40</sup>

The Communism of 1917 stood under the sign of equality and unity, that of 1968 under the sign of freedom and difference. A possible communism of 2018 would have to take solidarity and association to the centre stage. 1917 focussed on the whole (of statist totality), 1968 on the singularity (of unfolded individuality), the future of the present should be concentrated on the in-between, on relation itself. The many-faced history of the Communism has left a paradoxical legacy to its present and future. We are looking for a model of society that is egalitarian without being homogenizing, that welcome *difference without* promoting *separatism*. An *ensemble of modes of relationship* that *undermines totality* and *exceeds atomization*; that remains *faithful to the promise of universalism without* using it as a *veil for a particular norm*. Social equality is the foundation of real democracy, but the path to this equality as the aim itself must be democratically formulated by different positions. Today the condition for communism is that of *dispersion*. This is already why its first word is *assembly*.

Translated by Frank Ruda

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39 Cf. Nancy 1991.

40 Cf. Roth / van der Linden 2015.

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# 1968-2018, or from the “Revolution impossible” to the Impossibility of Revolution? Variations on the objet petit s<sup>1</sup>

Eric Alliez

**Abstract:** In France, the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of May 68 are coming to an end, so my contribution will be *late*. As it should be, since its main purpose is to submit a hypothesis that would have no other address than the position of the 50th anniversary of 1968: with regard to the historical-dialectical concept of "revolution" in relation to which "68" is the "impossible revolution" of which we are the contemporaries; but also, in return, on the side of an alternative construction of the concept and practical idea of "revolution" that can draw some consequences from fifty years of defeat and erasure of any kind of revolutionary strategy... The question would therefore be that of the passage from a "thought of emancipation" (or "subjectivation") and "resistance" (ontologically first, if not strategically) to a new thinking about revolution for our times of permanent counter-revolution.

**Keywords:** Revolution, Molecular Revolution, Subjectivation, Counterrevolution, Strategy, Ontology, Dialectic, History, Antagonism.

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In France, the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of May '68 is coming to an end, so my contribution will be late. It could be deliberately late, and even offbeat, if primarily it is a matter of submitting a hypothesis that would have no other address than the *position* of the 50 years of (May) 1968. Or, if you want to really count, a time longer than that which separates the crushing of the Commune from the victorious revolution of October, 1917. And no one, from my political generation, danced on the snow for so much time, and the times were *adverse*. To the point that one could almost think of the backwards path, from victory to defeat, a defeat continued despite "uprisings" of history whose outcome can sometimes be described only in terms of crushing.

A hypothesis, therefore, that it would be necessary, before formulating it, to introduce into the long duration of this past, impossibly present in the manner of a blind spot (*tache*) (and perhaps as a blind task (*tâche*)), designating this always mobile point that would include blindness as its most proper possibility. By this ellipsis, I call the revolution *under erasure*, namely what has become the most *problematic* for "we, the people", who can no longer be said so, if not "lacking" and missing (*qui manque*) (*the missing people replace the desire without lack coming from 1968*), or make multitude(s)<sup>2</sup> (the Spinozist immanence

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<sup>1</sup>The text presented here is a first "cut" of a work in progress with Maurizio Lazzarato to be titled *Guerres et Révolution*, which is the second part of the work opened by *Guerres et Capital* (Paris, Amsterdam, 2016 / English trans., Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2018).

<sup>2</sup>More tactical than strategic, the *Multitude/s* debate was rather epic at the time of the foundation of the French magazine *Multitudes* in the year 2000.



projects lack on the side of Capital), or/and any other forms of existing multiplicities or yet to be invented... So many ‘qualities’ are showing, demonstrating that we have well and truly gone through the "Impossible revolution of 1968". Not to mention that '68 was also this "path of Damascus" (Badiou) for those (the gender is here essentially masculine) - perhaps not the most numerous, but the most "militant" - who wanted to force its possibility with the models of "the Chinese cultural revolution and the principles of a regenerated Marxism in the theory of Althusser" (here I quote Jacques Rancière in this article written in 2008, the Fortieth Year after 68, "May 68 revised and corrected"<sup>3</sup>).

Here, we can think of certain commentaries by Félix Guattari, about "The Masochist Maoists or the impossible May" (1970), the opportunity for which had been given to him by a misprint in a Mao pamphlet published by *L'Idiot International* where two leaders of the Proletarian Left engaged in an exercise of "self-criticism" envisaging a book on after May (*Vers la guerre civile [Towards the Civil War]*, 1969, which had not been foreign to the formation of the so-called “groupuscule”), to which the same Guattari had collaborated.<sup>4</sup> In a skid of sorts, where an "s" inconveniently came to replace a "d", the *lapsus calami* reads *without reality in France* of the (supposed) universality of Maoism (instead and in place of: "*in its reality in France*").<sup>5</sup> This is our *object small s*. Focusing on these militants ready to "fight back against what Lacan refers to as the 'real impossible'", Guattari summarizes the situation as follows: "The *manifested* evidence is the impossible revolution. From there, how to decipher a *latent* real, a social unconscious of the revolution? Two ways to proceed: either stand with the six hundred million Chinese and make a great leap forward through imaginary vapors, historical dreams... or side with this ‘impossible real’ and build, piece by piece, the revolutionary machine with a clear head ». Perhaps, Guattari is the first to recognize that *after May 1968, only the first way has been efficient*. "Only the craziest of the French maoists have had the guts and the gall to go out of the student ghetto, to weave relations of fight with young workers, and finally start to unblock the revolutionary struggles in 1970. All this in a mess, an incredible logomachy, and which these comrades could not have done without, one must believe, if one considers by contrast such paralysis, in which inhibitions have remained blocked the anarchists, the unorganized and the enlightened intellectuals". Which is the *proof that a lure is capable of mobilizing desire* - and that we must therefore “find something

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3 Rancière 2009, p. 194.

4 See Guattari 1969. Guattari puts forward in this discussion "*the strategic unconscious*" protesters and the barricade as a "cut-off".

5 I am referring to the words 'sans' and 'dans' which in English translate as 'without' and 'in' respectively. So that the 'd' substituted for 's' inadvertently transforms (and reverts) the meaning of the status of the (supposed) universality of Maoism in France.

else: if possible, a completely other thing! Something that combines revolutionary efficiency and desire”<sup>6</sup>. It is this "truth" of May that must be reinvented, already, at a new expense to break with what "tends to make that we are always beaten on the same beaten track”<sup>7</sup>.

Except that, despite the explosion “in several capitalist countries, under the flag of Maoism, [of] these new forms of struggle” that could lead to “the Cultural Revolution without Mao, even against Mao<sup>8</sup>”, and the advance of the Italian "Operaist" May far in the 1970s<sup>9</sup> (until its final breakdown in April, 7th of 1979), these same years will not have given rise to the construction of the *alternative revolutionary war machine* called for by the "political activist and psychoanalyst" (In this order, according to the words of Deleuze opening his preface to *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*). This can not be foreign to the fact that the '68 French thought, to better side with (*prendre son parti*) this impossible real, will have not stopped thinking about the *impossible* revolution of '68 by investing in this single "impossibility" regarding the tutelary model of Marxism-Leninism as its most differential potentiality ... This is what Rancière calls “the questioning of all patterns of historical evolution” to project it immediately against this “Marxist revolution” that the activists of May '68 thought to make, despite the fact that “their action undid it on the contrary, by showing that a revolution is an autonomous process of reconfiguring the visible, the thinkable and the possible, and not the accomplishment of a historical movement led by a political party to its purpose.<sup>10</sup>” It is, almost, and in a way less *aesthetic*, what the same Guattari was agitating and thinking since the mid-1960s - in a vigorous *contra Althusser* worthy of denouncing the "structuralist impasse”<sup>11</sup> - in terms of “rupture of historical causality”, of “subjective

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6 Guattari 1972, p. 277-278.

7 These are the last lines of Ibid., p.284), and the end of the article *Nous sommes tous des groupuscules* [We Are All Groupuscules] (1970).

8 Ibid., p. 278. "It is as if the Chinese Cultural Revolution had put into circulation a certain model of spontaneous struggle, a struggle which for some time has more or less escaped the hands of the Chinese Communist Party apparatus." We can amuse ourselves here to raise a *certain* convergence of analysis with the last position of Alain Badiou on the question (see Badiou 2018). Beside the saturation of the Party-State model, *contradictorily and impossibly* expressed in and by the Cultural Revolution, there is the idea that "All kinds of subjective and practical trajectories have found, in the tireless inventiveness of the Chinese revolutionaries, their *nomination*". (47). What remains here of "signified" (i.e. "the unterming inventiveness of the Chinese revolutionaries"), Guattari slid it towards the emergence of the "signifier" as subjective cut of the history-development in his texts from the sixties. Not without a certain relationship with what Badiou will do, in the late 1970s, in his seminars that will give rise to his *Theory of the subject*.

9 Badiou must be contradicted: the Maoist current is certainly not the "only true creation of the sixties and seventies" Ibid.,p. 47.

10 Rancière 2009 p. 195.

11 We will think here of Rancière's famous sentence in *La leçon d'Althusser* [*Althusser's Lesson*]

cut” and “signifying cut” (*coupure signifiante*) where the loss of control of “structured signifying chains” *signifies* that “events are ‘flush with the real’” while carrying their subjective potentialities far beyond “the simple ‘political revolution’” imagined by Trotsky.<sup>12</sup>

Our hypothesis can be stated as a kind of problem-question:  
*If it is as a philosophy of the event, and then as a political philosophy of emancipation that has been stated the principle of a thought faithful to its constituent relation to the “events” of ‘68 and to the forms of subjectivation that cause history to differ from itself, the “liquidation of the liquidation” of the legacy from May 1968 - pointed out by Rancière at the end of his article in reference to the resurgence of the anti-capitalist trait of ‘68 into the struggles of the present - should it not today tend to the reflection, and our collective reflection, towards a new construction, towards an alternative construction of the concept and the practical idea of “revolution” which would take a few lessons from fifty years of defeat?*

Would anyone object to the “regressive” nature of such enterprise in its effect of repeating the program of the immediate after-68, as it was stated by Guattari in terms of “Molecular Revolution and Class Struggle”, that we could begin by arguing that the question of the articulation between “the class struggle, the implic[a]te struggle for liberation for the existence of war machines capable of opposing the oppressive forces” and “the the struggle, on the front of desire, of collective fixtures carrying out a permanent analysis, *a subversion of all powers*, at all levels”, has not, after all, lost any of its actuality. Just as the observation that the molecular revolution (Guattari successively refers to the struggles towards rights of common law prisoners, homosexual struggles, women's liberation movements, against psychiatric oppression...) quickly stumbled upon “the absence of a great revolutionary war machine<sup>13</sup>”. On the side of the Italian “movement of 77”, the lesson of *L’Orda d’Oro* is rigorously complementary: “We have probably lost because of our inability to produce a new social model from within the refusal of work, to link our practice to a program. We lost because of a lack of intellectual extremism. The adversary, on the other hand, has produced a coherent extremism[...].”<sup>14</sup>

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published in 1974: “Althusserism was dead on the barricades of May along with many other ideas of the past” (Rancière 1974, p. 10).

12 Cf. Guattari 1972, p. 176-180.

13 Guattari 1977, p. 30, p. 34. “Molecular Revolution and Class Struggle” is the title of Part I. On a European scale, and not only in Italy where, in the field of autonomy, the “movement of 77” culminated as the social force of all the ruptures of which 1968 was synonymous, 1977 is undoubtedly the last year in which a continuum of struggles (including armed struggle) is deployed in *direct connection* with 68.

14 Balestrini and Moroni 2017, p. 589.

34 1968-2018, or from the “Revolution impossible”...

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But forty years later, it would be a question of risking the passage of from a “thought of emancipation” (or of “subjectivation”) and of “resistance” (primarily ontological, if not strategically) to a new thought of the revolution *for* our times of *permanent counter-revolution*. For it is important to remember: if it no longer has to justify itself “the text and the image of the good revolution<sup>15</sup>” (with the party seizing the power as an apparatus equipping the organic subject of history: the working class), “the impossible revolution of ‘68” must have opened new possibilities for everything to happen, *since ‘68 and in response to ‘68*, as if - as Etienne Balibar recalls in a recent intervention on the concept of revolution<sup>16</sup> - *the permanent world revolution had passed into the camp of capital*. Thus, Capital finally closes its reformist parenthesis by intensifying all the variants of the civil war in a “post-fascist figure”, “that of a [world] war machine which directly takes peace as its object, as the peace of the Terror and of Survival”, while commanding the “most terrible local wars as its own parts”<sup>17</sup> and this *global war* that is not that of the Anthropocene but of *Capitalocene*.

It is in such a “context” that we must observe the double prohibition striking these two words: “revolution” and “civil war”, even though, as Rancière reminds us, the novelty of the movements we invent (France's *Nuit Debout* is the latest) is in itself taken by a logic “which is primarily to resist the enemy.” *Without much success*. As for the coming insurrection, which, ten years later, has not really come, its penholders *Now* tell us that we must renounce the revolution as a process to better ensure the “patient growth of the power of insurrection” in a daily self-organization of life favoring forms of subjective dissent. This is the “secessionist” path of/in the post-68 that Rancière thought it should be reminded of the egalitarian demand while thinking afresh its “aesthetic” dimension. Not without the philosopher of emancipation finally pointing his fingers, and very precisely, at what seems to be the limit of the exercise when the modern history of the “good revolution” is completed. I take the liberty of quoting here at somewhat greater length because our “hypothesis” depends to a large extent on the problem raised by Rancière in answer to the question *En quel temps vivons-nous?* [In which time do we live?]

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15 According to the expression of the collective *Les Revoltes Logiques* in introduction of the special issue on *Les Lauriers de Mai ou les chemins du pouvoir* (1968-1978), February 1978, p. 5. (Jacques Rancière was one of the animators of the magazine.)

16 Balibar 2016

17 Deleuze and Guattari 1980, pp. 525-526. It will be noted here that this theme of the “becoming” *world war machine* of capital has been very little exploited by the Deleuzians, who on the other hand wonder at length on the validity in itself and *for us* of the phrase “machine of war”. They prefer the “smooth space” because of its supposed “nomadic” creativity. On the contrary, Alliez-Lazzarato, *Wars and Capital*, 2016/2018, challenges to reconstruct, step by step, the assembly of the war machine of capital.

35 1968-2018, or from the “Revolution impossible”...

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“Spring 2016 [i.e. *Nuit debout*] has given new relevance to the idea of a community of struggle that is also a community of life. It has, at the same time, re-enacted the problem of the connection between the two, between a process of constitution of an autonomous people and that of the constitution of a force of struggle against the enemy. All modern history has been traversed by the tension between a class struggle conceived as the formation of an army to defeat the enemy and a class struggle thought of as a secession of a people inventing their institutions and their autonomous forms of life. The tension could be solved as long as the same people could include the army of combatant workers and those of the emancipated producers. One the other hand, it ruptures when it is no longer the factories or even the universities that are occupied, these are no longer the places of social function bringing together conflicting forces, but the empty space of the squares places where the community is symbolized in assemblies of the egalitarian times of speech, while in the surrounding streets resonate slogans like 'Everybody hates the police' and that the destruction of a few cash machines derisively compensates the destruction of thousands of jobs by the financial powers against those which the labor struggle proved powerless. [...] To be together - against a world order that separates and competes - and to fight against the enemy, are two forms of building up a subjective force stay apart from one another. That is to say that the being-together can not constitute itself as conflictual in its separation, in its autonomy.”<sup>18</sup>

Then, it is indeed necessary *to rethink the strategy*, as Rancière puts it a little further on.<sup>19</sup> But how to do it if, after having made the diagnosis, one immediately affirms on a quasi-ontological level the existence of two types of conflicts, the conflict of forces (to which is referred the class struggle of the Marxist tradition) and the conflict of worlds (going through the subjective self-affirmation of the autonomy of the political subject)? What exactly is a strategy without conflicts of forces, if not a *strategy without force* that can only refer the "extraordinary invention of institutions" which is synonymous to revolution as a process - quite the opposite of the Leninist model, which liquidated in the aftermath of the Revolution his only *institutional innovation*, namely the soviets<sup>20</sup> - to the *only* “work of re-elaboration of the perceptible and the thinkable”<sup>21</sup>.

18 Rancière 2017, pp.28-29

19 Ibid., p.65.

20 See in this sense the Guattarian analysis of the "Leninist cut" (in Guattari 1972, p.186).

21 Rancière 2017, p. 63: "What really characterizes this revolution [the French Revolution] is its extraordinary invention of institutions - both official and parallel - [...], it is his work of re-elaboration

So that the "'we' that wonders if 'we do not have to define strategies by ourselves'... exists only as a subject of speech and a way of speaking”<sup>22</sup>. The Rancierian *fictional hypothesis* here presents itself as a third "aesthetic" way between the Butlerian performative and the strategy of the signifier of Laclau regarding the people it “articulates” (to use an Althusserian term of which we have ourselves made use) in a descriptive phenomenology of the present whose aesthetic relief leaves the "strategic" question curiously untouched. Last quote: “a fictional hypothesis[...] can only make sense by linking itself to other hypotheses, other propositions of world that makes as many different holes in the fabric of the dominant world.”<sup>23</sup>

Let’s turn now to Balibar, at the end of his paper:

“if capitalism has become in a sense “ultra-revolutionary”, beyond the conditions of its own stability, then every resistance that is rooted in life, labor and culture, is already “revolutionary”, because it challenges “TINA” [There Is No Alternative], and raises the possibility of a *bifurcation*, or it contradicts the dogma of the acceleration of “progress” as unilineal and one-sided. For me, the *material conditions* – be they geopolitical, due to economic conjunctures, or ideological (since ideology is a very powerful material force) are “determinant”. But civic and democratic insurrections, with a central communist component against ultra-individualism, also involving a “intellectual and moral reform” of the common sense itself (as Gramsci explained), are probably not destructible. Call “revolution” the indestructible? I would suggest that possibility.”<sup>24</sup>

But, on one hand, does this "possibility" not classically refer to the impossibility of a revolution when the *determining* “material conditions” are not present; and on the other hand, in a more contemporary and biopolitical way (in a sense, probably more Deleuzian than Foucauldian), to the ontological overdetermination (the indestructible, the indestructible vitalism) of resistance whose modes of subjectivation are obviously more *immediately* for a *becoming-revolutionary* than for

of the perceptible and the thinkable. It is this political imagination that changes the world. It is that which is cruelly lacking today and which is not compensated by the call of some to the communes and the call of others to the resurrection of the party and the soviets”. Needless to say, we absolutely agree with this last point, without making ours what remains the presupposition of Rancière: the revolution of the 'people' as a political subject (in the, then unavoidable, framework of the nation as a collective reality)...

22 Ibid., p.68

23 Ibid.

24 Balibar 2016



“revolution”? And does this “becoming-revolutionary”, according to the notion elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari in the mid-1970s, not fall in a more phenomenological than strategic way of describing the “minority” spirit of the most singular struggles of ‘68 and of after-’68 as they continue until today? The affirmation of the prevalence of the ‘lines of flights’ over the dialectical contradiction poses in the foreground the revolutionary power of the connections between minorities in a non-totality of “transversality” and “connection” (we say today intersectionality) that can “find his figure or his universal consciousness in the proletarian<sup>25</sup>” (or in the “multitude”) without properly confronting the question of a new (non-dialectical) principle of antagonism, negation and “division” capable of orienting the pragmatics of “transformation-multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari’s *multiplicités à transformation*) in history. And to rupture in our history dominated by the counter-revolution. To assert that “*everything* is divided but in itself<sup>26</sup>” will not fail then to refer the question of non-totalization to the examination of the difficulties of the “intersections” between “minorities” with split sensitivities and radically divergent strategies.

II  
Having begun in the middle, as it should be, I start again from the beginning by analyzing briefly and broadly the historical-dialectical concept of “revolution” with respect to which “‘68” is the “impossible revolution” of which we are still the contemporaries.

1 / Historical necessity *oblige* everything begins with the French Revolution. And for *good reason*: the revolution abandons the cosmological circle and its political application (with the eternal return of a certain number of constitutional forms which succeed one another that cannot be transgressed: nothing new under the sun, the revolution is a repetition) for to become “revolutionary” in the sense of an acceleration of time worth both irreversible direction and progress engaging an entire philosophy of history (whose prelude could only be the Terror: Hegel *explains*). Because the revolution is also an evolution (that is to say, bourgeois revolution), it can be applied to the “industrial revolution”, before this one is confronted with the movement leading from political revolution (the “right of representation”) to social revolution (the presentation of the movement of history in the world). Since 1830, and even more so after 1848 in his Marxist reading, “the history of the future becomes the history of the revolution” (Koselleck). The anticipation of the future becomes the dimension of the revolutionary

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25 Deleuze and Guattari 1980, p. 589.  
26 Deleuze and Guattari 1972b, p. 91.

project: the awareness, the *consciousness (prise de conscience) of the laws* of history animated by the contradictions of capitalism supports the historical agent who will sweep away the past. With all the defeats of the nineteenth century, the crushing of the Paris Commune belongs to this past *overcome (aufgehoben)* by the victorious revolution of October 1917, supposed to bring the “human race” to the International of the Future (“The International will be the human race”). 1968, the *events* of ‘68 mark the threshold from which, on the scale of the world, in a total reversal of the concept of “world revolution” towards the new conditions of a revolutionary world, this future belongs to the past (*Koselleck’s Futures past*). The revolution is no longer a *project for the future*. It is the *present alone* which creates less futures than possibilities (*des possibles*) brought about by what Guattari calls, in the 1960s, “collective agents of enunciation” capable of performing in a singular way the immediate knotting of social production and of the desiring production which is no longer *lacking*. This is one of the keys leading to *Anti-Oedipus*: the extension of “production” to “machinations of desire” and *production of subjectivity* (Guattari) invests on the present as a “machinic rupture” (with respect to the order of structure) and *construction* of all kinds of multiplicities and temporalities in a movement whose “transversality coefficients” are never given (past-present) or projected (in the future). The discontinuity of the revolutionary enunciation involves the “subjective rupture” (or subjectivity in rupture) of its forms of content and expression. At its simplest: with regards to ‘68 and the immediate French after-68, the March 22 Movement, the Action Committees and the Information Groups, the new ways of doing and talking promoted by the feminist and homosexual movement, which will inevitably conflict with the reconstruction of the party-form in ‘groupuscules’ where the “division” remains between the vanguard and the masses. The Guattarian difference between “subject-group” and “subjugated group” makes the political constructions of subjectification in each collective pass through as a radical problematization of politics itself, in the tension never “resolved” between these two poles. The history put in the present *becomes* this field of forces where, in an unprecedented sense, the “rupture of historical causality” is played out. A rupture, a break in the present of a non “programmatic” but “diagrammatic” form, where the subjective rupture with the set of power relations established throughout the cold war and that crystallizes in the *American way of life* is *consumed*. To stop returning to the same, the revolution must be total and totally present in each of the variables that determine its mutations: “We want everything. Now”.

It is this “revolution of the revolution” pointed out by Maurice Blanchot (in a letter to Marguerite Duras dated October 13, 1968) as the coming (and not the future) of the *communist imperative* and the only possible truth of the French May. Truth is this possible as a forcing of the “impossible real”.



And it may be noted that the expression “revolution of the revolution” fits for Blanchot in the wake of the work of Régis Debray, *Révolution dans la Révolution. Lutte armée et lutte politique en Amérique latine* (1967). This does not prevent him from quickly adopting the most spontaneous conception of the Action Committees, which he will push to the hyperbole of a “kind of eternity of immanence” aiming so little to work or to be inscribed in history that *impowerlessness* (*désœuvrement*) absolutely replaces any kind of organization<sup>27</sup>. If Blanchot cites Benjamin's theses *On the concept of history* at the header of the first issue of the Student-writer Action Committee, the “Rupture of Time: Revolution” it is to identify the “power of refusal” to the *underworld* (*pègre*) and its lack of regard for the outcome of the insurrection: we are at the “end of history”, put “to the test of radical nihilism” against all kinds of *constituent powers*. The “rupture of time” is then the fact of a “vacancy of history” that does not only dislodge the revolution of a future to build, but also of any kind of inscription in the duration that could only *consent to a coup by which power is instituted and perpetuated*. Purely *destituent*, the conception of revolutionary politics as a continuation of war by other means is then only aimed at “provoking or [...] terrorizing” - and not at “gathering”<sup>28</sup>. From Blanchot to Agamben, from Agamben to Tiquun and to the Invisible Committee, the consequence unfolds following the thread of what has been lost in the long after ‘68 when the notion of “resistance” has finally imposed itself regarding the counter-revolution on march - namely, this “*effectiveness of the offensives*” (Foucault) which has as presupposed, but not as sole condition, this “Great Refusal” (Marcuse, focusing on the students of American campuses) which has rightly been said to haunt “the imaginary of the sixties” by combining under the sign of anti-capitalism the subjective rupture with what Foucault gives us to think, for a time, in terms of strategic refusal of the game of governmentality: “it is not about confrontation inside the games, but resistance to the game and refusal of the game itself [...]; we prevent the game from being played”<sup>29</sup>. Still, while placing at the heart of his analysis this strategy of refusal, Foucault does not seem to grasp the reality of the political-economic turn in Capital's response to *the impossible ‘68*, and that it is imposing on a forced march in the late 1970s. For what the French philosopher theorizes in terms of the “analytical philosophy of politics” is the substitution of power game for the economic stake of wealth

27 See Blanchot 1969.

28 “Let's wave the red, the black, either, but to provoke or to terrorize and not to gather,” writes Blanchot in a typewriting.

29 See Foucault 1994, pp. 543-544. See also Foucault 1982, and the analysis that we propose in Alliez -Lazzarato 2016/2018.

production<sup>30</sup>, which has been the *subject* of “what is called, since the nineteenth century, the Revolution”<sup>31</sup>. And that is still the difference between the “revolutionary struggles” which are affirmed by “this kind of resistance and struggle [having] essentially as a goal facts of power themselves, much more than what would be something like an economic exploitation, much more than something that would be an inequality”. Resistance struggles will therefore be called “immediate” in the sense that they do not seek “the main enemy or the weakest link” (as in Leninism) and neither do they expect salvation “from a future moment that would be revolution, that would be liberation, classless society, the decline of the State, the solution of the problems”. Foucault further defines the same struggles as “anarchical [in that] they inscribe themselves within a *history that is immediate, accepts and recognizes itself as indefinitely open*” in their challenge to reformism: while Reformism stabilizes the system of power, this is here “a destabilization of the mechanisms of power, a *seemingly endless destabilization*.”<sup>32</sup>

At this point, it is hard not to argue that there was indeed a “main enemy” who was resuming the initiative with strategies of social warfare that without having to declare the “end of history”, have *managed to close* their “indefinitely open” being by bending the present to the new laws of wealth accumulation and redesign of *economic power* to put an end to the “seemingly endless destabilization” of power mechanisms. *Economic power* - it is obviously necessary to reunite what Foucault separates by prolonging at the wrong time - with all the exponents of the ‘68-thought - the optical effect of the “Glorious Thirties”. Keynesian or neoliberal, the economy enlarged to all its *mechanisms of power* which overdetermines it, is the politics of capital as science of domination.

2 / On its historical-dialectical development plan, the “world revolution” whose Idea nevertheless took shape outside the temperate zones of the Marxist economist projection (Russia, China, Cuba... *the revolution against Das Kapital*, to use the Gramscian formula) is essentially Eurocentric in that it involves the division between the center and the periphery proper to the evolutionist schema: formation of the Nation-State - bourgeois revolution - proletarian revolution. With the hegemony of the proletariat in the national framework of a bourgeois revolution (Plekhanov repeated by Lenin in *What to do?*), it is up to the proletarian revolution to put an end to the contradiction between the development of the productive forces and the relations of production. On the periphery, it

30 “This problem of the impoverishment of those who produce wealth, of the simultaneous production of wealth and poverty, I am not saying that it was totally solved in the West at the end of the twentieth century, but it does not pose more with the same urgency” (Foucault 1994, p. 536).

31 Ibid., p.551

32 Ibid., p.545-547.

will therefore be necessary to quickly build on the “delay” (with regards to the accomplishment of the historical mission of capitalism) in order to explain the success of the revolution (Russian or Chinese)<sup>33</sup>, and the fact that uprisings, guerrillas, insurrections, etc., can since follow one another by making the model of “war of movement” their own. Even before the defeat of the German Communist Party, it is, as we know, the same position that is criticized in the West as “adventurism”: Lenin again, and of course Kautsky-Gramsci vs. Rosa Luxembourg. It is precisely because of the supposed progressive nature of capitalism that the strategic fracture between metropolis and colonies, constituted by the racial division over which capitalism *has been built in its totality and as a totality* after the conquest of the Americas, is reproduced within the theory of revolution by Marxist geography. Hence, post-war European Marxism shows such a weak awareness of the ongoing world revolution, and that it hardly gives itself the means to anticipate, organize and even analyze the change in conditions of possibility of revolution in the light of decolonization. Yet, that *from the beginning*, the revolutions *are not produced or fail where they should*, and that *they occur where they should not*... should contribute questioning with Foucault what could be called the “strategic method” - but by relating it to the theory of revolution. All the more so as the historical-dialectical schema was totally disrupted by the importance taken by the decolonization struggles in the very heterogenesis of the “impossible revolution of ‘68”: the Algerian war (a “police operation”: It was not until September 1999 that the expression “war of Algeria” was endorsed by the French National Assembly), the Vietnam War and the Guevarist armed struggle in Latin America - but all anticolonialist struggles have to be taken into account on a global scale, involving the “colonized from within” of imperialist metropolises: struggle for civil rights in the US, the question of “immigrants” in France, etc.: what Henri Lefebvre, in one of the first books published on the French ‘68 will call “endo-colonisation.”<sup>34</sup>

To put it simply: with its planetary, transnational and polycentric dimension intersecting the global and the local at the crossroads of all the crises that jostle the economy of the North-South and East-West axes, 1968 is, as *the first (and impossible) (non-socialist) “World revolution”*, the first phenomenon of *alter-globalisation*. And it is indeed up to the “liberation wars” to have exploded the Eurocentric framework

33 Lenin explains in his “Report on War and Peace” of March 7, 1918, that the world’s socialist revolution can not begin as easily in the West, in the advanced countries, as in Russia.

34 Lefebvre 1968, p. 103 sq. The book - from a long article originally published in the “*Dossier de la révolte étudiante*” of the journal *L’Homme et la société* (April-May-June 1968) - opens with the question of the event: “The event thwarts the forecasts; to the extent that it is historical, it upsets calculations. It can go as far as to reverse the strategies that took into account its possibility. Conjunctural, the event shakes the structures that allowed it. The predictions, the suppositions, inevitably based on analyzes and partial observations, can not rise to the total character of what occurs.”

of THE revolution by imposing a radical break with the dialectical scheme that animated it. Fanon *via* Nietzsche vs. Hegel-Marx: the struggle for recognition *violently derails* by affirming the antagonistic difference of colonized people from the non-synchronous nature of European and non-European perspectives. This rupture is therefore also the bearer of a whole “epistemic decolonization” (Matthieu Renault) which renews in depth the relationship between war and politics. Because we realize that war as a continuation of politics by other means is a European “formula” that has never been practiced in the colonies. But, it is also the question of internal colonization that introduces politics as a continuation of war by other means at the heart of metropolises by reintroducing at the same time all the modalities of world war in revolutionary theory. Hence the importance of the substitution of the North-South axis (the African continent is boiling, the guerrilla warfare is raging in Latin America) to the East/West axis, with the multiplication of Souths in the North - and the break-up of the ideological bloc of “real socialism” in the East (Prague, Warsaw, after Hungary in 1956)... The dividing line, nonetheless remains: hundreds of protesters are killed, wounded, arrested or reported missing after the Mexican army opened fire on the students gathered at the Three Cultures Square Tlateloco in Mexico against the “socialist” government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. It is October 2nd, 1968, ten days before the opening of the Olympic Games, where two black American athletes will raise a black-gloved fist in tribute to the Black Panthers.

It is worth mentioning Hans-Jürgen Krahel, a young philosopher who died early and was a major figure in the German student movement, in his speech at the Congress on Vietnam held in Berlin in February 1968, attracting thousands of European protesters<sup>35</sup>: Vietnam, Cuba, the guerrillas in Latin America “have created a new, qualitatively new fact in the history of the world: *the actuality of the revolution* [*Aktualität der revolution*, Lukacs' term]. For the first time in the history of capitalism, revolution is a globally present and vivid possible/possibility (*eine global gegenwärtige und anschauliche Möglichkeit*) that is real/realized, even if, for now, it only takes place on the outskirts of late-capitalist civilization, as an armed struggle by the oppressed and poor countries of the third world [...] [But] What is the mediation between the actuality of the revolution in world history and the daily actions of protest movements in

35 As noted by Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand and Jacques Portes, this Vietnam Congress “is the highlight of the meeting between the European protest movements” (“The International Interactions of the Vietnam War and May-68”, in *Les Années 68. Le temps de la contestation*, Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, Robert Frank, Marie-Francoise Lévy, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (ed.), Brussels, Éditions Complexe / IHTP, 2000, 66. It was during this meeting that the French discovered the tactics of struggle of the German students of the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*), borrowed from the practices of action of the *American Students for a Democratic Society*.

the metropolis?"<sup>36</sup>. The question takes on a new relevance in 2011, when the permanent crisis maintained differentially across the planet by neo-liberalism, with the 2007-2008 financial crisis and its "shock treatment"<sup>37</sup>, reaches a level such that the incidence of antagonism seems to give a new principle of reality to the impossible revolution. But the "movement of the squares" which develops on both sides of the neocolonial dividing line, will come up against structures of power and social warfare that are far from being the same in the US (Occupy Wall Street), in Greece (movement against the debt), in Turkey (mobilization around Gezi Park against the new ottoman sultan) or in Spain (with the Indignados), and in Tunisia or in Egypt. A manifested example of the "objective contemporary non-contemporaneity" (Ernst Bloch re-read by Krahel) commanded by capital, that knows how to hold together, in times of global exploitation and domination, radically heterogeneous temporalities by intensifying globalization. Facing On the other hand, the impossibility of an "a-critical transcription (*eine unkritische Übertragung*)" of guerrilla strategies in the metropolises no longer allows to retain from them "the model of a fight without compromise (*eine Modell kompromisslosen Kampfes*)"<sup>38</sup> where it is still a question of conflict and war. What Foucault had withheld when he was still advancing ten years later: "What I would like to discuss, starting from Marx, is not the problem of class sociology [privileged by Marxism], but of the strategic method of struggle. [...] What is the struggle, when we say class struggle? Because saying struggle, it is about conflict and war. But how does this war develop? What is its purpose? What are its means? [...] My interest goes to the incidence of the antagonisms themselves: who enters the struggle? With what and how? Why is there this struggle? What is it based on?"<sup>39</sup>

The difference compared to the 1968 years - engaging with our point of *non-contemporaneity* to 1968 - is that no one, in the North as in the South, seems to be asking the question of the revolution, this question that Krahel wanted to distinguish from a "revolutionary theory" ("a revolutionary theory is not the same as a theory of revolution"). Everything happens as if neo-liberalism had succeeded in erasing the revolution from the memory of the "vanquished", in the course of a trial reducing it to a "regime change" (the surplus reserved for "backward" countries). To follow Asef Bayat, *Refolution* (composed of *reform* and *revolution*) and *Revolution without Revolutionaries* are needed as expressions *Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. "Rich in tactics of mobilization but poor in vision and strategy of transformation, [...] a mix of revolutionary mobilizations

36 Krahel, 2008, p. 148 sq.

37 See again Alliez and Lazzarato, 2016/2018, last chapter

38 As stated by Krahel 2008, p.. 150.

39 Foucault 1994, p. 606.

and reformist trajectories. Defenselessness against the domestic and regional counterrevolution was one of such anomaly."<sup>40</sup>

3 / The old regime of the revolution was essentially "ruled" on the dialectical model of the Hegelian-Marxist *Aufhebung* recognizing no other revolutionary subject than the working class (the most skilled and therefore the *most conscious*) as the driving force of history at work. Now, what arises around 1968 is a new working "class", or rather a new, *unskilled proletariat* that embraced in their own struggle the anti-union and *disintegrating* (with regard to the "integration" of the working class<sup>41</sup>) theme of the "refusal of work" in its struggles. The refusal of work commands to the *politics in act* of the "revolutionary task [aimed at] the suppression of the proletariat itself, that is, from now on, the suppression of the corresponding distinctions [to those that the bourgeoisie have introduced into the proletariat] between the vanguard and the proletariat, the proletariat and the sub-proletariat [...] to free, on the contrary, subjective and singular positions capable of communicating transversely<sup>42</sup>". *On the contrary, therefore*, of the socialist renewal of the State in the Party, as it unfolds between the "Leninist rupture" and the Cultural Revolution - which is definitely "the last significant political sequence still internal to the Party-State and failing there (s'y échouant)<sup>43</sup>".

The new "class composition" (including immigrants) emerging in the years 1968 is in close conjunction with the proletarianization of the student's world which in turn modifies the "class antagonism" by extension of the "socialization of capital"<sup>44</sup>. This is not without extending the question of capitalist production to "reproduction" (with the explosion of the "female labor force<sup>45</sup>") and to the condition of women outside the sole question of "domestic work" - because "Women are oppressed within the sexual model". Hence, too, that '68 marks the explosion of the "wars of subjectivity" directed against power, and against a *diffuse power* whose "microphysics" can no longer be fought by the mere seizure of political-institutional power, supported by by the "professional revolutionary" of a male avant-garde speaking the

40 Cf. Bayat 2017, p. 22, p. 27.

41 Recall the title of the third part of "Causality, subjectivity and history": "Integration of the working class and analytical perspective" (1966).

42 Deleuze 1972a, p. VII.

43 Badiou 2018, p. 49. We take for a touch of humor the following sentence: "Already, May 68 and its aftermath, it is a little something else."

44 Cf. Krahel 2008, p. 339 sq.

45 Think here about the female worker in the documentary "The return to work at the Wonder factories in June 1968": "No, I will not go in there! I will not put foot in this jail!" (<https://vimeo.com/276078088>).



“universal militant language”. The “bolcho complex” (Guattari again) works here with the Oedipus complex. Carla Lonzi, with the group *Rivolta Femminile*: “Behind the Oedipus complex, it is not the taboo of incest that we can guess, but the exploitation of this taboo by the father to ensure his salvation”. It is this reversal of psychoanalysis that *Anti-Oedipus* will seek to think on the plane of immanence of the “coextension of social production and the production of desire,” and that Guattari, after having “restored the unconscious historical perspectives on a background of unquietness and unknown<sup>46</sup>”, will develop in terms of “micropolitics of desire and everyday life” (homosexuality is affirmed inseparable from a “becoming woman” that concerns everyone).

### III

But is it not Deleuze himself who says in 1980:

“*Anti-Oedipus* has been a complete failure. It would take a long time to analyze, but the current situation is very difficult and stifling [...]. I cannot say why I have so many bad feelings<sup>47</sup>”.

Four short years later, and after the socialist government of Mitterrand promoted the “turning point of rigor” (a neoliberal-inspired policy of austerity *made in France* combined with trade union consultation ), Deleuze signed an article with Guattari entitled “ Mai 68 n’a pas eu lieu<sup>48</sup>” [May ‘68 did not take place]. The defeat is so well recorded (*we are in 1984*, with Orwellian echoes included) that it somehow reflects on the explanation proposed in the context of the failure of a “left” reformist policy whose focus is to reorient the terms - rather than analyzing the defeat of ‘68 and the failure of its reformist “reconversion” sealed by the left government. Because the socialist left is engaged in a completely different movement: of *conversion* to the values of the market economy and its neoliberal international order. Deleuze and Guattari write in what will be their last text on the events of 1968: “French society has shown a radical inability to carry out a *subjective reconversion* at the collective level as required by ‘68: then, how could it currently operate an *economic reconversion* under the conditions of the ‘left’? ”(our underlines). The American New Deal and the Japanese post-war boom, despite “all sorts of ambiguities and even reactionary structures,” are taken as “very different examples of subjective reconversion[...] capable of meeting the demands of the event”. So much so, that it is towards this reformist hypothesis cut off from the relations of social and geopolitical forces that imposed it, and which are lacking at a time when “the only subjective conversions at the collective level are those of the American wild

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze 1972a, p. III.

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze 2003

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.. All the quotes that follow are taken from this text.

capitalism, or of a Muslim fundamentalism”, that the constituent relation of the event with the “new collective subjectivity” seems to be renewed. Like its outcome and impasse, depending on whether “*the society*” will be able or *not to* “form collective agency corresponding to the new subjectivity”. But this one is now that of the *children of May ‘68*, of whom Coppola’s Rusty James is the biotype: “a little at the end of the line[...] a mixture of culture coming from the street and from the university[...] and he does not see nothing [...]”. The question of life or death created by the event (“*du possible, sinon j’étouffe [give me something possible, otherwise I will suffocate]*”) on the mode of a clairvoyance phenomenon (“as if a society suddenly saw what was intolerable in it and also saw the possibility of something else<sup>49</sup>”) becomes a matter of survival in a present with *no other possible* than the *no future* of the late 1970s. “Every time the possible has been closed” by the reaction against ‘68, “on the left almost as much as on the right,” concludes Deleuze and Guattari. Before reopening in *extremis* the prospect of a “*creative reconversion*” discovering that the field of the possible must be “elsewhere” *to take over from a general May ‘68* that did not take place. A geopolitical Elsewhere moving along the West-East axis to “disaggregate the relationships of conflict” and distribution of the world in zones of influence by the shared policy of overarmament (pacifism); and on the North-South axis to invent a new internationalism, “which is no longer based solely on an alliance with the Third World, but on third-world phenomena in the rich countries themselves.”

But is not this “elsewhere” the result of a political strategy that would “take over” above all from this philosophy of *pure event* supposed to distinguish, as such, and as ontologically at the beginning of the article<sup>50</sup>, 1968, from the revolutions that preceded it (the French Revolution, the Commune, the October Revolution), where the share of event was (still) mingled with “determinism and causality”? This is the nuclear heart of ‘68 thought, where the *1968 subject* would think himself somehow in its most constituent ontological-political difference. It will take nothing less than all the “machinic materialism” (Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc) of *Thousand Plateaux* to give meaning to the statement that “before being, there is politics<sup>51</sup>”. Stating that for our part, with Maurizio Lazzarato, we translate *or transduce into: strategy precedes ontology*. In 1984 at least, when the

<sup>49</sup>This will strangely send Deleuze’s reader back to what he wrote of post-war Italian neo-realism as the rise of pure optical situations determined by the “crisis of the image-action”. What can therefore be returned to the side of the failure of the “Leninist break”, committed to the successful revolution. The bourgeois woman of Europe <sup>51</sup> “sees, she has learned to see”. Let’s say “a mutation concerning the general notion of situation. The bourgeois of Europe <sup>51</sup> “sees, she has learned to see”. This is “a mutation concerning the general concept of situation.” Deleuze 1985, p. 7-17.

<sup>50</sup> Hence the convocation of Prigogine and Stengers’ Far-From-Equilibrium Physics in the first paragraph.

<sup>51</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 1980, p. 249.



spring primers of the molecular revolution (“new relationships with the body, time, sexuality, environment, culture, work...” mentioned under the “subjective conversion”) gave way to the “Winter Years” (Guattari), the exclusion of “determinisms and causalities” leads, as “collective agents”, only to a *society* that is a little too “civil” and a *new subjectivity* without any “class” connotation, whose horizon and framework can only be that of Europe. For it is indeed this European “reformist” illusion, this Eurocentrism in which the ’68 thought undoubtedly meets one of its main limits, which has made it possible to ignore the mutant multiplicity of war strategies that capital adopts in these same years by *calculating* as never the violence, repression, economic and technological “innovations” according to the situations and according to the intensities of the conflicts which traverses them.

It is to face the radicality of the subjective *and objective* ruptures operated by the 1968 “movements” in their exploration of “the social unconscious of the revolution” (Guattari) that capital launches against the emerging possibilities (*les possibles émergents*) of this “strange revolution” a no less “strange civil war”, cold *and* hot, which extends throughout the 1970s. Its most striking and dramatic episode are civil wars of incredible violence that have crossed the entire South American continent, and that the Eurocentric perspective of ’68 thought hardly grasps in its extent and scope. That, from the strategic point of view of capital, this is not a civil war waged in “peripheral” environments is sufficiently demonstrated by the “experiments” of the Chicago Boys in Chile. The policies of structural adjustments, privatization, pension funds, the new role of the State and the dismantling of Welfare policies, access to university and “education” conditioned by access to credit, etc., was a research laboratory of the fascist “pacification” of a military dictatorship. These neoliberal policies were then then gradually implemented under the the IMF’s leadership in the rest of the world, with all the debt policies that mark the entry into a total social war (*the organization* of the fiscal crisis of the city of New York gives the starting point of the *new urban wars*) that can extend to a continent (Africa).

We return to our original hypothesis, which we can now risk formulating in the form of a *thesis*: because the counter-revolution we have been facing since 1968 is a “permanent revolution” of the world war machine of capital, the “liquidation of the liquidation” of 1968 will have to go beyond “the closing of classical revolutionism<sup>52</sup>” by reopening the question-problem of revolution. For if there is no longer any possible dialectical mediation on the horizon of a reformism always imposed by a local and global relationship of forces, or within the national framework of a “left-

.....  
52 Badiou 2018, p. 40.

wing populism”, the logic governing the relations of power is definitely war, in its regime of extensive multiplication (*proxy* wars on several fronts) and intensive (these wars of classes, races, sexes capitalized by the new fascisms). What Foucault, on the one hand, with the reversal of Clausewitz’s formula that has already taken place (politics is the continuation of the civil war by other means), Deleuze and Guattari, on the other, with their war machine and analysis of the mutations of capitalism had done more than glimpsing. Before turning to a thought of “subjectivation” without revolution that can be said, here and there, “ethico-aesthetic.”

Foucault, who imposed the term “subjectivation” at the turn of the 1970s, introduced into his genealogy the old Horkheimer question: “But is this revolution so desirable?”. *This* revolution? The question is so badly *or so well* posed that it resuscitates the figure of an “infinite” power to which one can only oppose, in order to limit it, “impassable laws and unrestricted rights” in which the philosopher will greet a development, at the universal level, of liberal governmentality in its defense of *society* against the State. We would simply like to recall, in conclusion, that it is not only revolutions that end badly when they must be opposed, in the name of defending uprisings (against their fallout in history), to an anti-strategic theoretical morality.<sup>53</sup>

.....  
53 See Michel Foucault, “Inutile de se soulever?” (1979), in *Dits et Écrits*, op. cit., p. 794. This is the last text published by Foucault on the Islamic revolution in Iran, which precedes for a few months the courses of the College of France on liberal governmentality.

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# Scattered Notes on “May 68” and its Interpretations

Étienne Balibar

**Abstract:** This essay, designated as Notes, deals with seven segments of the events of May 68. Mostly focusing on France, this paper offers a “scattered” rather than a systematic interpretation and discussion on those events. These Notes follow a certain order, but they are intrinsically discontinuous. In this work, I maintain that although the Name “68” applies to a single Event, it is certainly not leading to any unitary description or definition. Rather, it refers to a conjuncture whose multiple components are important to recall, and increasingly so as time passes, and the “myth” is growing. In writing these Notes, I have confronted my thoughts and my memories of the events with those of the others, their proposals and interpretations and in this way I came to the conclusion that what needs to be expressed is this multiplicity as such, a multiplicity in which – no doubt – certain lines of force must be made apparent, but no such thing as a “diagonal” can be drawn that crosses and distributes all of them, except through a very arbitrary decision.

**Keywords:** event, May '68, politics, movement, (counter)revolution, schools

While I embark on these Notes, a precaution is in order: the notes are too long and too complicated to give the readers a simple “idea of May 68”. But they are also far too limited to give justifications for each and every of the statements I make. The fact is I already had the idea that, although the Name “68” applies to a single Event, it is certainly not leading to any unitary description or definition. Rather, it refers to a conjuncture whose multiple components are important to recall, and increasingly so as time passes, and the “myth” is growing. However, while gathering my thoughts and memories, confronting them with what others have proposed, I came to the conclusion that what needs to be expressed is this multiplicity as such, a multiplicity in which – no doubt – certain lines of force must be made apparent, but no such thing as a “diagonal” can be drawn that crosses and distributes all of them, except through a very arbitrary decision. For this reason, I propose *seven* successive notes. They follow a certain order, but they are intrinsically discontinuous.

## 1. Traces and historicity of an event

In 1984, Deleuze and Guattari published a short tract with the title “Mai 68 n’a pas eu lieu”, or “May 68 did not take place”, in which they noted “the incapacity of the French Society to assimilate May 68”: this would be a “pure event”, released from any “normal” chain of causes and consequences.<sup>1</sup> “*Assimiler*” is ambiguous in French, denoting at the same

.....  
<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in Deleuze and Guattari 2003/2005

time understanding and digesting, or swallowing... Then in 2007 President Sarkozy declared : “I want to get rid of the legacy of May 68”, which he described as a “moral relativism” infecting the country’s intelligence. The year after (2008), in a joint interview with Judith Revel for *Libération* Jacques Rancière replied: “there is really no need to liquidate May 68, this was done long ago by the Left itself”.<sup>2</sup> However, he insisted, “the pleasure of a political metamorphosis” could always return, and there were signs that this could happen. I could add other names to these voices. But *what would I say myself?* The question inevitably becomes: speaking *from which “place”?* I cannot just repeat here what I wrote at the end of a prefatory essay for a translation of Althusser’s piece on “Ideological State Apparatuses” (a philosophical sequel of May 68 in the work of somebody who had been notoriously “external” to the event): “I speak now as unrepentant *soixante-huitard*...” And I can also not simply state: “I was there...”, if only because some of my contemporaries would immediately reply: yes, you were there, but in the wrong place! (which raises a serious question: how do we cartography the game of places within the event?). I will simply mention that a great deal of my intellectual life was made of ruminating the traces and the questions left open by 68, and there remains no more time to postpone formulating them for my personal use. Others may find it interesting or not.

*Traces and questions:* they are part of what, in a landmark book, Kristin Ross has called *the Afterlives of May ’68*. The plural is important: there is not *one* trace. This is first because during the event participants and actors expressed completely antithetic, at times antagonistic “truths”, none of which can be *dismissed a priori*. Georges Séguy, the union leader of CGT, who reiterated the (in)famous formula from General Secretary Maurice Thorez : “il faut savoir terminer une grève”, has repeated shortly before his death: “the situation in 68 was not revolutionary”<sup>3</sup>; but among the “leftists” this remains largely seen as a historic betrayal which actually *prevented* the situation from *becoming* revolutionary. Infinite *a posteriori* settlements of accounts are waged. They don’t leave the professional historians untouched. But the question of conflicting interpretations and narratives leads to a more profound question, on which I will try to elaborate later, which is the question of the *split composition* and the *divided legacy* of an event that participants with the same adversaries (the Gaullist “power”) *made in common* but did not really *share* (“événement partagé” would have both meanings in French). As a consequence, you can’t avoid *taking sides* on this or that issue (except in a poor fiction of objectivity), but you can also not *conclude* forever, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

2 Interview of Judith Revel and Jacques Rancière by Eric Aeschimann, *Libération*, 24 May 2008.

3 See Séguy 2017.

What I deduce nevertheless, is that we must try and *construct the historicity* of the “event” that we call “May 68”, without limits of time and space, without preestablished synthesis for the opposite forces, opposite discourses, opposite actions which are “precipitated” and “confronting themselves” in that astonishing moment. This involves addressing the philosophical question: what kind of “event” did take place (since to call it “pure” only repeats the question)? I suggest that we look for *continuities and discontinuities, irreversible effects and reversible achievements, failed possibilities and postponed consequences*... We must also look for an articulation of what is “dominant” and more visible (from a certain place), and what is “dominated” and less visible (or remained invisible) among the actions of the time. Let me try and start this discussion with two classical dialectical figures: revolution or counterrevolution, internal splitting of the movement.

2. Revolution, Counterrevolution

We may begin by returning to the antithesis between the statements: “No revolutionary situation!”, “revolution betrayed”, adding many varieties which, taken together, indicate a veritable *obsession* (pro et con) of the idea of revolution among the protagonists, the witnesses, the interpreters. Most interesting are those formulas which associate the understanding of May 68 with a *questioning* about what is called a “revolution”. *If there is a revolution in 68, this is perhaps not the one that was “anticipated”* (Castoriadis’ word: “la révolution anticipée”). Or *if there was no revolution in 68, this is perhaps because it was looked for where it did not exist* (Raymond Aron’s word: “la révolution introuvable”). Perhaps we had better remain in the uncertainty that was perceived by some contemporaries (Edgar Morin: “la révolution sans visage” - which also means an *anonymous* revolution, without a leader). Admittedly an “interrupted” revolution is not the same thing as an “impossible” revolution, but what is a revolution?

That the insurrectional movement observed in France in 68 should be compared to a past model that is neither “the Great French Revolution” (notwithstanding the reality of some legacies, such as the role of standing assemblies) nor “the Communist Revolution” of 1917 (despite the extreme popularity of “Marxist” and “Leninist” rhetoric, especially among students and intellectuals), but rather the “*printemps des peuples*” and the socialist *uprisings* of 1848 in Europe, is an idea that has been proposed by commentators as diverse as Jacques Rancière (who indicates the resurgence of a language of emancipation and equality invented in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Parisian “prolétaires” - very different in fact from their later “Marxist” picture) and Immanuel Wallerstein (who asserts that the revolutions of 1848 and 1968, at two crucial moments in the history of the “capitalist world-system”, had the most lasting consequences because, even if they didn’t affect the *possession of*



political power, they transformed in depth the *political culture* of both “those from above” and “those from below” in the society). I will return to Rancière’s point later, when I discuss the “democratic” character of 68. Let me now address the implications of Wallerstein’s thesis, to which he gave a provocative form: the greatest “revolution” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is *not* the October Revolution, and of course also not the 1989 “Velvet Revolution”, but *the 68 Revolution*, and we must constantly return to its meaning in order to understand the trajectory of the century.<sup>4</sup> A first implication concerns the mutation in “antisystemic movements”. The second concerns the essentially *global* character of 68, as a *chain of uprisings* crossing geopolitical boundaries. They are of course closely associated.

Wallerstein’s thesis alleges that revolts and uprisings in the late 60’s (what we may call “Broad 68” in a comprehensive manner) – from Berkeley to Mexico City, Japan to Germany, France and Italy to Prague and Warsaw, Dakar to Cairo and Palestine (more problematic would be, at two extremes, the Chinese “Cultural Revolution” and the victory of Allende’s *Unidad Popular* in Chile which, nevertheless, are essential elements of the chain) – are directed at the same time against the Hegemonic Powers in the World System (bourgeois classes and capitalist States) that he calls “the Right”, and against the “Old Left” (including ruling parties in Socialist States, the protagonists of a former revolutionary wave who have now become power holders themselves, and the movements or parties in the West and the South which, in various measure, confer ideological and political leadership to “really existing Socialism”). They are not (or no more) *against the system*, but form *part of it*, and “reproduce” it: the rhetoric of the Cold War, from this point of view, is no more than an ideological smokescreen. This is based on the idea that, after 1929, and in any case since 1945 (Yalta), the Leninist revolution has become institutionalized and integrated into the world-system, with permanent conflicts, but no major antagonism. More profoundly, it is based on the idea that the “new Left” has identified the “two step strategy” common to the Social-Democracy and the Bolshevik tradition - first, conquer State power; second, use it to transform society - as a dead end and a trap, never leading to emancipation. So, the 68 uprising marks the emergence of a “new Left”, however multifaceted, which opposes *both the Right and the Old left*, because it sees the latter as a major obstacle to effectively destroy the system. In its apparent “confusion”, it began to invent the new strategy that targets the institutions and the practices in the “civil society”, rather than focus on seizing the state power. 68 is therefore the genuine “revolution in the revolution”.

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4 It is important to recall, of course, that Wallerstein himself, then a young assistant professor at Columbia University, New York, was an active participant in the local movement of students, teachers, and neighborhood activists. See his essay Wallerstein 2000.

We may agree or disagree, but, in this bold assessment, a *global* perspective is involved, which, while relativizing the specific modalities of the “French May”, also decisively helps understanding those dimensions that, from a purely local point of view, would remain impenetrable. In fact, I take the idea of the “two fronts” on which 68 is fought (therefore its *split* ideology) to be an essential characteristic. But, in directly “jumping to the global”, there is also a risk of abstraction that we may want to avoid. A marked characteristic of the succession of uprisings and political conflicts that we may take into account, over a decade, is both their *singularity* and what I would call their *transversality*: there is no vertical organization, but a contagious movement that *crosses borders* which seemed to delineate the “parts of the world”: migrating and translating from North to South and conversely, from West to East and conversely. The *voices* of 68 remain heterogeneous, but they seem to echo each other across boundaries. Enormous differences are observed between places and moments, in particular with respect to the *degree of violence* in the repression, due to the different nature of political regimes, the uneven militarization and corruption of power: barricades are erected by the students in Paris, but no tanks roll against them as in Prague, and the police only kills a handful of individuals, compared to the hundreds massacred in Tlatelolco... However, the demand for autonomy and the rejection of authoritarian forms of government are universal. Equally important: although I will have to qualify this remark, *class boundaries* are crossed as well as geopolitical ones, because workers or peasants as well as students, intellectuals, professionals, take part in the movement. This is especially true when appreciating the participation and the driving capacity of the *youth* in movements across the world, which has led some commentators to describing the insurrection as an “age struggle” rather than a “class struggle” (Edgar Morin again: “lutte des classes d’âge”, with a question mark).<sup>5</sup> I introduce this idea here, because it immediately adds to our understanding of the global transversality: cultural innovations are spreading globally (often coming from the U.S., as the militant poetry of the “Beat Generation”); mutations are under way in the educational systems and their social function all over the world; youngsters with a critical view of society and a potential for revolt against their respective States, having lost their illusions about the Soviet system, are still eagerly awaiting signals of fragility of the dominant order. Third World struggles for independence, plus Castro’s and Guevara’s victory in Cuba, and above all Vietnam played that role: it was not only the common cause of young rebels in the U.S. (black and white, bourgeois and working class), but the lightning that sparked the

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5 Morin, Lefort, Castoriadis 1988.

revolt of the 68 generation all around the world.<sup>6</sup>

These considerations, however, lead to an enigma: if rebellions against the social and political order are so widespread, so international, and so innovative, why is it that the world-system seems to emerge unbroken and reinforced from a decade of continuous uprisings? Asking the question already provides part of the answer: whereas a centrally organized revolutionary movement like early 20<sup>th</sup> century communism had profoundly disturbed the logic of capitalism and imperialism, leading to dramatic changes in social structures and the overall distribution of State power, only to produce in the end an adaptation of the revolution to the system, in 68 dispersed “antisystemic” movements fighting in opposite directions at the same time could only meet successive defeats from the hands of their adversaries, despite their transnational inspiration. I want however to qualify this conclusion with two remarks.

First, if, looking at the complete chain of insurrections in the “Broad 68” (mid-60s to mid-70s), we assume that at least three great movements of emancipation were in action in different “parts of the world”: a revolt against the capitalist logic in the West (targeting social inequalities, “Taylorist” organization of labour, alienating forms of the culture of mass consumption), a revolt against imperialism and neo-colonialism in the South (with a special opposition to the U.S. domination, now taking the place of other empires), a revolt against authoritarian “communist” rule (especially where it was combined with national subjection) in socialist countries, we may formulate the hypothesis that a “fusion” of the three “critiques” of capitalism, imperialism, and State communism, formed the virtual horizon of the whole “movement”, the positive content of a “revolution in the revolution” many of us dreamed of at the time. *If that fusion* had taken place – i.e. *if* it had been possible –, then *the world would change...* and indeed, it is quite remarkable to see how much circulation of ideas, words, and people *did take place*, which illustrated the potential energy of the encounter (the Black Power/Black Panther movement being perhaps the most visible). But it is also remarkable to see that a certain barrier was never lifted. *Ideologically*, I would say with hindsight that this obstacle essentially was “really existing socialism” (the core of what Wallerstein calls the “Old Left”), because of its conservative geopolitical role in the world combined with its “monopoly” of the revolutionary language. Even the “New Left” (albeit not entirely) tended to think of its objective as a *restoration of the betrayed communist ideal*, in its ideal “purity” (Leninism). Therefore, it remained mired in the shadow of the

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6 Because I am keeping the French 68 as my main object of analysis, I may add the following: there was not only Vietnam, there was the silent trauma of the colonial war in Algeria, in which young men of all classes had been forced to help the ignoble and ultimately defeated rule of the bourgeois Republic, sometimes resisting it in various manners. Based on memory and reflection, I consider the after-effects of the Algerian war a key element to explain the spread of “contestation” among young French people (and some of their elders) in 68.

Old. And when it departed from this model, it tended to be (or become) reformist... This situation is crucial: in particular (combined with the dubious idea that China was a better ally for the Vietnamese people than the Soviet Union), it largely explains the prestige of the Chinese Cultural Revolution among young activists, because it was perceived at the same time as a demonstration of the possibility to rescue Leninism from its “statist” degeneracy, *and* a miraculous fusion of the three great struggles: anticapitalist, antiimperialist, anti-Stalinian...

However, the episode that perhaps, in its own specific character (with deep roots in a national history), best illustrates a virtual fusion of different emancipatory movements in the period is Salvador Allende's *Unidad Popular* in Chile. With hindsight, I consider it as the ultimate moment in the global chain of insurrections, not only because it resonates so tragically in the memory of my generation, but most importantly because it leads to articulating the question of “revolution” and the question of “counter-revolution” (which is my *second remark*).<sup>7</sup> Allende was elected president in November 1970 and killed in the American backed military coup of General Pinochet on September 11, 1973 (the “other 09/11”). But this is not an isolated event: it makes sense in the framework of what I will call the *post-68 counter-revolution*. In fact, the strongest indication that there is a *real* revolutionary element in the *virtual* encounter of several “antisystemic” movements in the 68 moment, is provided by the fact that an *organized counter-revolution* did take place to suppress these movements: clearly the ruling elites in the system took the challenge to their power very seriously. And the counter-revolution led to *radical changes* in the “economy”, the “politics” and the “ideology” of contemporary capitalism: in other terms it launched the transition to the kind of capitalism in which we live now. My thesis therefore is: “neo-liberalism” to an important extent is a post-68 development, a consequence of the strategy that capitalism invented to neutralize the forces coming to the fore in the 68 period, and to suppress the conditions that had made their convergence possible.<sup>8</sup> Without that strategy the *tendencies* in the global economy and the geopolitics that aimed at “modernizing” capitalism and “burying” the effects of socialist revolutions on the social conflicts within capitalism would not crystallize and cross a decisive threshold. It was in 68 namely that the last attempts at “democratizing” the socialist regimes from the inside were crushed, but at the same time it became clear for the outside that soviet-style

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7 There is something unjust in the statement placing the “end” of “Great 68” in 1973, because it seems to forget the “carnation revolution” in Portugal in 1974, the dismantling of the military junta in Greece the same year, etc. Let me admit that there is an element of abstraction in my picture. On the end of dictatorial regimes in Southern Europe, see Poulantzas 1975.

8 This thesis, apparently, has affinities with the controversial idea developed by Boltanski and Chiapello in their influential book, Boltanski and Chiapello 2005. I will return to their thesis below.

socialism no longer had capacities to change. Soon after, the West discovered the possibility to “play” on the Soviet-Chinese conflict to win positions in the anti-imperialist Third World itself. But 1973 is also such a symbolic date because it coincides with Nixon’s decision to impose a new financial and monetary standard on the world (decisively reversing the economic conditions of the “Keynesian” social compromise), and with the foundation of the “Trilateral Commission”, which planned the modernization of political and economic regimes in Japan, Europe, and America. *The “global doctrine” of the Trilateral is the systematized anti-68 ideology.*<sup>9</sup> In France, prominent members of the Trilateral Commission are Raymond Barre and Jacques Delors, close advisors and ministers of Presidents Giscard d’Estaing and Mitterrand, who put an end to traditional Gaullism.

3. Split Movements

In this new one, I want to explore a correlative question, which regards the articulation between forces and subjective “forms of consciousness” during the heydays of May 68: what we could call in Lukacsian idiom the “subject-object” of the revolt – focusing on the French pattern of *décalages* between the principal actors, with effects on the strategic dilemmas opposing them.

It is useful to have in mind here Marx’s argument in his essay on *The 18 Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). As we remember, Marx gives a dynamic picture of the confrontation between “classes” in the French society which, during the revolution, pass from “*Klasse an sich*” (simply characterized by the analogous situation of its members in terms of economic conditions, particularly their relationship to property) to “*Klasse für sich*” (which *collectively* plays a political role, defending a common interest and, directly or indirectly, expressing a common ideology). We should certainly see May 68 as a *new episode* in the long history of “class struggles in France”, where the “traditional” form of the State (what Marx articulated as *State power* and *State apparatus*) is at stake. The enormous *general strike* of 10 Million workers over more than one month (bypassing the model of 1936), is sufficient testimony of that. But there is more: in Marx’s description, a fundamental role (a negative one in his view, since it leads to the victory of the counter-revolution) is played by the fact that, in addition to the “organized” classes, an *external mass* of petit-bourgeois and particularly peasants (who are overwhelmingly represented in the army) come to the rescue of the state. The conflictual scheme, therefore, is not binary, but a confrontation of two “central” forces *plus* a “remainder” that proves decisive. I submit that a similar complexity, albeit following a different model, can be observed in the events from 68 in France. We must take it into account to understand

9 It is exposed in Huntington, Crozier and 1975. See the commentary by Offe 1984.

why in this episode formidable *class dimensions* are brought back to the political stage, where they had become partially invisible, and continuous splitting and shifting in the *representation of class “positions”* are displayed, creating *uncertainty* as to what is a “class politics”.

We may begin here with the vexed question of the “failed encounter” of the *working class* (the “subject” of the general strike) and the *student’s movement* (the “subject” of the confrontation with the police on the barricades, challenging the repressive apparatus of the State, around which other groups of teachers, artists and intellectuals also gravitate). What kind of “encounter” is that? Did it really take place, beyond a few (massive) street demonstrations and (minoritarian) “soviet-style” assemblies? There is permanent controversy on this point. According to Kristin Ross, “the principal idea of May was the union of the intellectual contestation with worker’s struggle”.<sup>10</sup> According to a more recent historian, Ludivine Bantigny, “one exaggerates the failed encounter, highlighting the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt closing its gates before the student’s troop, and forgetting the many discussions, the construction of barricades in common by students and young workers, the concrete solidarity...”<sup>11</sup> I propose a Deleuzian formula of *disjunctive synthesis*: the synthesis is real, the disjunction is also real, therefore the synthesis is not a *fusion*. It harbors a conflict, and other conflicts within the conflict, evolving in the conjuncture (very rapidly). We need to progressively approach this complexity.

*In the first place*, it is essential to maintain that *the encounter did really take place*, in practical forms. Beyond the common idea that the student’s revolt (initially, about liberties and living conditions in the residences of Nanterre-University) and their violent suppression by the state (the police closing the Sorbonne and beating the students in the Latin Quarter) “triggered” the general strike, I insist on the importance of *common demonstrations*, and above all shared practice, each in their style, of “*occupations*” in the factories and the schools (plus theaters, hospitals, etc.).<sup>12</sup> Add to this the crucial fact that neither workers nor students *remain isolated in the society*: this is perhaps the more interesting, since the massive *support* of families, local municipalities (particularly to compensate for the loss of salaries), shopkeepers, civil servants, artists, is what *isolates the government*, and what *connects* the disjointed participants in the movement in a dense network of solidarities. Last not least, all the participants are *negatively* (but strongly) united in a “friend vs foe” dynamic through their opposition to

10 Ross 2002, p. 11.

11 Bantigny 2018, p. 46.

12 As for the “trigger-effect”, it is also important to recall that in previous months, a number of resolute working-class movements (strikes, occupied factories) had taken place in important industrial places (Chantiers de l’Atlantique Saint-Nazaire in 67, Sud-Aviation in 68...)



a common adversary, which is the Gaullist regime: this is the “power of refusal” (*puissance de refus*) strongly emphasized by Blanchot, which the great demonstration on May 13 expressed in the slogan “10 ans ça suffit”.<sup>13</sup> The workers and the students have a common enemy since the former reject the “reform” of Social security, and the latter reject the “reform” of Universities, which are part of the same politics. But we must also absolutely take into account that this encounter is not between “fluid” or “inorganized” masses: the workers have strong unions, which doesn’t mean that every worker follows the union’s strategy, or that the union *imposes* their decision on the workers; the students are also organized, with associations and leaders (Cohn-Bendit, Sauvageot and several others). Their organizations don’t have the same ideology and the same demands; more profoundly the workers and the students don’t have the same *representation* of the society and its relationship to the State power. Even their practices of spontaneity and self-organization are not the same.

From the double fact of real convergence and heterogeneous forms of consciousness derive virtual tensions, which can be “negotiated” or, on the contrary, aggravated. There are undeniable echoes of the student’s “libertarian” spirit among the workers, just as there is a fascination for the traditions of the labour movement among the students. However, the bulk of the workers are not ready for a regime change, they grant primacy to a significant success in the struggle for better conditions of living and radical changes in the organization of labour and the internal discipline in the factory, which occasionally pushes them to overwhelming the trade union’s limited catalogue of demands. And the students combine their protest against poor conditions of study and life in the Universities with a rejection of “top down” pedagogy, and also with a moral critique of bourgeois family values, which is of little or no appeal for most workers. A strong mimetic rivalry, even a detestation, exists between the Communist party (controlling the national leadership of the CGT) and “leftist” groups which claim to be restoring a revolutionary use of Marxism. More interesting than the “theoretical” debates is the fact that, inside the CGT and the CFDT (the two major unions), an old tradition of “syndicalisme révolutionnaire” is revived against the “vertical” practice of organization (which presents itself, not without reasons, as a strategic necessity to confront a centralized and aggressive state-power). And more significant than the rhetorical dispute between reformist and revolutionary discourses, is the fact that a never resolved antagonism between ideals of *autonomy* and *self-management* (“autogestion”) and ideals of *centralized organization* (tracing back to the confrontation between anarchism and communism, Proudhon and Marx in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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13 “10 years is enough”: the time passed since the coup of 1958 calling De Gaulle back to power. See Blanchot 2018.

century) has been reopened. This internal dialectics of different forms of socialist ideology will continue after 68, in the discourses of “Programme Commun de Gouvernement”, the “Nouvelle Gauche” and “New Social Movements”. Both are alive, and it is profoundly mistaken to simply consider, as Slavoj Žižek does, that “the rhetoric of *autogestion* has been appropriated by capitalism”.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, the Communist party, whose leadership is governed by the imperative of limiting the independence of the social movement in order to preserve its own capacity of political (parliamentary) maneuver, can certainly aggravate the scissions, but it certainly does not *create the décalages*, which are inherent in the political traditions and the collective imaginary of the French society.

At this point, we may return to the question of the diversity of “subjects”. Marxian schemes are useful, but must be displaced. A major conflict of various social groups with the State which concentrates the “defense” of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist *patronat*, is implemented. But there will never exist a “fusion” of the anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist forces in a single “party of the movement” as in 1848 (where it produced a regime change). I find it very interesting to analyze this disjunctive synthesis, because it seems to have *equivalents in all of the major episodes of the 68 conjuncture in the world*, albeit always with a different composition and different relations of forces. This is particularly true if we compare the French 68 with its U.S. counterpart, where the working class as such is largely absent, and the question of political unity is played between the student movement and the autonomous struggle of African-American emancipation, newly invigorated by the emergence of Black Power and an increasingly radicalized Civil Rights campaign: they both oppose the Vietnam War and the power structure of U.S. imperialism, but they never really find a common language and a joint strategy.<sup>15</sup> It is thus tempting to suggest a *general rule*: everywhere in the world the 68 insurrections involve students, everywhere they raise the question of unification or fusion with another, broader or equivalent, social group or “class”, which is never the same (workers, peasants, people of color), and everywhere the disjunction remains within the synthesis, which affects the “political capacity” and survives the moment of active confrontation with the hegemonic power. To which immediately should be added that there is also a *remainder*, meaning a more or less “invisible” collective participant in the confrontation which is not “accounted for” in the previous dichotomies, but contributes to its political singularity,

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14 Žižek 2008. An after-effect of 68 where the idea of *autogestion* is best illustrated is the struggle of the Lip watch-factory to survive its liquidation by the capitalist owner (later strangled by the banks at the direct request of the Giscard d’Estaing government): see the movie *Les Lip, l’imagination au pouvoir*, by Christian Rouaud (Pierre Grise Distribution 2007).

15 There are significant episodes of “failed unification” taking place on campuses at Berkeley and Columbia in this respect.



in particular its radical democratic dimension (I will return to this). I submit that, in the French May 68, this “invisible component” is the nascent women’s liberation movement: what is sometimes called the “second wave” of historical Feminism. Its most visible initiatives and new organizations will emerge soon after 68, in the years 70 to 73 (when the protest against the criminalization of abortion becomes organized and defies the judiciary authority of the State). But the roots are in the active participation of women in the assemblies, talking groups and occupations of 68.<sup>16</sup> This is the *plus* (or “supplement”) that makes it decidedly impossible to simply discuss 68 in terms of the binary “workers-students”, however crucial it is in the immediate conjuncture (and, of course, there are women participating on both sides of the divide).

A review of this note therefore leads me to the conviction that, in the Marxist tradition, the model of an “analysis of the situation” is best found in the direction of “hegemonic conflict” between “historical blocs”, as it was elaborated by Gramsci and variously resurrected or varied in the aftermath of 68 by such thinkers as Nicos Poulantzas or Laclau and Mouffe: insisting on the circulation of conflict between the public and the private realm, and the plurality of heterogeneous agencies that can become alternatively united or disjunct. The strategic relationship to the State cannot be minimized, since agents are gathering against a *centralized* organization of power (therefore we will need to say more about the *specific figure of state power* that did exist in France and similar countries at the time). But the conflict is mainly played in the form of a generalized *politization of society*, which penetrates all (or many) particular institutions and “private” practices (what Althusser will call “Ideological State Apparatuses”), it abolishes or relativizes statutory barriers (such as technicians vs workers, or teachers vs students, even doctors vs patients...). Hence a tendency to return to “historic” figures of active citizenship and the autonomy of society which used to support a *popular* notion of the polity (as in the “Front Populaire”). However this politization is fragile, or it leaves room for a *reversal of the hegemonic tendency*, which can occur very rapidly, as was observed in June of 68, when the Gaullist power (who also claims a “popular” legitimacy of patriotic, if not nationalist origin) imposed and won the elections. This meant that it was no longer the “Movement” that was dissolving the “Order”, but the “Order” that was dissolving the “Movement” (to make use once again of categories reminiscent of the 1848 Revolution).

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<sup>16</sup> This is indeed a disputed point. Some feminists (like Geneviève Fraisse) argue that, since Women didn’t “speak” publicly in 68, it didn’t contribute to the new wave and the mutations of Feminism. Others like Michelle Perrot insist that their experience within the “movement” immediately generated a multiplicity of autonomous initiatives and an increase in collective consciousness that gained momentum in its aftermath. Observing the situation from a European point of view (mainly French and Italian), Mario Tronti has argued (in 2009) that Feminism is the only political Movement arising from 68 that has survived until today, without losing its strength or even continuously increasing it. I find this a very convincing assertion. See Brunerie-Kaufmann “2018.””

4. Why the strategic function of the School system?

Let me now return to the question of the “generational struggle” intersecting with the “class struggle”, from the angle of the contradictions that are concentrated in the educational system in 68, and could explain why the “students” became protagonists of a major “insurrectional” movement – not only nationally but transnationally. Should we consider in a quasi-Leninist terminology that the educational system had become a “weak link” of the institutional power system?

If we concentrate our attention on the French situation, one aspect is well-known (owing to the sociological analysis of Bourdieu and Passeron, in *Les Héritiers* (1964) and in *La reproduction* (1972), followed by numerous replicas and virulent refutations)<sup>17</sup>: since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the school system has been a strongly polarized one, where children from different social classes are educated in separate institutions, with Universities and higher professional schools almost entirely reserved for bourgeois children (including the “Noblesse d’Etat”, or the caste of State officials, which tends to become hereditary). But in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, after the implementation of “progressive” reforms (ultimately deriving from the *Front Populaire* educational policy and the social reforms at the end of WW II, known as *Libération*), a growing number of middle class and lower middle-class students enter the University, leading to a statistical explosion in the early 60s. At this point the class pedagogy based on the invisible “*habitus*” granted to bourgeois students by their cultural background becomes progressively untenable, just as the difference in financial resources among students explodes, and they clash with the official “republican” notion of the equal opportunity incorporated in the school system. This is the first visible causality. But another aspect generated a rebellious or even a revolutionary spirit among the 68 generation of students, which was the manner in which a pedagogy based on *discipline* reinforced the *patriarchic and paternalistic* model of dependency, the rigid system of authority that preserves the type of bourgeois family relations even in non-bourgeois families. At the same time students would “leave” the family and find themselves in the same old relationship to teachers and administrators... On this side it is not directly a class domination that gets into crisis, but a dominant social norm (or “normality”) configuring a major *anthropological difference* (namely “age”, separating adults and teenagers, who are in fact already young adults themselves, with autonomous social, political, cultural consciousness).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It should be recalled here that *Les Héritiers* is one of the two essays which have actually permeated the subjective consciousness of revolting students in 68, the other – from a completely different angle – being the “situationist” pamphlet *De la Misère en milieu étudiant* from 1966.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, there is not one single “reading” of this conflict about *normality*: no wonder if it will become a major object of discussion and elaborations on the side of “post-68” philosophical and

This is not “directly” class domination, but is it not *indirectly*? In fact, what appears to be at stake here is also, and perhaps above all, a new understanding of the category “class”, with its social and political dimensions. I must leave this largely open, but I will tentatively introduce two working hypotheses. One of them is relatively classical in part of the Marxist tradition itself. The other one contradicts this tradition and owes more to Bourdieu (or a radical reading of his work), but acquires an increasing urgency in today’s society. What is relatively classical but often neglected is the fact that we must not simply identify a *bourgeois hegemony* with the domination of the *capitalist mode of production*, under the simple reason that the “bourgeoisie” is the ruling class of capitalism. The power of the bourgeoisie is cultural and political as much as an economic function, its historical characteristics do not simply derive from the property of capital.<sup>19</sup> The “anthropological” norms are thus distributed on both sides (rules of morality and cultural “distinction” on one side, division of manual and intellectual labor on the other side). Whenever I tried to “explain” the atmosphere of 68 to a younger audience, I have often repeated that the “bourgeoisie” against which the revolt was directed no longer exists today: it has been all but eliminated in the 70’s and 80’s, in favor of managerial expertise and ostensible “superwealth” with no cultural pretense. This is what is triumphant now with Trump... But then arrives, on the other side, a more debatable issue, concerning the mechanisms of *class subjection*. In the standard Marxian view (which the Althusserian use of the concept of “reproduction” largely retained), these mechanisms are rooted, “in the last instance”, in the relationship of exploitation within the labour process: the “reproduction” is a reproduction of *the labour force*; other antagonisms or processes of unequal distributions, however important to stabilize the system, are just consequences of the first. I believe that 68 begun to demonstrate something very different (that, in a sense, Bourdieu grasped better): namely that division of labor and wages are only *one determination of class*, whereas *distribution of cultural and educational goods* – and probably also racial discriminations in the postcolonial “multicultural” world – form another, *no less determining*, defining feature of class. Thus 68 did express a class determination, but rather than attributing its “deviant” or “exceptional” aspects to *external factors* irreducible to class, or to a phenomenon of “intersectionality”, we had better acknowledge that it prompted a change and a complexification of our understanding of the phenomenon we call “class” (soon to become theorized by the dominant ideology under the name “human capital”).

This means that we have to interpret new layers of contradictions

sociological elaborations: primarily Foucault, but also Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan, Bourdieu, Althusser and the emergent feminist theory (Irigaray, Guillaumin, MLF).

19 See Therborn 1978.

(or tensions) within the “people” who gathers in May 68 against the “system”. Protests within and about the functions of the school are strategic *not only* because it is a central piece in the hegemonic machinery of the bourgeoisie, but because they touch a process generating class distinctions and power relations *per se*. In a moment when capitalism and imperialism are strongly delegitimized, students are revolting against the roles of managers and ideologists that the bourgeois education assigns them in the future, but they are also fearful of “intellectual proletarianization”. Above all, their revolt is likely to go into opposite directions (just as the strikes on their side call for a renewal of the old antithesis of self-organization and quantitative redistribution), and this is exactly what we can observe in May (and after): on the one side, there is an intense pressure for a “democratization” of the educational system that intensifies the “popular” demand inherited from the socialist tradition (opening universities to the children of working classes, and implement a more comprehensive, more participative pedagogy), at the other extreme we find the *anti-pedagogic* discourse (which was perfectly expressed some years later in the work of Rancière), which stresses the antinomy between radical egalitarianism and any “Master (teacher) – Disciple (student)” hierarchy. Or we find the idea of “deschooling society” (formulated by Ivan Illich, one of the most influential theorists at the time, travelling between Europe and the Americas).<sup>20</sup> The incidence of this division is anything but negligible on the tensions between workers and students (or intellectuals) mentioned above. I am not at all convinced that a simple “class determinism” is at work here, but I submit that a working class – no longer the “self-taught” proletarians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – whose potential recognition as a class of producers and citizens has been suspended for decades to the development of technical education and accessing “general culture” would have little interest in meeting with “ignorant masters” or in “deschooling society”. Not counter-pedagogy is their primary objective, but mass admission in schools of higher education. This story is not finished, however, because we observe today an intense privatization of education and a form of technocratic selection of elites (soon to be compounded with the introduction of “artificial intelligence” in training programs), which largely renders obsolete the terms of this debate..<sup>21</sup>

20 See Rancière 1987/1991; Illich 1971. There are other radical critiques of pedagogy in this period: especially noteworthy is the work of Fernand Deligny, which combines the critique of traditional pedagogy with that of psychiatric order applied to “autistic” children: see the new complete edition of his works by Sandra Alvarez de Toledo, in Deligny 2007.

