

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.¹ “*Assimiler*” is ambiguous in French, denoting at the same

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¹ 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”.² 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”³; 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 Aeschmann, *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 19th 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 20th 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.⁴ 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).⁵ 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.⁶

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 20th 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*).⁷ 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.⁸ Without that strategy the *tendencias* 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.*⁹ 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

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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”.¹⁰ 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...”¹¹ 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.).¹² 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

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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”.¹³ 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 19th

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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”.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 68.¹⁶ 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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¹⁶ 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)¹⁷: since the 19th 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-20th 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”) configurating a major *anthropological difference* (namely “age”, separating adults and teenagers, who are in fact already young adults themselves, with autonomous social, political, cultural consciousness).¹⁸

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¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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).²⁰ 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 19th 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...²¹

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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.²² 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)²³; nevertheless

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.

22 See in particular Balibar 2014 and 2015.

23 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.²⁴

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

24 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).²⁵ 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”.²⁶

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)²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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 Ludivine 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”²⁹, 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).³⁰ 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).³¹ 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).³² 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*³³, 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.³⁴ I believe that the “speech” that was captured in 68, with all its obvious fragilities and redundancies, indicates the exact opposite of a surrender

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)³⁵; 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”.³⁶ 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

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.³⁷ Not all these formulations are equally relevant in my view. What I want to retain in the first place is

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³⁷ 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 18th 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*).³⁸ 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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³⁸ 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.³⁹

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)⁴⁰, 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.⁴¹ 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

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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).

40The « 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 Crézégut (forthcoming)

41There 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.⁴² 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).⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ All these nuances, however,

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42The GRECE (Groupement de recherche et d’études pour la civilisation européenne) 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.

43This 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 Hölderlin 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 révolution sans révolution ? ») 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 Žižek who frequently invokes its political value (see Žižek 2010).

45 On the spirit of 68 as a philosophy of unconditional desire, see Dollé 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 céder sur son désir*”, originally formulated in his Seminar VII from 1959 (“Ethics of Psychoanalysis”) 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

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).

46 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 Schloendorff, *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.

47 Balibar 2015.

associated with the history of revolutions in the 19th and the early 20th 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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