

Making Subjection Visible: The Materialist Effects of 1968

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Abstract: One of the most important theoretical effects of the global revolt of 1968 was that everything about it, from where revolts occurred, who participated and who stood aside from or opposed them, to the nature of their demands and objectives, called into question the model of base and superstructure. These revolts did so not by rejecting Marxism (as would happen in the eighties and nineties) but by confronting it with the evidence provided by the experiments undertaken by mass revolutionary movements. It became clear that treating the phenomena assigned to the superstructure as somehow less real in their existence and effects than the relations and means of production led to a series of political errors and failures, often summed up in a single word: economism. To regard the many forms of racism (including Islamophobia) as a matter of attitudes, beliefs and intellectual prejudices that depend on economic relations and will necessarily change as they change, and to ask those whose subjection is coextensive with their racialization to set aside their struggles in the name of the universal are disastrous politically as well as theoretically. Only by understanding the material existence of every form of subjection and the necessity of confronting this materiality directly can we assemble a force powerful enough to bring about real change.

Key Words: ideology, Marxism, racism, colonialism

Cours camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi. No slogan so effectively captured the sense of eschatological, if not messianic, time that characterized the lived experience of 1968, not only, or even primarily, in France but across the globe, from Vietnam to Czechoslovakia to Mexico. The sequence of social and political struggles, some of which, already existing, suddenly intensified, while others emerged without warning as full blown crises, and thus a sequence without any clear point of origin or end, seemed miraculous enough to herald the imminent arrival of the new. Now, fifty years later, it appears that their significance for us lies in the fact that the limits and outright failures of the combined assault on the international order contributed in significant ways to the making of the catastrophe of our historical present. But we cannot allow the defeats and impasses these movements ultimately encountered to obscure what were once called the “theoretical acquisitions” of 1968. By this I mean not simply the new concepts and methods that the power of its movements made possible, but also the irrefutable critiques of the existing ideas, including the critiques from which new ideas have yet to come, that emerged from the developments and struggles in both theory and practice.

There should be nothing surprising in the fact that 1968 marked an increase in the power of thought, bringing about, to use Foucault’s

expression, an “immense and proliferating criticability of things.”¹ Spinoza, whose philosophy, despite the fact that it was three centuries old, can be identified as one of the discoveries of 1968, argued that “whatsoever increases or diminishes, assists or checks, the power of activity of our body, the idea of the said thing increases or diminishes, assists or checks the power of thought of our mind” (*Ethics* III, Prop. 11). The millions around the world whose struggles, precisely in the diversity of their methods and objectives, succeeded for a time in tipping the balance of forces in favor of the oppressed and exploited, created the conditions in which the reign of the obvious was interrupted and thought could break out of the ritualized repetition of words, phrases and concepts to say and conceive new things.

But what can be acquired, including theories and concepts, can be lost or forgotten. As we know only too well, the time of revolutionary struggle gave way to a generalized counterrevolution that was absolutely ruthless, whether it took the form of bloody repression (as in Latin America) or a gradual, nearly imperceptible, but implacable, re-imposition of discipline. With it, came a systematic forgetting of the thought of 1968 and its challenges to the existing theoretical order, resulting in a return to the ideas whose invalidation was itself forgotten. This led Althusser, eight years after May 68, and therefore at the threshold of a realization of the scale of the defeats (which sometimes masqueraded as victories) and the magnitude of their effects, to advance the idea that Marxism (with psychoanalysis) was a “conflictual” or “schismatic” science (to adopt Balibar’s translation of *scissionnelle*): “it not only provoked powerful resistances, attacks and critiques, but, more interestingly, attempts at *annexation* and *revision*.”² (225-226). Among the attacks on Marxism the most effective began from the outside but completed their work only from within, by occupying its conceptual space and appropriating its concepts in order to modify their meaning or systematically block their development.

