

## ***Introduction: La pensée dix-huit***

by GUILLAUME COLLETT

On the eve of the fortieth anniversary of May '68, the then presidential candidate of France Nicolas Sarkozy claimed that May '68 had imposed upon France – and the wider world besides due to the global nature of the 1968 uprisings – the “leftist heritage” of “intellectual and moral relativism”, understood by him as a “cult of money-worship, short-term profit, speculation”, in short, “the excesses of finance capitalism”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in his contribution to this issue, Christian Laval notes that, with the exception of the perverse stipulation of the latter, this reading of May '68 amounts to a common misinterpretation which cannot be divorced from a certain historical revisionism – and indeed symptomatic projection – issuing from the well documented neoliberal counter-revolution firmly established by the 1990s<sup>2</sup> and becoming overripe by 2007-2008. This misinterpretation of May '68 holds, at its most general level, that there is some causal relation between May '68 and the development of neoliberalism in the post-1970s era. Indeed, in the wake of the tenth anniversary of the collapse of Lehman Brothers, and after the 2016 US presidential election of Donald Trump and the UK's Brexit vote, what was glimpsed through Sarkozy's revisionist bulwark has become the new politics – that is, the return to conservative conceptions of Nation and Tradition, as palliatives for a crumbling social order which have the effect of projecting the cause of the misery produced by capitalism's internal dynamics outside itself onto an other.

Yet, at the same time, which Laval hints at, any reading which simply conflates May '68 with just another “worker's uprising” – conceived in the traditional Marxist mould – if perhaps with a few additional and inessential modifications, misses the historical singularity of this event, and the complex manner in which May '68 and the development of neoliberalism partake of (if in differing ways) a shared historical sequence requiring a rethinking of traditional Marxist categories. Here we have to be very careful not to underplay the significance of May '68 as a worker's uprising, given the historically unprecedented general strike to which it gave rise, which summoned two thirds of the French workforce at its peak thus threatening to oust de Gaulle's government. Nonetheless, May '68, and the global 1968 uprisings more generally, seem to reflect something outstripping such events as the October Revolution of 1917 or the revolutions of 1848.

While – after Guattari and Foucault, to name but two names – one cannot deny the inextricability of socio-economic factors and considerations elsewhere termed “superstructural” (i.e. pertaining to subjective factors), these latter revolutions nonetheless appear to still lean much more directly on immediate and pressing socio-economic woes. By contrast, 1968 globally saw workers' wages at their highest point relative to the portion of

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Christian Laval's article in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> See particularly Boltanski and Chiapello (2017).

profit returning to capital, a trajectory which would continue until the mid-1970s. If rightly considered an anti-capitalist uprising, albeit one not fully reducible to this horizon, and continuing in the shadow of its forebears in the following respect, May '68 arguably points to a revolution against capitalism made possible by capitalism and its historical development. Perhaps more accurately, we can add, made possible at some level by the erosion of institutions that some consider to have been in decline since the early twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War and for reasons not reducible to economy,<sup>3</sup> though whose decline cannot be entirely separated from the history of capitalist development either. Just as 1848 and 1917 were co-extensive (if not mono-causally so) with the social and urban transformations undergone in response to or in any case alongside capitalist expansion during those periods, 1968 appears to be inseparable from profound social changes undergone during the post-War era – if, as Deleuze and Guattari and others rightly note, as *event*, nonetheless not fully reducible to mono-causal lines of socio-economic and political causality.