21 At this point, it should be possible to develop a critical reading of the antithesis between *critique sociale* and *critique artiste* which provoked the controversy after the publication of the book on *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005), in which it is argued that the latter, more developed among the student movement, and focusing on “alienating effects” of the bourgeois culture rather than economic and professional inequalities, was “recuperated” after 68 (together with some of its bearers) by the modernist bourgeoisie which used it to substitute “self-

## 5. A crisis of the “national social state”

Until now, I have tried to include in the analysis several dimensions which are correlative but cannot be “fused” in a single scheme of interpretation: a global “transnational” phenomenon of contagion rooted in structural developments of the “world-system”; the idea that actors in the French “movement” are displaying at the same time a deep solidarity and strong internal tensions; finally the idea that everywhere students are among the protagonists not only because their consciousness crystallizes many currents of generational revolt, but also because they find themselves at the heart of a historical trouble in the constitution and the representation of “class”. Each time a relationship to the State and its position in the game of institutions and subjectivities is involved. I must try to be more specific on this.

Some years ago, with an intention to clarify the degree of *nationalist ideology* that is involved in resistances (or resentments) against the dismantling of *social security* and *social rights* in our neoliberal economy, I coined the expression: *the national-social State*, to name a State in which rights to education, to medicare, to welfare, to pensions, even to minimum wages, are conditioned by national membership, which thus becomes *legitimized* by its socially “progressive” function.<sup>22</sup> Such a State was progressively constructed over one century, marked by acute episodes of class struggle, wars, even revolutions. It became institutionalized in the form of a “social contract” or a “historical compromise” (e.g. the “Beveridge plan” in Britain), that was never absolutely stable (since it is threatened both from the inside and the outside: social unrest, demographic transformations, financial difficulties; or brutal changes in the place of the country’s economy on the world market)<sup>23</sup>; nevertheless

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discipline” to Taylorism in the management of production and, more generally, labor, thus turning the edge of the critique against the truly disadvantaged. There are analogies between this sophisticated analysis and the idea that the “spirit of 68” was ultimately a bourgeois individualism preparing for the triumph of neo-liberal economics, as in Debray or Žižek... I cannot deny that this seems to go in the same direction as my previous idea that neoliberalism arises out of the *counterrevolution* (or “revolution from above”) provoked by 68. A “recuperation” is a modality of counterrevolution, very important in history. However, there seems to be a confusion here, which touches the meaning of “individualism”: left libertarians can become right libertarians, but the element of *absolute competition* (a part of “absolute capitalism”) has to be injected in the ideology. It is not there in “autogestion” or “autonomy”. See Querrien 2004.

<sup>22</sup> See in particular Balibar 2014 and 2015.

<sup>23</sup> At the very point where internal and external tensions intersect arises, of course, the destabilization of the “Keynesian” model of national economy and the “Fordist” organization of labor, where the increase of productivity and the continuous intensification of labour was compensated for by real wages remaining stable and a moderate level of unemployment: see in particular Trentin 2014/2012. Italian “workerism” has particularly insisted on the fact that the crisis of Fordism leads to a situation of “civil war” within the factory system, which in turn creates conditions for a combination of class struggles and revolutionary activism that didn’t exist to the same degree in France: this was the so-called “protracted May” (*Maggio rampante*). But this was also the situation on which the Italian communist party tried to base its “Eurocommunist” strategy of “historical compromise”, fatally crushed by the armed confrontation between the State and the Red Brigades.

it proved remarkably resilient over decades in the post-War period. We may consider that May 68 marked a deep crisis of this form of State in the form it had been granted by the “Gaullist regime” - shaking its legitimacy, its mode of “government”, its social bases. However the fact is that the “political defeat” of the insurrection in June of 1968 made it possible for the National-Social State to gain a renewed stability in the successive years: this was achieved at the cost of significant compromise (on the battlefield of social rights and social policies, and the academic reforms), but also by means of a rather violent suppression of “leftist” organizations trying to perpetuate or regenerate the insurrectional spirit of 68. Interestingly, the “historical compromise” seemed to have become most stable with the retreat of the post-Gaullist political leadership, when the “Union of the Left” under Mitterrand, with its “Programme Commun” influenced by the Communist Party, incorporating many of the hopes and energies of the “sixty-eighters”, came to power in 1981. But in the end, this proved to be a Pyrrhic victory: as I suggested above, a “counterrevolution” was under way, officially declared in 1973 and decisively advanced twenty years later, after the end of the Cold War. Therefore 68 marked at the same time a new impulsion, a suspension and a germ of destruction for the National-Social State. It is my intention now to indicate in a schematic manner how this may account for some paradoxical aspects of the 68 movements, particularly its combination of *defensive* and *offensive* orientations.<sup>24</sup>

The primacy of the “national-social” function of the State is extremely visible at the core of the 68 events, all the more because the French State is highly personalized (De Gaulle’s presidency was continuously deemed “pouvoir personnel” by its adversaries). When the President is forced to leave France for Germany (apparently to prepare a new military “coup” in legal form), a Prime Minister who typically incarnates the merging of higher administration and financial interests (Pompidou) takes command of the government’s strategy. And when it is a question of transforming an electoral victory, which expressed the fear and anger of the conservative “deep country”, into a stable neutralization of the student’s contestation, it is a seasoned politician from the 50’s and 60’s (Edgar Faure) who becomes Minister of the Education to implement a revised reform of Universities, establishing formal “autonomy” and student’s “participation” in their administration (very symbolically). Thus, we may consider as exemplary demonstrations of the political capacities

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<sup>24</sup> In this very schematic account, I say nothing of the *European* dimensions of the history of the National-Social State. The French ruling elite, with an increasingly explicit “pro-European” commitment (from De Gaulle to Giscard to Mitterrand), was certainly aware of the interdependency of the National and the European power institutions. The “contestation” itself, on the other side, was completely National, even when it launched and received signals of “internationalist” solidarity (more with the Third World than with Europe – a student’s leader like Daniel Cohn-Bendit being a remarkable exception).



of the State the Grenelle negotiations leading to the new legislation of labor at the end of the strikes, and the foundation of the “Université expérimentale de Vincennes” (where Faure invites Michel Foucault and other “anti-conformist” academics to create a special place for political expression inside the academia). In a recent essay (quoted above) Anne Querrien describes Grenelle as “triangulating industrials, State, and trade unions”, but it is the State which provides the legal framework, while the industrials are momentarily disarmed, and the unions have the workers on strike in their back. At Vincennes, in the fall of 1968 and the following years, the question is never settled whether the university will provide militant groups with a “red base” to plan interventions in the society and develop their theoretical education, or engage in a deep *aggiornamento* of academic disciplines based on structuralism, Marxism, feminism, critical sociology, psychoanalysis. In fact, it is both, in a permanent disequilibrium. But it is the State that, ultimately, defines the limits.

The class struggle in May 68 therefore has a *defensive character*, because it anticipates a planned degradation of the social state (already apparent in the project of expelling trade union representatives from the administration of social security funds, which provided a strong motive to launch the strike nationally) and seeks to guard it, by including new protections for labor (such as “échelle mobile”: an automatic adjustment system of wages following the inflation rate) and new forms of recognition of the worker’s representation in the factories. It acquires an *offensive character*, more directly threatening the capitalist power on labor, when it challenges the Taylorist division of labour which makes the factory seem like a prison, and the “despotism” of industrial management of mass production, particularly through the mobilization of unskilled workers (who often are women and migrants) - a movement which will continue long after the 68 general strike, but also meet with violent repression inside the factories, paving the way for the introduction of a new “personalized” control of the productivity of labour, substituting self-control (and financial incitement) to the standardized mass discipline of labour (which existed both in capitalism and soviet-style socialism).<sup>25</sup> On this point, a conflict of tendencies existed within all trade unions, but the “Christian” CFDT was more receptive to the *offensive* orientation of class struggles, at least locally, because of its greater affinities with the Proudhonian tradition of *autogestion* (as in the case of the Lip factory) – before this became incorporated in a more technocratic ideology of the

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 25 The critique of Taylorism as a form of slavery is classical in sociology since Friedmann 1947 and 1956 and the *Journal d'usine* by the philosopher Simone Weil (1934-35) whose echoes are perceptible in Linhart 1978. See also Linhart 1976. A typical slogan in the 68 strike was: “Ne dites plus travail, dites baigne” (don’t say labor, say penitentiary). On the ambiguous “end of Taylorism” after 68, see Bruno Trentin 2014.

“modernization of capitalism”.<sup>26</sup>

I believe that these movements in opposite directions make sense beyond a mere opposition of leadership, tactics and ideologies, which is to be found in any collective historical event (including revolutions), provided they are located in the more general framework of a crisis of the national-social State, and the tension between attempts at renewing it and tendencies at liquidating it, which will powerfully emerge in the wake of 68, as a replica to its own revolutionary tendencies. In the end the confrontation will have paved the way for a transition into a completely different form of capitalism, where the State itself is not so much the “arbitrator” of social conflicts in a national framework (therefore, as Nicos Poulantzas, in particular, rightly insisted, a stake and a place of their development)<sup>27</sup> than the intermediary of the global markets (increasingly so with its dependency on financial markets). But this is not a one-day achievement: in this respect 68 only marks the entry into a transition phase. Therefore, it marks also the beginning of a phase in which the issue of *left politics* (which objectives, which “practices”, which forms of organization, or choices between organization and spontaneity) is widely open.

## 6. “Politics” or “politics”?

It is a very striking fact that the *theoretical discussion* on the notion of politics and the “concept of the political” was recreated after 68 (in France and elsewhere), especially on the Left, with a wide variety of antithetic positions, combining the critical reading of classical texts (from Machiavelli, La Boétie, Hobbes or Spinoza, to Weber, Sorel, Lenin, Gramsci, Schmitt, etc.) with a direct reflection on contemporary issues. All determinations of the global situation are involved in the debate – with a special insistence on the crisis of Socialist regimes (therefore the party-State identification) and the new egalitarian and libertarian impulses revealed in the May events. Such names as Rancière, Lefort, Castoriadis, Laclau and Mouffe, Poulantzas, Rosanvallon, Foucault himself through his “genealogical” analyses of politics as “war” and disciplinary institutions (later “governmentality”) come to mind, but also Althusser (whose major texts however remained unpublished), Italian *operaisti* theorists (Tronti and Negri), German “left Habermassian” (Negt and Kluge, Offe), etc. Such questions as the identity of the “political subject”, the “party form”, or the nature of the “political event” come

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 26 A comparison between class struggles in France and Italy, the “twin countries” of mass Communism and “conflictual” trade-unionism in Western Europe, is very interesting. Italian trade unions are more advanced in terms of offensive strategies against the “fordist” organization of labor, therefore come closer to a “revolutionary threshold” (without crossing it), because they insert into conflicts in the productive process the revival of the *consigli di fabbrica*, the Italian equivalent of Soviets in 1919 (see Trentin 1977).

27 Poulantzas 1978.



to the fore. They seem to extend from an extreme *institutionalist* to an extreme *anti-institutionalist* position in the definition of “emancipatory politics”, with the possibility of a “dialectical” synthesis (as advocated particularly by Poulantzas) somewhat insecure. Let us note that these alternatives have not disappeared in today’s political theory, although they seem increasingly obsessed by the general *withering away of the political* that is produced by neoliberalism (which calls it “governance”). To situate these debates is both a necessity to identify our immediate past, and a key to the understanding of what makes the importance of 68 in contemporary history.

I have recalled Rancière’s thesis: “it is the Left that buried May 68” (or its political inspiration). What he has in mind are the policies of the Socialist and Communist “Programme Commun” after 1981, in other terms he sees the project of those militants who had been active in 68 to counteract the new technocratic modernization (incarnated by Giscard and Barre, and essentially following the inspiration of the Trilateral Commission) by setting up a “left reformism” from above, as a blatant absurdity.<sup>28</sup> The succession of “retreats” beginning with the turn towards austerity of the Mitterrand government in 1983, and the “centrist turn” (*recentrage*) of the “second left” (Maire, Rocard, Rosanvallon), confirm his view... But the reverse question is worth asking: why is it that (except in the abstraction of philosophical discussions) the Left with all its internal multiplicity was not able to devise a consistent alternative politics (and conception of politics)? Or should we say that this impression derives from the fact that we don’t look in the right direction (being obsessed by State and anti-State definitions of the political)? These are crucial questions for the understanding of 68 and its legacies. I will look in three directions: the “anti-authoritarian revolt”, the “becoming political of the non-political”, and the exercise of public discourse.

Undoubtedly, *anti-authoritarian revolt* is a general characteristic of *all* components in 68. It takes the form of a constant interpellation – or rather, “counter-interpellation” – of power, which Ludvine Bantigny has rightly called a phenomenon of “social dis-obedience” – the exact object of the conservatives’ horror (de Gaulle called it “la chienlit”, or the crapper). This is enough to explain the post-68 relevance of the issue of “power” and “resistance”, particularly in the work of Foucault and under his influence. However, there are several problems associated with the general use of this concept. One of them comes from the fact that power has many forms: should they become ultimately reduced to a single “authoritarian” pattern, in accordance with the project of “generalized

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28 Without entering unnecessary details, it is worth recalling here that the French-European power elite, increasingly intertwined with multinational interests, was happy to rally behind De Gaulle when he used what remained of his prestige to defeat the Left in the 1968 elections, but rapidly pushed him aside and installed in the Presidency men more directly linked to the new capitalist project (Pompidou, Giscard).

struggle” (*globalization des luttes*), or retain an essential multiplicity? After looking in the first direction, expressed in his retrieval of the pattern of Bentham’s “panopticon”, which led him to writing: “schools resemble hospitals, which resemble barracks, which resemble factories, and they all resemble prisons”<sup>29</sup>, Foucault seems to have decidedly moved towards the second, while in particular emphasizing the importance of law. On the contrary, with their notions of “registration” and “territorial codification of desire”, applicable both to the Oedipal family order and the capitalist “productive machine” (*Anti-Oedipus*, 1972), Deleuze and Guattari provided a general language (however sophisticated, with its distinction of “macropolitics” and “micropolitics”) for the unitary hypothesis. This is not without effects on the other big problem, namely how does a technocratic “governmentality” proceed to neutralize or integrate resistances. In the work of Lefort and others (Deleuze and Guattari can be counted on that side) the old notion of “voluntary servitude” (La Boétie) is reprised, whereas Foucault and Rancière decidedly reject it, arguing that, where there is power, there is always also resistance. But, for Foucault, power can (even must) permanently build itself on resistances.

*Becoming political of the “non-political”*. This is best illustrated by the post-68 feminist slogan: “*le privé est politique*” (the personal is political). It seems to *invert* the famous definition of politics in Machiavelli (*The Prince*, chap. 8) as an individual’s transition from “private” to “public person”. However, I would not identify it with a reversal of the political into *the social*, because the “social” activities are *politicized* among many others: *domestic, cultural and artistic, pedagogic, economic...* This means both that any of these activities ceases to be *protected from the political* (in a quasi-Schmittian sense: conflict, antagonism), and that the political itself crosses its institutional *boundaries* or *excesses* them (in French I would speak of *débordement*, which includes intellectualization or ideologization, collectivization, urbanization, and moving to the everyday).<sup>30</sup> We can easily enumerate the “non-political” institutions which become politicized through discussions and contestation of authority: schools, universities, churches, patriarchic families, prisons, hospitals, etc. The militant and intellectual activities of the *Groupe Information Prisons* founded by Foucault, Deleuze, Domenach, and young Maoist activists in 1971 perfectly illustrates this *débordement*. But we must also identify the contradictions it harbors. In the wake of the work of Henri Lefebvre (*Le droit à la ville*, 1967) and militant architects (many of them communists), also inspired by the example of Italian thinkers like Tafuri, “utopian” projects of urban transformation, both

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29 Foucault 1975.

30 In Max Weber, moving to the everyday (*Veralltäglichung*) is seen as a routinization of politics; in 68 it is just the opposite: an essential form of politization.

social and political, flourished after 68 (later culminating in the *Banlieues 89* movement): however they lacked the capacity of curbing or breaking the administrative and financial complex, in particular because they had no counterpart in a mass movement in impoverished “banlieues”. Even more crucial is the question of the *politicization of the economy*: Italian Marxists, however antithetic (Tronti, Trentin) have argued that the 68 struggles (strikes, occupations, rebellion of the “mass worker” in the factory) irreversibly challenged the *separation of the economic and the political* (of course, the Italian *consigli di fabbrica* are more typical in this respect than the French “section syndicale d’entreprise”). We are back to the question of “counter-revolution”: since the whole strategy of capitalist management after 68 is a strategy of *active depoliticization* of labor relations, which also involves resisting the expansion of labor legislation, later smashing it (especially after 1989, with the help of European legislation).<sup>31</sup> For sure, to “depoliticize” is a highly *political* process, but entirely *one-sided*.

I want to conclude this quick *aperçu* of the “politics of 68” with the most important element, in a sense, because it *activates* all the others: the new function of *discourse* in the public sphere (not the “parliamentary” sphere, but the “civic” realm in general). In a famous statement, which immediately followed the May uprising itself, Jesuit historian and philosopher Michel de Certeau wrote that “en mai dernier on a pris la parole comme on a pris la Bastille en 1789” (in last May the people captured speech as it captured the Bastille in 1789).<sup>32</sup> This formula may sound emphatic: in fact it “captures” itself the reality of what is taking place during one month (sometimes more) in the various “places” where the movement develops itself, taking multiple forms (among which we should not forget the *artistic* ones). By definition this is a *momentary* phenomenon (with later replicas, such as the Feminist “groupes de parole”, or *speaking groups*, and the lively conversations in some universities). It is momentary, but not *superficial*, even less a simple form of “bavardage” or *empty speech*, as was immediately denounced by neo-conservative thinkers (Lipovetsky in *L’ère du vide*<sup>33</sup>, where the 68 discussions are associated with the unbridled individualism of the consumer’s society), and now claimed by some anarchist writers who denigrate the “assembly” movements where the legacy of 68 is revived.<sup>34</sup> I believe that the “speech” that was captured in 68, with all its obvious fragilities and redundancies, indicates the exact opposite of a surrender

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31 Supiot 1999 (revised edition 2016).

32 Certeau “1968. See *Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, University of Minnesota Press 1997.

33 Lipovetsky 1983

34 Comité Invisible, *Maintenant*, Editions La Fabrique, 2017.

to the culture of mass-consumption and mass-media, increasingly commercialized in the new capitalist era. It is not a form of “voluntary servitude”, but an attempted *transgression* of the “calibrated” rules of communication. This is probably not enough to completely disorganize a class rule, or even overcome the structural divisions in the society which, as I suggested, produce a “disjunctive synthesis” of movements in 68. Myriads of questions are pending, such as the question of *language*, even the question of *common ideals* after which a transgression of the barriers separating “parts” of the society is attempted, and partially achieved. I venture also the idea that the paradox (and in a sense the tragedy) of “leftist” organizations was that they sought to remedy the *historical failure* of the Communist Party (and the “party form” in general) to create a “horizontal” community among militants of different education and profession, in a *radicalization of the party’s rhetoric* (the “Marxist-Leninist” language), which they thought was a restoration of its original purity. But that does not cancel the importance of the general phenomenon, or its exemplarity.

I conclude – provisionally - that the importance of 68 in the realm of politics essentially resides in providing an example of a genuinely “democratic moment”, which is *radical* in several complementary meanings: it is *extra-legal* to various degrees (which justifies the name “insurrection”, not to be confused with a violent armed uprising: rather it *resists* violence); it is a clear vindication of what we now call, in a generalized Arendtian terminology, a “right to have rights” (which is very clear for social rights and less simple for educational rights)<sup>35</sup>; it conducts an experimentation, not only of “direct democracy”, but of *democracy in the present* (whereas, in a sense, “representative democracy” is always democracy *postponed*, it is a democratic “investment”). This is the most profound reason why *political parties*, in particular the Communist Party, whose function (as theorized already by Engels after the Paris Commune) is to “spare” or “accumulate” social solidarity (including class solidarity), are taken by surprise, and try to “slow down” the movement in order to “organize” it, and to define the “successive steps” of its “long term program”. There certainly were programmatic ideas in 68, but what is typical is not a solidarity constructed *over time*, it is a *solidarity in the moment of action* (which can be speech...), a “conjunctural solidarity”.<sup>36</sup> In such radical democratic moment we find indeed many discourses expressed (socialist, communist, anarchist, surrealist, utopian, civic or even republican), therefore a *dispersion* is in order, reproducing at a

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35 On Arendt’s “empathy” with the French 68 Movement, see Fauré “”2018.

36 Althusser’s hesitations are very interesting here: when he combines a reflection on the crisis of the Communist party’s strategy (the “programme commun”, the “*compromesso storico*”) linked to a *governmental* project (in France, Italy, Spain) with an afterthought on the legacy of 68, he creates the ideal figure of the “parti hors Etat” (*party without the State*), which is probably a myth.

distance the *splitting* of the groups and interests themselves. This is *per se* a figure of “subjectivation”, which has no single denomination, but is not at all deprived of agency. Above all, as I said in the beginning, it *leaves a trace*: more than a memory, less than a constitution. Perhaps, for us today, in the moment when a generation withers away, and another one begins to try its ideas and forces, this is the most significant “afterlife”.

7. A “cultural revolution”?

This last one is not a conclusion, since I want to leave more questions open than answered: rather it is an *afterthought*, when I realize that an idea is latent that was not explicitly discussed, or simply exposed in the previous notes. This is an interpretation of “May 68” as essentially a “cultural revolution”, which perhaps – depending on how we understand the meaning of “cultural” - would extend to the “broad and global” 68, but was primarily invoked for the French May 68. The meaning could fluctuate between the idea that, as a revolution, 69 essentially took place in the realm of *culture*, and the idea that it was performed by *cultural means*, now applied to the object of politics, or social change.

I quoted authors who have different views on this point (and there are certainly others): Wallerstein believes that 68 dramatically affected the “geo-culture” of the world system, by which he means the representation of “systemic” and “anti-systemic” forces at the global level, therefore granting the idea essentially a geopolitical meaning; Rancière believes that 68 was a moment of “political metamorphosis” in the sense of breaking with the domination of *institutional politics* (which he prefers to call “police”) through imagining the politics of equality, which involves a new *perception of the society* by its own subjects (a new “*partage du sensible*”); Boltanski and Chiappello call the rejection of the fetishism of commodities in the capitalist society a *critique artiste*, by which they mean that this critique emphasizes an incompatibility between the utilitarian logic and the aesthetic dimension of art, and that it mainly expresses the aspirations of a “cultivated” social group where artists themselves are like “organic” intellectuals; Blanchot combines the *puissance de refus*, or absolute negativity, of May 68 with an idea of realized utopia, whereby “extraordinary things happen in the streets”, therefore a moment of anonymous creativity.<sup>37</sup> Not all these formulations are equally relevant in my view. What I want to retain in the first place is

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<sup>37</sup> I leave aside many authors. Castoriadis is just as relevant as Rancière and Blanchot. He provides a good counterpoint to the Boltanski-Chiappello thesis, by stressing that certain forms of individualism are not incompatible with solidarity, or even incarnate communist ideals (see Castoriadis 1987/1977). Althusser’s “mass ideological revolt of the students” (see Althusser 2018) seems to attribute the autonomization of the “cultural” dimension to the “separation” between the students’ movement and the working class, which is not incompatible with the idea of *critique artiste*. Interestingly, a reference to Baudelaire (hailed by Benjamin as inventor of the notion of “modernity”) is also insistent in Foucault, particularly in his attempts at transforming the idea of critique into an “aesthetics of the self” (see Foucault 1985).

their insistent reference to an *aesthetic dimension* of the French 68.

Actually, it would be preferable to speak of a *poetic* dimension, rather than aesthetic. We run the risk of endorsing a mythical representation of the event, but it should be noted immediately that great social movements inevitably generate their own internal myths (Marx knew that perfectly, as illustrated in *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire*, although he was ambivalent on its political effects). Perhaps the formula that, *during* the event, best captured this poetic dimension was the idea of the “fusion” of the Marxian motto (“transforming the world”) and the motto from Rimbaud “changing life”, which the young *soixante-huitards* inherited from the Surrealist “revolution” in the 1930’s, itself in close vicinity to the other memorable General Strike (*Front Populaire*).<sup>38</sup> To invoke a “poetic” dimension makes it possible to highlight a sharp contrast with any *aestheticization of politics*, which always keeps the idea that a centralized political agency (whether a State or a party) has conferred an “artistic quality” upon collective mobilizations, enrolling artists for this special task. This was not the case in 68, when writers, painters, moviemakers, directors and actors participated in “interventions”, or tried to give a voice to the collective affects. Graphic posters of the “Atelier des Beaux-Arts” and photographic pictures of “Agence Gamma” (some of which remain iconic emblems of the confrontation with the police), movies like “*La reprise du travail aux Usines Wonder*” made by students of the IDHEC school (later praised by Jacques Rivette as “the only interesting film on 68”), Ariane Mnouchkine’s *Théâtre du Soleil* perhaps more than the *Living Theater’s* “happenings” (my personal taste...), or the postponed short novel by Robert Linhart, *L’établi* (with its poignant echo of the Maoist’s attempt at “joining the proletariat” in taking blue collar jobs in automobile factories) immediately come to my mind. They are always situated on the frontier of personal experiences and collective engagement, displaying its very flexibility. They also illustrate the intellectual and affective consequences of “politicizing the non-political”, inventing new democratic practices. Because of the rapid change in the relationship of forces between insurrection and restoration of order, they are often characterized by the juxtaposition of enthusiasm, a joyful empowerment, and tragic frustration.

If this is the correct tonality to be remembered, two critical remarks are in order. In the first place, May 68 as a “cultural revolution” is profoundly antithetic to the events with the same name that took place in China during the previous years, which largely acted as a delusion, however enthusiastically endorsed by some intellectuals who had no idea

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<sup>38</sup> In his intervention before the 1935 *International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture*, poet Paul Eluard speaking in the name of the Surrealist group famously exclaimed: “”Transformer le monde”, a dit Marx; “changer la vie”, a dit Rimbaud: ces deux mots d’ordre pour nous n’en font qu’un”. This was a favorite phrase of Henri Lefebvre and the Situationnistes, and was often quoted in 68 and after.



of what it really was, even when they travelled to Beijing or Shanghai. It is not a “Great Cultural Revolution” ultimately orchestrated by the State Power (or by a fraction of that State Power against another one, making use of the anti-authoritarian aspirations of young students and workers, in order to destabilize and eliminate their adversaries). Above all it is not characterized by the anti-intellectualist and iconoclastic element that was to triumph over other forms of critique of the “division of manual and intellectual” labor and the “monopoly of culture” in the hands of the elites during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, leading to the coercive and humiliating “re-education” programs of intellectuals and the imposition of the most simplistic slogans in the name of the “service of the people” (the *Little Red Book*). There are clearly elements of “counter-culture” or rejection of “official” art, education and culture in 68, but, strikingly enough, they are oriented towards greater diversity rather than ideological uniformity.<sup>39</sup>

It is worth asking again, in such conditions, whether the model that best corresponds to the case we are discussing is not the Gramscian model of “hegemony” (even an incipient hegemony, that was prematurely defeated, but could be retrieved in other conditions). There are several reasons hinting in that direction: not least the fact that, particularly in France (which had been notoriously deaf to the importance of the Gramscian legacy)<sup>40</sup>, the post 68 period witnessed an intense discussion about his notions of “war of position” and “organic intellectuality”, which are seen as the post-Marxist foundation of the the new idea of the socialist transition as a strategy of “expansive democracy”. Whether Eurocommunism is a legitimate heir of the 68 insurrection or, conversely, a contribution to its burial, remains a hotly debated question, which indicates that there is not *one* 68 (see above). What remains unquestionable, however, is the fact that the Gramscian inspiration and the Maoist teachings were seen in this context as two sides of a fundamental dilemma.<sup>41</sup> To which we may add the interesting fact that intellectual circles of the “New Right” (later to irrigate a significant part of the nationalist revival in France) consistently claimed to be

39 I cannot understand how my friend Alain Badiou defends the idea that May 68 in France is essentially an echo of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, except if this is a way to assert his unmovable conviction that Maoism represents the “absolute truth” of (and in) the century... (See Badiou 2018) This is not to say that early episodes of the “Cultural revolution” did not plant profound seeds of revolt and democratic spirit in China: they were particularly visible ten years later in Wei Jinsheng’s *dazibao* on the “Fifth Modernization” (1978), and after another ten years, in the demonstrations on Tien An Men square (1989).

40 The « failed reception” of Gramsci’s thought in France in the postwar period (with notable exceptions, including Sartre, Lefebvre, and later Althusser) is now elucidated by Anthony Cr  z  gut (forthcoming)

41 There is one exception to this, which won some recognition at the time, due to the exuberant personality of the author: Macciocchi’s 1974, which declares a fusion of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

“Gramscians of the Right”, reversing his methodology in the sense of preventive counter-revolution.<sup>42</sup> I would not pursue this line entirely, however, for the very same reason that leads me to picturing the “politics” that emerges in 68 as a *democracy in the present*: whereas the Chinese “cultural revolution” was supposed to *follow upon* a political revolution and rectify its internal deviations (or “bourgeois” tendencies, entrenched in the State apparatus and the party itself), and the Gramscian “transformation of the common sense” of the masses is supposed to *precede* and *prepare for* a conquest of power in a non-dictatorial form, the revolution within culture in 68 is strictly *concomitant* to the insurrection, and essentially immanent to its operations (occupations, in particular). It has the same strengths and weaknesses as the insurrection itself. What I called the poetic dimension of 68 becomes therefore a component of a “transvaluation of the dominant values”, which also includes the critique of bourgeois morality (unevenly shared by the participants, as we have seen).<sup>43</sup> Needless to say, such propositions do not *simplify* our understanding of the event: rather, they add to the difficulty of choosing between a positive view of 68 as a “revolution in the revolution”, and a negative view as a “revolution without a revolution”, which in the end leaves things unchanged, or paves the way for a recuperation of revolt and a reversal of the historic tendency.<sup>44</sup>

Before I give a tentative answer to this question, let me emphasize that – like the event itself as a multiplicity of actions assembled into a “disjunctive synthesis” – the languages in which a poetic and moral “transvaluation” is attempted are multiple: they range from the insistence on the unconditional character of “desire” to the praise of a sovereign form of imagination that “calls for the impossible” to an experience of “empowerment” that grounds resistance in individual or collective (better perhaps “transindividual”) autonomy.<sup>45</sup> All these nuances, however,

42 The GRECE (Groupement de recherche et d’  tudes pour la civilisation europ  enne) was founded in 68 by Alain de Benoist, gathering around him a number of far-right activists, but also – for some time at least – engaging in public debates with intellectual figures on the left.

43 This is of course a translation of the Nietzschean motto: *Umwertung aller psychischen Werte* (*The Antichrist*, 1895). I suggest replacing it within a long story of reflections on whether there can exist a social or political revolution that is not also, or primarily a “cultural” or “religious” revolution, a question running from H  lderlin or Tocqueville to Foucault. This is to be pursued in a different place.

44 I had used this formula, which comes from Maximilien de Robespierre (“Citoyens, voulez-vous une r  volution sans r  volution ? ») in my book from 1976, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Balibar 1977), largely an attempt to build a language common to the Marxism of the traditional Communist Parties, and the Marxim-Leninism of the Maoists. Today, it is Slavoj   i  ek who frequently invokes its political value (see   i  ek 2010).

45 On the spirit of 68 as a philosophy of unconditional desire, see Doll   1972, as well as the special issue of *Lignes* (Editions Leo Scheer), 2001/1, n   4, with the same title. Lacan’s formula “*ne pas c  der sur son d  sir*”, originally formulated in his Seminar VII from 1959 (“Ethics of Pyschoanalysis”) frequently served as a reference, all the more remarkable because Lacan himself was rather hostile to the student’s movement in 68. It was for Deleuze and Guattari to try and transform



are linked to modalities of *transgression* of the established order one way or another. This indicates the relevance of Bantigny's formula, that I quoted above: "désobéissance sociale", or social disobedience. A notion which, in turn, has obvious affinities with the old idea of "civil disobedience", which had been revived by the anti-war movements against colonial wars, the French War of Algeria as well as – even more massively – the American War in Vietnam. I would argue that this constellation illustrates the strongly *anti-militaristic* character of the 68 insurrections. The improvised "barricades" in the Latin Quarter are no objection to this statement, because they are not armed, having an essentially defensive character. They resist violence, but do not retaliate. In that sense (I will contend) the massive *pacifist movements* in the post-68 period (particularly campaigns for nuclear disarmament in Western Europe in the late 70s and early 80s, with resonances on the other side of the "iron curtain") are truthful heirs of the 68 moment, whereas the "urban guerilla" movements, despite the idealist capacity of self-sacrifice (*Rote Armee Fraktion* in Germany, *Red Brigades* and *Lotta Continua* in Italy, and the much smaller *Action Directe* in France), are tragic forms of degeneracy.<sup>46</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the intellectuals who had closely collaborated after 68 in "politicizing the society", such as Foucault and Deleuze, parted ways when it came to approving or disapproving of the "armed" derivations of the revolution. I conclude that anti-militarism, or more generally *anti-violence* (which in other places I called a strategy of "civility", or "civilizing the revolution"), is a *third component* of the "cultural revolution" that also includes the interpenetration of the political and the poetic, and the "transvaluation" of ethical and social values.<sup>47</sup>

I draw the consequence that "revolution in the revolution", with which I started, is decidedly a better formula than "revolution without revolution", despite the obvious fragility and the ephemeral character of the 68 upheaval in France and elsewhere in the world, because it captures the orientation of an insurrection that was radically democratic while excluding the perspective of the *civil war*, which had been so profoundly

this revolutionary character of desire into a complete metaphysical system in their *Anti-Oedipus* ("Capitalism and Schizophrenia I", 1972).

<sup>46</sup> On the pacifist movement, see the discussion launched by Thompson's essay "Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization", in Thompson 1982. On the political motivations and the road to hell of the Red Brigades, see the conversations between Rossana Rossanda, Carla Mosca and Mario Moretti (who organized the abduction and murder of Aldo Moro) in 1994. On the "Baader-Meinhof" group (R.A.F.), see the film *Germany in Autumn* (1978), co-directed by 11 directors, including *Alexander Kluge*, Volker Schlöndorff, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, and *Edgar Reitz*. Robert Linhart has testified that the decision of the French "Gauche Prolétarienne" (with the exception of a small breakaway group) *not to engage* in militarized urban guerilla, had been encouraged by secret discussions with Jean-Paul Sartre.

<sup>47</sup> Balibar 2015.

associated with the history of revolutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is all the more significant because *counter-revolutionary strategies* in the same period never excluded this perspective (even de Gaulle, who insisted that he would not "begin a career of dictator at the age of 78", kept the army in reserve), or directly resorted to it (in Eastern Europe or Latin America). From that angle, the proclamation by the French CGT and Communist leaders - often commented and criticized - that they represented a party of "order" in the middle of potential chaos, appear in all their ambiguity: walking the thin road between a reduction of politics to parliamentary democracy, which in the end leads to anticipating the compromise, and a lucid recognition that the confrontation between symmetric forms of violence would make the defeat of the popular forces all the more inevitable and destructive. We may believe that we are no longer facing this kind of dilemma today: I am not so sure, given the typical combination of technocratic depoliticization and "normalized state of exception" that contemporary neoliberalism tends to generalize. One more reason to reflect on the vicissitudes of "revolution" in 68 with an open and critical mind.

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# The Procedure of its Invention, the Construction of its Form, the Means of its Transmission

A. J. Bartlett

**Abstract:** Using Louis Althusser's Letter to Italian comrades concerning the events of May 68 as a foil, the essay interrogates the form and place and determining power of knowledge in recuperating and rendering foreclosed the thought of the event as such, thereby rendering the truth of May 68 indifferently either nothing or impossible. This suggests the necessity of revivifying the 'nothing or impossible' as the undecidable of the event-site of May 68. One of the consequences of what is truly the 'knowledge economy' (in all its forms), which is the maintenance of this impossible *withinknowledge* is to produce divisions within the people (e.g., between students and workers, etc.), and here the essay turns back, as it were, to a reading of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, tracking two key documents: The *May 16 Circular* and the *Decision in Sixteen Points*. These 'founding' documents of the revolution within the revolution reveal a reorientation within the knowledge of the situation to the situation of knowledge itself. The Cultural Revolution demands a change in form and a consequent subjective recommencement based on what is called here the educational invariant – that it be manifestly *for all*. Lastly, with this two-fold analysis as backdrop, the essay polemicalises the contemporary scene of the knowledge economy as the decided lack of education and suggests that only by a reorientation to knowledge which affirms what is impossible to it might there appear today as education what is invariant to it. This would be to take the lesson of both the GPCR and May 68.

**Keywords:** Althusser, May 68, Cultural Revolution, Rancière, Plato

I don't bother asking you why didn't you come to ask me what I know so I could tell you what I know you need to know because I already know you don't know even enough to know I know more and better than you.' The nimble and flexible monkeys grab at the pendulous breasts of knowledge everywhere. <sup>1</sup>

Plato the Greek or Rin Tin Tin  
Who's more famous to the billion millions?<sup>2</sup>

And I guess that I just don't know.<sup>3</sup>

.....  
<sup>1</sup> Justin Clemens, personal communication.

<sup>2</sup> The Clash, 'The Magnificent Seven,' *Sandinista*, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> The Velvet Underground, 'Heroin', *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, 1967

## The times will have suited it

In a 1969 letter to Italian comrades offering the promised response to the 'events' of May 1968, Louis Althusser begins by noting that in making this promise the previous year he was getting ahead of himself:

For how could anyone presume to speak of events of this kind without having a minimum of *objective* documentation at his disposal? How can anyone presume to speak of an important historic event without that minimum of objective information which would allow one, if not to carry out in full, then at least to outline 'the concrete analysis' of 'the concrete situation' that produced the May events?<sup>4</sup>

Althusser goes on to say that what he has to say – for, as he says, he must say something anyway – will be 'schematic, crude, and perhaps even fundamentally incomplete. I originally hoped to send you my analysis in the form of *theses*. Instead, what I have are, at best, *hypotheses*.'

There are several things that would be of interest here if one were to track Althusser in a similar way to that done by Jacques Rancière in his formidable reckoning of these years, *Althusser's Lesson*.<sup>5</sup> Fundamentally, for this essay, that Althusser after the 'event' seeks to put the *knowledge* of the event back on centre stage, to, in a way that will become the predominant form of the relation to this event, subject the event to knowledge and this means – hence 'the concrete analysis of the concrete situation' *which gives rise to* these events – subjecting what 'happened' to prior knowledge *and* subjecting the post-evental situation to that *same* knowledge. Knowledge before, knowledge after, then, and thus the event as such is circumscribed. This circumscription Althusser unconsciously signifies in the slippage from event to events and the subsequent use of them as interchangeable.

Provisionally speaking, and this is perhaps the one thing that all of the most influential theories of the event have presumed as their starting point, an event is an event precisely because it cannot be circumscribed by knowledge. Ironically, but in line with the dual party line in metaphysics, one Aristotelian, the other Kantian, that continues to dog philosophy at the level of the one and the many, the finite and the infinite, subject and object and so on, thus the very form of 'our knowledge' or of what we *know* as knowledge, this discovery of the event as *event* ushers in a rush to return to knowledge. As if it abhorred a void. Although Rancière's critique does not take exactly this slippage, circumscription and return as *the* lesson of Althusser, that Althusser

4 Althusser 2018. Note here how Althusser slips between event and events.

5 Rancière 2011.

prioritises knowledge over event<sup>6</sup> squares with Rancière's trajectory in his work. Another way to put this 'a priori', and this will be reflected later in the essay, is to defer to the *knowledge* of the masses over the *masses*' knowledge. This needs to be understood as a fundamental division, a division in truth, if you like, and not be reduced to a mere distinction, or object of knowledge.

Even though Althusser is not the subject of this essay – the circumscription of events, the division in truth, the production of subjects, the lack in knowledge and so on is – let me add a little more anyway. Let me use and abuse Althusser, against the grain as it were, as exemplary of a wider metaphysic and thus as a way to contextualise what I am trying to say. There are two ironies in Althusser's claim to his objective non-knowledge of the event as the stop on his full engagement with it – his impossible thesis qua hypothesis. The first is that our position today, with regard to *May 68* – a designation, hence the italics, that announces a specific knowledge as that of the knowledge of May 68 in itself<sup>7</sup> – is one of the saturation of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Althusser *knew* nothing or too little, we know everything or too much. As Kristin Ross puts it in her book on May 68<sup>9</sup> one of the features of this saturation is to make the true thought of May 68 – which must be concentrated in the *event* as such – impossible. The more it is known, the more obscure what is true of it becomes.

Of course, one of the trans-ontological suppositions of enlightenment is that to know is to act and under capitalism to act is to own and to own is to determine in every instance. It's not a surprise at all that knowledge and property so easily accommodate one another – we live now in the 'knowledge economy' after all or, more accurately, knowledge operates and always has as property and or currency when, that is, it is not bound to what is true of it.<sup>10</sup> Not coincidentally, then, this knowledge

6 Rancière's critique, especially in that published as 'Appendix: On the Theory of Ideology: Althusser's Politics' in the English edition, focusses on Althusser's own conception of for Rancière the overplayed and mis-laid distinction between science and ideology. At one point he attributes this to Althusser's Kantianism. Rancière 2011, p. 134.

7 As is well known Althusser was highly critical of the focus on the students and this is what 'May' essentially means. As Althusser points out, the strike of 9 million workers, which for him is the real force of what needs to be thought in '68 as '68 took place in June.

8 On this (see above note) I have sympathy with Althusser's position and that he notes also the obviously bourgeois character of the 'revolt in knowledge', and, as I'll speak about, the need of this revolt to find sanction in the factories. If one were to speculate psychoanalytically one way to consider the movement of knowledge to the factories, especially given how the 'factories' return to work and, so it is said, forestall the revolution, is that in fact knowledge went there seeking its repression in the other – the workers. Thus the workers are then to blame! This is clearly, as history shows us, the psycho-pathology of the New Philosophers, whose performance of this for their bourgeois masters is an exemplary lesson in the more general function of university discourse under neoliberalism.

9 Ross 2002.

10 Plato, in *The Republic*, already remarks on this coincidence of knowledge qua interest and money



of May 68 proliferates horizontally too, rhizome like, necessarily legitimating all sorts of knowledge with access to what it is a knowledge of. In what we call neoliberalism a certain (false?) conception of this nomadism of the concept often since emphasised in a variety of ways, as essential to May 68, the de-territorialisation thesis par excellence, obtains. So many different meanings, senses, causes, effects, for good, ill or nothing. So many reductions, to pleasure, sex, peace, identity and so on. So many radical knowledges as the knowledge of May 68 – so many such that, precisely, nothing can be true of May 68. And indeed, any claim to the truth of May 68 is already to falsify May 68, such is the pedagogy of these disparate knowledges, radically horizontal and obscurely conservative alike, for which nothing *invariant* can be. Difference will out over contradiction in the post 68 proliferation of knowledge, which is to say, after all, that this must be the empirically attested essence of May 68. Or to put it another way, the battle over the matter of May 68 has been fought and won at the level of its knowledge.

The knowledge of May 68 – that there is no truth of May 68 – is the whole of which these proliferations in knowledge are each a part and indeed this distinction cum relation between whole and part is itself dependent on a metaphysical complicity inherent to each of these ‘disparate’ knowledges. Each component part assumes that there is no definitive truth of the events of May 68 (the plural is functional) only this proliferation of its knowledge of which it is one (albeit the ‘best’ one each and every time). The whole of knowledge assumes that the truth of May 68, precisely because each component part eschews it as ground of their critique, is beyond the reach of knowledge as such. In other words, we have the metaphysics of the lack of truth – there is no truth only the proliferation of different knowledges; or there is *the* truth, which all these different knowledges lack but precisely because of this production of lack the truth is impossible to know. Knowledge makes truth – which is ‘out there’ – impossible to know. So either truth is nothing or it’s impossible to know. Subjectively, this ultimately amounts to the same thing. The can be no subject which is not that of knowledge.

So, to return to the terms of the Letter, where Althusser objectively lacked we are subjectively full and yet in both cases the events qua event remain obscure or opaque as some say; all the better to interpret ad infinitum. To lack and to have, as noted, are thereby the same thing because what they share is an orientation to the question of the event and that is, finally, that there is nothing other than knowledge itself. An event is an event in knowledge; its predicate can be found, its effects thereby prescribed. Which is to say, all events are of the knowledge of the event no matter which knowledge pertains.

The second irony – and let’s note irony in the Platonic sense of

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by reference to the term *tokos*. Derrida, albeit with an other orientation, speaks of this also.

interruption and recommencement and not in the sense of a dinner party at Mr Rorty’s – is that Althusser’s admission of non-knowledge of the *event* is actually true. It is the *invariant* feature of an event (and its consequence) being not-knowledge at all, that it is necessarily the starting point for an *other* orientation to the situation of knowledge within which this event *takes place*. So Althusser is correct but, ironically, he doesn’t know it or rather he doesn’t know what he professes to know of the events – that is, the eventality of the events. Or again, that he knows nothing is true but he doesn’t know that that is itself the only possible truth of his knowledge. His science recuperates the event which, correctly, is not it. In short, the event as occurring can and must be thought lest it be known.

For Althusser, knowing nothing of the *event* is actually of a piece with his knowledge of the events. It is, as noted, how the event fits within knowledge a priori. In this sense, the event is a *known* nothing and not a *nothing* to knowledge as such (this distinction signifies a metaphysical division). There is, as noted, nothing knowledge cannot know including what is not knowledge. Which is to say, nothing cannot exist outside of knowledge even the unknown. With regard to our situation today, that of the saturation of knowledge, (which is not Althusserian; there is no Althusserian century) the same irony pertains. The great rhizomatic slew of opinion, ideology, policy, identity, nostalgia, derision, exaltation, celebration, etc., etc., betray May 68 as impossible to know. There is the mark of the bad infinite; there is always something else to know, and, as such, it is unknowable. Another complicit concept in this metaphysics of the impossible is the much loved and metaphysically resilient, ‘potential’. Again, invoked, supposed, operating in knowledge as the end of the true.

To reiterate, it is true that the *event* of May 68 is an event *in* knowledge but is in itself as event non-knowledge and thus it is impossible to know. So again, all the knowledge in the world is correct except insofar as what it knows as what is impossible to know. It knows what cannot or must not be known – this is what all this knowledge collectively arborescently, produces, this impossibility and indeed, as noted, it is its metaphysics. Thus, it knows nothing about impossibility as such or that impossibility can be thought. And indeed it is the event, which is not knowledge and is nothing to it, which, by *taking place*, is the non-impossibility of this thinking of what is for knowledge impossible. It is, invariantly, the single point of a recommencement. But it is not recommencement itself which necessarily requires an unknown subject.

In the same letter Althusser treats with the question of knowledge in a manner which in later accounts becomes almost *de rigueur* and it concerns the infamous and animating division between students or intellectuals and workers. This division predates May 1968 of course and is in some sense interminable. We see it as a motivating problem

in Plato and, differently formalised, in Aristotle, and it dominates and determines all questions of knowledge to this day – knowledge when thought, that is, as relevant to the collective or politically. Indeed, it can even be – and is – the basis of precisely how the collective, the polity, is even conceived. We only need think again of that ubiquitous, managerial, global determination ‘the knowledge economy’. This division in the field of knowledge which amounts as much to where knowledge is placed as to who has it, is of course fundamentally linked to education, another epiphenomena of May 68.

Education is the means of knowledge – the (institutional) arrangements for its transmission – and necessarily what is education falls within the circumscription of what knowledge can and must be – and what it cannot and must not be, moreover. In these terms, the students/intellectuals are the educated while the workers are seen thereby to lack. This is not to say of course that workers don't have knowledge but effectively their knowledge is bound by technique and place whereas the educated intellectual is bound, so to speak to understanding, wherein every knowledge of technique would be submitted, and the place of his/her knowledge is qua *university* everywhere at once.<sup>11</sup> But note this pseudo-Platonic division is just that: one subject to the regime of knowledge whose orientation is as described above; thereby grounded in the determined lack of truth and thus what we have, given there can be no thought of what is true other than as knowledge, is the rule of this division. Lacan famously, and at the time, named this ‘University discourse’ and more famously still noted that its subjects, subjects of repetition in reproduction, were merely looking for a new master. The problem is that this will have been the new master of us all given that the new master is ushered in under the guise of established knowledge.

All this comes down, in the field of politics, to a fundamental division: knowledge knows what must be done with the all as divided and thus what must never come to knowledge is what this all is capable of without it. The point being, this distinction in knowledge of intellectual/worker is a product of a metaphysics of knowledge itself (and its institutionalisation) which requires within itself as itself that this distinction be. Hence, the relations between workers and intellectuals (including students in this) in May 68 is necessarily bound by this distinction as the limit of the field itself. It is what some intellectuals – though seemingly, never the workers – announce must be crossed and

11 Note Althusser's distinction between science and ideology incorporates into science the knowledge of technique – thus a representation of science is science for Althusser and this science is that of the intellectuals. Ostensibly he opposes this science to the ideological discourse of the students and thus his distinction operates to cut off the students from the workers at the level of what can be truly known of them. The students approach the worker as bourgeois-petit bourgeois ideologues while the intellectual ‘scientist’ knows the workers in their objective state. Note it is not necessary to take one side or another here. We can say, after Stalin, both are worse and which, as we'll see, is what Mao essentially puts into action.

the nature of that crossing, as Ross shows, is itself contested. But what matters is not, in the first instance anyway, the differences in the way the Maoist and the Trotskyists intellectuals,<sup>12</sup> for example, approached the worker and the factory but the very conditions of possibility of the approach. Which is to say, the knowledge that conditioned the approach, that such an approach in this way, intellectual to worker, university to factory, was necessary, which is to say, then, the knowledge of the distinction in knowledge constituted by the ‘worker in technique’ and the ‘intellectual in understanding’. It's this *situation* of knowledge that this distinction exemplifies as its material condition thus making of it a real division, that must be thought because this very kind of attempt to overcome it – to go to the factory – is the sign of its repetition as knowledge itself. As Althusser asks, rhetorically, why did the factory never go to the university? We can see in this question (for which Althusser has a reasonable answer) the symptom of what is an exemplary doubling down on the lack of the worker in the field of established knowledge. Not only does the worker lack it does not know it lacks. If it did it would seek out, so it must be assumed, given this is what knowledge demands, the knowledge of the university.<sup>13</sup>

What divides or what unbinds from knowledge is, in the first instance, the event. The event is that which is not subject to this knowledge and thus this distinction in qua division by knowledge: it inaugurates the division *from* this operating distinction. Thus, to think is to put oneself (and one's knowledge) under the sign of the event, which is to say, to, on the basis of that which happens and is not knowledge, be reoriented to the situation of knowledge without it. To think unbound from knowledge – this is what an event offers to its unknown subjects. And this is where education or the question of education matters for it is always about the constitution of subjects such that in knowledge its subjects will necessarily be those of its reproduction: the state of knowledge, which the university guarantees (now more than ever) assures itself in the subjects it educates of itself as knowledge and as all there is to know of knowledge.

12 In *May 68 and Its Afterlives*, Ross 2002, p. 111, speaking of the *enquête* made by students and intellectuals in the factories and countryside throughout the period of the mid-sixties and beyond, contrasts the investigations of a Maoist derivation with the approach of other radical organisations. Ross quotes Georges, a Citroën worker, saying that, for example, the Trotskyist would come to the factory armed with a tract; with quotes, page numbers etc. The Maoists, on the other hand, took their point of departure from what we told them. They *didn't know anything* before we talked to them. They listened to what we said and made a tract out of that. We were really struck by that' (emphasis added).

13 One can see this reflected in much of the so called academic discourse on education, specifically that pertaining to the difficulties of ‘educating’ the working class or so called disadvantaged. Their ‘resistances’ are attributed to their lack of understanding of the ‘advantages’ of knowledge. These advantages are rarely spelled out, merely assumed and amount only to what the state determines them to be. Of course it is not expected that these newly knowledgeable subjects will be advantaged within this regime of advantage only that they will, suitably enlightened, accept being placed within it.

Whereas those subject to an event, so to speak, cannot be so subject, cannot be subject to knowledge and thus cannot reproduce what is known as knowledge. In fact, such a subject knows *nothing* of that knowledge and will work precisely to produce 'in knowledge' what is not this knowledge and what is not this situation of knowledge in and ultimately as the world as such. And as what is not knowledge is what is not for all, equally and the same, what the subject of the event produces in the world is what is true of and for all – that knowledge as it is known is not all there is to know. This is the universalism which is the lack of the university. The division between intellectual and manual, university and factory, in the regimes of known knowledge is itself undone and as such we see it as precisely a matter of such knowledge.

It is worth noting here that in the approach of the intellectual to the worker as indicative of the 'memory' of May 68 is an assumption on the part of the intellectual that – one way or another – in the worker lay some form of legitimacy or authenticity even – though not necessarily truth.<sup>14</sup> But for or of what? This is the issue and of course in one sense the intellectual is not wrong: non-knowledge is the chance of a real recommencement, of something truly new, which of course is impossible in knowledge itself. The intellectual, so to speak, seeks his alienation in lack. But this is the problem. The intellectual by virtue of his intellectuality – his education in knowledge – is convinced that in the worker – which, as we have seen, is known a priori – he will find the truth of *his* knowledge and this is why he goes there. It's a species of exoticism.

He leaves the place of knowledge and traverses across town to the place of its lack. The place where it can be made true, so his knowledge assures him. It's a strange and paradoxical move but it is assured by knowledge(science) itself. Of course these encounters are ultimately impossible – not because this division is interminable one way or another but because, as noted, of the knowledge that this traverse is subject too. Let me just add that this same symmetry pertains when the worker is ignored – when his position of lack (of knowledge) is the basis of his exclusion from political or social effect or power etc. The conservative vision of the hoi polloi is coincident with that of our 'left-wing' intellectual insofar as it is a case of 'knowledge coming to lack'. The conservative simply acts to conserve on the basis of the lack of knowledge that must be placed in the worker, whereas the 'radical' left-wing intellectual seeks in this lack a legitimacy for the work of knowledge.

If we think about the neoliberal approach to this – which might be thought as a weird *laissez faire* amalgam of the two; the endless adaptability of 'our' knowledge i.e. –we are, in some respects, despite

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14 Indeed, for Althusser as Rancière portrays it, the science is constituted in the intellectual contra ideology which is the 'natural' knowledge of the worker. It is weird how this form of the relation works in Althusser given his opting for the PCF and the 'worker' against the bourgeois ideology of the students. Rancière posits an explanation.

neo-liberalism's beginnings in the late 1930's early 1940's, in post-May 68 territory. Neoliberalism is truly part of the same discursive or perhaps epistemic arrangement of rhizomatic proliferation for which there are only knowledges ('bodies and languages' as Badiou puts it in *Logics of Worlds*) and no truth (in both senses).

Truth for this *episteme* is after all synonymous with authority, with order, with the rule of the one, with metaphysics tout court and so the fall of truth among the intellectuals is at once the fall of the state and its power. In many ways, and as has been often remarked, it is really post May 68 – and this might be extended to include all that May 68 signifies, globally – that neoliberalism, that multitudinous end of the state program, gets going and this is undeniably because the *knowledge* of the times will have suited it. The knowledge of May 68 won out we might say as *events* and so not event, and this knowledge being itself liberal in its metaphysics, the lack of truth, the proliferation of bodies and languages as knowledge as such, became the intellectual currency of the neoliberal sublime – which is, as a capitalism, an exploitation of all that exists and not simply another orientation to the market. This knowledge of lack, so to speak, puts the 'new' into the system of liberal economy that is capitalism – it is the new technique of its discourse. The unity of the operating division of the radical and the neoliberal is found in their metaphysics. Every year since May 68 has slowly unveiled to us the primacy of this unity.

Thus the vision of May 68 which is given to us as the knowledge of it makes us all subject to it and thus subjects of the material order of the day such that in fact we know nothing else, that we know anything other than this is impossible. Thus in the face of such knowledge we adapt, we flex, we innovate, we are resilient and as such ruthlessly individual. We are the good, egoic subjects of knowledge. But as knowledge itself tells us consistently at the limit – there is that which is not knowledge which we cannot know. This is then the state of knowledge but a state which itself refuses itself as state relevant to its knowledge. Indeed, the state of knowledge is obsessed by what is not it, which is to say, by what it determines as not it such that it has determination over it. But how does knowledge, the state, know what is not and cannot be known? How does it know what it is not? This is the *aporia* in knowledge (reminiscent, of course, of Plato's question in the *Meno*) that, again, an event makes real and shows as invariant to it. What is invariant to knowledge – signified in the division between worker and intellectual in this regime of knowledge – is that knowledge comes to lack. Which is to say, as Plato demonstrated, the indiscernible is real.

### The style of plain living and hard struggle

Given that we are speaking in terms of knowledge, in some sense in terms of ideology but also of the place of knowledge, the means of its

transmission, its production of subjects and so on and thus as education, and given, via May 68 we are speaking of how the intellectual/worker division is operative both materially and ideologically, it is clear we are talking also in terms of culture. May 68 was to be thought of and spoke of itself in part as being a cultural revolution. Not merely in the sense of an imitation of the Chinese experiment but in its own terms, albeit that these terms took China as influence. But a Cultural Revolution, as was the case in China is not a revolution solely in the sphere of what is designated all too exclusively as culture. As we will see the term cultural revolution as it was spoken of in China is a revolution in civilisation. It's a revolution in knowledge as such and this means in terms of its interminable structuring division. What makes it cultural is the means of its revolt but the aim of its effect is material.

As just noted, *The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* influenced the events of 68 as it influenced and became exemplary for many of the radically emancipatory movements of the time and still.<sup>15</sup> Its influence on May 68 wasn't ubiquitous obviously, it's enough to note our example above of the way Mao's and Trots differently approached the factory, to show many flowers were only half-blooming in May.<sup>16</sup> But it's also not incidental to note that the way of the Mao's as related by Ross, when thought in the context of the GPCR, is to think of precisely how on the basis of a revolution in culture, the thought of the 'masses' is and will have been the thought of all. That's to say that what the GPCR did in the world of knowledge was decide the necessity for an other orientation to what was known as knowledge, to, more importantly, undermine what this knowledge prescribed as impossible to know. But if the event is anything at all – if May 68 can be *evental* – it functions as the limit of the limit of knowledge. Not just of one knowledge in opposition to another; not the approach of one to another; but what is known as knowledge itself.

The GPCR is an instance in this effect whose aim at its heart was not the synthesis of the distinction in knowledge as knowledge but the undoing of the conditions of its very possibility. This is reflected in the efforts of the Mao's in May '68, to work to have done with the division as such, by regard to what is true of its *evental* collapse, an effort that of course fails or falls back into knowledge. But this is the point. The failure was one in knowledge which is not the failure of the event as such. The event cannot fail – it happens or it doesn't. This is why the struggle over the knowledge of May 68 is crucial still. There must be nothing left to speak of.

To contextualise or even to serialise May 68 or at least the (hypo) thesis I am running here – that the knowledge of May 68 is the means of

15 In India for example, the Naxalite insurgency.

16 See Ross's citation from Emmanuel Terray and Jean Chesnaux in Ross 2002, pp. 92-98 e.g.

its undoing as event, as site of a possible truth that is not recoverable, assessable, determined by knowledge itself and as such is the invariant and non-impossibility of a new subject and a new subject formation – I want to, fairly cursorily, show how something significant and similar pertained to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. To do so I focus on two critical documents of the GPCR and their subjective, collective effect on 'knowledge'.

In 1966 two documents are published and disseminated across China, thereby addressing themselves immediately to 700 million people. It's true not every one of these 700 million people read the documents but it's true to say that everyone is inscribed within them. The shorthand titles of these two documents are the *May 16 Circular* and *The Sixteen Point Decision* (from August 8).<sup>17</sup> These were released by the Central Committee but are clearly authored by Mao Tse-tung. Although the Cultural Revolution was already an active policy by this time, superseding, importantly, the existing Socialist Education Movement, most commentators consider these the founding texts of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The GPCR is, as we have been speaking about, one of those things that everyone knows about but in truth knows almost nothing about. And thus it is probably one of the most under-conceptualised and over-determined events of modern times, as much de-historicised as it is de-politicised. In China an active policy of 'thorough negation' of the GPCR has been in place since the late 1970's. In May 2016, *The People's Daily*, mindful of the anniversary nature of these documents, published an article calling the GPCR 'a mistake... that cannot and will not be allowed to repeat itself'. The article went on to laud the modernising achievements of the past 30 years.<sup>18</sup> As Wang Hui argues, this 'policy of negation represents not merely a rejection of the radical thought and practice of the Cultural Revolution but a 'thorough negation' of China's whole 'revolutionary century' which, he says, 'includes also the French and Russian Revolutions and the Paris Commune which served always in China as models, and indeed orientations toward them have defined the political divisions of the time.'<sup>19</sup>

This same process of negationism – which is really a pedagogy of un-thinkability – is evident throughout much western commentary on the GPCR which seems to be split between the smug denunciations and

17 available at [https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/cc\\_gpcr.htm](https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/cc_gpcr.htm) and <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1966/PR1966-33g.htm>

18 In the column to the right of the online version of the article, giving headlines for articles of interest, were several that caught the modernising eye: 'Students take stylish bikini graduation photos'; 'Monkey grabs a handful of breast; air stewardess packed into overhead bin; Top 20 hottest women in the world.'

19 Hui 2009, pp.5-6.



cheap irony of specialist mandarins, professing a singular insight and those whose general tenor might be described as empiricist-hysterics or *histrionicist* if you'd prefer. Supposedly horrifying statistics abetting moral posturing itself grounded in the mythological liberalism that is the west's progressive self-understanding – hence assumption after assumption – seems to be the general form much of this enquiry takes, making any real thought of the process impossible *a priori*. It's worth noting, too, that western publishers are also partial to the individual eyewitness account, which, being individual is definitive each time. As Hui notes about China but which marks a global truth, '[t]oday, the most powerful counter to any attempts at critical analysis of China's problems—the crisis in agricultural society, the widening gap between rural and urban sectors, institutionalized corruption—is: “So, do you want to return to the days of the Cultural Revolution?”’<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, this negationist approach to the knowledge of the GPCR mirrors and repeats the very ‘knowledge’ that was at issue in the struggles carried forth in the GPCR. One that can be reductively characterized as presenting as both neutral qua ‘objective’ and hierarchical in conception and effect – indeed the latter *because* of the former. This because subjectively speaking neutrality is always a choice for what already exists. Thus the question of an *education* in and by this knowledge is a critical one for the GPCR, precisely because this framework serves as the dominant orientation to the revolution itself and for Mao, it is this orientation that has come to give the direction of the revolution its revisionist form – which is to say, taking some lines from the Circular, ‘to appraise the situation from a bourgeois stand and the bourgeois world outlook’.

Since about 1961, the right faction – those westerners like to call ‘moderates’ – was in the majority in the party; certainly in the upper echelons but spread across the country – though Mao would axiomatically maintain that 95% of cadres were good. Rightist essentially meant two direct things: first, following an ostensibly Stalinist path economically – thus a sort of top down determination, primarily industrial; ‘it considers things, not people’ Mao says in his critique of 1958 – ‘its basic error’ he says ‘is distrust of the peasants.’ Secondly, a Khrushchevist path politically, which in short meant an abandonment of the commitment to the dictatorship of the proletariat. It ‘obscures the sharp class struggle that is taking place on the cultural and ideological front’ the *Circular* says; it abandons politics as such, given all class struggle is political. The key word here is ‘obscures’, for this is the key criticism of the *Circular* in the field of knowledge – that what appears left in form was right in essence. Moreover, these external models, ostensibly communist, in fact hark back

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.5.

to the social formations of pre-revolutionary China, making the rightist both traditionalist and individualist. Thus knowledge before, knowledge after.

To cut what is a very long and complicated story short and to twist it toward the concerns of this essay, this meant for Mao, echoing Robespierre (echoing Saint-Just), an abandonment *within* the revolution of revolution as such, insofar as what both positions combined conspired to do was to take the masses off stage, so to speak, as subject and position them as object; as that with which something needed to be done, or in other words, the knowledge of what was to be done in the name of the masses was not that of the masses themselves. Indeed, we can say that for the revisionists, the intellectual bourgeoisie of the communist party or the capitalist roaders, the knowledge of the masses does not exist and this lack of the masses is amplified in commentary. In fact, the impossibility of the knowledge of the masses is necessary to such commentary given that the (much beloved in the West) ‘thesis’ of the ‘cult of Mao’ requires a minimum of 700 million passive dupes. It is this paradox in knowledge – a knowledge *of* the masses *not* its knowledge – which Mao identified as the impasse of the revolution and it is why, also, the revolution ostensibly begun in 1966, within the communist party itself, was a ‘Cultural’ one: that is to say, a revolution in and of knowledge as such – its concepts, categories, assumptions, habits, traditions, the privileges it accords to its technicians and so on – which means, most fundamentally, a revolution with regard to its orientation, and indeed, *that it has one*, which is to say that knowledge can only truly be ‘knowledge in truth’.

Let me note again that ‘cultural’ as used here signifies civilisation. Thus the Cultural Revolution is a revolution in civilisation and civilisation in this Chinese context refers to an educated class – those who make up and determine ‘the civil’, if you will, and have done so *traditionally*. In the context of the GPCR the orthodox or revisionist position is the educated position and determines the status of the civil. So what is at stake in the documents is the thorough-going *re-orientation* of everything that circulates as knowledge in the situation of contemporary China and this includes the knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, given that Mao seemingly upsets the orthodox relation of base to superstructure in emphasising the primacy of the struggle in knowledge. Indeed, this choice for revolution over orthodoxy *inside* the revolution – of, the *Circular* says, ‘opening wide to the masses such that they can ‘hit back” as against an opening wide to bourgeois liberalism which would be the protection of the bourgeoisie from the masses – underpins much of the trouble to come.

The *May 16 Circular* and the *Sixteen Point Decision* are comrade documents we might say. The *Circular* is a document of critique and intervention and the *Decision* is a document of affirmation or action. Alessandro Russo argues that the former remains within the formal

procedures of the party even as it opens them to critical exposure, while the latter is the basis of what he calls a ‘pluralisation’ relative to this critical exposure.<sup>21</sup>

The *Circular* is directed in the first instance at the ‘Outline Report on the Current Academic Discussion made by the Group of Five in Charge of the Cultural Revolution.’ This Report, which the *Circular* critiques in the strongest terms, was presented under the guise of a critique of a play called *Hai Jui Dismissed From Office*. The play was based on real events and was considered within the remit of the terms of the GPCR to be revisionist. The author of the play was well connected in the Party, and moreover the revisionary tendency of the play drew many sympathisers. The problem with the report, as the *Circular* makes clear, is definitely that the play was revisionist and that the report was sympathetic, but the real affront was that the report was sympathetic by stealth. It did not come out and support the line of the play, instead it obfuscated political critique – the content of the play – for academic assessment – a formal exercise.

What is relevant is that the Report of the five – written by one man, really, Peng Cheng, Mayor of Peking – exposed the revisionist position to public critique. In writing the report in the way they did, thus channelling the political struggle in the cultural sphere into so-called pure academic discussion, so frequently advocated by bourgeois politics, and thereby opposing giving prominence to proletarian politics, the revisionist current has asserted itself as what it is: ‘duplicitous and without line.’ As such – and this should ring familiar today – this document of the revisionist bourgeoisie ‘nurses a bitter hatred against those on the left already published and colludes in suppressing those not yet published. Yet they give free rein to all the various ghosts and monsters who for many years have abounded in our press, radio, magazines, books, text-book, platforms, works of literature, cinema, drama, ballads and stories, the fine arts, music, the dance, etc., and in doing so they never advocate proletarian leadership or stress any need for approval.’

The upshot is that the document the *Circular* criticises has, despite itself, exposed the field of culture more generally to critique and made culture a way in to the exposing of the bourgeoisie. Thus, now, officially if you like – which is to note Mao never had the free reign theorists of totalitarianism fetishize – there is the impetus for a real revolution in culture because culture itself – the province of the educated bourgeoisie – has exposed its own artifice and shown itself to be operating at the highest levels and so with the greatest influence on the direction of the state ... through the arts, etc., but most critically in and as education.

The point of this artifice, as noted, is the de-politicisation of the content of the play by recourse to academic form, which is to say again

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21 Russo 2005, p. 549.

that it is this form that is the target here, not academics or specific types of knowledge or art or literature per se nor any persons as such – except that 5% who are the ‘enemies of the people’. In other words, this form of knowledge, which supposes that it is neutral, supposes neutrality to be off limits to politics, and supposes that before knowledge the bourgeoisie and proletariat are equal, must be critiqued for what it is and transformed. The means of this transformation, which is a re-orientation, is the thought of the masses; the assertion, if you like, of the truth of the proletariat into the field of knowledge itself.

The *Decision in 16 Points* is a different document. If the *Circular* opens the space of culture to the *new* form of its critique, the *Decision* is the affirmation and direction of this revolution as such. It’s sort of the ‘what is to be done’ of the GPCR. And what is to be done, abstractly put, is to shift knowledge from its objective form – by which subjective revisionism hides and insists – to its subjective form which, as the document specifies, is that constituted in the masses. To put it another way, if the knowledge of the state under revision, which is what the *Circular* criticises, is predicated on the impossibility of the thought of the masses, the *Decision* makes this thought of the masses axiomatic and prescriptive, or not impossible: this is the basis of the pluralisation thesis Russo maintains by which he means that ‘the document of the central committee allows groups authorising their own existence to form across the country, to take up this process of what becomes known as struggle-critique-transformation.’<sup>22</sup>

These groups are certainly concentrated in the first instance in schools and universities, thus the Red Guards, but ultimately exceed this concentration, and involve workers, soldiers and peasants alike both in discrete organisations and together. (The successful example of this being the Shanghai Machine Tool Plant Worker University.)<sup>23</sup> This despite the efforts of the so called ‘work groups’ sent into the schools and universities in the early stages of 1966 by the revisionist leaders Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. These work groups, supporting and comprising the Black Gang or Black Line, were actually a pretence aimed directly at preventing this organised coming together of students and workers. The French Communist Party, perhaps or perhaps not, with a similar motive, had a similar idea in 1968.<sup>24</sup>

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22 Ibid., p. 549.

23 See: *Take the Road of the Shanghai Machine Tools Plant In Training Technicians from Among the Workers: Two Investigative Reports on the Revolution in Education in Colleges of Science and Engineering*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1968.

24 Again, re: Althusser’s Letter – ‘the primacy of the general strike over the student actions.’ This ‘is correct not only because it reflects the real relationship of forces in May, but also because it conforms to the Marxist-Leninist thesis of the revolutionary character of the working class, and of *it alone*.’ Looked at from the orientation of the *Decision*, and so from that of the truth of the masses, it is possible to consider the CFP’s move as more Maoist, and less reactionary than it is given credit

The *Decision* begins by declaring that ‘the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution now unfolding is a great revolution that touches people to their very souls’ and indeed to change the very soul of man is what is declared to be at stake. This has been described as a metaphysical proposition but if so it’s clearly a materialist metaphysics assuming as it does – and contrary to liberalism which reserves man in his essence – that the soul can indeed be changed and through ‘education’ no less, albeit one that is as much taken as it is given, which is to say is *subjectively* transformative. Moreover, what is meant by ‘soul’ is clearly ‘orientation’ and this is precisely what the GPCR is about and what May 68 assumed of itself as event: a complete re-orientation of all to the situation as such.

As mentioned this is not, supposedly, an orthodox position but it is clearly in line with Marx’s determination in *Theses on Feuerbach* that materialists must stop leaving subjectivity to the bourgeois idealists and conceive of a materialist subject as the very possibility of a real change in the world. In short, without this thought of the subject, no such change is possible because, as today, all we have is the subject of infinite potential or innovation – adaptable, flexible, resilient etc. in the face of a change *which is not its*. Indeed, as we see under the logic or knowledge of capital, the vitality of adaptation is the impossibility of the subject and this is the supposed subject of education today – schooled into existence as that capable of adapting to what is already determined to exist, which is itself not for changing, as the Lady said.

In direct contradiction with this orthodox prescription, then, the *Decision* prescribes that the educated subject must, ‘meet head-on every challenge of the bourgeoisie in the ideological field and use the new ideas, culture, customs and habits of the proletariat to change the mental outlook of the whole of society. At present, our objective is to struggle against and overthrow those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road, to criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois academic ‘authorities’ and the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes and to transform education, literature and art ...’ So clearly, a bourgeois education cannot support a subject capable of such transformation; such a subject needs an *other* orientation.

As noted, the *Decision* sets out both what is at stake and what is to be done; it notes the forms of resistance and how they shall appear; it advocates boldness, no fear, and necessarily in this invention,

for. It maintained the basis and means for the refusal of the division of knowledge predicated in the approach of the intellectuals. Nevertheless, it is the case that the PCF were in no way inclined to revolutionise the PCF in a way that would ‘let the masses educate themselves in the revolutionary process’.

experimentation; the latter, Russo argues, ‘in the Galilean sense, in that it reveals an unknown truth, allowing something crucial, though unthinkable in the existing system of political knowledge, to appear: namely, the structural heterogeneity between emancipatory politics and governmentality, posing the question of how to deal politically with emancipation...outside the form of the party.’<sup>25</sup>

In this sense are friends and enemies distinguished and the *Decision* invokes Mao’s famous thesis regarding the two types of contradictions: those between the people and its enemies and those amongst the people themselves – namely, not to mistake the former for the latter. Indeed, this mistake by the Red Guards leads almost to civil war – a mistake Mao, in a conversation with the various leaders of the factions in 1968 held to give them a chance to stop the violence themselves, attributes only half-jokingly to their ‘orthodox education’. Some readers may be pleased to know that in this same vein the *Decision* makes clear that ‘care should be taken to distinguish strictly between the reactionary bourgeois scholar despots and ‘authorities’ on the one hand and people who have the ordinary bourgeois academic ideas on the other.’

To end this section, I want to highlight what I’d say is the central thesis, the one that brings the thought of the masses onto the stage; that interrupts history as revolutions qua events do. What Mao does is situate this reversal of knowledge, thus this new orientation of the knowledge of all, in the masses as a fixed point. This, Wang Hui argues, is ‘to move from the traditional ‘worldview based on heavenly principles’ to the axiomatic principles of the scientific worldview’; this, he says, ‘embodies a sea change in social sovereignty.’<sup>26</sup> Hence the great and axiomatic statement of Point 4 of the *16 Point Decision*: ‘Trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast out fear. Don’t be afraid of disturbances. ... Let the masses educate themselves in the great revolutionary process. Let them decide for themselves what is just and what is not.’

Let me conclude in 4 points:

1. The masses become the point of orientation – and so the opposition to the orthodox position is to take up this singular position of the universal class and not to retreat into some form of relativism or difference.
2. As self-educating, self-authorising in the field of knowledge, the masses become subject. Thus the subject is not abandoned lest one

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25 Russo & Pozzana 2012, p. 310.

26 Hui 2009, p. 140.

becomes, again, subject to anything and everything, but renewed relative to this new orientation which is essentially its very axiomatic existence in the field of knowledge: the emancipation of the masses by the masses.

3. Critically, these two assertions assume that the masses think or are actively capable of thought. What could 'trust the masses' refer to but that they can think the situation as such, other-wise than via the knowledge prescribed for them by 'bourgeois' others; and what is it for them to educate themselves except to suppose that they have the capacity to do so.

4. So the thought of the masses – *that* they think – is the condition for the revolution in knowledge, the disturbances, such that the question is 'what is knowledge relative to this orientation' – which is to say, what is civilisation such that it manifests the thought of the masses?

This idea of trust in the masses, that they *think* is Mao's most radical idea. To put it bluntly, to possess knowledge is traditionally what marks you out as distinct from the run of men and there is a coincident assumption that this distinction accords to it certain privileges – whatever they are: status, power, research holidays, money – your run of the mill competitive advantages and so on. Knowledge is distinction from and against the masses, by definition. Thus as long as knowledge is *conditioned* by this framework of 'each according to his abilities' the revolution will always be in danger of backsliding into this bourgeois framework of relative merit masquerading as natural advantage and failing to be revolutionary as such – and thus always 'televised'!

Turning this upside down, then, Marxism-Leninism is supposed to be the thought/truth of the masses and to make this thought/truth manifest is the revolution: the revolution is the self-education of the masses in what is thought/true of them. That the masses were generally steeped in tradition is what makes their exploitation by the superior knowledge of the revisionist in Marxism-Leninism possible and thus what makes the revolution top-down so to speak, supposing as it does that the masses are forever ignorant in just this way. Mao's 'axiom', that the masses think, is the *decision* of the sixteen points: that the masses can come to know all they do not; precisely, the truth of Marxism-Leninism which, as *manifest* – hence as the work of the masses themselves – will have been the truth of the masses. Thus Marxism-Leninism is itself no doctrine, no knowledge.

For Mao, then, this recasting of knowledge, of culture, is the way to the full realisation of the promise of revolution. Again, this is unorthodox to suppose that changing the superstructure effects the base except that for Mao here the change is not in what is taught – thus not in known knowledge per se – or at least the target is not the banishment of certain symptoms but in the *orientation* of teaching and knowledge itself and thus

the recasting of the subject of knowledge itself – hence the masses.<sup>27</sup> This is not some vulgar imitation of a vulgar Lysenkoism: new knowledge doesn't depend on the masses for its existence as knowledge and nor is the masses a check on what can come to be known – that 'we will come to know all that we do not know' is one of Mao's favourite things to say, after all – rather, whatever knowledge comes to exist in the situation of the revolution it will be and can only be that of all or the *thought* or truth of the masses – which is Marxism-Leninism – which is not the *knowledge* of Marx or Lenin!

The masses, the political category par excellence, are the subject of and for all knowledge. It's precisely a prescription on the way forward and not something already attested to in experience or empirically – it is not precisely known knowledge but as has been said, knowledge in truth whose experiment is to be carried out – for example, in the factory universities which sought to train their own technicians within this framework of the thought of the masses or this truth. Moreover, this change in the subject of knowledge is the only way to fulfil the victory of the base as it were, to concretise their alignment – to move from the socialist state maintaining the false division of labour to the non-state form of communism – something Plato, with full knowledge of the *failure* of the GPCR and the seizure of power by the right, wisely said was nowhere visible but not impossible.

This 'not impossibility' of another knowledge than that which orients all education today is something that once again needed to be decided in the event of May 68. Whether it is 'Maoist' is not the issue. Whether it *is* the thought of all, the decision that the all are capable of thought is what's at stake and not, precisely, what we once again have: that the all are subject to what is known of them and thus that they do not, cannot and – hence the orientation of contemporary education – *must not think* what is true for them. Lest it upset the smooth archi-metaphysical institutional order of what passes today as the *knowledge* of the new, so called neoliberal, bourgeois state form.

### The destruction of incapacity

Today, in the constructed aftermath of May 68 – and thus in line with the *denkverboten* that state knowledge accords to it – more completely than at any other time, knowledge and the state are synonymous, implicative, and education is reduced to being the training ground for good state subjects: as so many policy and curriculum documents, no less than course descriptions, excitedly attest. The rhetoric of employability, job readiness, adaptation, flexibility, resilience and so on – all of which see the subject in no other terms than that of 'human resources' permeates

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<sup>27</sup> Rancière makes this essentially Mao-ist criticism of Althusser in his breakdown of Althusser's science ideology distinction and how it effects his critique of May 68. See Rancière 2011.



and determines the educational discourse of the so-called West and those determined to follow its 'lead'. Educational systems everywhere have been humanitarially-intervened-on in the name of the good of education. Such a good requires, the World Bank tells us:

flexible and nimble institutions and policy frameworks that can adapt to rapid change, and a creative and entrepreneurial private sector that can exploit new opportunities that emerge from that rapid change. Thus creating a society of skilled, flexible and creative people, with opportunities for quality education and life-long learning available to all, and a flexible and appropriate mix of public and private funding.<sup>28</sup>

This is the fluxable good(s) the West trades on in its interest, repeated in policy documents and faculties of education everywhere without remorse. As Marx noted: 'Whenever it comes across evil it attributes it to its own absence, for, if it is the only good, then it alone can create the good.'<sup>29</sup>

The problem today is *not* that neo-liberalism is trying to take over education, the problem today is that *education is neoliberal: global, nomadic, horizontally distributed*. Neo-liberalism is the contemporary form of the state, knowledge of capital. It provides the norm by which reality is constructed, exactly what the cronies of the Mount Pelerin Society set out for it to be some 70 years ago: '...a thoroughgoing re-education effort for *all parties* to alter the tenor and meaning of political life: nothing more, nothing less.'

Hence in neo-liberalism, neo-liberalist pedagogies, which we have embraced and deliriously reconciled as the 'knowledge economy': not simply knowledge for sale or reduced like all else to the commodity form, but knowledge as economy; economy, the law of the state qua household as all knowing and thus itself unknowable. What is occluded in education is the opening to thought of this unknowable guarded, again, by some God or other. Thus what is occluded by knowledge is the thought of education itself.

Today the 'market', already a metaphor, a mark of the displacement of the real, is for us that master signifier which knows precisely what we do not and cannot know and thus what *must* not be known. Hence as the totalising condition of all known knowledge the market cannot be thought; it marks the space of the ineffable limit for creatures like us and, as with the mind of God, we must only know it as our 'manifest destiny' and not presume to think it. Which is to say, to think what is true of it –

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28 'Building Knowledge Economies: Opportunities and Challenges for EU Accession Countries. Final Report of the Knowledge Economy Forum "Using Knowledge for Development in EU Accession Countries", World Bank in cooperation with the European Commission the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank Paris, 19–22 February 2002', May 2002, [www.worldbank.org/eca/knowledgeconomy](http://www.worldbank.org/eca/knowledgeconomy).

29 Marx 1974, p. 404.

exploitation, division in two e.g. – which is also to say, to think what-it-is-not *for all*. That way lay the camps, so goes the current pedagogicisation.

We are today attuned, conformed, post May 68, post the consolidations of the new capital that is reformed on the basis of the negationism described above to the dogmatic claim that any notion of 'common purpose' is untenable – being *false* at the limit. Ineffable difference, the *constancy* of deterritorialisation has the day. Nomadology and the neo-liberal sublime coincide at this juncture, of *knowing* what must not be known, of, ultimately, and in tune with the times or at least the theoretical times of western theory, committing a *destitution* of the subject. Thus they coincide not just in their hori-zonal conception of global space (much beloved of the Israeli state) but also in their metaphysics of the subject.

This destitution is not 'de-individualisation' however, or even the individualisation of communities of difference but de-subjectivisation: the impossibility of some collective, participative formation predicated on an indifference to differences, on some idea irreducible to any specified or determined body and to any determinative and classificatory schema of language. In short, the destitution of a subject predicated on what we are capable of here and now beyond such a reduction to the finitist categories of 'bodies and languages', identities and differences. This subject has been shamed into impossibility by charges of immodesty and impiety: impiety before the market, immodesty before our a priori determined limits, which, when we add the vitalist-empiricism converts this knowledge into what is effectively a bio-logic of subjective incapacity. Thought, the very kernel of the subject, the wager that is its sole predicate is annulled in the knowledge that goes before it of this 'partial impenetrability', this living impossibility.