I want to focus on one such concept, that is, a concept that initially allowed Marxism to separate from the Hegelian and Feuerbachian background, but that subsequently became an obstacle to its further development: the concept or “metaphor” of base (or “infrastructure”) and superstructure. Throughout his work, Althusser cited the survival of this motif (beyond its inaugural moment) as the source of repeated errors and failures in the Socialist and Communist movements, the site of a gap or discrepancy in Marxist theory, a stubborn, enduring idealist

1 Foucault 1997 7.

2 Althusser 1993, p. 226.

survival in the midst of a developing materialism. In a recent commentary on the (re)discovery of Spinoza in France and Italy that began in 1968 (referring to the work of Martial Gueroult, Gilles Deleuze and Alexandre Matheron, soon followed by Macherey, Balibar and Pierre-François Moreau), Antonio Negri argues that this new reading of Spinoza made the singularity of the thought of 68 intelligible. In particular, the movements that succeeded in shifting the balance of forces in the conjuncture of 1968 demonstrated that reliance on the base and superstructure model led to a predictable set of errors that included both “revisionism” and “reformism,” and their apparent opposite, the apocalyptic ultra-leftism that flourished in that period. Among the most important critiques of what we might call structuralist historicism (following Althusser’s demonstration in *Reading Capital* of the fundamental commonality between Hegel and Lévi-Strauss), Negri singles out the most Spinozist: Althusser and Foucault (in particular, *Discipline and Punish*) (*). Although they operated on different, even “opposing fronts,” he argues, the combined effect of their work succeeded in “calling radically into question” the “analytic *dispositif* of ‘base and superstructure’ (*le dispositif analytique « structure-superstructure »*).”³

For Negri as for Althusser the struggles in 1968-69 in France and Italy (and for Althusser, the Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions as well) revealed that this *dispositif*, once considered the very form of Marxist materialism, was now a central obstacle to its continuing development. Referring, if obliquely, to the base/superstructure model, in “Contradiction and Overdetermination” (1962), Althusser argued that it is “the *exact mirror image of the Hegelian dialectic*, the only difference being that it is no longer a question of deriving the successive moments from the Idea, but from the Economy, by virtue of the same internal contradiction. This temptation results in the radical reduction of the dialectic of history to the dialectic generating the successive *modes of production*, that is, in the last analysis, the different production *techniques*. There are names for these temptations in the history of Marxism: *economism* and even *technologism*.”⁴ Althusser cited precisely those texts by Lenin that stressed the impossibility of deciding strategy and tactics, that is, not simply when, but if, to push for revolutionary insurrection, on the basis of the maturity of capitalist development. In fact, the theoretical stakes of “Contradiction and Overdetermination” were no more important than the political intervention it represented for Althusser

Although Althusser nowhere mentions the struggle that shaped

3 Negri 2004 194

4 Althusser, Louis 1969, 108.

the leadership of the May revolt, the fact that he is writing in 1962, and therefore within months of the massacre of hundreds of Algerians in Paris in October of 1961 and the killing of nine PCF (Parti Communiste Français) militants in February 1962 at a mass demonstration (in which a number of his closest students participated), reminds us of the importance of Algerian revolution of 1954-1962 and the PCF's troubled relation to it. In fact, the economism that lay behind the party's failure to support the movement for Algerian independence and to lead the mobilization against French military intervention (until the war was drawing to a conclusion) laid the groundwork for the PCF's responses to the mass radicalization of workers and students in the period from 1968-1975. In 1958 (and thus four years into the war), the French Federation of the FLN published a devastating critique of the PCF ("*Le P. C. F. et la Révolution Algérienne*").⁵ The FLN recalled the eighth of twenty-one conditions for membership in the Third International, a text that Lenin had reworked on the advice of Indian Marxist (then in exile in Mexico) M.N. Roy, and about which he was passionate:

"A particularly explicit and clear attitude on the question of the colonies and the oppressed peoples is necessary for the parties in those countries where the bourgeoisie possess colonies and oppress other nations. Every party which wishes to join the Communist International is obliged to expose the tricks and dodges of 'its' imperialists in the colonies, to support every colonial liberation movement not merely in words but in deeds, to demand the expulsion of their own imperialists from these colonies, to inculcate among the workers of their country a genuinely fraternal attitude to the working people of the colonies and the oppressed nations, and to carry on systematic agitation among the troops of their country against any oppression of the colonial peoples."

The FLN noted the discrepancy between this "particularly clear and explicit" statement, and the PCF's actual positions on Algerian self-determination. They located the beginning of the PCF's deviation in party leader Maurice Thorez's declaration in 1939 that Algeria was insufficiently developed to qualify as a nation, and remained "a nation in formation," and, as such, not yet eligible for independence. From this postulate, the PCF drew the conclusion that *une véritable Union française* would be far better for the Algerian people (especially that part of the people who were of French origin, whose presence in Algeria was cited by the PCF to deny the legitimacy of the fight for independence). Needless to say, the formulation "nation in formation" both conferred an essential role on the French colonial community and obscured the fact that the independent Algerian nation-state that existed in 1830 was conquered and dismantled by French military power (after fierce and lengthy resistance). The PCF's support for decolonization through absorption into France led Communist

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⁵ FLN 1958, Vernant 1959..

parliamentary deputies in March 1956 to vote to grant special powers to the colonial administration to contain the revolt. Although the PCF leadership faced the increasing dissatisfaction of its student and youth membership (many of whom faced conscription), the change in their line came only after the sheer brutality of the French army following the establishment of military rule in Algiers under General Massu in 1957, and the torture and murder of Communists of European origin in Algeria (as well as the danger of a military coup at home).

