

Re-politicizing 68

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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.

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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 18th 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 25th 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

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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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