

Topicality of May 68

Daniel Blanchard

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

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

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

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

Politics then became potentially meaningful again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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