Althusser, to my knowledge, said little publicly or privately about the Algerian revolution or the movement against the war, a fact that in no way set him apart from many other Communists of his generation. But his insistence that the denunciation of the party's positions as betrayals or mere opportunism was less important than identifying the theoretical bases of the PCF's errors, may help us see the relevance of his remarks on contemporary economism in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* to an explanation of what may be understood as a "dress rehearsal" of the party's failures in the revolt of 1968. Althusser repeatedly reminds us that the "poor man's Hegelianism" according to which the dialectic of history consists of a fixed linear sequence of stages of development "runs up against the implacable test of the facts: the revolution did not take place in nineteenth-century Britain nor in early twentieth-century Germany; it did not take place in the advanced countries at all, but elsewhere, in Russia, then later in China and Cuba, etc." Later, in his *Soutenance d'Amiens* (translated into English as "Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?"), an overview of his work up to 1975, Althusser returned to these questions which, he insisted, were decisive both politically and theoretically:

"How can we understand this displacement of the principal contradiction of imperialism onto the weakest link, and correlatively how can we understand the stagnation in the class struggle in those countries where it appeared to be triumphant, without the Leninist category of uneven development, which refers us back to the unevenness of contradiction and its over- and underdetermination? . . . If Marxism is capable of registering these facts, but not capable of understanding them, if it cannot grasp, in the strong sense, the "obvious" truth that the revolutions which we know are either premature or miscarried, but from within a theory which dispenses with the normative notions of prematurity and of miscarriage, that is, with a normative standpoint, then it is clear that something is wrong on the side of the dialectic, and that it remains caught up in a certain idea which has not yet definitively settled accounts with Hegel."⁶

There is little doubt that this last passage represents a subtle, but pointed, critique of the effects of the PCF's economism on the party's

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⁶ Althusser 1976 186-187.

role in the events of May 68, one that is far more important than the crude and sometimes bizarre responses to critiques of the PCF from the left Althusser advanced in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. From the perspective outlined in the *Soutenance*, the demands and slogans advanced by the PCF suggest that it regarded the relative strength and orientation of the forces of revolt in the second half of May as a threat to the success of its electoral strategy of achieving a government of the left. Among students, it attempted to restrict the already existing mobilization with demands limited to reinstating the annual final exams and increasing financial aid (rather modestly). In the large factories, where the PCF played a dominant role among the workers through the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), the party leadership seemed determined to contain the growing revolt on the shop floor, attributing it to the influence of Trotskyist and Maoist “*groupuscules*.” The party leadership initially opposed the general strike that began in mid-May, and when the unanimous support of workers and the arguments of the CGT leadership compelled them to drop their opposition, tried to limit it to 48 hours. Further, the PCF refused to support demands, even if they clearly emanated from the workers themselves, that moved beyond wages, benefits and job security to address the question of power, discipline and control on the shop floor. The demands advanced by the other major industrial union, the CFDT for workers’ control and self-management were viewed with alarm by both the PCF and CGT leaderships as potentially leading to the formation of committees outside the factory. They declared that such “premature” actions would only endanger the ascendancy of a union of the left in parliament and hinder the coming of a government of the left that would create the conditions necessary to bring about the beginning of a transition to socialism. In contrast, those to the left of the PCF viewed this strategy as an attempt to demobilize the mass movements in order to channel their power into the electoral sphere of “legitimate” politics.

These were the realities that led to Althusser’s categorization of the PCF as an Ideological State Apparatus in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, a fact that perhaps necessitated, in a tactical sense, his shrill and unconvincing defense of its positions during the May events. The fact that Althusser would identify the PCF as even tending to the reproduction of the capitalist order created the possibility of a negative evaluation of the party’s actions in the face of the opening that May 1968 presented, even if Althusser himself did not develop such an evaluation. Just as importantly, however, the PCF emerges from his analysis as a kind of limit case whose heterogeneous and conflictual character necessarily resists and interferes with the process of the reproduction of the existing order even as it contributes to it. From Althusser’s position, the PCF was as unstable an ISA as could be imagined, its function, or functions, determined perhaps to a greater degree than any other by the

shift in the balance of power between class forces, given its specific composition. While the history congealed in the practical forms of its existence and in the discourse of its “spontaneous philosophy” tended to block any radicalization of the membership, when the struggles all around it breached the protective barriers the party set up around itself, the internal regime was disrupted and it became possible (within certain limits) to criticize its assumptions and presuppositions. The years just before and after 1968, precisely the Althusserian moment, were such a time of disruption.

