

Introduction: 50 Years after May 68

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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¹ Badiou 2005, p. 69

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

Frank Ruda & Agon Hamza
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² In this very sense, Alain Badiou once stated that "a large part" philosophy is "in reality" a gigantic attempt "fully to come to terms with... what happened" in '68. Cf. Badiou 2005a, p. 237