In other words, 1968's strategic importance as anti-capitalist uprising – at the level both of symptomatic expression, and a kind of extra-historical self-analyzer of the theory and practice that would flow from it – lies precisely in its (both historical and extra-historical) inability to be conflated with earlier uprisings, anticipating as it does a new mode of capital accumulation of which we are the contemporaries. This new mode of accumulation is perhaps historically unprecedented in terms of the degree to which it merges the economic and supposedly extra-economic or non-historical materialist, or to phrase it otherwise, in its use of what Foucault called “governmental” devices as a primary means of expanding capital accumulation itself – centred as it is during the neoliberal era on social relations themselves, today inseparable from the digital, which further impacts on the need to reconceptualize traditional Marxism.<sup>4</sup> If, as Guattari noted, socio-economic relations during May '68 extended to the University (Guattari 1984: 66),<sup>5</sup> this was not so much because of students' role as vanguard with respect to the ensuing general strike, a position Althusser for one completely rejects,<sup>6</sup> and more to do with May '68's symptomatic-critical expression of what Mario Tronti referred to as the “social factory” (and Deleuze and Guattari would later term the psychic factory of the unconscious) enveloping all social and psychic relations. While Deleuze and Guattari would go on to project this onto the “universal history” of capitalism as such, May '68's expression of such a “universal” perspective can nonetheless not be entirely divorced from the intense period of *actual* post-War history in which, as Alliez and Lazzarato have recently reiterated (2016: 218-19, 232-42), governmental devices perfected during the post-

---

<sup>3</sup> See Deleuze's (1995) comments on Foucault (177-8).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Hardt and Negri (2001, Ch. 1.2); and for a more contemporary Marxist account, Mason (2015).

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this reference from Jose Rosales' article in this issue.

<sup>6</sup> See Althusser's March 1969 letter to Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, which provides his preliminary analysis of May '68 (accessible here: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3851-louis-althusser-s-letter-on-the-may-events> last accessed 10.09.2018).

WWI and then post-WWII eras became progressively folded into shifts in the dominant mode of capital accumulation (what was earlier termed “State monopoly capitalism”). Or, from another angle, during which time production became and has become progressively entwined with knowledge, particularly when conceived at the level of something akin to a “general intellect” that is fundamentally social in nature.

Taken as a whole, this issue argues that thinking together May ’68 as complex event – symptomatic of, yet not entirely reducible to, history, an ambiguous position from which it arguably derives its critical force – and the legacy of Marx’s work on the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth, helps us see in what ways the former sheds light on the latter, and vice versa, allowing us to better understand our neoliberal present, and correspondingly, May ’68’s potential futures. This is what we are calling “*la pensée ’18*”, that is, the doubling reflection of Marx (born 1818) in May ’68, as seen through the refracting prism of today’s ongoing reaction to May ’68 and the historical sequence it expresses.

\*

The first three articles in this issue provide a range of differing approaches to the relation between May ’68 and the emergence of neoliberalism over the past fifty years. Christian Laval’s article “May ’68: Paving the way for the triumph of neoliberalism? Rereading the event with Foucault and Bourdieu”, aims to decisively separate out our understanding of both May ’68 and neoliberalism from their assimilation into dominant narratives about the causality underpinning the emergence of neoliberalism. To critically re-think the relation between May ’68 and neoliberalism, Laval turns to Bourdieu and Foucault, two theorists who “took seriously the *neoliberal phenomenon*” and provided critical analyses of its emergence “from” May ’68, this “from” understood strictly as a retrospective/retroactive and strategic *response* to it, given that May ’68 constituted, for Laval, “the most profound challenge to the social order to have taken place in France since the nineteenth century”. Laval concludes by suggesting that rather than “ask if another ’68 is possible”, we should instead “first ask ourselves if all the lessons have been drawn from the events of the last fifty years”. In other words, whether today we can separate the horizon of resistance, as we conceive it within circumscribed history, from the contingent effects of power relations issuing from the neoliberal response to ’68, so as to think outside the contemporary capitalist system.

Jose Rosales’ article, “1968–2018: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose (?)*”, takes a similar approach, focusing on the separation between the distinct political spaces occupied by May ’68 and Leftism today. The article begins by focusing on Badiou’s reading of the “diagonal” function of May ’68 as synthesizer of three distinct and heterogeneous struggles: that of the students, the workers, and cultural protestations. May ’68 was capable of synthesizing these, Badiou argues, because it did not conform to a totalizing, top-down model of revolution in the Leninist mould. However, Rosales considers today’s struggles to be structured entirely differently, insofar as the major tension within British and American

Leftist politics, is that between a reinvestment in extant electoral politics and extra-parliamentary struggle. May '68's structural tension lay elsewhere, given its fundamentally non-hierarchical nature, namely, as Deleuze put it, in its constituting a "becoming-revolutionary without a revolutionary future" (quoted in Rosales). Rosales considers Blanchot to be the theorist of May '68 best able to capture our distance from it today, which Rosales understands in terms of an impoverished choice between a "melancholic reflection", which fails to accept that this event does not fit in our current conjuncture and thus cannot be used to ground contemporary struggles, and the event's "farcical repetition" to which the former gives rise.