For Althusser, however, the effects of economism and the evolutionary historicism of the “poor man’s Hegelianism,” were not only expressed in rightist errors; they could also take the opposite form of an ultraleft messianism, whose operating assumption was that capitalism (whether in a single nation or internationally) had not only matured, but was “overripe,” “rotting,” etc, and only the will to overthrow it (the “subjective factor,” as it was once called) was lacking. “In both cases [right and left economism], the dialectic functions in the old manner of pre-Marxist philosophy as a philosophical guarantee of the coming of revolution and of socialism.” In the “left” version materialism is “juggled away [*escamoté*—made to disappear or vanish, as in a magic trick],” displaced by the notion of consciousness, class consciousness, or will, while in the rightist version it is “reduced to the mechanical and abstract materiality of the productive forces.”⁷ Earlier he had argued that “if there really are two distinct ways of identifying the superstructure with the infrastructure, or consciousness with the economy – one which sees in consciousness and politics only the economy, while the other imbues the economy with politics and consciousness, there is never more than one *structure* of identification at work – the structure of the problematic which, by reducing one to the other, *theoretically* identifies the levels present. It is this common structure of the problematic which is made visible when, rather than analysing the theoretical or political *intentions* of mechanicism-economism on the one hand and humanism-historicism on the other, we examine the internal logic of their conceptual mechanisms.”⁸

In these critiques of the base/superstructure *dispositif*, separated by an interval of ten years, Althusser argues that it necessarily presupposes the contemporaneity of its elements: all belong to and form functioning parts of a single present. The superstructure is the expression, even the consciousness, of the economic base, the medium in which it thinks about itself and is aware of itself. Even if the origins of certain elements lie in earlier modes of production, exhibiting different

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7 Ibid.

8 Althusser 1970 138-139.

relations of production, such elements are transformed and equipped with new identities, entirely assimilated into the new world by the causal power of its economic base. In fact, the concept of causality at work in this *dispositif*, requires that the superstructure, understood as an expression or emanation of its economic base and thereby deprived of any material existence, change with every change in the base, registering, as it were, every modification of the reality from which it flows. To explain the elements of the superstructure is to trace each of them back to their origins or to show the function each has arisen to fulfill. But Althusser's critique of this model is not simply a consequence of his general critique of the Hegelian notions of totality and contradiction. On the contrary, it might be argued that only the very practical problems of actual revolutions, specifically, the Russian and, even more importantly for him, the Chinese, made his critique of the idea of base and superstructure possible. It was he who wrote in 1962 that "there is no true critique which is not immanent and already real and material before it is conscious."⁹

Thus, in "On the Cultural Revolution," published anonymously in 1966, but thought to have been written by Althusser, he explains that it is "absolutely necessary to give the socialist infrastructure, established by a political revolution, a corresponding—that is, socialist—ideological superstructure,"¹⁰ There is a strangeness to this formulation, above all in Althusser's notion of "giving" a socialist economic base its superstructure, as if when a mode of production is destroyed, the superstructure that it supported collapses with it or simply vanishes, leaving a void to be filled by the gift, the place left empty when the previous mode of production was destroyed. Everything that follows in the essay undercuts any such notion and postulates exactly the opposite: the old superstructure remains fundamentally unchanged, and therefore at odds with the new relations of production. An ideological superstructure capable of simply disappearing would consist of disembodied and immaterial ideas, beliefs and prejudices. The stubborn resistance of the superstructure to change, however, is not subjective but objective, a result of its material existence. As such, to change a superstructure requires more than the power of critique or rational argumentation, but will take nothing less than "a mass ideological revolution."¹¹ Althusser's essay on the Cultural Revolution is full of hope that a party guided by the correct line can successfully lead the masses to carry out such a revolution. This position, however, without further qualification, would amount to the very historicism and voluntarism Althusser criticized both before and after the appearance of this essay. Fortunately, he will

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⁹ Althusser 1969 143.