Purposefully vague but ideologically crucial conceptions of change, innovation or disruption predicated in an affective other-worldly vitality provide the very conditions of the constancy of this nomadic regime of knowledge: constant movement or innovation, and so, paradoxically, an anti-statist 'disruptive' conceit is its loudest most interminable refrain, its contemporary pedagogical force. The unsayable, ineffable etc., being what remains over as a thoroughly un-actualised infinite potential, stands guarantee for the in-terminable multiplicity of appearances or knowledges, movements and 'disruptions', which the repetition of deterritorialisation requires. Another way to put this is as the 'free market in ideas', where everyone can choose their own 'truth' qua identity given precisely that nothing is truly true – nothing 'solid'. This is the triumph of the simulacra, wherein the economy of immutable difference is life itself – the beings of (non)being.

What we need to ask is what holds out against this, what point of indifference, what point of a new orientation? What in the education

situation refuses the demand to not demand the impossible as real? Without holding to something un-deterritorialisable, nomadology can only be conceived as a clearing for what already exists and not an inventing of what *can* be: ‘...if the people do not have their *own* politics [education], they will enact the politics [education] of *their* enemies: political history abhors a void.’<sup>30</sup>

This nomadism of our contemporary capitalism is too much and not enough. It is movement sanctioned by the constancy of what is impossible for us, what is impossible to know. What is off limits is that this very bond between the logic of indetermination and the multiplicities of desire be itself cut<sup>31</sup> and thus what is impossible in the moving image of knowledge that organises us pedagogically – we are all *educated* after all – is the truly new: not some laissez faire fantasy, which is to return to the market-divine but the truly new as that-which-is *for all*. A subject is what holds to *this* – that truths – which are new and what insists – are what a collective is capable of – which is (not) impossible. In other words, the state is incapable of truth, but this does not mean, as has long been assumed, that truths are thereby fictions of the state.

An education predicated on a limit or a horizon of the knowable – ‘the pedagogy of the world as it goes’<sup>32</sup> – is, as Plato says, a queer sort of education; meaning that it reduces to a mere utility function and, having a use, can be bought and sold depending on the difference currently demanded by the market. Education is currency. It presumes also, ‘conceitedly’ to use Plato’s term of art, that there exists a knowledge, contradictory – as noted, the knowledge of the limit – off limits to thought and so – and clearly problematically for the concept – off limits to education. It knows that to un-know the state is impossible as *there is* no such knowledge and it is this *unknowability* or this subjective incapacity that is taught.

Today education, given over to the nomadic predations of state logic – there is nowhere it cannot go – is the taught knowledge of the lack of education. This is not a paradox but the logic of the systemic necessity to *not* hold fast. ‘The solemn and sanctimonious declaration that we can have no knowledge of this or that always foreshadows some obscure devotion to the Master of the unknowable, the God of the religions or his placeholders.’<sup>33</sup> We might call it the hidden curriculum. It comes down to a single presumption: ‘that which is not susceptible to being classified

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30 Badiou 2012, p. 193

31 The unsayable/impossible seems to be the one stake our contemporary anti-Platonists won’t wager!

32 Badiou 2009, p. 302

33 Ibid., p. 302.

within a knowledge *is not*.’ As Durkheim points out, with specific reference to education, to what is true for it, ‘the recurrent and never fully solvable tension between thinking and knowledge is the rule rather than the exception’.<sup>34</sup> The thinking of education needs again to be unbound from its knowledge.

It is ridiculous to give summary to polemic but let me just note again what May 68 thought as event and thought thereby in relation to what conditions it as such, forces into the scene of education. In the first place that education is site of a fundamental antagonism: this because it can never rest assured as the knowledge of the state. It asks necessarily *of* this state of knowledge, this moveable feast of the knowledge economy, which supposes itself to be the limit of all. When the knowledge of the state is the state of knowledge education nowhere exists. Education always exceeds its limit and so begins again as an exception to it. This is the promise of education for all. And it is this immanent force that the knowledge of the state operates on in its interests. It idealises the promise and instrumentalises the procedure, betraying what is invariant to it. But this invariance insists and shows itself as unbound from the state and its limits, its metaphysics, its bio-logic. To insist on this invariance, which insists as what is not the knowledge of the state, and thus as what is truly education, is the force of the subject. The subject of education is the capacity to take, to produce, to invent a non-state form. The exceptional force of education is invariably to not know the state. This educated subject is the end of the subjective incapacity that the state cannot not teach; the teaching that the interests of the state are the interests of all and that there are no others is the intrinsic corruption of the state. The subject of education is necessarily the destruction of this subjective incapacity, the corruption of this corruption. Hence it is found nowhere in the state but is not impossible.

Eeducation truly can only be the destruction of this incapacity – which can only be un-educative given it stakes all its worth in a limit which is unthinkable for it. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is possible to see – within and despite the knowledge of May 68 – in the construction of itself as an exception qua event that just such a subject insists and this despite the insistence of its encircling metaphysics that no such subject is possible. Indeed, the individuals that make up this becoming subject are precisely de-individuated in the invention of this event as the recommencement of what is invariably truly new, truly exceptional and *for all*. Something within the situation of the state that the state as such renders impossible for it is by the *thought* of the event made manifest as truly of that situation. The subject names this procedure of its invention, the construction of its form, which is at the same time the means of its transmission. Those truly the subject of education insist in this exception

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34 Durkheim 1977.

at the limit and on this ongoing procedure of which May 68 can be seen to be its singular orientation. What is decisive, as the GPCR demonstrated, is that today we refuse to not read this subject there. Or in other words: find what rusticates you and let it kill them.

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# Will it Happen Again? Boredom, Anxiety and the Peak of Human Evolution

Franco “bifo” Berardi

**Abstract:** The question I try to ask myself is the following: may a global insurrection happen again? What is the background of the global explosion that happened in 1968?

My answer is that 68 is the culmination of a long period of increasing expectations and desire on the backstage of boredom. And now we live in a situation that is marked by anxiety, the contrary of boredom. Where can we find the energy for a process of subjectivation, when attention is permanently mobilised by neuro-stimulation proceeding from the Info-machine?

**Keywords:** neuro-stimulation, boredom, desire, cognitive labor, general intellect, anxiety, panic

## 1. Boredom

Boredom is the background of the explosion that changed the world in the years 68.

Boredom is a multi-faceted sentiment, based on the disproportion between undefined desire and real existence. This sentiment is ubiquitous in the cultural experiments of the postwar decades: its symptoms range from Sartre nausea to Antonioni psychological desert of incommunicability, to the Moravia cynical absentmindedness.

After the distressing years of war, after the tragedy and the protracted condition of fear, a wave of boredom (sweet boredom, sad boredom, anguishing sometimes and sometimes pleasurable) weaselled its way in the post-war mind.

This is not of course an attempt of explanation of the cultural earthquake whose temporal epicentre is in the year '68. Just a possible approach to the psycho-cultural environment that prepared the kids to gather in the streets and do something never happened before.

Boredom is the painful (but not so painful) contrast between the intensity of desire and the scarcity of nervous stimulation coming from the surrounding world. Boredom happened to be the prevailing psychological condition of pre-adolescents in the past: unfulfilled arising sexual desire, lonely pleasure, lingering and imagining.

Having been born just after the end of the world war, we had the opportunity of accessing the public school, of buying paperbacks, those non expensive books that gave us the inspiration of being travellers, intellectuals, fighters explorers and pirates. We had the chance of going to the movie theatres just when Hollywood was projecting all over the feeling of being citizens of the world.

But our parents protected us from the dangers they had just experienced in the years of war. They wanted us to be safe, and we learned to despise safety, and security was for us one of the ugliest words of the vocabulary.



Travelling was expensive, before discovering that it is possible to travel for free just avoiding to pay for the ticket, and avoiding to respect the law. So we did not travel much, in the '60s, before discovering hitchhiking, and the possibility of taking a train and not paying the ticket. The intensity of our imagination did not match with the slow rhythm of family life, inspired by the smiling reassuring advertising of the '50s. And conformism was part of the boredom: dressing, and hairstyle, and daily life we wanted to change in order to escape the order of normalcy.

The gap between our imagination and our expectations nurtured those long summer days of delicious agonising boredom, when we fantasised about travelling exotic places and about fighting against the wrongdoings of the imperialist world.

Adventurism is an expression that in the history of Communism has been employed against those extreme-left activists who dared to do things that could imperil the common cause: a double edged definition, that many young extremists like me embraced with a certain degree of irony: we wanted to live those adventures that seemed unattainable in the boring welfare society of our pre-adolescent years.

Then something happened, and the bubble of boredom burst.

## 2. Information and consciousness

My political expectations have been forged by the persuasion that progress is the general trend of human history. This was the prevailing vision of the future. Fascism and war had been a dark digression, a parenthetical outburst of backwardness and reactionary violence, in our perception. In my perception at least, as my father, who had fought as a partisan against the Nazis in the mountains of Central Italy, told me thousand times in my childhood: you are lucky, as you will never again experience fascism and war. Progress was the common ground of expectation for the communists like my father and for the democrats who were ruling country where I have been growing up. This assumption was wrong, as we know nowadays in the new Century, as Evolution has taken the shape of Regression.

Progress means, first and foremost, that the new generation will live better than their parents, and the per capita available resources are destined to increase, and that the modern criteria of justice are destined to be better implemented from one generation to the next. From this point of view, it's easy to acknowledge that progress is over: for the first time in modern history the new generation is destined to receive less than the previous, at least in the industrialised world. And on a global scale the quality of life is worsening for the wide majority of the human kind, including those who have been lured by the promise of consumption, and now are facing the harshness of hyper-exploitation, environmental pollution and massive mental breakdown.

Old woes like nationalism, religious fanaticism and racism that in

my youth were considered buried forever are resurfacing and taking the upper hand almost everywhere. Happiness seems almost an impossible goal for the precarious generation, and sexual joy is largely replaced by compulsive digital stimulation.

The reversal of expectations can be dated more or less around the end of the '70s, when the two defining processes of the post-modern transition (neoliberal privatisation of everything and networked virtualisation of social life) were put in motion simultaneously and inter-dependently.

Therefore I assert that 1968 is the peak of human evolution: the moment in which technological innovation and social consciousness reached their high point in convergence. Since then the technical potency has steadily expanded, technology has grown more and more pervasive, while social consciousness has been relatively receding. As a result technique has been enhancing its grip over social life, while society has been losing control over technology, and therefore has grown less and less able to govern itself.

In the conjuncture that we name '68 social consciousness was expected to preside over technological change and to direct it to the common good, but the contrary happened. When a new technological horizon appeared, following the diffusion of electronics and computing, the Leftist parties and the unions regarded the technological change as a danger, rather than as an opportunity to master and to submit to the social interest. As a consequence the liberation from labor was labelled unemployment, and the Left engaged in countering the unstoppable technical transformation.

The relation between information and consciousness is here the focus of my reflection. So I have to clarify the meaning of these concepts in this context: I define information as knowledge objectified in signs and conveyed by media, and I define consciousness as the subjective elaboration and the singularisation of the contents of knowledge.

After the years '68, and particularly in the wake of the digital acceleration of the info-sphere, simultaneous to the Neoliberal turn, the sphere of objectified knowledge has enormously expanded, while available time for conscious elaboration has inversely shrunk.

This double dynamics has provoked a reshaping of social consciousness: the relative reduction of available time has resulted in a systemic downsizing of the individual conscious assimilation of information and the singularisation of knowledge. The rhythm of technological innovation has intensified while social awareness has symmetrically decreased.

While Artificial intelligence is expanding in the technical sphere, human ignorance has relatively increased, and demented behaviour

is spreading all over, as is exposed by the massive support to racism, nationalism, and religious fanaticism. I use the expression dementia in a literal sense: separation of the automated brain from the living body, and resulting dementia of the brainless social body.

### 3. Emergence of the general intellect on the scene of history

Sixty-Eight marks the moment when the general intellect enters the scene of the world, and marks the beginning of a long lasting process, that is still underway: the formation of the networked the general intellect.

Hans-Jurgen Krahel, a thinker and an activist of the German movement in '68, in his text "*Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarischem Klassenbewusstsein*", (published in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, 1971 Verlag Neue Kritik) argued that a new composition of labor is emerging, thanks to the insertion of science and technology in the cycle of production, and to the emerging consciousness of the techno-scientific intelligence, intended as a social force.

Actually the decade that prepares the explosion of '68 marks the highpoint in history of mass education: the universal access to the public system of education is an effect of the progressive struggles of the workers movement, and creates a new condition in human history.

The faculty of critical thought, which has been exclusive privilege of a part of the bourgeoisie in the past centuries turns into a common good of the majority of society. Simultaneously in those years the evolution of technology prepares the conditions for the formation of the general intellect, that Marx conceptualised in the *Grundrisse*: the concept of network as structure for the simultaneous connection of distant brains, takes shape in the wake of the movement. The different streams of alternative culture that come to the surface with the student revolt in the second part of the '60s, have different approaches, but converge in the appreciation of something that we may define with Marx "general intellect": the Californian psychedelic wave and the holistic approach to the Global Mind, the German legacy of the Critical Theory, the Italian Neo-Marxist approach of *Potere operaio*, in different ways signal the consciousness of an emerging technical and anthropological entity, that is reshaping the very ground of social imagination.

Those who conceived the network, as a technical and cultural compound come from the generation that went through the brainstorm of '68.

In the *Grundrisse*, particularly in the well known *Fragment on machines*, Marx asserts that machines, as a product of knowledge, are reducing the time of necessary labour up to the point of making possible the emancipation of society from the slavery of salaried labour.

In the years '68 actually, the alliance between students and industrial workers could be intended as something more than an ideological or moral solidarity. In fact, students were the bearers of the force of knowledge, while workers were expressing a widespread refusal of salaried exploitation. The political alliance between them implied the prospect of an organised process of reduction of labor time. In Italy the slogan "lavorare tutti lavorare meno"

"Everybody at work so everybody can work less" was the culmination of those years of social mobilisation.

But this alliance did not last for long, because the political leadership of the workers movement (the communist parties and the Unions) proved unable to transform technology into an opportunity. On the contrary, they saw technology as danger, and they engaged into the losing strategy of defending jobs.

The emerging movement of the University proved unable to transform the prevailing culture of the Left, and the legacy of Soviet Communism strangled the novelty that students were bringing about, swallowing the emergent social rebellion into the rigid symmetry of the Cold War.

### 4. Anxiety

In the years '68 everybody was expecting a long lasting process of social emancipation from misery and exploitation. This persuasion was totally wrong, as we know fifty years after. Exploitation and misery have not decreased, they have transformed and expanded in many ways.

Today the prevailing expectations are very different, almost opposed: massive depression, expanding inequality, precariousness and war.

Why? What has broken the expectations of fifty years ago, what has provoked this sort of reversal of imagination?

Financial capitalism has paralysed the ability to act together, and the collapse of social solidarity has paved the way for a dynamics that is quite similar to the dynamics that led to Fascism in the past Century. Fascism is back, mixed with the unrelenting aggressiveness of global economic competition, that in several cases results in open war.

The only possibility to overcome the devastating effects of financial capitalism and to dispel the sense of impotence that overshadows social life in the new Century would be a worldwide movement like was '68, because only a movement might unleash the intellectual energy that is needed for the reactivation of the autonomous social mind.

Only a massive and long lasting mobilisation might dispel the fog depression. So the question: is a new '68 possible? Although I don't forget the Keynes assertion that the inevitable generally does not come into being because generally the unpredictable prevails,

I must admit that - as far as I can understand and I can foresee - a social movement up to the situation is out of the imaginable possibilities.

Why so? I could reply this question about the impossibility of a movement in many different ways: I could refer to the effect of precarisation in the sphere of labor that has made so difficult social solidarity, I could refer to the feeling of impotence of people facing the mathematical inexorability of financial capitalism. In my vision, however, the main reason of the present de-solidarisation is based in the relation among conscious bodies. The digitalisation of communication has resulted in the paradoxical effect of expanding communication in condition of increasing isolation.

The sphere of affection is disturbed because of a fundamental uncoupling of language and the body. In human history, language has always been based on the bodily relation among sentient and conscious beings. The access to symbolic has always been granted by the bodily relation with the mother. The voice (as Agamben suggests in language and death) is the point of conjunction of meaning with the flesh, therefore it is the point of singularisation of meaning.

The relation between the signifier (words, images) and the signified (meaning) is not based on any isomorphic link. The only foundation of our trust in the meaning of signs is the bodily relation with the voice of the mother.

I'm not talking here of the biological mother, I 'm not even talking of a female person. It may be an uncle, or a friend or a father, but it has to be human, and singular, and physical. The voice is the certifier of the relation between words and things: the body is the ground of signification.

*Loveless* is the title of a movie by Zvyagintsev. The first I saw is *Leviathan*: two movies describing the iced desert of the contemporary post-modern soul. *Loveless* is about the disappearance of the future. The future is Aljosha, the 8 years old child who disappears at the beginning of the movie. He disappears (dies? is killed? flies faraway? we don't know) because Genia, the mother of the child is unable to feel love for the unwanted son. She is unable to feel affection because of the surrounding sadness, competition and loneliness.

The kid disappears, and the mother is desperately looking for him, and not finding him.

All along the movie connection is permanently haunting and capturing attention: people watching all the time the small screen of their smart phones in the train and in the street and in the bedroom, perpetually driven by the engulfing flows of neuro-stimulation.

Boredom has been erased, and angst has replaced it in such a way that we cannot desire adventure anymore, because the simulated adventure has saturated our attention and our imagination.

**Coda**

I don't intend to measure the distance from '68 in political terms, because I think that the transformation that happened after the end of those years can only be appreciated from the point of view of anthropological evolution and of cognitive mutation. A process of evolutionary regression is underway. I wonder if the human mind can consciously and intentionally (politically, I mean) deal with the evolution of the human mind itself.

*April 2018*

# Topicality of May 68

## Daniel Blanchard

**Abstract:** In 68, social consciousness began to be reconstructed, both through the autonomous seizing of speech and through action. The example of the Centre d'Etudes Nucléaires de Saclay illustrates the battles in May. These illuminate some fundamental features of society at the time, features even more markedly at work in our present-day capitalist world : its totalitarian tendency, the destruction of all ties, of all truly living social relations, of the very meaningfulness of life in society. And conversely, the intense conviviality, the transgression of barriers and roles in May.

At Saclay we see how rapidly the *contestation* moved from the student milieu to this heterogeneous milieu, how spontaneously it began and developed, and its all-encompassing, systematic nature. Collective control of work is demanded, with its necessary corollary, freedom of speech (perceived as the requisite for true democracy). As Michel de Certeaux showed, speech was seized directly and in egalitarian fashion.

Wherever there was an upsurge of "*contestation*", challenging everything including parties and unions, it is bureaucracy that is denounced above all. What is demanded is responsibility; equality between individuals is translated into practical solidarity. Demands for higher wages receded into the background, and the Grenelle agreements with their 10% wage increment were often taken as an insult.

Action had a revelatory power, as shown by the practices of the 22<sup>nd</sup> March movement, especially provocation, aimed at bringing its opponents to betray their reactionary nature and exemplary action showing the possibility of immediate positive action.

Politics then became potentially meaningful again.

**Key words:** May 68; speech (seizing); unions; bureaucracy; wages; equality;

Fifty years have gone by, and the crackdown on the social movement challenging president Emmanuel Macron's politics has shown how vivid the fears and hatred elicited by May 1968 remain among the rich, politicians, bureaucrats... and renegades. That is not the subject I will address here, but rather, the events which we continue to view as deeply positive, and which justify the reactions of the above-mentioned. What remains relevant about May, today, is above all the combats that were engaged then, both in their goals and in the paths they took, but also in those paths that led them to failure. There is also the fact that those battles illuminated some fundamental features of society at the time, features which are even more markedly at work in our present-day world.

To point up the most remarkable aspects of the movement, I have chosen an example that involves neither a university nor a factory, and



thus clearly evidences the great variety of sectors of society that were drawn into it. The place is the Centre d'Etudes Nucléaires de Saclay, a State-run institution in charge of theoretical and applied research on nuclear energy.<sup>1</sup> The Center is practically a city in its own right, with streets, avenues, restaurants, a railroad station, etc., visited daily by some 10,000 people, half of whom are researchers and technical personnel working for the Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique, while the rest are employees and workers employed by outside companies, foreign students and researchers, and innumerable security guards. A city near Paris but cut off from the outside world by fences, barbed wire, and strict security arrangements. A fortified area, then, but one that May invaded nonetheless, and very early on.

Like everywhere, it was the repression of the student movement that triggered protest, followed by what was called “*contestation*” : challenging the established state of affairs. At first some leftist activists and sympathizers got together and launched a petition. They soon found themselves in discussions with dozens, then hundreds of their colleagues. On May 13, 2,000 people demonstrated in the town of Saclay before going to join the huge demonstration in Paris. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, the *contestation* was so contagious within the Center that the joint union group – the *intersyndicale* – called for a general assembly. 5,000 people attended : five or six times more than usual. Everything was challenged, all at once : the bureaucracy, the passes, the unions. There were demands for respect for individuals, freedom of speech. For three whole days, the discussions went on among about 1,500 participants. They gradually came to the conclusion that the whole established order must fall. And they were not requesting, they were demanding, for they were the legitimate, democratic source of power. Everyone participated on equal footing, the C.E.A. personnel as well as the outside companies, at all hierarchical levels. What did they *demand* ? That the administration be headed by an elected, revocable Company Committee, with elected workers' councils in each department and sector, the end of internal policing measures, free speech for all...

We must not idealize what went on in Saclay, however. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the considerable differentials in wages were not called into question, even if some improvements were demanded for workers at the lowest echelons. Even more significantly, perhaps, there is no indication of any criticism of the goals of the institution... The program led to co-management, not to workers' management, and to collaboration. Thus, all of the C.E.A. personnel demanded the right to participate in the designing of its programs, *including its military programs*...

Nonetheless, the situation contains many of the features that made the May movement so radical. First of all, the rapidity with which

.....  
<sup>1</sup> Controlled by the Commission à l'énergie atomique (the C.E.A.).

what was euphemistically named *contestation* moved from the student milieu to this heterogeneous milieu with an extremely broad range of qualifications and a wide pay scale, ranging from very high-level scientists to maintenance workers. Next, the spontaneous way in which the movement was set in motion and developed. A handful of “*enragés*”, as they called themselves, did actually play a role, but the political organizations played none, and the unions just tried to hang on... and to restrain it. And then, the all-encompassing, systematic nature of the *contestation*. Bureaucracy is everywhere, it is denounced everywhere. And positively, what is demanded is collective control of work, and its necessary corollary, freedom of speech: they demanded responsibility. Monetary demands were relegated to the background. The freedom, and almost the duty, to speak out – what Michel de Certeaux has called “*la prise de la parole*”, seizing the right to speak as the people seized the Bastille in 1789, was immediately perceived as the requisite for true democracy. It broke down the barriers between professional categories, and – to some extent... – between social positions. It demolished the social roles in which people are locked up, or lock themselves up. It led to the rediscovery of the bases of that “working-class democracy” that the revolutionary movement has put into practice in its most radical moments : the sovereign general assembly, councils and delegates mandated for a definite assignment, and revocable... In other words, the assertion of equality between individuals viewed as political and human beings. And this equality translated into practical solidarity : “Some immigrant workers were going hungry in a nearby shantytown. We took a truck, some money, gas, and we went to buy the chicken and potatoes they needed at an agricultural cooperative. The hospitals needed radioelements : the department that produced radioelements went back to work. Gas is absolutely necessary in this outlying place. The strike committee of the Finac refinery in Nanterre sent us 30,000 liters of gas, which enabled us to continue our action and above all, to go to the Center...” (*Des Soviets à Saclay ?*, Paris, Maspéro, 1968).

That sort of ideas, demands, and practices emerged just about everywhere in 68, and they remain just as meaningful and subversive today. One may of course say that most of them came into being at the outset of the working class movement, along with the combat against capitalist society, and that their relevance will last as long as capitalism. But the May movement is much closer to us, more eloquent, concretely, than 1848, 1871, or... “What makes all crises important, is that they reveal what was latent until then,” according to Lenin. That is almost a truism, but nonetheless, it must be taken seriously. What, then, was “latent” in 68 ? A transformation of the mechanisms of capitalist society, which had begun, in France – or the pace of which had considerably quickened – with the Fifth Republic.

With hindsight, the very pugnacious strikes of the previous years,

such as at the Rhodiacéta plant, the radicalization of some participants in the student movement, as in Strasburg, definitely look like early signs of the upheaval, but in my opinion they do not represent a cumulative rise in combativeness that can account for such amazing facts as the extremely rapid propagation of the movement to a huge portion of French society, impelled by an act of insubordination by a handful of students, the apparent diversity of the sectors affected by that propagation and the convergent radicalness of the ideas and practices adopted by more or less all participants. What these facts demonstrate strikingly, I think, is a shared, common experience of a social reality which in turn had been profoundly homogenized. It is the fact that the previous period had deepened and systematized the totalitarian aspect of capitalist society. Totalitarian : not, of course, in the sense of a totalitarian *regime* such as Nazism or Stalinism, but in the sense of an integration of all sectors, all aspects and all actors of social life into a machinery aimed at the unlimited expansion of the production of goods, and therefore of capital and its dominion. From consumption to leisure time, from information to the transmission of knowledge, from the laboratory to the factory, everything must be submitted to the rules of instrumentality and functionality and subjugated to that absurd goal, which has nothing to do with the life of “ordinary people”. Obviously, this devastating process has continued to be constantly deepened since then.

In France, the inauguration of the Gaullist regime represented the onset of an enterprise of rationalization of French society which took the form not only of the liquidation of the lobby of “beet-growers” (the farming industry) and “liquor distillers” (the “backward” farmers), but above all of the transformation of colonial domination into neocolonial imperialism, and in the productive system in the broadest sense, of a reorganization of the work process in the name of the necessity of control and efficiency. Many service industries, especially the post offices and banks, were mechanized and industrialized, and the jobs proletarianized. Standardized definition of tasks and bureaucratic control were extended to communications and research. In universities, where a touch of “democratization” produced larger numbers of students, the same spirit of “rationalization” prevailed, tending to shape the curricula and the professional profiles for which students were trained to fit the need for more managers within the production system. This was the trend, even if it was still a far cry from the “university machine” defined by its prophet, Clark Kerr, President of the University of Berkeley, in California, whose authoritarian stance had provoked the student uprising there in the fall of 1964.

So wherever there was an upsurge of “*contestation*”, including the challenging of parties and unions, it is bureaucracy that is denounced, first and foremost, with its divisive hierarchy, rewarding servility, its absurdity, opacity, etc. There is a refusal of frustrating work with its

denial of any initiative, of free speech, and almost, of all intelligence. The revolt is not against work per se, but against the stupidity of living only to work. Consumer society is not criticized – to my knowledge, the “counter-culture” in the United States is the only instance of criticism of consumerism by a mass movement – but it is not valued either : demands for higher wages receded into the background, and the Grenelle agreements negotiated by the unions and the government to put an end to the strike, with their 10% wage increment portrayed as the main achievement of a general strike, were taken as an insult in a great many plants. The May movement was no doubt the first revolt that did not stem from want, from material need.

And the last ? That may well be. Massive unemployment, precariousness and “exclusion” have thrust so much of the population back into the “realm of necessity”, and brandish a constant threat – a blackmail – of degraded social and human conditions for the majority of workers. The means of domination have changed. Of course, capitalism cannot do without bureaucracy, but in the sphere of production above all, it has somewhat successfully fought the “irrationalities” bureaucracy introduced in its functioning. Financial capital now has the upper hand over the managerial “technostructure”. On-the-job control by a hierarchical superior is increasingly replaced by a contract – monstrously inequitable – for provision of a service, the obligation to achieve results, and the strict codifying of acts imposed on allegedly autonomous and responsible workers. The employer’s hold on the employees’ labor power tends to extend to the totality of their time and even of their mind.

As I noted above, the main features of the capitalist world have simply been reinforced : its totalitarian tendency, the destruction of all ties, of all truly living social relations – and above all of the very meaningfulness of life in society. In May, the depth of that destruction and of the frustration it causes was evidenced by the intense conviviality, the transgression of barriers and roles – be it of youth, manual worker, intellectual, woman... - in the joy with which all that was experienced; one could almost say the marveling at rediscovering a lost, subconsciously desired world. The May movement was radical in that it showed us how radical capitalist nihilism is.

But maybe we only had a vague intuition of all that at the time : in many respects, the timeliness and modern character of May can only be seen retroactively, so to speak. That is true of one modern mechanism of domination which was barely beginning to be introduced, and which plays a central role today. The “seizing of speech” – of the right to speak out – not in the sense of a narcissistic exhibition, as on TV, but as an exchange, exploring the social world, as a discovery of equality of status, as the seeds of solidarity... – denounced and subverted the system of production of what may be called, using writer Armand Robin’s words, “false speech” (he applied the expression to the Soviet Union radio programs

it was his job to listen to). I think it would be worthwhile to analyze this complex system in depth, and I can only give a general, hypothetical idea of it here.

Today we can no longer be content with denouncing, as Chomsky for instance does so relevantly, the manufacturing of consent by propaganda, the lies, disinformation, concealing, and so on, produced by specialized agencies with ties to the powers that be, using considerable, sophisticated means, and unilaterally injected into society. Those relatively gross techniques are completed by systems that are far more underhanded and toxic in that they are *interactive*. They constitute an extension of the representational system, which tells its citizens : this is your government, it is you who decided that it should do this or that, etc. Similarly, the market, polls, the media, the social sciences all tell us : this gadget is the expression of your desires, that opinion is yours, that TV presenter or politician you see on the screen is another you... And it definitely is not Big Brother who authoritatively proclaims an official lie and orders us to believe it. It is not even an anonymous man on the streets, it is a “customized” individual who talks to us personally, and what he says has been developed using material that has been extorted from us by an army of surveyors, market researchers, sidewalk interviewers, etc., to be processed – analyzed, classified, reshaped... - and then served to us as our own. A sort of do-it-yourself propaganda, a mimed, fallacious leveling down of the powerless by those in power.

Of course the gadget was only modeled after our desires – and our desires themselves were merely induced – in order to extract as much money and submission as possible out of us in our role as consumers. The politician’s speech only borrowed our words to oblige us to “consent” to what is imposed on us : this is the most effective form of censorship. In short, and in other words, speech, like work, is now being *exploited*. Just as the surplus value extorted from the worker increases the amount of capital and therefore reinforces the power of the capitalist, our words are extracted from us in order to perfect, refine and adjust the techniques by which we are dominated.

This expropriation of the speech of the powerless by the speech of power is carried further by an even more diffuse process functioning in the opposite direction so to speak, since it is the in-depth penetration of a language which is not spontaneously our own, and which if not directly the language of the authorities, is that of techno-scientific engineering, at the least. We no longer know how to talk about ourselves or about the world around us using words of our own, words that belong to a *subject* ; it is as if those words were totally worthless in our own eyes, and we replace them by speech that is portrayed as objective. We locate ourselves in society using the words and categories of the social sciences, we talk about our organs with the words of the doctor, about our feelings with those of the psychologist, athletes speak of their body as if

it were a machine outside of them. The object begins to talk about itself as an object...

I will not, of course, broach the fathomless question of the internalization, by the dominated, of the dominant ideas, values, representations, etc. I have restricted my remarks to some concrete processes, easy to see and hear in everyday life. The objective discourse that portrays itself as representing society and each of us, as the *science* of that reality, confiscates every true social *consciousness* at the root, distorting and inhibiting it.

Now in 68, precisely, it was that – a social consciousness – that began to reconstruct itself. Sociologists, social psychologists, the mass media, and so forth, were silent, and if the politicians talked to us, it was not to seduce us but to threaten us : the imposture had vanished. Speech was seized directly and in egalitarian fashion by each and all, the propagation of horizontal, transgressing exchanges – flouting age, role, sex, categories, etc. – revealed the naked reality of society, in concrete experience and using the words of shared ordinary language, the depths of shared status, the sense of solidarity.

But action had a revelatory power as well, at least at some times during the May movement. The 22<sup>nd</sup> of March movement had particularly significant practices in this respect. Personally, having participated in the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group for years, and although we were audacious in our theories, I had remained stuck with a traditional conception of political action, reduced essentially to discourse. The practices of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March movement were a revelation for me : I realized the degree to which the symbolic level influences the impact a small group of individuals can have on an infinitely broader social struggle.

The “movement” was born on March 22 1968 on the Nanterre campus (in a suburb to the west of Paris), very agitated at the time, when a hundred-odd students, mostly anarchists, occupied the administration building of the university. The ensuing repression elicited demonstrations of solidarity, often violent, which gradually spread to the country at large and ended up inspiring workers of all categories, who went on strike.

My intention is not to compare the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March movement with *Socialisme ou Barbarie* or the *Internationale Situationiste*, whose devastating analyses of the student condition were influential in triggering the university revolt. It only existed for some weeks, and was not an organization. It had no intention to construct a theory and did not recruit members : you were a member if you participated in it and of course if you agreed with a few basic ideas. It was born out of action and only continued as long as it could act with the aim of radicalizing struggles, pushing them to unite and to gain greater autonomy.

Broadly speaking, its action took two forms, often combined : “provocation” and “exemplary action”. Provocation aimed at bringing its opponents (the government, unions, Communist Party – CP -, etc.)

to betray themselves, revealing their reactionary nature. Exemplary action consisted of taking the initiative of acting in one's own name in a struggle, significantly and comprehensibly, so that this example might incite other forces to do the same. In other words, the idea was to open up the situation, to reveal its possibilities by taking action in one's own name, without making the slightest effort to take control of the movement.

In this conception, action aims at awakening and stimulating awareness by what it says, concretely, but also by what it represents – it is both “life size” and at the same time it is an image that synthesizes meaning and makes it perceivable by both feelings and mind. And in some sense, at least at the beginning, the very existence of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March movement was precisely that for the protagonists of May in general, at least for those who were not imprisoned in the Leninist logic of the “*groupuscules*” : both a hotbed, a motor and a figure through which to see and understand one another, both a real and a symbolic force.

More important, perhaps, it was at the time a concentrate of the paradoxical way of being of the May movement, and is still enlightening today, like all really transgressive movements: they occur both here and now and in the universal and the future, they truly experience possibility as reality. Such movements provide the experience and immediate enjoyment of a society that does not exist yet, but is a promise of an authentic social life, devoid of those codes that rigidify and partition, and of instrumentation, constantly practicing that “faculty to begin” which is Hannah Arendt's translation of “freedom”.

The dynamics of the movement, then, was based on three necessities : equality, activity, and immediate positivity. It broke down when the reign of hierarchy, passivity, and constant disappointment was reinstated. The unions have a heavy responsibility for that process. By closing the striking factories and reducing their occupation to mere guardianship by a handful of active union members charged with protecting the equipment against vandalism by leftist activists they did more than simply preventing contacts between students and workers. The split between those who decide and those who obey was reintroduced within the striker community itself, and perhaps even worse, the great majority of the latter were left to their own devices, and “went fishing” as the expression went. They didn't have to, of course, but since the unions claimed they were taking care of everything... So, since nothing was happening today, you just had to wait for tomorrow, for what the unions and the bosses condescended to offer.

This teaches us a formidable political lesson. The May movement has been accused of not raising the political issue as such. It definitely did not raise it explicitly, but like many other revolutionary moments, it did in fact show what path should be followed to deal with that issue. The subversion of Politics can only occur through an upsurge of *political activity*, which is to say when a collective subject bursts onto the public

scene and undertakes the direct, egalitarian management of all of society. In 68 that collective subject hardly had time enough to begin to constitute itself on the basis of a lucid social consciousness and to define the institutional obstacles to its action – that is, the government, political parties, the unions, those self-proclaimed embodiments of the proletarian consciousness – but that was enough for all those entities to lose all of their content, relevance and grip on reality, at least for some days. The movement also seems to have grasped – at any rate it helps us to grasp – the extent to which, in a modern State, it is vain to try to subvert politics from within the system viewed as the institutional arrangement through which a fraction of society governs the whole, and implying the split between those who give orders and those who obey, between representatives and the represented, active people and those who are passive, etc. Eric Hobsbawm (in *The Age of Empires*) clearly shows how the invention of mass political parties completely frustrated and confiscated universal suffrage. And as for “false speech” and its hold on us, it is not by denouncing it that we will shut it up, it will be when every one of us seizes the right to speak out.



# To Make the Long March Short: A Short Commentary on the Two Long Marches that Have Failed Their Emancipatory Promises

Boris Buden

**Abstract:** The present work is a discussion of two different marches. It begins with a discussion of the German students uprising, especially with the figure of Rudi Dutschke, the leader of German student movement in the 60s, and the comparison of his movement with the Chinese movement and slogan from the thirties: “the long march through the institutions.” It goes on discussing the opposite position of the German liberal sociologist, Dahrendorf. This paper then discusses Gramsci and other thinkers and situations in the world and ends with deliberating on the possibilities of taking a ‘long march’ without return, that is, without cutting it off.

**Keywords:** Dutschke, long march, Gramsci, Mao, students

Once I was a student with books and a sword;  
(...)  
Now I am getting on in years: will what's left of  
My life be useful and worth mentioning?  
Darko Suvin, *The Long March*<sup>1</sup>

## Red Rudi at the gates of institutions

There was no disagreement about the general direction back then. It should have led to the revolution with capital R, expected to bring about the change of the human condition as it has been shaped by all hitherto history. It is still unclear what precisely had allowed for the universal translatability of this idea but the fact is that it was somehow understood all over the world: in the classrooms of French or German Universities, as well as among the workers in FIAT or Peugeot factories; by a simple peasant in a remote Asian village who would abandon his home and family to follow its path, or in the jungles of Africa where it provided the insurgents with a cause that was even bigger than their anti-colonial one. Most curiously, it was also shared by those who mercilessly fought each other in its name. As it seems, no human language since the Tower of Babel was so commonly understood as the language of the Revolution.

It is in this sense no wonder that Rudi Dutschke, the cult leader of the German '68 movement, chose the name of a Chinese revolutionary event from the thirties as a metaphor for the strategy of a western protest movement in the late sixties: “The long march through the institutions”. However geographically, historically, culturally and economically far and different, the concrete revolutionary experience of Chinese communists

.....  
<sup>1</sup> Suvin 1987

appeared to “Red Rudi” as something common, an experience he and the movement can directly translate into their own historical condition and the language of their struggle. Yet, there is no such thing as a perfect translation. Not only every translation, even the best one, more or less significantly differs from the original, it also always gives birth to what is untranslatable. In other words, it discloses the intrinsic incommensurability of languages and human experiences that have found their expression in these languages. In short, what Rudi Dutschke meant with the notion of the “long march” was not quite the same as what the leaders of the Chinese Red Army intended and achieved by this strategic move and what was subsequently mythologized into the narrative of their victory. These differences matter, not because they might prove someone or something wrong, but because they alone provide the epistemic and political ground on which we can address what is common in our historical experience. It is only through openly dealing with these differences that we can live up to the famous Fredric Jameson’s dictum from the early eighties: “Always historicize!”

The first suspicion of such a difference arises with the notion of “long” in the phrase “The Long March”. What does it actually refer to: space or time? In fact, the original Long March, the one of the Chinese Red Army lasted no longer than a year – from October 1934 to October 1935. However, it was an intense time densely packed with events of utmost importance, a time of fateful decisions, heroic deeds, tragic failures and unexpected turns that sealed the fate of China until nowadays. In fact, it was a forced march of history itself. And, as it is often the case when history is marching, it was literally a march over dead bodies. Of those original 100,000 soldiers of the First Front Army who had started the March, less than 7,000 made it to the final destination, which is less than one tenth. And still, the question whether the cause has justified such human losses is out of place, for we know the answer: History doesn’t care. Curiously, in the case of Rudi Dutschke’s “Long March” the same question does not make any sense either. Not because he could have also delegated responsibility to history, but rather because he didn’t have to reckon with any losses. He expected only gains instead. And he also expected that it will take a long time, a very, very long time. This is first what he said in one of his speeches in which he explicitly defined the idea of “The long march through the institutions”:

Revolution is not a short act when something happens once and then everything is different. Revolution is a long, complicated process, where one [*der Mensch*] must become different.<sup>2</sup>

2 See “The Long March through the Established Institutions”, (English subtitles), Rudi Dutschke, You tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJsu4kFHS3s>. The English translation in the subtitles is slightly changed so as to more accurately follow the original speeches in German.

He speaks of “small esoteric circles” in which this process of change has already started but has so far affected only a minority. Nevertheless, Dutschke is sure that:

[T]he process goes along this way, which I have once named ‘The Long March through the Established Institutions’, in which [institutions], through clarification [*Aufklärung*], systematic clarification and direct actions, awareness is brought [*Bewusstwerdung*] to further minorities in and outside the university, in schools, in trade schools, in engineer schools, also technical universities and finally in factories, where workers are currently worrying about their jobs. The process has begun, and that is a long story, which right now has been set on its course by us.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, during this same discussion, Dutschke’s concept of “The Long March through the Institutions” was directly challenged by the German liberal sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf—precisely in the point of its temporal meaning: “When you say that it is a long, long way, and when you suggest that it can last decades, than you make your opinions irrefutable. What can anyone say against them? That is, then, simply a theory that one can put out into the world, but which can no longer be discussed.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Dahrendorf explicitly refuted Dutschke’s claim to revolution and he did so in the name of reform. Revolutionaries in a non-revolutionary situation are for him comical figures and he argues that the current state of affairs in the Federal Republic cannot be described in terms of a revolutionary situation. Rather, it offers, as he believes, conditions for possible reforms.

Dutschke, on the contrary, clearly understands “The Long March through the Institutions” as a revolution—a process of radical change that can truly take place only if it affects the whole society, or as he explicitly states, only when the majority of the population becomes “conscious through a long process of clarification and action” so as to no longer accept the current situation. He, contrary to Dahrendorf, believes that the student movement in Germany of that time stands “at the end of a pre-revolutionary phase”. This, however, does not mean for him that the students can start the revolution. They can not, although such a revolution can succeed only if it does not fail at the university in the first place. Moreover, it can succeed only if it doesn’t stay confined within national borders: “There will be no German revolution. There will, however, in a further sense, be a world-wide process of emancipation.” In other words, “The Long March through the Institutions” is for Rudi Dutschke

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

the concept of an international revolution whose ultimate goal is to change the whole world. With this he remains firmly within the historical mainstream of the twentieth century's revolutionary movements.

**A matter of lord or death**

Looking back from today's perspective, the differences between a student revolutionary and a liberal reformist expressed then in an open dispute over the idea of "The Long March through the Institutions" had very concrete consequences on their personal lives. While the revolutionary had never managed to enter the gates of the institutions of his country he intended to march through, the liberal reformist successfully climbed them up to their highest heights. Even an institution-of-institutions, the British state, in which Dutschke sought refuge, expelled him as an "undesirable alien". On the other hand, Dahrendorf walked smoothly through universities, parliaments, government departments, making it in the United Kingdom as far as the House of Lords.

Curiously, many revolutionary followers of Dutschke's strategy of "The Long March through the Institutions"—except those few who tragically ended in the deadlock of left terrorism—seem to have had, in contrast to their charismatic leader, a fate similar to his liberal reformist opponent. They too walked successfully through the institutions, occupied corridors and sometimes the very top of the political power, key positions in economy, universities or media. And, beyond doubt, they also brought about a certain change, one that cannot be thought of or judged in political and social categories typical for the epoch of industrial modernity and the mode of life organized around the major site of its material reproduction, the fordist factory. So, the generation of 68—to the extent that it can be historically subjectified as such—has not toppled the world's capitalist system and freed the working classes from the chains of exploitation. It has not put in question the already established political order, including the centuries old system of more or less sovereign nation states, nor has it challenged its ideal form of government, parliamentary democracy, party politics, and the rule of law. In fact, it has never taken the lead of any of the radical historical transformations that have changed the world in the decades following the student protest in 1968. But it was somewhere around when the neoliberals crashed the trade unions, privatized economy and dismantled the welfare state, when labour turned post-industrial and capital went global, when communism collapsed or when the rulers of the world started to wage wars again—the generation of 1968 was always there, marching steadily through the institutions as a quietly spoken and modestly critical companion to history. If this does not look like what Rudi Dutschke once dreamed of, it still suffices for a perfect CV.

But nevertheless, it would be wrong to consider "The Long March through the Institutions" as being a historical failure. Its protagonists

might even claim a sort of victory, at least in what Antonio Gramsci once called the war of position. It is therefore not surprising that many still attribute Rudi Dutschke's famous phrase to Gramsci. Yet, although it does not originate with him, it is still closely connected with the strategy of revolutionary struggle he developed while imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime.

Having witnessed as a young communist the tragic failure of all the attempts to repeat in the West the Bolshevik's successful seizure of power, as well as facing personally firm and steady force of the bourgeois class rule in Italy, Gramsci drew the conclusion that the strength of the latter does not rely solely on the state and its apparatuses of coercion, but is rather broadly based in what he called cultural hegemony. Revolution, therefore, cannot win without challenging the world of ideas, beliefs and values deeply entrenched in civil society. So the general strategy of the proletarian struggle had to be changed, from the "war of manoeuvre", focused on a direct conflict with the state and prompt seizure of its power apparatuses, to the "war of position", a slow and long struggle for, as we would say today, "hearts and minds" of people with the goal to counter and suppress the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. On winning the war of position and so gaining overall influence and popular support the revolutionary proletariat would then establish the conditions for the real revolutionary change.

In fact, Gramsci's strategic concept is not essentially different from Dutschke's "The long march through the institutions". In both cases the general direction as well as the ultimate goal are same—the revolutionary transformation of the world. The paths to be taken in order to achieve this goal are also remarkably similar. German student leader's "becoming conscious through a long process of clarification/enlightenment" might be easily subsumed under the strategy of a slow and long struggle for cultural hegemony developed by Italian Marxist some thirty years before. There is, however, one more affinity between the two strategic concepts, which is, although less explicitly symmetric, even more striking. Gramsci actually drew the strategic distinction between "the war of manoeuvre" and the "war of position" on the ground of a fundamental—ultimately cultural—difference between the East and the West, or more concretely, between at that time historically belated Russia, where, due to an underdeveloped civil society, the state dominated the entire social life, so that a direct assault on it and seizure of its institutions could bring the working class to the final victory over its bourgeois enemy. In the West where the bourgeois hegemony was already deeply anchored in civil society, the victory over state alone would not suffice to topple down the capitalist class rule, which is why the revolutionary forces had first to entrench themselves for a long war of positions on the front of consciousness and culture.

When it comes to Rudi Dutschke's strategy of "The long march,"

it is clear that it does not follow in any explicit way a similar logic of a cultural difference between the West and the East, or to put it in the terminology of that time, between the first world on one side and the second and third world on the other side. Moreover, the student protest movement from the sixties accumulated a significant amount of its emancipatory energy from the solidarity with the anti-colonial struggle and the third world liberation movements. Nevertheless, “The long march through the institutions”, as far as it may claim any historical success, has been an entirely western political phenomenon. The student protests of 1968, however, did not take place only in the most developed countries of the capitalist West. There were politically significant and sometimes more dramatic protests in the communist East and former Yugoslavia as well as in other parts of the world like Mexico, Pakistan or Japan. Yet only in the West, as it seems, the student radicals of 1968 really realized the strategic vision of their iconic German leader. They entered the institutions, marched persistently through their endless labyrinths and finally arrived at their destination winning, to a non-negligible extent, the struggle for hegemony—in the West, to repeat it again. A plethora of new values that clearly originate from the ideological arsenal of the so-called New Social Movements and thus belong to the legacy of the 1968 movement have in the meantime become an intrinsic part of the hegemony in the western societies: women’s as well as minority rights in general, especially those of LGBT communities, multicultural tolerance, environmental awareness, relaxed sexual moral, right to criticism in schools and universities, social and cultural inclusivism—just to mention a few.

These values are important, no doubt. They have significantly improved the quality of life in the developed liberal democratic countries of the West. But what, in fact, is their historical meaning— having in mind that both Gramsci and Dutschke understood the winning of the struggle for hegemony as a precondition for a true revolutionary change of the world?

They have changed the world nevertheless. In the ideological guise of the so-called “western values”, they have become efficient instruments—not to say weapons—of the West’s hegemony over the world. While they essentially inform the normative content of the West as an identity block today, their proper place is not somewhere within, in the kernel of its alleged essence. Rather, the so-called “western values” reside on its borders, there where a painful, and often violent cut between “The West” and “The Rest” has to be taken, time and again. It is in this ideological role that they cast a dark shadow on the otherwise splendid success of “The long march through the institutions”. At the arrival on their destination, the revolutionaries of 1968, who bravely carried the emancipatory values of the student revolts from the streets and occupied classrooms to the very top of the institutional edifice of their western

societies, have become a sort of split personalities. In the daytime they live their western values, enjoying the fruits of their “long march”. As night falls, however, they turn into the gatekeepers of the “western culture” deploying their “western values” as ideological instruments of a ceaseless border performing. It is in this twilight of cultural—and in this sense also social, political and geopolitical—bordering, which, of course, takes place today in a perfect harmony with the interests of the global capitalism, that the emancipatory ideals of the movements of 1968 suddenly get appropriated by the very forces against which they were once proclaimed and in the long march through the institutions enforced, the forces of the conservative, right-wing and today increasingly fascist counter-revolution. It is in this ever darkening night that an emancipatory ideal of, for instance, women’s rights and sexual freedoms becomes a “western value” to be implemented by bombs and cruise missiles or, which is nowadays the main topic of the western democratic party politics, protected against migrant rapists.

One cannot escape the impression that Gramsci’s “war of position”, the long struggle for cultural hegemony and its 1968 newly updated edition “The long march through the institutions” have opportunistically ended in the very problem of which they had been once offered as a solution—in the cultural difference between the West and the Rest as the everlasting traumatic kernel of our historical experience. Is it really true that there is nothing to be learned from the modern history except the trivial racist lesson that the emancipation in “The Rest” wages — and loses! — bloody senseless wars, while in the West it creates a superior culture? If that is the case, then we have no other option than to look back again to that original historical event that later gave name to “The long march through the institutions” as the strategy of the 1968 protest movement.

### **Vernacular escape**

Was the long march of the Chinese Red Army in the thirties a move that strategically belongs to a “war of position” or rather to a “war of manoeuvre”? An answer to this question does not have to follow any military logic, for what has made this forced and rather desperate move to escape an imminent military defeat a historical event was not its martial excellence but rather its political meaning. If war is a continuation of politics with other means, then politics is a cause/effect of every warfare, even if the military professionals had not anticipated that before. In fact, already 1935, immediately after arriving at the destination, Mao himself explicitly defined the Long march as “a manifesto, a propaganda force, a seeding machine”. Concretely:

“The Long March is a manifesto. It has proclaimed to the world that the Red Army is an army of heroes, while the imperialists and



their running dogs, Chiang Kai-shek and his like, are impotent. It has proclaimed their utter failure to encircle, pursue, obstruct and intercept us. The Long March is also a propaganda force. It has announced to some 200 million people in eleven provinces that the road of the Red Army is their only road to liberation. Without the Long March, how could the broad masses have learned so quickly about the existence of the great truth which the Red Army embodies? The Long March is also a seeding-machine. In the eleven provinces it has sown many seeds which will sprout, leaf, blossom, and bear fruit, and will yield a harvest in the future.”<sup>5</sup>

What looks militarily like a shift from the war of position to the war of manoeuvre—the breakout of the Chinese Red Army from encirclement on a territory which its units, entrenched, defended for a long time—was politically a shift into the opposite direction. The Chinese Long March resembles rather Gramsci’s war of position, a displacement of force from a direct confrontation with the organized state power, in this case the regular Army of Kuomintang, to another theatre of war. But which exactly?

This is where the two marches part their ways. Both, Dutschke’s and Gramsci’s strategy—let us call them “western”—target a space, which we can think of as “intrasocial”. While marching through the institutions, Dutschke’s revolutionary followers never leave the enclosed space of what has been until nowadays conceived of, and, even more importantly, in political, cultural, economical, normative and epistemological sense explicitly addressed as society—the name for what all these institutions, governmental, non governmental or para-governmental, brings together into one and the same historical conjunction, or better, encloses them within one and the same historically contingent form of common existence. However diffusive and divergent are the institutional paths the revolutionaries of 1968 have taken, they all finally lead to society as their common teleological end, like myriad arms of a river, which, however wide-stretched in the meanders of estuary all issue into one and the same sea. Society is thus the final destination of Dutschke’s Long March at which all the emancipatory energy, carried individually through the institutional labyrinth is finally discharged so as to bring about its revolutionary change. In other words, the revolutionary emancipation takes place as a cumulative effect of all these countless struggles fought individually on all the levels and stages of “The long march through the institutions”, in political parties, state bureaucracy, education, art and culture, sport, etc. Its projected result is creation of a historically new form of social existence that is free from oppression, exploitation and all sorts of alienation.

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<sup>5</sup>Tse-Tung 1965, p. 160

By and large, this also applies to Gramsci’s war of position. While it takes place primarily in the theatre of civil society, its collateral target is the state. In fact, its emancipatory claim addresses a meta-unity of both. For what actually moves forward in the long war of position is, again, a cumulative translation of hegemony into the state power that, however slow and extensive, finally brings about revolutionary social change. It is from the perspective of revolution as the strategic goal of the entire emancipatory struggle that a differentiation between state and civil society is of a secondary, tactical nature. Since the ultimate—teleological—object of a truly revolutionary politics is society in its totality, any difference between state and civil society remains intra-social.

This, however, is not the case with the Long March of the Chinese Red Army. By breaking out of the encirclement and so liberating itself from the fatal clinch with the Kuomintang forces in a futile wrestling for the state power, it also leaves the theatre of an intra-social struggle. Or, to put it more precisely, it breaks out of society into a sort of its outside, a space that descriptively resembles a wild nature with its impassable mountains and unbridgeable rivers, an unfriendly territory populated by agricultural “tribes” governed by feudal warlords and their private armies.

From a western perspective, which always already implies both the colonial legacy and the logic of state sovereignty, such an extra-social space would be essentially perceived as *terra nullius*, a territory to be occupied and colonized, populated by savages and barbarians that are “yet-to-be-civilized”—a space of an anthropological otherness and a different, ahistorical temporality, but at the same time also a space of natural resources and human labour that is at free disposal for extraction and exploitation, in short, a political, social and cultural exteriority that has yet to be enclosed in order to launch the primitive accumulation of capital.

For Mao and his comrades the territories of western China into which they escape in October 1934 is an entirely different space. Before all, it is a refuge that secures survival; a resource of renewal and multiplication that makes possible the primitive accumulation of political and military force and provides sustainability for the revolutionary movement. For Chinese communists the people who populate this space are primarily an audience to be addressed through the medium of their Long March. However, these masses don’t understand the language of universal emancipation, the *lingua franca* of the revolution. They, in fact, speak their vernacular languages, which is why a translation is needed to address them. This is precisely the task of the Long March. It might be understood as a sort of translational device that works in the mode of vernacular address.

To understand what is “vernacular address” and how translation

actually works in that mode we must, for a while, return to the late medieval England, concretely, in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century when John Wycliffe, scholastic philosopher, theologian, Biblical translator, reformer and one of the first modern “dissidents” of the Roman Catholic Church, wrote “A Petition to King and Parliament”, his complaint about corrupt clergy, their life in luxury and pomp in striking contrast to the poverty of the peasants.<sup>6</sup> The tract, however, has two versions, one written in Latin and another in the vernacular, i.e., in what was then English.

So why was it translated into the vernacular? Not as both the common sense and the ordinary theory of translation want us to believe in order to simply make it understandable for an audience that does not understand Latin. The purpose of this translation was far more specific—to reach those who could do something practically about the corruption in Church, namely those who could revolt against it. Translation in this case was not simply an auxiliary form of linguistic practice that helps people to understand each other. Rather it was about changing the mode of address and, in this way, about creating a social relation such that it would have emancipatory effects.

**The march of no return**

For Sylvain Lazarus, the year 1968 marks the end of an era in which the forces of emancipation were resorting to the idea of revolution. In his words, “revolution has become too allegoric”.<sup>7</sup> This seems to fully apply to Dutschke’s concept of “The long march through the institutions”. It is too allegorical a revolution. Like Gramsci’s “war of position” it does not confront directly the state, but focuses its emancipatory effort on the institutions, stretching its impact endlessly in time. This absence of any strict temporal limit of Dutschkes’s concept of revolution made Ralf Dahrendorf already then call it “irrefutable”, which is obviously another word for “too allegoric”. Yet still, just like in the case of Gramsci’s struggle for hegemony, the revolutionary politics of “The long march through the institutions” had its clear object, the society in its totality.

For Lazarus, however, the category of society has no consistence, nor does it have its own space. There is no such thing as a social order that can be targeted and changed through revolutionary action. Lazarus speaks of society and social formation as a fiction that is supported in the interest of the rulers. It is created by the state itself as a sort of its interlocutor, a *Doppelgänger* with which the state stands in a virtual object-subject relation. For Lazarus, the state is the only organ of regulation, control and order. To say that there is no social order means that there is nothing else except the state order. This, however, does not

6 See Somerset 1998, p. 3-5.

7 Lazarus 2018, p. 25.

mean that everything can be reduced to state. There is a life outside of the state, there are people, activities, cities. Or, we might add, there is a vernacular outside of the state qua society.

Having this in mind, we can think of the “wild side” into which Mao and comrades take a march in 1934 in terms of such a vernacular space. Contrary to Dutschke’s Long march, which is long (endlessly) in time but short in space (the institutions of the state/society), the Long March of the Chinese communists is rather short in time (a year, 1934/35) but long (limitless) in space—a space that did not exist a priori. Such a space emerges only insofar as it is addressed as a vernacular space. In fact, it is nothing but an effect of vernacular address. In this sense it is also limitless, for it cannot be objectified, or, in other words, it can be limited only insofar as it becomes an object of politics in its own right. What turns a limitless vernacular space into a clearly confined object of politics is the act of its political enclosure, which is precisely the opposite of the vernacular address.

Speaking now in terms of Sylvain Lazarus’s distinction between “politics in exteriority”, meaning all sort of political activities and organizations that articulate themselves in relation to a particular object, regardless of which sort, real or imagined, and “politics in interiority” that develops itself at distance of an object, i.e., starts from itself and not, for instance, from the antagonistic relation to an object, we might say that what is called here the vernacular address is in fact an act of a genuine politics of interiority—in the sense that it performatively creates a political space outside of the state qua society, which means beyond any intra-social antagonisms.

The idea of such a space is not far from what Ivan Illich calls “vernacular domain”. He opposed it to the concept of “shadow economy”, the space of the “black market”, or the so-called informal sector, which mirrors, like the hidden side of the moon, the realm of formal economy.<sup>8</sup> According to Illich, the two fields are in synergy, i.e., they together constitute one and the same whole.

This whole, however, is complementary to the vernacular reality as the realm of everyday life, which is shaped by people themselves as a space in which they create their own sense of things and negotiate, for instance, how they should educate themselves or how they should use the local commons. It is a space of survival and subsistence. While for the mainstream economists the shadow economy is something new—a discovery of new land, much like the industrial market which emerged for the first time in history only during the last two centuries—the vernacular domain, on the other hand, has always been there: “It is the way in which local life has been conducted throughout most of history and even today in a significant proportion of subsistence- and communitarian-oriented

8 See Illich 1981, p. 29-31.

communities.”<sup>9</sup> In the vernacular domain of their communities people struggle to achieve regeneration and social restoration.

The territories into which the Chinese Red Army escaped in 1934, if only for a short time, was precisely this sort of space we call here vernacular domain, a space in which it sought survival and regeneration and where it could socially restore itself, rebuild its military strength and massively increase its ideological and political influence. Yet at the same time, this space was by no means complementary to that of the state and its institutions. It was not a sort of shadow society that is yet to be enlightened in the long and hard struggle for hegemony, so as to be finally reincorporated into the one and the same whole of the state qua society, nor was it another theatre of war in which, like in Gramsci’s war of position, the revolution takes detour in order to finally reach its goal, i.e., to radically change this same whole. Rather, this space was the vernacular outside of the state/society, where, among people who organize their life, manage their activities and govern their communities by themselves, a revolutionary movement could not only find a refuge but also secure its political subsistence.

Seen from this perspective, the Long March of the Chinese communists was in fact short, far too short. It ended in their return to the open confrontation with and later successful seizure of the state power, reducing its entire meaning to a short heroic interval on a long way to the final triumph of the revolution. Having in mind how this triumph looks today, namely like one of the most brutal forms of neoliberal capitalism on earth, we might say that a truly long march of the Chinese communists, so long that it lasts until nowadays, had actually started immediately after the short historical one and is still ongoing, prolonging endlessly the failure of its emancipatory promise.

On the other side, Rudi Dutschke’s “The long march through the institutions” seems to have been, as said before, successful. Or, shall we rather say, too successful, since it was best followed by the liberals who finally proved to be the true beneficiaries of its strategy. It has installed them as the ideological guardians and political custodians of the so-called western values in which the emancipatory ideals of the 1968 have found the historical form of their decadent, racist realization. Moreover, the strategy of “The long march through the institutions” has proven even so successful that it is today opportunistically followed by the right-wing populists who are nowadays climbing up the institutional hierarchies of the so-called democratic West faster and more effective than the liberals ever did.

This is the reason why, today, we should remember the short march of the Chinese Red Army into the vernacular outside of the then revolutionary politics. There is still something to learn from them—not

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9 Schroyer 2009, p. 69.

only how to articulate the politics of vernacular address as a form in which the revolution can find the mode of its survival and regeneration today, but also, how not to repeat their mistake of cutting the long march short. The time has come again to escape from the encirclement into a Long March of no return.

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# 1968 and the Cahiers pour l'analyse. Internal Debates in the Philosophy of Concept: Epistemology, Formalization and Anti-psychologism

## Pascale Gillot

**Abstract:** I examine in this paper the tradition of the philosophy of concept in the 60's of the XXth century in France, insofar as it is characterized by heterogeneous views about science, truth, formalization, epistemological break, discourse, subjectivity.

I consider for that scope the 9th issue of *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, the review published by the "Cercle d'épistémologie de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure", mostly composed by young followers of Althusser and of Lacan. This issue published in summer 1968 is entitled "*Généalogie des sciences*" ("*Genealogy of sciences*") and deals with formalization and the different models of history of science. It is the occasion of a sharp debate concerning in particular the notion of epistemological break, between the redactors of the review on the one hand and Michel Foucault on the other hand, whose "Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie" will constitute the matrix of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* published one year later (1969).

Starting from this debate of 1968, I try to interrogate Foucault's archaeological program in so far as it implies a particular use of the "epistemological rupture", the kind of antipsychologism involved in his critique of formalism and rationalism, and also the specificity of his analysis of discourse insofar as it breaks up with a psychoanalytic font.

So that finally, it appears that 1968 was also the occasion of strong debates between the protagonists of the philosophy of concept following Bachelard's and Canguilhem's claims.

**Keywords:** Archaeology, Epistemological break, Formalization, Antipsychologism, Subject, Knowledge, Analysis of discourse.

It may seem at first sight that the tradition of the philosophy of concept, as it was developed in the 60's of 20th century in France, is characterized by some sort of theoretical homogeneity: namely a particular interest for epistemology, formalization, structural analysis and its correlate, anti-psychologism. Such an agreement on these topics would be a consequence of the collective mistrust towards the tradition of the philosophy of consciousness. Probably one of the most striking expressions of this general trend in "French Thought" could be found in the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*<sup>1</sup>, the review published by the "Cercle d'épistémologie de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure", mostly composed by young followers of Althusser and of Lacan, during the fertile period of 1966-1969.

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<sup>1</sup> f of the episteme, is asked a tw a, Agon Hamza The Cercle d'épistémologie held this publication, The *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, Travaux du Cercle d'épistémologie de l'Ecole normale supérieure publiés par la société du Graphe, éditions du Seuil, between 1966 and 1969 ; it involved 10 issues. Henceforth quoted CPA.



Yet the widespread notion of a homogeneous view that would have been shared by all the protagonists of the philosophy of concept in the continuity of Bachelard's and Canguilhem's claims, might be contested, if one considers for example the debates at work in the 9<sup>th</sup> issue of the *CPA*, entitled “*Généalogie des sciences*” (“*Genealogy of sciences*”), which deals with formalization and the different models of history of science. The disagreement, in this issue of the *CPA* published in the summer of 1968, takes place between the redactors of the review (Alain Badiou, Alain Grosrichard, Jacques-Alain Miller, Jean-Claude Milner, François Regnault) on the one hand and Michel Foucault on the other hand.

Quite remarkably, the author of *The Order of Things*, the theoretician of the episteme, is asked a series of – sharp – questions about the way he used the notion of epistemological rupture (or epistemological break) in the framework of the archaeological program he developed in these years. Foucault's answer is exemplary of such a division inside the field of Canguilhem's followers. Very different conceptions about history of science, theory of truth, analysis of discourse, functions and limits of formalization, and even theory of subject, appear to be here at stake, at the heart of the year 1968, two months after may 1968. Foucault's particular view on these topics, which is characteristic of his archaeological method, is then transcribed in his book of 1969, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: a book which is substantially inspired by this confrontation with the members of the Cercle d'épistémologie in 1968, and by his *Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie*.

As regards epistemology and history of science, Foucault departs from Althusser and his followers, through his critique of rationalism and formalism. As regards the analysis of discourse, he departs from Lacan and his followers.

In both case, the notion of *discursive formation* is at stake: it is central, for the subversion of the “epistemological rupture”, from a horizontal to a vertical position, as well as for the emancipation of the theory of discourse from a psychoanalytical frame. This central notion, in its turn, involves in Foucault's perspective a strategic, original distinction between *savoir* and *connaissance*, and the focus is put upon the discontinuity and anonymity of *savoir*, a central claim of his *Archéologie du savoir* that he tries to define systematically in 1968. Such are the features of Foucault's singular and radical anti-subjectivism, which appears to be quite distant from the Fregean, rationalist anti-psychologism that was widely dominant in the editorial board of the *CPA* at that time.

I will organize my paper in three parts, each of them being related to a topic involved in Foucault's text published in the *CPA* in 1968:

I will first examine Foucault's archaeological program in so far as it implies a particular use of the “epistemological rupture”, then I will deal with the topic of Foucault's original antipsychologism involved in

his critique of formalism and rationalism, and eventually I will focus the attention on the analysis of discourse of which prodromes are set up in Foucault's *Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie*.

### I The archaeological program: Foucault's particular use of the “epistemological rupture”.

The importance of the topic of the “epistemological rupture” in French philosophy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is well known. But it plays an original and quite disconcerting role in Foucault's *archeological* programme developed in the sixties: that is, the archeological sequence that goes from *Madness and Civilization (Histoire de la folie, 1961)*, to *The Archaeology of Knowledge (L'Archéologie du savoir, 1969)*, passing through *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses, 1966)*.

In 1968 indeed, on the occasion of his exchange with the redactors of the *CPA*, Foucault makes a clarification about his own theoretical line, from a methodological point of view one may say: such a clarification will constitute the general pattern of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in 1969, from the introduction up to the last section.

The “epistemological rupture”, a concept elaborated by Gaston Bachelard under the name of “rupture épistémologique”<sup>2</sup>, is central in the tradition of French epistemology. It is for instance particularly strategic in the philosophy of Louis Althusser – one of the inspirators of the young members of the Cercle d'épistémologie, together with Lacan and Canguilhem. Althusser reactivated Bachelard's concept under the name of “coupure épistémologique” (*epistemological cut*), in order to give an account of the radical difference between science and ideology, and, also, in order to underline the “theoretical revolution” in Marx, that is historical materialism, the opening of the continent “History”<sup>3</sup>.

Foucault himself was deeply influenced by this tradition of French epistemology of which main protagonists were Cavaillès, Bachelard, Canguilhem. For such a tradition represented, according to his own explicit claim, the field of the *philosophy of concept*, as opposed to the field of the *philosophy of consciousness*, the philosophical adversary. One must say that Foucault was also very close to Althusser, who had been his professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and whose struggle against theoretical humanism, subjectivism, psychologism, was shared by Foucault, as well as the critical reflexion upon the problematic “scientificity” of human sciences. But at the same time, there were strong disagreements between the two of them, concerning the philosophical use of such a concept, “the epistemological rupture”.

One is then led to interrogate the ambivalent, complex relationship

2 Bachelard, 1949 ch. 6, “Connaissance commune et connaissance scientifique”, pp. 102-118.

3 L. Althusser, “Marx's immense theoretical revolution”, in Althusser and Balibar 1970, part II, pp. 182-192.

which linked Foucault with this famous concept of epistemological rupture in its Bachelardian, then Althusserian acceptations. For the general claim I intend to defend is that the very field of the philosophy of concept, even through its constant, apparently unified battle against subjectivism and psychologism, was very far from being a homogeneous, harmonious field; there were effective dividing lines even within the area constituted by the “philosophy of concept, knowledge, rationality”.

In the first place, the specific *problem* that I will try to examine is the following.

On the one hand, Foucault, throughout his archaeological moment, accorded a huge importance to “*the question of discontinuities, systems and transformations, series, thresholds*”. Foucault was interested in such notions, which are variations on the theme represented by the Bachelardian-Althusserian concept of epistemological rupture. For example, his anti-subjectivist, discontinuist conception of history was in perfect harmony – or it could seem so at least – with Althusser's program during the same years: anti-humanism, anti-historicism, anti-psychologism, the definition of history as “a process without subject”. Foucault made recourse to these concepts, because they served his purpose to develop a discontinuist conception of history - especially in the field of the “history of ideas”.

But on the other hand, the use of the notion in Foucault's work is *very different* from Bachelard's and from Althusser's. The difference between these philosophical perspectives might be related to the question of truth, and to the type of cut, or rupture that should – or should not – be established between truth and error, between true and false, between the scientific and the no-scientific, or between science and ideology. This could put a new light on the complex configuration of anti-psychologism, in French philosophy at that time, that is during the glorious sequence of the sixties-seventies of the XXth century.

Generally speaking, Foucault, all along his theoretical percourse, inscribed himself within a constellation that one could name as the philosophy of concept (represented by Cavailles, Canguilhem, Althusser, Foucault himself). We may refer here, of course, to the Foreword by Michel Foucault to the English edition of the book by Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*. In this Foreword, Foucault seems to follow an insight by Cavailles, when he asserts the famous 'dividing line' between 'a philosophy of experience, of sense and of subject, and a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of concept'<sup>4</sup>.

This revendication of a philosophy of concept is already quite

4 See Foucault's "Foreword" to the English edition of the book by Georges Canguilhem, in Canguilhem 1978, p. I.

clear in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). In the first pages of the Introduction, Foucault makes an explicit act of allegiance, let us say, to the his famous predecessors in epistemology, Bachelard and Canguilhem.

« [...] in the disciplines that we call the history of ideas, the history of science, the history of philosophy, the history of thought, and the history of literature [...], in those disciplines which, despite their names, evade very largely from the work and methods of the historian, attention has been turned [...] away from vast unities like “periods” or “centuries” to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity. Beneath the great continuities of thought, beneath the solid, homogeneous manifestations of a single mind or of a collective mentality, beneath the stubborn development of a science striving to exist and to reach completion at the very outset, beneath the persistence of a particular genre, form, discipline, or theoretical activity, one is now trying to detect the incidence of interruptions. Interruptions whose status and nature vary considerably. There are the *epistemological acts and thresholds*, described by Bachelard : they suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time, cut it off from its empirical origin and its original motivations, cleanse it of its imaginary complicities ; they direct historical analysis away from the search for silent beginnings, and the never-ending tracing-back to the original precursors, towards the search for a new type of rationality and its various effects. There are the *displacements* and *transformations* of concepts : the analyses of G. Canguilhem may serve as models [...]”<sup>5</sup>

Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, focused his analysis on what he calls “*the question of discontinuities, systems and transformations, series, thresholds*”<sup>6</sup>. He dis so because to these concepts helped him to disqualify a theory of history characterized by continuism, teleology, and – a crucial point - subjectivism. For the criticism towards teleological continuism, against the “*twin figures of anthropology and humanism*”, was of course, in Foucault's view, closely related – this point is crucial - to the rejection of a *philosophy grounded upon the concept of consiousness*<sup>7</sup>. As though anthropological thought had found its ultimate shelter in a continuist conception of history, i. e. in the representation of a form of

5 M. Foucault, 1972, Introduction (p. 4).

6 M. Foucault, 1972, Part II (“The Discursive Regularities”), Chapter I, (“The Unities of Discourse”) p. 21.

7 Foucault writes, in Foucault, 1972, Introduction, p. 12 : “Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought. In this system, time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness”.

history referred to the “synthetic activity of the subject”.

Such a theoretical line was in perfect harmony – or it could seem so at least – with Althusser's program during the same years. Althusser in his field had already promoted, since 1965 at the time of *For Marx*, and *Reading Capital*, the categories of anti-humanism, anti-historicism, anti-psychologism, through his definition of history as “a process without subject” : a process with no subject, no origin and no end.

Foucault's proximity to Althusser can also be seen in the questioning about human sciences, about their – very uncertain - “scientificity”<sup>8</sup>.

There is, then, this shared struggle against anthropologism, at stake in the common critique directed against the idea of a teleological historical process, and the common refusal of any form of subjectivism – even dissimulated through the figure of historicism, the last “asylum”, the “*privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness*”, in Foucault's words<sup>9</sup>. It seems rather uncontested that, as far as an antisubjectivist conception of history is concerned, Foucault was deeply influenced by Althusser. But the game of the reciprocal influences is rather intertwined, complicated. Who influenced who ? It is also probable that Foucault himself had an important role in Althusser's discovery “structural analysis”<sup>10</sup>.

Be that as it may, when Foucault, in the Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* which was re-written from his debate of 1968 with the Cercle d'épistémologie, looks back to his own archeological percourse, since 1961, he insists upon the fact that the (implicit) method he had used was above all distinct from any “*anthropologism*”. On this ground, the importance of the encounter with Althusser's philosophy cannot be denied.

## II Antipsychologism and the question of truth and knowledge. Foucault's critique of formalism

One could believe, then, that Foucault's central methodological use of the category *episteme*, in his archeological history - in so far as it implies this *discontinuity* previously evoked - is a mere product of an original matrix, the Bachelardian, and then Althusserian, concept of epistemological rupture. One thinks, of course, of the caesuras between the great epistemes in *The Order of Things* : the Renaissance (governed

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<sup>8</sup> see the end of *The Order of Things* ; this view is already at stake in the last chapter of *Madness and Civilization*, dedicated to the “Anthropological Circle”.

<sup>9</sup> Again, Foucault, 1972, Introduction, p. 12

<sup>10</sup> This is striking when one reads for example the Letters to Franca Madonia in the years 1961-1962. In a letter addressed to Franca (5 October 1962, Althusser 1998, p. 228), Althusser mentions the project he had in mind of a seminary dedicated to the “origins of structuralism”, and that he presents as a direct consequence of his very enthusiastic reading of Foucault's book, *Madness and Civilization*.

by the category of resemblance), the Classical Age (commended by the category of representation), and Modern times (commended by the figure of history). These discontinuities, these ruptures between the different epistemes would be understandable as the manifestation of a rather obvious, transparent recourse to the bachelardian concept of “rupture épistémologique”. Yet the situation is not so simple, it is even extremely disconcerting.

Let us recall that this concept, the epistemological rupture, was introduced by Bachelard, in the framework of his anti-empiricist conception of science and its elaboration. We find a first occurrence of the term, “rupture épistémologique”, in *Le rationalisme appliqué*, by G. Bachelard, published in 1949<sup>11</sup>. In Bachelard's original view (opposed to the positivist tradition in the philosophy of science), the concept of epistemological rupture is required by a certain conception, a discontinuity conception, of the scientific work. It is inscribed, thus, within a certain conception of *science*, of scientific procedures, and not at all within a conception of “history” in general, nor of the “history of thought”. Bachelard's claim is that there exists a “*deep epistemological discontinuity*” between science, “*scientific knowledge*” on the one hand, and “*common knowledge*” on the other hand. Moreover, Bachelard specifies that this epistemological discontinuity is only effective, really operating, in the “fourth period” of history, the contemporary period. Of course, Bachelard's view is directed against the teleological representation of an history of science conceived (like it is in Brunschwig) as the continuous and necessary development of Reason. In that respect, it could seem rather close to Foucault's later discontinuism.

But at the same time, Foucault's later view is very far from a mere, faithful actualization of Bachelard's claim. On the contrary.

Indeed, Foucault's notion of episteme, as we know, is not reducible to the field of science, as opposed to the field of its “pre-history”, error, or ideology. Rather, Foucault's concept designates the systematic, “structural” intertwining of, not only sciences (biology, linguistics...) but also “knowledges”, ideological representations, power dispositives : an intertwining that Foucault, later on in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, relates to the general category of “discursive practice” (*pratique discursive*). It is particularly remarkable, then, that when taking over the discontinuity schema, Foucault does not in fact reactivate the Bachelardian-Althusserian cutting between science and ideology. Not only does the concept of episteme largely exceed the field of science, but the discontinuity, the cutting works in an original way : it functions vertically, between “periods” of history, and no more horizontally as in Bachelard's epistemology, when it was used to mark the specificity of a

.....  
<sup>11</sup> Bachelard 1949, ch. 6.



science within a particular period of history.

One could speak, then, of some *vertical rupture*, in contradistinction with what would be an *horizontal rupture* which would define Bachelard's *applied rationalism*, and even, later on, Althusser's distinction between science and ideology. And we would be then confronted to what might be seen as the Foucauldian subversion of Bachelard's concept of epistemological rupture.

Such a subversion was perfectly identified, in 1968, by the members of the "Cercle d'épistémologie de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure". In fact, this distinction just mentioned between a vertical and an horizontal rupture was produced by the members of the Cercle d'épistémologie (Circle of epistemology) themselves, and it can be found in the ninth issue of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse* of which title is "*Généalogie des sciences*".<sup>12</sup>

The ninth issue of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, published in 1968, is constituted by a series of questions addressed to Michel Foucault, concerning mostly his archaeological theory. It also includes the answer by Foucault himself to the members of the Cercle d'épistémologie. Among the questions addressed to Foucault, there is this sharp criticism, almost some sort of accusation of having transformed Bachelard's concept of epistemological rupture.

Indeed, this is the issue at stake in the first question asked "A Michel Foucault" by the Cercle d'épistémologie, under the title "*De l'épistémè et de la rupture épistémologique*" ("*On episteme and on epistemological rupture*").

The redactors of the *CPA* are eager to hear Foucault explain himself about his conception of science, and more precisely about the postulates that govern his Archaeology and "the implications of his method" employed from *Madness and Civilization* to *The Order of Things*. Starting from the constatation that, since Bachelard, the notion of epistemological rupture had served to define the discontinuity between "the birth of every science" and the ideological context (the "tissue of tenacious, interrelated, positive errors") from which it separates itself, and recalling that "the author of *The Order of Things*, by contrast, identifies a vertical discontinuity between the epistemic configuration of one epoch and the next", they ask Foucault what kind of relations he thinks are obtained "between this horizontality and this verticality". Thus, at that point, comes out some sort of attack against Foucault's "archaeological periodization", insofar as it "breaks up the [historical] continuous into synchronic sets, grouping together *knowledges (savoirs)* in the shape of unitary systems".

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12 *CPA*, 9. See the section "*Sur l'archéologie des sciences*", which includes the questions to Foucault ("A Michel Foucault") and Foucault's long answer ("Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie"), in *CPA*, 9, original edition pp. 6-40.

This archeological periodization, indeed, would efface "the difference that, in Bachelard's view, separates scientific discourses from other kinds of discourses, and, by assigning each a specific temporality, makes of their simultaneity and solidarity a surface effect"<sup>13</sup>.

Foucault's answer to the Cercle d'Epistémologie (*Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie*) was also published in the 9<sup>th</sup> issue of the *CPA*<sup>14</sup>. It is particularly interesting and illuminating, in this respect, for its main insights are taken over and developed in *L'archéologie du savoir* of 1969 (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*). This answer to the Cercle d'épistémologie can be read as Foucault's retrospective effort to systematize his own archeological method, the one he "used" since 1961, at the time of *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault's reflection upon his own theoretical insight as regards the archaeological program such as it is proposed in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, is therefore the direct consequence of his debate with the members of the Cercle d'épistémologie, whose proceedings can be read in the 9th issue of the *CPA*.

Foucault's heretic claim (as regards the rationalist trend in the *CPA*) is particularly remarkable when he asserts the inadequacy of the distinction between scientific and non-scientific, or between the rational and its contrary, as regards the specificity of the discursive formations he studied in *The Order of Things*, concerning language, analysis of wealth, life. In these cases, the scope was not to establish the "cut" between pure science and impure ideology: "the issue at stake was not to know with what cuts or what repressions a science, or at least a science-orientated discipline was finally about to constitute itself from such an impure soil". Rather, the notion of discursive formation is explicitly constructed upon the dissolution of these classical distinctions: hence the striking assertion according to which discursive formations are "epistemologically neutral"<sup>15</sup>.

The gap is then acknowledged by Foucault himself between the archaeological program on the one hand, and the epistemology of Bachelard and Canguilhem on the other hand. In other words, to the initial question addressed to Foucault by the Cercle d'épistémologie, about the possible obliteration in his work of the difference established by Bachelard between scientific discourses and other kinds of discourses, Foucault's answer could be understood as a positive one.

This is the reason why, in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault's more explicit defence consists essentially in a critique addressed to the

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13 *CPA*, 9, pp. 5-6. English translation: Cahiers Kingston (Translation slightly modified).

14 *CPA*, 9, pp. 9-40.

15 *CPA*, 9, p. 31-32. I translate from the French (as well as all the ulterior quotations from the « Réponse de Michel Foucault au Cercle d'épistémologie »).



formalism and to the rationalism that would still be at work in French epistemology. In this answer can be found a distancing from an “epistemological history of the sciences” whose models would have been provided by “G. Bachelard and G. Canguilhem”. Indeed, according to Foucault, the epistemological history of the sciences “is necessarily concerned with the opposition of truth and error, the rational and the irrational, the obstacle and fecundity, purity and impurity, the scientific and the non-scientific”: a series of opposition which obviously contrasted with Foucault's own program, that is, precisely, the “Archaeology of knowledge”, *l'archéologie du savoir* <sup>16</sup>.