Christos Marneros' article, "Deleuze and Human Rights: The Optimism and Pessimism of '68", also takes as its starting point the twofold nature of the event of May '68. Badiou considers us to be the contemporaries of May '68 because the twofold nature of that event still haunts our present: both its ability to more clearly problematize for us today our political condition and the attendant possibility of our emancipation from it; and the ultimate failure, both then and now, of such an emancipatory project. Using this lens, Marneros presents contemporary human rights discourse and the immanent metaphysics of Gilles Deleuze as two examples of these two opposed trajectories. In doing so, he provides a Deleuzian critique of the assimilation of human rights discourse into today's putatively "post-ideological", which is to say marketized, landscape. If, on the one hand, human rights emerged after May '68, and particularly after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, as a "substitute" for "most of the calls for a 'real social revolution'", the evolution of Deleuze's thought during and after May '68 reveals this event's twofold nature and internal ability to critically counteract its neoliberal cooptation, offering via Deleuze's work a "potentially new way of creative thinking and living in an ethical, expressive way that could do away from dogmas and hierarchies".

The next article shifts its perspective away from neoliberalism's cooptation of May '68 and towards the mutual imbrication of May '68 and French theoretical structuralism. While standard readings of structuralism tend to oppose its theoretical concerns to questions of genesis, becoming, and event, Patrice Maniglier's "May '68 in Theory (and in Practice)" shows how, alongside constituting an event in the metaphysical and/or political senses explored in other contributions to the current issue, May '68 was not least also an "event for 'Theory'", which is to say structuralism. Attempting to disintricate this event for theory from mainstream understandings of "*la pensée '68*", Maniglier seeks to go back to the actors of the events of May themselves in order to better understand their perception of the theoretical stakes of this thought. Maniglier shows that these theoretical stakes were, at least in part, conflated with the theoretical structuralism of the period, which reached its height in France around 1966 and which would continue to inform the decade's key theoretical developments. In doing so, Maniglier's interest is not only to better understand French structuralism but also the significance of this theoretical movement for the social and political actors of May '68.

Arguably one of the most important offshoots of “*la pensée ‘68*”, and more generally one of the most important outcomes of the global 1968 uprisings, was a reinvestment in identity politics and a flowering of new social movements, of which intersectionality is one of the most significant later developments. Chiara Bottici’s article “Anarcho-Feminism and the Ontology of the Transindividual” engages intersectionality in relation to feminism, asking if feminism is still needed after intersectionality, given the latter’s de-centering of struggles. Bottici first underscores the usefulness of the notion of intersectionality, but also its limitations, thus leading her to develop an anarcho-feminist research program. It is in relation to this program that an ontology of the transindividual is put forward as a philosophical framework adequate to thinking anarcho-feminism, since it enables a thinking of the plural nature of the female body and thus its multiple forms of oppression. This allows Bottici to defend the notion of a specifically feminist form of anarchism, which she argues is ultimately needed in order to be able to effectively articulate a feminist critique of contemporary society.

Understanding and critiquing contemporary capitalism effectively also necessitates a thorough re-evaluation of Marx’s work, particularly in light of the post’68 conjuncture. Yet, conversely, such work leads at times to the validation of many of his key insights, and to a degree he might not have anticipated.