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¹¹ Althusser 2014 2.

complicate these statements in ways that will lead to an unprecedented theory of ideology, but only after he confronts the ultimate failure of the revolts of 1968 in France.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution, he writes, "is a matter of transforming the ideas, the ways of thinking, the ways of acting, the customs [mœurs] of the masses of the entire country [*les idées, les façons de penser, les façons d'agir, les mœurs des masses du pays*]."¹² According to convention, ideas can be changed through rational argument, persuasion (whether rational or irrational—appeals to prejudice, dogmas, etc.), even through conversion (sudden or gradual). Ways of acting, however, especially those organized in ritualized movements in which we participate without our knowledge or consent that Althusser calls customs or manners, offer, in their materiality, resistance to change. Here, as Spinoza noted, the body seems to act of its own accord, or at least without any intervention on the part of the mind. Some individuals, for example, "automatically" bow to others (or step aside to make way for them, etc.), while the others wait patiently to receive the physical expressions of respect that, with a certainty that cannot be questioned, they feel they are due. Worse, these rituals and prescribed acts (including speech acts organized into secular liturgies) make up the greater part of the life of an individual, and as such normally operate below the threshold of visibility; to change (let alone replace) them requires that they be rendered visible, and they become visible only when they are disrupted or violated. Subjection is the terminal point in a concatenation of unequal relations of force, many of which operate at the most micro level: from the issue of who can and cannot make eye contact, who may initiate a conversation or even greet another first, who must move aside to let another pass, who may use the informal mode of address to another adult, who may use the first name of another adult, to who can "speak out," occupy public spaces in large numbers, or even, in certain circumstances, who is able to disobey the law or party declarations.

For Althusser, the customs, rituals and liturgies that survive revolution are the incarnation of the forms of subjection that were in no way incidental to the old regime, but essential to its functioning. These are among the thousands of obstacles, invisible to the law and typically disregarded by revolutionary movements, that, according to Lenin in his polemic against Kautsky, prevent legal equality, including equality of right, from becoming real. Worse, even as these customs, gestures and postures resist the emergence of an equality that is exercised and not merely possessed, such practices endow the old forms of deference, respect and subordination with an appearance of obviousness; that is, they appear as norms of conduct beyond law and legislation, minute but no less necessary expressions of a universal

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¹² Ibid. 8.

morality that no one thinks to question. Together, these innumerable modes of conduct, iteratively organized into rituals and customs whose combined force can, if left unchanged, push a society, even a society whose economic base has been transformed, backwards. At the same time, the enactment of customs and manners always takes the form of a confrontation between unequal powers; it is unstable and constantly exposed to sudden reversals or simply momentary resistance that provokes a corresponding attempt to overcome this resistance. It is on the basis of these innumerable confrontations that a revolution deepens or counter-revolution works toward a restoration of the previous property forms. As Althusser is quick to remind us at this point, the very idea of regression and counterrevolution, determined not externally, by war or conquest, but internally by the power of opposing forces within the superstructure itself, is unthinkable from the point of view of economism and evolutionism. The economic base must produce the infrastructure it requires; the leftover traditions and beliefs will wither away according to an irresistible necessity: “the ‘regression’ thesis would, finally, be impossible if Marxism were an economism. In an economist interpretation of Marxism, the abolition of the economic bases of social classes is all that is necessary to confirm the disappearance of social classes, and with them, class struggle and the dictatorship of the proletariat’s necessity, and therefore the class character of the Party and the State—in order, in other words, to be able to declare that the victory of socialism has been “definitively assured.”¹³

But among the forms of subjection, those that maintain the “superstructural” existence of distinct social classes even after they have ceased to exist at the level of the economic base, the essential precondition for a restoration of capitalism, are not the only forms it takes. Lenin in his time was compelled through a long process of debate and ideological struggle to recognize the decisive role played by the exercise of great Russian chauvinism against a hierarchically distributed collection of subjugated nationalities (and beyond the Soviet Union the role of racism in colonial empires and the Americas, well as the role of anti-Semitism in diverting the class struggle in Europe). The hatred, fear and contempt that these nationalities, to varying degrees, inspired, served an indispensable function in the reproduction, and at the time of the revolutions of 1917, the defense of the old order. The revolutionaries in these communities were well aware that the class struggle alone, even if it resulted in a change of the mode of production, would not automatically end their national and cultural subjection. No one, least of all Lenin, conceived of this subjection as a matter of beliefs, prejudices or ideas, except secondarily. The struggles of the oppressed nationalities had shown that everything about it existed in material forms, from the

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13 Ibid. 12.

micro-practices of everyday life, extra-legal forms of subordination and exclusion to exterminationist violence.

This is precisely the aspect of the ISAs essay that has proven nearly illegible to readers: the material existence of ideology in apparatuses, practices and rituals from which no idea can be dissociated, including the multiplicity of practices that combine to interpellate individuals as subjects, attributing subjectivity to them the better to insure their subjection. Ideology is no longer a matter of false consciousness or deception; indeed, even the “imaginary relation” of individuals to “their real conditions of existence” has nothing to do with belief or illusion. It consists of the material practices that render us free, responsible and thus punishable for the acts that we determined ourselves to perform, material practices that no critique can dissipate. Althusser forces his readers to understand thought in relation to the body, what it can and cannot do, where it can and cannot go. This is what Foucault develops into a theory of the disciplines, extending intelligibility to the microphysical supports for class domination. In this way both Althusser and Foucault provide the theoretical tools for the analysis of “the bitter tyranny of our everyday lives”¹⁴ as well as of the previously unnoticed forms of resistance to it: one of the great themes of 1968. None of this renders the great battles fought in the street or the workplace any less important: it is they that are finally decisive. But to understand the conditions necessary to their emergence and to their victory, we must understand the terrain on which they take place.

Today, in the face of neo-fascist, racist and Islamophobic mobilizations internationally, the left in Europe and North American is increasingly captivated by the image of base and superstructure and the fictitious guarantees offered by the economism that follows from it. The forms of racial and national subjection, no matter how intertwined they are with the specific historical existence of many capitalist economies, according to the economism that flourishes today, will wither or vanish when the material conditions that brought them into being are changed. As expressions of these material conditions they do not possess a material existence themselves; indeed, they are minimized as feelings, attitudes and representations too insubstantial to furnish the basis for political struggle: they are just the pseudo-politics of identity. Such a critique of anti-racism is founded on the basis of an opposition between the reality of the means of production and the relations of production and the immaterial ideal in which it is expressed or represented. In addition to the assurances that the notions it invokes together offer, it provides as a “secondary gain” the opportunism that promises to unite the working class by denying or minimizing the real (as opposed to symbolic or formal) inequalities or even conflicts internal to it. A proponent of this

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14 Foucault, 1977 xiv.

view recently argued that the way to fight racism is to build the unions and address universal economic interests rather than quibble over the ethereal particularisms of race (as if racism has not been a historical barrier to building unions and a factor in their decline).¹⁵

To follow the thought of 1968 as expressed by Althusser (who never said a word about race) and Foucault (who did) is to acknowledge that the forms of subjection once regarded as the secondary product or by-product of economic relations are fully real and material and cannot change except through “a mass ideological revolution.” Improving the “material conditions” of workers confronting racism, cannot mean simply raising wages and improving working conditions (which would still leave Black and Latino workers in the US economically disadvantaged given the legacy of unemployment, underemployment and racially determined wages). Their material conditions include the constant threat of state violence, incarceration and surveillance and for Latinos the threat of extra-legal or quasi legal detention and deportation. Added to these, are the acts which cannot be dismissed as imaginary micro-aggressions: a high level of non-state violence and vigilante activity, de-facto exclusion from specific places and spaces, and the extra-legal and often violent policing of clothing and languages. To dematerialize and dismiss the forms of racism and Islamophobia as epiphenomenal or secondary in relation to class struggle is both to deny the complexity and unevenness of class struggle itself and to abandon the most oppressed sections of international working class at the moment they face the greatest threat since 1945.

Machiavelli noted that those who neglect what is done for what ought to be done, whether according to reason or morality, will come to ruin. The old world with its opposition between ideology understood as illusion and the material reality of the base, is a reduction (and therefore a denial) of what is done to what ought to be done. Its theoretical props are so many signposts on the way to ruin. 1968 points us in a different direction: not to a new world, but to the world we already inhabit, a world of irreducibly distinct struggles without guarantees, whose unity was never given in advance but achieved temporarily, conjuncturally, through a convergence of singular movements into a new, more powerful singularity. The errors that the far left fifty years ago imprecisely denounced as opportunism and betrayal were based on theoretical assumptions and foundations we have identified and can now oppose with clarity in both theory and practice. The difference between now and then is one of scale: the cost of the political errors fifty years ago was high enough, especially outside of Europe. The cost of the same errors today will be unimaginably higher.

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15 Sunkara 2018.

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