The situation is quite paradoxical of course, as Foucault, all along his own philosophical percourse, constantly recognized his debt to Canguilhem's philosophy. But at the same time, his mistrust in Bachelard's conceptualization of a strict dividing line between the scientific and the non-scientific (ideology), a dividing line that, as we have just seen, cannot be taken into account in the very elaboration of the concept of *savoir* and *discursive formation*, leads Foucault to some kind of heterodoxy ; namely, to the denunciation of a “formalism” that could haunt this tradition of French epistemology, in so far as it is deeply marked by the strict distinction between truth and error which is characteristic of rationalism. Thus, when Foucault points out the trap represented by what he calls the “formalist illusion” (*illusion formalistice*), when he asserts that “it is illusory to imagine that science would constitute itself through the gesture of a cut and of a decision, that it would emancipate itself, all of a sudden, from the qualitative field and from all the murmurs of the imaginary, by the violence (serene or polemical) of a reason that would institute itself in its own assertions : therefore, that the scientific object would begin to exist by itself in its own identity”<sup>17</sup>, he refuses *de facto* Bachelard's legacy (even though he does not mention his name) in the field of the history of science.

Similarly, one may say, Foucault can not inscribe his own work in the trend of a Fregean tradition at the core of analytic philosophy, a tradition deeply marked by an anti-psychologist rationalism, and a general claim about the epistemic virtue of *formalization*, which represent on the contrary the object of a particular interest among the members of the Cercle d'épistémologie<sup>18</sup>.

Such are the many faces of anti-subjectivism and of anti-psychologism, in the last 60's in French philosophy : the archaeology of *knowledge* (*savoir*, not *connaissance*), in that respect, is irreducible to the

16 Foucault, 1972, chapter 6 (“Science and Knowledge”), (e) “The different types of the history of sciences”, pp. 189-190.

17 CPA, 9, pp. 37-38.

18 See for instance the 10<sup>th</sup> (and last) issue of the CPA ( winter 1969), entitled « La formalisation ».

rationalist philosophy of science and to the formalization program.

We could go back, at this stage, to the analysis of the divergence between Foucault and Althusser, around the use of the epistemological rupture, which implies, in each of them, a very different treatment of the question of truth.

What is the use – so important – made by Althusser of the Bachelardian concept of epistemological rupture ?

One may isolate a persisting claim in Althusser's work, throughout the inflexions of his own philosophical percourse, his “formalism”, then the criticism against theoreticism, etc. : this claim consists in the position of *the rupture between true and false* <sup>19</sup>.

Althusser acknowledged his debt to Bachelard, and more precisely to the concept of rupture epistemological rupture<sup>20</sup>. Althusser adopted this concept, and radicalized it, from the “rupture” to the “cut” (*coupure*), through an outlook that remained for the most part epistemological. This notion was necessary in order to give an account for the radical, irreversible discontinuity between science and non-science, between truth and error, between a science and its “pre-history”, that is ideology. The specific context of Althusser's work in the sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was to establish, against all forms of humanist and historicist interpretations of Marxism, the *revolutionary discovery* of Marx, in the field of science, his establishing a new science, the science of the continent History, totally *cut* from its pre-history (that is : Feuerbach's humanism, Classical political economy, Hegel's idealist philosophy).

So that ultimately, Althusser's perspective remains within the field of rationalism. Of course, after the “auto-critique” and the “anti-theoreticist” turn, Althusser will write that his previous conception (in the sixties, during the “theoreticist” period) of the rupture was unsatisfying, because it remained formalist, theoretical : as he puts it, his explanation of the rupture was a rationalist explanation, “contrasting *truth* and *error* in the form of the speculative distinction between *science* and *ideology*...”<sup>21</sup>. But it is remarkable that *even after the autocritique*, Althusser will not abandon the category of true, as distinct from the category of false. He remains, in a way, a rationalist, as shows his constant reference to Spinoza, all along his philosophical percourse.

But this implies a particular use of rationalism. Althusser revendicates, a non orthodox – non Cartesian – rationalism, liberated

19 Even if a continued - never ending - rupture is at stake, according to some spinozistic rationalism, a spinozistic rationalism which would not be exclusive of a nominalist position refuting the “Truth” as some transcendent category. Cf. The reading by Etienne Balibar on the topic of *la coupure continuée*, in Balibar 1991, “Le concept de coupure épistémologique de Gaston Bachelard à Louis Althusser”.

20 Cf. Althusser, 1976, Part 2, pp. 112-114.

21 Althusser, 1976, Part 2, NLB, pp. 105-106.

from the representation of a subject of knowledge<sup>22</sup>. His constant reference is Spinoza's rationalism, combined with "nominalism", that is to a conception of "what is true", and not a conception of Truth defined as as a metaphysical category. Yet in Althusser, the divide (the rupture, or "the cut", between true and false, science and non-science) remains fundamental, irreducible - although the epistemological cut, "*la coupure*", should be understood, in *Essays in Self criticism*, as an "ongoing" rupture, ("*coupure continuée*").

As regards Foucault on the contrary, rationalism, even in its heterodox, spinozistic form, is radically rejected. His refusal of humanism and anthropologism, which is so insistent in his whole philosophical percouse, his anti-psychologism then, no less important than Lacan's or Althusser's, is connected with a radical subversion of the divide between true and false, and with a contestation of the rationalist claim according to which science could be neatly isolated from non-science.

In Foucault's archeological perspective articulated to the categoris of *episteme*, *savoir* and *discursive practice*, as we have shown, the rupture is horizontal, rather than vertical as it was still in Bachelard, Canguilhem and also Althusser, that is operating in an epistemological framework.

III Analysis of discourse : a discourse without subject?

We may say that in Foucault, the general "cut" between true and false is no more relevant. This is what appears from his very concept of *savoir*, involved in the theory of the *episteme*, by contrast with the concept of *connaissance*. One must insist upon the importance of this differentiation, of this antagonism, between *savoir* on the one hand, which is the very object of archaeology, and the concept of *connaissance* which is implied by an "idealist" theory of knowledge, and a teleological conception of history, these twin figures of anthropologism rejected by

22 For Althusser, the Cartesian subject, identified with the 'Subject of truth and objectivity', that is the subject of knowledge, remains a fallacious concept, in so far as it is taken within a contestable comprehension of what the 'cut' between truth and error is - a crucial misunderstanding of the epistemological rupture. Descartes, according to Althusser, simply opposes error to truth, as though the former were the mere negation of the latter and remained 'outside' of truth, he does not thematize then the relation of error to this "outside". The effective *cut* between truth and error is not adequately comprehended, it is reduced to an exclusion, a partition ('*partage*'), and this partition is then seen as the 'result of a judgement', the judgement operated by a Subject, a thinking Ego, the Subject of Truth (See Althusser 1996, 2nd conference).

According to this genealogy, the Subject of knowledge, the subject of science, should not be reduced to the psychological ego, that is to the 'subject of error'; yet its very transparency to its own epistemic procedures and operations is a mistaken claim, inherent to this philosophy of consciousness founded upon a misconception of what the knowledge process is. To the Cartesian *Cogito* then, Althusser opposes the Spinozistic model of thinking and knowledge as *production*, that is, according to the famous formula of the '*veritas norma sui, et falsi*' (Spinoza, *Ethica*, Part II, Propositio 43, Scholium), as a process in which the 'subject of objectivity', the subject of knowledge, is suppressed : a process which will become, in Althusser's terminology, the well-known process without subject.

Foucault <sup>23</sup>.  
*Savoir* is fundamentally anonymous, whereas *connaissance* always supposes some subjet of knowledge. In that respect, Foucault's notion of *discursive practice*, developed in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in relation to the analysis of discourse involves this operation that consists in substituting the concept of *savoir* to the still formalist-rationalist concept of *connaissance*. At the end of the operation of substitution, the cut between true and false is not central any more : the reason is that Foucault's conception of *savoir* is not commended by the "metaphysical" category of Truth, nor by the very concept of true.

Such a move, from *connaissance* to *savoir*, appears to be strategic in Foucault's elaboration of his archaeological method, which entails a mistrust in the hypostasis of the notion of science, a diffidence against the "formalist illusion". What is at stake in this move is also, in a correlative way, his particular conception of the analysis of discourse, together with the systematic refutation of a "subject of knowledge" that accompanies the dissolution of a classical subject of discourse.

He draws this explicit opposition between *savoir* and *connaissance* at the end of his *Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie*, and proposes the total evacuation of the notion of *connaissance* from the field of archaeology:

"What archaeology cuts out, is not the possibility of the various descriptions that could be developed about scientific discourse ; it is, rather, the general topic of "*connaissance*". [...]

Now, to this major topic, others are related : the topic of a conscious activity that would guarantee, through a series of fundamental operations preceding every explicit gesture, every concrete manipulation, every given content, the unity between science defined by a system of formal conditions and world defined as the horizon of all possible experiences. The topic of a subject that guarantees, through its reflexive unity, the synthesis between the successive diversity of the given, and the ideality which is sketched out, in its identity, through time. Then and above all, the great historico-transcendental topic, that has gone through the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which is scarcely exhausted today [...]"

Now, by opposition with all these topics, one may say that *savoir*,

23 One must here underline the misleading dimension of the first english traduction of the *Archéologie du savoir*, under the title *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972), as regards this crucial distinction in the original French text between *savoir* and *connaissance*. Indeed, the english word *knowledge* is used indifferently to translate the two concepts (except when the opposition in the original version is so obvious that the translation leaves these original terms in French, *savoir* and *connaissance*), which conducts to obliterate Foucault's strategic differentiation between a philosophy of discontinuity, anonymity, discursive pratices (*savoir*), and a tanscendental philosophy of subject (*connaissance*) which represents the main adversary of his archaeology (the archaeology of "knowledge", l'archéologie du *savoir*).

conceived as the field of historicity where sciences appear, is free from any constituent activity, emancipated from any reference to an origin or to an historico-transcendental teleology, separated from any link with a founding subjectivity (*subjectivité fondatrice*). [...]

History needed to be continuous so that the sovereignty of the subject could be maintained ; but reciprocally history could not be conceived in its unity unless a constituent subjectivity and a transcendental teleology would go through it. Thus the anonymous discontinuity of *savoir* was excluded from discourse and set aside into the unthoughtable".<sup>24</sup>

Generally speaking then, the substitution of *savoir* to *connaissance* is the correlate of the disqualification of rationalist epistemology which separates Foucault from Althusser's followers. But it may also be understood as the mark of some radical anti-subjectivism, correlative of a non-psychoanalytical theory of discourse, which leads to the hypothesis of an anonymous discourse, a discourse without subject - should the subject be the subject of the unconscious. This original approach to discourse and enunciation seems to separate Foucault from Lacan's followers in the *CPA*, like Jean-Claude Milner and Jacques-Alain Miller.

We encounter here Foucault's singular distinction between theory of discourse, based upon the concepts of discursive practice, discursive formation, on the one hand, and theory of the unconscious on the other hand. The contestation of the psychoanalytical conception of a discourse beneath the discourse, a subterranean, silent discourse, that would be the discourse of the unconscious, haunts the pages of Foucault's methodological text in the *CPA*, as it will haunt the *Archaeology of Knowledge*. It entails the distancing from Lacan and from a Freudian framework that postulates some sort of dissimulated discourse underneath the "obvious" discourse, as reveals Foucault's mistrust in any kind of hermeneutics, even a Freudian one, such as it was theorized in *The Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>25</sup>. For, in Foucault's view, psychoanalysis would in some way reproduce, even paradoxically, a philosophy of the subject, although the representation of a sovereign consciousness has disappeared since the elaboration of Freud's first topic at the time of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Moreover, Foucault's analysis of discourse, through the notion

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24 *CPA*, 9, pp. 39-40. The same view, of a systematic, then methodological opposition between *savoir* and *connaissance* which announces the opposition between philosophy of concept and philosophy of consciousness, is summarized this way in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* : « Instead of exploring the consciousness/knowledge (*connaissance*)/science axis (which cannot escape subjectivity), archaeology explores the discursive practice/knowledge (*savoir*)/ science axis ». (Foucault 1972, ch. 6, p. 141). "What archaeology tries to describe is not the specific structure of science, but the very different domain of knowledge (*savoir*)". (*Ibid.*, p. 151).

25 Freud, 2010, ch. 6 and 7.

of discursive formation which is the object of a description, even an empirical one, also departs from Althusser's conception of the *symptomatic reading* (*lecture symptomale*) which is used in *Reading Capital* in order to investigate Marx's theoretical revolution in *Capital*<sup>26</sup>. Not only does the philosophical reading proposed by Althusser and his followers in 1965 aim at revealing through the blanks and the lapses of *Capital* Marx's latent philosophy, but it follows for that scope what would constitute according to Althusser Marx's own method, Marx's own symptomatic reading of Smith's Political Economy :

“ a reading which might well be called “symptomatic” (*lecture symptomale*) insofar as it divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates it to a *different text*, present as a necessary absence in the first”<sup>27</sup>.

Foucault's refusal of any symptomatic reading could be the lesson of his diffidence in the categories used by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in particular the distinction between “latent” and “manifest” at the core of the definition of the dreamwork : a distinction which is on the contrary quite central in Althusser's elaboration of the *symptomatic reading* dispositive. This latter dispositive is explicitly indebted towards Freud, Lacan and Lacan's return to Freud, and consists in interrogating the “silences” and the “blanks” in Marx's discourse, that would be symptomatic of a secret, dissimulated discourse, conceived through the category of the *discourse of the unconscious*.

At the beginning of *Reading Capital*, Althusser insists on the importance of the reference to Freud, and to Freud read by Lacan, in his general project to reveal the epistemological mutation at work in Marx's theory, historical materialism, since *The German Ideology* : a project which involves both a philosophical and a symptomatic reading whose premises are explicitly psychoanalytical :

“Only since Freud have we begun to suspect what listening, and hence what speaking (and keeping silent) *means* (*veut dire*) ; that this “*meaning*” (*vouloir dire*) of speaking and listening reveals beneath the innocence of speech and hearing the culpable depth of a second, *quite different* discourse, the discourse of the unconscious”.<sup>28</sup>

And he adds, in an important note :

“We owe this result, which has revolutionized our *reading* of

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26 L. Althusser, « From *Capital* to Marx's philosophy », in Althusser and Balibar 1970, Part I, pp. 11-34.

27 *Ibid.*, Part I, p. 28.

28 *Ibid.*, Part I, p. 16.

Freud, to Jacques Lacan's intransigent and lucid – for many years isolated – theoretical effort. [...] I feel bound to acknowledge [this debt] publicly [...]. Just as I feel bound to acknowledge the obvious and concealed debts which bind us to our masters in reading learned works, once Gaston Bachelard and Jean Cavaillès and now Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault”.<sup>29</sup>

In that respect, by contrast to Althusser's perspective, Foucault's reluctance to adopt any psychoanalytical category, such as the discourse of the unconscious, marks his anomalous position, one may say, within the galaxy of the “philosophers of concept” at the end of the 60's in France., as well as his singular indifference to Lacan's work.

Particularly significant of Foucault's heterodox position at that time, regarding psychoanalysis, is a question formulated by the Cercle d'épistémologie. This question takes place within the second series of remarks and demands that can be found after Foucault's answer, and it is called “De l'impensé”, “*On the unthought*”. The Cercle d'épistémologie finally asks where Foucault might stand in relation to Freud, since, according to its members, one could wonder whether Foucault's use of discontinuity would

“henceforth exclude the possibility that a statement might be produced *in order* to take the place of another ? That is to say : in order to prevent it from appearing, in order to *repress* it ?”<sup>30</sup>

The reader understands then quite clearly that Foucault's possible rejection of the concept of repression (*refoulement*) would set him aside from psychoanalysis which represents on the contrary a crucial theoretical background for the Cercle d'épistémologie. This theoretical frame is indeed revindicated as such by the members of the Cercle, when they claim, at the end of their question to Foucault :

“recognition that a discourse can come to the surface in order to repress another one beneath it strikes us as the definitive achievement of psychoanalysis”.<sup>31</sup>

Far from such a recognition of what would be the definitive results of psychoanalytical theory, Foucault's singular view on discourse analysis presents itself as an *empirical* description of the statement as a singular

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* Part I, p. 16, note 1. Of course, it has to be noticed that this homage from Althusser to Foucault himself is formulated in 1965, one year before the publication of *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses)*, whose sharp critique against what would be the vestiges of anthropologism in Marx's theory of history could not be understood and accepted as such by Althusser.

<sup>30</sup> CPA, 9, p. 44. English translation : Cahiers Kingston.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

*event*, incompatible with any kind of hermeneutic outlook. One could isolate then in Foucault's method a gesture of sticking to the surface of to the enunciated in its singularity, which signs the explicit refusal of any kind of “depth” beneath the positive statements.

This point is quite clear when Foucault, following an insight developed in the CPA, explains in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that discursive analysis is quite different from thought analysis, for it does not obey to an allegorical perspective, for it refuses the very conceptual differentiation surface / depth.

“Once these immediate forms of continuity are suspended, an entire field is set free. A vast field, but one that can be defined nonetheless : this field is made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them. Before approaching, with any degree of certainty, a science, or novels, or political speeches, or the *oeuvre* of an author, or even a single book, the material with which one is dealing is, in its raw, neutral state, a population of events in the space of general discourse in general. One is led therefore to the project of a *pure description of discursive events* as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it. [...]”

It is also clear that this description of discourses is in opposition to the history of thought. There too a system of thought can be reconstituted only on the basis of a definite discursive totality. But this totality is treated in such a way that one tries to rediscover beyond the statements themselves the intention of the speaking subject, his conscious activity, what he meant, or, again, the unconscious activity that took place, despite himself, in what he said or in the almost imperceptible fracture of his actual words ; in any case, we must reconstitute another discourse, rediscover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears, re-establish the tiny, invisible text that runs between and sometimes collides with them. The analysis of thought is always *allegorical* in relation to the discourse that it employs. Its question is unfailingly : what was being said in what was said ? The analysis of the discursive field is orientated in a quite different way : we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence ; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. We do not seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse [...]”.<sup>32</sup>

Now, it is interesting to notice that already in the text of the CPA, discourse analysis, through the asserted disjunction between analysis of discourse and analysis of thought, was explicitly defined as a *description*,

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<sup>32</sup> Foucault, 1972, Part II, Ch. 1, pp. 26-28.



indifferent therefore to the hermeneutic paradigm and to the conceptual configuration surface / depth.

Since the scope of *l'analyse du discours*, the analysis of discourse, is to grasp the statement as an event, considered in its “narrowness” and its “singularity”, and also to examine the specific interrelations between this statement and other statements, what gets excluded in this investigation is the search of “beneath what is manifest, the half silent chattering (*bavardage*) of another discourse”<sup>33</sup>. This revendicated indifference towards “some kind of secret discourse, which would animate from the inside manifest discourses”<sup>34</sup>, is strategic. It situates Foucault's analysis of discourse within “the general element of *archive*”, and distinguishes it from other types of discourse analysis that would be more closely linked to psychoanalysis : for example, as we have just seen, Althusser's *lecture symptomale*, developed in 1965 in *For Marx* and in *Reading Capital*.

Foucault's tone is thus quite polemical, against the followers of Lacan and Althusser, with this assimilation of the supposed silent discourse to some “chattering” (*bavardage*).

Indeed, the disjunction established in the *CPA* between the analysis of discourse and the analysis of thought, the recourse to the vocabulary of the “*archive*” and of the “*monument*”, used to describe the status of discourse, involve a powerful and constant disqualification of categories such as a “silent discourse”, a “discourse beneath the discourse”, or even a “discourse of the unconscious” : all categories that pertain to a tradition of the conception of discourse currently inspired by psychoanalysis. For such dominant categories seem to require the place of a supposed subject, the subject of discourse, the subject of the unconscious, which cannot be admitted by Foucault. As though there were remainders of anthropologism and subjectivism within psychoanalysis itself. When, for example, Foucault links his concept of *discursive formation* to the concept of “positivity”, he insists on the fact that, although this concept of discursive formation “puts into the light, among the phenomenons of enunciation, relations that had previously remained in the shadow, and were not immediately transcribed at the surface of discourses”, he underlines that what discursive formation enlightens is not “the unity of a secret meaning, nor a general and unique forme”<sup>35</sup>. The target of Foucault's attack here might be the unique form, the “secret meaning” carried on, in his own outlook, by the system of the unconscious in its Freudian acception.

We know that this starting diffidence as regards psychoanalytical theory

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33 *CPA*, 9, p. 17.

34 *CPA*, 9, p. 19.

35 *CPA*, 9, p. 29.

will be accentuated later on, in the 70's, when Foucault will not hesitate to situate psychoanalysis within the general dispositive of “psychiatric power”, and disciplinary power in general <sup>36</sup>. In that respect, the text of 1968, on the topic of discourse analysis, represents a key moment in the inversion of Foucault's view on psychoanalysis, whereas it was still positively considered in 1966, at the time of *The Order of Things* : psychoanalysis was then identified, together with linguistics and structural anthropology, to one of these “counter-sciences” that could be opposed to the anthropologism characteristic of traditional human sciences.

In other words, it could seem on a first reading that Foucault's radical anti-subjectivism would lead him to a general and univoque contestation of psychoanalytical theory, together with what would be his “eliminativist” claim regarding the very notion of subject.

Yet the situation at the time of the *CPA* is not so simple, it is indeed far more complex than this eliminativist reading. For there exists, even for the first Foucault, during the archaeological sequence, a *fundamental ambivalence* as regards the question of the *subject*. On the one hand, there is indeed a temptation to erase the subject, as being the other name of consciousness, psychological or tanscendental subjectivity, as shows the very definition of *savoir* through the categories of discontinuity and *anonymity*. But on the other hand, Foucault's archaeological inquiry is really ponctuated by the attempt to reformulate in a radical way the question of the subject, that is to disconnect the subject from the figure of sovereignty, and to conceive it on the contrary as being subjected and constituted in the discursive formations, therefore assigned to a pre-determined empty place. For *savoir*, in Foucault's words, is not the realm where the subject vanishes ; it is rather

“a domain in which the subject is necessarily situated and dependent, and can never figure as titular (either as a transcendental activity, or as empirical consciousness)”<sup>37</sup>.

Thus Foucault would draw the paradoxical portrait of an anonymous, decentred and multiple subject, conceived through the paradigm of discontinuity and dispersion.

The constatation of such an ambivalence, at work in the archaeological texts themselves, would lead us then to contest a common reading according to which the “first Foucault”, in the 60's of the 20th century, would have refuted the conceptualization of the subject, or even attempted to efface such a question, whereas the “second Foucault”, at

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36 Foucault, 2006.

37 Foucault, 1972, ch. 6, p. 141.

the turn of the 70's - 80's, would have rediscovered the question of the subject.

As a matter of fact, and the text of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is very clear on this point, the problem of the “status of the subject” is central in Foucault's archaeological analysis ; and it is particularly central in his *analysis of discourse*. We may therefore suppose that his approach to psychoanalysis is governed by the same kind of ambiguity. The conclusion of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is under that respect particularly interesting, when Foucault sustains that, in so far as archaeology seeks “to define, out-side all reference to a psychological or constituent subjectivity, the different positions of the subject that may be involved in statements”, then it “touches on a question that is being posed today by psychoanalysis”<sup>38</sup>. And it has to be recognized, Foucault explains in the introduction of the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, that psychoanalysis, together with linguistics and ethnology, has contributed to the decentring of the subject, that is to the contestation of the sovereign subjectivity.

In a way then, analysis of discourse, despite its rejection of the category of “silent discourse”, would take the place of transcendental philosophy to reconsider the general question of the subject : the subject henceforth considered, not as a principium, but as an *effect of discourse*, as suggests Foucault's striking formula about “the different positions of the subject that may be involved in statements”.

It finally has to be noted that this view concerning a subject that would be constituted inside the sphere of discourse, at the opposite of the notion of a “constituent subject”, happens to intersect remarkably with the program followed by Michel Pêcheux in his own *analysis of discourse*, a few years later. The scope of Pêcheux, at the intersection of linguistics, philosophy and psychoanalysis, will be to study the “subject-effect” within the discourse, according to a general “non-subjectivist theory of subjectivity” inspired at the same time by Althusser (the theory of ideology) and Lacan, and developed in his major book first published in 1975, *Language, Semantics and Ideology. Stating the Obvious (Les Vérités de La Palice)* <sup>39</sup>.

Quite significantly, the young Michel Pêcheux, seven years before the publication of his book, also published under the pseudonym of Thomas Herbert, in this 9<sup>th</sup> issue of the *CPA*, an article entitled “Remarques pour une théorie générale des idéologies”<sup>40</sup>.

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38 Foucault, 1972, conclusion, p. 160.

39 Pêcheux, 1982.

40 CPA, 9, pp. 74-92. In particular, p. 90.

To conclude, one can only be struck by the multiple, sometimes contradictory figures of antipsychologism in French Philosophy, that is within the very field of the philosophy of concept. First, the two-fold figure of anti-psychologism, in Foucault and in Althusser, supposes a very different treatment of the notion of truth, which situates the archaeology of knowledge, and its denunciation of formalism, quite apart from the French tradition of history and philosophy of science, conceived through its rationalist matrix.

Second, Foucault's radical anti-subjectivism seems to lead him to disqualify even the psychoanalytical (Lacanian) conceptualization of the subject of the unconscious, as what would be the symptom of a persisting, subterranean philosophy of the subject, at least the paradoxical vestige of idealist subjectivism.

Yet, Foucault's relation to psychoanalysis is quite ambivalent, as we have noticed. Indeed, it is as ambivalent as his treatment of the question of the subject. On the one hand, he seems to have revendicated the suspension of any psychoanalytical reference ; and this distancing is correlated to his eliminativist temptation about the notion of subject. Nevertheless, Foucault's archeological sequence remains haunted by this question of the subject, up to the point that it leads to a renewal in the conceptualization of the subject, as an anonymous, diffracted, constituted subject : the subject henceforth defined, we may say, using a vocabulary borrowed from Pêcheux, as a *discourse effect*. In this latter respect, psychoanalysis remains a useful theoretical tool, although totally reconsidered, from a singular outlook.

As a matter of fact, a remarkable example of such an heterodoxical reappropriation of psychoanalysis may be seen at work in the passage of Foucault's answer to the Cercle d'épistémologie, in which he assigns his analysis of discourse to the order of description, rather than to the order of interpretation. His simultaneous rejection of the representation of a “silent discourse” stands at the core of the construction of his original notion of *discursive event (événement discursif)*. In order to qualify more precisely such a notion, Foucault does not eliminate the category of the *unconscious*, but suggests its singular and rather astonishing re-definition in the terms of “the unconscious of the thing said” - in strong resonance with the figure of an anonymous, non constituent subject – substituted to the traditional notion of “the unconscious of the speaking subject”.

“These relations [between formulated statements, intertwined into discursive sets], would never have been formulated for themselves in these statements [...]. But these invisible relations would not in any way constitute some kind of secret discourse, which would animate from the inside manifest discourses ; therefore it is not an interpretation that could bring them to the light, but rather the analysis of their coexistence,

of their succession, of their mutual functioning, of their reciprocal determination, of their independent or correlative transformation. Taken together (although they could never be analyzed in an exhaustive way), they form what may be called, by some play upon words, the unconscious, not of the speaking subject, but of the thing said”<sup>41</sup>.

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41 CPA, 9, p. 19.

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# Lacanian Subversion: Psychoanalysis for the Post-Humanity Era

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**Abstract:** The present article explores the triad theory-practice-political for psychoanalysis portraying contradictions, missusages and paradoxes, which derive from it. The discussion of the political as a feature embedded within the field is articulated and problematized. Through the Lacanian notion of subversion, this essay examines Lacan's position on May '68 and metapsychological implications for the field of such discussion. Focusing on what a psychoanalysis for the post-humanity era would look like, this critical appreciation of the political and Lacanian subversiveness, tensions the ethical of the field itself.

**Keywords:** subversion, Lacan, Freud, genericity, Žižek, psychoanalysis, communism

## Psychoanalysis and its knots:

The construction of psychoanalysis as a field has always faced many challenges and most of these challenges seem to be structurally embedded in its core. One can easily find questions of science, practice, dissemination, methodology, boundaries (or its lack of)... So, it is not such a bold statement to say that psychoanalysis was forged through struggles. In this sense, it should come as no surprise or provoke awe into no one, address the divisiveness of psychoanalysis. The polemic history of the psychoanalytic field concerning politics or even, about the problematic tacit internalization of the political through the institutional aspect on the construction of the field - those are challenging elements since Freud started formalizing the field. Therefore, none of these remarks are necessarily new, it is actually quite the opposite, they were always already invisibly and silently making themselves present. Freud,<sup>1</sup> establishment of psychoanalysis as a field has always stumbled upon challenges regarding the triad of the theoretical, clinical and political.

This is one of the many heritages Freud left to psychoanalysis, but this is a quite particular one, this is a ghostly heritage. This challenging triad lurks through the field and haunts any one who steps into it. And as good ghost stories usually goes, the moment of 'scare' comes when the unexpected comes to surface, even if only retroactively as a surprise - what appears was always already there, hidden in plain sight. Dolar<sup>2</sup> makes this point remarkably clear, Freud's lack of political positioning, marked the foundations of the psychoanalytic field with this absence.<sup>3</sup> The 'ghostly' sightings produced by the knotting between these three notions,

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<sup>1</sup> Freud 1989/2014

<sup>2</sup> See Dolar 2008

<sup>3</sup> Danto 2005, p. 63



or to put into other words, the proper effects of this lack of the political within psychoanalysis have only recently started to be seriously explored. Considering this premise, the present article attempts to examine some authors that have already dealt with this 'ghost' before and also, takes into consideration a few notions that derive from it. And, not 'setting the score' with the political history, will always lead to creating the ghosts that will haunt the fields of knowledge.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is quintessential for the proper examination of this challenging triad. Lacan<sup>4</sup> provided a much needed attention to the political through his psychoanalytic developments, but still not a necessarily satisfying one, many questions are still left open. Although his investigation of Freud's psychoanalysis did provide great tools to further investigate this blindspot of the field, the psychoanalyst himself was a bit ambiguous on some of his political positions. And, after approximately forty years of Lacan's death, his theoretical developments still resonate lively within many different realms of thought, but to what concerns psychoanalysis - the ghost of the political seems to keeps on haunting the field. It is not so far fetched to consider that Lacan felt the effects of this ghostly blind spot on his own skin. One should only consider how Lacan's excommunication from the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) seems to exemplify, to a great extent, an effect of that. Lacan was theoretically and clinically courageous, but this institutional and political step was rather forced upon him. Maybe the creation of the Freudian School of Paris [*L'Ecole Freudienne de Paris* (EFP)] could be considered an institutional materialization of an impasse derived from this triad.

Lacan's return to Freud<sup>5</sup> and the establishment of his own psychoanalytic thinking was divisive from its beginning. And aspects of this divisiveness will be approached throughout this article, not in a historically dedicated manner but in a specific theoretical way. Considering this, a few decisions were already made and translated here through the framework chose for this text. These decisions are the following: (1) a reflexion between philosophy and psychoanalysis is viable (but not without considering its consequences) and (2) the standpoint of Lacanian psychoanalysis is being investigated and not refused. Therefore, this article does not aim at delegitimize Lacanian psychoanalysis, but to specifically approach and explore it. The key element to be considered regarding our 'ghostly' triad is the Lacanian understanding of subversion and its divisive consequences.

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4 See Lacan 1998 & 1997

5 See Lacan 1966

### Lacanian thought and the ghost of the political:

This first stop might be considered a bit of a common place, but it is a necessary one. For psychoanalysis, the articulation between other fields was somehow always already there. Freud from the beginning of his formalization had invited literature, science, philosophy, as well as other fields. Although concerned with invention, his approach to other fields of thought was rather strategic and focused on defending what psychoanalysis was not. Much like trying to explain what a circle is by defending that it is not a square. This particular Freudian heritage was immensely embraced by psychoanalysts, but its consequences are not always fully appropriated. Basically, it is common to notice psychoanalysis placing itself as a particular discursive position, finding itself quite comfortable as a field to examine and address all other realms of knowledge, but usually forgetting that other fields *could* provide crucial insights to psychoanalysis.

The second stop made here, regards how Lacan took Freud's invitation of articulating psychoanalysis with other fields and boosted into much larger potency. Lacanian psychoanalysis is remarkably concerned with providing proper metapsychological grounds<sup>6</sup> to the field in order to better sustain the clinical practice. So, the approximations with other fields explored by Lacanian psychoanalysis was 'internally' provoked and therefore justified by clinical challenges and theoretical impasses. This approach logically generates internal consequences, but the external subsequences to this very own movement of approximation were usually not cross-checked. With that being said, one understands Lacan's "uncanny" <sup>7</sup> formal approach to other fields, traces unfamiliar/familiar bridges, since these were always already there. Acting as if psychoanalysis could smoothly bridge between different fields, because blurries the lines between the internal and the external, as a paradoxical feature printed in its "dna" allowing it to come and go as it pleases. Although Lacan was worried with the internal impasses of psychoanalysis, formally speaking, this critical rigor could be formidably valid if further explored, specially by psychoanalysis. And once again, this is most definitely not a denial of Lacanian psychoanalysis in terms of the validity of its structure and practice - this is only the tensioning of some historical impasses of its theory regarding our current conditions.

Another crucial heritage concerning our discussion is the silence, the peculiar silence of the political within this triad (theory-practice-political). Kept hidden under broad daylight, this silent link of psychoanalysis, its political link, make itself present in many different situations - but far mostly for its absence, in its brutal silence, its lack.

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6 Lacan 1966, pp. 376, 684

7 Freud 2003

The political in psychoanalysis acts like an anamorphic element, it is simultaneously invisible and all-too-present at the same time. For instance, when theory and practice are "pushed against the wall", is the ideological shadowplay of its elements that quietly present itself. Sometimes the reasoning behind a few of the formal and theoretical choices done in psychoanalysis are vastly ideological. So, it is incontrovertible that the political should be regarded when discussing psychoanalysis - especially, because it is an open element at its very own kernel. Thus, the consequence of this open element at the center of psychoanalysis is one of the key points of decisiveness within Lacanian theory. And along with ideological decisions, there will be implications and consequences. Such elements must be considered when thinking the current psychoanalytic scene. This is where ideological implications appear more clearly or where this decisiveness more obviously arises. But this apparent decisiveness is still problematic, because it only tells half of the story. When Freud approach psychoanalysis to the a scientific *weltanschauung*<sup>8</sup>, a scientific like perspective towards disagreements and developments was defended. Disagreements in the theoretical field, even metapsychological ones, should be addressed theoretically within the field and not avoided politically/institutionally. The usual defense of psychoanalysis in order to keep up with its theoretical and practice orthodoxy is to use the weight of the institution, e.g. IPA *versus* Lacan,<sup>9</sup> because the author propose to think the field beyond the institutionally programed agenda. This is why a critique of ideology seems rather necessary to address the field - psychoanalysis as a field should most definitely not place itself 'above' it or free from it, as some psychoanalysts would like to think.

From the Freudian formalization of psychoanalysis and then to Lacanian developments of the field, the political has always found a way to provoke the thinkers. Lacan did pushed psychoanalysis to have a more open dialogue with its own problematic political kernel, but this point is much more ambiguous than it seems. The French author was most definitely not a militant revolutionary, even less was Freud for that matter. Although their combined efforts in psychoanalysis, managed to built formidable tools to thought itself and also, to the critical analysis of social transformations. To a certain extent both thinkers dealt with the political scenario of their historical realities in their theoretical developments and both provided insights to the external political situations (e.g. Freud on the World War<sup>10</sup> and Lacan<sup>11</sup> on May of 1968) but

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8 Freud 1989

9 Lacan 1998

10 Freud 2010 and Lacan 1997

11 Lacan 1997

still, their wits was not necessarily translated into the institutional level of their own field.<sup>12</sup>

Ideological choices produce deep implications. How one approaches Lacanian psychoanalysis (or any other theory for that matter) should be putted be understood through such axiom, in order to attest for the knowledge produced from it. Thus, choices within knowledge production matter and they must come from the object.<sup>13</sup> And psychoanalysis, in this sense, works in the same way, in a non-totalizing sense. For instance, when Stavrakakis<sup>14</sup> discusses if Lacan should be consider either a reformist or a revolutionary, forcing a dichotomic approach which induces a false discussion. On a previous article called *The dead master, the placed master: another shielding of orphanage*,<sup>15</sup> a detailed examination on Lacan's rather ambiguous relationship to the political, takes a closer look at his position on May '68 and provides a valid critique to Stavrakakis' render on Lacan. The two main critical points from this article are: (1) by placing Lacan as an "a" or "b" kind of theorist the author misses out on the crucial dialectical aspect of his materialist theory: its notion of excess<sup>16</sup> and (2) reading Lacan as either a reformist or a revolutionary, do not do justice to the paradoxical subtlety and potency of the Lacanian formulation of *subversion*. The term is addressed in nine different passages throughout his book<sup>17</sup> and yet, the type of *investment* needed to support "the radical democratic ethics of the political"<sup>18</sup> remains to the author as a question mark. Well, the *subversive* viability of seizing the means of symbolic production, is a much needed type of investment towards current class struggle, a much formidable insight for proper radical politics. No questions asked.

But, this is jumping ahead, one must go back to Lacan in order to present how his political position is much more ambiguous than some authors (and some psychoanalysts) would like to think.<sup>19</sup> For example, when Lacan famously stated:

If you had had a bit of patience and if you really wanted our *Impromptus* to continue I would tell you that the revolutionary

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12 Danto 2005

13 Milner 1996

14 Stavrakakis 2007

15 Gonsalves & Estevão 2018

16 Milner 1996

17 Stavrakakis 2007

18 Ibid., p.282

19 Gonsalves & Estevão 2018

aspiration has only one possible way of ending, only one: always with the discourse of the Master, as experience has already shown. What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a Master. You shall have one!<sup>20</sup>

At a first glance, one could read Lacan's interaction with the students, as some crude reactionary position or perhaps a proto-reformist approach. But remember ambiguity is key, here. Lacan's position was that the structures were walking the streets, when he place such statement there is a crucial psychoanalytic insight being placed at stake. By the way, after fifty years one could risk saying that its a political insight still hard to be listen. As further explain on another opportunity,<sup>21</sup> psychoanalysis requires conditions for its existence and must struggle against what resists to its existence. So when Lacan, prescribes hysterization at the clinical and social level, what is at stake is the movement of alienation and separation. Of its capacity for instituting and displace a master.

In this sense Lacan's position regarding May '68<sup>22</sup> seems more complex than what meets the eye and the same could be said about this political perspectives. Here, the psychoanalyst is much more of a pessimist. And pays attention to the discursive twists occurring right in front of him, when he "prophetically" (we can now retroactively defend this) proclaims such statement to the students. When Lacan approaches Marx on his Seminars, he was doing in the name of the political silent link and did leave this as a valid heritage to the field. As an effort to voice this silent link and provide grounds for psychoanalysis to think contemporary suffering, Lacan is aware of the implications of articulating symptoms through Marx and Freud. Thus, after Lacan and Althusser's explosion of Freudo-Marxism, psychoanalytic theory permitted itself through subversion to think critically about capital and also, emancipatory possibilities. Probably the reason why there are tons of texts produced in this direction after Lacan.<sup>23</sup> A lot of proper names such as Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar, Barbara Cassin, as well as others... which to certain extent embrace the subversive viability of psychoanalysis in order to provide a valid critique to the contradictions of our reality. Therefore, Lacanian psychoanalysis renders forms of sociability and politics, especially concerning his theory of discourses. And another suitable argumentation, comes from the Lacanians trying to make sense if Lacan was a conservative or not. A rather homologous line of questionings one find on Marxists, more

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20 Lacan 1997, p.362

21 Gonsalves & Estevão 2018.

22 Lacan 1997, p.362

23 Estevão & Gonsalves 2018

than necessarily on Marx himself. Lacan's subversiveness speaks for itself. When Lacanian psychoanalysis, sustains its subversive function despite all efforts to 'normalize' it or to try to turn it into another mastery discourse - this is what is at stake and what should be consider. The defense of he analytical discourse as subversive, and the defense for the conditions for that discourse to always continue to be subversive, is where psychoanalysis should find its militancy. And psychoanalysts a large missing piece of their praxis.<sup>24</sup>

Orthodox psychoanalysis hits again when the choice to read Lacan only through the configuration of the five discourses he did formalize and that forgets that Lacan himself was open to the formalization of other ones, has an ideological push. Other discursive possibilities are viable, especially one that aims at emancipatory politics and subversive conditions to current contradictions. So, for those who defend psychoanalysis must not be political, these are not naive but ill intended. Perhaps even cynicals, sustaining through their choices to privilege a given reality instead of fully embracing the subversive element that lies at the core of psychoanalysis itself.

**Miller and the political: silent choices**

If taking sides is crucial for psychoanalysis, it is necessary noticing how it shapes different coordinates for Lacanians and moreover, if there is someone who truly understand this is Jacques Alain-Miller (later on addressed as JAM). Well, in a sense JAM had to face major institutional challenges inside psychoanalysis which are analogous to Jung's. And institutionally, with associations and schools, he did progressed the Lacanian dissemination worldwide. And theoretically, at a tremendously young age he wrote fundamental essays for psychoanalysis and later on held the responsibility of establishing Lacan's Seminars. But concerning our topic of choices and political repercussions, one must consider Pavón-Cuéllar's<sup>25</sup> critical take on the paradoxical position of Jacques Alain-Miller to "fight" neofascism while supporting neoliberalism. Although a more in-depth understanding on the heritage from *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* still needs to be formulated, a whole new article would be necessary to even start to address the recent rampage of Miller against his old fellows Badiou and Rancière. But is safe to say that, it traces back to the political spectrum of psychoanalysis and its implications. On one hand, one must not 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' considering meaningful articulations and dissemination from Miller to the field; but on another hand, the recent events do invoke much needed attention concerning the political within psychoanalysis. So, bringing one of

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24 Estevão & Gonsalves 2018

25 Pavón-Cuéllar 2017

The surprising thing is that it was a psychoanalyst who refused to listen with the greatest attention to the symptomatic neofascist denunciation of neoliberal capitalism. Like most of his compatriots, JAM preferred to erase the symptom than to attack the disease. Instead of facing neoliberal capitalism and positioning itself as abstentionist or voter against Macron, JAM and millions of French, in fact, only tried to stifle the telling neofascist symptom by voting against Le Pen. And they succeeded: they took a painkiller, a sedative that will take away the neofascist discomfort for five years, but what will happen in 2022?<sup>26</sup>

Well, neofascism and neoliberalism go more hand in hand, as effects of capitalism than are just mere 'stumbles' of such system. And Cuellar defends the point that JAM, as well as other psychoanalysts, did not fully capture what Lacan pointed out about Marx through '68 to '70:

to grasp quantitatively the object of desire, to surplus-enjoyment, through the calculation of surplus-value understood as surplus of the use value of labor over its exchange value. But Marx's calculation allowed him to approach the notion of surplus-enjoyment by isolating what can not be reduced to calculation, which goes beyond surplus-value, what is lost by the worker, as well as non-transferable, unexplored, unusable for the capitalist. This useless is what manifests itself in the generalized unhappiness in Marx's capitalism, as well as in the malaise of Freud's culture, and it is also in the name of what we can condemn the typically bourgeois ideological reduction of desire to the supreme principle of utility, as is manifested in JAM and Laurent.<sup>27</sup>

Obviously, the point here is not to condemn a much necessary stand against neofascism, but to contextualize it and to problematize Miller's particular silence regarding other political situations. Thus, something of Milner's understanding of a Lacanian materialism seems necessary to criticize this much defended principle of utility embraced by JAM and other psychoanalysts. The servile obedience to the current Millerian politics, without critical consideration can only sustain the suffering produced by capitalism and its contradictions. And even further, such dissemination risks turning psychoanalysis itself into a kind of hermeneutics of the elites. Therefore, some ethico-political priorities are

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26 *ibid.* p. 1

27 *ibid.* p. 2

required for nowadays Lacanians. The JAM from the crucial problems of psychoanalysis and who questioned Lacan about the ethical statute of the unconscious instead of the Heideggerian ontic, is no more. Lacan's understanding of ethics for psychoanalysis and its metapsychological implications, should be heard under the subversive potency of the field - which is a political one, as well.

Clinical psychoanalysis must be able to assimilate contemporary suffering. And it is unlikely sustain psychoanalysis subversive potency in the era of "post-humanity"<sup>28</sup> without taking into consideration its political kernel. Beyond only aiming at the reach of psychoanalysis for those who suffer, psychoanalysis must be able to absorb and speak to popular suffering. A psychoanalysis which problematizes suffering whose expression itself is money. A psychoanalysis dialectically aware of subversion, understands that the capitalist discourse does not connect subjects to other subjects, but subjects to the objects of their libidinal enjoyment<sup>29</sup> and must be able to deal with suffering caused and expressed by it. The metapsychological insights derived from this parallax, still needs to be further explored and developed, but such coordinates are crucial for clinical psychoanalysis nowadays. Such perspective not only provides fundamental clinical insights, but also, allows for a valid analysis of the conjunctions and disjunctions regarding labor and militancy faced by political movements and social movements. A psychoanalysis that faces its political kernel, must confronts its impasses regarding the economy logics, providing steps for a political transformation about how the subjects spend their time. The notion of subversion allows a shift of realms, it makes room for the displacements of fields and also to the introduction of a void or of a completely different universality,<sup>30</sup> therefore setting the ground for the 'transcultural' link of common struggle between different communities .

**Subversion in psychoanalysis**

Lenin stated that "[i]t is precisely because Marxism is not a lifeless dogma, not a completed, ready-made, immutable doctrine, but a living guide to action, that it was bound to reflect the astonishingly abrupt change in the conditions of social life". Lenin's approach to Marx can be parallel to Lacan's approach to the Freudian *wissenschaft*. When Freud approach psychoanalysis to a scientific *weltanschauung* (roughly translated as world-view), in his classic,<sup>31</sup> he sets a non-totalizing science to encompass the field. Many challenges derived from this

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28 Žižek 2018, p.103

29 Lacan 2007

30 Žižek 2014, p. 180

31 Freud 2014, p. 38



metapsychological configuration arise, on one hand a non-totalizing logic was sketched, on another hand, the ambiguity towards the political got structurally placed. These profound consequences are bound to Freud's choices when establishing psychoanalysis.

The non-totalizing *wissenschaft* of psychoanalysis proposed by Freud, when formalizing the tools to investigate the unconscious setted all sorts of troubles that resonates even today. Lacan's return to Freud had to deal with some of those choices and the ambiguity with the political, this more symptomatic formation also played its part. If psychoanalysis always had a privileged sit judge external political situation, it seems to always had struggle to deal with its own political issues. And Lacan tried to formalize his response through the notion of subversion as a living guide to action, acting as a constant reminder that psychoanalysis is not a "lifeless dogma, not a completed, ready-made, immutable doctrine".

Lacan's notion of this excess, from that which is never fully symbolically subsumed, therefore non totalizing, an insight that in some sense guides Milner's understanding of Lacan as a materialist. And Milner defends that the main characteristic of an authentic materialism resides on the fact that it is not totalizing, derived from a systematic need. Milner describes this feature as an incompleteness and through it, the author approaches Marx to Lacan defending a non-totalizing reading of both.<sup>32</sup> Especially articulating how such materialism allows for thinking the objects, with only a few exceptions. And concerning science, the author explains that:

There is indeed a theory of science in Lacan. She is very thorough and not trivial. To restore coherence, one must first establish what it is not and start from the difference that separates Freud from Lacan. For there also exists in Freud a theory of science. It is quite summary, and if we ask why there is one, the answer is simple. It lies in what we agree to call Freud's scientism, and which is only an assent to the ideal of science. This ideal fully supports the vow that psychoanalysis is a science. I am saying *ideal of science*. It is in fact an ideal point - outer or infinitely distant - to which the straight lines of the plane tend and which at the same time belongs to all and never lies in them. It is not the *science-ideal*, which "incarnates" in a variable way the scientific ideal: strictly imaginary determination, demanded in order that representations are possible.<sup>33</sup>

32 Milner 1996, p.10

33 Ibid. p.30

Milner explains this metapsychological disjunction-conjunction between the ideal of science with the science ideal, conforming to the disjunction-conjunction of the Ideal of the I to the I-ideal.<sup>34</sup> And even further, the author defends that: "From this structural analogy we shall easily extract the effects of the mirage which operates the name science, they exist, must be dissipated, but science is not reduced to this."<sup>35</sup> So, Lacan sustains Freud's aphorisms regarding science as a technique, but differentiates himself in terms of the ideal of science for psychoanalysis. Milner concludes that searching for the conditions where psychoanalysis would be a science and to present a totalized constructed scientific model for psychoanalysis to follow are the two faces of the same false approach. And without an ideal of science nor a science-ideal for for psychoanalysis, the field "must find in itself the foundations of its principles and methods."<sup>36</sup> It is the element of analysis which became the ideal point as an epistemological and clinical coordinator, Lacan<sup>37</sup> even defends the notion of *praxis* to describe the Lacanian orientation of analysis. To build the ideal of analysis for science, from within psychoanalysis. Milner reminds that such movement inspired the marxists of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, to find within Marxism itself its coordinates for praxis.<sup>38</sup>

Psychoanalysis viabilize its praxis by letting go of an external ideal for itself and aiming at a possibility from within. This line of thought could be articulated with Canguilhem's critique of normativity,<sup>39</sup> where he defends how life is always already present at any moment of subjectivization, therefore artificial gestures of cutting will never be without consequences. And in this sense, any attempt at fully boxing psychoanalysis to moral, biological or scientific normativities, will miss psychoanalysis itself. Thus, the discursivity of psychoanalysis must be subversive at its kernel. On a clinical level, subjectivization is rather crucial for psychoanalysis. It deals with the narcissistic fiction of the I, established by the Freudian disentanglement of the ideal of I and I-ideal, portraying subsequent qualities of neurotic suffering. Both fictions express the past and the future constantly experienced by the subject. And for Freud, the present provides a temporal subjective experience of lack, sustaining a possibility for shift the narcissistic coordinates. And Lacan picks up this instance, presenting the double inscription of this

34 Ibid., p.50

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., p.31

37 Lacan 1998, p.42

38 Milner 1996, p.31

39 Canguilhem 1978

fiction to the subject. For example, when the psychoanalyst pedagogically formalizes the schema R,<sup>40</sup> those are the vectors he uses to present the 'field of reality':

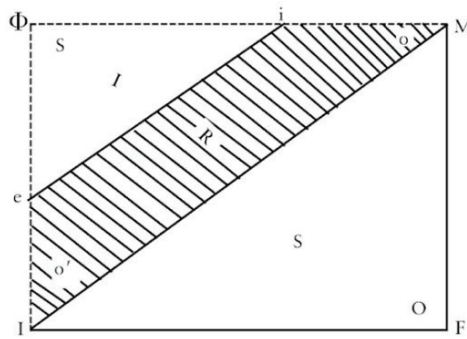


Figure 1: schema r (Lacan 1991)

Lacan's complexification of the schema L, formalizes the relation between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, but also differentiates Real and reality for the subject. This double inscription is much more complex and promotes all kinds of challenges for clinical psychoanalysis regarding the subjective experience, which were further explored by Lacan through the logic of the knots.<sup>41</sup> Fundamentally, the role of fantasy is always already infiltrated in the reality believed by the subject. And if the ethical purpose of psychoanalysis regards the awakening from the fantasy that control us when awake<sup>42</sup> then, the role of subversion seems only necessary. Lacan's subversiveness can be dialectically revolutionary, although Lacan was no revolutionare and even a stand to surpass capitalism through subversion can be drawn from his teachings. But the political within psychoanalysis must be faced instead of being a recurrent repetitive symptom of itself and its consequences heard as loud as possible, instead of silenced.

### Ideal of Communism or communism-Ideal?

Benefiting from the discussion made so far and learning from Milner's insight, let's extrapolate and propose a thought experiment: what would be to consider the ideal of communism and communism-Ideal? Considering what was already discussed until now, such short-circuit not only provides an interesting render of the historical experiments tried this far, it also provides insights to political challenges found even

40 Lacan 1991

41 Lacan 2016

42 Žižek 2007, p. 60

today. According with Žižek<sup>43</sup> the proper subversive re-significance of communism, is only justified if references the excluded. All antagonisms miss its subversive edge if the excluded are not in sight. And logically following Milner's argumentation, this must not be a pathway towards another ideal or to another dead guide, but a appreciation of specific political knots - all with the same level of importance and intimately connected - which triggers the living guide of political action. Or in other words, these are thoughts in order to thinking reactions to today's contradictions. The disjunction-conjunction of this double inscription on the political level, tactically means to (1) consider a subversive tearing up of the zombified symbolic fabric of reality, (2) sustaining the void provoked by it and (3) also, provide conditions to invent a new affirmation of the impossibilities. The first and second elements are defended throughout the article, under the name of subversion. The radical possibility of subversiveness within Lacan's proposition, provides the tools for seizing the means of symbolic production and fighting the zombified fabric of reality.<sup>44</sup> And concerning the last point, one must consider it as the tie knot of some arguments which will be further presented in brief conversation proposed between three proper names: Žižek, Mbembe and Badiou.

Žižek compares contemporary riots and outbursts (e.g. Ferguson, USA) with May '68 arguing its lack of a guiding fiction.<sup>45</sup> This does not mean that their struggle is not justified, it means that it expresses a paradoxical condition: the systematic violence imposed upon the Black communities and all the frustration experienced by them, explodes to the surface through acts of violence. The silent violence that sustains reality, normalizing brutality and exploitation leads to this lack of trust on ideals. And even worst, it undermines hope for something new. Political frustration is always first felt, it comes as an affect. Such outbursts solidify the contradictions of social disparities harming and putting in danger even further those who already suffered enough. It generates more violence towards those who already experience too much of it, as the author defends. Heading back to the main discussion, Žižek criticizes the Kantian understanding of "communism as a regulative idea and thereby resuscitating the spectre of 'ethical socialism', with equality as its *a priori* norm or axiom."<sup>46</sup> And the Slovenian thinker goes further:

Rather, one should maintain the precise reference to a set of social antagonisms which generates the need for communism;

43 Žižek 2009b

44 Gonsalves 2018, and 2016.

45 Žižek 2016, p. 41

46 Žižek 2009a, p.87

the good old Marxian notion of communism not as an ideal, but as a movement which reacts to actual contradictions. To treat communism as an eternal Idea implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal, that the antagonism to which communism reacts will always be here. From which it is only one step to a deconstructive reading of communism as a dream of presence, of abolishing all alienating representation; a dream which thrives on its own impossibility.<sup>47</sup>

Always from the standpoint of the excluded, the need for communism comes as a movement of reaction to social contradictions. It means to demand the impossible, to put the contradictions sustained by reality in check and aims at enlarge reality transforming it. This is the living guide of action which tears up the zombified fabric of reality, that pushes it towards new universalities. Marx is the link between Mbembe and Žižek, and Badiou will basically tell us how. In Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*<sup>48</sup> the neocolonialist thinker, philosophically portrays the "*Becoming Black of the world*."<sup>49</sup> as the new condition of existence in our reality. This means that the neocolonial domination and exploitation is globally spreaded, a point already warned by Marx and Engels<sup>50</sup> and explored by Fisher,<sup>51</sup> Badiou,<sup>52</sup> Dolar,<sup>53</sup> as well as many other thinkers; the consequence of this vastly spreaded capitalism, is the need of a "bridge" between cultures and identities, gathered in a common struggle against a common condition of suffering. This is what *thinking in circulation* or *thinking-crossing*<sup>54</sup> means for Mbembe, the possibility of a link that transcends identitarianism in the name of a common struggle.

And finally, there is Badiou's understanding of the 'generic' linking through Marx, the previous arguments from Mbembe and Žižek. The French thinker argues that:

"...Marx gives the name 'generic humanity' to humanity in the movement of its self-emancipation, and that 'proletariat' - the name 'proletariat' - is the name of the possibility of generic humanity in

.....  
47 Ibid., pp.87-88

48 Mbembe 2017

49 Ibid., p.5

50 Marx and Engels 2017

51 Fisher 2009

52 Badiou 2012

53 Dolar 2008

54 Mbembe 2017, p. 179

its affirmative form. 'Generic', for Marx, names the becoming of the universality of human being, and the historical function of the proletariat is to deliver us this generic form of the human being. So in Marx the political truth is situated on the side of genericity, and never on the side of particularity. Formally, it is a question of desire, creation or invention, and not a matter of law, necessity or conversation... So for Cohen - as well as for Marx - the pure universality of multiplicity, of sets, is not to be sought on the side of correct definition of clear description but on the side of nonconstructibility. The truth of sets is generic."<sup>55</sup>

Thus, Badiou's comprehends that revolutionary desire lies within the realisation of generic humanity, which represents the end of the separation between law and desire, and claims for the "creative affirmation of humanity as such."<sup>56</sup> Defending the necessary creative engagement for seizing the means of the symbolic fabric of our reality, supporting the law of life, in order to create a new symbolic fiction. Perhaps, this is what a psychoanalysis in an era of 'post-humanity' should ethically pay attention to. In this sense, perhaps this is the parallel to be consider. This is where the current coordinates of suffering are displayed, and a field which focus on diminishing symptoms and a traversing of the fantasy, must be able to address it. The constant subversiveness of psychoanalysis guides the analysis by re-inventing the coordinates for the subject by the subject, towards a cure. While the constant movement within communism sustained by the local engagement, reacting against the contradictions of reality and demanding what is impossible, also subverts the given conditions in the name of a new Universality.

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55 Badiou 2015, p.53

56 Ibid., p.54

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# Global 1968 Reconstructed in the Short Century

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**Abstract:** The story of Paris 1968, connects and overlaps, with the Chinese "Cultural Revolution". However, in the wake of the "Cultural Revolution", the commemorations to 1968 have remained silent about the events in China. In 2018, Chinese young intellectuals have a distinctive feature for the retrospection on the 1968, that is, to maintain a distance from the classic style of commemoration of the 1968. In order to reconstruct the memory of the 1960s, the national liberation movement, the Cultural Revolution and the struggle against racial discrimination before and after 1968 and the workers' movement have all been included in the field of vision, and the conversion of the "short May" into "long 1968", was an inevitable narrative strategy. With the focus of discussion shifting from the classic memory of 1968 to different directions, there are three notable aspects: first, the focal point of the observation is not the short red May, but the interaction and alienation between students and workers' movements and radical organizations. The second focus is not in the disoriented student movement and its simultaneous rejection of the two camps, the East and the West, but the movement between the movement and the widespread struggle against imperialism in the Third World and its connection with different other forms of communist movements, which all constitutes the historical spectrum of 1968. Thirdly, the overall melody of China's "Cultural Revolution" echoes in the European movement, suggesting the connection between the two, but in general, the "Cultural Revolution" is still a silent heritage that is difficult to tackle. If the "Cultural Revolution" lies in "May", then how come it did "not become a legacy"? If it's not present, how can we nevertheless understand the relationship between the "Cultural Revolution" and "May 68"?

**Keywords:** exodus and bring back, output and convergence, the long 1968

The story of 1968 in Paris connects and overlaps with the Chinese "Cultural Revolution." However, the commemorations of the "Cultural Revolution", which should have been regarded as an indispensable part of the Global 1968 discussion, have remained silent in China since its termination in 1976. 1998, 2008, when the whole world was discussing 1968, the Chinese intellectual community fell into a collective embarrassment. However, a change finally occurred in 2018: under the joint efforts of young editors, journalists and intellectuals, "The Paper News (*Pengpai xinwen*, [www.thepaper.cn](http://www.thepaper.cn))" set up a commemorative column and published a series of articles about 1968, with broad views and reflective depth, which far exceeded the previous discussions. The authors and editors who participated in the discussion were all born in the 1970s and 1980s. While these participants could not have directly experienced 1968, their writings

place them as the descendants of the 1968 spirit. By reconstructing the historical context and reflecting on the power and limitations of the movement, they attempt to re-establish contact between 1968 and the contemporary China.

As a historical milestone, 1968 is a symbolic expression of the ‘global 60s’ in general. With Red May in Paris serving as the focal point, it also started a particular style of commemoration. This style of commemoration is a process of forgetting. In the words of Wang Pu, “they were all yelling Maoist, anarchist or anti-imperialist slogans. But now they tell everyone that the true meaning of May [1968] was just about the ‘individual’, nothing but a liberation of the individual. It was merely a celebration of the younger generation daring the tradition, marking the transformation of France from traditional capitalism to a postmodern consumerist society. It was a puny cultural adjustment, a passport to the freedom of consumption and hedonism. As a social transformation and a cultural reform, it is inevitable. It is ultimately a grand reconciliation within the street barricades (!) and a celebration of cultural exchange. The continuous workers’ struggles are absent. The Third Worldism is nowhere to be found. The ideological debates are gone. Instead, the revolutionary subject changes into the sociological intergeneration and political struggles turn into ethical clashes. The only main character left in this adulterated historical drama is: a young student/individual/consumer; and there simultaneously remains only one director — capital. ‘The subject of individual freedom was, - in a nutshell - depoliticized.’”

Yin Zhiguang revisits the "Long 1968" from the perspective of the Arab world around the time of “Sixty-Day War” in 1967. This unique perspective reveals that the image of a ‘global 1968’ constituted by anti-Vietnam War protests in the U.S., the Black Civil Rights movement, and series of European student movements under the Parisian “May storm” still projected a “Eurocentric standpoint”. Such a ‘global 1968’ continues to celebrate the student movements in European countries as a ‘new forms of social organization and political activism, using radical or even violent methods to confront various types of ‘authority’. 1968 unfolding in this context bears several crucial characteristics. On the one hand, it is viewed as a ‘global movement’ that transcends national boundaries and ideological camps. On the other hand, its political results have achieved reconciliation with the Western democratic political narrative by becoming the symbol that reiterating the universality of the claims such as the ‘awakening of society’ and the ‘crisis of the state’. It is immanent to this logic that the failure of the left-wing socialist political demands represented by the 1968 student movement in Europe ushers the world into the revival of ‘liberalism’ and ‘democratic politics’. Hence, as a left-

wing ‘humanist’ movement, 1968 was incorporated into the mainstream historical and political narratives of the West and become an event that ‘shook the world’.”<sup>1</sup>

To rebuild the memory of the 1960s which includes the national liberation movements, the Cultural Revolution, the struggle against racial discrimination before and after 1968, and the workers’ movement, we must covert the “short May” into a “long 1968”. These contemporary young Chinese intellectuals are distinctive in their revisiting of 1968. They maintain distance from the classic narrative of 1968. The editor of the column in the “澎湃新闻 Surging news” clearly stated that the goal of the column was to salvage the “heaviest part” of history that was obscured by the tamed classic narrative. “50 years later, after the Cold War, when 1968 is mentioned, people think of the May storm in France, the ‘radical philosophy’, *la Nouvelle Vague*, rock music, hippies.... The rebellion of the ‘68 generation’ seems only to transform resistance into an ornament and ultimately helps capitalism to triumph. Through such a deliberate commemoration, the heaviest part of 1968 is inevitably forgotten. It should rather be said that 50 years later, people are immersed in the homogenized romantic nostalgia for passion, rebellion and liberation. We are reluctant to be infected with the smell of blood from that era. We are unwilling to touch upon the heterogeneous struggles in different regions. However, it is the world image shaped by these struggles that brings the ‘global 1968’ truly alive”.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, it’s not Paris in May 1968 that creates the ‘global 1968’. Instead, we should look at the sacrifice of Che Guevara, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War, the national liberation movement in Palestine, the black Civil Rights movements in America, the worker and student movements in France, Germany, and Italy, the students and citizen protests in Japan, the democratic socialism in Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovak, the ‘long 1968’ from the Arabic perspective, the active responses to the above mentioned movements from China, and even the violent revolutionaries such as the Italian red brigades and the *Sendero Luminoso* from Peru. All these distinct movements shape the complicated spectrum of a true “global 1968.” Perhaps we should also include the Bandung conference, the Sino Soviet debate, and the safeguarding the Diaoyudao Island movement in Taiwan. Exploring the blood-stained memories is not to repeat their tactics but rather to analyse the reasons behind the disintegration of 1968; and to understand the “completely heterogeneous struggles” obscured by the radical, yet romantic and ornamental revolt of 1968.

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<sup>1</sup> Wang 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Yin 2018.

With the focal point shifting away from the classic historical narrative of 1968, I propose three areas of attention for further discussions. First, research should not focus on the short Red May, but the interactions and alienations between the students and worker's movements. Second, the historical spectrum of 1968 is not comprised of the disoriented student movement and the simultaneous rejection of the cause by the Eastern and the Western blocs. Instead, it is formed by the widely spread resistances against imperialism in the Third World, as well as the connections among various forms of communist movement. Third, in the midst of the European movements there was a resounding tune reminiscent of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," which hints to their connection. However, the "Cultural Revolution" is still muted in the prevailing narrative of '68, appealing almost to be an embarrassing inheritance. Therefore, when these contemporary Chinese authors claim that "May 68 has not become a legacy, but still remains emblematic of contemporary society",<sup>3</sup> they leave the question of whether or not the lingering "May 68" incorporates the "Cultural Revolution" for us to address. If the "Cultural Revolution" is internal to the "May 68", then in what sense does the 'May 68' remain relevant to today? If not, then how should we comprehend the relationship between the "Cultural Revolution" and "May 68"?

**‘Converging’ Politics: An ‘Acentric’ 1968, Class, Party, and State**

Let us begin with the first question, which is the connection of 1968 with the workers' movement and the theoretical questions relating to such a connection. How to understand the relations between the events of 1968 and concepts such as social class, organization, and the political party. 1968 has a lot of theoretical designations that we ought to take into consideration. For example, Alain Tourraine and Michel Crozier regard '68 as a "new type of social conflict" and "product of an institutional crisis". Edgar Morin prefers to understand it as "a generation clash (patricide)". Pierre Bourdieu has explained this complex movement as a structural field, in which crisis in all the Western societies resonates with each other. Not to mention Raymond Aaron, who, from a conservative view, maintains that this movement is only an "elusive revolution" or "the event that turned out to have been a non-event".<sup>4</sup> The young Chinese commentators have revisited these narratives about an acentric and bizarre revolution only to move away from focusing on the movement's 'acentric' characteristic. Instead, they begin to describe and comprehend the convergence of the students, the working class and other social movements.

3 From the *Surging news thought market*, 16. 6. 2018, according to the editor of the column "1968".

4 Zhao Wen 2018.

The shift of focus from the "decentralised" deconstructionist narrative to the analysis of the 'convergence' of the heterogeneous revolts, is in fact a deviation from the '68 generation's self-narration and self-reflection. As a participant of the 1968 movement, Perry Anderson "examined the development of German, French and Italian Marxism from 1918 to 1968, and regrets that Western Marxism "severed the bond it should have had with the mass movement striving for revolutionary socialism". His discussion is based on the research of the radical movements of 1968 from the perspective of the European, Soviet and Asian revolutionary traditions. However, due to the fact that Anderson's reflections are founded on his own personal experience with the events of '68, he neglects social resistances, which were also ignored and devalued by the youth in the midst of the climax of 1968. Wang Xingkun presents an alternative to Perry Anderson's narrative, through focusing on the "development of Italian revolutionary Marxism from the sixties onward." By introducing this aspect into the investigation of the Italian "long 1968", Wang Xingkun notices that the revolutionary bond established through the movement of winning the support of the mass is the most important neglected aspect of 1968. The "revolutionary Marxism" Wang refers is mainly suggesting the "left-wing movements independent of the Italian Communist, socialist parties, and parliament", namely the Leninist-Maoist "Avanguardia Operaia" in 1968, the Maoist "Potere Operaio", "Lotta Continua" and "Il Manifesto" (expelled by the Italian Communist Party in the same year) in 1969. The most influential one among these organisations was the workerist "Potere operaio".<sup>5</sup>

These four groups of revolutionary Italian Marxism and the 1968 student-workers movement are tightly connected. If we consider them to be the "the largest Western European new leftist groups", the common description of the European new left is inevitably bound to change. The power of the New Left in the intellectual sphere claims its theoretical link with Maoism. However, it also gains its influence by distancing itself both the political party and the state. Maoism, on the other hand, also criticized the Soviet Union and the increasingly dogmatic Western European Communist Parties. It cannot be said to have completely abandoned the line of establishing a truly radical political party, nor can it be said to have abandoned the line of creating a socialist country. In the "post-68" atmosphere, radical thought turned to the criticism and deconstruction of classes and political parties, but the "long 1968" also entailed a pursuit of the class politics and organized mass resistance. The student movements were not as 'innocent' as some of their participants later claimed. These movements largely contributed one way or another to the later 'terrorist' groups. Founders of later organizations such as Franco Piperno and

5 Ibid

Oreste Scalzone for the “worker's power” (potere operaio), and Renato Curcio for the “Brigade Rosse”, had all played an important role on the stage of the Italian ‘long 1968.’”<sup>6</sup>

The same situation played out all through Europe and the United States. As Zhao Wen points out: “In the United States, from the early 1960s, the student movements were already happening in large scale and systematically. With the “Huron Port statement” of the “Students for a democratic Society” as its symbol, and going through the student protests at the University of California, Berkley, the substantive social resistances organised by student organisations across the US persisted well into the 1970s. In fact, the climax of the May '68 movement in France was when the workers’ movement were set off by the student’s movement. It was only after the biggest workers strike in France’s history, after the most widespread riots in the world's most developed region since the Second World War that the “May storm” began to truly take shape. For the first time, the general strike in France in 1968 burst out from the manufactural sector, the conventional epic centre for worker movements, and moved into the media and cultural industries. It manged to spread into almost all the sectors of social reproduction and lead to the formation of the theory of practice for an actual ‘worker autonomy’.”<sup>7</sup>

The discussion of “convergence” focuses on the following aspects: the student movement can only have a real impact when combined with the workers’ movement; students can only produce a real revolution when they are separated from their “student identity”. Despite the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) have already turned into conservative institutional powers, class and organisation remain to be the prerequisites for a revolutionary and wide-spread mass movement. In this sense, the young Chinese intellectuals’ reviews of 1968 share Perry Andersons’ self-criticism of rather than a post-modern deconstruction of the ‘68. Their interpretations of the ‘68 are much closer to the Marxist tradition and the Chinese revolutionary experience instead of the genealogy developed within the tradition of postmodernism. The sort of problems the young Chinese intellectuals posed in their interpretations of the ‘68 are in fact the sort of problems that both contemporary Chinese society in general, and the new generation of young Chinese intellectuals in particular, are facing. The problem is that in the era of market expansion, the educational institutions mushroomed as well. Intellectuals are no longer capable or able to maintain links with workers, peasants and other social classes.

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<sup>6</sup>Wang Xingkun 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

With the exception of a short-lived experience of some Chinese, which was annulled quickly after 1989, forty years after the end of the “cultural revolution”, many generations of Chinese have been unable to establish independent organizations and participate in collective political action.

Since 1989, on the one hand, large-scale expansion of economic industrialization and urbanization, continuous social division, contradictions and conflicts, were all concealed by rapid economic growth. On the other hand, in the midst of a historical forgetting under the strong leadership of the state, neoliberal ideology permeates all the sectors. We appeal to be no longer able to see the continuous youth movements and their interactions with all the other social sectors which were common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century China. The expansion of manufactural industry also marks the booming of the size of Chinese working class. There are about 260 million new workers in China. I have made a distinction between two types of ‘new poor’ in contemporary China. The first type of ‘new poor’ have higher level of education and technological skills. Their imagination of the world is closely associated with the dynamic of the consumerist society. The other type refers to the new working class which features with the largest number of *mingong* (migrant workers who use to be farmers) in the world. Both types reside in the margin of the market society without the ability to form a new ‘convergence’.

The strikes of Guangzhou Honda Motor Company, the suicide of Foxconn workers, and the struggle of many new working classes reveal that in the struggle to change their own destiny, the workers’ groups are exploring their own identity and their political demands. However, the question, as to whether the identity and status of the new industrial workers can produce or need to produce a class consciousness similar to that of the working class of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, is, to this day, still controversial.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that the “new poor” groups lash out their discontent on the social media such as Weibo and Wechat, they nevertheless failed to launch a new political imaginary. They are disillusioned by their lack of consumption. Yet, they continue to reproduce operative logic compatible with the consumerist society. We see similar images in recent political movements such as the Arab spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the protests in the streets of Moscow. However, China seems to be an exception to all of these. Since 1989, with the minor exception of the self-organization and mobilization of overseas students in 2008 to defend the Olympic torch, the political struggle of the Chinese youth is rare; the direct link between the two types of “new poor” is extremely thin.

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<sup>8</sup> Zhao, 2018



Over the last decade the situation is changing. 2018 is destined to be an important turning point in China. In the late 2017 and early 2018, the government of Beijing drove out many immigrants living in the suburbs on a massive scale. The expulsion of immigrants inspired numerous young people to travel to Beijing to express their solidarity and support for the immigrants or express their critical opinions of Beijing's anti-immigration policies on social media. In May 2018, workers of Shenzhen Jasic Technology Co., Ltd. attempted to negotiate with the company because the workers were dissatisfied with how the company treated them. They tried to form a workers' union to negotiate with the company management. This eventually resulted in the termination of employment for some of the workers. In July 2018, in the struggle for more workers' rights, some workers were beaten and arrested. Similar incidents occurred frequently in Guangdong, but with an important difference: students from the best universities in China, such as Sun Yat-Sen University, Beijing University, Qinghua University, and Renmin University of China, gained information from online and formed student support groups. They continued to publish lists of arrested workers for the public and report these workers current conditions. This eventually led to the arrest of several students which initiated support and sympathy from many young people. Unlike the liberal or neoliberal tendencies of many movements after the end of the Cold War, this wave of youth movements clearly positions itself within the Left. The Chinese government and universities have strengthened their control over students and have even blocked teachers from serving as mentors for those student societies. Under this high pressure, these young people show courage, persistence and demonstrate an ability to think which does away with the cynical attitude of the past 30 years. These young students pay close attention to their relationship with workers and their social stratum. They excel at using social media to struggle. They support workers to organize trade unions. And they try to use student associations to conduct legitimate struggles.

Trade unions, student societies, and the search for some kind of theoretical, Marxist orientated guidance, constitutes the most urgent demands of the contemporary Chinese workers' movement and student movement. Most of the students who are directly involved in, or express solidarity with, the workers, were born in the 1990s. The students who have the most organisational experiences are members of Marxist study groups at Universities. Their discursive rhetoric is different from the discourse of the young Chinese intellectuals who wrote and edited the columns on '68. The latter is deeply influenced by the new European left, while the former seems to have a more explicit Marxist character of "returning to class." In terms of mobilization and formation of the

movement itself, this is a relatively simple student movement that seeks to explore the link between rebuilding itself and connecting with the working class. Its appeal is how it supports the workers' unions and demands for the inclusions of a diverse range of legitimate struggles within the autonomously formed student associations.

The focus of the commemoration of 1968 shifts from a simple student movement and youth movement to a "convergence" and organized resistances. One question to posit at this juncture is that while the concept of "convergence" can be said to theoretically demonstrate how the concept of "the masses" replace the concept of "class", the returning to class and organisational problems occurred during the exploration of the methods of "convergence" prove that the concept of class has unique political and mobilizational functions which can not be replaced by other ideas. The Chinese revolution of the 20th century was never a simple class movement, but a mass revolutionary movement with peasants as the main subject. However, the concept of class and the political organization established on the basis of this concept, constitutes the foundation of revolution. How do we analyse the political purchase of the concept of class which transcends its merely descriptive connotation? Why is it that that concepts which accurately describe the heterogeneous identity of the formation of social movements, also have immense difficulty in articulating the link between mass movements and revolutionary socialism?

### **The Spatial Dimension of 1968: Exodus, Return, and Exportation**

In addition to the transformation of a "short May" to a "long 1968" along the time axis of the logic of "convergence" and the process of failure, retrospective analysis of '68 from 2018 brings us back to the topic of struggle against imperialism, of the third world, and also from a temporal dimension. If the key word of the spatial dimension is "convergence", then the central term of the temporal dimension is "exodus" and "return" or "bring back." Although many commentators have analysed and reviewed '68 in the framework of the "global 60s", most of the memories, summons, and reflections have centred around the students and intellectuals in Paris, Europe and the United States. The significance of the revolt in 1968 lies precisely in its worldwide reach: the "Cultural Revolution" in China, the national independence movements of Asia, Africa and Latin America, and the student movement beginning from the safeguarding Diaoyudao Island movement in the 1960s, the social and student movements in Hong Kong and Macao. Liu Ye outlines the development of the Black struggle in America. He points out that in its initial stage, the antiracism of the American black movement did not possess the internationalist traits of anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, nor anti-imperialism like the European

Left wing ideology. However, the interactions of different movements in the era created a “convergence”, in which the American black movement experienced “exodus” and “bringing back” and transformed into a part of the global 1960s. It is not surprising that the main character who “exodus” and then being “returned” was not the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who became “sanitised” by the mainstream. Instead, it is Malcom X. His dual identity of both being black and a Muslim made him particularly difficult for the American mainstream society to swallow. In 1964, Malcolm X’s pilgrimage to the Middle East and North Africa brought the anti-imperialist struggle in the Third World to the American black civil rights movement. Not only he gained direct contact with African anti-colonial leaders, but also began to pay attention to the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan , the Vietnam War and the US Hegemony in Asia. He also fervently praised the Chinese Cultural Revolution and its political line.

"Exodus" and "Return" are relevant to the movements in the United States and Europe. If we shift the gravity centre of our narrative to the destination to where these Western activists ‘migrant’ and the origin from where they brought back spiritual inspiration, we consequently will have a story of ‘exportation’. Who is exporting? In 1963, after receiving another African American leader Robert Williams, whom also “migrated” from his home country, Mao Zedong issued a statement in the *People’s Daily* calling for "all the workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals, enlightened bourgeois elements and other enlightened people in white, black, yellow, brown, etc. to unite against racial discrimination inherent in American imperialism and support the struggle of black Americans against racial discrimination. After all, racial struggle is a question of class struggle..."<sup>9</sup> Malcolm X started a practice of integrating the US hegemony from outside the US. This transformation distinguishes him from the previous American Civil Rights movement leaders. Malcolm X’s act created a direct link between the Red China and the African American and student movements. They together fed into the revolutionary tide of anti-imperialism. The fact that Malcolm X and the various political groups he inspired, such as The Black Panthers, are difficult for the liberal mainstream to consume is not only due to his defense of the rationality of the violent struggle, but even more importantly his political stance of uniting with the international revolutionary movement undermining the American hegemony during the Cold War. For the imperialist system, the interactions among “exodus”, “bringing back” and “exportation” are most dangerous. The decrease of such interactions was accompanied

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9 Mao Zedong: "The call to the people of the world to unite in opposition to racial discrimination of the American hegemony and the declaration of the support of the struggle against the racism of the Black Americans", 8. 8. 1963.

by the decline and dissolution of the “long sixties”. The disintegration of the 1960s is clearly related to two main premises. First, the coming to an end of the socialist and national liberation movement form the basic precondition of the dismantlement of the 1960s. Second, the termination of the aforementioned interactions means that internationalism in the 20th century eventually lost to nationalist and imperial politics. "Politics" has once again returned to the sphere of imperial hegemony and national sovereignty.

The anti-Vietnam war movement is significant in the sense that it too placed the US in the global hegemonic system. It consciously regards the US hegemony as the external enemy against the world’s people and consequently target of its own resistance. Just as Lenin called for an internal revolution in the First world war and forced his country to withdraw from the war, so too the anti-Vietnam war movement brought "war" back to the United States, and changed the imperialist war relationship (us vs. enemy) into the antagonistic relationship between a protest movement and a hegemonic power. It was this reconstruction of the relationship between us and the enemy that had created interaction and allianship between the American radical movement and socialist countries such as China. One after another, American university students visited Beijing, radical intellectuals at Paris peace talks helped the Communist party of Vietnam, the radical anti-war organizations and Mao Zedong’s thought were interlinked. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Weather Underground Organisation (WUO), which was the armed division affiliated to the SDS, the Marist-Leninist Progressive Labour Party, and factions dedicated to the violent revolution, which were created through the divisions and reorganisations of the movements, were all organizations that deviated from the mainstream political narrative. In terms of short-term goals, the 1960s movement did not fail. The Vietnam War is not only considered to be an outright military failure of American hegemony, but it is also a political and moral failure as well. The radicalization of the anti-War movement with its stance against U.S. imperialism, determined the fate of the radical movements. They were ultimately all mercilessly suppressed, dismantled, divided, and eventually marginalized, but their power is still unforgettable. Perhaps if we can look back at their fate from the place where they migrated to, instead of from within the US, we might be able to find different meanings.

Apart from "exodus", "bringing back" and “exportation”, it is necessary to emphasize the historical context of the third world's own political practices and the endogenous roots of their struggles. There is a mutual oscillation between these various struggles and they inspire political struggles in other regions. However, “the Third World might not need to acquire its historical and political subjectivity through the 'discovery'

of Western intellectual elites. By expanding the horizons to broader historical periods and geopolitical spaces, we can discover that the demonstrations of the Tunisian student, that shocked Foucault, should be understood in the context of a long anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle of the Third World."<sup>10</sup> For example, the student strikes in Tunisia in March 1968 and the broader social protests in which miners participated, the roots of which included multiple historical lineages, such as *le Groupe D'études et d'action socialiste en Tunisie* (the Tunisian Left-wing Student Organization Socialist Research and Practice Group), *Parti socialiste destourien* (the Tunisian Socialist Constitutional Liberal Party), the Trotskyist Gilbert Naccache, the Tunisian Communist Party, and the Arab nationalist movement. "The founder of the 1967 protests, Ben Genette, was a student at Al-Zaytuna. During the Bourguiba period, the Grand Mosque of Zaytuna and its subordinate, University of Zaytuna, were considered to be the home base of Islamic fundamentalism in Tunisia. These thoughts seem to be irrelevant, but in the context of the Middle East, the common political demands of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism have become the key driving force for connecting these trends of thought and establishing their 'pan-left' colour. Therefore, rather than seeing these movements as part of the global student 'radical movement', it is more appropriate to understand them in a broader and longer genealogy of anti-imperialist, anti-colonial movements of the Third World. "<sup>11</sup> In order to explain the close relationship and mutual support between China and the Third World National Liberation Movement, the global radical anti-imperialist movement has to be placed in the framework of the entire twentieth century, and not just of 1960s.

For Chinese young intellectuals in 2018, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of '68, it is once again clear that the relationship between the anti-imperialist movement in the third world and the European and American student movements has multiple meanings. First of all, salvaging the complex relationship between 1968 and the Third World Movement and the violent revolution serves to understand anew the 20th century Chinese revolution and its international connections. 1968 is not an event distant in the horizon, but a process closely related to China itself. The Korean War, the Bandung Conference, the Vietnam War, the Palestinian issue, and the Third World political line marked by the aid in construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway and China's return to the United Nations with the support of third world countries constitutes an important context for understanding the history of the People's Republic of China. In the aftermath of 1989, this overall context gradually

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10Yin Zhiguang 2018.

11 Ibid.

disappeared. As early as 2015, the commemoration of the Bandung conference began to break away from the indifferent attitude in the past. The issue of the third world internationalism has once again entered the public sphere.

Secondly, the rupture, failure, and continuation of 1968 raises a series of questions that need to be addressed. As Liu Ye said in his article: "1968 is a dazzling climax, and also a watershed." "In 1968 and before, participants in the movement only needed to have a relatively loose and ambiguous identification to form an alliance. The then political circumstance did not require people to make clear choices and political decisions." However, after 1968, should the dramatic conflict be translated into a seemingly trivial but fundamental mobilization and solidarity of the masses? Is it possible to refrain from the illusion of absolute freedom and seek the dialectical unity of the individual and the collective?"<sup>12</sup> These questions did not get clear answers with the different choices of the post-1968 moment, but are instead now reemerging in new ways with the contemporary youth and their movements.

Thirdly, along with the rapid growth of China's economy and the persistence of the global economic crisis, China is re-entering Africa and Latin America, and its Asian neighbours, under new impetus, in the form of the "Belt and Road" initiative. This is a completely different attitude from the China of the 1960s and 1970s. China's re-entrance is surrounded by accusations and criticisms of it being "neo-colonialist" and the "neo-imperialist" from the western world. The African nations also have mixed feelings about the return of China. They welcome and criticised China's move. They hold expectations as well as concerns. In such a complex context, how should we understand the international role of China? How can we reconstruct the discourse of the third world internationalism? How should we analyse the situation, challenges to the status quo of the third world countries after the national liberation movement? These are all bound to become important issues which the new generation of Chinese will have to face. China's role in Africa depends not only on how China handles it, but also on how we assess the achievements and failures of the national liberation movement, how we explore the role of China in these regions and its differences to the European and American forms of colonialism and imperialism in Africa, as well as the new role of China within the global capitalist system. Although young commentators, in their examination of the events of '68 did not directly answer these questions, their efforts to rebuild third world internationalism and its position in the history of the 20th century are not only relevant, but also bound to influence the understanding of the historical role of China and

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12 Liu Ye 2018.



the orientation of the youth movement for the new generation. Therefore, in the foreseeable future, the reflection and activism of Chinese youth will necessarily also include the interconnection between “exodus”, “bringing back” and “convergence”. However, the connotations of these terms will be very different from that of 1968.

Why is it that the movements of the Western world, the Asia-Africa and Latin America, and the Soviet Union, have different appeals and different historical contexts, but these different historical backgrounds and movement can nevertheless interact and merge at this very historical juncture? The "Cultural Revolution" in mainland China, the Safeguarding Diaoyudao Island Movement in Taiwan, the rebellious movements against colonialism in Hong Kong and Macao — why are these separate movements capable of echoing one another and connecting with each other? What are the foremost fundamental conditions for this? The younger generation transcended their national and ethnic identities, standing firmly against imperialism. They gave birth to a real progressive politics in a historical moment that connected different regions. Without the history of imperialism, we might not be able to comprehend the internal logic resonating in these events, making them to connect with each other.

There is another basic condition for the interconnection of such different movements, namely the existence of the socialist state system after the October Revolution, especially after the Second World War. First of all, it is difficult to account for the rise of the post-war Third World national liberation movement and new forms of internationalism, without first taking into consideration the emergence of the Soviet Union, the Eastern European system, and China. Secondly, within the socialist camp, between the Communist Parties of various countries, differences in political lines and dramatic theoretical debates were made manifest since the 1950s, The Poznań 1956 protests, the Hungarian crisis and the Prague Spring are the landmark events in which political differences have developed into interstate conflicts. There were differences in political lines and ideological debates between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, between China and the Soviet Union, between China and Yugoslavia, between China and the Western European Communist Party, between European Communist Parties, and within Communist Parties across the world. Therefore, the global movement that reached its climax in 1968 actually had to answer the questions of how we are to understand the socialist state, the socialist system, and even the October Revolution. The '68 movements had to choose between the Chinese and the Soviet line and had to respond to the socialist countries, or the theoretical divisions within the Communist Party. The new left wing that matured in the 1968 movement came to the stage in the right way and drew the bow in the

direction of the Right and in the direction of the Left. To the Right: against the capitalism and imperialism; to the Left: towards the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. But with the disintegration of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the new left has also weakened as an ideological movement, and intellectuals and youth culture have gradually fallen into a long sense of powerlessness and melancholy. In other words, after 1968, the power of the new left (including the liberal left) originated from its critique of the socialist system and the Communist Party's organizational capability, while simultaneously relying on the structural existence of this power. In my opinion, this is one of the "heaviest parts" of the motivation that prompted the new generation to reclaim anew the events of 1968.

**The Chinese 1960s and the Global 1968**

This touches upon the third aspect mentioned at the beginning of the article, namely the Cultural Revolution, which has been time and again critically questioned, but has never managed to appear directly on stage. The "Cultural Revolution" is internal to the “long 1968”, but it is also very unique that has not been adequately examined and given a comprehensive answer. Looking back at 1968, the commentators talked mostly about the interaction between the Parisian students and “Cultural Revolution” propaganda, especially the thought of Mao Zedong, Red China’s support for the African American and the student movements, the Sino-Soviet debate, the critique from the student movement against the French and Italian Communist Parties, and China’s contribution to internationalism in the third world. On an international level, commentators also pay attention to the Chinese military involvement in the Vietnam War from June 1965 to January 1972 when the Vietnam-US Paris Peace Accords was signed. During this period, China dispatched a total number of 320,000 soldiers to the North Vietnam, carrying out missions such as air defence, military combat, engineering, minesweeping, and logistic support. In 1965, China also began to conduct geological survey in order to prepare for the construction of the TAZARA Railway. From October 1970 to July 1976, China, in cooperation with Tanzania and Zambia, completed the construction of an 1860.5 kilometres long railway. From supporting Vietnam against the US invasion, to the construction of the TAZARA Railway, China could only perform these missions for being a socialist country led by a communist party. No other organisations would be able to achieve these goals. The Soviet support of the third world national independence movement, including its large-scale aid to the industrialisation of China in the 1950s should not face total oblivion just because of its chauvinist tendency and internal arbitrary actions. When examining 1968, how could we praise internationalism abstractly without acknowledging the role played by political parties and states? How could we ignore the political pretext before the formation of



the third world internationalism? How could we only focus on researching the postcolonial condition and categorically negate the significance of sovereignty and state? How could we, after all, face national liberation, the most important achievement of the third world national independence movement, but without actually acknowledging it? It is without questions that hegemony, intervention, and imperialist domination continue to have their ways in today's world. It was not very long ago when external powers could monopolise national resources and wantonly change demographic structure in the third world nations simply through installing puppet governments. However, thanks to the achievement of the national independence movement, the era is now long gone.

The political events of 1968 correctly exposed the shortcomings of the socialist system in practice as well as in theory. A shortcoming that functions as the starting point, and a mutual echo between the various social movements in Europe, the United States, and of course the "Cultural Revolution". During this period, China experimented with nearly almost all possible political options. Not only criticism and resistance to imperialism and capitalism, but also criticism and resistance to the Soviet Union. Not only the rebellious movement of students and the experience of establishing various organizations, but there was also a denial of the new bureaucratic system under the leadership of the Communist Party. There was not only "cultural battles" but also "armed battles". However, these attempts failed one by one. Due to the violent elements in the movement, the protracted reaction to this movement provided reasons for the depoliticization process in the next few decades. In fact, the denial of the "Cultural Revolution" was not only a process after 1976-1979, but was also already hidden within the "Cultural Revolution" itself. Under the conditions of continuous armed struggles and chaotic social order in some areas, in August 1968, Yao Wen Yuan published the slogan "The working class must lead everything" in the *Red Flag* magazine. Since then, the workers' propaganda team successively stationed in educational, as well as other institutions. Yao's slogan directly refers to class, rather than the political party, as the subject of leadership. This attention to class demonstrated the "Cultural Revolution's" awareness that the political party had transformed from a majority into a minority. However, since the power of the mass movement was already declining, the actual role and influence of this radical slogan itself has been very limited.

Since the beginning of 1968, the rebel movement transitioned and developed a revolutionary committee centred around the idea of the "three-in-one" of the heads of mass organizations, namely: local garrison leaders, leading cadres of party, and government organs. The highest authority figure within the revolutionary committee was not a

rebel, but the leading cadre who played a "core and backbone role" in the organization and a military representative who played a "significant role". Within the 28 provinces and cities in the country, with the exception of seven provinces and cities such as Shanghai, Heilongjiang, Shanxi, Shandong, Beijing, Hebei, and Shaanxi, the first leaders of other provinces and cities were all from the military. The rebels were ebbed away from positions of authority and centres of power. In order to solve the problem of urban unemployment and address the fast growth of the population, under the banner of "taking the road of the integration of workers and peasants", the large scale Down to the Countryside Movement was launched nationwide. All of this also indicates that the rebel movement that began in 1966, in China, was at the time heading towards a turning point. Therefore, the focus on 1968 in Europe and the United States also needs to shift to incorporate China's own point of view of these events and social changes, especially the waning of the "Cultural Revolution".

In Europe and the United States, there are very few scholars and intellectuals who regard the "Cultural Revolution" as an intrinsic or even as a key element of the revolts of 1968, but the failure of the "Cultural Revolution" lies in their own reflections on 1968. The denial of the radical "great democracy" or the mass movement is but one of the most mainstream, ideological attitudes, and a deeper reflection will touch upon the limitations of the movement, involving concepts such as classes, political parties, and states. After the "Cultural Revolution", the suspicion, reflection and criticism of the sovereign form of states in the framework of the socialist states based on the expansion of the class struggle, the violence of mass movements, the bureaucratization of revolutionary parties, the radical European left gradually performed a series of theoretical replacements. The concept of the multitude replaced class, political organization replaced party, the politics of equality replaced class struggle, the politics of the recognition and multiculturalism replaced the liberation movement, the concept of the global south replaced the third world, practice oriented socialism, or workers countries replaced the communist hypothesis, cosmopolitanism replaced the people liberating internationalism... Yes, it is not possible nor necessary to repeat the strategies and ways of 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, global capitalism has absorbed almost all of these subtle critiques and practices and has managed to turn them into a driving force for its self-renewal. The aforementioned theoretical replacement also cannot change the weakened state that the contemporary Western Left now finds itself in. The radical theoretical position is linked with depression and loneliness, not to mention that this exploration of the third world is reduced to the play of a small number of academic intellectuals.

Perhaps, based on this theoretical situation, we in 2018 China must adopt a retrospective view of 1968 which seeks to transcend the framework of the Parisian revolts and once again salvage the hardest, blood-soaked, broken pieces, and reconstruct the complete historical view of '68. In this act of retrospection, the "cultural revolution" serves only as a reference point for 1968. No one has exhaustively placed the Cultural Revolution directly within the historical map of 1968 and examined its prophecy for the future failures. If we say that the act of salvaging the historical significance of 1968 is to be found within a reflection on the events of '68 on a global scale, then the prevailing absence of the Cultural Revolution in these reflections, together with the failure of multiple political experiments, ensures that 1968 remains a very hard nut to crack. There is still much to be salvaged, and the work is still not complete. However, the efforts of a new generation to re-present the historical landscape in a broad and heterogeneous relation is generating multiple clues to the mystery of the 1968 story. The contemporary Chinese youth movement, while still quite small but nevertheless still unfolding, is undecided as to what name to adopt for itself. The youth movement does not know, what form it ought to take, or how to set periodic objectives and final goals, or how to establish the unity of intra-state and international political lines. In this sense, reflection and retrospection are the preconditions for the formation of a new politics.

In 2018, the revisiting of 1968 is a rejection of the myth of 1968 as the "last revolution". As Jiang Hongsen demonstrated to all in his speech, an advertisement of the art movement from the French May storm, the ATELIER POPULAIRE - "May 1968, the beginning of a protracted struggle."<sup>13</sup> The significance of revisiting the 1960s lies in reiterating this slogan, however the more pressing issue now is, where to start the new protracted struggle?

23<sup>rd</sup> September 2018, Göttingen  
Transalted by Katja Kolšek

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<sup>13</sup> Jiang Hongsen, the author's speech at the online seminar session on the 25th May, 2018 at 7pm, "The art movement Atelier Populaire in the May storm", published at the Wechat group *Artworking*, founded by Qu Yingzuo, professor at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts. <http://jiliuwang.net/archives/73963>

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# Storming Language

## Jean-Jacques Lecercle

**Abstract:** In order to describe the May events as an event in the strong sense (the sense of Badiou), the essay revisits de Certeau's interpretation in terms of *prise de parole*. The concept is developed through a number of theses and the analysis is applied to a *dazibao* on the walls of the English department in Nanterre.

**Keywords:** Badiou, counter-interpellation, *dazibao*, de Certeau, event, *prise de parole*, Saturnalia, storming language.

### 1. Event(s).

If, decade after decade, the bourgeoisie celebrate the May events of 68 in France, it is because they believe the episode is dead and may be safely buried.

Every tenth year they sing hosanna with renewed zest: Praised be the Lord, it was only an unfortunate incident and order has been restored. The revolution has a bad name, Marxism and its organisations are in the throes of death, all the students want is to take their degrees and make money, the trade unions are in irreversible decline (and the CFDT is now the herald of class collaboration), most of the actors of May have seen the light in their old age and turned renegades. And lo and behold, Cohn-Bendit is now one of us: he is an enthusiastic supporter of the neo-liberal policies of Macron. Alleluiah!

This, of course, is wishful thinking, or what the French call *la methode Coué* (if you are shivering in the blizzard, repeat "I am nice and warm" till the icicle at the tip of your nose melts): for whoever lived through those few weeks in 68, the conviction remains that something – something not only unusual but truly extra-ordinary – did happen. Not the dreamed of *grand soir* but a significant break in the routine of our ordinary lives, perhaps even something akin to a Badiou-type event, that rare historical occurrence that shatters a situation, demands a new language to express its radical novelty and spell the truth that emerges from it, and engages a process of subjectivation. Badiou himself ascribes the emergence of such an event not to the usual "three Mays" (the student revolt, the general strike, the libertarian impulse) but to a fourth, not clearly perceived at the time but which developed during the following decade: a change in the common language of political action, a new way of doing politics – unfortunately limited to a small group of Maoists, the most notorious of whom was Badiou himself.<sup>1</sup>

The celebratory obfuscation has somewhat blurred the exact nature of the event. Since I am no political leader and have no world-strategic vision of the import of the May events, I shall seek the truth that emerged at a more modest level, by following the intuition that if something did

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<sup>1</sup> A. Badiou, *On a raison de se révolter*, Paris : Fayard, 2018.

happen it was not an intimation of revolution, but a change in language, not devoid of social and political effects. In order to do this, I shall revisit one of the better analyses of the May events: Michel de Certeau's thesis that the May events were indeed a revolution, but a "symbolic revolution", an interpretation of the events that centres on the concept of *prise de parole*.

2. *Prise de parole*.

On the most superficial level, the events of May 68 are characterized by an abundance, often described as a "liberation", of speech: interminable palavers in *assemblées générales*, myriads of slogans, leaflets, pamphlets and manifestoes, innumerable short-lived journals, heated discussions with complete strangers on street corners and, of course, everywhere on the walls, in corridors or streets, those famous posters, *graffiti* and *dazibao* that are the most obvious cultural legacy of the events. No wonder de Certeau's reminiscences wax lyrical: "Something unheard of occurred: we started speaking".<sup>2</sup>

This, I am afraid, is rather trivial: any historical upheaval induces such proliferation of private and public speech, and Paris in 1789 already knew multitudes of deciduous newspapers, clubs of political debate and chanted slogans. The situation, by no means unheard of, deserves the ironic inversion of one of the best-known graffiti: "*Assez d'actes, des paroles!*" ("We want words, not deeds!").

But de Certeau's *prise de parole* is no buttonholing garrulousness, it is a concept, the determinations of which are tirelessly expounded in his political writings of the period. And it begins with the very name of the concept, which so far I have failed to translate.

For *prise de parole*, my dictionary rather tamely gives "speech". "*Il a pris la parole*" means, in ordinary parlance, "he made a speech" or "he joined the conversation", the latter version focusing, as does the French phrase, on the beginning of the process: he started to make a speech, his conversational turn having come. But beneath that innocuous irenic conversational cooperation, there may lurk something potentially more violent. The word "*prise*", meaning "capture", suggests that the conversational turn may not be patiently waited for but captured, even at the cost of interrupting the current speaker. "*Il a pris la parole*": he wasn't expected to speak, or not to speak at this juncture, but he did, against hierarchical order and polite conventions. He did not merely capture speech, he stormed it. For the native French speaker, and de Certeau explicitly plays on this, *la prise de parole* immediately suggests *la prise de la Bastille*, the storming of Bastille, which by historical convention marks the beginning of the French revolution. *Prise de parole*, therefore, ought to be rendered, rather than the tame "speech", as "storming speech, or language."

2 M. de Certeau, *La prise de parole*, Paris : Seuil, 1994, p. 41.

Let us look at de Certeau's exposition of the concept, which I shall sum up in a number of theses. The first thesis<sup>3</sup> concerns the object of *prise de parole*, what this storming of language achieves. It is, as the name suggests, a violent process, a rejection of established norms, of language and of behaviour, and a rejection of the placement the norms imply. In Althusserian terms, this is the moment when the subject, interpellated at her place in the social structure by ideology, violently rejects the interpellation, refuses the identity it imposes upon her and seeks to acquire autonomy by "occupying" established language even as the workers occupied their factories and the rebellious students the Sorbonne. This is a purely negative moment of rebellion – the moment, to use one of the keywords the movement introduced into common language, of *contestation*. This negative stance, the decision to deny interpellation, its placements, its identities, in other words the whole of the established situation, has its own "frailty", as de Certeau calls it, as *contestation* always threatens to be caught up in a spiral of rebellion and repression. But it also involves a positive posture: storming and occupying established language displaces the whole system, involves a general shift, a different use of received expressions, of common and garden turns of phrase.

The second thesis<sup>4</sup> describes the operation of such *prise de parole* under the concept of displacement. In Badiou's terms, the emergence of the rare historical event makes the language of the situation obsolete and anachronic. But obsolescence does not preclude survival: the subversion is not plain replacement or destruction of the old language, rather a shift within it. The same words have to be used, and the same syntax, only the general tone and the nuances of meaning are not the same – an apparently innocuous shift which, because it affects the whole of the established language, amounts to subversion. We are closer to Marx's idea of historical repetition (the French revolution is compelled to express its radical novelty in the old language of the Roman republic) than to Nikolai Marr's linguistic heresy (duly liquidated by Stalin in his intervention in the field of linguistics), according to which the proletarian revolution, because it introduces a new mode of production, involves a destruction of the current language and the invention of a radically new one. The displacement of *prise de parole*, therefore, is the linguistic incarnation of the inevitability of historical repetition: the new is phrased in the terms of the old, the voice of autonomy is heard through the old language of heteronomy. Yet, if a displacement there must be, something must have happened to the established language beyond repetition and survival: the radically new must have made itself felt. In other words,

3 Ibid., p. 44, 55.

4 Ibid., p. 52



the operation of this shift that affects the whole system remains to be described. That is the object of the third thesis.<sup>5</sup>

The name of the operation is inversion. Storming language involves taking language à *contre sens*, against its natural grain, forcing the usual words to mean what they cannot or will not mean. And this forcible inversion has consequences that go beyond language, as it involves an inversion of hierarchical positions, both in knowledge and authority. The hierarchies of boss and worker, of professor and student are suddenly inverted, as the authoritative or authoritarian voice has lost its authority. As de Certeau phrases it, “the site of knowledge moves from its subjects to its objects” (the phrase he uses for “move”, “*passer aux mains de*” again suggests a violent struggle, a position conquered in war).<sup>6</sup>The worker is no longer a recipient of orders, he no longer conforms to what Marx calls the real subsumption of labour to capital, as he takes charge of the organization of the factory; the student is no longer the mere recipient of knowledge distilled by academic authority, as she takes charge of the academic debate, thus asserting her autonomy as producer of knowledge.

At this stage, we can sum up the theory of *prise de parole* using the Deleuzian device of a systematic correlation of *langage* versus *parole*, the established form of expression, the language of the situation versus the autonomous speech of the no longer subservient:

| 1              | 2                   | 3          | 4                 | 5                       | 6            | 7                 |
|----------------|---------------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <i>langage</i> | institution         | domination | central discourse | representation          | conformity   | silent majority   |
| <i>parole</i>  | <i>contestation</i> | revolution | marginal speech   | autonomy of represented | lack or void | storming language |

Columns 1 to 3 are self-explanatory. Column 4 stresses that the discourse of *contestation* occurs at the margins of established language, not a replacement or destruction but a shift in tone, involving new meanings and new pragmatic relations of power (*rapports de force*) – a contamination from the margins rather than a downright displacement. Whereby (this is column 5) the represented, those whose speech is phrased only indirectly by their official representatives - members of parliament, trade union officials, professors whose students are *in statu pupillari* - acquire autonomous speech over and against the discourse of their representatives. Whereby again (this is column 6) they introduce a lack or void in the discourse of conformity, the established language of the situation. This void being contagious, “official” speech is recognized

.....  
5 Ibid., p. 34

6 Ibid.

as empty, always already devoid of meaning in spite of its apparent centrality, because phrased in predictable *langue de bois*, the wooden language of officialese. We understand the link between shifting tonality, speaking at the margin and voiding established language: the only possible language of autonomy is made up of the ironic graffiti (*Assez d’actes, des paroles!*) for which the Situationists were famous, or the *dazibao*, denouncing authority in the indignant language of the Marxist-Leninist - the very embodiment of the frailty of the purely negative posture in the storming of language, as this wooden language of rebellion merely parroted the wooden language of authority.

Column 7 is not explicitly present in de Certeau’s text, but I believe it is a welcome addition as it inscribes this so far abstract discussion of storming language in the field of political debate, where language is both caught in the class struggle and a central element of the struggle. If the liberation of speech that is the result of storming language is characteristic both of the revolting students and the striking workers, the opposing side, the resisting Gaullist power as representative of the bourgeoisie has coined, in imitation of America, the phrase *majorité silencieuse*, Nixon’s “silent majority” – the mute inglorious citizens who are supposed to oppose the storming of language in so far as it announces a possible storming of the political Bastille, threatening chaos. The phrase was used by de Gaulle and other right wing politicians as a powerful political weapon, in spite of its obvious paradoxical flavour: bourgeois politicians claim to be the voice of a majority that remains silent, and endlessly eff out, if I may say so, the ineffable. This voicing of the unvoiced expresses the struggle for the status quo, for the old situation in which public discourse is the privilege of authorised, because duly appointed, representatives, and mute acceptance the duty of the represented (once they have inserted a piece of paper into the ballot box). Column 7, therefore, insists on the materiality of the language practice, in so far as it has political and therefore social efficacy – the question of language, we are back with de Certeau, may be treated as central in a historical conjuncture dominated by what he calls a “symbolic revolution.”: for him the shift in the “values” inscribed in the language of the situation, on which a whole structure of power and communication was based, constitutes a revolution, a symbolic revolution that opens up potentialities of social change.

The notion of symbolic revolution involves a fourth thesis,<sup>7</sup> which might be called, taking careful account of its potential idealist overtones, the thesis of the centrality of language. For de Certeau, language lies at the centre of the revolutionary crisis provoked by the emergence of the event. For him, storming language, *prendre la parole*, means taking language seriously, *prendre la langage au sérieux* (and again, we note the

.....  
7 Ibid., p. 62.

presence of the word *prendre*: seriously storming language as well as taking it seriously). Language is not in the nature of a game, a neutral conventional code for purposes of communication: language as an instrument of communication is the basic bourgeois ideological concept of language. For language is part and parcel of the hierarchic social structures which it founds and on which it acts (by reproducing them, but also, potentially, in *prise de parole*, by subverting them). Language is both the field of struggle, the battlefield, and the weapon of the opposing parties, meaning the classes engaged in the class struggle, a weapon always more efficiently wielded by the dominant class (this is how the dominant class is also the hegemonic class). We are a long way from Stalin's irenic and interclassist (and fundamentally bourgeois) view of language as a means of communication. But language, even if the positions in the field are structurally unequal, *is* a field of struggle. The crisis provoked by the historical event is inseparably a social and a discursive crisis, expressing the need for a language that is no longer the language of the dominant class, the need for a change in hegemony. This need for a new language is the most manifest expression of the crisis, a symbolic revolution, an attempt at storming language, in order to allow the dominated their linguistic and social autonomy. *Prise de parole* is also, inseparably, *prise de pouvoir*: storming language as an indispensable element of seizing power, the power to organize autonomously, to subvert established hierarchies. In the words of de Certeau, "*vouloir se dire, c'est s'engager à faire l'histoire*"<sup>8</sup>: the will to express oneself autonomously (*se dire*) is an undertaking to "make history", to act in order to change the established situation.

Naturally, a strict Marxist would balk at the idealism involved in the concept of a symbolic revolution, of taking power through storming language: the Winter Palace, and not merely language, must be stormed if the revolution is to come about. But such a position would not enable us to understand the specificity of the May events. As a political revolution, they were a distinct failure: no storming of the Elysée palace, but a trip to Germany by general de Gaulle to make sure of the support of the army. From a strict Marxist position, the May events were a revolutionary crisis, but one that did not occur in a revolutionary situation, famously defined by Lenin in *The Infantile Malady of Communism* (those above are no longer able to rule, those below are no longer willing to be ruled – the second condition may, with certain reservations, have applied, but certainly not the first). But an event in the strong sense the May events were, a storming of language with lasting consequences, in other words the emergence of a truth. In order to perceive the lineaments of this truth, we must start more modestly, not from a broad historical analysis, but from the analysis of a concrete text.

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8 Ibid., p. 67.

### 3. Dazibao.

In his account of the symbolic revolution of May, de Certeau's historical point of comparison is the emergence of the concept of *négritude*, the French equivalent of black consciousness: "A few years back, *négritude* was the mark of a change in the 'established text', which however it failed to reshuffle and replace."<sup>9</sup> This form of black consciousness had two striking characteristics: it was literary before it was political (both Aimé Césaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor were considerable poets before they were successful political leaders) and its mode of expression was the French language, the language of the colonizer (both were *French* poets, besides being egregious products of the French educational system). Hence both the limits of the enterprise ("a poor few words...") and its importance ("...but already a crucial displacement")<sup>10</sup>: its very limits, says de Certeau, are a symptom of the poverty of Western culture, able only to recuperate the emergent new language, thus trying to stifle it and being unaware of its potential, as *négritude* was a crucial step towards the development of black consciousness, both political and literary.

I believe that this dialectics of limitation (what de Certeau calls the frailty of the negative posture of storming established language) and positive developments (a "crucial displacement" of the said established language) gives us an inkling of the truth that was born of the May events. Let me, therefore, produce a text. And since the university of Nanterre was the mythical place of birth of the whole movement, and since the *prise de parole* took the privileged form of *graffiti* and *dazibao*, let us look at a text written of the walls of the English department in Nanterre:

*Le langage étant le mode de relation sociale des individus qui s'est formé sous la contrainte :*  
*1° de l'aliénation naturelle,*  
*2° de l'aliénation proprement sociale,*  
*il n'est aucune raison de ne pas le faire péter au niveau de la répression grammaticale ; depuis que Dada a dicté son foin, la littérature n'a fait que le récupérer.*<sup>11</sup>

The first thing to note about this text is the problem its translation poses: I have no difficulty in translating it, but only up to the last sentence, because there the meaning of the French becomes uncertain. Here is, however, my attempt:

Language being the mode of social relation formed under the constraint of:

.....  
9 Ibid., p. 66.

10 Ibid.

11 J. Besançon, *Mat 68. Les murs ont la parole*, Paris : T'chou, 2007 (1968), p. 104.

1° material alienation,  
2° strictly social alienation,  
there is no reason not to blow it up at the level of grammatical repression; since Dada dictated its fuss, all literature has done is to recuperate it.

The difficulty lies in the sudden change in register: the academic language of the first half of the text, characterized by standard French, correct grammar and exact punctuation, suddenly allows a “vulgar” slang word, “*péter*”, literally, “fart”, the phrase “*faire péter*” meaning, through metaphor, “to blow up” (a translation which cancels the linguistic violence, the vulgarity, of the metaphor). And this difficulty is compounded by the appearance of a mysterious phrase, a novel metaphor, the meaning of which is not fixed in established language, “*dicter son foin*”, literally, “dictate its hay”, which is nonsense, except that in slang the phrase “*faire un foin*” means “make a fuss” – hence what seems to be either a brilliant poetic metaphor or an unfortunate mixed metaphor “dictate its fuss”, the meaning of which has to be constructed (Dada did indeed make a fuss, and their tendency to proceed by manifestoes, like most *avant-garde* groups, may be captured under the metaphor of “dictation”).

De Certeau claims that the storming of language means taking language seriously. I therefore propose to take this text seriously, not as a mere joke or provocation (the *graffiti* of the Situationists concealed serious subversion under their jocular provocation). And in an attempted self-parody of the academic seriousness of my own discourse, I shall deal with this text in eight points.

1. The rhetorical characteristic of the text is, as we saw, *bathos*, the sudden fall in register, from elevated academic language (with all the seriousness of established language in its noble academic garb) to downright vulgarity, a topsy-turviness that is meant to deflate the inflation of academic discourse. In other words, the text does what it says: it “blows up” the academic seriousness with which it begins, it violently rejects its “grammatical repression.” As de Certeau says, this storming of established language involves a change in tone; or again, to use another theoretical language, such deliberate “agrammaticality” is, according to Deleuze, the mark of a style.

2. The text, therefore, is characterized by a form of style, of poetic invention, manifested in its rhetorical agility and its novel (mixed) metaphor. Storming established academic language involves a poetic *coup de force*, forcing it to say what it cannot or will not say, by mixing not only registers but also genres of discourse, in this case the poetic with the scientific (or what seeks to pass for it). Hence the third point.

3. So far, I have insisted on the critical aspect of the text, as pastiche or parody of an academic text. But if we take the text seriously,

and decide that it takes language seriously, we must realize that there is seriousness in the parodic displacement. This is shown by the presence of the words “alienation” and “repression”, as typical words of the language of the events. “Alienation” was central to the critical version of Marxism given by Henri Lefebvre, who at the time taught sociology at Nanterre, and “repression” is the inevitable antonym of “*contestation*”.

4. Taken therefore as a “serious” text, our text is characterized by the clash of two intertexts. The first half speaks the language of social science (a form of linguistics) or of the philosophy of language, the second the language of the literary avant-garde. And the second language is used to subvert the first and make a critical point that goes way beyond parody.

5. But there is another potential clash, within the language of literary criticism itself. The recourse to Dada as symbol of the avant-garde is an implicit attack on the literary canon, which at the time was the main object of learning in the study of English: Dada, not Shakespeare, and Dada not as an object of academic knowledge, not as recuperated by an enlarged and liberal canon, but as a constant vector of literary subversion.

6. Let us go back to the first half of the text, and let us take it not as a parody of a statement but as a statement in its own right. What we have is the sketch of a philosophy of language, which contains a few, as yet largely implicit, theses. The text does imply (a) that language is a social process (not an instrument of communication but “a mode of social relation”); (b) that language is materially constrained (the reference to “natural alienation” involves a theory of the origin of language in the relations between humankind and nature, perhaps Engels’s conception of the common origin of language and work); (c) that consequently language, being a social practice, cannot be an individual competence: our text in practice opposes the methodological individualism that characterizes mainstream linguistics. However, we haven’t so far taken into account the keyword, “alienation”, so that there is a fourth implicit thesis: (d) language is a form of alienation, in other words the constraints of the grammatical system oppress the free expression of the individual speaker, which is only regained in avant-garde subversion. Or again, linguistic interpellation is a form of non-empowering constraint. The text does play on the word constraint: on the one hand, grammatical rules impose linguistic constraints on expression (“you must say this, you may not say that), and such constraints, to speak like Judith Butler, are “empowering” (they enable the individual speaker to go from etymological infancy to fluency); but, on the other hand, the text says “under the constraint”, thereby adopting the political language of oppression and of the necessary struggle against it, a violent struggle that will “blow up” grammatical and social constraints, which are far from empowering, as they impose domination and produce hierarchies.

7. We now understand the articulation between the two halves of the text, its *pars construens* and its *pars destruens*: the text moves from imposed interpellation, meaning subjection to established knowledge and language to counter-interpellation, the blowing up of grammatical repression, hence the opposition of avant-garde and canon, of style and grammatical system.

8. As a consequence, the text shows us that de Certeau's "crucial displacement" of established language is fourfold: (i) an anti-grammatical and stylistic displacement of register, which introduces impossible vulgar words into innocuous academic language; (ii) a counter-interpellative displacement of established discourse through the ironic disrespect of parody or pastiche; (iii) a counter-interpellative displacement of academic structure, as avant-garde replaces canon and "literature" appears as an academic fetish – both (ii) and (iii) embody de Certeau's thesis of inversion (the subject of knowledge, the professor, becomes the object not of knowledge but of derision); (iv) a straightforward theoretical-scientific displacement, which suggests another philosophy of language, phrased in broad Marxist terms (treated as marginal by academic consensus but central to the student and worker revolt), embodied in the concept of alienation and breaking with the mainstream instrumentalist and methodologically individualist conception of language. This fourfold displacement may indeed be called a storming of language.

4; Symbolic revolution, or Saturnalia?

I take this text as typical of the storming of language that characterizes the May events. May 68 is a moment of collective counter-interpellation, when all the places assigned by the hierarchical structure of language, which reflects the hierarchical structure of society, are subjected to *contestation* through inversion. The actors of the May events did not only occupy their factories and universities, they also occupied language. This raises two questions: what is the relationship between linguistic structure and social structure? And was this occupation of language merely temporary, for the duration of the events, a modern linguistic version of the Roman Saturnalia (when, for a few days, all hierarchies were jocularly inverted and the slaves – within limits – became temporary masters), or did it have more lasting consequences?

In a text written with Luce Giard, de Certeau evokes a form of homology between language and society: "Even as a natural language is a sedimentation of phonetic, syntactic, lexical and phrastic heirlooms, articulated in fragile and temporary equilibrium, the life of a culture and a society is made up of a constant circulation of realities, representations and memories: both their present and their future depend on an

archeology of gestures, objects, words, images, of forms and symbols."<sup>12</sup>

Although there is no direction of the causal relationship implied here (is it language that reflects culture and society, or the reverse?) this could be an idealist position, of the Laclau and Mouffe type, whereby society is a fundamentally discursive reality. But we needn't go that way (and de Certeau's own position is immaterial here): we could take this as a materialist statement of the material efficacy of language, as part of social reality (words are real, as are objects and gestures). If language and work have a common origin as human practices, a co-evolution of language and society (expressed in the concept of culture) is in order, and the symbolic revolution is also, inextricably, a social revolution.

We understand why the May events could be interpreted as a form of Saturnalia: the question of power was not seriously raised, and the return to order, with the election of an even more right wing parliament, soon occurred. The fragility of the displacement was manifest in the repetition of former revolutionary situation in symbolic gestures and language (the language of the October revolution, the barricades of 1848 and the Paris Commune). Factories and universities were occupied, but not the centres of political power, so that the occupation of language and *prise de parole* may themselves be treated as temporary, and the symbolic order was soon restored.

But there was more to the events than this Saturnalia: a lasting legacy of struggles on the shop floor, of political struggles, and a host of instances of *prise de paroles* in innumerable committees of prisoners, soldiers and even catholic priests, against the nuclear energy industry or the male chauvinism that plagued even revolutionary groups: feminist and ecological struggles are notoriously the heirs of the May events, even if they did not play a significant part in them.

As an illustration of this, let us focus on a more modest instance, and envisage the consequences of the linguistic displacement operated by our *dazibao* on English studies and on universities in general. Before the May events an English degree was based on magisterial lectures, final exams, and a restricted curriculum, the same in all French universities, based on the study of the canon of English literature and the practice of translation. After May, after the temporary inversion of hierarchies and values that the student movement imposed, lectures were marginalized, the teaching and assessment mostly took place in tutorials (the brand new university of Vincennes was the embodiment of such change), final exams were replaced by continuous assessment and there was an explosion of the texts and subjects taught, and a range of new subjects (linguistics, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, translation studies, etc.) were included in the curriculum. An exhausted academic structure was given a brand new life and English studies was a fertile field of

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12 Ibid., p. 211 ;



knowledge again. Fifty years later, English departments are still organized according to this structure, even if it is nearing exhaustion. I think this may be generalized to all university departments and to society in general. Fifty years on, the bourgeoisie is still trying to cancel the effects of the May events, and its *prise de parole* is still what animates our current struggle for emancipation.

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# Making Subjection Visible: The Materialist Effects of 1968

## Warren Montag

**Abstract:** One of the most important theoretical effects of the global revolt of 1968 was that everything about it, from where revolts occurred, who participated and who stood aside from or opposed them, to the nature of their demands and objectives, called into question the model of base and superstructure. These revolts did so not by rejecting Marxism (as would happen in the eighties and nineties) but by confronting it with the evidence provided by the experiments undertaken by mass revolutionary movements. It became clear that treating the phenomena assigned to the superstructure as somehow less real in their existence and effects than the relations and means of production led to a series of political errors and failures, often summed up in a single word: economism. To regard the many forms of racism (including Islamophobia) as a matter of attitudes, beliefs and intellectual prejudices that depend on economic relations and will necessarily change as they change, and to ask those whose subjection is coextensive with their racialization to set aside their struggles in the name of the universal are disastrous politically as well as theoretically. Only by understanding the material existence of every form of subjection and the necessity of confronting this materiality directly can we assemble a force powerful enough to bring about real change.

**Key Words:** ideology, Marxism, racism, colonialism

*Cours camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi.* No slogan so effectively captured the sense of eschatological, if not messianic, time that characterized the lived experience of 1968, not only, or even primarily, in France but across the globe, from Vietnam to Czechoslovakia to Mexico. The sequence of social and political struggles, some of which, already existing, suddenly intensified, while others emerged without warning as full blown crises, and thus a sequence without any clear point of origin or end, seemed miraculous enough to herald the imminent arrival of the new. Now, fifty years later, it appears that their significance for us lies in the fact that the limits and outright failures of the combined assault on the international order contributed in significant ways to the making of the catastrophe of our historical present. But we cannot allow the defeats and impasses these movements ultimately encountered to obscure what were once called the “theoretical acquisitions” of 1968. By this I mean not simply the new concepts and methods that the power of its movements made possible, but also the irrefutable critiques of the existing ideas, including the critiques from which new ideas have yet to come, that emerged from the developments and struggles in both theory and practice.

There should be nothing surprising in the fact that 1968 marked an increase in the power of thought, bringing about, to use Foucault’s

expression, an “immense and proliferating criticability of things.”<sup>1</sup> Spinoza, whose philosophy, despite the fact that it was three centuries old, can be identified as one of the discoveries of 1968, argued that “whatsoever increases or diminishes, assists or checks, the power of activity of our body, the idea of the said thing increases or diminishes, assists or checks the power of thought of our mind” (*Ethics* III, Prop. 11). The millions around the world whose struggles, precisely in the diversity of their methods and objectives, succeeded for a time in tipping the balance of forces in favor of the oppressed and exploited, created the conditions in which the reign of the obvious was interrupted and thought could break out of the ritualized repetition of words, phrases and concepts to say and conceive new things.

But what can be acquired, including theories and concepts, can be lost or forgotten. As we know only too well, the time of revolutionary struggle gave way to a generalized counterrevolution that was absolutely ruthless, whether it took the form of bloody repression (as in Latin America) or a gradual, nearly imperceptible, but implacable, re-imposition of discipline. With it, came a systematic forgetting of the thought of 1968 and its challenges to the existing theoretical order, resulting in a return to the ideas whose invalidation was itself forgotten. This led Althusser, eight years after May 68, and therefore at the threshold of a realization of the scale of the defeats (which sometimes masqueraded as victories) and the magnitude of their effects, to advance the idea that Marxism (with psychoanalysis) was a “conflictual” or “schismatic” science (to adopt Balibar’s translation of *scissionnelle*): “it not only provoked powerful resistances, attacks and critiques, but, more interestingly, attempts at *annexation* and *revision*.”<sup>2</sup> (225-226). Among the attacks on Marxism the most effective began from the outside but completed their work only from within, by occupying its conceptual space and appropriating its concepts in order to modify their meaning or systematically block their development.

I want to focus on one such concept, that is, a concept that initially allowed Marxism to separate from the Hegelian and Feuerbachian background, but that subsequently became an obstacle to its further development: the concept or “metaphor” of base (or “infrastructure”) and superstructure. Throughout his work, Althusser cited the survival of this motif (beyond its inaugural moment) as the source of repeated errors and failures in the Socialist and Communist movements, the site of a gap or discrepancy in Marxist theory, a stubborn, enduring idealist

1 Foucault 1997 7.

2 Althusser 1993, p. 226.

survival in the midst of a developing materialism. In a recent commentary on the (re)discovery of Spinoza in France and Italy that began in 1968 (referring to the work of Martial Gueroult, Gilles Deleuze and Alexandre Matheron, soon followed by Macherey, Balibar and Pierre-François Moreau), Antonio Negri argues that this new reading of Spinoza made the singularity of the thought of 68 intelligible. In particular, the movements that succeeded in shifting the balance of forces in the conjuncture of 1968 demonstrated that reliance on the base and superstructure model led to a predictable set of errors that included both “revisionism” and “reformism,” and their apparent opposite, the apocalyptic ultra-leftism that flourished in that period. Among the most important critiques of what we might call structuralist historicism (following Althusser’s demonstration in *Reading Capital* of the fundamental commonality between Hegel and Lévi-Strauss), Negri singles out the most Spinozist: Althusser and Foucault (in particular, *Discipline and Punish*) (\*). Although they operated on different, even “opposing fronts,” he argues, the combined effect of their work succeeded in “calling radically into question” the “analytic *dispositif* of ‘base and superstructure’ (*le dispositif analytique « structure-superstructure »*).”<sup>3</sup>

For Negri as for Althusser the struggles in 1968-69 in France and Italy (and for Althusser, the Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions as well) revealed that this *dispositif*, once considered the very form of Marxist materialism, was now a central obstacle to its continuing development. Referring, if obliquely, to the base/superstructure model, in “Contradiction and Overdetermination” (1962), Althusser argued that it is “the *exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic*, the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving the successive moments from the Idea, but from the Economy, by virtue of the same internal contradiction. This temptation results in the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive *modes of production*, that is, in the last analysis, the different production *techniques*. There are names for these temptations in the history of Marxism: *economism* and even *technologism*.”<sup>4</sup> Althusser cited precisely those texts by Lenin that stressed the impossibility of deciding strategy and tactics, that is, not simply when, but if, to push for revolutionary insurrection, on the basis of the maturity of capitalist development. In fact, the theoretical stakes of “Contradiction and Overdetermination” were no more important than the political intervention it represented for Althusser

Although Althusser nowhere mentions the struggle that shaped

3 Negri 2004 194

4 Althusser, Louis 1969, 108.

the leadership of the May revolt, the fact that he is writing in 1962, and therefore within months of the massacre of hundreds of Algerians in Paris in October of 1961 and the killing of nine PCF (Parti Communiste Français) militants in February 1962 at a mass demonstration (in which a number of his closest students participated), reminds us of the importance of Algerian revolution of 1954-1962 and the PCF's troubled relation to it. In fact, the economism that lay behind the party's failure to support the movement for Algerian independence and to lead the mobilization against French military intervention (until the war was drawing to a conclusion) laid the groundwork for the PCF's responses to the mass radicalization of workers and students in the period from 1968-1975. In 1958 (and thus four years into the war), the French Federation of the FLN published a devastating critique of the PCF ("*Le P. C. F. et la Révolution Algérienne*").<sup>5</sup> The FLN recalled the eighth of twenty-one conditions for membership in the Third International, a text that Lenin had reworked on the advice of Indian Marxist (then in exile in Mexico) M.N. Roy, and about which he was passionate:

"A particularly explicit and clear attitude on the question of the colonies and the oppressed peoples is necessary for the parties in those countries where the bourgeoisie possess colonies and oppress other nations. Every party which wishes to join the Communist International is obliged to expose the tricks and dodges of 'its' imperialists in the colonies, to support every colonial liberation movement not merely in words but in deeds, to demand the expulsion of their own imperialists from these colonies, to inculcate among the workers of their country a genuinely fraternal attitude to the working people of the colonies and the oppressed nations, and to carry on systematic agitation among the troops of their country against any oppression of the colonial peoples."

The FLN noted the discrepancy between this "particularly clear and explicit" statement, and the PCFs actual positions on Algerian self-determination. They located the beginning of the PCFs deviation in party leader Maurice Thorez's declaration in 1939 that Algeria was insufficiently developed to qualify as a nation, and remained "a nation in formation," and, as such, not yet eligible for independence. From this postulate, the PCF drew the conclusion that *une véritable Union française* would be far better for the Algerian people (especially that part of the people who were of French origin, whose presence in Algeria was cited by the PCF to deny the legitimacy of the fight for independence). Needless to say, the formulation "nation in formation" both conferred an essential role on the French colonial community and obscured the fact that the independent Algerian nation-state that existed in 1830 was conquered and dismantled by French military power (after fierce and lengthy resistance). The PCF's support for decolonization through absorption into France led Communist

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<sup>5</sup> FLN 1958, Vernant 1959..

parliamentary deputies in March 1956 to vote to grant special powers to the colonial administration to contain the revolt. Although the PCF leadership faced the increasing dissatisfaction of its student and youth membership (many of whom faced conscription), the change in their line came only after the sheer brutality of the French army following the establishment of military rule in Algiers under General Massu in 1957, and the torture and murder of Communists of European origin in Algeria (as well as the danger of a military coup at home).

Althusser, to my knowledge, said little publicly or privately about the Algerian revolution or the movement against the war, a fact that in no way set him apart from many other Communists of his generation. But his insistence that the denunciation of the party's positions as betrayals or mere opportunism was less important than identifying the theoretical bases of the PCF's errors, may help us see the relevance of his remarks on contemporary economism in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* to an explanation of what may be understood as a "dress rehearsal" of the party's failures in the revolt of 1968. Althusser repeatedly reminds us that the "poor man's Hegelianism" according to which the dialectic of history consists of a fixed linear sequence of stages of development "runs up against the implacable test of the facts: the revolution did not take place in nineteenth-century Britain nor in early twentieth-century Germany; it did not take place in the advanced countries at all, but elsewhere, in Russia, then later in China and Cuba, etc." Later, in his *Soutenance d'Amiens* (translated into English as "Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?"), an overview of his work up to 1975, Althusser returned to these questions which, he insisted, were decisive both politically and theoretically:

"How can we understand this displacement of the principal contradiction of imperialism onto the weakest link, and correlatively how can we understand the stagnation in the class struggle in those countries where it appeared to be triumphant, without the Leninist category of uneven development, which refers us back to the unevenness of contradiction and its over- and underdetermination? . . . If Marxism is capable of registering these facts, but not capable of understanding them, if it cannot grasp, in the strong sense, the "obvious" truth that the revolutions which we know are either premature or miscarried, but from within a theory which dispenses with the normative notions of prematurity and of miscarriage, that is, with a normative standpoint, then it is clear that something is wrong on the side of the dialectic, and that it remains caught up in a certain idea which has not yet definitively settled accounts with Hegel."<sup>6</sup>

There is little doubt that this last passage represents a subtle, but pointed, critique of the effects of the PCF's economism on the party's

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<sup>6</sup> Althusser 1976 186-187.



role in the events of May 68, one that is far more important than the crude and sometimes bizarre responses to critiques of the PCF from the left Althusser advanced in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. From the perspective outlined in the *Soutenance*, the demands and slogans advanced by the PCF suggest that it regarded the relative strength and orientation of the forces of revolt in the second half of May as a threat to the success of its electoral strategy of achieving a government of the left. Among students, it attempted to restrict the already existing mobilization with demands limited to reinstating the annual final exams and increasing financial aid (rather modestly). In the large factories, where the PCF played a dominant role among the workers through the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), the party leadership seemed determined to contain the growing revolt on the shop floor, attributing it to the influence of Trotskyist and Maoist “*groupuscules*.” The party leadership initially opposed the general strike that began in mid-May, and when the unanimous support of workers and the arguments of the CGT leadership compelled them to drop their opposition, tried to limit it to 48 hours. Further, the PCF refused to support demands, even if they clearly emanated from the workers themselves, that moved beyond wages, benefits and job security to address the question of power, discipline and control on the shop floor. The demands advanced by the other major industrial union, the CFDT for workers’ control and self-management were viewed with alarm by both the PCF and CGT leaderships as potentially leading to the formation of committees outside the factory. They declared that such “premature” actions would only endanger the ascendancy of a union of the left in parliament and hinder the coming of a government of the left that would create the conditions necessary to bring about the beginning of a transition to socialism. In contrast, those to the left of the PCF viewed this strategy as an attempt to demobilize the mass movements in order to channel their power into the electoral sphere of “legitimate” politics.

These were the realities that led to Althusser’s categorization of the PCF as an Ideological State Apparatus in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, a fact that perhaps necessitated, in a tactical sense, his shrill and unconvincing defense of its positions during the May events. The fact that Althusser would identify the PCF as even tending to the reproduction of the capitalist order created the possibility of a negative evaluation of the party’s actions in the face of the opening that May 1968 presented, even if Althusser himself did not develop such an evaluation. Just as importantly, however, the PCF emerges from his analysis as a kind of limit case whose heterogeneous and conflictual character necessarily resists and interferes with the process of the reproduction of the existing order even as it contributes to it. From Althusser’s position, the PCF was as unstable an ISA as could be imagined, its function, or functions, determined perhaps to a greater degree than any other by the

shift in the balance of power between class forces, given its specific composition. While the history congealed in the practical forms of its existence and in the discourse of its “spontaneous philosophy” tended to block any radicalization of the membership, when the struggles all around it breached the protective barriers the party set up around itself, the internal regime was disrupted and it became possible (within certain limits) to criticize its assumptions and presuppositions. The years just before and after 1968, precisely the Althusserian moment, were such a time of disruption.

For Althusser, however, the effects of economism and the evolutionary historicism of the “poor man’s Hegelianism,” were not only expressed in rightist errors; they could also take the opposite form of an ultraleft messianism, whose operating assumption was that capitalism (whether in a single nation or internationally) had not only matured, but was “overripe,” “rotting,” etc, and only the will to overthrow it (the “subjective factor,” as it was once called) was lacking. “In both cases [right and left economism], the dialectic functions in the old manner of pre-Marxist philosophy as a philosophical guarantee of the coming of revolution and of socialism.” In the “left” version materialism is “juggled away [*escamoté*—made to disappear or vanish, as in a magic trick],” displaced by the notion of consciousness, class consciousness, or will, while in the rightist version it is “reduced to the mechanical and abstract materiality of the productive forces.”<sup>7</sup> Earlier he had argued that “if there really are two distinct ways of identifying the superstructure with the infrastructure, or consciousness with the economy – one which sees in consciousness and politics only the economy, while the other imbues the economy with politics and consciousness, there is never more than one *structure* of identification at work – the structure of the problematic which, by reducing one to the other, *theoretically* identifies the levels present. It is this common structure of the problematic which is made visible when, rather than analysing the theoretical or political *intentions* of mechanicism-economism on the one hand and humanism-historicism on the other, we examine the internal logic of their conceptual mechanisms.”<sup>8</sup>

In these critiques of the base/superstructure *dispositif*, separated by an interval of ten years, Althusser argues that it necessarily presupposes the contemporaneity of its elements: all belong to and form functioning parts of a single present. The superstructure is the expression, even the consciousness, of the economic base, the medium in which it thinks about itself and is aware of itself. Even if the origins of certain elements lie in earlier modes of production, exhibiting different

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7 Ibid.

8 Althusser 1970 138–139.

relations of production, such elements are transformed and equipped with new identities, entirely assimilated into the new world by the causal power of its economic base. In fact, the concept of causality at work in this *dispositif*, requires that the superstructure, understood as an expression or emanation of its economic base and thereby deprived of any material existence, change with every change in the base, registering, as it were, every modification of the reality from which it flows. To explain the elements of the superstructure is to trace each of them back to their origins or to show the function each has arisen to fulfill. But Althusser's critique of this model is not simply a consequence of his general critique of the Hegelian notions of totality and contradiction. On the contrary, it might be argued that only the very practical problems of actual revolutions, specifically, the Russian and, even more importantly for him, the Chinese, made his critique of the idea of base and superstructure possible. It was he who wrote in 1962 that "there is no true critique which is not immanent and already real and material before it is conscious."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in "On the Cultural Revolution," published anonymously in 1966, but thought to have been written by Althusser, he explains that it is "absolutely necessary to give the socialist infrastructure, established by a political revolution, a corresponding—that is, socialist—ideological superstructure,"<sup>10</sup> There is a strangeness to this formulation, above all in Althusser's notion of "giving" a socialist economic base its superstructure, as if when a mode of production is destroyed, the superstructure that it supported collapses with it or simply vanishes, leaving a void to be filled by the gift, the place left empty when the previous mode of production was destroyed. Everything that follows in the essay undercuts any such notion and postulates exactly the opposite: the old superstructure remains fundamentally unchanged, and therefore at odds with the new relations of production. An ideological superstructure capable of simply disappearing would consist of disembodied and immaterial ideas, beliefs and prejudices. The stubborn resistance of the superstructure to change, however, is not subjective but objective, a result of its material existence. As such, to change a superstructure requires more than the power of critique or rational argumentation, but will take nothing less than "a mass ideological revolution."<sup>11</sup> Althusser's essay on the Cultural Revolution is full of hope that a party guided by the correct line can successfully lead the masses to carry out such a revolution. This position, however, without further qualification, would amount to the very historicism and voluntarism Althusser criticized both before and after the appearance of this essay. Fortunately, he will

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9 Althusser 1969 143.

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11 Althusser 2014 2.

complicate these statements in ways that will lead to an unprecedented theory of ideology, but only after he confronts the ultimate failure of the revolts of 1968 in France.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution, he writes, "is a matter of transforming the ideas, the ways of thinking, the ways of acting, the customs [mœurs] of the masses of the entire country [*les idées, les façons de penser, les façons d'agir, les mœurs des masses du pays*]."<sup>12</sup> According to convention, ideas can be changed through rational argument, persuasion (whether rational or irrational—appeals to prejudice, dogmas, etc.), even through conversion (sudden or gradual). Ways of acting, however, especially those organized in ritualized movements in which we participate without our knowledge or consent that Althusser calls customs or manners, offer, in their materiality, resistance to change. Here, as Spinoza noted, the body seems to act of its own accord, or at least without any intervention on the part of the mind. Some individuals, for example, "automatically" bow to others (or step aside to make way for them, etc.), while the others wait patiently to receive the physical expressions of respect that, with a certainty that cannot be questioned, they feel they are due. Worse, these rituals and prescribed acts (including speech acts organized into secular liturgies) make up the greater part of the life of an individual, and as such normally operate below the threshold of visibility; to change (let alone replace) them requires that they be rendered visible, and they become visible only when they are disrupted or violated. Subjection is the terminal point in a concatenation of unequal relations of force, many of which operate at the most micro level: from the issue of who can and cannot make eye contact, who may initiate a conversation or even greet another first, who must move aside to let another pass, who may use the informal mode of address to another adult, who may use the first name of another adult, to who can "speak out," occupy public spaces in large numbers, or even, in certain circumstances, who is able to disobey the law or party declarations.

For Althusser, the customs, rituals and liturgies that survive revolution are the incarnation of the forms of subjection that were in no way incidental to the old regime, but essential to its functioning. These are among the thousands of obstacles, invisible to the law and typically disregarded by revolutionary movements, that, according to Lenin in his polemic against Kautsky, prevent legal equality, including equality of right, from becoming real. Worse, even as these customs, gestures and postures resist the emergence of an equality that is exercised and not merely possessed, such practices endow the old forms of deference, respect and subordination with an appearance of obviousness; that is, they appear as norms of conduct beyond law and legislation, minute but no less necessary expressions of a universal

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12 Ibid. 8.

morality that no one thinks to question. Together, these innumerable modes of conduct, iteratively organized into rituals and customs whose combined force can, if left unchanged, push a society, even a society whose economic base has been transformed, backwards. At the same time, the enactment of customs and manners always takes the form of a confrontation between unequal powers; it is unstable and constantly exposed to sudden reversals or simply momentary resistance that provokes a corresponding attempt to overcome this resistance. It is on the basis of these innumerable confrontations that a revolution deepens or counter-revolution works toward a restoration of the previous property forms. As Althusser is quick to remind us at this point, the very idea of regression and counterrevolution, determined not externally, by war or conquest, but internally by the power of opposing forces within the superstructure itself, is unthinkable from the point of view of economism and evolutionism. The economic base must produce the infrastructure it requires; the leftover traditions and beliefs will wither away according to an irresistible necessity: “the ‘regression’ thesis would, finally, be impossible if Marxism were an economism. In an economist interpretation of Marxism, the abolition of the economic bases of social classes is all that is necessary to confirm the disappearance of social classes, and with them, class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat’s necessity, and therefore the class character of the Party and the State—in order, in other words, to be able to declare that the victory of socialism has been “definitively assured.”<sup>13</sup>

But among the forms of subjection, those that maintain the “superstructural” existence of distinct social classes even after they have ceased to exist at the level of the economic base, the essential precondition for a restoration of capitalism, are not the only forms it takes. Lenin in his time was compelled through a long process of debate and ideological struggle to recognize the decisive role played by the exercise of great Russian chauvinism against a hierarchically distributed collection of subjugated nationalities (and beyond the Soviet Union the role of racism in colonial empires and the Americas, well as the role of anti-Semitism in diverting the class struggle in Europe). The hatred, fear and contempt that these nationalities, to varying degrees, inspired, served an indispensable function in the reproduction, and at the time of the revolutions of 1917, the defense of the old order. The revolutionaries in these communities were well aware that the class struggle alone, even if it resulted in a change of the mode of production, would not automatically end their national and cultural subjection. No one, least of all Lenin, conceived of this subjection as a matter of beliefs, prejudices or ideas, except secondarily. The struggles of the oppressed nationalities had shown that everything about it existed in material forms, from the

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13 Ibid. 12.

micro-practices of everyday life, extra-legal forms of subordination and exclusion to exterminationist violence.

This is precisely the aspect of the ISAs essay that has proven nearly illegible to readers: the material existence of ideology in apparatuses, practices and rituals from which no idea can be dissociated, including the multiplicity of practices that combine to interpellate individuals as subjects, attributing subjectivity to them the better to insure their subjection. Ideology is no longer a matter of false consciousness or deception; indeed, even the “imaginary relation” of individuals to “their real conditions of existence” has nothing to do with belief or illusion. It consists of the material practices that render us free, responsible and thus punishable for the acts that we determined ourselves to perform, material practices that no critique can dissipate. Althusser forces his readers to understand thought in relation to the body, what it can and cannot do, where it can and cannot go. This is what Foucault develops into a theory of the disciplines, extending intelligibility to the microphysical supports for class domination. In this way both Althusser and Foucault provide the theoretical tools for the analysis of “the bitter tyranny of our everyday lives”<sup>14</sup> as well as of the previously unnoticed forms of resistance to it: one of the great themes of 1968. None of this renders the great battles fought in the street or the workplace any less important: it is they that are finally decisive. But to understand the conditions necessary to their emergence and to their victory, we must understand the terrain on which they take place.

Today, in the face of neo-fascist, racist and Islamophobic mobilizations internationally, the left in Europe and North American is increasingly captivated by the image of base and superstructure and the fictitious guarantees offered by the economism that follows from it. The forms of racial and national subjection, no matter how intertwined they are with the specific historical existence of many capitalist economies, according to the economism that flourishes today, will wither or vanish when the material conditions that brought them into being are changed. As expressions of these material conditions they do not possess a material existence themselves; indeed, they are minimized as feelings, attitudes and representations too insubstantial to furnish the basis for political struggle: they are just the pseudo-politics of identity. Such a critique of anti-racism is founded on the basis of an opposition between the reality of the means of production and the relations of production and the immaterial ideal in which it is expressed or represented. In addition to the assurances that the notions it invokes together offer, it provides as a “secondary gain” the opportunism that promises to unite the working class by denying or minimizing the real (as opposed to symbolic or formal) inequalities or even conflicts internal to it. A proponent of this

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14 Foucault, 1977 xiv.

view recently argued that the way to fight racism is to build the unions and address universal economic interests rather than quibble over the ethereal particularisms of race (as if racism has not been a historical barrier to building unions and a factor in their decline).<sup>15</sup>

To follow the thought of 1968 as expressed by Althusser (who never said a word about race) and Foucault (who did) is to acknowledge that the forms of subjection once regarded as the secondary product or by-product of economic relations are fully real and material and cannot change except through “a mass ideological revolution.” Improving the “material conditions” of workers confronting racism, cannot mean simply raising wages and improving working conditions (which would still leave Black and Latino workers in the US economically disadvantaged given the legacy of unemployment, underemployment and racially determined wages). Their material conditions include the constant threat of state violence, incarceration and surveillance and for Latinos the threat of extra-legal or quasi legal detention and deportation. Added to these, are the acts which cannot be dismissed as imaginary micro-aggressions: a high level of non-state violence and vigilante activity, de-facto exclusion from specific places and spaces, and the extra-legal and often violent policing of clothing and languages. To dematerialize and dismiss the forms of racism and Islamophobia as epiphenomenal or secondary in relation to class struggle is both to deny the complexity and unevenness of class struggle itself and to abandon the most oppressed sections of international working class at the moment they face the greatest threat since 1945.

Machiavelli noted that those who neglect what is done for what ought to be done, whether according to reason or morality, will come to ruin. The old world with its opposition between ideology understood as illusion and the material reality of the base, is a reduction (and therefore a denial) of what is done to what ought to be done. Its theoretical props are so many signposts on the way to ruin. 1968 points us in a different direction: not to a new world, but to the world we already inhabit, a world of irreducibly distinct struggles without guarantees, whose unity was never given in advance but achieved temporarily, conjuncturally, through a convergence of singular movements into a new, more powerful singularity. The errors that the far left fifty years ago imprecisely denounced as opportunism and betrayal were based on theoretical assumptions and foundations we have identified and can now oppose with clarity in both theory and practice. The difference between now and then is one of scale: the cost of the political errors fifty years ago was high enough, especially outside of Europe. The cost of the same errors today will be unimaginably higher.

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15 Sunkara 2018.

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# May 68': Spacing

## Jean-Luc Nancy

**Abstract:** This work takes into account the aftermath of the events of May 68. It starts from the premise that it was not neither a revolution, nor a crisis. It analyses the phenomena's which dominated the events 50 years ago and deals with the transformations caused by these events. At the end, it argues for the impossibility of projecting a 'new world'.

**Keywords:** new world, revolution, old age, time, impossibility

May 1968 was not a revolution, as we know, since no new order was imposed. It was not a crisis either because it did not declare itself as an inflammation of an organism, but rather as a stasis in a flux. It was not a revolt, which would then stumble **but not fall**. Neither a sedition, whose supporters would have clearly identified. There have been all these features, and even others. Two phenomena dominated this event: on one hand, the proven failure of the colonial wars, thus the end of all colonial legitimacy - and on the other hand, the proven failure of progressive trust in the developed countries (politics, morals, culture, nothing fundamentally made "progress" - apart from technique and profit).

There were therefore two sides of the same phenomenon: the civilization which thought to guide the world, whether under a democratic and spiritual banner or under a socialist and material crest, was temporarily suspended. She did not recognize herself anymore. She described herself as an "old world". The most eloquent slogan of the French 68' was: *Run, comrade, the old world is behind you!*

But this old world was not distinguishable from a new world. There was just no new world: nor the one who had worn the name of America, nor the one which the Soviet epithet had indicated. There was a breakdown of the two-headed machine that had both ruled and divided the world since 1945 or even since 1920, as we prefer to say. Fascisms had already arisen from a desire to project towards a new world, unheard of, which had already been experienced as old age or exhaustion. They had collapsed for presuming the strengths of their mythological old junk.

But old age and exhaustion did not affect the machine itself - out of its ideological heads. The sciences, the techniques, the calculations of production and profitability did not cease to progress. We were going to tackle major structural changes in energy sources and in production objectives, we were going through a computer mutation that nobody saw it coming while it was already maturing in laboratories of prospection.

It is normal not to see what matures in a shade which is too thick. The announcements of the future were, also, less frequent and less noisy than today's, we did not see this intensification of "communication" coming from all-around. There are, however, some spirits which are often more piercing than others. In '68, Pier Paolo Pasolini, who had a keen sense of the tragic, spoke about the prologue of his film *Theorema* of the coming advent of a generalized middle class.

This announcement was intimately linked to the whole narrative of the film: the irruption of a strange visitor who reveals to a bourgeois family the emptiness of its existence and "a new meaning" that yet "remains indecipherable".

It was a beautiful mutation of signs and meanings. It occurred through the emergence of one world overtaking the two elder ones. One and the same world which, however, instead of composing a unit, behaved rather like a gap. It opened without revealing any outline or depth of its opening. This was later to be called "globalization" according with an expression by Marshall McLuhan, whose major books had just appeared in 1967.

## 2

1968 inaugurated a new spacing between a world and itself. Between a globe and a cartography. The globe was going to be criss-crossed with connections, transports, transfers and transhumances, but it would be more and more difficult to draw lines representing countries and countries representing cultures.

None of us knew at the moment. On the contrary, we felt a new solidarity from San Francisco to Tokyo in both directions and passing through all over, even if it was clandestine. 1968 was also the year of Prague and a considerable shake-up of Eastern Europe, while in the West, the Beatles sang the year before that *All you need is love* premiered the first world TV transmission. In Tokyo, the year '68 had the most powerful student demonstrations in the world. It is also the year of the first annual special issue of the magazine *Jeune Afrique* which presents a state of its continent, as well as the year of the *Black Power Salute* at the Olympic Games in Mexico. We could multiply the signs, and this has already been done in more than one work.

In '68, a gap was opened which was no longer that of the distance between an ideal and a real, nor about the time projected to accomplish a project - at the same time, it was no longer solely that of an opposition of classes without being reduced either to a domination of races or to a confrontation of worldviews. It was rather the world where both perceive themselves as an unprecedented involution - a surprising self-relation that reveals itself unrecognizable. Tendentially this involution is separated from an evolution and of history's oscillations. It is space that transforms, expands and contracts, according to pressures and torsions that no instrument has yet grasped its characteristics.

Like in any relation to oneself, one discovers that his identity escapes him. He feels himself apart (*espacé*) from himself in himself. He acknowledges that he does not know himself and this recognition, by principle, can not produce knowledge. What had been known - or believed in a knowledge - of history, progress, mastery and finally "man" himself (as well as an "Idea", "Presence" or even "Being") is exposed

to the challenge of a non-knowledge that Sartre had already mobilized while retaining a purpose in the horizon of a humanism, as broad and revolutionary as it was. In '68, it is the horizon of all humanism - of all centrality or human finality - that dissipates. Foucault attests this same year in a March interview.

This is why '68 is also the point of practical, affective and symbolic crystallization of a philosophical displacement that has started for more than ten years and that it has continued to transform ever since. It is a displacement within philosophy itself - not considered solely in its academic discipline but in all the manifestations of thought, knowledge, the arts and morals. It is the displacement of the "world view" into an interrogation on the two terms of this expression: is it "seeing"? and is it a "world"?

This inner spacing to the major meanings of the entire conceptual apparatus of Western civilization is the deep reality of which '68 has been the gushing expression. We have no more visions of the world, we do not have people anymore, we have algorithms and procedures. And we are at the same time more and more pushed, not pressed towards the future of a project, but towards the impossibility to project of what can not fail to arrive. *Let's run, comrades!*

September 2018

Translated by Rodrigo Gonsalves

# One or Two Melancholias? 1917, 1968 and the Question of Organisation

Rodrigo Nunes

## Abstract:

This paper weaves together two recurring themes in philosophical and political debates of recent years: the idea, loosely inspired by Walter Benjamin, that describes melancholia as a dominant structure of feeling and desire among the left; and the suggestion that we are currently witnessing a revival of debates on the question of organisation. My argument identifies not one but two left-wing melancholias, the specular relation between which precludes the work of mourning and deprives us of the conditions for thinking organisation concretely. It follows that a real return to the question of organisation can only take place if we escape this melancholic mechanism; I propose that the very idea of organisation might offer us theoretical resources with which to do so.

**Keywords:** organisation; left-wing melancholy; melancholia; 1917; 1968; schismogenesis; real opposition; dyads

*We come to love our left passions and reasons, our analyses and convictions, more than we love the existing world that we presumably seek to alter with these terms or the future that would be aligned with them. ... What emerges is a Left that operates without either a deep and radical critique of the status quo or a compelling alternative to the existing order of things. But perhaps even more troubling, it is a Left that has become more attached to its impossibility than its potential fruitfulness, a Left that is most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure, a Left that is caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing.*

Wendy Brown

*The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald

It has been said for some years now that, after a long hiatus, what was once called the *Organisationsfrage* — the question of organisation — is in the process of making a comeback. Shortly after the mobilisations that rippled across the world in 2011, Alain Badiou wrote that, “however shining and memorable”, they ultimately arrived back at the “universal problems left in suspense in the previous period, in the centre of which

one finds the problem of politics par excellence, namely organisation”.<sup>1</sup> Regarding another revival recently promoted by Badiou (among others), that of the “idea of communism”, Peter Thomas has remarked that

the most widespread response [to it] ... has been the proposal that a coherent investigation of the meaning of communism today necessarily requires a reconsideration of the nature of political power, of political organization and, above all, of the party-form.<sup>2</sup>

Jodi Dean, herself a prominent advocate of a return to communism, the question of organisation and the party-form, has summarised the issue thus: “the idea of communism pushes toward the organization of communism”.<sup>3</sup> Mimmo Porcaro, in turn, has argued that the permanent crisis in which the world has lived since the financial meltdown of 2008 renders outdated every ““evolutionary vision”” of the overcoming of capitalism, and the need for moments of rupture raises the problem of “coordinated action, articulated in steps and phases”, and the kind of organisation that might be capable of that: “The crisis thus rings in, once again, *the hour of Lenin*.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, Frank Ruda has lamented a “paralysis of the collective and social imaginary” regarding “new ways of conceiving of emancipatory politics”, and insisted that the development of these “necessarily [has] to be linked to rethinking the question of organization.”<sup>5</sup>

This small sample indicates two broad traits of the discourse surrounding the idea of this return. First, its performativity: most of the time, rather than advance concrete proposals or suggest new ways of approaching the question of organisation, it argues for the importance of doing those things and takes the form of an injunction to do them. Second, a tendency to treat the question of organisation as coextensive with that of the party, thus making the return of one synonymous with the return of the other. Should we conclude then that this all there is to this return — either the reassertion of a historical form from the past or an appeal to an imminent future that never arrives? Or should we take this as evidence that the return is not yet here — that something still blocks the question of organisation and prevents us from fully posing it?

In what follows, I propose that we read the claim regarding the return of the organisation question alongside another recurring theme

1 Badiou 2011, p. 65.

2 Thomas 2013.

3 Dean 2014, p. 822.

4 Porcaro 2013. (Italics in the original.)

5 Ruda 2015. (Modified.)

in recent debates — the idea, loosely inspired by Walter Benjamin, that identifies melancholia as a dominant structure of feeling and desire among the left. What I hope to do is unearth a connection between the two, showing how a self-perpetuating melancholic mechanism eclipses the question of organisation, but also why it may take more than a simple return to past answers to free ourselves from it. More precisely, I contend that we are dealing with not one but two left-wing melancholias, and that their specular relation, by virtue of reducing politics to a set of abstract choices between absolute values, deprives us of the conditions for thinking organisation concretely. Overcoming that predicament therefore demands that we reconstruct those conditions rather than pick sides by reasserting this or that option from the past. Doing this, in turn, offers us a way of approaching the question of organisation that goes beyond the search for an ideal organisational form, and thus also severs its automatic association with the question of the party. It also affords us the means to claim the legacy of both those melancholias, which frees to carry on with the work of mourning the losses and defeats that are at their source.

Who Are the Melancholics?

In a well-known 1999 piece, Wendy Brown proposed Walter Benjamin’s concept of “left melancholy” as a means to shed light on the “crisis of the left” that at the time had already been going on for two decades or more, depending on who you asked. The term was supposed to describe “not only a refusal to come to terms with the particular character of the present”, but a “narcissism with regard to one’s past political attachments and identity that exceeds any contemporary investment in political mobilisation, alliance, or transformation”.<sup>6</sup> Committed “more to a particular political analysis or ideal — even to the failure of that ideal — than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present”,<sup>7</sup> left melancholies shield themselves from facing failure by displacing the narcissistic identification with the lost object onto the hate of a substitute. In the particular conjuncture analysed by Brown, it was cultural politics, identity politics and “postmodernism” that normally played the role of villains, scapegoated as the vectors of dispersion that sundered the solidity and assuredness of a left project that had ceased being viable.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, Jodi Dean has revisited Brown’s argument in order to suggest a different diagnosis. While praising the 1999 essay

6 Brown 1999, p. 20.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 23.



for providing “an account of a particularly left structure of desire”,<sup>9</sup> and seeing it as part of the process of elaboration of the defeats of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dean suggests that it failed to correctly identify “what was lost and what is retained, what is displaced and what is disavowed”.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the almost fifteen years that separate the two pieces, what is central to this difference is Dean’s emphasis on the drive aspect of Freud’s understanding of melancholia, on the one hand, and her different interpretation of “left melancholy” itself, on the other. For Dean, rather than “Benjamin’s unambivalent epithet for the revolutionary hack”<sup>11</sup> who cannot overcome his former attachments even in the face of failure, the term should instead be read as a description of what is more or less the opposite. Accordingly, then, her diagnosis ends up being almost symmetrically opposed:

Instead of a left attached to an unacknowledged orthodoxy, we have one that has given way on the desire for communism, betrayed its historical commitment to the proletariat, and sublimated revolutionary energies into restorationist practices that strengthen the hold of capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

The left melancholia diagnosed by Dean is one in which the experience of defeat and subsequent abandonment of revolutionary desire have been channelled into a drive whose “incessant activity” — “criticism and interpretation, small projects and local actions, particular issues and legislative victories, art, technology, procedures, and process ... the branching, fragmented practices of micro-politics, self-care, and issue awareness”<sup>13</sup> — has failure, not success, as its goal. For the melancholic left, enjoyment comes precisely from its incapacity to win, its “withdrawal from responsibility, its sublimation of goals and responsibilities”.<sup>14</sup> That is what ultimately explains why it cannot break out of the repetitive patterns that ensure its continued impotence: it *wills* that impotence, it derives pleasure from it.

Who is right, then — which diagnosis is correct? Or should we consider Brown’s, as Dean suggests, an earlier moment of elaboration of that melancholia, to be completed in the present day?<sup>15</sup>

.....  
9 Dean 2013, p. 81.

10 Ibid., p. 84.

11 Brown 1999, p. 20.

12 Dean 2013, p. 87.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 88.

The first thing to note is that, although that is in no way a demerit *per se*, neither reading is entirely faithful to Benjamin’s use of the concept. Even if Dean is certainly closer to the original, each of them creatively extrapolates on and ascribes a new meaning to the term first introduced in a 1931 review of Erich Kästner’s poetry. For starters, whereas Brown and Dean understand “melancholia” as qualifying “left” — as a particular “structure of desire” proper to the left-wing of the political spectrum, however defined —, the relation in Benjamin works the other way around: it is “left” that qualifies “melancholia”. Kästner is not criticised for being an old party hack stuck in the same politics of yore, nor for being a journalistic hack who has turned his old revolutionary leanings into trendy commodities, but for finding a market niche in catering for a widespread melancholia that is only the latest chapter in the malaise that eats bourgeois society from the inside.<sup>16</sup> It is the audience, not the poet, who is melancholy — or rather, it is the bourgeoisie.<sup>17</sup> It is to the bourgeois public, in whom the hollowness of commodified life might even stir some “revolutionary reflexes”, that the New Objectivists like Kästner raise the mirror of a “yawning emptiness”.<sup>18</sup> Yet this simply transposes the repulsion that reacts to an all-pervasive spiritual immiseration “into objects of distraction, of amusement, which can be supplied for consumption”,<sup>19</sup> cancelling any political significance that these feelings or the artworks that respond to them might have. The latter do nothing to intimate that things could be different, or how; what they offer to both public and artist is ultimately only the contentment of contemplating one’s own vacuity. This is why Benjamin concludes that “this left-wing radicalism is ... to the left not of this or that tendency; but simply to the left of what is in general possible. For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet”.<sup>20</sup> It is, in short, the outwardly radical expression of bourgeois nihilism — but ultimately no more than the left-wing variant thereof.

Yet none of this gets us closer to understanding our own time. The second thing to notice in Brown’s and Dean’s texts, then, is the observable behaviours that are in each case chosen as evidence of melancholia, and

.....  
16 “Tortured stupidity: this the [sic] latest of two millenia [sic] of metamorphoses of melancholy.” Benjamin 1974, p. 31.

17 “Kästner’s poems are for the higher income bracket, those mournful, melancholy dummies who trample anything or anyone in their path” and suffer from “the mournfulness of the satiated man who can no longer devote all his money to his stomach”. Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 29.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., p. 30.

what sector of “the left” is supposed to embody them. It is clear, when examined in this way, that the two texts somewhat mirror each other.

It is relatively easy to see that what Brown has in mind is a tendency to blame the defeats of the last decades not on an incapacity to respond to a changing environment, but on the “wrong turns” allegedly taken by the advocates of a type of politics that emerged in the 1960s. Her melancholic is the “old-school” leftist who would rather rejoice in the failure of younger generations of activists than question his own deep-set analyses and prescriptions. Dean’s reference to the abandonment of “antagonism, class, and revolutionary commitment”, on the other hand, initially suggests a broader argument. After all, the sublimation of revolutionary desire into “the repetitious practices offered up as democracy (whether representative, deliberative or radical)”<sup>21</sup> is an accusation that could be levelled at New Labour as much as at contemporary anarchism. More importantly, it papers over rather important distinctions such as whether we consider that move as conscious or unconscious (deliberately giving up on the revolution as opposed to choosing self-defeating methods to pursue it), strategic or tactical (rejecting the very idea as opposed to the short-term viability of revolutionary activity), due to the acceptance of “an inevitable capitalism” or to an elaboration of past “practical failures”.<sup>22</sup> What the blanket reference to “real existing compromises and betrayals”<sup>23</sup> ends up doing is strike an equivalence between those cases where betrayal can be asserted with relatively little controversy (say, New Labour) and those in which a more or less *unconscious* compromise is precisely what must be shown (abandonment of revolutionary desire as the source of melancholia and drive). It soon transpires that the latter, not the former, are the target. What Dean really has in mind is not ostensibly conscious “traitors”, but the *de facto* betrayal of those who engage “in activities that *feel* productive, important, radical” but ultimately seek only to reproduce “an inefficacy sure to guarantee [them] the nuggets of satisfaction drive provides”.<sup>24</sup> As Dean’s choice of examples makes clear — an emphasis on the personal, the local and the small-scale, single-issue campaigns, micropolitics etc. — one recognises this kind of melancholic by their attachment to precisely the kinds of practices that one would associate not with the “old school” but with a post-1968 left.

21 Dean 2013, p. 87-8.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 87.

24 Ibid. My italics. The implication here is that, if these activities are felt to be productive, those who engage in them do so because they consciously seek something effective to do, rather than merely pretending to do it. Even if — and that is Dean’s argument, precisely — their unconscious desire points in the opposite direction, this should be enough to differentiate them from deliberate traitors.

Should we take this to mean that Dean’s diagnosis is no more than a confirmation of the actuality of Brown’s? Or should we accept the historical perspective in which Dean places both and see her own position as indicative of a swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction: the moment when the new left’s critique of the old left has itself come under critique — by a third perspective, one would hope, that is neither one nor the other? A third option would be that, rather than choose between them, we decide that both are correct: that we are in fact dealing not with one, but two melancholias — and thus also, in a way, with two lefts.<sup>25</sup>

The Two Lefts

The main feature separating mourning from melancholia which Freud seeks to explain is the fact that the melancholic “represents his ego ... as worthless, incapable of any achievement ... reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished”.<sup>26</sup> The reason is that, in melancholia, incapacity to give up the love for the lost object results in an identification with it, so that “an object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss”, opening a “cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification”.<sup>27</sup> Hate towards the object, which was always present as ambivalence but loss allows to come to the fore, is thus directed towards the self. The “self-tormenting in melancholia, which is no doubt enjoyable, signifies ... a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned around upon the subject’s own self”.<sup>28</sup>

Freud observes that, “[i]f one listens patiently to a melancholic’s many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them ... fit someone else, someone whom

25 It is generally the case that any attempt to use psychoanalysis in social or cultural critique depends on constituting a collective subject that can be treated as analogous to an individual psyche (as the one who has lost an object of love, failed to mourn it etc.). Doing so, in turn, implies compressing into that one subject a number of agents who may or may not identify with each other at different times; a web of processes that have their own individual trajectories; practices whose reproduction has its own inertial pull; individuals who may experience what is predicated of that collective psyche in very disparate ways; and so on. This is not to say that such operations cannot detect true and revealing “family resemblances” among the elements that they assemble, but simply to point out that, as operations, they are open to questions as to whether they abstract too much (if what they predicate of the unit that they compose is indeed predicable of all its components) or too little (if they ascribe to a restricted group a behavior that could be predicated of a larger one).

26 Freud 1957, p. 246. Modified. Although Freud had started two years before, this piece, which would come to tinge reflections on the state of left politics so significantly, came out roughly at the same time as the 1917 revolution in Russia.