In “Indigenous Marx. A Becoming-Earthling of Communism”, Dalie Giroux shows how this is perhaps above all true of the Marxian conception of “primitive” or “original” accumulation. If Marx posited such a conception as “primitive” insofar as it was considered a crucial *pre*-capitalist operation needed to lay the foundations, typically with brutal force, for a society’s entry (or usually intensified re-entry) into capitalist market relations, Giroux re-affirms the well-established (post)-Marxist argument that primitive accumulation is serially enfolded within contemporary practices of capital accumulation. What Giroux contributes to the debate is the loosely Kristevan claim that in uprooting pre-capitalist territories, primitive accumulation not only acts on the land but also on the body’s semiotic chora. As such, workers’ uprisings not only contest the enforced loss of the commons, they also dramatize the ripping apart of the body, and collectively the separation of the “people” from the “nation”. In this sense, anti-capitalist protests and demonstrations act as a “scene” or “stage” upon which “the primitive body” exposes its exposure to primitive accumulation, ultimately understood as a single process acting always both on land and body, given the contemporary understanding of matter as that which lies outside representation.

Likewise, Fabian Danilo Rojas Pineda’s article, “Indebted Man and Alienation in Capitalism”, updates and in some ways re-affirms the Marxian notion of alienation – also key to Giroux’s piece – through a combined analysis of Maurizio Lazzarato’s *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* (2012). While Marx developed theses on alienation in capitalism in such texts as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and *The Paris Manuscripts* (1844), developments in contemporary capitalism necessitate a rethinking of the Marxian category of alienation, particularly in light of the neoliberal

practices of subjectivating and governing individuals through private debt. Nonetheless, Rojas Pineda shows at the same time that Lazzarato's reading of Marxian alienation is partially limited. As such, the concept of "Total Alienation" is developed as potentially able to better explain debt, the indebted subject, and the production of subjectivities today.

Guillaume Collett's article "Deleuze and Guattari's Political Symptomatology: From the Psychoanalysis of Literary Symptoms to the Becoming-minor of May '68", shifts perspective by focusing on Deleuze and Guattari's literary symptomatology and the development of their notion of "becoming-minor". Collett shows first how Deleuze and Guattari's approach to literary symptomatology shifted from an initial focus on individual fantasy augmented through the metaphysical principle of eternal return, in the early Deleuze of the 1960s, to a transversal understanding of desire as collective production at the margins of a majoritarian social field, in Deleuze's later collaborative works co-written with Guattari, particularly their *Kafka: For a Minor Literature* (1975). In both cases, the psychoanalysis at stake is examined as well as the politics to which it gives rise. In the conclusion, the notion of becoming-minor is used to engage the question of the neoliberal reaction to May '68, as considered in terms of post-Marxism. Like the previous two articles, Collett seeks in part to show how Marxian notions, particularly class struggle and revolution, continue to provide important resources for thinking the present even if they are in need of updating, and particularly after May '68.

In "2k18 // RE-EVOLUTIONARY ABORT", Louis Armand continues this line of investigation, focusing on the question of revolutionary possibility and the critical force of experimental knowledge after May '68, and with reference to Marx and Blanqui, as well as through the work of Guy Debord, Deleuze and Guattari, and others. However, unlike earlier articles in this issue, Armand's focus zooms back to contextualize the post-May '68 moment, firstly, in the development of cybernetics in the post-WWII era, and even further back, to consider twentieth-century social, technological, and political history in terms of the Anthropocene. Armand focuses on Guattari's characterization of May '68 as an "abortive" moment, but pushes this understanding further to conceive of this abortive moment as a "technology" of "re-evolution", or from another angle as the "prestige commodity" of revolution itself (following Debord), enabling capitalism to maintain its processes of accumulation yet fundamentally modifying the manner in which we understand the traditional Marxist account of this.

Glen Melville's article "Digital De-Subjectivation: Becoming-Imperceptible in the Machinery of Digital Capitalism" also engages the question of today's revolutionary conditions, but focuses more specifically on the problem revolutionary becoming within digital networks. Melville begins by carefully unpicking the familiar claim that the internet is a "rhizome" simply because it is a supposedly de-centred, relational and connective network, and the attendant argument that it is inherently revolutionary because of these supposed characteristics. Melville goes on to argue that, rhizomatic or not, connectivity itself is not inherently liable to offer a revolutionary space within digital capitalism's networks, as can be seen in the ways in which it has been all too easily weaponized in recent years and/or

used to continue to advance and intensify capital accumulation over the past decades. Rather, