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.

Volume 5

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.1

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

205

¹ 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".²

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 conversional 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."

sum up in a number of theses. The first thesis³ 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

Let us look at de Certeau's exposition of the concept, which I shall

The second thesis⁴ 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.

R

S

S

&

С

R

Q U

F

Volume 5 /

Issue 2

207

garden turns of phrase.

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

⁴ Ibid., p. 52

S

&

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

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). 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.

CRITOLOGICAL CONTROL C

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
langage	institution	domination	central discourse	representation	conformity	silent majority
parole	contestation	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. 208

Storming Language

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, 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 language 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 Volume 5 / 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 indispensible element of seizing power, the power to organize autonomously, to subvert

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.

established hierarchies. In the words of de Certeau, "vouloir se dire, c'est

s'engager à faire l'histoire" : the will to express oneself autonomously (se

dire) is an undertaking to "make history", to act in order to change the

8 Ibid., p. 67.

established situation.

S

S

&

С

R

Q U

Issue 2

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."9This 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")¹⁰: 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. 11

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.

211

11 J. Besancon, *Mat 68. Les murs ont la parole*, Paris : Tchou, 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 avantgarde 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.

S

S

&

С

R

Q U

Volume 5 /

Issue 2

8. As a consequence, the text shows us that de Certeau's "crucial displacement "of established language is fourfold: (i) an antigrammatical 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."12

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.

Volume 5

Issue 2

But there was more to the events that 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

S

S

&

С

R

Q U

F

Volume 5 /

Issue 2

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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

216

Badiou, Alain, *On a raison de se révolter*, Paris: Fayard, 2018. Besançon, Alain, *Mai 68, les murs ont la parole*, Paris: Tchou, 2007 (1968)

De Certeau, Michel, La prise de parole, Paris: Seuil, 1994.

R I S I S & CR I T I Q U E /

Volume 5 / Issue 2

Storming Language 217