27 Ibid., p. 249.

28 Ibid., p. 251.

the patient loves or has loved or should love.”<sup>29</sup> What is curious in Brown’s and Dean’s diagnoses of the left — and, I would wager, in the direct experience most people have of it — is that such attentive exegesis seems for the most part unnecessary. While both identify a tendency for the left to derive pleasure from its own “impossibility ... marginality and failure”,<sup>30</sup> they also detect a tendency for the responsibility for that paralysis to be shifted onto someone else’s shoulders. One may more or less consciously choose to remain ineffective; but that is always in response to the damage wrought by an other (“antiracists, feminists, queer activists, postmodernists, unreconstructed Marxists”<sup>31</sup>) or to the threat of the other’s politics (“moralism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, utopianism”<sup>32</sup>). Thus, whereas Freud’s melancholic is really recriminating the other when he ostensibly blames himself, the left melancholic ostensibly *does* blame the other. This is what creates the mirroring effect that exists between Brown’s and Dean’s analyses. To the extent that both see one sector of the left as tending to react to shared defeat by holding another sector responsible, each could include the other as evidence of precisely that kind of behaviour, that is, of shifting the blame onto an other. Or, more precisely in their case, onto *the other who blames others*.

This specular structure suggests that, while historical defeat and feelings of impossibility and failure are shared by a whole spectrum that could be called “the left,” this situation is effectively experienced from at least two different perspectives. That there are two different perspectives means that, even if the “unavowed loss” is in both cases *formally* the same — “the promise that [one’s analysis and commitment] would supply its adherents a clear and certain path toward the good, the right and the true”<sup>33</sup> —, the content is different in each. In other words, the concrete commitments whose promise of correctness and righteousness was lost were different for each perspective. And if the actual losses being mourned are different, that is because the difference between these two

.....  
29 Ibid., p. 248. This sentence is important in the text’s overall economy because, while from that point on Freud will tend to identify the indirect target of recrimination with the lost object (and thus “someone whom the patient ... has loved”), it implies a different possibility: that the indirect target which the melancholic has in mind when reproaching himself is not the lost object, but a third party which is perhaps blamed for the loss. See Freud: “[P]atients usually still succeed, by the circuitous path of self-punishment, in taking revenge on the original object and in tormenting their loved one through their illness. ... After all, the person who has occasioned the patient’s emotional disorder, and on whom his illness is centred, is usually to be found in his immediate environment.” Ibid., p. 251. This alternative, as it will become clear, is relevant for the reading proposed here.

30 Brown 1999, p. 26.

31 Ibid., p. 23.

32 Dean 2013, p. 87.

33 Brown 1999, p. 22.

different perspectives was already well established by the time when the rise of neoliberalism ushered in the “winter years” (to borrow Félix Guattari’s turn of phrase) of the 1980s and 1990s.

Brown’s and Dean’s accounts imply a chronological structure: although the two lefts coexist in the present, they have not always done so, and one of them is clearly fairly recent. This entails both that the divide is not reducible to older oppositions (like the one between Marxists and anarchists) and that the rupture can be traced back to some period or specific event. Even if neither are explicit in this respect, their textual clues all point in the direction of a break situated at some point between the 1960s and 1970s; we could therefore approximatively indicate it by the name “1968”. And if we can point to that moment as the one in which a new left arose by contesting a left shaped by an earlier event, no better candidate presents itself to the role of said event than 1917.

Drawing the distinction chronologically has the advantage of highlighting the extent to which one position emerges in reaction to the other, attempting to draw its lessons and explore its blind spots. After 1917 “gave world capitalism the worst fright it ever had”,<sup>34</sup> it must indeed have seemed, for a few decades at least, that the enigma of revolution had essentially been solved. Even if the Russian Revolution was not quite as theory had predicted, the Bolsheviks had been the first to weld theory and practice in the form of a victorious party, demonstrating that it was definitely possible for communists to successfully take power and retain it.<sup>35</sup> By the late 1960s, however, many saw the experience of really existing socialism as drifting ever farther from its own ends, while most of its epigones outside the Soviet bloc had given up on the idea of revolutionary change altogether. To activists coming of age at the time, it looked as though the model had turned out bad where it did not work and even worse where it did. That sense of impasse led many to seek new models elsewhere or try to create them themselves. The time had come for a “revolution in the revolution” — a phrase that was “key to the political 1960s”,<sup>36</sup> in Chris Marker’s words.

.....  
34 Lecerle 2007, p. 270.

35 Even an anarchist like Victor Serge could then say: “My side was taken, I would be neither against the Bolsheviks nor neutral ... I would be with the Bolsheviks because they pursued, tenaciously and without losing heart, with magnificent fervour, with reflexive passion, necessity itself; because they were the only ones to do it, taking all initiative upon themselves ... They were certainly wrong about several essential points: in their intolerance, their belief in state control, their penchant for centralisation and administrative measures. But if it was necessary to fight their mistakes with freedom of spirit and a spirit of freedom, that had to be done among them”. Serge 2001, p. 563.

36 See Marker 1977. Apart from the February 1969 speech by German student leader Rudi Dutschke that Marker quotes in the film, the phrase also figures in a 1966 speech by Chinese general Lin Piao and as the title to Régis Debray’s 1967 bestseller on Latin American guerrillas. Thanks above all to Debray (but also to Carlos Marighella), the Cuban foco guerrillero and urban guerrillas like Uruguay’s Tupamaros and Brazil’s Aliança Libertadora Nacional would become, alongside the Chinese Cultural

While “1917” and “1968” are evidently no more than shorthand for the plural fidelities that each of those events has inspired over the years, the differences in perspective, sensibility and priorities that they indicate seem intuitive enough for the distinction to make sense. In broad contours, they define the legacies of arguably the two revolutionary events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the greatest impact on left-wing imaginary, as well as the two generally divergent, though occasionally intersecting, lines of inheritance that descend from them.<sup>37</sup> We could try to summarise the rift as pitting, on one side, a left that emphasises political action as the driver of social transformation, and accordingly has a greater investment in the state apparatus, in themes of unity, leadership and hegemony, and in the party as organisational form. Historically, that focus on unity has also translated into a strong attachment to a certain idea and stage of development of the working class. On the other side, we find a left that places greater stress on the initiative of social actors themselves, and thus tends to be wary of the limits of state action and the risks of enforced unity. To what it perceives as the permanent danger of reproducing patterns of bureaucratisation, authoritarianism and top-down control, it responds with an emphasis on plurality, autonomy and bottom-up organisation.

Tracing this split back to its origin allows us, first of all, to bring to mind something that the subsequent story of “compromises and betrayals” could make us forget. Namely, that while the 1980s saw its fair share of former *soixant-huitards* use the denunciation of really existing socialism as a way of rationalising some biographical continuity into their change of political allegiance,<sup>38</sup> the opposition between a 1917 and a 1968 left did not emerge as a simplistic dichotomy of totalitarianism versus freedom or revolution versus reform. At its source, it was a dispute on *how to do revolutionary politics* — which is also to say that it concerned the nature of revolution.

Secondly, this move enables us to see how, from the start, the two sides’ identities were largely dependent on each other, defining themselves over

Revolution, important (if not always very practical) organisational references for the next few years. See Debray 1967; Marighella 1969. Curiously, another icon of the period, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, presents focuses less on innovation than on the recovery of what had been cast aside. In his balance sheet of the May events in France, he states that if “the month of May saw a breach of modern capitalist society and also of the old authority of the Left, it did far more than that: it represented a return to a revolutionary tradition these parties have betrayed”. Cohn-Bendit 1968, p. 16.

37 Needless to say, the borders between those perspectives is complex and shifting, and runs within those events themselves — not everyone present that was present in 1968 would necessarily be representative of the “1968 left”.

38 While it is unclear, as noted above, if these are included in Dean’s analysis as belonging to “the left”, I am explicitly excluding them from my account — not in the name of some idea of what the left “really” is, but because she does not actually seem to have them in mind.

time through their mutual opposition. This helps explain why, when faced with the historical defeat of their respective analyses and commitments, they would be so reluctant to accept or even acknowledge the loss of certainty. When the other is defined as the negation of who one is, questioning one’s convictions is too much like giving in to the other, and giving in to the other is too much like losing oneself. Shifting the blame thus allows each side to claim revenge for the other’s failings at the same time as it exorcises its own doubts.<sup>39</sup> What one attacks in the other — by attacking exactly the kind of ideas that would have to be considered if questioning were to really take place — is also its own vacillations: the fear of being wrong, the suspicion that it is perhaps responsible for its failure after all.

Mutual recrimination generally tends to develop into a positive feedback loop: the more each side blames the other, the more likely both are to defend themselves by shifting the blame. The same goes for the commitments that define one’s identity: the more they come under attack, the more one tends to reassert them unilaterally. The upshot is that both sides end up constantly demarcating their mutual difference through the reiteration of terms that function as the negation of each other: unity, centrality, concentration, identity, closure, the party-form; multiplicity, connection, dispersion, difference, openness, the network-form (or no form at all). That, of course, only makes self-criticism less likely: if each question allows for only two answers, one of which is associated with the other, the cost of doubting our choice becomes unreasonably high. On the other hand, the more the other is found to be wrong, the less I need to ask myself if I am right. For as long as the two sides are locked in reciprocal negation, self-criticism can exist in inverse proportion to criticism of the other. What is more, the process can carry on even as Brown’s and Dean’s analyses render it self-reflexive. Each side can read their diagnoses and agree that “yes, the problem is the other who always shifts the blame to others” — seemingly without realising that, from the perspective of the other whom I blame, *the other who shifts the blame to others is me*.

What follows from this is that we are dealing not with one “orthodoxy” whose limits are “safeguarded from ... recognition”<sup>40</sup> by its adherents, but *two*. The 1968 left can in fact be just as prone to shielding itself from hard questions by displacing them onto the shoulders of its 1917 counterpart

39 See Freud’s observation that “[t]here is no need to be greatly surprised that a few genuine self-reproaches are scattered among [those ostensible self-reproaches which are actually directed at someone else]. These are allowed to obtrude themselves, since they help to mask the others and make recognition of the state of affairs impossible”. Freud 1957, p. 248.

40 Brown 1999, p. 23.



than the other way round.<sup>41</sup> My hypothesis is that this pattern of evading and assigning responsibility, of entrenching identity and shunning the work of mourning, is what accounts for the eclipse of the question of organisation and the difficulty of posing it anew.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the question disappeared in the 1960s and 1970s. On the contrary, that was a period of intense experimentation with different forms and practices: the consciousness raising groups of the feminists, the ecclesial base communities of Liberation Theology, groups of prisoners and mental patients, the welfare programmes of the Black Panthers, the combination of “organised” and “diffuse” elements in Italy’s Autonomia. As that age drew to a close, however, and old and new forms alike ran up against their limits, debates on the left appear to have increasingly become expressed in terms of exclusive disjunctions like hegemony *or* autonomy, macropolitics *or* micropolitics, unity *or* diversity... Naturally, it is unlikely that many people would, if asked, argue that it is indeed possible or even desirable to have only one of those things in each case. “Of course”, they would say, “some balance between them is necessary”. Yet this only makes it more curious that much of the communication that actually takes place in the left should be expressed in the most abstract terms, as if it really were a matter of an either/or choice. That only begins to make sense when viewed in the context of a specular relation that tends to erase the common ground (“some balance”) on which a real discussion could take place even while each side might separately acknowledge that only on this ground can concrete problems be posed. This is how, instead of arguing over differences that are clearly laid out in relation to concrete shared references (such as different analyses of the situation at hand and hypotheses on how to change it), we wind up endlessly relitigating old conceptual oppositions that are unlikely to produce any new conclusions, let alone action.

The more each side identifies with one of two possible abstract answers to a set of equally abstract questions posed in moral terms (“what is the *right* thing to do?” rather than “what is the best thing to do *in this situation?*”), the less visible becomes the fact that concrete problems always raise issues pertinent to both: “how, here and now, can we balance a maximum of autonomy with the capacity to act in a coordinated way?” “How, in the conjuncture at hand, can we reconcile decision-

41 See, for example, how Félix Guattari (who, in all fairness, confronted the hard questions more often than others) states that “each time” that movements of prisoners, women, immigrants, mental patients and so on had failed “it was because the old forms and structures of organization take power, holding the rhizomatic element of desire in a system of arborescent power”. Guattari 2009, p. 276. Obviously excluded here is the hypothesis that they could also fail for themselves, in their own terms.

making capacity with the broadest democracy and participation?” The less each side recognises the other as dealing with the same set of problems, the easier it is to construe it as a caricature (Stalinist control freaks, out-of-touch bureaucrats, woolly liberal do-gooders, obtuse ham-fisted anarchists...). Likewise, the easier it is to see one’s own practice not as it actually is, with its limits and challenges, but as the embodiment of the ideals it is supposed to enact or enable (efficiency, leadership, horizontality, openness...). Whatever limits are encountered can thus always be discounted or disavowed as being contingent, accidental, temporary, *someone else’s fault*. Our core beliefs, questioning which would force us to rediscover some common ground with the other, can thus remain intact.

Two “left-wing melancholias”, then, marking out two distinct lefts: one proper to the 1917 left, another pertaining to its 1968 counterpart, each responding at once to a shared experience of defeat (the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and its continuing hegemony) and to their own particular losses (the ignominy of the Soviet bloc and the dissipation of the alterglobalist movement, for example). Between the two, a relationship of mutual reinforcement that corresponds quite precisely to what Gregory Bateson called *symmetrical schismogenesis*: a “cumulative interaction”<sup>42</sup> in which the members of two groups react to each other with an identical pattern of behaviour, with equal intensity but in opposite directions, so that

each group will drive the other into excessive emphasis of the pattern, a process which if not restrained can only lead to more and more extreme rivalry and ultimately to hostility and the breakdown of the whole system.<sup>43</sup>

It is more appropriate in this case to speak of “perspectives” rather than “groups,” as the point is not so much that there are two clearly delimited, denumerable camps that we could identify with “1917” and “1968”, even if it is often not difficult to situate individuals or organisations in one side or the other. The two perspectives pre-exist the camps that they bring together, in that they are the principle of cohesion around which they coalesce and reproduce themselves. They subsist regardless of who might be counted on what side at any time, and might coexist within the same group, even the same individual.<sup>44</sup> Unlike in Bateson’s examples,

42 Bateson 1981, p. 112.

43 Bateson 1981, p. 68.

44 There would thus also be such a thing as a left-wing schizophrenia: it would consist in thinking some questions from one perspective, some from the other, without ever reconciling the two.

however, this opposition does not seem to lead to a full-blown rupture (“the breakdown of the whole system”), arguably for three reasons.<sup>45</sup> First, because the two perspectives not only share a common defeat, they also identify themselves before others as part of a single camp (“the left”); like an unhappy couple, they continue to live under the same roof even as they lead mostly separate lives. Second, because the fight over their common identity (the mantle of “the true left”) keeps them tied to each other, even if around an antagonism; if they carry on living under the same roof, it is because they are permanently fighting over who should keep the house. Thirdly, they effectively need each other, not only because their identities depend on their mutual opposition, but because the presence of the other offers exemption from responsibility for their own mistakes; after all, the one comfort to be had in marital grief is not having to take charge for one’s own happiness (or otherwise).

In the system that is formed by the relation of these two melancholias to each other, finally, we discern the structure of drive that Dean describes. To carry on doing the same thing in order to obtain the same results, to always opt for paths whose limits have been exposed in the past, all of this is a way of punishing oneself for defeat and a disavowed loss of conviction without ceasing to extract some enjoyment from failure at the same time. Yet this is all done while ostensibly attributing responsibility for this failure to an other, so that it never becomes necessary to question one’s own choices and beliefs. By choosing to keep on encountering the same impasses instead of revising our certainties — which would naturally entail acknowledging the ground shared with the other —, we remain free to carry on failing.

### To Finally Return to the Question of Organisation

If the hypothesis linking the disappearance of the question of organisation to the consolidation of this schismogenic mechanism is correct, a return to that question would necessarily involve overcoming this mechanism. That might help explain why this “return” so far has often sounded more like the repetition of an injunction to take up the question again than an effort to actually restart it. It also suggests a limit that any attempt to rekindle the question solely by restating one of its past answers will eventually encounter: it is of the nature of this kind of relation that any intervention that stays within the territory charted by symmetrical schismogenesis will tend to reinforce it rather than break with it. Yet this also gives us a clue regarding where to look for signs that the organisation debate might indeed be stirring anew: in clear-eyed

45 For Bateson’s examples, taken from both Western culture and the latmul of Papua New Guinea, see Bateson 1936, pp. 176-87. On schismogenesis as positive feedback, see this telling remark: “The writing of *Naven* had brought me to the very edge of what later became cybernetics, but I lacked the concept of negative feedback.” Bateson 1981, pp. xix-xx.

appraisals of the limits of actual processes and in attempts to think outside of the disjunctive simplism of either/or choices.

Fortunately, such signs can indeed be found. For example, in how a new generation of militants trained in the horizontal practices of the 2011 protests have engaged in electoral campaigns without portraying what they were doing as a simple “return” to the party-form or a recantation of earlier “mistakes”, but as a veritable political experiment that tested convictions and tactics learned elsewhere on a new terrain.<sup>46</sup> We can also see them in several analyses of the protest cycle of the last decade that openly acknowledge its limitations without abandoning some of its more fundamental commitments.<sup>47</sup> We can find them, in short, in good-faith attempts to incorporate practices and questions previously not recognised as one’s own without supposing that this would automatically mean shifting to the opposite perspective. Wherever there are people who do not feel constrained to be *either* this *or* that, and who adopt tactics and practices not for the sake of sustaining an identity but because they look like they might be what works in the case at hand, there is hope of escaping the pull of the left’s double melancholia.

It is not the case, of course, that the 1917/1968 rift ever really exhausted the range of possible positions, nor that communication and hybridisation between the two perspectives ever ceased to exist. The overall point here is in fact the opposite: as flexibility is a condition for viable practice, any practice that tried to be purely one or the other would could not survive for long. Purity is never given as such except as an imaginary misrecognition and disavowal of real activity. Still, there are reasons to suggest that the effort to pose problems in concrete ways, outside of a sterile opposition between ossified identities, could grow in the near future. First of all, of course, there is the very dissemination of diagnoses of melancholia, including those that identify it as a potentially positive condition.<sup>48</sup> Then there is the widely shared sense of urgency,

46 Evidently, discourses and analyses may vary significantly within initiatives like Podemos, Momentum and Democratic Socialists of America, not least between the grassroots and the leadership. In Spain, the likes of Pablo Iglesias and Iñigo Errejón have sometimes presented Podemos as evidence that Spanish movements acknowledged the “error” of rejecting party politics. As I have argued elsewhere, my impression is that many 15M activists now engaging with institutions have a rather more sophisticated take — one that projects a complementarity among different practices instead of the need to choose between them. See Nunes 2015.

47 Examples covering a broad range of languages, registers and political orientations include: Martins and Cordeiro 2014, Legume 2015, Marom 2015, Maniglier 2016, Gerbaudo 2017, Jones 2018, and the excellent dossier organised by the Spanish journal *Alexia*, “De Tahrir a Nuit Debout: la Resaca de las Plazas”, available at <http://revistaalexia.es/de-tahrir-a-nuit-debout-la-resaca-de-las-plazas/>.

48 Enzo Traverso, the latest to come to grips with “left-wing melancholia”, construes it in a more positive light than Brown and Dean. Inevitable in a context in which utopian expectations have been replaced by “global threats without a foreseeable outcome”, he argues, it is “[n]either regressive nor impotent”, but constitutes a “melancholy criticism” maintaining open a space in which “the search for new ideas and projects can coexist with the sorrow and mourning for a lost realm of revolutionary experiences”. Traverso 2006, pp. xiv-xv. The “conservative tendency” identified by Brown, Traverso

hopefully also potential, that arises from a conjuncture crisscrossed by several overlapping crises (ecological, of social reproduction, economic, of representation). Finally, there might be something about the ebb of the 2011 cycle itself that stimulates responses that are at once more critical and more open.

It is interesting to note that Wendy Brown’s “Resisting Left Melancholy” came out in 1999, the year when the “Battle of Seattle” at once relativised the fragility that she described and somewhat revised the very content of the word “left”. The “alterglobalism” of the following years would, in a way, be the revenge of 1968 against the reactive “traditionalism”<sup>49</sup> that Brown’s article criticised. Not only had a new generation of activists come to claim that libertarian legacy, they presented themselves as finally capable of actualising potentials until then condemned to remain latent and end up betrayed. In the heady cocktail of 1960s radicalism and technological determinism of those years, the internet promised to lift the material obstacles that had until then prevented horizontal, bottom-up ways of organising from scaling up. In so doing, it tendentially made older forms of organisation obsolete at the same time as it brought the dream of a decentralised, self-organised global society closer within reach.

Much of that sensibility and imaginary would resurface in 2011, despite there being little organisational continuity or even memory to connect the two moments.<sup>50</sup> And yet, at least to those who have lived through both, the reckoning occasioned by the latest seems at once more heartfelt and more profound. We could conjecture that this stems from two dissimilarities them.

The first concerns historical circumstances. Whereas the alterglobalist moment arrived unexpectedly at a time of capitalist expansion, the 2011 protests were the long-delayed response to an event, the 2008 crisis, that had created great expectations for radical politics. But while the former petered out over half a decade, squeezed out of the global agenda by the War on Terror and its inability to go beyond its characteristic form of action (the summit protest), the latter ebbed even faster, incapable to build on its initial successes and defenceless against

suggests, could just as easily be interpreted as “a form of resistance against demission and betrayal”. Ibid., p. 45. Nevertheless, this vision appears to hesitate between an actuality and a project yet to be realised: “[i]n order to be fruitful ... this melancholia needs to become recognizable”. Ibid., p. xv. Traverso identifies three fields of memory and mourning that correspond to the three “sectors” of world revolution as the 1960s and 1970s radical left understood it: the anticapitalist movements in the West, the anti-bureaucratic movements within really existing socialism and the anticolonial movements of the Third World. It would not be difficult, I believe, to show that the cleavage between the two lefts runs through the memory of each of these.

49 Brown 1999, p. 25.

50 The notable exception was Spain, arguably also the place where the 2011 protests have had the most impact.

a decisive backlash. The sensation of shrinking horizons and missed opportunities that surrounds it is therefore much greater.

The second difference has to do with political composition. The alterglobalist moment was always more of a patchwork of fixed political quantities, in which parties and trade unions still played a significant part even if the younger activists were the real protagonists. Always an unsteady alliance of “vertical” and “horizontal” elements, it still allowed both sides to deal with impasses by blaming each other. In 2011, however, the “vertical” element was negligible and the direction of the protests much more clearly in the hands of “horizontals”. The limits that those struggles encountered were not necessarily new, and many of them had already been seen in 1968 and the early 2000s; but the combination of big stakes, high hopes, a steep fall and no-one else to blame made them much harder to ignore.

We could force a parallel here. It was also the case that nothing that was “revealed” when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 had not been known for a long time. And yet, even though the collapse of the Soviet bloc may have been only “the death-event of the already dead”,<sup>51</sup> it still meant to many that it was finally impossible to carry on as before. If the self-scrutiny we see now runs deeper, this may in fact be because 2011 was in some ways the 1989 of 1968.<sup>52</sup>

If there is a return to the question of organisation today, or at the very least growing talk about the need for it, it is of course primarily because recent experiences have left many people feeling that organisation is something they lack and could use more of. As I hope to show next, however, organisation is by its very nature ideally suited to play the role of transitional object that can help us escape the circuit of drive in which our double melancholia detains us — provided we are also willing to change how we conceive it.

Organisation as Mediation

In the heyday of the *Organisationsfrage* debate, which we could roughly situate between the “revisionism debate” around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Third International’s Fifth Congress in 1924 (the so-called “Bolshevisation Congress”<sup>53</sup>), organisation appears as a figure of

51 Badiou 2003, p. 59.

52 It is in this context that we might, for example, find two of the thinkers who were most influential in shaping the broad outlook of alterglobalism state that they are “not among those who claim that today’s horizontal movements in themselves are sufficient, that there is no problem, and that the issue of leadership has been superseded. Behind the critique of leadership often hides a position we do not endorse that resists all attempts to create organizational and institutional forms in the movements that can guarantee their continuity and effectiveness.” Hardt and Negri 2017, p. 8.

53 It was at this congress of the Communist International that, following the passing of the “Theses on the Structure of Communist Parties” at the Third Congress in 1921, a rigidified version of the Bolshevik organisational model was imposed on all affiliates.

*mediation*. Following György Lukács' formula, organisation is "the form of mediation between theory and practice", and "as in every dialectical relationship, the terms of the relation only acquire concreteness and reality in and by this mediation".<sup>54</sup> Yet theory and practice were not the only terms between which organisation was supposed to mediate. Lukács himself saw in the party the "concrete mediation of man and history"<sup>55</sup> and, in conscious subordination to party discipline, the mediation between individual and collective will. Even a cursory read of the classic Leninist statement on organisation, *What Is To Be Done?*, will show that its chapters are already from their titles governed by a number of dualisms (spontaneity and purposefulness, economic and political struggles, "artisanal" organisation and "revolutionaries by trade") which branch out into yet more oppositions (masses and leaders, "from within" and "from without", and so on). It is evident that, in all these oppositions, Lenin is making the case for one of the terms against the other; it is equally evident, however, that this case is never unilateral or disjunctive, but supposes precisely some mediation between the two. After all, Lenin would have otherwise found himself in the awkward position of having to argue *against* practice or *against* the masses.<sup>56</sup> Even if Lenin's goal was to reinforce one of the sides of the equation at the other's expense, it was never a matter of choosing one at the exclusion of the other, but of instituting a mediation between them — a task that fell upon organisation, no less, to perform. As we shall see, in fact, the act of stressing one term over the other should be read not as the *negation* of mediation, but as part of the work of mediation itself: to emphasise one pole of a dualism against the other is a way to propose a certain balance between them. Even *overemphasis*, as is often the case with Lenin, is justified if it is meant to compensate for what one perceives — rightly or wrongly, as the case may be — as a balance unduly tilted in the opposite direction.<sup>57</sup>

54 Lukács 1997, p. 299.

55 Ibid., 318.

56 One finds instead that he was often enthusiastic about both the *praktiki* (activists) of Russian Social Democracy and the spontaneous uprising of the masses: "we *will* be able to do these things, precisely because the mass that is awakening in *stikhiinyi* [spontaneous] fashion will *push forward from its own milieu* a greater and greater number of 'revolutionaries by trade' (if we don't convince ourselves that it is a great idea on all occasions to invite the workers to mark time)". I am employing here the new translation of *What Is To Be Done?* available in Lih 2008, p. 774. Italics in the original.

57 See Lih 2008, pp. 26-7, regarding Lenin's well-known observation in defence of *What Is To Be Done?* at the Second Congress of Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party in 1903, in which he makes exactly that point: "Obviously, an episode in the struggle against economism has here been confused with a principled presentation of a major theoretical question .... We all know now that the 'economists' bent the stick in one direction. In order to make the stick straight it was necessary to bend the stick in the other direction, and that is what I did."

As we have seen, one of the mechanisms keeping the "two lefts" locked in their specular relation is the transformation of a series of conceptual pairs into exclusive disjunctions: micropolitics *or* macropolitics, diversity *or* unity, horizontality *or* verticality, hegemony *or* autonomy, and so on. Now, exclusive disjunctions are nothing but unmediated oppositions, or oppositions between which no mediation is admitted. What we have here then is a circular causality: if these terms can appear as mutually exclusive, it is because what should mediate between them has disappeared; as a mediating element, organisation cannot but disappear, given that what it is supposed to mediate presents itself as unmediatable.

That disappearance, it should be noted, is at once theoretical and practical, and the relationship between those two aspects is also mutually reinforcing: excessive abstraction inhibits practice, the absence of practice stimulates abstraction. Yet it is precisely because of this circularity that organisation might go from lost object to transitional object: the means for recovering itself.

To think organisation concretely is to think in terms of specific problems rather than merely conceptual relations. The more we do so, the more apparent it becomes that the challenges involved in assembling and channelling the collective capacity to act are the same for all, regardless of theoretical allegiances or political preferences; the same difficulties, constraints, thresholds, dangers. Conversely, acknowledging that common ground is a condition for responding to actual situations instead of just reiterating abstract principles or reproaching reality for being unlike our model. It is on that common ground that a partisan of autonomy might accept that the circumstances call for stronger coordination, or a "verticalist" admit that attempting to enforce unity will only create more division under given conditions. Rather than each being capable of playing only their characteristic type (the Stalinist, the autonomist, the insurrectionist...) and droning on about their one characteristic idea (centralisation, autonomy, direct action...), those who recognise their interpellation by the same set of problems can explore a range of solutions tailored to the occasion at hand, at once more complex and more precise than any general model. It is a matter of inverting the usual procedure: instead of starting from the big differences and acknowledging commonalities only as an afterthought ("of course, some balance is necessary..."), we start from what is common and situate differences in relation to a shared problem. This makes them appear not as absolutes, but as relative to each other: different shades in a range of possible responses to a shared condition.

Doing that, however, hinges decisively on what we mean when we speak of organisation as a mediating element — and ultimately on how we understand mediation itself.



## Force over Form

There are basically two ways of thinking mediation. The first conceives the relation between the terms to be mediated as a logical opposition: they negate each other, and hence cannot be predicated without contradiction of the same subject at the same time. What mediation must do in this case is bring the two predicates together in a third term that would be their synthesis. Given that we are dealing with a logical contradiction, the problem (the contradiction) is in principle solved as soon as the solution (the synthesis) appears. By means of a third term that at once cancels and conserves them in a higher unity, it will be possible, from that moment on, to predicate the two previously incompatible terms from the same subject. That is why Lukács does not say that organisation mediates between theory and practice, but that it is the *form* of this mediation. For him, a communist party in the Bolshevik mould, in open rupture with social-democratic organisations mired in reformist “opportunism”, was the “form at last discovered” within which the logical contradictions between theory and practice, mass and leaders, history and existence, individual and collective will, economic and political struggles could be resolved in an age of imminent revolution.

Understanding mediation in terms of logical contradiction thus subtly directs us to consider the problem of organisation as concerning the *form* that would solve it: a determinate type of organisational form in which the solution would, at least in principle, already be contained.<sup>58</sup> This helps explain why, to this day, talk of “organisation” so easily slips into, or is effectively treated as being shorthand for, a discussion of “the party”.<sup>59</sup> To be sure, nothing can prevent practical “deviations” from corrupting this form, precluding it from acting as the mediation that by right it is. However, as the very talk of “deviations” suggests, these are no more than accidental modifications of what, in its essence, would be the fully realised answer to the problem.

We arrive at a different idea of mediation if we change how we conceive of the opposition. Kant gave the name *real opposition* to this other kind of relation, in which the two terms are opposed but not logically contradictory. Rather than a predicate being the negation of the other (A and not-A), here both are affirmative in their own right, and even if they cancel each other out, that does not stop them from being predicable of the same subject at the same time. They might cancel each other out completely, in fact, and the resulting “nothing” will still not be

58 It is true that the theses on the organisational structure of communist parties approved at the Third International's 1921 Congress state right at the start “[t]here is no absolute form of organisation which is correct for Communist Parties at all time”. What is unquestionable, however, is that the dominant form of organisation is the party, whatever shape it may take.

59 For example: “The real *Organisationsfrage* today is not the affirmation or the negation of the party, conceived in the abstract, but rather, the question regarding the particular type of party-form that could help these movements to continue to grow.” Thomas 2013, p. 8.

a positive existence. Thus, if two mechanical forces of equal intensity act in opposing directions on the same body at the same time, the body remains at rest; that rest, however, is not a non-being, or the negation of movement. It is still something: a real physical state produced by the interaction of two real forces.

[S]ince the consequences of the two [predicates], each construed as existing on its own, would be *a* and *b*, it follows that, if the two are construed as existing together, neither consequence *a* nor consequence *b* is to be found in the subject; the consequence of the two predicates A and B, construed as existing together, is therefore zero.<sup>60</sup>

From which it also follows that, if the intensity of A or B changes, the outcome will be other than zero: the predominance of the consequence *a* mitigated by the presence of *b*, or vice-versa. Under these conditions, F. Scott Fitzgerald's challenge poses hardly any difficulty. It is perfectly possible to maintain two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time; all it takes is for us to consider them as being in real opposition to each other.

In short, real opposition is not an opposition between concepts, but between real forces or tendencies. And whereas two concepts that logically negate each other produce no reality, but only impossible entities like “square circle”, opposed forces can come into all sorts of mixtures bearing all sorts of proportions. Alternatively, we could say that real opposition is not an opposition between determinate qualities, but between quantities — a specific class of quantities, in fact, called *intensive*: those that are non-additive, that is, not composed of smaller quantities of the same kind.<sup>61</sup>

When we call an object “hot” or “cold”, we are registering the physical sensation of a change of state in our body occasioned by coming in contact with that object. Yet the fact that the verbal resources we have to do so make us ascribe a determinate quality to it (“hot”, “cold”) should not blind us to the fact that what we are doing is describe an intensive

60 Immanuel Kant 1992, p. 212. As we know, this pre-critical distinction would be central to Kant's attack on the Leibniz-Wolff school in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and, later on, to the deduction of attractive and repulsive forces in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Italian Marxist Lucio Colletti mobilised it against the persistence of Hegelian “dialectics of matter” in dialectical materialism, identifying in its affirmation of the “heterogeneity between thought and being” the reason to see Kant as “the only classic German philosopher in whom it is possible to detect at least a grain of materialism.” Colletti 1973, pp. 104-5. For the sake of brevity, I am obliged to set aside here a discussion of that argument, as well as of the criticism levelled at it in Macherey 1990, pp. 232-47. For Colletti's later relativisation of his position, see Colletti 1975.

61 Thus, for example, while the total mass of three bodies will be the sum of their masses (mass being an extensive quantity), the total temperature of a system composed of two bodies will not be the sum of their respective temperatures prior to being put together.

difference between the object and our body: it is hotter or colder than we are. Many of the qualities that we regularly ascribe to things (“heavy”, “light”, “wet”, “dry”) function in this way: what they name is a *quantum* of some property (weight, temperature, humidity) resulting from an intensive relation. They correspond to *definite quantities* produced by a real opposition. Thus, for example, the quality of “heavy” that we predicate of an object names the excess of the downward pull of gravity on its mass over the upward traction that we exert on it.

That intensive relations differ from determinate states, and that the former are the cause of the latter, is an idea that we can trace as far back Anaximander. Thus, for example, Plato:

Wherever they apply, [real oppositions/intensive relations] prevent everything from adopting a definite quantity; by imposing on all actions the qualification “stronger” relative to “gentler” or the reverse, they procure a “more or less” while doing away with all definite quantity. ... [But] once they take on a definite quantity, they [are] no longer hotter and colder. The hotter and equally the colder are always in flux and never remain, while definite quantity means standstill and the end of all progression. The upshot of this argument is that the hotter, together with its opposite, turn out to be unlimited.<sup>62</sup>

What Plato is pointing out here is a fundamental asymmetry between two regimes. Particular bodies might be called hot or cold, the quality of coldness or hotness that we attribute to them corresponding to the determinate *quantum* of temperature established by the real opposition between its temperature and ours. Yet the relation “hotter and colder” is not the relation between this or that particular body, this or that determinate quantity, but the intensive difference considered in itself. Once it is expressed in particular bodies, that difference is of course the condition for any determinate quantity; in that regard, it is a principle of change, preventing everything “from adopting a definite quantity” permanently. In itself, however, it is not the relation between two things or *quanta*, but “unlimited” in the sense that it is a pure relation of “more and less” — an intensive dyad extending indefinitely in two directions. In Gilbert Simondon’s words:

as Plato remarked, every realised quality appears as though inserted, according to a measure, in an indefinite dyad of contrary and absolute qualities; qualities go by pairs of opposites, and this bipolarity is given to every existing being as a permanent possibility of orientation...<sup>63</sup>

62 Plato 1997, 24c.

63 Simondon 2013, p. 163.

The distinction between logical and real opposition, contradiction and intensive dyad, explains why it was said above that thinking oppositions as exclusive disjunctions was doing so “abstractly”. Specifically, the abstraction lies in treating “absolute qualities”, which only indicate the two opposing directions in which an intensive dyad stretches (“more or less”), as if they were actual entities between which one could, and in fact should, decide. Opting for “horizontality” or “verticality” in absolute terms is like choosing “the cold in itself” or “the hot in itself” — when “cold” and “hot” exist only as definite quantities arising from intensive relations, and any single thing is at any given time only the balance of intensive relations acting on it. What exists is “never this or that isolated element [or quality], but only mixtures; ... the individual being is no longer an absolute unity, but the stability of a relation”.<sup>64</sup>

What does mediation mean in this case? Whereas logical opposition demands a logical solution — the construction of a third term as the synthesis in which the first two are somehow made compatible —, what we have here is something else. If every “realised quality” (our sensation of hot or cold, light or heavy) is a definite quantity individuated from an intensive dyad (hotter and colder, lighter or heavier) by the interaction of really existing forces, mediation here is a problem that cannot be solved, not even in principle, once and for all. If forms are but the temporary, more or less fragile stability of the relations that compose them, the balance of forces is the more fundamental problem; and since that balance changes over time under the action of internal tendencies and outside factors, the object of mediation ought to be forces, not form. No form could, in and of itself, be a one-size-fits-all solution, even if some forms are preferable to others owing to the balances that they afford. Each situation demands an answer appropriate to *that* situation, to the balance verified in *that* moment. Neither a choice for this or that quality in absolute nor a form “discovered at last”, it is a definite *quantum* of force that tilts the existing balance in the desired direction. It is not just that every organisational form is only ever good *for a determinate end, in determinate circumstances*, there being none that would be good absolutely. In its existence over time, as the forces that act on it change, every form necessarily faces questions of the “how much?” type (how much autonomy? how much coordination? how much planning? how much spontaneity?).

This should make it clear why, even though mediation is said here to take place between two “absolute qualities”, this is in no way a doctrine of the golden mean. The “balance” that each intervention seeks is defined according to goals that vary from case to case and situation to situation; thus, for example, the Marxist idea of revolution stressed centralisation at

64 Simondon 2013, 374. (Modified.)

first and decentralisation afterwards. As the desired effect varies, there is properly speaking no absolute golden mean, and even excess might, in the appropriate conditions, be the right measure.<sup>65</sup> That is in fact the idea behind Lenin's image of "bending the stick", as it is also the insight with which Machiavelli effectively broke with the Ancient conception of politics.<sup>66</sup> If he taught that the Prince must learn how not to be good, it was not just because he was "the first to visualise the rise of a purely secular realm whose laws and principles of action were independent of the teachings of the Church ... and of moral standards".<sup>67</sup> This realm, as the examples that Machiavelli borrows from Antiquity show, had always been present, even if disavowed. It was above all because he understood that asking oneself about the "right conduct" in absolute terms is not only a moral (or theological) question, rather than a political one, but a potentially disastrous way of approaching practice. Because it is about relations of forces, politics has no room for the *always right* or the *absolutely correct*; if circumstances change and the methods remain the same, ruin is the most likely result.<sup>68</sup> It is for that reason that *virtù*, for Machiavelli, was not on the same plane as virtues (mercifulness, generosity), but rather like the faculty tasked with moderating their use: the capacity to determine when, how and in what proportion to employ them. "[T]he moment, the measure and the means"<sup>69</sup> are crucial: "it is enough to take one little step farther — a step that might seem to be in the same direction — and truth turns into error."<sup>70</sup>

.....  
<sup>65</sup> We could go further and say there is no "right measure" either, if what is understood by that is a conduct that agents could be sure would be the most appropriate for a given situation. Agents always act on limited information, and their action is always subject to the interference of factors that they could not have previously taken into account. We find a particularly bloody example of how excess might function as the right measure in *The Prince*: Messer Ramiro d'Orco, having been assigned by Cesare Borgia to establish military control over Romagna, and offering ample evidence of his character as a "cruel and unscrupulous man" in fulfilling the task, was publicly executed once the region was pacified, his body cut in half and his head put on a stake, so that the Duca Valentino could dissociate himself from his vassal's brutality. Machiavelli 2005, p. 27.

<sup>66</sup> See note 51 above.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt 1973, p. 36.

<sup>68</sup> Machiavelli 2005, p. 85. Lenin, on this count a Machiavellian through and through, makes a similar point about his erstwhile Second International comrades: "They fully appreciated the need for flexible tactics; they themselves learned Marxist dialectic and taught it to others ...; however, in the application of this dialectic they committed ... proved to be so undialectical in practice... [T]hey were hypnotised by a definite form of growth of the working-class movement and socialism, forgot all about the one-sidedness of that form, were afraid to see the break-up which objective conditions made inevitable, and continued to repeat simple and, at first glance, incontestable axioms that had been learned by rote... ." Lenin 1974, p. 102. Modified.

<sup>69</sup> Boff 1988, p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> Lenin 1974, p. 103.

Thus understood, mediation could in no way be reduced to a form; it exists as activity, constant exercise, *dynamic equilibrium of forces*. Since it mediates between absolute qualities that negate one another, it also necessarily presents itself in the form of trade-offs: an increase in autonomy of the parts entails a loss in coordination for the whole; centralisation might accelerate decision-making but weaken grassroots control over representatives; emphasis on a group identity boosts cohesion but turns potential allies away; and so on. We can say that these qualities, all of which are to some extent desirable, are mutually exclusive; yet precisely *not* as logical oppositions, which would force us to opt for one or the other, but as real oppositions, which means that they must be balanced or *dosed*. To say that they cancel each other, in this case, is to say that they always coexist *to some degree*, in mixtures that contain one *and* the other in greater or lesser proportion. And if it is impossible to have everything at once (maximum identity and maximum openness, maximum centralisation and maximum democracy, maximum autonomy and maximum coordination...), nothing prevents us from having all of them to some degree, balanced according to the needs of the occasion.

This, in turn, promises us a way to revisit the sterile oppositions that have immobilised imagination for so long and see them as something else: an invitation to place thought and practice at the service of the invention of new solutions, guided by concrete problems and conditions rather than doctrinaire adhesion to fixed identities. It also promises us a way to claim the legacies of 1917 and 1968 without reverence or bitterness, delivering us from the need to choose between them, freeing us to see both in their limits and to find in them lessons that can illuminate challenges we face today. Finally, it promises us a manner of posing the problem of organisation that breaks with the supposition of an ideal organisational form and enables us to explore it again in its full extension: as the question concerning the many ways in which the collective capacity to act can be accumulated, focused and deployed, and the trade-offs, comparative advantages, conditions and constraints that apply to each. If these promises can be translated into practice, perhaps we might at last begin to be done — at least done *enough*, done *for now* — with the work of mourning the past.

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# October 2 is Not Forgotten! The History, Collective Memory and Transgenerational Perseverance of Mexican '68

## David Pavón-Cuéllar

**Abstract:** The Mexican '68 Movement is especially known for the Tlatelolco massacre, which took place on the 2nd of October, 1968. Since then, on each anniversary, students fill the streets of Mexico and chant the slogan: "October 2nd is not forgotten!". This paper is about such a slogan, the historical plot in which the Mexican '68 Movement was inserted, its history, its consequences, its collective memory and its symbolic form of transgenerational perseverance until now.

**Keywords:** Mexico; Tlatelolco; 1968; students; collective memory.

### **The students of '68 and the current validity of their revolutionary impetus**

The spirit of '68 had one of its centers in Mexico. In this country, as in France or the United States, 1968 was a year of broad and intense mobilizations characterized by their relative spontaneity, by their naturalness and freshness, by their novel and subversive aspect, by their great expressiveness and overflowing imagination, by their liberating eagerness and by the massive participation of students. They were young people who studied in high schools and universities in Mexico City, Morelia, Puebla, Guadalajara, Monterrey and other cities. They were generally very different from their parents. They saw society and history in a different way. They wanted to change everything around them. They were vigorous and impetuous. And many, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, flooded the public space.

The Mexican student wave rose to levels never seen before and threatened to disturb and change everything. The social and political structures trembled under the impulse of the '68 Movement. The students of those times almost revolutionized the country in which they lived, but they did not or, rather, as I will try to show now, they have not done so yet.

We do not know everything that can still happen in the future in Mexico thanks to what happened in 1968. We only know what happened in that year and its effects in the years that have passed since then. And we know all this only in part. What we know is a part, a trace of what happened, which now allows us to think about '68.

### **Mexican '68 Movement: Unique and like any other**

Whether we were alive in 1968 or not, our thoughts about that year are based only on a fraction of what happened: what we remember, what we have read, what we have been told. This is merely a tiny fraction of the whole. However, this fraction can become something enormous, a cluster composed of innumerable reminiscences, information, images, words and impressions. Let us recall a few of them, starting with those that are not distinctive of the Mexican '68 Movement, those in which the Mexican '68 Movement is analogous to that of other Western countries because of a

profound generational consonance among young people of that time.

Mexican '68 students proceeded like the Europeans and the Americans in their main actions and methods: assemblies, strikes, street protests, silent marches, blockades, sit-ins, rallies in public places, banners, posters, leaflets, pamphlets and so on. They overwhelmed institutional policy, they opposed the establishment, they had a progressive and leftist orientation, they questioned the authorities, they protested against the government, they clashed with the police and threw stones at policemen. Mexican '68 actions also coincided with those of other countries in denouncing the hypocrisy of their time. This denunciation, in the precise case of Mexico, tended to focus on the authoritarian and highly repressive regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which hypocritically presented itself as democratic, tolerant and respectful of freedom of expression.

Behind the external image of tolerance, freedom and democracy, Mexican society suffered a despotic oppression and the ruthless persecution of all kinds of political opponents dating from the 1940s. This oppressive and persecutory climate was a determining factor in why Mexico's '68 was so different from the '68 actions in other countries and ended with a bloodbath, the slaughter of Tlatelolco, on October 2, 1968. Such an outcome could almost have been predicted in examining the history of Mexico in the 20th century. Let us remember this history to understand why the Mexican '68 Movement was so particular. Its particularity owes in large part to the historical plot in which the movement was inserted.

### **The history that led to the Mexican '68 Movement**

Since colonial times, Mexico has been a country torn by socioeconomic inequalities. These inequalities did not decrease with the independence of the country at the beginning of the 19th century. On the contrary, they tended to increase, prevented true democratization and became unsustainable during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This partly explains the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The revolutionary movement was for democracy, land and freedom, but also, fundamentally, for what is often forgotten: justice and equality.

After the Mexican Revolution, it was necessary to wait until the regime of Lázaro Cárdenas, between 1934 and 1940, so that the revolutionary ideals could materialize partially through nationalist and egalitarian measures, such as the expropriation of large estates, the distribution of 18 million hectares to peasants, the nationalization of railroads and the oil industry, the strengthening of trade unions, an ambitious plan for literacy and public education, the popular dissemination of culture, and insubordination in the face of interference by the United States. These measures caused great discomfort among

the privileged and conservative sectors of Mexican society, which, after the conclusion of the Cárdenas presidency, endeavored to reverse the revolutionary transformation of the country.

The pressure of the ruling classes caused Cárdenas' achievements to be attenuated, curtailed or simply annulled in the following decades. From the 1940s forward, the history of Mexico has been characterized by an incessant dismantling of Cardenism and its revolutionary heritage. This has led us to a situation very similar to that which existed during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, with a vertiginous growth of inequality, the increasing exploitation and marginalization of the poorest citizens, the abandonment of education, the greater concentration of wealth and land in the hands of the privileged, the privatization of what had been nationalized, the unstoppable plundering of national resources by foreign companies, the erosion of sovereignty and the growing interference of the United States in internal affairs.

The anti-Cardenista reaction, the turn to right-wing policies and the return to the pre-revolutionary past has triggered from the beginning, since the 1940s, a wave of collective mobilizations to defend the revolutionary legacy of Cardenism. These mobilizations provoked, in turn, the violent reaction of the PRI regime, which, from then until now, has shown an authoritarian and highly repressive side that manifested itself in the aggressions enacted against the student movement of 1968 and especially in the carnage of October 2 in Tlatelolco.

The Tlatelolco massacre was not the first of its kind. Between the 1940s and 1968, there was a series of killings perpetrated for political reasons and executed by soldiers and police against civilians and opponents of the regime, including: in 1942, in downtown Mexico City, the murder of six students of the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN); in 1952, also in Mexico City, more than 200 left-wing opponents, followers of Miguel Henríquez Guzmán, killed in the Alameda; in 1958, in the Zócalo of the same city, several victims participating in the teachers' movement; between 1960 and 1962, in Guerrero, 50 murdered in the repression of the Guerrero Civic Association; in 1963 and 1966, in Morelia, 3 students killed; in 1967, in Guerrero, 5 deaths among teachers and parents in Atoyac, and between 40 and 80 deaths and disappearances in the repression conducted against the coprero peasants near Acapulco. These massacres did not prevent, during the same period, large protest movements in which the heritage of the revolution and Cardenism was defended: in 1952, the movement of the henriquistas for the restoration of the Cardenista project; in 1958, the Revolutionary Movement of Teachers led by Othón Salazar, as well as the railroad strike led by Valentín Campa and Demetrio Vallejo; in 1964, the strikes and demonstrations of doctors; and between 1963 and 1967, the student mobilizations in Puebla, in Sonora, in Tabasco and especially in the Michoacán University of San Nicolás de Hidalgo in Morelia.

## From the March of Freedom to the meetings of the National Center of Democratic Students

Just as government violence was unable to stop the great social mobilizations of 1952 to 1968, so it was unable to prevent the great student movement of '68. This movement made its way through despite ruthless repression, as we shall see now in a brief journey in which I will only sketch some general outlines of what has already been recorded, reported and analyzed thoroughly and exhaustively by authors such as Edmundo Jardón Arzate<sup>1</sup>, Elena Poniatowska<sup>2</sup>, Sergio Zermeno<sup>3</sup>, Paco Ignacio Taibo II<sup>4</sup>, Daniel Cazés<sup>5</sup>, Sergio Aguayo<sup>6</sup>, Jorge Volpi<sup>7</sup>, Julio Scherer y Carlos Monsiváis<sup>8</sup>. Perhaps the only distinctive feature of my historical account is what happened outside of Mexico City, especially between January and July 1968, which, significantly, is often forgotten or underestimated.

The year 1968 begins with the organization and realization of a great March for Freedom organized by the National Center of Democratic Students (CNED). The marchers intend to travel 200 kilometers, from the town of Dolores Hidalgo to the city of Morelia, to demand the release of political prisoners, including Rafael Aguilar Talamantes, Efrén Capiz and Sebastián Dimas Quiroz, leaders of the student movement of 1966 at the Universidad Michoacana. After advancing 120 kilometers and reaching Valle de Santiago, the march was dissolved with violence enacted by the military. This provoked a wave of student protests in Mexico City, Morelia, Culiacán, Mazatlán, Monterrey, Villahermosa, Veracruz, Chihuahua and Puebla.

In February 1968, in various parts of Mexico, 11,000 students from 29 normal rural schools went on strike. In the following months, the arrests of student activists and members of the Mexican Communist Party and other organizations multiplied. At the same time, there were numerous demonstrations for the release of political prisoners. One of the most charismatic prisoners, the famous railroad leader Demetrio Vallejo, goes on a hunger strike in prison. Several student leaders of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) stand in solidarity with him

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1 Jardón Arzate 1969.

2 Poniatowska 1971.

3 Zermeno 1978.

4 Taibo II 1991.

5 Cazés 1993.

6 Aguayo Quezada 1998.

7 Volpi 2006.

8 Scherer and Monsiváis 1999.

and also declare a hunger strike.

The Mexican National Conference of Solidarity with the People of Vietnam is held between March 16 and 17. Then, between March and May, tens of thousands of people, including many students, express their support of the Vietnamese and their repudiation of US intervention in several cities of the country. There are demonstrations held successively in Guadalajara (March 25), Chilpancingo, Torreón and Los Mochis (April 21), Mexico City and Culiacán (April 25), Zacatecas (April 27), Fresnillo (April 27 and 29), Mexicali (May 24) and Morelia (July 26 and 28).

In May in Mexico City and in July in Morelia, there are two meetings of the National Center of Democratic Students (CNED). Representatives from all over the country resolve to continue fighting for peace in Vietnam, for the democratization of education and for the liberation of student political prisoners. The General Constitution of this student broad organization, approved on May 10, not only marks the goal of emancipation from “Yankee imperialism”, but also considers “an active political, ideological and practical struggle against the restrictionist and technicalist planning of education and against the pragmatic, scientificist and developmentalist orientation, bases of the current educational system”.<sup>9</sup>

On July 11, at a student demonstration in Puebla, a student is killed by a university group closely linked to the government. This murder provokes protests and aggravates a long and violent conflict between governmental and anti-government sectors at the Autonomous University of Puebla. The same murder is also a reason for the public declaration of condemnation made by the National Center of Democratic Students in Morelia.

### The epicenter of the movement in Mexico City

From the end of July, the '68 Movement has its epicenter in Mexico City. It is here where, on July 22, a week after the aforementioned student meeting in Morelia, there is the unleashing of a series of events that will unfortunately lead to the massacre of Tlatelolco. Everything begins with street confrontations between senior high school students. The police intervene, detain several students and raid a vocational high school of the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN). On July 26, students demonstrate to protest against the police actions. These students are, in turn, attacked by the police. As a result of the attack, the protesters retreat and end up meeting another demonstration that has been convened at the same time by the Communist Youth, the National Democratic Student Center (CNED) and student societies of the National Polytechnic Institute and the UNAM to celebrate the Cuban Revolution and commemorate the assault on the Moncada Barracks. The participants of both

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9 In Peláez Ramos 2018.

demonstrations march together and are harshly repressed by the police. There are more than 500 injured and dozens of detainees. In the following days, police and military will enter several schools, occupy the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and stop some members of the party as well as members of the National Center of Democratic Students (CNED).

On July 31, protesting against police and military actions, all the faculties, institutes and schools of the UNAM and the IPN went on strike. The next day, August 1, there was a demonstration of 80,000 university students led by Javier Barros, the UNAM rector, who demanded respect for university autonomy and freedom for imprisoned students. On August 2, a National Strike Council (CNH) was formed. It was composed of the main leaders of the movement.

During the months of August and September, the demonstrations multiply in Mexico City. The movement no longer only has a student character. There are also all kinds of workers: electricians, railroad employees, telephone operators, primary teachers and workers at the Euzkadi tire factory. All these people protest against the repressive reactions of the regime, against its oppressive and undemocratic character, but also against capitalism and US imperialism. Starting August 20, after the intervention in Czechoslovakia, there are also protests against the USSR. Even the Central Committee of the Mexican Communist Party condemns the Soviet intervention. Unlike other communists in the world, Mexicans tend to show close proximity, affinity and sensitivity to the 1968 movement, which, in turn, tends to sympathize with communists and externalize anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist positions. Portraits of Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh appear in the demonstrations along with those of the railroad leader Demetrio Vallejo. There are also portraits of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, the consequent revolutionaries par excellence, who did not give in and did not let themselves be corrupted and perverted like those in the regime.

The most popular protests were held on August 5, with 100,000 demonstrators; on August 13, with 150,000 people; and on August 27, with 300,000 protesters. In this last demonstration, which lasted until the next day, students raised the red and black flag in the Zócalo of Mexico City. They received the solidarity of government employees, but they were also severely repressed by police and military, as well as by snipers who, for the first time, shot at the demonstrators from the surrounding buildings. Government thus answered again and again with repression against demonstrations against repression. But the mobilizations continued. Meetings were held in Texcoco, Tlalnepantla and other industrial areas to approach the workers and seek their support. On September 13, there was a great silent march in Mexico City. Many protesters appeared gagged or with adhesive cloth in their mouths. They made the “V” sign with their fingers. There were banners and posters that read: “silence is repudiation

of repression”, “honest leader equal to political prisoner” and “freedom to the truth: dialogue!”.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, throughout the country, there were signs of solidarity with the students at the capital. Between August 8 and 9, strikes broke out in the National School of Teachers, the Technological School of Ciudad Madero, the Training Center of Uruapan and the universities of Puebla, Oaxaca, Morelos, Yucatan, Sinaloa, Sonora Tabasco, Campeche, Baja California, Chihuahua, Veracruz and Guerrero. The most important Jesuit educational institution in Mexico, the Universidad Iberoamericana, goes on strike on August 13. There are student demonstrations throughout the country: July 30 in Puebla, August 1 in Monterrey, August 5, 10 and 16 in Torreón, August 13 in Xalapa, August 25 and August 31 in Morelia, August 26 and 27 in Oaxaca, August 27 in Culiacán and Monterrey, September 4 in Puebla, September 9 in Culiacán again, and September 28 in Orizaba and Xalapa, where there is a violent response from police and military.

### Reaction and repression

The violent reactions in Orizaba and Xalapa were not isolated events. Recall that on August 27, the military had attacked the demonstrators in Mexico City. In September, the military surrounded educational centers in Oaxaca and Chilpancingo. They also occupied a high school in Cuernavaca, where the Strike Council of the Autonomous University of Morelos was meeting. There was also an important military deployment around the buildings of the Autonomous University of Puebla.

In an isolated incident, on September 14, five workers from the Autonomous University of Puebla were lynched in the small town of San Miguel Canoa. The inhabitants of the place used machetes to kill three of them and the owner of the house in which they were staying. The main instigator was a priest who accused the university students of being communists and of wanting to raise a red and black flag in the church.

The anti-Communist campaign constantly surrounded the '68 Movement. From the beginning, the same in the capital as in the province, all Sixty-Eighters were considered Communists by government officials and by several journalists working in radio, television and newspapers. Many imagined a communist-Soviet maneuver to destabilize the country, overthrow the government and prevent the Olympics that would be held in Mexico between October 12 and 27 of that same year of 1968.

The animosity against the movement of 1968 was predominant in the highest levels of government and in the most conservative and right-wing sectors of Mexican society. The students suffered violence from far-right movements, pro-government youth gangs and military and paramilitary groups whose members dressed as civilians and used firearms. These

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10 Cazés 1993, p. 166.



kind of groups constantly attacked the '68 Movement and showed their power by conducting a series of coordinated aggressions on high schools on August 31 and September 7. That is how they set the stage for the final actions of the military.

On September 18, the Mexican Army occupied the University City and arrested more than 500 professors and students. Four days later, on September 23, the military occupied the main educational centers of the National Polytechnic Institute. Finally, on October 2, a rally of 15,000 people in Tlatelolco was attacked by the military and paramilitaries of the Olimpia Battalion, who murdered more than 200 people—perhaps 300, perhaps more than 300. There were also more than 3,000 detainees added to the hundreds who were previously detained. Many of them were tortured. Some disappeared forever. Today we know that these crimes were decided, engineered, authorized, ordered and directed by the highest officials of the Mexican government of the time, including the President, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the Secretary of Defense, Marcelino García Barragán, and the Secretary of Governance and future President Luis Echeverría Álvarez.

The government brutality achieved the purpose of temporarily stifling the movement. As we read in an account by Arturo Taracena, “finally, with the ebb produced by the massacre of Tlatelolco and the capture of the main leaders of the student movement, the spirit of '68 was suspended for a moment, overshadowed by the lavish inauguration of the Olympic Games”.<sup>11</sup> However, between the months of October and December, the repression continued. On November 16, the Marxist writer and thinker José Revueltas was imprisoned. There were more arrests, more student murders, as well as expulsions of foreigners linked to the movement. On December 1, at a meeting of the National Center of Democratic Students from which several murdered and imprisoned were missing, an eloquent diagnosis was made, a diagnosis that continues to be valid until now: “The governing forces need their traditional repressive and antidemocratic methods, as they are not able to stay in power in a free game of political forces”.<sup>12</sup>

**October 2 is not forgotten!**

The Mexican Sixty-Eighters managed to unmask the traditional repressive and anti-democratic methods of the PRI regime. And they did this in 1968, when the eyes of the world turned towards Mexico, where the Olympic Games were going to take place. These circumstances were decisive to reach the bloody end of 1968 in Mexico. The massacre occurred on October 2, only ten days before the Olympics began. Before

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11 Taracena Arriola 2008, p. 77.

12 In Peláez Ramos 2018.

the imminent arrival of an avalanche of tourists and journalists, the Mexican government resorted to its usual method, repression, to solve the problem of student mobilization quickly and effectively.

The main purpose of the student mobilization, as I pointed out before, was to unmask the Mexican PRI government, take away its hypocritical democratic mask and show its true face: its authoritarian, violent and repressive face. But it was the same government that betrayed itself, in the slaughter of Tlatelolco, so as not to be denounced and exposed by the students. Indeed, to ensure the student movement did not unmask it, the government hastened to unmask itself.

The best-known event of the anti-repressive '68 Movement was paradoxically the bloody government repression. It is because of this repression that we remember 1968 every year in Mexico on October 2. On that day, year after year, for half a century now, tens of thousands of students take to the streets of Mexico to honor their fallen '68 comrades. It is a way of memorializing them and keeping them alive in memory. It is also an expression of what Maurice Halbwachs called “collective memory” to designate “the memory in which we participate as members of a group”<sup>13</sup> and in which we collectively remember “an event that is part of the existence of the group and that we perceive from the point of view of the same group”.<sup>14</sup> Here the group is the Mexican student body that remembers, feels and conceives what happened in 1968 as part of its existence. It is, in a way, the same group that was mobilized in 1968 and that was attacked in Tlatelolco. It is the group that continues to mobilize each time October 2 arrives to commemorate the anniversary of the massacre. Its collective memory becomes explicit in the slogan repeated again and again by the students: “October 2 is not forgotten! October 2 is not forgotten! October 2 is not forgotten!”.

That October 2 is not forgotten is confirmed by the students who fill the streets to repeat “October 2 is not forgotten!”. Their slogan says the same thing they convey when they massively deploy their presence. They show, by demonstrating each October 2, that October 2 is not forgotten, that October 2 is remembered collectively by demonstrating, marching, attending rallies, painting the walls. These actions externalize a collective memory that differs from simple past history, as Halbwachs correctly points out, because “it only retains from the past what is still alive and capable of living in the consciousness of the group that sustains it”.<sup>15</sup>

Students from Mexico keep October 2 alive. They distinguish it from a simple dead historical date by making it live in what they feel and think, but also in what they say and what they do. All this is the consciousness

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13 Halbwachs 1942, p. 174.

14 Halbwachs 1944, pp. 65-66.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

of the student body. All this is also its collective memory. It is as external as it is internal. It lies not only in the significance of the gestures, but in the gestures themselves, among them chanting that October 2 is not forgotten.

The enunciation itself, the act of chanting the slogan, corroborates the statement that “October 2 is not forgotten”.<sup>16</sup> Enunciating this every year, as well as demonstrating this every year, is a way of not forgetting October 2, not forgetting it even if the years go by, 1969, 1970, 1971, the rest of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and then the 2000s. The years go by and the students continue to go out on the street every October 2, showing us again and again, every year, that October 2 is not forgotten, that its memory insists and resists, that the collective memory perseveres and manages to cross generations: those before me, then us, in the middle, and those who come later, including my students at the university, who continue to march every October 2, as I did, chanting what we chanted between 1994 and 1997.

We have, then, a transgenerational perseverance of the Mexican '68 Movement. This perseverance is a symbolic form of subsistence of the student body that was mobilized in 1968 and that was attacked in Tlatelolco because the subsistence of the group, as Halbwachs suggests, is correlative of the permanence of its memory, a memory that is neither more nor less than “the group seen from the inside”, a memory whose “limits” coincide with those of the same group.<sup>17</sup>

After their “first death”, their death in the real world, the students of 1968 remain symbolically alive through those who remember them in the commemorative demonstrations on October 2.<sup>18</sup> The collective memory is a triumph against Díaz Ordaz, against the members of the Olimpia Battalion and against the other executioners of Tlatelolco. Although the murderers have killed young people full of life, they will not have terminated an important part of their life: the spirit of '68. Such a spirit will remain alive until its extinction, its disappearance in the symbolic realm, the “second death”.<sup>19</sup> It will live as long as there are new bodies in which it can be incarnated. And to embody it, to prolong its life, it is enough to remember and act accordingly. All we need is the “fidelity” that “attaches us” to the event of 1968.<sup>20</sup>

16 See Lacan 1959.

17 Halbwachs 1944, pp. 131, 140.

18 See Lacan 1960, pp. 289-298.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Badiou 1988, p. 258.

**What is forgotten when October 2 is not forgotten**

It is true that many students, although they protest on October 2, do not have a very clear idea of what happened that day. It is also true that most of the demonstrators on October 2 ignore almost everything about the 1968 movement in Mexico. There is a great amnesia in the collective memory. October 2 is not forgotten only to forget everything else.

We cannot deny that much is forgotten when October 2 is not forgotten. Nor can we avoid the most diverse suspicions regarding this oblivion. The collective memory is suspiciously selective. Why does it retain what it retains and discard what it discards? What is its selection criteria? How can we not suspect it? Some of our suspicions, by the way, are not very important and can even be fun.

For example, when we think of the widespread amnesia with respect to the origin of the '68 Movement, the March of Freedom and everything else that happened outside Mexico City, how can we not glimpse a perfect example here of what I will humorously call “*Chilangocentrism*” to designate the prejudiced belief that Mexico City is the center of the country, that everything revolves around it, that it precedes and governs everything that happens in the province, that the provincial cities follow the rhythm of the capital and that nothing truly original and decisive happens outside of Mexico City? This prejudice finds an interesting refutation in the '68 Movement, which, although it ended up having its epicenter in Mexico City, originated clearly outside the city and buried its roots in student movements in Sonora and especially in Morelia. However, given the importance of what happened in 1968, it seems ridiculous to dwell on these minor details. What does it matter to forget what happened in the province when hundreds of protesters were murdered in the capital?

**Forget the hopeful and remember the hopeless**

The exclusive evocation of October 2 contains oversights that we can forget without consequences, but there are also other suspicious oversights that we should not forget. There are two to which I wish to refer. I mentioned the first: by remembering October 2 and only October 2 again and again, we forgot all the other days, all the other events, all of 1968, everything that happened that year. The '68 Movement disappears behind the terrible slaughter of Tlatelolco. October 2 ends up being synonymous with 1968, replacing the whole year, condensing it into a single day, as if October 2 would have been the only day of the year, as if there were no longer 364 days, as if repression was the only thing that happened in the '68 Movement.

Paco Ignacio Taibo II expresses this sentiment in a brilliant way: “the black magic of the cult of defeat and of the dead has reduced '68 to Tlatelolco alone”, in such a way that October 2 “remains alone”

and “replaces in the memory the 100 days of strike”.<sup>21</sup> There is, indeed, a disturbing necrophiliac defeatism. We forget the wonderful social movement and we do not forget the appalling government repression. We remember the killing that scares us and discourages us, but we forget what is killed, what inspires us and encourages us. We lose the hopeful, the '68 movement, and we are left with the hopeless, with October 2, with the violence of the government. We keep alive the terror and not the illusion of '68. We forget what we should not forget and we do not forget what maybe, in the end, it would be better to forget.

The insistent memory of the Tlatelolco massacre could be fulfilling a crucial function in the repressive and antidemocratic PRI regime: to inflict a traumatic blow that would nullify any confidence in mobilization and that would plunge people into discouragement, fear and terror in the face of governmental violence. The “October 2 is not forgotten!” slogan also means: *Do not forget that the PRI regime represses protestors, that it kills those who protest, that the protests end in bloodbaths, they have no happy endings, and that's why it is better not to protest, as is taught to us by October 2, and that is perhaps also why we should not forget it.*

In the 1990s, when I was young and participated in demonstrations in commemoration of October 2, I remember that my mother, to dissuade me from demonstrating, told me that it was dangerous, that I should not forget October 2. She told me then exactly the same thing that I was going to shout in the streets: October 2 is not forgotten. What made me go to the streets to express my rage against the murderous government was the same thing that made her think that it was a bad idea to go out and express that anger. Her fear was provoked by the same thing that ignited my anger: the belief that is summarized in the slogan “October 2 is not forgotten!”. The collective memory could justify both anger and fear, both courage and discouragement, both passivity and activity. The effects were contradictory, but the collective memory was the same. Remembering October 2 not only made me and my comrades go to the streets to protest against the regime, but it also meant that many others, perhaps many more than us, did not go to the streets to express their disagreement.

There is, then, good reason to suspect that the reduction of the '68 movement to October 2 has disheartening, dissuasive, demobilizing effects. It is the same thing that happens with the reduction of the Sixty-Eighters to the ones who gave up their convictions, who ended up embodying the opposite of the spirit of '68, who betrayed their comrades and sold themselves to the regime in exchange for scholarships or government posts. There are, of course, cases like those of the renegade Gilberto Guevara Niebla, the informer Socrates Campos Lemus and the incongruous Marcelino Perelló Valls, but they are proportionally a minority. In addition to this, as Luis González de Alba has shown, they are

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<sup>21</sup> Taibo II 1991, p. 101.

debatable cases and none corresponds to the profile of someone who is “objectively a traitor”.<sup>22</sup> However, by thinking that they are objective cases of treason and that they are the majority or typical or even universal, one is left with the impression that the spirit of '68 was a simple form of immaturity, a typically adolescent rebellion, something that should be overcome when maturing. This is how we ended up simplistically reducing the '68 Movement to the caprice of a few miserable, despicable characters, spoiled youngsters and inconsequential adults. This simplistic reductionism can fulfil the same functions as the one that reduces 1968 to October 2: disappointing, demoralizing and deflating those who are tempted to continue what Sixty-Eighters began.

**Forget the present**

The specter of '68 is conjured with the invocations of slaughter and betrayal. When thinking about Tlatelolco and Campos Lemus, who would have the courage to pick up the torch of the '68 Movement? This is how the '68 Movement can be confined to the year 1968. What is sought is that it is over. This leads us to the second reductionism to which I wish to refer: a reductionism that not only equates the year 1968 to Wednesday, October 2nd, but reduces the half century that has already passed since 1968 to the single year of 1968, which then is reduced to a single day. I will explain.

Contrary to what we are led to believe, the '68 Movement was not stopped by the Tlatelolco massacre. It was not defeated by the bazookas and machine guns of the military. Nor is it something that can be relegated to the year 1968, something that has begun and ended in that year, something that responds only to the conjuncture and the planetary environment of 1968. Mexican '68, rather, expresses a movement that comes from 1940 and that still endures in 2018: a movement for freedom and for democracy, for equality and for justice, for the legacy of Cardenism and the revolution, and against the PRI regime with its counterrevolutionary, corrupt, unjust, repressive and undemocratic tendencies. This movement that has not ended is also the '68 Movement, which, therefore, is not an event of the past, but still an evolving force. Remembering it is continuing it. Keeping its memory alive requires us to keep the movement alive.

Collective memory, as conceived by Halbwachs, is distinguished by keeping alive what is remembered and not just the memory. It is not just that the '68 Movement is not forgotten, but that it does not end, that it goes on, which, moreover, is also what happens when the students go out to the streets to chant “October 2 is not forgotten!”. Current students do not forget October 2 because they are still fighting for what students were fighting on October 2, 1968. And they keep fighting for the same thing because they have not succeeded, because everything is the same as in

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<sup>22</sup> González de Alba, 2016.

1968, because the movement has not yet managed to revolutionize the country, but it may do so in the future. This is also what is often forgotten when October 2 is not forgotten. What is forgotten is that there is nothing that can simply be forgotten, left behind, as if it were only past, as if it had already happened, as if it did not continue to happen.

The massacre of Tlatelolco was repeated on June 10, 1971, in Mexico City; then on December 22, 1997, in Acteal; and on September 26, 2014, in Iguala. The repressive government did not stop killing the opponents. The repression continued—oppression and authoritarianism, too. The democratic deficit is still valid in Mexico. Injustice and inequality are suffered daily by most Mexicans.

Capitalism continues to devastate the world and now threatens the subsistence of the human race. US imperialism does not stop bombing innocent peoples, impoverishing underdeveloped countries and being an obstacle to democratization in Latin America. The Vietnam War moved to Central America and then to the Middle East, to Iraq, Syria and Palestine.

The causes of the 1968 movement are as valid now as they were in 1968. And it is because of all this that one cannot stop fighting, and that the '68 Movement continues after 1968, just as it had begun earlier. It is a continuous struggle against repression, against oppression, against exploitation, against destruction. There are only two possibilities here. Either we fight and maybe we succeed, or we give up and we surely lose. As José Revueltas wrote in 1968, we are facing a “unique unavoidable and resounding dilemma: victory or death”, because while “victory, for our country, will be a free, democratic, healthy Mexico, where you can breathe, think, create, study, love”, the defeat will be death, “the night of the soul, the endless tortures, the padlock on the lips, the misery of the body and the spirit”.<sup>23</sup> It is to avoid this misery that people fought in 1968, but also before, after, even today and surely tomorrow.

History of struggle

We have already seen how the Mexican '68 Movement is inserted into a history of struggle that dates back to the 1940s. José Revueltas conjectured that this history, after the repression of the railroad strike in 1958, found a way to “take revenge” by “moving under the events” until it emerged in the student movement of 1968, which, therefore, was not “historically isolated”.<sup>24</sup> As Pablo Gómez pointed out, coinciding with Revueltas, '68 was part of a historical framework in which different protests and other collective actions, far from being “isolated from one another”, were woven into a single “process” of struggle in which 1968

23 Revueltas 1970, p. 91.

24 Sevilla 1976, pp. 13-14.

appeared as a “climax”.<sup>25</sup> This year only made the existing process acquire a certain intensity, amplitude and coloration, and to continue forward as it came from behind. The process, then, should not be confined to 1968. Of course, that year is decisive, though not to inaugurate, much less to consummate, complete and finish the history of struggle, but simply to continue and lead it through new channels.

The climax was also a turning point. Everything changed in crossing the spirit of '68 with its marked youthful factor, its questioning of generalized hypocrisy and its other characteristic elements. For example, as Soledad Loaeza, Ilán Semo and others have shown, the democratizing action of the movement and its social and institutional impact were decisive factors that have conditioned and determined the endless transition to democracy in Mexico.<sup>26</sup> As for the government repression and specifically the massacre of Tlatelolco, by betraying the closure of the Mexican government to any legal and peaceful strategy, it could have favored the proliferation of the guerrillas in the 1970s. The sure thing is that 1968 came to transform the country.

Everything changed with the event of 1968, no doubt, but to move forward. In Mexico, from 1968 until now, social movements have not stopped in their effort to defend and preserve the revolutionary legacy. There have been millions of Mexicans who struggled for the same thing as in 1968: for freedom and democracy, but also for equality and justice. As we remember the '68 Movement, we also remember the most important national mobilizations of the following years: those offering support to the son of Lázaro Cárdenas, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, when he was the presidential candidate in the electoral fraud of 1988; the wave of solidarity with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation since it took up arms, from 1994 to now; the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) in 2006; and the movement led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador in recent years.

The insistent remembrance of the great struggles should not make us forget the innumerable social movements that have unceasingly agitated Mexican society in the last 50 years, including several student mobilizations in various institutions throughout the country: in the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon in 1971, in the Autonomous University of Sinaloa in 1972, in the UNAM in 1986 and 1999, in the Colleges of Sciences and Humanities in 1995, in the Autonomous Metropolitan University in 1996, and so on. At the same time, each new October 2, the students have gone out to the streets to chant “October 2 is not forgotten!”. In recent years, there have also been two major movements that united students from all over Mexico who insistently

25 Poniatowska 1971, p. 18.

26 Loaeza 1989. Semo 1993.



remembered the Tlatelolco massacre: in 2012, the #yosoy132 movement for democracy, for freedom of expression and against the return of the PRI regime; and in 2014, the movement caused by the disappearance of 43 students from the Normal Rural School of Ayotzinapa, who, significantly, were attacked by the police when they gathered funds to go to Mexico City and participate in the commemorative demonstration of October 2.

Half a century of repression

Just as the mobilization continued during the last 50 years, so did the repression, leaving thousands of victims throughout the country, among them some who were murdered collectively in the massacres of the regime that came after Tlatelolco, for example: in 1971, in Mexico City, 50 students killed in the Corpus Christi massacre; in 1982, in La Trinidad, Guerrero, 9 murdered peasants; in 1995, in Aguas Blancas, Guerrero, 17 peasants who were killed; in 1997, in Acteal, Chiapas, 45 indigenous people who were murdered; in 1998, in El Charco, Guerrero, 11 young people who were killed; in 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero, 8 people murdered and 43 students went missing; in 2016, in Nochistlán, 10 murdered; and in 2017, in Arantepacua, 4 indigenous people who were killed. All these people annoyed the regime and were eliminated by police, military and paramilitaries. Their elimination is enough to confirm that the Mexican political system was not a democracy, not even an imperfect democracy, but simply a dictatorship, a “perfect dictatorship”, as Mario Vargas Llosa called it.<sup>27</sup>

As we considered earlier, government repression of peaceful movements, before and after 1968, might lead many opponents to take up arms and join the guerrillas. Since the 1960s, there have been many important guerrilla groups in Mexico, including those of Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez between the 1960s and the early 1970s, the Revolutionary Action Movement and the September 23 Communist League in the 1970s, the Revolutionary Party of Workers and Peasants Union of the People (PROCUP) in the 1980s, and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the Popular Revolutionary Army in the 1990s. In the face of the eruption of the guerrillas, repression tended to intensify. Thousands of people were arrested, tortured and killed under the persecution of the guerrillas. It was in the context of this persecution that many of the previously mentioned massacres took place.

In any case, in all the previously mentioned massacres and in the thousands of political assassinations perpetrated by the PRI regime after 1968, the victims were mostly opponents of the regime eliminated by the military, paramilitaries and police working for the regime. It is true that the dead people fought for different causes, but always, as the last resort, they also fought for the same thing as the young people who

27 Vargas Llosa 1990.

died in Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968: for freedom and democracy, for justice and equality. We can say, then, that it is a struggle that has not ceased in Mexico since the 1940s. This struggle, which has now lasted almost 80 years, is the one that was externalized in the '68 Movement, which, therefore, should not be confined to the year 1968, should not be abstracted from the great struggle in which '68 is only one link, a decisive link that is different from any other, but a link that only makes sense because of the past and the future that come together in it. And the future of 1968, we must not forget, is our present, that is, the present of those, like me, who still believe in the same values as the students of '68: freedom, democracy, equality, justice.

Happy ending?

If we believe in the same thing as the Sixty-Eighters, then we can only manifest it by continuing what they started. We must see their struggle as a pending task. We must continue to fight against repression and oppression, against injustice and inequality, against capitalist exploitation, and against the imperialism of the United States and other world powers.

Why not fight? We still suffer the same as the Sixty-Eighters. We still feel and think the same as them, we desire the same, we are the same. It is true that we are also many other things that they were not yet. And of course they were also many other things that we are no longer. But there is something that they already were and that persists through what we are. There is the subject caused by the event of 1968. There is our fidelity to this event, our commitment to the truth that has been disclosed, our sustaining of the consequences of 1968.<sup>28</sup>

As we pledge ourselves to keep up the struggle of the Sixty-Eighters, our “we” is also theirs. They are also part of who we are. There is something that we can only be with them. Leaving them behind would be nothing more than leaving ourselves behind.

In order not to be lost, we must continue protesting as the Sixty-Eighters did, denouncing what they denounced, exposing us to the bullets that killed them. We must keep talking about them as the only way to continue talking about us. And we must not stop chanting the slogans with which we remember ourselves by remembering them loudly every new October 2. Otherwise, as the astronomer Guillermo Haro said when recalling '68, we will fall into “that magnificent and selfish silence with which we protect ourselves and forget ourselves”.<sup>29</sup>

To keep ourselves alive in memory, we must let ourselves be possessed by what Jorge Volpi called the “spirit of Tlatelolco”. We

28 Badiou 1988.

29 In Poniatowska 1971, p. 145.

have to be the spirit of '68 that is not extinguished: the fighting spirit of the Sixty-Eighters. We must keep alive not only their memory, but also them, those who apparently died in Tlatelolco. Only then can we defeat those who believed they were killed. And, by doing so, we will defeat other murderers of life and hope, among them those who murdered and disappeared the students of Ayotzinapa in 2014, while preparing to honor the students of Tlatelolco.

Maybe in the end, with the support of the students from Ayotzinapa and all the others, we will get Mexican '68 to have a happy ending, distinct from October 2. Let me insist that October 2 was not the end of the movement. The end remains to be seen.<sup>30</sup> And surely there is a long time to see it because the Sixty-Eighters, as José Revueltas pointed out, are “making history”, they are “its flesh and blood”, and that is precisely why they can only “win at the end”.<sup>31</sup>

30 Badiou 1988.

31 Revueltas 1970, p. 25.

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# Re-politicizing 68

## Jacques Rancière

**Abstract:** The present work reconsiders the event of May 68. It does so not simply by commemorating the event, but by rethinking the relation between politics, time and narration. A new examination of the sequence of May 68 and the history of its interpretations might have some consequences that could help us think about the temporality of politics and the kind of rationality to which it belongs and also to analyze its present state. It is from that perspective that I would like to reexamine the conflict of interpretations about the existence or non-existence of an event called May 68.

**Keywords:** event, politics, time, collectivity, organisation,

The remarks that I will present about the sequence of facts known in France as “May 68” are not destined for the commemoration of a 50th anniversary. They are part of a wider reflection on the relation between three terms: time, narration and politics. This reflection implies a reevaluation of the hierarchy of forms of temporality and an emphasis on those forms of interruption that are most of the time perceived as ephemeral incidents in the long course of historical evolution. It also implies a specific attention to the way in which those interruptions are narrated and to the political uses of memory and history. There is no particular reason to speak about May 68 every ten years. But a new examination of this sequence and the history of its interpretations has some consequences that may help us think about the temporality of politics and the kind of rationality to which it belongs and also to analyze its present state. It is from that perspective that I would like to reexamine the conflict of interpretations about the existence or non-existence of an event called May 68.

Before getting to the heart of the matter, I must make two preliminary remarks. Firstly, I chose to focus on what happened in France around May 68. This does not mean that I ignore the importance of the movements that happened during that period in many other countries, from Czechoslovakia to Mexico. Nor do I ignore that those movements were part of the wider dynamic of the anti-imperialist movement that went across the world in the 1960s. The French “May 68” can be thought as a form of condensation of wider processes which include the decolonization in Africa, the struggle against American imperialism in Vietnam and the struggle against Soviet imperialism in Eastern Europe. But a condensation is precisely a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the effect of a sum of conditions. It is a singularity, a power of novelty that becomes separated from the totality of its conditions and engenders unexpected outcomes. If we want to rethink politics, it is important to focus on the autonomous logic of singular events happening at specific moments instead of dissolving them in the endless web of connections

that makes them depend upon a global process.

Next, when I speak of the interpretations of the event, this does not mean that there is the event, on one side, and a collection of its interpretations, on the other one. An event is so due to a mode of narration and interpretation that links the description of a fact or a series of facts with the declaration of a specific significance: naming it an event means that something has happened that has disturbed the usual course of things. The interpretation does not merely provide a reason for the disturbance. It also determines its nature and the form of rationality under which it falls. You can think that a students' protest in a university and in the streets results from the action of some agitators, which can always happen anywhere and at any time; you can think that it results from malfunctions in the University system that had not been detected and fixed early enough; you can also interpret it as a symptom of a malaise among the young people that had not been perceived. In all these cases, the event is analyzed as the deviation produced by a cause that had not been taken into account. But the interpretation of the deviation from the normal order of expectations remains consistent with this order. The excess of the event is interpreted as the effect of a lack or a lateness. One thinks that those who were in charge of predicting did not do it correctly, but the order of the predictable itself is not disturbed. It is just a matter of adding a few more variables in the causal order. Such is the logic of the explanation that I analyzed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Politically speaking, this is the logic of what I called the police order, an order that reduces the political stage to the interplay of well-identified social groups and the effects of a global social evolution.

But you can take a totally different view of the “disturbance” and give it a much more radical meaning. In this case, you will not only think that a particular sequence of facts disturbed the normal linkage of causes and effects. You will think that it initiated another form of linkage that upsets this normal causality and questions the normal way in which, in general, facts are linked together as causes and effects. From this perspective the event is not only the unexpected that happens. It is the unexpected that calls into question the way in which things are “expected”, in which temporal continuity and discontinuity are integrated into a form of rational linkage.

Identifying a sequence of facts as an event thus means identifying not simply a break inside a normal causal linkage but the emergence of another form of temporality that sets to work another form of rationality. It is from that perspective that I will raise the question: under what conditions can we identify the conglomerate of facts that are designated in France by the date “May 68” as a political event in the sense that I mentioned earlier? I will try to show that we can do so if we discern in this temporal sequence a mode of temporal and rational linkage that disrupts the very form of rationality at work in the categories, descriptions and

arguments by means of which politics is “normally” thought of in the police order. This implies that we take this sequence away from its dominant mode of narration and interpretation, which is the sociological one.

I must make here a remark concerning the adjective “sociological”. As I use it in this text, it does not refer to a specific science or academic discipline. Nor does it involve a conflict of disciplines. Disciplines are not for me established forms of rationality that propose modes of interpretation of that which happens. Instead they are forms of condensation and solidification of modes of interpretation born from the very constraint of identifying that “happening”. Names like *sociology*, *social science* or *political science* do not so much designate disciplines as they designate modes of construction of events, forms of interpretation and subjective positions regarding the very fact that something happens or seems to happen. What I call a sociological mode of interpretation can be implemented in a philosophical argumentation, a journalistic report or a historical narration as well. It is so because “sociology”, long before becoming the name of an academic discipline, had been a way of interpreting modern society and even a way of constructing the very category of modernity. The sociological interpretation defined modernity as a time of crisis in the relation between individuals and the community. That dramaturgy of crisis was first framed at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the event of the French revolution. For the counter-revolutionary thinkers, the French Revolution had destroyed all the social bodies and institutions that served as intermediaries between the individuals and the global society: feudal links, corporations, the Church or others. Accordingly, it left individuals isolated in front of a social totality, which thereby became an imaginary monster unleashing the monstrous acts of revolutionary Terror. But, in their view, that disaster itself did not come out of the blue. It was the effect of a civilizational disease which reached back much earlier —the modern disease named individualism. That disease had started with Protestantism, which had given to the individuals the privilege of an unmediated relation with the Bible. It had been prolonged by the Enlightenment's principles of putting individual freedom and the spirit of free examination at the very basis of social life and political institutions. It had reached its peak with the revolutionary Rights of Man destroying all the traditional social links.

The point is that this narration and this interpretation of modernity as the disastrous triumph of individualism did not remain the sole property of the Counter-Revolution. On the contrary, they became the dominant narrative about modernity, shared by all types of socialism, which brought only a small change to the scenario by accusing, instead of Protestantism or the Enlightenment, the power lurking between them, namely capitalism. They all described modern society as a society characterized by the dissolution of community links, which were drowned



in what the *Communist Manifesto* called the “icy water of egotistical calculation”. They affirmed the necessity of creating new links, new mediations between the individuals and the totality. Sociology was first a project of social reorganization. That which remains of the sociological project is a mode of interpretation that can be summed up in two principles. First, there is a nature of social things, which has its laws like that of natural things. Those laws must be known and respected. Their ignorance gives way to the unleashing of the imaginary, which pretends to rebuild the society as it likes and only engenders destruction. However – this is the second principle – that destruction is ephemeral. When the destructive cycle is over, the nature of social things resumes its normal course.

Those principles involve a certain idea of politics: it is thought of as a form of management dedicated to maintaining or reconstituting institutions that create links between the individuals and the State and harmonize the interests of the various social groups. They also involve a philosophical axiom: the event only happens when the real is denied. It is the disaster that indicates that the stitches of the real have come loose and have left to the imaginary some interstices, which it has transformed into bloody wounds. But the wound is always provisional because the denial of the real is doomed to be denied by the real in turn.

According to these principles, what happened in May 68 in France seems to be the imaginary event *par excellence*. A student revolution seems to contradict the very status of a group mainly composed of sons of the ruling class who live at a remove from the sphere of economic and social conflict. Needless to say, the event itself clearly contradicted that diagnosis: the student revolt in 68 unleashed a movement which, in two weeks, spread over a whole country and undermined all the hierarchical institutions and ways of thinking that govern a society and legitimize a government. That conflagration seemed to refute the sociological worldview. Very soon however the return to order allowed the latter to turn it into its confirmation. A few months later, the leading figure of French academic sociology and a leading intellectual of the French right, Raymond Aron, published a book called *The Elusive Revolution*. His interpretation of the events of the last spring was a mere reassertion of the two axioms of the sociological worldview. Firstly, he said, this turmoil had happened because of a constitutive default of modern society: the lack of intermediary bodies and collective links. Secondly, for the same reason, it could only be an imaginary event. France, he said, lacks those intermediary bodies that are required to tackle the complexity of modern societies. Individuals, and especially young individuals are doomed to loneliness. This lack of real bonds provokes an imaginary overinvestment. The student revolt could thus be described as a big carnival of dreamed brotherhood. But the same reason that accounted for the event explained why it could not be the revolution that it was hoped to be. The 68

Revolution happened because there was a lack of intermediary bodies, but it was doomed to remain an imaginary revolution because there was at least one real “intermediary body”, the French Communist Party, who knew how to protect the working class from the contagion of the student’ movement and collaborate with the government to maintain the normal interplay of social relationships. However, it was an unstable intermediary body. During the crisis, it served as a conservative force but the rest of the time, it continued to maintain the theoretical credibility and the affective attraction of the Marxist revolutionary paradigm.

With the decline of both leftist movements and the Communist Party, the sociological interpretation has become increasingly prominent. In serious academic sociology and ordinary journalistic prose as well, May 68 has become the big surge of the “baby-boomers”, nurtured by the economic prosperity of the so-called “*Trente Glorieuses*” (Glorious Thirty Years) and eager to cast off the yoke of patriarchal authority in order to fully enjoy the pleasures of consumer’s society and sexual freedom. A serious academic historian wrote a book called *The Baby-boomers* which set the 68 events in the wake of a societal and moral revolution - a hedonistic” revolution - whose turning point for him occurred in 1965. He said that the move toward “hedonistic” values could be perceived at that moment in France through a number of converging symptoms: the slowdown of religious vocations, the apparition of nudity in films and magazines and the emergence of an emblematic long haired singer, Antoine, who called for the sale of contraceptive pills in the supermarkets.

Four years before, two sociologists, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello had been still more radical in their book, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. For them the spirit of 68 was not only the manifestation of a hedonistic youth culture. It was also the ideological matrix of the rejuvenation of capitalist culture and capitalist forms of management. Their diagnosis remained predicated on the key principles of sociological interpretation. They argued that there are two main types of critique. There is social critique, which fights against egoism and inequality in the name of the values of solidarity. And there is “artistic critique,” which pits the dominant order against the individualistic values of autonomy and creativity. The first critique belongs to the working-class tradition; the second one characterizes the Student movement. And it is the latter which gave to capitalism the intellectual instruments that enabled it to legitimize new alternative forms of management and undermine working-class resistance by taking up to its advantage the “artistic” and “individualistic” values that the students had opposed to the tradition of social critique.

In such a way, the dominant interpretation of May 68 has become a perfect case of concordance between the sociological mode of interpretation and its object. The basic principles of the sociological

tradition suffice to strip this sequence of facts from any political relevance and reduce it to a typical example of the imaginary event that expressed an underlying sociological process ignored by the actors of this “event”. I think, however, that it is possible to read the concordance the other way around: May 68 might be the kind of event that the sociological mode of interpretation must reduce to nothing in order to validate its own presuppositions. And it is possible to draw from the examination of this sequence a totally different analysis of the temporality of the event along with a totally different view of what politics means.

When we embark on a new examination of the May 68 sequence, one thing first strikes us: the motivations and the practices of those activists are quite far from the images conveyed by the sociological interpretation. No guitar players, no youths with long hair among those who occupied the universities and marched in the streets. No claim against the family order, few calls to sexual freedom, no exaltation of artistic creativity, no claim of the youth as such. From the outset through to the end, the movement focused on the relationship between the University system and capitalist domination. It emphasized the way in which the academic system expressed the domination of a class and prepared those that it trained to become agents and accomplices of that domination. *We don’t want to be trained in order to become the instruments of the capitalist exploitation of the working class*: such is the main theme that goes across the whole sequence from the first conflicts about specific matters of exams at the University of Nanterre in the suburbs of Paris through to the massive protests in the streets of Paris. In a groundbreaking short cut, a tract of that time calls for “the abolition of the exams and capitalism”. From the beginning to the end, the movement used the themes and arguments of the social critique and especially those of the Marxist theory of class war. More importantly, the main target of the critique was precisely the new culture of modernized capitalist management that the May movement, in retrospective sociological analyses, is told to have fostered. As a matter of fact, that new culture already existed under the name of neo-capitalism. That rejuvenated form of capitalism was supposed to be oriented toward “growth”, to the benefit of everybody, instead of individual profit. The place of the University system and the social sciences in that new form of capitalism had been in previous years at the center of an intense intellectual activity. There had been two highly publicized conferences calling for the modernization of the University system and its adaptation to the ends of economic growth and social cohesion. It is no coincidence that the 68 movement started from the new, modern and progressive University of Nanterre and more precisely among the students of the new and progressive department of sociology – a discipline that had just been emancipated from the supervision of philosophy. The first contribution given to the movement by the leader

who would become the incarnation of May 68, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, was a contribution to a polemical manifesto entitled “Why sociologists?”

But it is not simply a matter of opposing the slogans of May 68 to the retrospective images. That which deserves attention is the dynamic expressed by those slogans. It is the set of connections between the universities, the streets and global society that was at work in the forms of thinking and action of that sequence and in the very articulation between thinking and action. Behind the conflict opposing the revolutionary students to the reformist State, there is a more radical conflict between two ideas of politics. There is, on one side, what I have called the “police logic”. According to that logic, political action consists in settling a balance between the forces that compose a society. A political conflict is thus the symptom of a change provoking an imbalance in the relations between social or societal forces, a change that requires a readjustment. What is at work in the 68 movement is a completely opposite view of politics, a view that makes politics an activity with a rationality of its own. Politics deserves this name inasmuch as it is the work of specific subjects. Those subjects are not social groups or representatives of social groups. They are not defined by their identity but by their acts. Those acts displace the very lines of distribution of social identities and the very modes of articulation between words and actions, spaces and times. They change the very mode of articulation between actions so as to create a new space, a space of manifestation of capacities and possibilities, which did not exist in the “normal” distribution of places, activities and capacities. In other words, politics exists thanks to the suppression of the mediations and intermediaries that constitute the very consistency of a society according to the sociological form of rationality. I mentioned earlier the “short cut” formulated by a students’ manifesto. But political subjectivation in general can be defined as an art of the “short cut” that directly links a “local” problem to the whole of a social system.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I analyzed the two opposite ways in which it is possible to link the part to the whole according to the thinker of intellectual emancipation, Joseph Jacotot. On the one side, there is the inegalitarian logic – the police logic – in which the part can only be understood in relation to the whole, according to a process whose steps must be followed in a determined order with a learned guide. On the other side, there is the emancipatory logic according to which “everything is in everything”, which means that it is possible, from any point of departure to find a path making it possible to link this particularity to other ones and to invent, step by step, a still unknown method of linkage. We can say then that the apparent naivety of students who demand at once the abolition of exams and capitalism sets to work an emancipated politics. The activist students invent, from their specific position, a process of condensation of the power relations that govern the social order. They decide that the

issue of exams contains in itself the whole of the relation between the university and the social system, which in turn condenses the whole of the social organization of domination. They decide that the question of that relation can be raised directly by skipping all the mediations that normally mark out the steps – which means the distance – between their situation and the global assault against the capitalist system. At that moment the institutional left said that there were many steps to get over between the revolutionary aspirations of the students and the reality of their situation of privileged inheritors. Many things were needed such as: a more democratic recruitment of students, the acquisition of the science of the historical process, the subordination of student unionism to workers' trade-unionism and of trade-unionism in general to the avant-garde party.

The suppression of those mediations has been vilified in the Marxist tradition by a stigmatizing name. It has been called “spontaneism”. And spontaneism has been characterized as the propensity for immediate action and the faith in the capacity of the oppressed to act by themselves without being guided by the knowledge of the historical process and the leadership of a conscious avant-garde. But from the very meaning of the word “spontaneity”, it is possible to put the argument the other way round. What is spontaneous in a social order is not savage rebellion, it is “business as usual”, a way of thinking and acting in accordance with the existing order of the perceptible, the thinkable and the doable. It is the faith in the necessity of this existing order and the subordination to the mediations and the intermediaries that embody that necessity. In contradistinction the organization of political struggle begins with the affirmation of the contingency of this so-called “necessity” and the invention of sequences of words and acts that draw out the consequences of that contingency and, by so doing, open up an unexpected field of possibilities. It begins with the suspension of the authority of social science, the suspension of its pretension to provide the theoretical weapons and determine the practical agenda of the struggle.

The same reversal affects the temporal category of the ephemeral. It is customary to pit long-term revolutionary strategies against the ephemeral upsurge of revolts. But the movements that are called ephemeral actually make breaks in the ordinary course of long-term time, which is a time of endless mediations and postponements. And it is out of those breaks that a specifically political time can emerge. It is not incidental that the political subjects who constitute themselves by breaking with the distribution of social identities often owe their name to a date. It is well known that the main organizer of the 68 demonstrations in France was not defined by a social composition nor by a program but by a contingent birthdate. The *22 Mars* (22nd March Movement) owed its name to the date of an improvised protest on the campus of Nanterre. This privilege of a date suggests that politics is not the power of a social

force or a program. It is the power of new beginnings that initiate a new temporal thread, diverging from the normal social evolution. That which characterizes this new time is a change in speed. A political event implies the creation of shortcuts between singular points in a social order. In the same way, it implies an acceleration in a sequence of actions and in the very invention of scenes and forms of action. The 22nd March Movement positively affirmed that they had no “political program” as people usually have it: they did not define a series of steps between the present situation and the future of the “seizure of power”. Instead, they provocatively said, they just had a grasp on what was happening and on its consequences “for the next three or four days”. The provocation did not simply reverse the ordinary relation between the short term and the long term. More radically, the 22nd March activists pitted against police rationality another linkage between time and causality: a rationality of political action which is immanent to the very development of action instead of being calculated according to a program of steps to be taken on the way leading to the seizure of the power. Political temporality, in this view, is not determined by a progression of steps—of intermediaries—toward an end. Instead it is determined by a succession of actions that undo the locks – the mediations –that prevent a movement from developing its immanent power of universalization, its own capacity of confronting the whole of the social distribution of identities, places and powers.

In other terms, it is not a matter of moving closer and closer to a power taken as the end of the action. It is a matter of increasing a power that is already at work. This is what is entailed in a concept that was one of the key words of May 68, the concept of “exemplary action”. The meaning of this notion has often been misunderstood. An exemplary action is not an action that serves as a model for other actions. Nor is it an action providing an exemplary revelation on the nature of the repressive power. As was defined in a text of the 22nd March Movement, it is “an action that will move beyond itself and be brought beyond itself” (“*une action qui va se dépasser et être dépassée*”). This does not simply mean that the action creates a new situation. It means that it disrupts the normal system of the stages of an action determined by the play of the mediations between the part and the whole. The autonomous dynamic of the exemplary action unlocks the barriers that separate the “local” protest from the global struggle against the system. In order to do so, it must change the nature and the scope of the acts of protest. The same text sees this modification in the way in which the movement occupied the streets and the universities. The activists did not simply protest in the streets. Instead they held the streets. They invented there a new collective power based on the equal participation of everybody. The erection of the barricades was significant in this respect. Those barricades were not simply a means of collective protection against the police. They were properly the constitution of a collective, the

transformation of anonymous individuals – students, inhabitants, passers-by or else – into a collective, by the very fact of using their imagination and their hands to find the materials and build them together.

As for the occupation of the universities, the idea was taken up from the past workers' strikes and notably from the occupation of the factories during the big strikes in 1936. But it was transposed in a way that changed the very meaning of the practice. Unlike the occupation of factories, the occupation of the universities was an open occupation. The students invited factory workers and all types of people to come and take part in it. It was not an affirmation of a student power over their workplace. Instead it was an attempt at changing the very function and meaning of that place – an attempt at tearing it away from the normal distribution and hierarchy of social institutions.

Those ways of acting in the streets and in the university are “exemplary” inasmuch as they create forms of participation of individuals, modes of linkage of actions and forms of transformation of situations that widen the field of the possible and produce effects beyond the very barriers opposed to the propagation of the movement. This is what happened regarding the relationship between the student movement and the strike in the factories. After the occupation of the Sorbonne by the students, the occupation movement spread in the factories without any order from the trade union leaders. The functionaries of the trade unions closed the doors of the factories to avoid the interferences of the student movement, they negotiated with the government and exerted pressure in the factories for the acceptance of the agreement that they had made. In spite of all that pressure, the majority of the strikers rejected the agreement, as an effect of the very dynamic of the exemplary actions.

This is the sense that can be made of the famous May 68 slogan “Power to the imagination” (*“L’Imagination au pouvoir”*). It has often been understood as the power given to an outburst of carnivalesque fantasy. But “imagination” is not dreamlike fantasy. It is the invention of forms. And politics too is an invention of forms. Far from being a youth carnival, the May 68 sequence can make us perceive what politics means as a power of collective invention: it is the invention of names that break social identities that are given; the invention of actions that burst apart the mediations that define the consensual order; the transformation of spaces – of their material and symbolic uses; the unfolding of an autonomous and accelerated time. Such inventions are usually thought of as the manifestations of spontaneous and ephemeral revolt. But it can easily be ascertained that it is those momentary disruptions of the normal state of things that bring into existence a specific temporality of politics. This does not mean that politics only exists in a few exceptional moments of insurrection. It means that it is as a result of those interruptions of normal police time that there is a history and a tradition of political

invention distinct from the history of social forces and state institutions. The barricades erected in May 68 Paris are not merely nostalgic and “anachronistic” repetitions of those erected in 1848 Paris. They take place within a political tradition of invention of other ways of using spaces and times, words and gestures. The political moments don't dissolve like ephemeral bubbles that leave the state of things unchanged. The temporal accelerations, the reconfigurations of spaces, the unexpected sequences of actions, the forms of dis-identification produced by words create ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking and acting that are active forces of struggle and transformation. The European revolutions of 1848 were crushed but they gave birth to huge social and political movements in the long run. The 1968 movements were defeated but they created dynamics of action and forms of symbolization of conflict that, in turn, created the possibility of new forms of collective affirmation. In France, that dynamic animated a long resistance to the so-called “neo-liberal” offensive long after it had triumphed in Reagan's United States or Thatcher's England, and that resistance was punctuated by massive and victorious strikes of workers and students in 1986, 1995 and 2006. All over the world the spirit of those years was revived in the big streets protests and the occupy movements that took place since 2011, from Tunisia and Egypt to Ukraine, Spain, Greece, Turkey, the United States, Hong-Kong and France among other countries.

It is then possible to identify the 68 sequence as a specific political event: a moment of rediscovery of some fundamental characteristics of political conflict, of its words and acts, of its time and space—both material and symbolic. This is not to say that it revealed a pure essence of politics. If the event is significant it is also because of the ambiguous relation between that political practice and the Marxist framework within which it was conceived by the participants themselves. On the one hand, the 68 activists conceived of their action within the framework of the Marxist tradition of class struggle. On the other hand, their practice of politics was at odds with the Marxist tradition of strategic action. This ambiguity can be read in two opposite ways: as the incapacity of the movement to break with the sociological view of the revolution led by a social force guided by an avant-garde; or, conversely, as the effective break with that paradigm even though it was still claimed in theory.

On the one side, it can be said that the May movement did not possess the theory of its practice. Its shortcuts and accelerations broke, in the field, with the strategic model of action, subordinating political action to a science of the evolution of society. It broke with the definition of legitimate political actors, the hierarchy of forms of actions and the progression of steps determined by this model. Nevertheless, the movement still conceived of its ends in the terms of this paradigm. They sent their militants to the gates of the factories where the functionaries of the Communist Party and the Communist trade union turned them



back. They called for street demos that the latter disowned and they created “action committees” to short-circuit them. Nevertheless, they continued thinking of their own action as an auxiliary action that must be subordinated to the leadership of the working class and of its organizations. They still thought in the framework of a conception of a legitimate leading force of the revolutionary process even though they denounced the party embodying it as a force of repression of this process. But it is possible to perceive the contradiction the other way round. One can then say that the revival of Marxist vocabulary, concepts and emblems in the movements of those years hid the reality of a break with the Marxist model of the social revolution brought by the historical process and led by the conscious avant-garde of a social group. From that point of view, the call made to the party that “should” lead the movement was a way to show that its real role was to repress it. And the link was made between that soft repression and the violent repression of the Prague Spring by the Warsaw Pact troops.

But the main point is not about the break of the 68 activists with the Communist Party. If the sequence is significant it is because of a more radical break, immanent to its very dramaturgy, I mean immanent to the form of its temporal and causal development. The conventional oppositions between spontaneity and organization or the ephemeral and the long term hide a deeper paradox: the political short-circuit that lifts the locks and steps engenders an immanent process of development. But this autonomous process is no longer thinkable as a process oriented toward a last step to reach or a last lock to undo. Both the students in the occupied faculties and the workers in the occupied factories affirmed that they wanted to go further, to go “all the way through” to the end. But this “end” could no more been objectified. This gap can be perceived in a text which has often been viewed as the “Chart” of the May 68 movement: the text entitled “Amnesty for blind eyes” elaborated by the “reflection group” called “*Nous sommes en marche*” (“We are on our way”). The text is constructed as a series of theses among which the 25<sup>th</sup> thesis says: “We want the means to our ends”. But this statement follows a sentence that has precisely brushed aside the question about the ends of the movement: “When people ask us to say ‘where we are going,’ we should not answer. We are not in power; we don’t need to be ‘positive’ or justify our ‘excesses’”. And the same sentence that claims “the means to our ends” continues with a clarification which points to a radical displacement in the very conception of that “end”: “...we want the means to our ends; that is to say, if not power, at least a power from which all forms of oppression and violence would be excluded as a basis for its existence and means for its survival”. This convoluted statement does not only express the desire of a non-violent power, breaking with the idea of the dictatorship of the revolutionary party. It evinces a displacement in the very conception of “power”. Power is no longer the

objective that must be reached by the means of revolutionary action and it is no longer that which provides the means to achieve the ends of a social transformation. It is the power that is deployed here and now: the collectivization of a capacity of thinking and acting that belongs to everybody. It is not the cleverness of smart strategists that allows the short-circuits of action and makes them efficient. It is the unforeseeable capacity of anybody, a capacity that was enacted by a multitude of grassroots organizations in the factories and the neighborhoods or anonymous individuals in the streets.

“We want the means to our ends”. But it is no longer a matter of the end justifying the means. It is no longer a case for strategists able to determine the right relation of means to ends. On the contrary, it is a matter of abolishing the distance that the instrumental and strategic mode of thinking sets between end and means. It is a matter of merging them both into a homogeneous process that becomes the unfolding of its own power. This power can no longer be gauged by measuring the blows inflicted to the enemy and the steps taken on the way leading to a takeover. It becomes autonomous by distancing itself from the world of the enemy rather than taking up arms against it. This is what I tried to sum up once in a formula: politics is not a conflict of forces; it is a conflict of worlds. The barricade is the self-affirmation of a community of equals rather than an efficient means of fighting against the enemy.

Marx had already gauged the full extent of the gap when he analyzed the life and death of the Paris Commune in 1871. To those who criticized it for not taking enough “social measures”, he replied that its greatest “social measure” was its very existence. It was the demonstration of the full capacity of ordinary men and women to do what was not supposed to be their business: namely, to organize a common world at every level and to organize it as a world of equals where all the public functions that had previously been the privilege of a social hierarchy became workers’ tasks on an equal footing. This is after all what the word “communism” designates in Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*: a capacity for action which is an end in itself and defines a world in which the distinction between ends and means has disappeared along with the distinction between leaders and executors. In Marx’s view, however, the very enactment of this communist nature had a damaging effect: the Paris Commune was so busy giving birth to a new society that they did not care for the “cannibals” – meaning the army of the Bourgeois power – who were on the doorsteps of the town. What is at issue in this “carelessness” is not an error caused by an excess of naivety; it is the very contradiction between the conflict of forces and the power of world-making, between a way of doing that separates ends and means and a way of doing that does not separate them.

It is true that this gap between two types of conflict could still be bridged and was actually bridged for a long time. As long as it was

possible to identify, under the name of working class, a part of the social body with a force of struggle and a power of world-making, it was also possible to translate a conflict of worlds into a conflict of forces. From that point of view, the May 68 sequence was a turning point. Even though the call made to the working class was still faithful to the scenario that gave to a social class the capacity of engendering a new world, the very development of the movement refuted that scenario. The capacity of everybody affirmed itself autonomously, quite separately from the identification to a social group. The power of the event undid the knot between the conflict of forces and the power of world-making, between social force and political subject. It made the dissociation perceptible on the political stage and the theoretical stage as well. Since that time, the destruction of the factories in the western world, the dispersion of the working class and the relocation of industrial work far away in Asia made this separation manifest in the very landscape of our countries. The factories toward which the students had marched in May 68 to claim the unity between students and workers have all been destroyed and replaced by condos, shopping malls or cultural centers. Now, you need a badge to get into the university of the Sorbonne that was the heart of the 68 movement. The dissociation then becomes all condensed in one word and one practice: occupation. We know how this word has been revived in the democratic movements of the 2010s. Occupation has become the very word expressing the global refusal of the dominant order and the break with the dominant temporality. It created new forms of manifestation of the capacity of anybody, new short cuts between local situations or incidents and the whole system of domination and new forms of the acceleration of time. The practices of occupation in the squares of the towns or the “communes” improvised in places threatened by big industrial projects gave its utmost visibility to the idea of politics as a conflict of worlds. But that conflict of worlds was no longer connected to any conflict of social groups and any identification of a social force carrying a new world to come. The process of occupation is no more what it had been in the past and still was in 1968: the blockage of a functional place in the process of capitalist production and social reproduction. It no longer took place in factories and universities. It mainly took place besides the places emblematic of financial capitalism and state power. The tents set up on the occupied squares and even the self-defense installations of the new “communes” appeared to be the forms of affirmation of a secession rather than the forms of organization of an army. The very slogan of the *Occupy Wall Street* movement calling to “occupy everything” appears to compensate for the fact that there is no specific place where the manifestation of a community of equals can coincide with the blockage of a cog in the social machinery. Many people have criticized the occupy movements as mere repetitions of the movements of the 60s, deprived of any strategic view. I think that it would

be more useful to realize that the 68 moment was a real breach beyond which the conflict of worlds can no longer be associated with a conflict of social groups and the development of a historical process. What an emancipatory politics can be in this new context has become both an enigma and a challenge\*.

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# May '68 – A Past That Never Was and a Future That Has Already Been Missed

Serene Richards

**Abstract:** This paper situates itself in the aftermath of May '68; the morning after, as it were. What are its reverberations and what do we claim to have inherited? The analysis begins with the impotence of the present and the capture of the collective unconscious by the digital financial machine; capturing our desires, dreams, and the potential for the adventurous life, the very condition of possibility for love. We short-circuit through a brief look at the *Mouvement des travailleurs arabes (MTA)*, whose struggles were the last attempt to articulate what we call a politics of adventure. In the end, unions and sovereign power annihilated the collective desire for the possibility of a life well lived. What is left, when all that could have been has already been missed?

**Keywords:** Adventure – Acceleration – Data - Desire – Delirium – Capitalism – Catastrophe - Collective Unconscious - Language - Mouvement des travailleurs arabes

“And this is the secret of James’ novels, we can only live because we have already missed our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

## A Dead End Came Knocking

It is easy for us to imagine the apocalyptic scene of the endpoint, the moment when all that is, and all that was, will never have been. More difficult to conceptualize are those whom we permit to die in our place today and tomorrow. Forgetting which lands we deem to be worthy of safety, and which ones to be worthy of annihilation. Capitalism, concerned with its own survival and endless proliferation, struggles with a double-bind: it is obliged to deny the seriousness of the catastrophe ahead, lest it renders meaningless its operations. Subsequently, we are limited to managing the sacrifices to be made; the law in this sense is nothing more than a tool for rationing. As Jean-Pierre Dupuy explains,

Capitalism can avoid extinction only by persuading economic agents that an indefinitely long future stretches before them. If the future were to be closed off, a reverse domino effect would abolish all economic activity from the moment its end point became known. With the approach of the end, trust would be impossible since there would no longer be any time to come in which debts could be repaid.<sup>2</sup>

Infinite debts founded on the condition of eternal repayment whose

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<sup>1</sup> Agamben 2015, p. 133

<sup>2</sup> Dupuy 2014, p. 65

finitude coincides precisely with the destruction of the world. It is a rationality founded on delirium. For this reason, we are happy to tolerate legal changes that promise to reduce the total number of pollution-related deaths from 100,000 to 60,000 a year. We watch as vast areas on the African continent are sealed off for conservation, thereby evicting and criminalizing indigenous populations from their land. Nothing more than shameless management, and designation, of the scapegoat.<sup>3</sup>

For everyone else, it is a life of industrialized impotence. The conditions of social solidarity have been dissolved: togetherness, long-lasting collaboration in the workplace, scattered apart in the urban jungle.<sup>4</sup> As Franco “Bifo” Berardi explains, the technological architecture upon which we are increasingly dependent shapes our perception of the world. During the Renaissance, people’s perception of the space of everyday life changed because of the innovation in the representational technique; so too has ours, thanks to acceleration.<sup>5</sup> For Berardi, “prior to modernity, a regime of slow transmission characterized the info-sphere, and this slowness shaped lived time and cultural expectations.”<sup>6</sup> The modern acceleration of the transmission of signs and the proliferation of sources of information has transformed the perception of time and meaning.

A problematic of a new kind confronts us. Whereas the place, or site, of action, used to be the body, today bodies are fixed in front of screens. The conditions for revolt exist: environmental catastrophe, forced precarity, techno-war, mental alienation. However, any form of action remains impossible, and any possibility for action seems increasingly diminished. Can any contemporary subject claim today to be ‘living well,’ as Aristotle had envisaged it for those in the *polis*?

*What do we know?* What makes information all powerful is its nullity or radical ineffectiveness.<sup>7</sup> Information, in fact, plays on its ineffectiveness to establish its power, and its power is to be ineffective, making it all the more dangerous. Therefore, information is precisely a system of control. Deleuze showed that a piece of information is a grouping of order-words, such that:

3 See Moore 2004, pp. 45-64

4 Berardi 2014, p. 167

5 Ibid., p. 34

6 Ibid.

7 Deleuze 1997, p. 269

when you are informed, you are told what you are supposed to believe. In other words to inform is to make circulate an order-word. Police declarations are said to be, rightly so, communications; we are communicated information, that is to say, we are told what we are supposed to be in a state to have to believe, what we are supposed to believe. Or not even to believe, but to act as if we believed. So that we are not asked to believe but to behave as if we believed.<sup>8</sup>

Our current predicament cannot be characterized as an epistemological problem. Where, for example, with a bit more information one could engender a kind of cognitive transformation of the social and radically alter the subjectification of bodies. Quite the contrary, in their book *Data Trash*, Kroker and Weinstein write that in the field of digital acceleration, a reduction of meaning necessarily accompanies greater information.<sup>9</sup> That is to say that, in the sphere of the digital economy, ‘meaning’ as such is a hindrance. Meaning slows the accumulation of value and the speed at which information circulates. This is because meaning needs time to be produced, and understood. Therefore, confusions, and any reduction in meaning, necessarily accompanies the acceleration of flows of information. Under these conditions, it would appear that our environment is one of pure functionality without meaning, where language is captured by the digital-financial machine and in so doing has framed the field of the possible.<sup>10</sup>

The paradox is that in our “habit of wanting to understand things in a complete manner,”<sup>11</sup> we inadvertently tighten the noose to which we have long been tied. As Nathan Moore argues: “it is potentially dangerous because it can have the effect of discouraging us from action. [...] Complete knowledge necessarily cancels itself out. In this sense, life is fueled by ignorance.”<sup>12</sup> We only ever discover what we expect to find, so that “the crucial ignorance of critical action (i.e. limited thought) is experimentation.”<sup>13</sup>

Semantic interpretation is no longer possible because time is too short. The result is a restless stimulation of social attention, which in turn

8 Deleuze 1987

9 Berardi 2012, p. 105

10 Ibid., p. 26

11 Moore 2004, p. 48

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.



causes a contraction of the time available for emotional elaboration and affective experiences. The contraction of time permeates the collective unconscious, culture, and sensibility. The Google Inc. empire is built precisely on the capture of users' experience to increase its value. A Google subsidiary, YouTube, is a classic case in point. Take the example of 'Toy unboxing,' a phenomenon that has gripped the attention of millions of adults and children around the world. Every day, millions of people watch YouTube videos of toys being unwrapped or unboxed. The items range from hi-tech gadgets to kinder eggs. One successful YouTube channel, "FunToys Collector DisneyToys Review" has roughly 9.5 million subscribers and over 13 billion total views. The videos are almost exactly the same: no face is visible, just two hands slowly unboxing or un-wrapping chocolate covered eggs and unveiling the plastic object to viewers. The same voice is heard, gushing over Play-Doh and miniaturized Disney characters. The "Fun Toys" channel earns around £3 million a year.

We no longer need to experience the world. One can use or access already experienced data about an object, a reference to a pre-packaged world. In *Destruction of Experience*, Giorgio Agamben shows that today, experience occurs outside of the individual, through the lens of a camera for instance, or charts and numbers. So that:

When humankind is deprived of effective experience and becomes subjected to the imposition of a form of experience as controlled and manipulated as a laboratory maze for rats - in other words, when the only possible experience is horror or lies - then the rejection of experience can provisionally embody a legitimate defense.<sup>14</sup>

An unprecedented capture of individuals' experience is characteristic of our contemporary era, our free time seized upon and put to work. Boredom appears to be analogous to what justice was for Kafka, technically possible, but not for us.

We are thus confronted with two dilemmas:

1. The acceleration of informatic flows and the disappearance of meaning, resulting in a kind of automation of behaviors; of course, to varying degrees.
2. The problem of economic and financial abstraction, that, like an impressionist painting which seeks not to show the thing, but

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14 Agamben 2007, p. 16

merely its impression,<sup>15</sup> presents the appearance of economic vitality in report after report, all the while ecological decay and human misery persist.

*What is to be done?* The image of thought in which we live is one that insists on the end of economic history. The image of thought functions as a mechanism and a means of putting an end to thought, of frustrating thought. Such that we believe that the financial dictatorship is here to stay, with all its subsidiary modes of reasoning: the maximization of profit and the near universal consensus of the value of mathematized abstraction for the governance of everyday life. We continually grapple with an image of thought that is simultaneously pre-supposed for thought to begin, which also functions to prevent thought itself. It is for this reason that we speak the language of abstraction, of data, and decisions are based on information, data, and statistics. A weighing up of risk, probability, in an attempt to stave off the future. Concern over the future, to ward off any potential threat: "this is the constant worry of the monarch, the military and murderers: the traitor, the ambush, the arrest."<sup>16</sup> A future that has already arrived and is always-already missed.

Statistics, the Science of the State *par excellence*, emerged as the mirror of the state.<sup>17</sup> Statistics, we are told, illustrates and renders concrete apparently crucial traits of the general population: health and death rates, ethnic and cultural differences, among other qualities. However, today, we look into a mirror of a different kind. Not a mirror concerned with the individual body and its characteristics (although these continue to be a concern), but instead, with capitalism's new tools, of big data and the digital financial machine, it has become possible to look into a mirror of the populations' very unconscious. Bringing to life a conceptual data double beyond its careful curation by the individual subject; that is, beyond what the individual presents of itself on digital platforms, towards the bulk storage of the unconscious stream of babble individuals throw up. For the first time, patterns of behavior, thoughts, and desires, are rendered visible and brought to life, amalgamated into an image of tendencies. As Byung-Chul Han formulates it: "digital psychopolitics is taking over the behavior of the masses by laying hold of, and steering, the unconscious logic that governs them."<sup>18</sup> Whole swathes of subtle interventions have become possible and deployable, not merely into modes of individual behavior directed at bodies (as that which concretely

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15 Berardi 2012, p. 29

16 Moore 2004, p. 48

17 Desrosières 1998, p. 34

18 Han 2017, p. 80

takes place), but, and this is its particular cynicism, interventions into the human being's modes of possibility, it's very potential for activity, and of action.

It is in this vein that one can understand Mark Fisher's notion of Capitalist realism, as "a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action."<sup>19</sup> A cynical takeover masked as the natural order of things; feeding off dreams, desires, and potentials, but also, any critique of itself. Structured on the premise of constant renewal and reactivation, the machine actively invites critique, solicits complaints, and carves out a space for disagreements; a veritably totalizing force. Here, "interpretation is always already a game, which has to be played on the despot's terms."<sup>20</sup> Axioms distributed for all, even for the language of dolphins.<sup>21</sup>

Oh Delirious Reason

"To kill an opponent will not change the world. It is not criticism. But to destroy your opponent's desire will change the world, and is then a critical operation."<sup>22</sup>

More insidious is the presentation of insanity as rationality which today has taken a pathological form. As Deleuze would say, it is a form of true rationality, given that "the machine works, there can be no doubt."<sup>23</sup> The complexity, however, is that "there is no danger of it going insane, because through and through it is already insane, from the get-go, and that's where its rationality comes from."<sup>24</sup> It is essential therefore to recognize that the codes and axioms were not brought together or assembled by chance, but instead function according to a rationality, a particular logic is at work, and a series of machines are in operation to this end. In other words, for Deleuze, reason is always formed, as a segment, stemming from the irrational, and is therefore traversed by it and defined by a relation precisely to it. So that, "underneath all reason lies delirium, and drift. Everything about capitalism is rational, except

19 Fisher 2009, p.16

20 Moore 2004, p. 48

21 Deleuze and Guattari 2015, p. 287

22 Moore 2014, p. 46

23 Deleuze 2004, p. 262

24 Ibid.

capital or capitalism."<sup>25</sup> A classic example is the stock market itself, one can understand how it works, yet "what a delirium, it's nuts."<sup>26</sup>

Marx too was fascinated by capitalisms' mechanisms: how can it present itself as perfectly rational and delirious at the same time? Deleuze asks, "So then what is rational in a society? Once interests have been defined within the confines of a society, the rational is the way in which people pursue those interests and attempt to realize them."<sup>27</sup> In a sense, therefore, it is not enough to point to fictions (legal fictions, sovereign fictions, fictitious capital), but one ought to examine the desiring productions these fictions set in motion; the desire that emerges from the irrational rationality and delirious functioning mechanism itself. As Deleuze points out:

Underneath that, you find desires, investments of desire that are not to be confused with investments of interest, and on which interests depend for their determination and very distribution: an enormous flow, all kinds of libidinal-unconscious flows that constitute delirium of this society. In reality, history is the history of desire.<sup>28</sup>

The digital financial machine captures the unconscious libidinal field, entangling us within a particular organization of possible fields. For Deleuze, capitalism has given rise to a new distribution of desire and reason, adding that we have certainly reached the stage of delirium to which there is only one equivalent in psychiatric terms: the terminal state.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike other societies comprised of 'scandals and secrets' that are nevertheless part of the system, or of the code, in capitalism, everything is transparent and democratic, there is no code. Everything is at once public and inadmissible.<sup>30</sup> That capitalism is a formidable desiring machine is evident in its capacity to subsume any and all social desires "including the desires of repression and death."<sup>31</sup> In this sense, capitalism's operation includes its own critiques of itself which it easily subsumes as part of its condition of possibility. A phantasmagorical

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 263

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p. 267

absorption of every flow, “flows of wealth, flows of labor, flows of language, flows of art, etc.”<sup>32</sup> For this reason, Guattari insists on the importance of an alternative structure capable of fusing collective desires and potential revolutionary organizations, failure to do so would see us heading from one repression to the next, “toward a fascism that will make Hitler and Mussolini look like a joke.”<sup>33</sup>

Before the wholesale digital capture of the collective unconscious, it was possible to act, albeit always within limits. Consider the example, events and activities of the *Mouvement des travailleurs arabes (MTA)*, who, uniquely in the history of class struggle, demanded the potential form of a politics where the question was not merely one of demanding particular rights as such, but rather the wholesale *transformation* of a form of living itself. An attempt at articulating the language of a form-of-life where being in action is presented as a possibility. Where the possibilities of one’s life are not limited or tied to inherited limits, or facts of life: poverty, lack of documents, etc. Unsurprisingly, the movement was obliterated by the French authorities with the help of the Maghrebi governments who organized separate social movements with similar concerns to subvert and undermine the MTA’s activities.<sup>34</sup>

Politics of Adventure

The adventure, deriving from the classical and Christian Latin *adventus*, designates, as Agamben shows, “something mysterious that happens to a given man, which could be equally positive or negative.”<sup>35</sup> Crucially, the subject is intimately involved in her adventure, worthy of the adventure that happens to her. Moreover, the adventure is not something that ‘precedes’ a story as such, but rather, it is inseparable from it.<sup>36</sup> The adventure is its own happening in language and event, its own being said and its happening such as it is. This is unlike the contemporary understanding of the term, which instead recognizes the adventure as being decisively external to everyday or ordinary life.<sup>37</sup> As Agamben says :

For the individual to whom it happens (*a cui avviene*), adventure is in fact fully identified with life, not only because it affects and transfigures his whole existence, but also and above all because it

.....  
32 Ibid., p. 267

33 Guattari, in Deleuze 2004, p. 269

34 This is further developed in Richards 2018.

35 Agamben 2018, p. 23

36 Ibid., p. 30

37 Ibid., p. 47

transforms the subject himself, regenerating him as a new creature [...] If Eros and adventure are here often intimately entwined, this is not because love gives meaning and legitimacy to adventure, but, on the contrary, because only a life that has the form of adventure can truly find love.<sup>38</sup>

For a brief moment after May '68, life and adventure coincided for a collective movement that sought not merely to correct identity documents and demand legal rights. Instead, thought the latter was indeed demanded, there was equally a demand for respect and kindness in everyday life, whether in cafés or in the street. They demanded comfortable housing for themselves and others; a demand, a desire, to live a life of possibilities, where mere facts (a lack of housing or legal documentation) could not limit their possibilities. A demand to render possible the potential for a life well lived. Incommensurate with the biopolitical schema which characterizes our politics, these simple, though bold, claims, have been erased from the history of class struggle.

*What Happened?* The events of May '68 are known as the series of strikes and occupations that took place across universities in France and that also spread to the factories, where students and workers, therefore, joined forces demanding a form of justice. As Kristin Ross puts it:

May '68 was the largest mass movement in French history, the biggest strike in the history of the French workers’ movement, and the only “general” insurrection the overdeveloped world has known since World War II. It was the first general strike that extended beyond the traditional centers of industrial production to include workers in the service industries, the communication and culture industries – *the whole sphere of social reproduction*. No professional sector, no category of worker was unaffected by the strike; no region, city, or village in France was untouched.<sup>39</sup>

May '68 was made possible by a collective desire, a collective unconscious traversed by politics and the social. A ‘shared enemy’ of imperialist capitalism, “Vietnam is in our factories,” as they say, and a shared identification with the Algerian Revolution.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre remarked that the events of May '68 were partly precipitated as a result of the spatial organization of the University of Nanterre. Nanterre, established as an

.....  
38 Ibid., p. 54

39 Ross 2002, p. 4. (Emphasis my own)

40 Ibid., p. 80-94

extension of the Sorbonne in the 1960s in the West of Paris, was built among some of the worst slums, or *bidonville*, in France. Nanterre was not easily accessible, lacking appropriate modes of transportation. Students would therefore have to walk through the slums to reach campus, and were, for the first time, forced to confront the realities of inequality.<sup>41</sup> The university is today by its very own train station, conveniently bypassing any 'unpalatable' areas.

These slums, mostly inhabited by North African migrants, were established at least since 1951 and are scattered around Nanterre. Much like the Windrush generation in the UK, the migrants arrived as workers, and they aided in the reconstruction of post-war France. By 1968, there were nine slums in total, the largest of which is *La Folie*<sup>42</sup> which housed at least 10,000 people. Those families were essentially living in self-built cabins made of wood and carton, with no electricity and just one access point for water. It was common for police to storm the slum to arrest individuals and destroy cabins. In 1961, between 100 and 150 people were killed by the police, and in one such offensive, some were drowned in the Seine.<sup>43</sup>

On the 13th August 1970, the minister of education, Olivier Guichard, pushed for the demolition of those slums. It quickly became a government priority, since Guichard believed that the presence of the Nanterre *bidonvilles* encouraged "leftist agitation on campus."<sup>44</sup> By 1971 the slums were destroyed and the workers housed in barracks.

.....  
41 Ibid., p. 85

42 'La Folie' can either mean 'madness,' or describe a chaotic situation, a 'madhouse.'

43 Vincendon, 2018

44 Ibid.



Still from a short documentary, '1967, Les bidonvilles de Nanterre.'<sup>45</sup>  
The inscription reads: "you are living in shit – REACT"

May '68 now seemed a distant memory, an event that happened where a form of justice appeared to have ensued.

These migrant workers, however, continued to be excluded from political life, they were not integrated within the structure of French political parties, including the Communist Party (unlike their European cousins). They were excluded from labor unions, and any right to vote, the Africans and Arabs were also exploited at work and faced discrimination and racism in daily life. Their presence was scattered throughout Paris, concentrated in the *bidonvilles de Nanterre*, as well as Paris' 18th arrondissement, near *Goutte d'Or* and *Rue de Barbès*.

Residents in the area grew hostile to the migrants and called for greater government control and security, many even taking to the streets asking French citizens to sign petitions for their expulsion. 27th October 1971 marked a turning point in this history when a young teenager of Algerian origin, Djellali Ben Ali, was brutally murdered. This galvanized public support for the migrant workers, and a committee Djellali was set up by local residents alongside Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and other notable figures.<sup>46</sup> Various struggles subsequently ensued, including mobilizations in support of both French and immigrant families on the issue of inadequate housing, where they would eventually occupy an

.....  
45 Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3S8D-V7wyyM>

46 Hajjat 2008, p. 522



empty building on the boulevard de la Chappelle.

The *Mouvement des travailleurs arabes* (MTA), set up in June 1972, was the first group to consider the conditions of immigrant workers as such. The MTA assumed a pan-Arab, and Marxist consciousness, driven by the unequal position they found themselves in the social and economic order of things. Excluded from French workers' unions, the MTA sought to articulate a common struggle of migrant workers, who had “arrived in France for the necessities of industrial modes of production.”<sup>47</sup> They sought to articulate a form of action directed at the “living and working conditions of immigrant workers” demanding, “the condemnation of racist crimes, the transformation of immigrant barracks (a military inheritance of the colonial era), access to decent housing, the obtainment of a stable juridical status that did not depend on the goodwill of the boss, the representation of working migrants in unions, etc.”<sup>48</sup>

Established workers' unions fiercely opposed this movement. In part because the MTA's activities rattled their traditional view of class struggle. Union chiefs believed the site of class struggle ought to be limited to the confines of the factory. For the MTA, the struggle extended to problems of inadequate housing and daily racism; oppression and exploitation was seen to be lived in the factory but also in cafés and on the street. In other words, politics, as such, traversed the whole social field of everyday life. Life and politics could not be said to be separate or distinct spheres.

In February 1972, and again in April 1973, the MTA mobilized a series of wildcat strikes at Renault-Bilancourt. As reported in the New York Times at the time: “when Renault sneezes, France has the flu.”<sup>49</sup> Half of the 96,000 Renault workers were migrants. The article goes on to say that: “France no longer has colonies where she can send capital and employ cheap labor, so she is importing them from countries with mass unemployment.”<sup>50</sup> The strikes caused great angst amongst official unions given that many workers joined in solidarity, culminating in the movement's general strike organized against racism.<sup>51</sup>

As aforementioned, the unions opposed the MTA. So did the French

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47 Hajjat 2006, p. 83

48 Ibid.

49 Robertson 1973

50 ibid

51 Hajjat 2006, p. 87

government who engaged in numerous attempts to expel and imprison leading activists. Additionally, the MTA faced resistance from organizations set up precisely to undermine them. The French State encouraged governments in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia to keep a close eye on their nationals. These countries set up associations known as “*Amicales*” with the support of the French Minister of Interior.<sup>52</sup> These were ideologically and politically opposed to the MTA and sought to undermine their activities especially given their connections to other anti-imperialist struggles, as well as their support for similar anti-capitalist struggles. In other words, the MTA's activities posed a direct threat not only to the local French order of things, but, equally, to the Maghreb's political order. In 1976, the MTA was finally dissolved: infiltrated by the police and security officials, denied funding from both state and non-state organizations, and excluded from the French workers' unions. The MTA have been denied a political existence in the history of political struggles. The (re)emergence of the immigrant workers onto the political scene, with the *Sans-Papiers* movement in the 90s for instance, supposedly took mainstream French society by surprise. Finally, it was said, immigrants have discovered their voice. The 90s movement took on a new form, an articulation contemporaneous with its time. The migrant workers' struggle had been absorbed and put to work through the mediatic-political apparatus. This resulted in the proliferation and production of a discourse strictly limited to the interplay between clandestine, criminal, and humanitarian. A liberal and Eurocentric designation of workers as pre-political ‘others,’ whose saving is a matter of common Western decency. A discourse which violently denies any relation to previous migrant struggles, or any relation to capitalism, and its various modes of operation.

**Becoming Magicians**

For Deleuze, politics traverses throughout social relations. There cannot be an isolated space where politics is supposed to take place. Our contemporary predicament today is one that is perhaps peculiar to our time. The place, or site, of action used to be the body, as the extraordinary efforts of those that came before us illustrate. But now, bodies are glued to screens. Just as in the past, the conditions for revolt exist in the present. Indeed, the forces of oppression are perhaps stronger today, though in different ways. As Agamben has recently said, our form of government has rendered any action impossible. We are trapped in an epistemological labyrinth: we explain, critique, and denounce, read commentaries and comments on commentaries. We witness revelations that don't reveal anything but revelation itself. The closed circuit of information has removed the signifier of language from

.....  
52 Nicholls & Uitermark 2016, p. 60.

the body, the body as that which connects us to our voice and language. Language today, as communication, functions as an operating tool to generate this or that effect. Under our oppressive regime, fear of the present and mental alienation are common ailments. As others have put it, tomorrow has been canceled, and all that is left is the transformation of the present. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Modes of the possible exist in the present. What is the Coming Community<sup>53</sup> but a form of radical presentness, a realization that within the present lies the possibility of change and transformation. Potentialities that already exist.

Lyotard's interpretation of Socrates' speech on the birth of love, Eros, emphasizes precisely this. For Lyotard, it is clear that Eros is, by nature, double, neither God nor Man. Caught in the divinity of the father and mortality of the mother, Eros is both life and death. "Eros remains under the law of Death, of lack, incessantly trying to escape it, to reinvent his life, precisely because he carries death with him."<sup>54</sup> In this sense, whatever being, the 'how' of being, is lovable being, a mode of openness to the world and its irreparability.

We are made to work and feel tired, to feel encased or trapped in a particular set up, working through false problems without end, grappling with problems given from above. For we are led to believe that problems are given ready-made and that they disappear in the responses or solutions. However, as Deleuze explains, "this belief probably has the same origin as the other postulates of the dogmatic image: puerile examples taken out of context and arbitrarily erected into models. According to this infantile prejudice, the master sets a problem, our task is to solve it, and the result is accredited true or false by a powerful authority."<sup>55</sup> The politico-juridical sphere acts as an arbiter of solutions, deciding each time who must live and who must be left to die, managing sacrifice and capturing experience, sensibility, and affection.

*All is not lost.* As Berardi says, "in our times, the economy is the universal grammar traversing every level of human activity. The reduction of language to information (data) and the incorporation of techno-linguistic automatisms in the social circulation of language, are securing the subjection of language to financial economy."<sup>56</sup> However, language is also boundless. Poetry is the excess of language that can disentangle the signifier from the limits of the signified. And, "irony, the ethical form

.....  
53 Agamben 2003

54 Lyotard 2012, pp. 27-27

55 Deleuze 2001, p. 158

56 Berardi 2014, p. 256

of the exceeding power of language, is the infinite game that words are playing to skip established signification, to shuffle meanings, and to create new semantic concatenations."<sup>57</sup> The nihilism of the present, along with its accompanying rationality can be undermined with a touch of irony, "irony as the independence of mind from knowledge" a kind of "excessive nature of the imagination."<sup>58</sup> Irony, in this sense, has the potential to render inoperative semantic commands, to test its limits, and at the same time opens the possibility for a re-appropriation of creativity that is today left to public relations marketers and executives. A strategic device, capable of re-appropriating language, gesture, and relationships, from the digital financial machine. A reinvented social sphere, a rediscovery of social solidarity disconnected from market exchange, can emerge in shared laughter and shared understanding. A short Arabic proverb provides an apt example:

One day, Juha calls at his neighbor's home and asks to borrow a large cooking pot. His neighbor obliges and lends him one. The following day Juha knocks on his neighbor's door and says: good news, the pot gave birth and now there are two pots for you. Somewhat bemused, the neighbor gladly accepts the two pots. Much later, Juha once again asks to borrow the large pot, and the neighbor agrees. A few weeks go by, and the neighbor has yet to receive his pot from Juha. Now growing very impatient, the neighbor visits Juha. Juha opens his front door and says:  
- "I'm so sorry, but I have unfortunate news, the pot has died!"  
- "but how can pots die? I do not believe it!" His neighbor replies with consternation.  
Juha, looking at his neighbor, calmly responds:  
- "If you could believe that a pot gave birth, then you must also accept that pots die."

Juha's gesture cannot be dismissed as a simple prank on his neighbor. Instead, Juha, the neighbor, and we - the audience - are obliged for a moment to enter into a space of collective thinking to (re)discover the connection between "*multitudo* and the potential of thought."<sup>59</sup> The *multitudo*, in this sense, designates the generic form of the existence of a potential that is properly human: that of thinking,<sup>60</sup> and the common power of thought as such. We know that fictions lie at the base or in the skies above, but know less about *how* they have come to function.

.....  
57 Ibid., p. 256

58 Berardi 2015, p. 144

59 Agamben 2015, p. 212

60 Ibid., p. 212

How they lend themselves to the subjectification of bodies; penetrating our language and marking our possibilities. Here, Juha's neighbor happily accepts a transformation in the order of things, perhaps out of convenience, until Juha's gesture reverses the outcome of the new rules of the game, turning it on its head.

The neighbor, now the loser, is forced to reconcile himself with a new problematisation: the distinction between the Real and reality; which, only by rethinking their relation, and finding the one, in the other, can the extent of the catastrophe be discerned. Only then will it be possible to desire anew, to feel “the crisis of presence” and prepare to “compete with capitalism on the playing field of magic.”<sup>61</sup>

Only in becoming magicians.

.....  
61 Tiqqun 2001, p. 174

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# The Long 1960s and 'The Wind From The West'

Kristin Ross

**Abstract:** Contemporary land-based struggles such as the zad at Notre-Dame-des-Landes and the NoTAV movement in Italy make prolonged battles such as the Larzac in France and Sanrizuka in Japan emerge as the defining conflicts of the worldwide long 1960s. Nantes plutôt que Nanterre.

**Keywords:** defense, territory, composition, dual power, commune, Commune de Nantes

What continues to give what we call “the sixties” their power is the way that any attempt to narrate those years, to commemorate them, curate them, or even allude to them in passing, functions, almost invariably, as a glaring indicator of *what is being defended now*. Last October, because of a book I wrote almost twenty years ago concerning the construction of the official memory of the French 60s, I was invited by the Macron government to come to the Elysée Palace to discuss President Macron’s intention to “celebrate,” throughout the entire upcoming year, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of May ‘68. What, precisely, I wrote back, did the President intend to celebrate? If the answer I received-- “the end of illusions, the modernization of France, the closing down of utopias”—was not a surprise, the angry breach of protocol on the part of Macron’s Counsellor when I declined the invitation, was. Apparently a summons to the Palace was to be thought of as a command performance.

Later I learned that a couple of other historians in France had received a similar invitation and that they, like me, had chosen to decline. Left with only his fervent supporter, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, in tow to function as the Master of Ceremonies of any celebration, President Macron chose wisely to abandon the idea and devote his commemorative energies to the centennial anniversary of the end of World War I and other more neutral topics.

Commemorations are killers. But they are a preeminently French exercise. President Sarkozy, who presided over the fortieth anniversary of May, had announced his intention to liquidate all existing memories of the upheavals as part of his presidential campaign. This, in the end, was an attitude on the part of the state to be preferred to Macron’s wish to absorb and celebrate, since it gave a bit of vim to the deadly ritual of the commemoration ten years ago. In Paris this year May ‘68 was everywhere: the date and accompanying images screaming out from kiosks, on posters announcing museum exhibits and competing colloquia, film series, memoirs, and special issues of everything from mainstream magazines to scholarly journals. Yet the commemoration framing and fueling the proliferation of references seemed to drain those references of any compelling interest.



There was one exception. Only once did some aspect of the '68 years break through the commemorative fog to enter directly, and with a high measure of political necessity, into the figurability of the present moment. This occurred early in the year when people found their attentions drawn to the sudden reinvoication in the media of the ten year struggle that began in 1971 in southern France—the battle by farmers in central France known as the Larzac. Suddenly, people old enough were dusting off their memories of summer evenings of solidarity spent on the Larzac Plateau, and young journalists were scurrying to bone up on the intricacies of sheep-farming. The Larzac was a ten-year battle that began when 103 sheep-farming families attempted to block the state expropriation of their land to serve as an army training ground. Over the course of the decade, hundreds of thousands of French people and others made their way to the Larzac Plateau to show their support for the farmers' ultimately victorious battle. This was the first time that such a large number of French people had displaced themselves and traveled such a long distance for political reasons.

The sudden re-awakening of interest in the Larzac struggle had everything to do with the victory in January of this year of what was the longest lasting ongoing battle in post-war France: the occupation of a small corner of the countryside in western France outside of Nantes whose purpose was to block the construction of an international airport. What had begun around 1968 when the site was chosen for a new airport with a few farmers in the village of Notre-Dame-des-Landes refusing to sell their land, had become in the last ten years a full-fledged occupation known as the zad: a motley coalition of farmers, elected officials, townspeople, naturalists and occupiers who had succeeded up until then in blocking progress on any construction. Like the sheep-farmers in the Larzac forty years ago, the zad attracted tens of thousands of supporters over the years to the site to help build their communal buildings and habitations, to share in collective farming and banquets, and to defend the wildlife and wetlands as well as the alternative and semi-autonomous, secessionary way of life that had developed there. And In January 2018 the zad won. President Macron announced a definitive end to the airport project. The state had, in effect, collapsed in the face of tenacious opposition. That fact alone caused the all-too-familiar feelings of fatality and powerlessness that so strongly permeate the recent political climate to be gloriously lifted. In the euphoric months following his announcement, the Larzac re-emerged to be parsed and examined as a possible precedent, a model of sorts, a way that the occupiers and farmers of the zad might continue to farm collectively in the manner they had become accustomed to, with the land remaining under their collective control. Suddenly the Larzac was understood as not just an afterthought or a waning moment of the long 1960s, but as a site whose deepest aspirations could only be fulfilled in the present, in the form of

the communist experiments at the zad. (The zad brought the Larzac back to peoples' minds, and not, for example, another significant struggle from the 1970s at the Lip factory in Besançon, in a way that made it clear that Lip now represented the closing down of a particular political strategy: factory occupation. While the Larzac—ironically, given the widespread perception of farmers as backward-looking, clinging desperately to the old—was from the future.) Since there was to be no airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes,, and the farmland and the wetlands had been preserved, why couldn't the Larzac serve as a precedent?

That hope was to prove very short-lived for reasons I will go into at the end of this essay. But what the new visibility of the Larzac early this year in turn made possible was a new perception of the decade of highly exemplary, even Homeric battles that began in 1966 when peasants and farmers outside of Tokyo, nimbly supported by the far-left members of the National Student Union, the Zengakuren, fought the state expropriation of their farmland to be used for the building of the Narita airport. It became possible to see that battle, together with the Larzac, for what they truly were: the most defining combats of the worldwide 1960s.

The zad and other recent land-based, territorial struggles, in other words, help us to see the Larzac and Sanrizuka (Narita) struggles as the battles of the second half of the twentieth century that reconfigure the lines of conflict of an era. Another way of saying this is that the 1960s, whatever else they were, are another name for the moment when people throughout the world began to realize that the tension between the logic of development and that of the ecological bases of life had become the primary contradiction of their lives. Henceforth, it seems, any effort to change social inequality would have to be conjugated with another imperative—that of conserving the living. What these movements of the long 1960s initiated and what the zad confirms is that defending the conditions for life on the planet had become the new and incontrovertible horizon of meaning of all political struggle. And with it came a new way of organizing, founded on the notion of territory as a praxis produced by space-based relations. '68 was a movement that began in most places in the cities but whose intelligence and future tended toward the earth/Earth.

This is perhaps a major shift in the way we consider the 1960s, but I have experienced once before how a shift in the political sensibility of today can give rise to a new vision of the past. This was at the moment when the 1995 labor strikes in France, followed by anti-globalization protests in Seattle and Genoa, awakened new manifestations of political expression in France and elsewhere and new forms of a vigorous anti-capitalism after the long dormancy of the 1980s. It was this revitalized political momentum (and NOT any obligatory commemoration) that led

me to write my history of May's afterlives.<sup>1</sup>The workers' movements had dislodged a sentiment of oblivion, if not triviality, that had settled over the '68 years, and I felt the need to try to show the way the events, what had happened concretely to a staggeringly varied array of ordinary people throughout France, had not only receded from view, but had in fact been actively "disappeared" behind walls of grand abstractions, fusty clichés and unanchored invocations. The re-emergence of the labor movement in the 1990s jarred the 1960s loose from all the images and phrases put into place in France and elsewhere by a confluence of forces—the media, the institution of the commemoration, and the ex-gauchistes converted to the imperatives of the market. Today, when Bernard Henri-Levy, André Glucksmann, Bernard Kouchner and Alain Finkelkraut no longer dominate the airways with the ubiquity they still commanded even a mere ten years ago, it is difficult to remember the monopoly such self-appointed and media-anointed spokesmen held as lone interpreters of the movement. These men, and a few others (we have their equivalents in the States), all of whom could be relied upon to re-enact at the drop of a hat the renunciation of the errors of their youth, were those I called in my book the official memory functionaries or custodians. It was they who took on the pleasurable task of affirming, symbolizing and incarnating an essentially generational movement the better to criticize its goals and foundations. Using the movement as a target of opportunity, they in effect made themselves the guardians of the temple they were in the midst of destroying. By the twentieth anniversary of the May events—the peak of their power—they had successfully presided over a three-part effacement of the memory of the movement: the effacement of history by sociology, politics by ethics, and ideology by culture. The voice of the counter-revolution was taken in France to a remarkably homogenous degree to be the voice of the revolution.

But the labor strikes of the winter of 1995 not only succeeded in forcing a government climbdown over the issue of changes to the pensions of public sector workers, they also helped wrested control of the memory of '68 from the official spokespeople and reminded people what all the combined forces of oblivion, including what we can now see as a kind of Americanization of the memory of French May, had helped them to forget: that May '68 was the largest mass movement in modern French history, the most important strike in the history of the French labor movement, and the only "general" insurrection western, overdeveloped countries had experienced since World War II.

Rereading my book about May's afterlives, I was surprised to see that the seeds of the new argument I sketched out at the beginning of this essay was already there in its pages. In what was for me a very uncharacteristic venturing into the realm of prophecy, I found that I had

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1 See Ross, 2002

suggested back then that there would come a day when an auto-didact farmer like Bernard Lambert would emerge as a far more powerful figure of '68 politics in France than Daniel Cohn-Bendit. And that what occurred offstage in Nantes that spring would someday be seen to be more significant, more powerful than what occurred center-stage in Paris. Nantes plutôt que Nanterres. The wind from the west. "The Wind from the West" was the name of a farmer's journal co-edited by Lambert published in 1967 and '68. It's not often that what emanates from the west can command our attention in a positive way, but I'll try in what follows to show why I think that the kinds of solidarities that developed in the Loire-Atlantique in western France and in analogous land-based struggles throughout the world are at least as interesting to consider, and possibly more, as any of the solidarities that come to mind when we talk, say, about "the global south." To return to my prophecy, I think that day has come, Cohn-Bendit's day is indeed over, and Lambert, with his call to "decolonize the provinces," his day has come, and it is only now, in the wake of the zad, that we can begin to measure the significance of that summer day in 1973 when Lambert, high atop the Larzac Plateau, addressing the tens of thousands of people who had come from all over France to support sheep farmers in their battle with the Army, proclaimed that "jamais plus les paysans ne seraient des Versaillais [never again will country people be on the side of the Versaillais]."

Lambert's reference to the Paris Commune is suggestive and appropriate, for the history I wish to trace in western France is in part nothing more than the continuing re-emergence of vernacular commune forms. Consider the events of May-June 1968 proper in Nantes, widely remembered under the name of the "Commune de Nantes." There the central strike committee was made up of a coordinated alliance between three distinct social groups—farmers, students and workers. It is not accidental that such a three-part alliance should occur only in Nantes and nowhere else in France. For the Loire-Atlantique region can lay claim to being the birthplace of a new agrarian left that had its origins in the Paysans/Travailleurs movement of the 1960s and 70s and its creation of new disruptive practices outside the confines of existing, nationally led unions. As Lambert put it in an interview, "We had lost the habit of asking our spiritual fathers in Paris how we were supposed to think about the actions we were taking."<sup>2</sup>This group, led by Lambert, was founded in response to the very direct and directed influx of industrial and finance capital into French agriculture after 1965, and it was they who were responsible for organizing the march of some 100,000 people, mostly farmers, in villages throughout Brittany and the Loire-Atlantique on May 8, 1968, behind the slogan "The West Wants to Live."

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2 Bernard Lambert, cited in Lambert, Bourquelot and Mathieu, 1989, p. 6. Here and elsewhere translations from the French are mine.



Willemont, 2008

In this sense Lambert's 1970 text, *Les Paysans dans la lutte des classes*, which was the first to place farmers and urban workers in the same structural situation vis-à-vis capitalist modernity, and this amidst a general call for the establishment of "a real regional power," bears comparison with canonical revolutionary texts like Fanon's *Les Damnées de la terre*, or de Beauvoir's *La deuxième sexe*, in its conjuring up of a genuinely new political subjectivity. A new subjectivization emerges in the pages of Lambert's book to accompany that of woman or the colonized in the form of the "paysan,"—or defender of the earth.

What I'd like to do now is return to the four movements and moments I've briefly evoked: the zad in Notre-Dame-des-Landes and its struggle that continues today, even after the airport victory; the two protracted land wars of the late 60s and early 70s—the Larzac and Sanrizuka in Japan--and the Commune de Nantes in May and June 1968, and consider them each, as well as the constellation they form, in the light of three practices they share, above and beyond their use of occupation as a form of direct action. The first such practice is the act of defending per se, embodied in the figure of the "paysan" whose name, etymologically, means "someone who defends a territory" and prominent in a word that has only just entered the French dictionary two years ago, namely zad, or "zone à défendre." Japanese farmers in Sanrizuka, taking a tip from North Vietnamese peasants in their war with the United States, went so far as to bury themselves in underground tunnels and trenches to prevent the entry of large-scale construction machinery into the zone. At a moment when the state-led modernization effort had made accelerated industrialization the sole national value in Japan, farmers countered with their conviction that the airport would destroy values

*essential to life itself.* In Notre-Dame-des-Landes, farmers who refused to sell their land, many of whom had been active in the Paysans-Travailleurs movement and who were among those who drove their tractors into the city center in May 1968, were joined by nearby townspeople and a new group after 2008: squatters and soon-to-be occupiers. With the arrival of the first squatters, the ZAD (zone d'aménagement différé) became a zad (zone à défendre)—the acronym had been given a new combative meaning by the opponents to the project, the administrative perimeter of the zone now designated a set of porous battle lines, and the act of defending had replaced the action we are much more frequently called upon to do these days—namely, resist. Why does the history of the zad show us that defending is more generative of solidarity than resisting? *Resistance* means that the battle, if there ever was one, has already been lost and we can only try helplessly to resist the overwhelming power the other side now wields. *Defending*, on the other hand, means that there is already something on our side that we possess, that we value, that we cherish, and that is thereby worth fighting for. African-Americans in Oakland and Chicago in the 1960s knew this well when the Black Panther Party of *Self-Defense* designated black neighborhoods and blackness itself as of value and worthy of defending. What makes a designation of this kind interesting and powerful is that it enacts a kind of transvaluation of values: something is being given value according to a measurement that is different from market-value or the state's list of imperatives, or existing social hierarchies. In the case of the Larzac, a spokesman for then Minister of Defense, Michel Debré, characterized the zone chosen for army camp expansion as essentially worthless, a desolate limestone plateau, populated, in his words, by "a few peasants, not many, who vaguely raise a few sheep, and who are still more or less living in the Middle Ages."<sup>3</sup> As for the land designated for the airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, it was regularly described in initial state documents as "almost a desert." These descriptions could only have been the echo of the familiar colonial trope indicating a perceived scarcity of population preceding invasion, since the area chosen in the latter instance was in fact wetlands, --an environmental category unrecognized as having any value at all in the 1970s.

So the gesture of defense begins frequently by proclaiming value, even and especially a kind of excessive value, where it hadn't been thought to exist before, in a manner I've discussed elsewhere that the Parisian Communards called "communal luxury."<sup>4</sup> In 1871 Eugène Pottier and the Artists' Federation under the Commune overturned the hierarchy at the core of the artistic world, the hierarchy that granted enormous

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3 cited in Stéphane Le Foll, July 18, 2013.

4 See Ross, 2015, pp. 39-66.



privilege, status, and financial advantage to fine artists (painters and sculptors)—a privilege, status and financial security that decorative artists, theater performers, and skilled artisans simply had no way of sharing under the Second Empire. Why should the labor of artisans not have the same value as the work of fine artists? The Federation, which gathered together “all the artistic intelligences, in complete independence from the State,” produced a Manifesto that ends with this phrase: “We will work cooperatively towards our regeneration, the birth of communal luxury, future splendors and the Universal Republic.” What Pottier and the other artisans meant by “communal luxury” was something like the creation of “public beauty”: the enhancement of the lived environment in villages and towns, the right of every person to live and work in a pleasing environment. This may seem like a small, perhaps even a “decorative,” demand, made by a handful of mere “decorative” artists. But what they had in mind actually entails not only a complete reconfiguration of our relation to art, but to labor, social relations, nature and the lived environment as well. It means a full mobilization of the two watchwords of the Commune, namely decentralization and participation. It means art and beauty deprivatized, fully integrated into everyday life, and not hidden away in private salons or centralized into obscene nationalistic monumentality.

This was, in other words, a full dismantling under the Commune of socially determined and ancient categories of artistic practices that began by proclaiming the value of artisanal work and decorative art. Shoemaker Napoleon Gaillard, or rather *artiste-chaussurier* Gaillard, as he insisted on calling himself, reinvents himself as barricade strategist and architect, constructing both a knowledge and an art of street defense, just as he performed in his trade a knowledge and an art of the shoe. Anti-communards called Gaillard a “vain shoemaker,” spoke contemptuously of him as the “père des barricades,” and nicknamed the enormous barricade he had constructed on the Place de la Concorde “the Chateau Gaillard.” They complained that he considered his barricades “works of both art and luxury.” As indeed he did, arranging to have himself photographed in front of his creations—in effect, signing them. Communal luxury as practiced during the Commune (or on the zad) is thus a way of constituting an everyday aesthetics of process, the act of self-emancipation made visible.



Communal hangar and atelier built at the zad. Photo K. Ross

And from here we can now begin to track the development of something like the end of luxury founded on class difference and examine how such an idea opens out onto perspectives of social wealth that are entirely new, perspectives best amplified by the work of William Morris. What seems initially like a decorative demand on the part of decorative artists is in fact the call for nothing short of the total reinvention of what counts as wealth, what a society values. It's a call for the reinvention of wealth beyond exchange-value.

Today, as we witness states redistributing wealth to the rich in the name of austerity, it is interesting to consider how much a phrase like “communal luxury” defies the logic underlying austerity discourse. By designating something that had no value before in the existing hierarchy of value to be of value and worth defending one is not calling for equivalence or justice within an existing system like the market (as in an austerity regime or in the demand for fairer distribution). One is not calling for one's fair share in the existing division of the pie. Communal luxury means that everyone has a right not just to his or her share, but to his or her share *of the best*. The designation calls into question the very ways in which prosperity is measured, what it is that a society recognizes and appreciates, what it considers wealth.

And what it is that is being defended, of course, changes over time. To return to the Larzac, Sanrizuka, and the zad at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, these are what the Maoists used to call “protracted wars”—struggles that keep changing while enduring and whose strikingly long duration has everything to do with the non-negotiability of the issue. An airport is either built or it is not. Farmland is either farmland or it has become something else: housing developments, say, or an army



training ground. But where once what was being defended might have been an unpolluted environment or farmland or even a way of life, what is defended as the struggle deepens comes to include all the new social links, solidarities, affective ties, and new physical relations to the territory and other lived entanglements that the struggle produced.

And as new, creative ways are found to inhabit the struggle, it becomes apparent that the state and capitalism do not have to completely collapse in order to begin living relatively free lives. Alternative, collective and practical ways of going about satisfying basic needs, both material and social—housing, food, education, health care—can be created in a relative independence from the state, a kind of lived and livable secession that is frequently called “dual power”—the second of the practices or strategies I wish to discuss. Lenin used the phrase to describe the practical help offered on a daily basis by the network of soviets and workers’ councils in 1917 that coexisted with, and formed a kind of alternative to, the provisional government. He was describing what was in fact a transitional political conflict that had to be resolved, an unstable and temporary situation where workers councils competed with the State for power. But the term has also come to refer to working alongside state structures, becoming less and less reliant upon them, in an attempt to render state structures redundant. And this, of course, requires the active cultivation of new capacities and collective talents to adapt to new circumstances. In the U.S. 1960s, with their school breakfasts and other community grass-roots organizations, the Black Panthers, to all extents and purposes, turned their communities into dual power communes.<sup>5</sup> They knew that by operating at the level of everyday life and not ideology, by substantially transforming everyday life, in effect re-owning it by and through political struggle and becoming fully accountable for it, they were making revolution on a scale people could recognize. In France, the events of May and June, 1968 in Nantes, even if ephemerally, offer the best illustration of the paths opened by such a dual power strategy. After the Sud-Aviation workers outside of Nantes occupied their factory, providing the spark that ignited the general insurrectional strike across the country, links that had been established earlier by the Paysans/Travailleurs movement allowed farmers to feed strikers at cost or sometimes for free. A popular government in the form of a central strike committee in the town hall was set up in Nantes for several days at the end of May and the beginning of June. At the same time, in the neighborhoods, using networks already in place, an organization of collective food distribution from nearby farms sprang up to deal with the most pressing problems of day to day life.

5 See former Black Panther party member Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin’s 1993 text, ‘Anarchism and the Black Revolution.’ <https://libcom.org/library/anarchism-black-revolution-lorenzo-ervin>.

Everything began at the end of the second week of the strike in a Nantes neighborhood that was 95% working-class, les Batignolles, where the wives of the strikers met together in neighborhood associations (...) and decided to organize food distribution themselves. Walking through the neighborhood with a loudspeaker, they summoned people to an informational meeting. (. . .) After the meeting, a delegation of one hundred women went to the nearest factory to contact the strike committees. After that a food and provisions committee was created by uniting the three workers’ neighborhood associations. The committee made direct contact with the famers’ unions in the closest village: La Chapelle sur Erdre. A meeting made up of fifteen farmers from the union and a delegation of workers and students decided to form a permanent alliance to organize a distribution network with no intermediaries.<sup>6</sup>

These initiatives were in turn linked to the central strike committee which, operating from the town hall and calling itself “The Central Strike Committee for Managing Daily Life” could well appear as a kind of parallel administration. Forty years later the prefect of Nantes himself attested to the accuracy of a term like “the Nantes Commune” to describe the situation that had developed in the region.<sup>7</sup> “If, everywhere in France, the interruption in the functioning of large-scale public services tended to paralyze the action of the legal authorities, it seems to be the case that only in the Loire-Atlantique region did forms of parallel administrations appear, animated by the strikers.”<sup>8</sup> And as Yannick Le Guin, author of *La Commune de Nantes*, points out, “The influence of these parallel circuits was so considerable that the population wanted to prolong the experiment.”<sup>9</sup> This was particularly the case in the poorer areas of the city, where workers’ families were most effected by the strike and where a farmers’ milk cooperative distributed 500 liters of milk a day for free after May 26<sup>th</sup>. That the population should want the experiment to endure should come as no surprise. When questions of existence and subsistence are no longer being posed at the individual level, who wouldn’t want such a state of affairs to continue?

The power source in “dual power” is of the same type that abounded during the Paris Commune of 1871—power that comes not from a law enacted by parliament, but from the direct initiative of the people from below, working in their local areas. But the Communards in 1871 were separated by vast armies and what Marx called “a Chinese wall of

6 Extract from the journal “Les Cahiers de Mai,” special Nantes edition, June 1968.

7 Jean-Emile Vié, cited in *Ouest-France*, May 9, 2008.

8 Jean-Emile Vié, cited in Guilbaud, p. 97.

9Yannick Le Guin, 1969, p.133.

lies” from any comrades they may have had in provincial cities or in the countryside. When Peter Kropotkin re-wrote the experience of the Paris Commune in *The Conquest of Bread*, he imagined the whole Ile-de-France and the surrounding *départements* given over to vast vegetable gardens to feed the revolutionary city. Proximity to and involvement with the means of subsistence is essential not only to establishing a lived intimacy with the territory, it is also essential to a movement’s duration. The active participation of a sector of Nantes farmers in May 1968, bringing food to the occupied factories and campuses, created the perspective, if not the reality, of a fight with duration. The farmer/student/worker coalition in Nantes enacted however briefly a kind of dual power that projected Nantes ’68 well beyond a riot or a general strike into well-nigh Kropotkinian dimensions, filling in the outlines of what life might look like if the infrastructure of a city and its surroundings were managed autonomously by an insurrectional commune.

The Nantes coalition is also an exemplary if short-lived manifestation of the process that the authorial collective at the zad, the Mauvaise Troupe, call in their book “composition,” – and this is the third aspect of these movements I want to highlight. “Composition” is a continuation of sorts of the relational subjectivity often said to be at the heart of 60s politics. Henri Lefebvre, for example, used to say that May ’68 happened because Nanterre students were forced to walk through Algerian *bidonvilles* to get to their classes. The lived proximity of those two highly different worlds—functionalist campus and immigrant slums--and the trajectories that brought students to organize in the *bidonvilles* and Algerian workers to worksites on campus, these precarious and ephemeral meetings, beset with all the incertitude, desire, empathy, ignorance and deception that mark such encounters, are at the heart of the political subjectivity that emerged in ’68. They are the laboratory of a new political consciousness.

A relational subjectivity of that sort clearly developed in the Chiba prefecture outside Tokyo, as a coalition came into being under skies criss-crossed by American domination, in the form of the encounter between farmers, who began by hunkering down to defend their way of life but learned in the process the true violence of which the state was capable, and radical urban students and workers who had never before given a thought to where and how the food they ate was produced. In the Loire-Atlantique region in the late 1960s, the central imperative motivating farmers in the Paysans/Travailleurs movement was the desire to break out of corporatism and achieve dialogue with other social groups. This was the moment when farmers in France began, perhaps for the first time, to consider the problems of agriculture and the countryside in global political, rather than merely sociological, terms. They wanted to self-affirm as a social group, but in a non-corporatist manner, to respond to problems that the whole country, and not just farmers, confronted:

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the problem of the use of space, of alliances with workers, of weapons production, of the fate of the land—land ownership and land usage-- in general. The movement organized long marches (including a march to the Larzac), in reaction against the national Paris-based Farmers Union, the FNSEA, that had demanded that their march on Paris be stopped at Orleans, so that they didn’t “stir up any shit” in the capital. And, equally importantly, so that they didn’t come into contact with the “urban riff-raff”—i.e. revolutionaries.<sup>10</sup>

The force of the Larzac movement lay in the diversity of people and disparate ideologies it brought together: anti-military activists and pacifists (conscientious objectors), regional Occitan separatists, supporters of non-violence, revolutionaries aiming to overthrow the bourgeois state, anti-capitalists, anarchists and other *gauchistes*, as well as ecologists. But where the Larzac movement indeed gathered together a diversity of social groups and political tendencies under its umbrella, at no time was the fundamental leadership of the farmer families who had spearheaded the movement ever in question. Sympathizers who supported the farmers politically and financially, usually from afar but sporadically in vast demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people who had voyaged to the plateau, were supporting the visceral attachment of the farmers to the same land and the same métier. At the zad, with its improbable assortment of different components made up of old or historic farmers, young farmers from the area, petty-bourgeois shopkeepers in nearby villages, elected officials, occupiers, and naturalists, however, no such group was or is in a leadership position. This has created a very different kind of movement, one that in its desire to hold together the diverse but equal components that make it up, requires, as one zad dweller put it, “more tact than tactics.”<sup>11</sup>

Composition, in that sense, was born with the zad. The kind of social base it creates is distinct: essentially a working alliance, involving mutual displacements and disidentifications, that is also the sharing of a physical territory, a living space. Composition is the mark of a massive investment in organizing life in common without the exclusions in the name of ideas, identities or ideologies so frequently encountered in radical milieux. If the zad is perhaps the best example of an open conflict that has managed to endure, to build for itself duration in the midst of struggle, then it has everything to do with this process.

Composition is really nothing more than the fruits of an unexpected meeting between separate worlds, and the promise contained in the becoming-Commune of that meeting. It is thus a space or process where even antagonisms create an attachment. “Composition” could be said to

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<sup>10</sup> Lambert 1989, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Mauvaise Troupe Collective, 2018, p. xxii. For an extended discussion of how “composition” worked at the zad, see pp. 87-115.

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be the way that autonomous forces unite and associate with each other, sometimes complementing each other, sometimes contradicting each other, but always, in the end, dependent on each other. When it works, these different elements strive to recognize each other and work together to pursue common desires that surpass each of them, rather than trying to resolve their differences. Rather than trying, that is, to convince each other or convert the other to the superiority of one's ways, whether this be sabotage, filing legal briefs, cataloguing endangered species, or frontal violence with the police. This is especially important in a movement whose enemies try ceaselessly to divide and conquer by setting one group up against another. The strength of the movement derives precisely from its diverse makeup, which in the case of the zad has allowed it to express itself through various kinds of actions, from highway blockages using tractors to legal maneuvering to violent demonstrations.

Composition creates and maintains *solidarity in diversity*, solidarity among people of disparate ideologies, identities and beliefs whose coming together and staying together adds up to no final orthodoxy, just a continuing internal eclecticism.<sup>12</sup> That eclecticism and the disagreements it produces can be exhausting, often aggravating. So why make the effort? Because the power of the movement resides in a certain excess—the excess of creating something that is more than the sum of ourselves—something that only the composition between our differences makes possible.

The goal is not to make the whole territory over into one's image. Elisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin knew this well when they wrote of the dangers of self-enclosed, intentional communities, withdrawn from the world and made up only of the faithful. "In our plan for existence and struggle," wrote Reclus, "it isn't a little chapel of like-minded companions that interests us—it's the world in its entirety."<sup>13</sup> The goal, as the naturalists might say, is to conserve diversity. To conclude by returning to our earlier discussion, it is the diversity of the territory that is now what is being defended.

AFTERWORD

Within months of abandoning the airport project at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the Macron government, whose agenda this spring was nothing short of smashing all political opposition of any kind, whether it be from the universities, the postal service, the SNCF or the zad, ordered, at the cost of 400,000 euros a day, a military-style invasion of 3000 police and

12 At the end of 2017, the Chilean Supreme Court brought a victorious end to another ten-year battle, declaring illegal the permit granted by the government to build an immense shopping mall over the entire historic port neighborhood of Valparaíso. In this instance the composition involved dock workers, artists, urbanists, neighborhood associations, and students.

13 Reclus, cited in Ross 2015, p. 119.

soldiers in tanks into the zad, destroying numerous dwelling-places and communal buildings.<sup>14</sup> Government intransigence, combined with the military occupation of the zone that has still not completely ended to this day, created an insurmountable division among the occupiers between those willing to negotiate with the government to find a way to stay and continue in some form the collective experiments of the zad, and those who brooked no dialogue whatsoever with the state. These latter were forcefully expelled by the government from the zone. For those occupiers who remain, a different phase of the struggle has unfolded, as they try to secure the different habitations and practices they developed over the years. Among these practices is one whose roots in the Commune de Nantes of 1968 could not be more explicit. La Cagette des Terres is a network operating from the zad since 2017 to “feed the struggles” of the Nantes region quite literally, using vegetables, bread and cheese produced collectively from the zad. Whether these movements be more punctual, like the strike by postal workers in the city, or more long-term, like the occupation by students of buildings at the University of Nantes they demanded to be turned into refugee housing, or the various migrant squats or workers’ cantines in the area, the network has already made its presence and solidarity known. Besides the immediate goal of simply helping movements to endure at the day-to-day subsistence level, the goal of La Cagette des terres is to strengthen the links between the city and the countryside, to reinforce the circulation *between* struggles more generally, and, beyond that, to experiment with forms of food distribution other than those dictated by capitalist economy.<sup>15</sup>

14 As I write, a similar military-invasion of the *zone à défendre* in the Hambach Forest has begun in western Germany, where occupiers dwelling in sixty treehouses for the last six years had successfully protected what remains of a 12,000 year-old forest from becoming an open-pit soft coal mine.

15 Those interested in joining the network as a farmer, deliverer, or subscriber, see LA CAGETTE DESTERRÉS – Réseau de ravitaillement des luttes du Pays nantais, <https://lacagettedesterrés.wordpress.com/>

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# May '68 and its Subject (some Philosophical Archives of a Revolution)

Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc

**Abstract:** This article concerns the philosophico-political archive of May '68 in France, dating from the beginning of the 1970s until the 40th anniversary of 2008. Through a comparative analysis of the texts of Badiou, Rancière, Daney and Deleuze, I question the difficulty of thinking the singularity of a militant subjectivity, caught between a Marxist hegemonic language and the wavering of its political grammar. I examine certain games of writing and legibility of this difficulty, by considering testimonial registers and philosophical analyses along with problems encountered by militant cinema of the 1968 years. Finally, I turn towards another “archive” of events, one characterized by anomie, traced by Maud Mannoni alongside a psychotic patient in May '68, to interrogate from the standpoint of such an “other scene” the hyperbolization of historico-political indentifications that, in May '68, had shaken strands of the universal instituted in the State and its sovereignty, the nation and its community, society and its exchanges, as well as the instituted figures of the individuality, or the normative constructions of the “person” and the attributes that our juridico-moral metaphysics bestow on it. We are thus confronted with a mode of effectiveness of historical signifiers that have given to a type of revolutionary subjectivity both its militant intensity and an extension of its universe of reference. These have also given rise to its “impolitical” side, that is to say the least prone to reappropriation, or the least to be grasped by the work of historical knowledge, and memory.

**Keywords:** Badiou, Deleuze, militant, subjectivity, Rancière, Daney,

We are invited to avoid the commemorative ritual without giving up on the question that still makes us contemporaries of May '68, and such a question is the very object of the commemorations. Thus, in France, every decennial commemoration is accompanied by its own exercises of conjuration, while the historiographical works correct and complicate the understanding of events. One modality of it takes on a reflexive and critical form, intruding into the complexity of heterogeneous or contradictory memories of May '68, their querulous production and various transformations. Kristin Ross' *contretemps* study<sup>1</sup> is a perfect example of the battlefield-like archive of May '68, which follows isolated attempts to go against the grain and counter depoliticization dating back to the summer of 1968. Another equally interesting modality could be labeled meta-commemorative: we ask not simply whether we are contemporaries of May '68 but question its impact on the sense of the “contemporary” that has radically transformed what “us” means in politics, or what are the conditions and coincidences, the precautions and the audacity necessary to declare such an “us”. We do not claim

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<sup>1</sup> Ross 2002

directly any fixed image of May '68, whether scholarly or trivial, complex or allegorical, intended for estrangement or identification. We do it indirectly, by analyzing how May '68 transformed the very meaning of the “political,” the identities mobilized by political movements, and the historicity invented and transformed by them. This nexus of history, politics, and collective subjects who “make history” by doing politics, has been dramatized under the idea of Revolution: thus these studies often appear as a thread stretched between a settled past and an active survival, between a confirmation of obsolescence and a remembrance for the future, necessary disidentifications and possible re-identifications with a revolutionary tradition, of which May '68 names both the last scene and the unsolved insistence of its promises. We are uncertain how to frame May '68, but we do believe that its repression would lead to a terrible loss. Between exercise of “dis-idealization” and reserve of ideal, the commemoration is de-ritualized, while the drama intensity of its stakes is multiplied tenfold.

This game of language is inseparable from a polemical space; and it is certainly not in vain, if only to interrupt the inexhaustible and rhetorically multiform work of the denial, falsification and “liquidation of '68” (between its minimal credo—nothing significant happened in '68, it's enough to check that nothing changed in the institutions, the law, the economical organization—and its sophisticated demonstrations—what happened differs from what the actors of '68 believed had happened, they believed they made a revolution and they accomplished a “cultural rupture” that was ultimately perfectly functional and synchronic with the mutations of advanced capitalism). The following reflections intend to suggest that this language game is not saturated either. I begin with the example of the conference given by Alain Badiou,<sup>2</sup> as it is interesting to scrutinize the construction of the philosophical archive of May '68. I will not deal with its accuracy against the present state of historical knowledge, but rather study the way the '68 years forced philosophico-political writing to question its own regime of legibility between historical knowledge and redistribution of a political memory. Next, I will focus on what becomes illegible here; that concerns some aspects of the identifications of political subjects, and particularly their discursive and imaginary implications for which Marx, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, suggested hallucinatory and delirious vectors. I will turn then conclude on another “philosophical archive” of May (which was often considered significantly synchronous to May '68, with its political vitality—or its illusions) by referring to some suggestions made by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the early 1970s. However I will not consider their propositions to be a draft of a general theory of political identifications, but rather a symptom of the hyperbolic game of historico-political

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2 Badiou 2008 (2010)

identifications that '68 popularized worldwide. It could be useful, in our necessary polemical intervention into the cobwebs of historical knowledge, and political memories of '68, to keep sight of the mode of efficiency of historical signifiers, or these “names of history” that have given a certain kind of revolutionary subjectivity to its militant intensity and the extension of its universe of reference. That is, precisely because they have simultaneously formed its “impolitical” underside, which could be less liable to re-appropriation and less controllable by the work of memory and historical knowledge.

**1, 2, 3 May '68, more or less**

Let us consider Badiou's conference of 2008. He does not pretend to be an administrator of patrimony of '68; his revision of events is not indifferent to his own political agenda of the time, nor to his later reformulations of the relations between politics and philosophical thought. What interests me is the form of exposition he adopts in seeking to place May '68 at this intersection. It is deliberately passed through the sketch of a surface of legibility in the hardly legible cobwebs of the facts and causalities, and on such a surface at least three Mays can be distinguished. There is the May of student and college youth, for whom novelty composes the worldwide character of the revolt and “the extraordinary strength of the ideology and the symbols, the Marxist vocabulary and the idea of revolution.”<sup>3</sup> There is also the working-class May, that of the general strike never before seen in France. This is mobilized around big factories and trade-union organizations in a more classical form of “leftist” struggles (“given its scale and its general features, the strike took place, in historical terms, in a very different context from the youth rebellion”,<sup>4</sup> but also in some previously unknown radical elements, such as the role played by young workers outside of trade-union organizations in the outbreak, the modes of action and the development of the strike. Thirdly, there is a May that Badiou, in passing, labels libertarian, one that sought to transform morals, manners, shapes of individual freedom, new relationships between the sexes and generations, emancipation of women and sexual minorities, and new frontiers of sensibility in the culture “with the idea of a new theatre, new forms of political expression, a new style of collective action, the promotion of happenings and improvisation, and the *États généraux du cinéma*....”<sup>5</sup> Although between these three Mays exist “important intersections,” meetings and even violent conflicts—between classical leftism and the classical left, between the political leftism of Trotskyists and Maoists and “rather anarchist cultural leftism”, the three

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3 Ibid., p.47

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p.50

Mays remain perfectly distinct. Badiou emblemizes this fact with the symbolic topography that distributes the occupations (one of the most striking forms of collective action of May '68): the universities of the Paris region (Nanterre, Sorbonne, Censier), the big automobile factories (Cléon, Billancourt, Flins), and the Odéon Theater (then called *Théâtre de France*) or even the Avignon Festival a few weeks later. Each May has its own sociology and complex memory, its regimes of utterances and dominant ideological forms, its organizations of reference and dissidents, its triggering events and chronology, its particular conflicts, and its own ways of referring to the other Mays. "Three components, three sites, three types of symbolism and discourse", which heterogeneity gives to this mass uprising its contradictory intensity as well as polyvocal and non-unifiable effervescence. "In May '68, political life was intense, and it was lived in the midst of a multiplicity of contradictions";<sup>6</sup> and for this very reason no univocal statement about it could be made, either today or yesterday.

To call this account simplified would be a superficial reproach. It reestablishes an assignable analytical (and duly assigned at the time) schema: the schema of a "*topique*". It came from Freud, but had different philosophical precedents, and was elaborated in two ways during the sixties by Lacan and Althusser, who developed its terms and meanings for a theory of the subject of unconsciousness and a theory of historical causality, respectively. It would be fitting to add to these three "discursive locations" of Mays (knowledge, production, and ideology) Lacanian registers of the symbolic, real and imaginary. The Althusserian palimpsest is more obvious: in Marx's *topique* Althusser conceptualized the kind of determination active in a non-unifiable multiplicity, in which relations will be regularized and deregularized by the differentials of "efficacy", of rhythms, and of historical temporalities deprived of any common measure. This complexity excluded purely aleatory distributions of contradictions and their transformations in the emancipatory struggles; but it equally excluded the possibility of a "total point of view" that would grant the analysis of conjuncture full visibility and grant revolutionary organization the control of its intervention, or that would "ideally" grant the availability of one for the other. It would instead subordinate their adjustment to the contingency of the conjunctural synchronization of these contradictions (to their "encounter" or "fusion," following the metaphors of *For Marx*) in a "unity of rupture" which is incompressibly equivocal, "overdetermined," and de-predictive.

This kind of editing doesn't need to be homologized in order to be put into the field: Badiou revises this narrative by dissociating its premises and effects. If May '68 is given as a non-unified multiplicity of contradictions and conflicts, their "encounter" can be detached as

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.51

another May, one politically and temporally distinct. This fourth May, Badiou says, is more "essential," but also "less legible"; it is "still prescribing the future," however it is difficult to comprehend this May within the events of May-June 1968. It inscribes an unity of rupture, but this occurs by means of a double inversion: in a series of differentiated effects afterward (rather than a rupture), and in the chrono-topical dissemination (and not unity) of a decade of struggles and of political experimentations, throughout the seventies. Between these three Mays and the fourth, dateless, May, a strange chiasmus appears. As the legibility of the revolt of May '68 is based on its over determined complexity, the minimal legibility of the "'68 years" promises its greatest univocity. This univocity then appeals to a superior legibility capable of extracting from it something that "still predicts the future," on the condition that the revolt of May-June '68 becomes more illegible in its turn. The field of this transaction is nothing other than the common language that could hold together, in a combative yet combined manner, these three disjunctive Mays in an over determined unity. These three discourses, heterogeneous as they are, were shaped by the same regime of historico-political utterances that articulated, for the sake of Marxism, a knowledge of social structures, a schema of historical evolution, and a restrictive scenario of political organization and intervention. This regime of utterance allowed conflicts on these three dimensions, on the relations of primacy and subordination, or of continuity or discontinuity between them; it held so long as the exigency to situate them in relation to each other held too. "There were certainly wide-ranging discussions about what that party was. Did it already exist, or did it have to be created or re-created? What form would it take? And so on. But there was a basic agreement that there was a historical agent, and that that agent had to be organized. (...) No matter whether they were actors in dominant institutions or protesters [*contestataires*], orthodox communists or *gauchistes*, Maoists or Trotskyists, everyone used the vocabulary of classes, class struggles, the proletarian leadership of struggles, mass organizations and the party. There were, of course, violent disagreements about the legitimacy and significance of these movements. But everyone spoke the same language, and the red flag was everyone's emblem."<sup>7</sup> In fact, this language was not first common and then became quarrelsome; it was common *because* it was highly conflicting. It was in this sense hegemonic: common and disrupting, devised and devising, making controversies communicable and incommunicability translatable.

Thus, the relation between May '68 and the decade that followed appears to be essentially negative, and the shift neither paradoxical nor problematic. Badiou gives it the rhetorical form of a secret and its fragile revelation, of the trouble between knowledge and non-knowledge looking

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp.53-54

for “a new vision of politics that was trying to wrench itself away from the old vision. The fourth May '68 is seeking to find that which might exist beyond the confines of classic revolutionism. It seeks it blindly because it uses the same language as the language that dominated the conception it was trying to get away from”<sup>8</sup> The difference between the first three Mays, and the fourth, becomes rather an opaque interference, providing the metapolitical meaning of the event: May '68 has desaturated what is implied by politics, and primarily by its Marxist theoretical and practical codifications. To the extent that this encoding was the very language of the actors themselves, measuring its reflux is inevitably ambivalent. One that presumes to show how this desaturation was lived by them. But that presumes also to accentuate a dividing line between what was said and saying, that is, between the utterances these actors made, full of sense and historical urgency, and the speech acts and practical inventions blindly calling for a new language still missing. Let us turn to the analysis of these two aspects.

**Theatres of May without image**

The first allows us a last incursion into Badiou’s narrative strategy precisely when the story is interrupted in the narration (in the present and in the first person “I” then “we”) of a young teacher of philosophy at the University of Reims. What a still missing language makes hardly legible has to be shown (“Here I must speak with images”, says Badiou) by means of a personal recollection vouching for this May '68 wrenching itself away from the language of May.

“So one day we organized a march to the Chausson factory, which was the biggest factory in town to have gone on strike. That sunny day, we marched in a long, compact procession towards the factory. What were we going to do when we got there? We didn't know, but had a vague idea that the student revolt and the workers' strike should unite, without the intermediary of the classic organizations. We approached the barricaded factory, which was decked with red flags, with a line of trade unionists standing outside the gates, which had been welded shut. They looked at us with mingled hostility and suspicion. A few young workers came up to us, and then more and more of them. Informal discussions got under way. A sort of local fusion was taking place. We agreed to get together to organize joint meetings in town. (...) What happened at the gates of the Chausson factory would have been completely improbable, even unimaginable, a week earlier. The solid union and party *dispositif* usually kept workers, young people and intellectuals strictly apart in their respective organizations. The local or national leadership was

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8 Ibid., pp.56-57

the only mediator. We found ourselves in a situation in which that *dispositif* was falling apart before our very eyes. This was something completely new, and we were both immediate actors and bewildered spectators. This was an event in the philosophical sense of the term: something was happening but its consequences were incalculable. (...) At that point, we realized, without really understanding it, that if a new emancipatory politics was possible, it would turn social classifications upside down. It would not consist in organizing everyone in the places where they were, but in organizing lightning displacements, both material and mental.”<sup>9</sup>

Striking “image”. There was obviously—singularly for the French Maoists—a political and militant syntax far more pressing than a “vague idea” stipulating such a Long March of students and young intellectuals towards the Chausson factory: to learn from the masses, to break down the manual/intellectual division which structures, not only the capitalist sociotechnical division of labor, but the very bourgeois practice of power, etc. “Speaking with images” (the text of Badiou comes from a lecture), Badiou shows a written image erasing the editing of his own writing; and thus he shows a scene that no script governs. In filmmaking terms : to show it in direct cinema. Actually, Badiou speaks in images, not about images. And yet such a gesture of erasure belongs to the time of this very scene. The film critics of the *Cahiers du cinéma* had at length (even before their late maoist turn) thrashed the odious authority of the script in the filmic process. Among them, Serge Daney was more informed than anyone about the vitality of the militant films of the '68 years. He heavily contributed to analyze the esthetical, technical, ethical and political issues confronting the demands to film *en direct*, from the inside, such a “local fusion” Badiou remembers. Yet Daney will note afterwards that the events of May-June 1968 left very few images. “Everyone pretended to need images but no one had the means nor the want to produce them”. Michel De Certeau had said in an eloquent formula: “*En 1968 on a pris la parole comme on avait pris la Bastille*”; Daney translated: “The '68 imagination lived on theater, not on films. On discourse, on dogmatic recitings, on points of order, on prises de parole, on souvenirs from 1789, and not on images. We “took” the Odéon Theater, not the O.R.T.F. [Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française].”<sup>10</sup> Only one image seemed to make an exception for the film critics of the *Cahiers* (Daney, Jacques Rivette, Serge Le Peron). The twelve minutes film roll of *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder* have often been seen—and still nothing on its strength today—as the visual archive par excellence of May '68. In

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9 Ibid., pp.58-60

10 Daney 1983, p.51



counter-position with Badiou's narrative of the '68 years, this image makes a link between May '68 and the red decade. It shows what does not end with the end of May, and what is not resolved with the negotiating settlement of the strike, with its count of gains and renunciations, with its economy of time conjugating the bygone era of the struggle and the hypothetical future of one another, with it injunction for the workers to go back to work, for the students to go back to studies, for the subjects to go back to the reason of their identity, and for the bodies to go back to the order of things. Yet there is no image without a screen: this linking-image also puts an obstacle. It archives better than anything else the absolute of the '68 revolt—the “becoming-revolutionary” and “opening of the possibles” (Deleuze), the “ultimate illegitimacy of all kinds of domination” and the “reconfiguration of the visible, thinkable, and possible” (Rancière). Though it not only archives a political memory in a film image; it archives also a political image in a memory of cinema. *La Reprise aux usines Wonder* catches the subjective rupture of the '68 revolution in an intense singularity. Meanwhile, *La Reprise* sets itself in the revolution of cinema in the history of images, going back to its inaugural shock, and rediscovering its origin while reversing it. The young worker woman who declares that she “will not return in this clink” reverses the image of mute workers staged, one Sunday of 1895, in *La Sortie des usines Lumières*.<sup>11</sup>

Jean-Louis Comolli, who, along with Narboni, during the Marxist-Leninist turn of the *Cahiers du cinéma* led the review a few months after the events of May, had already analyzed such a paradox of the “detour by the direct.”<sup>12</sup> Interrogating the development of direct cinema since the early Sixties, he noted that the radical reduction of all operations—fictional, technical and esthetical filters— on the film’s material does not guarantee the *effet-de-réel* of the “direct”. On the contrary it exposes the material to produce some uncontrollable effects of over-reality, that the most crafted scripted fiction would envy. Let us return to *La Reprise* one more time. A young woman is silhouetted against gathered people. She stands up and her voice rises. Around her, the distribution of the roles of May organizes the agora: the people become the chorus, the gauchist will serve as her ally, the elected communist and the union representative will serve as her protagonists. These ones order her to accept the law of the city, and she opposes it with nothing but the infinite refusal of her body and inflexible voice. They remind her of the written rules, the reached agreement and the time taken to return to a state of reason; she invokes another reason, and suspends her destiny: on the threshold of the factory from which she stands. The interior will remain out of sight, like the grave of this young worker who would be called Antigone.

11 Le Peron & Daney 1981

12 Comolli 1969, p.49

We shall now return to Badiou's image, since it is no less trapped in the “detour by the direct”; that is, it exposes a political memory which is immediately contaminated by memories of writing and theater. To demonstrate the vacillation of Marxist historico-political grammar in which the contradictory effervescence of May '68 utters, Badiou approaches the utopian breach that Marx allowed in *The German Ideology*, one of a “communist society” liberated from “fixation of the social activity” by the division of labor, “and thus mak[ing] it possible to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner.”<sup>13</sup> But by speaking with images, Badiou also depicts an image of theater. Its model should not be found in the Living Theater, but rather in the *Letter on Spectacles*. Here Rousseau remembered, with a tender melancholy suitable for that which is without an image outside of that which is kept safe by memory, the popular festival, improvised in the ward of Saint-Gervais, where children, women, and soldiers are drawn in a circle, irreversibly becoming actors and spectators. Another recollection and another ideal is addressing the future of a “an egalitarian society which, acting under its own impetus, brings down walls and barriers; a polyvalent society, with variable trajectories, both at work and in our lives.”<sup>14</sup> It is thus clear that this Badiousean image-recollection does not simply abrogate the difference of times it covers; it redistributes the blinding and illumination of afterwardness. The Maoist scenario which prescribed the long march toward the Chausson factory now becomes the unscripted “history of blind movement” (“we don't know,” “we understand at the moment without really understanding”). Conversely, the “incalculable consequences” of May '68 will found a measure and a count during the red decade, when “thousands of students, high school students, workers, women from the estates and proletarians from Africa” go in search of “what would be a political practice that is not willing to keep everyone in their place look like”, “that accepts new trajectories, impossible encounters, and meetings between people who do not usually talk to each other?”<sup>15</sup>

1968 – 1848: others repetitions, other bifurcation

Also in 2008, Jacques Rancière borrowed a similar rhetoric of the secret, and its revelation, to situate in May '68 two overlapping conceptions of politics, or, the crossing between a knowledge that does not “know” that it is no longer a knowledge and a non-knowledge that goes in search of a new language.

13 Marx 2010, p.47

14 Badiou 2008, p.

15 Ibid.

“May ’68 was a revelation of a disturbing secret: (...) in France, more or less in all sectors, we were seeing the putting into question of hierarchical structures organizing intellectual, social and economical activity, as if it was suddenly revealed that the politics don’t have another basement than final illegitimacy of all kinds of domination. This kind of shaking as such doesn’t give any definite result. Rather it questions all the schemas of historical evolution that are assigning to this evolution a necessary goal. The militants of May ’68 believed they were doing the Marxist revolution. But their action undid it on the contrary, by showing that a revolution is an autonomous process of reconfiguration of the visible, thinkable, and possible and not the accomplishment of a historical movement, led by a political party to its goal.”<sup>16</sup>

Rancière thus discerns an improvement that Deleuze had already observed in May ’68, between the “history of revolutions” and the “becoming-revolutionary” of the people.<sup>17</sup> But what would later appear distinct crosses indistinctly in May ’68 *within the same subjects*. As such, Rancière has to re-mark a type of division that he taught us to question, between what people say and what they do, between what they do and what they think they are doing, between the knowledge they mobilize in their struggle and its disqualification for the sake of a superior knowledge of their necessary blinding. The refusal of such a stage of illusion was Rancière’s anti-lesson of May ’68 he turned against “Althusser’s lesson”, by updating the implicit policy (“reactionary,” “paranoid”) of the rupture between science and ideology or the power statements this “epistemological break” served.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Rancière identified the historico-political location in Marx where this stage of illusion came to the foreground: in the failure of the revolution of 1848, the break of which is halted by *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* for being essentially political before being epistemological.<sup>19</sup> In *The German Ideology*, Rancière said in substance, the real was one of the division of labor and the class struggles; this position of reality united under one roof the pursuit of science and the perception of the classes who are materially engaged in the struggle; it ensured between the movement of knowledge and the historical movement this coincidence to which the *Communist Manifesto* will still give the form of a “revelation”, while the function of illusion was relegated to a petty-bourgeois marginality whose abstractions internalize its separation from the reality of the

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16 Rancière 2008, p.195

17 Deleuze & Guattari 1984

18 Rancière 1974

19 Rancière 1973

class struggle. But it is this topic that dismembers “the extraordinary pantomime of 1848, where, through the mirages of representation, each class found itself doing the task of its neighbor, where the men in power donned the costumes of another political scene to represent the opposite interests of those they were supposed to represent.”<sup>20</sup> The challenge of the illusion in the representation stopped to be localizable in the separation between ideology and reality; it became coextensive with a “scene of the reality which is that of the representation”. It is the class struggle and the defeat of the proletariat that dissociated the time of knowledge from the time of politics. This conferred to the science an autonomy that Althusser will hypostasize (which was, for Marx, impossible to think until then), giving for his object, not the illusion or objectivical reality, but the very invisible *dispositif* which, off-stage, oversees the objectivical illusion which stands as a reality for the social agents.

Meanwhile, Rancière was suggesting a very different surface of inscription of 1848, of the crisis of (theoretical, political) representations, and of the bankruptcy of the revolutionary scenario provided by the “simplification of the antagonism” in the *Manifesto*: a reorganization of the revolutionary problematic around a “rehab of the multiplicity”, attested to by the “politico-military dream of France spiked with armed workers” (Blanqui: “*Avis au peuple*”), by the “federalist dream of the ‘direct legislation made by the people’” (Rittinghausen) and a world of “communes” and autonomous groups of producers (Proudhon before Varlin), and also by a fantasmatic repetition of older forgotten polytheisms—“poetical (for example Louis Menard, insurgent and principal prosecution witness of June), philosophical (Feuerbach’s Theogony, before Nietzsche), historical (Michelet: *La Sorcière*), [repetition] which ends in the prophetic expectation of the regenerating barbarism of the hordes from the Eastern hordes (Coeurderoy : *La Révolution par les Cosaques*).”<sup>21</sup> It would be tempting to see in these two antinomic inscriptions of the political *coupure* of 1848, an analogical disjunction to that which will be illustrated on both sides of May 1968—Althusserian on the one hand, Deleuzian on the other—in French contemporary philosophy. Does this mean that at the time of questioning with Badiou and Rancière (and with their own debates with these two philosophical legacies) over what makes us contemporary from May 68, May 68 makes us contemporaries of the journey leading from the workers’ aspirations of February 1848 to the “mischievousness” of universal suffrage bringing his uncle’s nephew to power?

.....  
20 Ibid., p.8

21 Ibid.

May '68 between internationalist consciousness and woldwide unconscious

Shortly after May '68, Deleuze published *Difference and repetition*. He reexplores the analysis from the opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, which is about the constitution of modern-universalist revolutionary identities, the mechanisms of identification and idealization they lean back on, the phantasmatic repetition of the roles and costumes of past revolutions, the simulation which constitutes political subjects and both deludes them and makes them be up to their historical task.<sup>22</sup> However, in “the poetry of the future” (the very language that was missing, according to Marx, for the proletariat in 1848) Deleuze did not understand the transparent language that put an end to the tragi-comical reversals of bourgeois revolutions by reconciling actors and their characters, political identities and the roles they endorse, the revolutionary class and its proper name. Instead, with a striking marxo-nietzschean twist, Deleuze projected a “liberation” of the multiple that would confront revolutionary time (its dramaturgy of conflicts between the Old and the New, the pathos of the *césure* which makes them incommensurable while relating them to each other<sup>23</sup> with a regime of simulation without patterns, which makes all identities a simulation, and which makes every simulation the repetition of another, with one difference of intensity designated by a proper name. This results in the polytheistic theater of *simulacres* that Pierre Klossowski wanted to highlight in the schizophrenic hystirionism of the late Nietzsche (“What I find distasteful and hinders my modesty is that, at bottom, each name of history is me”).<sup>24</sup> And from that Deleuze and Guattari will still infer, in *Anti-Oedipus* in 1972, the essential parody of symbolic and imaginary identifications, always taken contradictorily from intensive co-ordinates and unconscious modes of location in a “historico-global” cartography, whose names are constantly collected by the clinic of deliriums—just as certain political conjunctures do, albeit more rarely.

From 1968, countless testimonies attest such an intense feeling of being synchronous with global history (Ross evokes some of them<sup>25</sup>), whose names are numerous. The student movement and the revolutionary militancy of 1968 were global, not only in their extension, but intensively: more or less undermined in each state, and within each political and subjective site, when collective enunciations and slogans, debates and claims included the intensities of a global conjuncture, without which these movements would have had neither their duration nor their magnitude. Whether it concerned the national liberation

22 Deleuze 1968, pp.91-93

23 Cf. Balibar 2016

24 Klossowski 1963

25 Ross 2002, pp.80-99

struggles or the Black American movements in the United States, the Vietnam War or the Chinese Cultural Revolution, each time we had to deal with *internal world events*; and the forms of their internalization and degrees of effectiveness in mass political consciousness were the result of a combination of multiple factors. Among these factors there is the “atopic” localization of these events within the major geopolitical balances, whose axes and borders they sufficiently destabilized to reopen, beyond the great significant break of the two “blocs” and the internal solidarities that each of them was trying to impose, outsider spaces for theoretical and political radicalism, proposing new forms of action, or reactivating older models of workers' struggle that its titled organizations had relegated to the margins or actively repressed (councils, “communes”, self-management...). But we also have to consider the differential internalization of these world events in regional contexts, which differed in their historical and political meanings and according to the series of national factors in which these events resonated. The opposition to the war in Vietnam, which was embodied in the great discursive equivalence of “imperialist aggression against the Vietnamese people”, was not supposed to produce the same effects as the political subjectification of global antagonisms in Japan (where it entered into series with the Second World War, the American military establishment on the territory, the prospect of the renewal of the 1960 Strategic Security Pact, etc.), in West Berlin (in a series involving the economic and military cooperation of the FRG with the United States, the ideological hegemony built since 1946 on anti-communism and opposition to the GDR, the campaigns opposing Adenauer's rearmament policy since the late 1950s, the mobilizations against the federal government's support for the South African and Iranian regimes), or as in France (mobilizing other strata of the collective memory, in resonance with the wars of Indochina and Algeria, and through them, with the place of the colonial history of the institution of a Republic that had to be urgently re-legitimized after five years of collaboration with the Nazi regime). Finally, the unequal appropriation of these different internal world events depends on the conflicts between movements and organizations. This is often recalled in France, no May 1968 without the *Comités Vietnam de Base*; and diverse oppositions to the Communist Party decisively crystallized into them, as in the commitment to Algerian independence ten years earlier. Therefore Marxist language—the field of discursive clashes in which the different May '68s will be differentially, concurrently and conflictually articulated—also forms a surface for the inscription and location of political subjects, a surface that will be both highly territorialized over existing organizations (criticized and contested in the very language in which these organizations partly defined themselves), and powerfully deterritorialized by the global context that makes its syntagmas iridescent. Hence, the difficulty, as we saw with Badiou and

Rancière, in taking afterwards the measure of the reflux of this language. Between Maoists, Trotskyists, Libertarians etc., Marxist coding did not only give a historical-political grammar, a more or less restrictive scenario of revolutionary militancy, and a set of rigid designators of the problems on the agenda (primarily that of the organization and the party). It also gave a world, a transnational space for transferential circulations and repetitions, between “the glorious struggle of the Vietnamese people against the imperialist aggressor”, the Black Panthers, the Latin American guerrillas, the Parisian “enraged”. A same history became commonly readable in the multiple dialects of Marxism. Inversely, internal world events drew, with their intense names, lines of demarcation in ideological positions, militant ethics and political objectives, all the while giving each of them the weight of immediate world history.

The massive effect of all this was the amplified rupture of state regulations of collective identities that continues to amaze us: a disidentification from the state and national frame of reference, whose institutional representatives (including those of the classical organizations of the workers movement) were abruptly disqualified as legitimate interlocutors, while a universal reference was favored. A dense universe, whose complex topology disrupted the relationships between the near and the far, hence redistributing the relative interiors and exteriors, making that “Vietnam is in our factories” (according to the slogan taken from the Fiat workers of Turin), and put in continuity the imperialist wars in the “Peripheries” and the mechanisms of social subjection to the “Centre” themselves understood in terms of “internal colonization”. Surely these continuities have been exaggerated by leftist students and militants. There is no doubt that “the extent to which the working masses of France, preoccupied by their own concerns, came to identify with the Vietnamese peasant and view American imperialism—and not the factory *patron*—as the “principal enemy” was probably very slight indeed.”<sup>26</sup> And the fantasmatic density of theses continuities is pretty certain. But what shall we conclude from this? That the “number of analogies [...] between the foreign peasant and the French worker as occupying structurally similar positions in relation to capitalist imperialism, the ‘principle enemy’”,<sup>27</sup>, remained too approximate or general analogies? There is no doubt about it, any analogy aimed at correcting the approximation of one relation with the generality of an other. That their “own concerns” inexorably riveted French workers to their immediate working conditions? It is as indisputable as the petition of principle that Kristin Ross’ Rancierian argumentation aims yet to contest, by linking emancipatory subjectification to a “disidentification”,

26 Ibid., p.92

27 Ibid., p.91

a dehierarchization of places and capacities, which redistributes “concerns” and “interests” and invents other measures of “immediacy”. But perhaps the problem arose, politically and subjectively, neither in terms of objective analogies nor in terms of imaginary fusions,—to pastiche Levi-Strauss: neither *totemic* adjustment between different anti-imperialist “classes” and different names of emancipation, nor *sacrificial* identification with the cause of the other—, but in terms of intensive simulation. Or in terms of historical repetition, as far as Marx outlined it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, it is neither a category of determination (which would aim at causal constants between different historical situations), nor an idea of reflection (which would allow us to infer relations of analogy or finality), but rather a scheme of dramatization, opening the phenomenology of the revolutionary subject to its excessive forms, those of hallucination and delusion.

**May '68 and “us”—and some others**

*Anti-Oedipus* has often been read as one of the most evidently immediate philosophical effects (for better and for worse) of the May 1968 revolt. However, May '68 remains singularly discreet in this book. Deleuze & Guattari's reproblematicization of sexuality in its coextension to social, economic and political relations, claims less to be the “sexual liberation” of the joli mois de Mai than the dead ends of the left-wing Freudians of the 1920s, contemporaries of the age of revolutions opened by 1917, and soon confronted with the rise of European fascism (the Freudo-Marxism they discuss is not Marcuse's but that of the Wilhelm Reich of 1933). Their reflection on the theoretical and practical articulation of the symptom, the relations of oppression and the dynamics of liberation, is less about anti-psychiatry than about the militant psychiatrist Fanon. *Anti-Oedipus* is contemporary with the inter-war period and the Algerian war, at least as much as it is with May 1968. The few references made to it are all the more significant: they relate to it in a play of displaced connotation, transposed onto an “other scene”. The main one is found in a statement of delirium (“no paranoid delirium that does not stir such historical, geographical and racial masses”). Georges, a Martinican interned for 10 years when Maud Mannoni began to follow him—in May 1968—, organizes his persecution in a trajectory leading from the Algerian war to the current events, and he situates himself in his delirium with regard to Arabs, Whites, Mongols and Gauls: “Everything started in 1957. I was born in Martinique. There was the Algerian issue—it desoriented me. The Arabs sawing my brain established a headline of politics. They used me as their brain, it hurt me. (...) I fell sick from the Algerian problem. I had partaken in the same foolishness as they (sexual pleasure). They adopted me as a brother-in-race. Mongol blood flows through my veins. Algerians controverted me in all my realisations. I had racist ideas. There were rumours about me in Paris when I felt persecuted. (...) I feel persecuted,



I have done nothing wrong and now an expert (the psychoanalyst) is sent to me. I want my freedom. With the present revolution (May events), patients must embrace it..."<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, reappraising both the incidence of politics in the process of psychotic symptoms and the impact of delirious elaborations on the radical political subjectivation (as Fanon already did), objected to the reproach that will be addressed to them anyway: to "identify the revolutionary with the schizo", to "think that the revolutionary is schizophrenic or vice versa"—"all-too-familiar traps."<sup>29</sup> Rather, the question would be to know whether or not we agree to take into account the fact that May 68 was inscribed in these *prises de parole* too; and if so, what results from it? What could this tell us, for the delirium clinic, about the implications of politics in the fragile montage of the symptom to which each subject's singularity is attached? But what could this tell us also about the sui generis registers of identifications at work in revolutionary subjectivation, in conjunctures where the names of history connect *both* a broader universality and a more elusive singularity than those regulated in social and individual representation? That is, in conjunctures where historico-political identifications undermine both the genres of the universal instituted in the State and its sovereignty, the nation and its community, society and its exchanges, *and* the instituted figures of individuality, the normative constructions of the "person" and the attributes endowed to it by our juridico-moral metaphysics (the representation of the self, will, and mutual recognition)? The question would then be, not that of an obscure "mystical identity of the revolutionary and lunatic", but to know if, or to what extent, "revolutionary militants cannot but be closely concerned by delinquency, deviance, and madness, not as educators or reformers, but as those who can read the face of their proper difference only in such mirrors."<sup>30</sup> But maybe this question also concerns the mirror where May '68 reflects its strangeness back to us, or, as I previously suggested, its *impolitical side*. Its "names of history" gave the political subjectivity of 68 both its militant intensity and the extension of its reference universe; but no discursive rationalisation knows how to measure their erasure, nore to relegate the question of those which will replace them.

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28 Mannoni 1970, pp.96-98

29 Deleuze & Guattari 1972, p.379

30 Deleuze 1972, p.201 (trans.modif.)

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# An interview with Karl-Heinz Dellwo: 68 – Aborted Liberation

Agon Hamza &  
Frank Ruda

**Dear Karl-Heinz Dellwo, thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us - which will be part of our issue on the fiftieth anniversary of May 68 and its consequences. To begin: Could you tell us a bit about the overall context of May 68 in Germany? In what way was this perceived as a political event, especially against the background of Germany's past or in which way did the German past overshadow what happened in the late 60s?**

Seen from today or from back then? Independent from one's age: if one is inside a historical break, one only perceives the immediate, precisely the break, precisely that something fundamental is happening. One is not yet in the analytical dimension. What was the particularity of 1968? Well, obviously that something happened in a large part of the young generation, the post-Nazi-generation, which abruptly made it clear to her where one belongs and where one does not. One belonged to those who wanted to change everything and not to those who, even if perhaps reformed, wanted to continue the world of the past. Suddenly, the idea of another world was concrete, it was there and it was liberating, a new breathing, a slashing of the mist of habits. And it brought with it the necessary virtues for the departure: boldness, courage, overconfidence, complete loss of anguish of authorities and traditions, self-assurance and confidence in a world that was not ours.

**Maybe to follow up: could you elaborate or tell us something about the differences and peculiarities of the German May 68 events and then later on in the "German Autumn" in comparison to the events in France and Italy? One difference is clearly that in Germany the post-68 period was also characterised by an armed struggle. It would be interesting to add that for instance, in the UK, there was no such a thing as "May 68 events" - strikes and other forms of political protests happened much later.**

One can neither separate the *German 68* nor the *German autumn* from the particularity of German history, precisely that of Nazi-fascism, of the biggest world war of all times, of the enslavement wish of other people, the annihilation of Jews and the extinction of all people that were declared unworthy to live, and of ethnic minorities like the Roma or Sinti. The ethnic community was in Germany as real as in no other western country. A kind of German ISIS-society. Almost all were somehow involved in the crimes of the system. This is why hardly anyone wanted to touch the past and to reveal his or her own interest in it. From the old, Nazi shaped majority society, there was after 1945 only denial and repression, with the consequence that the first generations afterwards were charged with the

responsibility of processing, and also – here someone like Claus Koch (“1969. Three Generations – One History”) is right: each defrayal of the experiences of the older generation by the younger was excluded (from any such processing by the former). So, something that otherwise should be ordinary between the generations. The only option was the rupture and a new beginning. This makes a difference even to Italy, the other European country with a mass movement that arose from below: here the resistance against the system was not defeated as in Germany. Here there was in the Resistenza a partisan experience that participated the different fractions of society – and a big communist party. In Germany there were as resistance a few heroic individualists like Georg Elser, small groups like the White Rose, some communist underground and the German National coup attempt of the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, whose agents wanted to get rid of Hitler to negotiate with the western allies, hoping they could oppose the Soviet Union together. From this emerged the new Federal Republic of Germany a few years later, and here the old Nazis could again persecute communists and in 1956 prohibit the communist party. This generation was basically unteachable. Not by its own experience nor by external events. It continued, simply in changed clothes. Its intra-psychic, fascist, internal construction remained the same.

In Italy, the contradiction which seized the whole world in the 60s passed over into the armed struggle. Yet it remained bound to the working class for a long time. Also, the armed groups became what the RAF was from the beginning: proxies of the class, instead of being its expression. That is clear in the Moro-action. This is a very interesting phenomenon because it indicates certain objective inevitabilities. In France there was no such development. There, one could not deny the working class its historical role. This is what the youth and student agents like Cohn-Bendit felt out, and this is why they did not take certain steps. In the German Federal Republic, this was totally different. The working class was expropriated from all fundamental politics. It had morally discredited itself through its participation in National Socialism and even returned as loser from the war, a double humiliation. Sponsored by the social democratized unions and the Social Democratic Party, it had bid goodbye to its own political demands and had fled into the political void of the distribution struggle. It tried to compensate for its self-inflicted damage through reconstruction [*Wiederaufbau*]. Instead of emancipation thus the concept of superposition. But we recognized the real character underneath. It was not addressable for the 68-movement, and those who tried it could not go beyond a caricature of the working class. May 68 in France was probably the strongest west-European event in its time. Because the working class participated in this event with millions, with factory occupations and militant struggles, the radical minorities outside of the factories did not get the idea to take the leadership of the

revolutionary struggle from the outside. In May 68, the French working class renewed its political authority.

England has in turn its own tradition. They did not have a Musolini, no Petain, no inner resistance. Against fascism they were politically and morally on the right side. And they also had a strong working class, especially in coal mining, which was certain of its role as counter-force in society. It regulated class struggle. The struggle against racism and war, especially the Vietnam war, was also led by the youth, but that alone does not change into an attempt to force the revolution.

**You were rather young then, you were 15 years old in 68, so it might be a little hard to evaluate this. But in retrospect, would you think that there was something that you would identify as genuinely new in what happened around May 68?**

I was 16 years old in May 68 when I participated in my first rally. “1968” had addressed me in our household already in 1966. Living at what seemed to be the end of the world, having the feeling of being excluded from all life that came to me through music and fashion from abroad, through a discussion that the family physician Mrs. Dr. Läßle had with my father, the message reached me that her son was prosecuted for an enormous amount in damages because of a blockade of traffic in Cologne. I did not know what he did and did not know anything about the specific concatenations, but I was totally fascinated by it and was convinced in advance that everything for which he was prosecuted was right.

“1968”, if we stick to this cipher, encountered in adolescents like me an open space of yearning, and it was for me linked to the hope to participate in something different, and for an end of loneliness. This is probably what was new for me in this departure. The world around me that I knew, I did not want and suddenly there was a new one, not only as a dream but as concrete possibility. In this moment the world around you becomes an unjust one, a withholding one that you only want to leave behind.

**It is rather easy to discern that there were clearly some libertarian elements associated with the May 68 actions (we are thinking of people like Langhans and the like, maybe the whole German Kommune?) But this is not a German specificity. Whereas the German specificity of the event seems to come to the fore if one takes a look at the particular sequence of events that led, inter alia, the death of Benno Ohnesorg in 1967 (during the visit of the Iranian Shah) and of Rudi Dutschke in 1968. So, what is, if any, the novelty of the events around 1968, and maybe in Germany, particularly for**

**you? Was this perceived, by you and others, as the state just showing its oppressive face or was there more to it - in other words, what did Dutschke and Ohnesorg stand for (to use a formulation coined by Alain Badiou)?**

Benno Ohnesorg stands in general for one of the many of the 68-movement, because of his age, certainly with a more precise consciousness than I, as an iconic figure. With his politically covered-up murder by the police, he above all stands for the brutality and militarization of a society honed in on coercion and order which overpowers all opposition. Dutschke, in contrast, stands for political articulation and for the political rhetoric of departure, for the damnation of the real-socialist constraints and for the struggle for a new socialism. In 1968, the state was not perceived as a different state but rather more discernible. The emotional relations that one has to the world as a kid or adolescent suddenly got a conceptual articulation. Irrespective of the fact that, in the beginning, these relations are bulky and intermingled on all categorical levels. The state became more discernible, as well as the newly-hoped for counter-world. And all reformists became discernible, those that wanted to capture us and expropriate us from our self-positing right to antagonism and separation from the old society. The openly right-wing and old-Nazi forces in society were easy to recognize. In social-democracy, the fraud occurred in the guise of our defence. Each of its reforms would, in the end, be paid twice by those to whom it was sold as a great social progress. There was, in 1968, for a historical moment, a glimpse of an immensely attractive counter-world that was in difference, and even in contrast to, the solidified real-socialist counter-world: a social life that beyond certain, not yet overcome, necessities proceeded from the individual as social subject.

**What could one say from the German perspective about the thesis espoused by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, namely that what the generic name “May 68” designates is nothing but a further productive differentiation of capitalist dynamics? Such that this event - and obviously even against the intent of most of its active proponents - brought previously non-activated or privatized creative potentials of everyone into the cycles of capitalist value production. Jürgen Link calls this flexible normalism (in short: you can look like a bum, with green hair and wrecked clothes, but you can be a successful software programmer these days). The norm itself becomes a flexible product of economic and cultural processes of constant productive re-differentiation. There is thus no outside of the norm anymore when norms are themselves flexible (and so integrative that they immediately absorb resistances).**

**This ultimately leads to a system which is ever more apt to adapt whatsoever form of resistance and turn them into a productive new form of oppression - an oppression that is not even any longer experienced as oppression. To reformulate and abbreviate this: what do you make of the claim that May 68 was the moment when collective and individual creativity was commodified? Also, do you think there is a difference in how May 68 manifested in Germany and in other places?**

What will become of something that happens, of an event, is, as you know, not what comprises its whole potential. What is correct is the diagnosis that the pandemonium of “May 68” became, above all, a new, productive dynamic of an expanding commercialization-cycle of capitalism. That life – and thus that commercializable something – which, from its perspective previously lay idle, the “private human being” as it were, was brought to commercialization. Even private life is today commercialized. And you are fully right: this is today not even experienced as oppression.

The particular thing about 1968 was that it created a new “outside”. Even though, to my mind, it was still driven by the long historical wave of the October Revolution – and some of its forms of expression indicate this, like the new fetishism of the proletariat and the K-groups – it was also a contradiction of its own. The individual was no longer posited as an agent of a new world to be erected, but was supposed to already be its expression. This is what philosophers, or philosophical actors as Marcuse or Kahl, made more precise. Its own contradiction became there the expression of a new appearance of a counter-sovereign against bourgeois society. This is historically, after the October Revolution, the first time that this happened in the western world. The “outside” of which I am speaking, or the “counter-sovereignty” of which the sovereignty-researcher Gesine Hindemith spoke in a common discussion years ago, became concrete in 68. Without this, 68 would today in fact only be a short-lived event, a small generational excitement that was no more than a convenient thrust for the modernisation of capitalism. But it took over a decade until the real fractions of society were again covered up by means of reform and application of force – but also by means of self-deligitimization of the armed groups, as last representatives of a real claim to counter-power and counter-sovereignty – and that the departed post-war-generation was driven into fundamental adaptation and integration.

Instead of devaluing 68 now completely, I would prefer to here talk about aborted liberation. We already talked about it: In face of a working class which just had renewed its authority in class struggle through its unity and militancy, the student actors of May 68 in France conceded to resign into the second rank as it were. Here, the old role of the working class was



newly recognized, with the consequence that one's own social processes, that were immediately directed at the revolutionary transformation of the whole life and that drew its particular force from it, had to be deferred. This is a surrender, or something that I rather call an abortion, of the liberation struggle. This abortion also took place in the Federal Republic of Germany after the short summer of protests and teach-ins. But in a different general framework: Here the proletariat was not a class-struggling force. While the stepping back of the student youth in France corresponded to the reality of class struggle, in the Federal German Republic it was rather the anxiety of historical responsibility. This is why these political illusory movements arose: "March through the institutions", or the emergence of diverse new student K-groups. With this, a central social event of the 68-movement, the sublation of the separation of subject and politics, but also the attempt to somewhat reconcile knowledge and practice, was negated and continued on a different level.

But the question of liberation was raised, and had become so concrete in societies, that it had a real weight. It remained, even after a bulk of the actors that admittedly took the primary contradiction to capitalism as expression of their own identity, in everyday life, slowly but steadily sunk into the reformed new conditions of existence. Even the most extremist among them faded with age. But this question's persistent existence explains why the armed groups could, for a long time, count on the solidarity of the 68ers.

**To follow up from this, it is often said, not only by sociologists as Boltanski and Chiapello, but also by philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek, that the events of May 68 indeed helped capitalism reproduce or reinvent itself. The struggle was centered on the three "essential" pillars of capitalism: family, factory and education. As the result of the revolts and riots, each domain was transformed into post-industrial or post-modern capitalism, or even post-Fordist form of organization. How does this argument apply to the German situation and particularly what happened in the aftermaths of the political actions of the RAF? Do you think that the RAF's actions brought a new phase of police control over the population in the West Germany (introduction of ID's, etc.)? Like, it reached the opposite of the desired effect. Or do you think that it made just visible what in one way or the other was already there (even though not quite as apparent)?**

As I said before: the adaption of the 68-movement is obvious. That which determines people today, in a dimension already foreclosing any sense in which one could still talk about an "I", is the all-encompassing

state of consumption and commercialization which is the result of this adaptation - that historically one has to consider to be the defeat of a struggle. Yes, you are right. This is what happened to it. But it was never the intention of this departure to become what it became.

I cannot treat the problem or the question of the RAF on the level of state action or reaction. Where the struggle emerges, there is also a response. Where there is inters, there is also a way. The interest in the police state I take only to be marginally determined by the actions of resistance or the general frictions within the system. You know yourself that the reference to "organized crime", or to individual offences and crimes as they are also committed by refugees, is fully enough to transform the police and legal system and for agitating the public. The interest in the police state springs, in my view, from a production that becomes increasingly fascist and that needs the corresponding state for it. I am tempted to agree with those who claim that we should call today's production fascist. The all-encompassing commercialization of people has posited a world that structures him and her so that the coercion from outside which destroys him becomes his inner desire. This is one part of humanity. The other becomes increasingly a surplus-population which capital, because of its gigantic technological progress, does not even need as slaves. They are just superfluous, progressively have no place in the world, and for them the camp is the condition of existence and with it the reduction to bare life of which Agamben has spoken for years. Probably, we need a different concept because the designation "fascist" is too much afflicted by a certain past, but I do not yet have it.

**How would you depict the link or relation, if it is one, from the events of surrounding May 1968 and what then became infamous under the name of the RAF? Could the former not but lead to the latter, or would this be a misconception (as this is not what happened, say in France)?**

The RAF is, for me, a compelling consequence of 68: there are always some remaining who cannot assume the abortion of liberation because the assumption of this abortion is for them synonymous with self-annihilation. The RAF is, in a certain sense, the flight forward from a truly felt liberation. And we already talked about the difference between the Federal German Republic and France.

**What is often referred to as left-wing terrorism, or armed struggle in the form of urban guerilla, was characteristic or rather present predominantly in the countries with a Fascist or Nazi past. If this is the case, what are to your mind the reasons for it?**

It is obvious that in the countries in which a version of fascism took power before it was disempowered from the outside – Germany, Italy, Japan – the armed struggle appeared in a particular existential manner. Here, the need of separation [*Trennung*] – the hyphen [*Trennungsstrich*] of which everyone talked – was greater than in other countries. There were also armed groups in the USA or France or Great Britain. But none had the existential dimension which had developed first in these three mentioned countries. When one looks at the Federal German Republic, through the denial and concealment of the crimes of National Socialism, in which the whole society was collectively enmeshed, the responsibility for reflection and processing the guilt was transferred to the next generation.

**Can you tell us a bit about your formative years? You started your political militancy as a member of a squatting unit, and only later, after a year of imprisonment, you became a RAF member (of the second generation). What was the cause / what were the causes of your political radicalism? What did generate what Adorno would have called the addendum (*das Hinzutretende*) which makes the present state of things so unbearable that one must interfere?**

What are formative years? I believe that my formative years were in school my 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade where I opposed in a mute but infinitely stubborn resistance the adjustment attempts of the old-Nazi teacher that I despised and made into my enemy [*befeindet*]. During the house squatting that I prepared as a 20 year old, all separation processes already took place, and it was decided that we do not want to belong to this society. There, we were already in the phase of forming a political articulation. The year in prison afterwards, because of this house squatting, was hard, contingent on isolation and violent collisions, but we anticipated this experience and it was no shock anymore. I would have perceived an integration into the existing conditions as total self-betrayal and self-annihilation. Without having it at hand conceptually, we knew that, as future stands before us, one in which the whole life is the property of capital, one has to be at its disposal and will be commercialized by it. The “addendum” of Adorno is not the accumulation of misery, but rather precisely the certainty that there can be a different life than the social one.

**Can we talk a bit about the RAF? We are curious to learn, from your perspective: How was it organized at the level of command - we are asking as once, some time ago in an interview of which you were also a part and that took place during your prison years (with Roger Willemsen) it was stated that there is only one RAF but there is no main control center. How were the cells/units organized with regard to the**

**“centre”, if there was one, how independent were them and what assured the unity of the whole?**

The RAF – that was the founding generation. It was imprisoned in 1972. Maybe the group found its real collective identity back then in prison. The prison, and the isolation inherent to it, is also a place where unambiguity and decisions are demanded. You cannot manoeuvre there, at least not for long. Those who did not allow for a sober insight into their situation sooner or later have fallen into orbit of the enemy.

What concerned our structure: We acted autonomously with regard to the prisoners but we unambiguously referred to them. Back then, we would not have done anything against the will of those prisoners that we recognized as political cadres. What concerns my own experience with these cadres – I here certainly talk above all about those later dead prisoners in Stammheim –, they always pointed out to us that we must ourselves know why and how we fight. A letter of Gudrun Ensslin always remains in my memory: “I cannot tell you why you must fight, I can only tell you how I solve contradictions and if it is correct, you recognize something in it.” The RAF was too small personnel-wise to necessarily need a “cell-structure”. On a short notice this may have been different for individual actions, but as political form of organization this would have been hypocritical.

**Could you also tell us a little about how this affected the trans-generational aspect (something that were quite important in the revolutionary movement in China in the 60s). So how was it organized and what role played the trans-generational dimension of an emancipatory organization, bringing older and younger people together?**

Certainly, there was a difference between those who came immediately from the politicization processes of 1968 and us. In the same way that there was a fundamental difference in the politicization processes between us and those that were mobilized by us and came after us. The ease of joining a great social departure was lost over time. The departure languished, the confrontation objectified into a power struggle, into the acceptance of its inherent logic which easily moved from the political to the military. A grave political problem was repressed or existed without being recognized: with the defeat of the USA in Vietnam, followed by its retreat and flight, a central politically-mediating thread of our own practice broke away. The reference to the now ended war-imperialism no longer really explained our own war. The normal state of the system became thus a problem of the revolutionaries. But we did not succeed to transform and delegitimize it in the attack. For this, a concrete counter-social horizon would have been needed, whose absence the people perceive as loss.

This problem was finally concealed by taking state power as our reference point. But precisely only concealed, not resolved.

**Did the second generation of RAF members follow the doctrine of Marighella? Who else were RAF's theoretical influences, of course, apart from him? Also, it seems that after Meinhoff's arrest, the RAF didn't pursue much of a "theoretical" elaboration of its actions, or did it? Could we say that, in the last instance, the arrest of the RAF's "theorist" was one of the reasons for major problems in the organization?**

I think all this is far too abridged. Already to say that Marighella could be linked to a doctrine, I think, is doubtful. Marighella, as most of the new revolutionaries of the anti-colonization-era, wanted to break away from the class-struggle-dogma of the communist parties that had become static, and from their apparent objectivism. Europe was not South- or Central-America, neither culturally nor with regard to the social structure of its population. One had to find new ways here as well as there. They only could be international and therein had some general congruences, but there was no transfer from here to there. The RAF did see itself from a certain moment on as fighting on the outer lines of the capitalist world system. The inner lines of this global struggle was, for it, composed by the liberation movements. We did assign them an avant-garde function, as it were. Because in the metropolises, a politicization of the inner class contradictions of the existing political lines of demarcation to the political front did not work out for a number of reasons – this is why most of the 68ers aborted the collective self-liberation – it appeared necessary to occupy something like the role of the partisans who, in the backcountry of the enemy, work towards its weakening. If they were more theoretical in prison than outside – this may be and may be explained by the conditions of struggle in the prisons but also by the different times of politicization, or by the different concatenations of politicization. Presumably, they were theoretically only grounded differently. But the militarization, and the flight forward which would become more overt from 1975 till at least 1977, was also promoted by the founders of the RAF and was also their responsibility. I do not here see any fundamental contradiction. Despite the often mentioned reference to Mao Zedong and his "Long March", the prisoners in Stammheim knew that the once posited thesis about the function of the city-guerrilla in the metropolises – "small motor that activates the large motor" (Ulrike Meinhof) – ultimately remained a thesis and was not suitable for reality. Prisoners like me suspected this, too, but would not admit it. Here lies also the reason as to why the Stammheim prisoners in October 1977 made the offer to the Federal Government to not return to the Federal German Republic and to not continue the armed struggle after an exchange of Schleyer. This was nothing less than the

offer to end the armed struggle. To reach this, everything was put in the balance. The Federal Government did not want to, and maybe Wehrmacht-lieutenant Helmut Schmidt finally wanted to also win a war, as Breloer also once said.

**It seems a recurrent criticism that the RAF didn't have a kind of a positive vision, an idea, for a post-capitalist, or post-imperialist German (or beyond Germany) society. While the first generation did undertake actions opposing the Vietnam war, against the presence of the US troops in Germany, et cetera, the following generations of the RAF aimed to a large extent with their political (terrorist) actions on the release of the RAF prisoners. Is this impression correct (you may have heard this quite a few times before)? Was there an idea of a post-capitalist society? If not, was there an idea of a transitory organizational period from which it should come from, something comparable to the dictatorship of the proletariat, or something of that kind?**

This is correct – but also a quite old hat. By reproaching especially the RAF with this, one insinuates that this political vision could have existed somewhere else. This I can see today even less than back then. In comparison with all other left-radical groups, I can only recognize that the RAF is still today politically tabooed and criminalized by the media and state. I was assigned by the journal "Der Freitag" to write an essay about the RAF in October 2017, and then the chief of culture was too cowardly to print it. No one gave rise to a questioning of the ruling conditions in such a radical and uncompromising way, and clung to it, for as long as the RAF. Even today, it seems unbearable to ask why there was here such a fundamental break with society.

Certainly, there are ideas of a future society that we would not have denoted as post-capitalist, but rather a post-socialist society. Real-socialism was admittedly rejected as a society to strive for back then, but fundamental determinations like socialization of productive capital was shared by us, and many of us thought that the bureaucratic administration of people is by those means surmountable. I know some of us who indulged in the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a mediating stage to the pre-stage of a communist society. I was not very convinced by this. I was rather close to the insight that both historical figures, the bourgeois as well as the proletarian, too, cannot be a goal and must be sublated. But this was not very decisive back then, because it was ultimately all fictitious. I was one of those people who did not want to stipulate in detail what comes in the form of a new society. It should be socialist, determined by collective structures, maybe a council democracy

in the transitory period, but above all it was nothing that could be conceived of in a circlet, but something that should be born in a revolutionary process in the first place. Andreas Baader wrote at some point in this time: “The aim of the RAF is to dissolve the RAF” and also that it is “The aim of politics to dissolve politics”. That has impressed me in its radicality and complied to me.

**One of your organizational tools was a kind of unconditional solidarity (especially in your prison years) with your fellow militants. For example, no deals with the state (for improved conditions) as long as one of you was being held under worse conditions. On the one hand, this solidarity seemed to be relying on the assumption that the political power of a group exceeds that of its members, on the other, it nonetheless seems to demand a strict discipline from each and every one of you. Was the idea of political discipline relevant for you (in this context and in general) and if so in what way?**

The core problem was after all the following: those who seriously spoke of a necessity of revolution were confronted – especially by the people who were integrated into the system – with the claim that they will sometime anyhow make their arrangements with the capitalist system. Whoever follows them (that is us) or does something with us, is stupid and will, in the end, foot the bill. On the second day of my imprisonment in the prison of Cologne-Ossendorf, when I was fetched for my solitary yard exercise and was putting my shoes on, there was a guard in the doorframe looking at me and he dropped the line, more as a question than as a sentence: “Well, would you do it again today?” There it was, this catholic certainty that following a sin there must be remorse. I did not answer to it, because I never talked to guards, but it did touch the fundamental question of betrayal in the departure. It is correct: to those who wanted to fight and wanted to continue fighting, we were unconditionally solidary. For those who could not do this anymore we have looked for a solution, unless they were overrun. This unconditionality of solidarity is indispensable, gratuitous, and unavailable. This is not demanded, you have it. Whoever does not have it already has betrayal in his or her pocket, because he binds his or her reliability to the stance of the other and so relativizes his or her decision and responsibility. Each egoism dissolves the coherence of the group at the other’s expense. Who draws the hyphen of separation [*Trennungsstrich*] or posits an antagonism can only do this on the basis of irreversibility. This is, in fact, also a crucial component of one’s political power. Anyone whose life is more important than the common cause would only be a caricature of a revolutionary. I would call this insight, not discipline. Discipline one develops when facing certain requirements of everyday life, questions of security, reliability in arrangements, control of

emotions in the state of confrontation, etc. – but not in face of the question if one’s own decision is irreversible. This does not come as an exigency from the outside, but from inside oneself.

**Everyone heard or read of the “Commando Ulrike Meinhoff”, or “Holger Mains Commando” (in which you were involved in Stockholm 1975). In what way and why did you use the proper names of individual members of your organization? We guess it would be wrong to consider martyrdom an element of your actions, but could you explain why this would be the wrong category (or maybe we are just mistaken)?**

We did call us “commando Holger Mains” because we wanted to make clear politically that this dead prisoner will not simply disappear in the morgues of the system, that for everyone who dies in the struggle, ten more will follow. I think this is easy to understand. On another level, this reflects also the guild of the survivors in face of the dead comrades. They remain an eternal obligation. Back then, I never thought of the category of “martyrdom”. On the other side, one cannot, as we did, occupy an embassy in Stockholm or later fight in a hunger strike without the readiness to sacrifice oneself. But the aim is not to mobilize others with one’s own death. The readiness to die only expresses the contempt for the life-circumstances to which one wanted to draw a hyphen [*Trennungsstrich*]. One is mobilized through one’s own action. One would die, but only if it is unavoidable.

**Could you also say something about the relation between political / emancipatory practice and theory in the RAF? Did you try to draw theoretical lessons from your political interventions, especially the ones that failed (with people imprisoned or killed, etc.)?**

Yes, sure. I have, for example, thought through a thousand times our action in Stockholm, its genesis, my participation, our actions. But also the actions of others. Even today this happens to me often. I think that all of us drew many doctrines from it. But this is not the place to formulate them. The armed struggle of an avant-garde, the concept of a city guerrilla in the metropolises, ends here. Otherwise, it has always played a very great role in our discussions, but also in our reflections that we passed on to the outside.

**We are asking this amongst other things, because there is this famous opinion poll, we believe from 1971, where about 25% of the German population under 30 stated certain sympathies with the actions of the RAF (in comparison to**



**today where being labelled a “terrorist” will immediately crush all sympathies imaginable). But this situation changed dramatically. When and why do you think this happened?**

Back then, we liked to often quote this opinion poll ourselves against this compulsive attempt of politics and the state apparatus to turn us into criminals and to de-politicize our struggle. But it did not have any great internal significance. One cannot really rely politically on such a thing. This rendered an atmosphere in society, a solidarity with all that fight, because the people saw themselves inspired by 68 to change many things in their life. Such moods reflect a moment, but not a whole life-decision. The state and the media have done a lot to change this mood. A rabble-rousing of sympathizers that even declared a political moralist and humanist like Heinrich Böll to being a supporter of the concept city guerrilla, or all these secret service campaigns like the “Sam-7 assault on full football stadium”, “nuclear in the Lake of Konstanz”, “hostage taking in Kindergartens” etc. to turn the population against us. In the end though, the transformation of the atmosphere into, in part, open hatred as in 1977 was caused by the RAF itself. Its military severity was no longer politically mediated after the end of the Vietnam war. Gudrun Ensslin wrote internally back then that the RAF – here mainly related to the actions against the Vietnam war, later related to the collective under the conditions of the prison – had a “moral ticket”. Reconsidered this obviously was indicated a political limit and weakness, it recognized from where the acceptance and solidarity towards us came. The 68-left has since then deserted to the system. One could do K-groups and at the same time work for one’s bourgeois career. One could do extra-parliamentary movement that only seemingly wanted to send a striking leg into the parliament. One could be radical and militant in a one-point movement, like in the anti-NPP movement and could remain more or less silent with regard to the whole system. One could be state-monopoly-capitalism-social-democrat to overcome capitalism “from within” etc. – but one was always still reminded by the RAF that one, in truth, once wanted a revolution and the destruction of capitalism. It had, no one could deny this, prompted the question of the system and posed its whole own life against it. With its flight forward strategy, military severity, or with its actions that destroyed legitimation, like the co-organization of the kidnapping of a vacationist plane, the RAF had then torn the remaining but thin relationship to the 68-movement and separated itself from it. 1977 was the decisive year, and after Autumn 77, the great open run towards integration into the system and into reformism began. The same phenomenon one finds incidentally also at the end of the Paris Commune. After the defeat for many comes the arrangement, for others the flight, if they are still able to flee. At the end the RAF failed at itself.

**And when and why do you think the RAF policies, strategies, agendas, practices reached a limit point? Was it there from the very beginning (as many would argue today) or did it emerge immanently as a certain practical deadlock (some say it is when there was the first “innocent” victim, a policeman)? Or is the relation more complex, as someone like Žižek claims with regard to the relation or non-relation between Lenin and Stalin: with the move to the Stalinist state, he states, this very state will have been a political implication of Lenin’s position (which does not mean that Lenin always was already Stalin but that one cannot simply play the game of separating the good Lenin from the bad Stalin, whereby one would be able to avoid confronting the real and difficult problem). How is your perspective on this conundrum with regard to the (history of the) RAF?**

The first innocent victim was Benno Ohnesorg. If one reduces everything to the Federal Republic of German, you can of course easily say that it was all from the beginning doomed to fail. But there was a worldwide political earthquake. The erosion of the post-war order, the failure of the US-American military doctrine, the anti-colonial struggles, the cultural revolution in China, May 68 in France, later the revolution in Portugal and the overthrow of the dictatorship in Greece, significant revolts like that of feminism. For us this was a situation where historically something like a window opened up, or a door, and had to try to push it open. It would have been traumatic for the whole left, for anyone who hoped for a fundamental transformation, if that had not been attempted. The armed groups in Europe have as representative for the whole left of the metropolises that, at least from the mid-60s, demanded the end of capitalism, implemented the influential fantasy of revolution into their practice and demonstrated in their failure the now-accepted fact that the times are obviously not ripe enough. Now, one could, without feeling that one has betrayed one’s own history, practice adjustment. But independent of the question of ripeness: what should those who recognize something unliveable in present social relations do? I think it is very complex as well this point you address by reference to Žižek on Lenin and Stalin. Lenin was not Stalin. Such an equation corresponds to the interest of the anti-communist rabble-rousers or sometimes also to that of the renegades whose alibi is called “theory of totalitarianism”. A discussion with them is not worth it. But the construction of socialism in one country was accompanied by nationalization, and with it, the submission of the revolt, the subsumption under the constraints of power, that did not come from the outside but were self-positing. Stalin turned submission to these constraints into a daily political exigency – which consequently placed him into the position of a forced administrator, satisfying his reactionary desire for power. Lenin

probably would have moderated this system of constraints that was linked to the construction of the state differently; certainly he would neither have organized show trials nor have the old comrades executed. But he would not have escaped the constraint as method of state construction.

To say this differently and explicitly against the attitude of many bourgeois intellectuals that just want to rescue their own incapacity to act: there was no “good” Ulrike Meinhof and no “evil” Andreas Baader in the RAF. There were probably differences in the direction of armed politics. Ulrike Meinhof sent me her regards and announced that: “Stockholm is the Điện Biên Phủ of Social Democracy.” She had, this is what her greetings told me, with this absolutely no problems. Certainly, she also wanted to stand by my side in prison. Andreas Baader has supported me several times in a different manner. After the decision to enter the armed struggle, there was no turning back anymore, because also the power that we had attacked left no other way as that of complete submission or that of continuing the path to an unambiguous end. Once all bridges are burnt, one must win or perish.

**Maybe this also offers a chance to address one of the political hot potatoes as it were, namely the question of political violence and, and this is the even hotter potato, the question of the victims of this very violence. We know that one reply that some (former) activists of the RAF gave to this concatenation is that there were not only the victims of the terror of the RAF but the very existence and reproduction of the capitalist system generated victims on a mass scale (as in African countries). This implies, as you recently argued, that there is a responsibility of for example the heads of state (say the heads of the German state, Schmidt, and others, were co-responsible for or at least tolerated the overthrow of the Argentinian government and the elimination of a huge number of anti-government activists). So, there were rather invisible victims of what Marcuse called structural violence (that is always constitutive of any system) before there was the violence of the RAF that produced a specific visibility of structural violence. And in this sense, the situation was comparable to a war situation, if we follow some of the RAF rhetoric (and obviously this is one possible interpretation of what class struggle means, a militaristic one, yet a possible one - or as Foucault once said, a lot of Marxist thought about what “class” means in class struggle, very few though offered an interpretation of what “struggle” means, well, one could say, at least the RAF did that). Yet, somehow this seems to introduce a peculiar primacy of violence into the understanding of**

**political action - or rendered differently and more precisely, maybe this introduced a too unified understanding of what violence in politics is. Someone like Žižek for example argues that a kind of universalist peaceful protest can be more violent than a visibly violent one (obviously, it can often also be just too impotent). But were there reflections of this kind involved in your political practice?**

I have previously also belonged to those who answered the accusation that the RAF had to take responsibility for several victims with reference to the victims of the systems, to the victims of structural violence, to poverty, wealth, domination or lost foundations of life, etc.

Holger Meins was an unarmed victim while in captivity. The choice to starve as a human being in isolation, or to die in a hunger strike, thus in a struggle for one's own self-affirmation – the production of this condition is an expression of a moral and political perfidy of those who sat back then in the corresponding positions of power. In my youth this was, for me, the legitimation, to take civil members of embassies as hostages. Today, this discourse that is mainly defined “morally” is only of a limited interest to me. Any decision that justifies itself primarily through the actions of the enemy does not escape its social weakness. This also holds for the other side.

When the breaks have been accomplished and the bridges are burnt, the question of the application of violence must be subordinated to the question of whether it is truly without alternative, and on the other, if it really opens a process in which it advances something of social and emancipatory nature in society.

The exception is obvious, when the war is open. When the war is normal, death is normal, too. This state of exception explodes all previous civilizational rules. This is the state in which the world is today. Violence is today pervasively linked to reactionary goals. This was different in the middle of the last century. There the application of violence against the back-then dominant conditions was linked with a new step of emancipation and social liberation.

**The RAF, if we are not mistaken, did collaborate with Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLO - who helped the Lufthansa hijacking action). But, did it also have any relation with, say, Brigade Rosse in Italy or other left-wing armed groups in Europe and elsewhere? We are asking this question because we are interested to know what role internationalism played for you.**

I met some members of the Red Brigades in prison and we are friends. One of those brigades had, around 1977, met then-RAF members in Paris. He told me that there was the mutual intention of solidarity and of mutual support but that one did not really find a common ground, because the Red Brigades, due to the large struggles of the Italian working class, were still very close to the factory and the proletariat as historical subject. Our group from 1975 had above all contacts to the Palestinian organisations. I think all armed groups claimed for themselves an internationalist dimension. All were with regard to their political determination anti-imperialist. But the RAF knew that she would be lost in advance if she were not a part of an internationalist structure.

**You are now editing what you call a “library of resistance” with your publishing house, Laika. Can you tell us a bit about the idea behind it (we were reminded of what Alain Badiou once called an “encyclopedia of exceptions”)? It seems you aim to thereby generate a left or emancipatory rendering of the history of emancipatory or left organizations and actions (and thus not leave those actions and group to the interpretation of the other side or deliver them to oblivion), is this the primary aim?**

The original idea for the publishing house LAIKA was to publish documentary movies on the great world-wide departure from the midst of the 60s. Movies that are very suitable to revivify the counter-social potential of that time. Of course, this is directed against the unspoken, yet openly pursued, law to wipe out all recollection of the possibility of another life in a world that is capitalized through and through. Part of the destruction of the world by the total commercialization of all life having become a dogma is also the destruction of remembrance and the production of existences that are without history.

**Is this also a way of coming to terms with the failure(s) and defeat of the RAF (this question does not imply a stupid version of sublimation, in the sense of first you try it for real and then you do it intellectually, first weapons, then books and movies)?**

No. The publishing house is no reply to the failure of the RAF. In a certain way, it formed contingently. I started beforehand to do documentary movies. Through this work, I met my colleague Willi Baer and from these discussion that idea of the publishing house arose, that then extended. Personally, it is for me part of the attempt not to despair completely and to still do something that seems meaningful.

**Could you, to end, draw a balance sheet, your own evaluation of the political (and not personal or whatsoever) failure(s) of what came out of the May 68 movement and especially the RAF? What kind of insight / part of it would you consider to still be of contemporary relevance for us (apart from the insight, which never was one, that one simply cannot change anything anyway so we should learn not to try)?**

If we want to draw a balance sheet, we would have, in my opinion, draw one of our own social life today. It then ends horribly. The camps have returned, even if without gas chambers, but for infinitely many people still exterminating. We already touched upon the surplus-population in our conversation before. Wars are endemic with the consequence of destroyed states like Libya or Syria with unbelievable numbers of victims. Evictions, too. The relation between Israel and the Palestinians will at one point probably be defined as the battles of Verdun: a nationalism that became senseless on both sides. In the metropolises, more and more people become insane and believe they find, in the resurrection of fascism, a rescue against the permanent threat of downgrading. The readiness to numb oneself to the dreadful living conditions in the world, to accept mass poverty in the world or mass deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, increasingly brutalizes the intra-psychical structure of the people. The state has amassed a power potential that, already in its potential, must be designated as fascist. A part of the political elite here, as in Europe – Viktor Orban, Matteo Salvini, Horst Seehofer, Sebastian Kurz, etc. – must already be called in their attitude radical right-wingers, if not fascistic. Not to mention Trump at all. All collectives destroyed, today the human being seems to be as disempowered as never before. An effective counter-movement is not in sight. If one reflects on this longer, only the over-auto-expansion of the system seems to contain a way out – but at the price that all of us will first suffer through its self-destruction.

The neoliberal processes have become the subject of history. That which before had determining character, like the national state, the federations, or transnational institutions – all this is usurped by the economic processes that run on themselves. The subject of history is thus virtually delivered to the non-subjectivity of the global market. One of the reason why such reactionary figures as the above-mentioned are raised to power: they are supposed to establish sovereignty in the world of objects, but they only lead us to believe [*vorgaukeln*] in it.

The idea of an “outside” is lost. I take this to be catastrophic. It came into the world with the October Revolution, has solidified and disappeared in 1989 from the global stage. The new outside of 68 has been lost at some point in the 70s and has outlived its time in small minorities. Everything

seems occupied by capitalism. This makes it, in fact also easier: we reject everything that is connected to it. The “hope of hopelessness” of which Žižek speaks, or the attitude of “inoperativity” that Agamben has thrown into our thought – somewhere there, in the complete rejection of today’s conditions lies our future.

Translated by Frank Ruda  
Dundee/Hamburg/Prishtina

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# Notes on Contributors

**Bini Adamczak** is a member of the jour fixe initiative berlin, which is organising a series of events in Berlin on the subject of solidarity for the first half of 2019. She recently published a book by Suhrkamp entitled *Beziehungsweise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende*. Her book *Communism for Kids* was translated into English in 2017.

**Eric Alliez** (b. 1957), philosopher, is a Professor at University of Paris 8 and at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University (London). He has been visiting professor in many universities worldwide (Rio de Janeiro, Vienna, Warwick, Karlsruhe, Weimar, Oslo,...). His publications in English include *Wars and Capital* (with M. Lazzarato, Semiotext(e), 2018), *Undoing the Image: Of Contemporary Art* (with the collaboration of J.-Cl. Bonne, 5 vol., Urbanomic, 2018- ), *The Brain-Eye. New Histories of Modern Painting* (with the collaboration of J.-Cl. Martin, Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017), *Transdisciplinary Problematics* (ed., *Theory, Culture and Society*, Special Issue, 2015), *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics*, (ed., with P. Osborne, Tate Publishing, 2013), *The Guattari Effect* (ed., London and New York: Continuum, 2011), *The Signature of the World* (Continuum, 2004), *Capital Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997, preface by G. Deleuze).

**Étienne Balibar** was a student of Louis Althusser, with whom he co-wrote *Reading Capital*. The author of many books on moral and political philosophy, he is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the Université de Paris-X Nanterre and Anniversary Chair in the Humanities at Kingston University in London. He has served as Distinguished Professor of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine, and, more recently, as Visiting Professor at Columbia University. His recent publications include *Equaliberty: Political Essays* (2014), and *Citizen Subject. Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology* (2016).

**Dr. A. J. Bartlett** is the author of *Badiou and Plato: An Education by Truths* and with Justin Clemens and Jon Roffe, *Lacan Deleuze Badiou*. With Justin Clemens he is the editor of *Badiou: Key Concepts, What is Education?* and *Badiou and His Interlocutors: Essays, Lectures, Responses*. With Alex Ling he is the translator of Alain Badiou's *Metaphysics of the Transcendental* and with Justin Clemens of *Happiness* and *The Pornography of the Present Age*. He teaches at the Centre for Adult Education in Melbourne.

**Daniel Blanchard** is a writer (poetry, essays, narration) and translator. His latest works include *Bruire* (haikus, 2018), *La Mémoire empoisonne mes puits* (prose, 2014), *Crise de Mots* (essay, 2013), *Ces éclats de liberté* (novel, 2009). In English : "Debord in the Resounding Cataract of Time" in *Revolutionary Romanticism*, City Lights Books, 1999). He participated in the radical left group Socialisme ou Barbarie from 1957 to 1965, and wrote, with Guy Debord, *Préliminaires pour une définition de l'unité du programme révolutionnaire*, signing P. Canjuers. In May 1968 he joined the 22 March Movement and a local comité d'action. Following a year spent in Vermont with Murray Bookchin, he worked in a small cooperative experimental printshop for several years, publishing some of his own work and participating in the radical magazine *Utopie*. He recently cofounded a group calling for a boycott of the French presidential election.

**Franco "bifo" Berardi** is a contemporary writer, media theorist and media-activist. He founded the magazine *A/traverso* (1975-1981) and was part of the staff of Radio Alice, the first free pirate radio station in Italy (1976-1978). Like other intellectuals involved in the political movement of Autonomia in Italy during the 1970's, he fled to Paris, where he worked with Felix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis. In the last ten years he has been lecturing in many Universities around the globe. His publications include *And: Phenomenology of the End* (2015), *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (2015), *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012), *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (2009), etc.

**Boris Buden** is a writer and cultural critic based in Berlin. He received his PhD in cultural theory from Humboldt University in Berlin. In the 1990s he was editor of the magazine *Arkzin* in Zagreb. His essays and articles cover the topics of philosophy, politics, cultural and art criticism. He has participated in various conferences and art projects in Western and Eastern Europe, Asia and USA, including Documenta XI. Buden is the author of *Barikade* Zagreb (1996/1997), *Kaptolski Kolodvor*, Belgrade (2001), *Der Schacht von Babel*, Berlin (2004), *Zone des Übergangs*, Frankfurt/Main (2009), *Findet Europa*, Wien (2015), etc. Buden is permanent fellow at the European Institute of Progressive Cultural Policies, Vienna.

**Karl-Heinz Dellwo**, born in 1952, grew up, from his 4<sup>th</sup> to his 14<sup>th</sup> year of age, in a small backward place in the Eifel. He was a member of the RAF up to their dissolution; in 1973, he spent a year in prison for squatting and from 1975 till 1995 he was in custody for his participation

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languages. We particularly know his work on community, the common communism. His recent publications include: What to do? (Galileo) - Sensitive signals - with Jérôme Lèbre (Bayard) - Sexistence (Galileo)

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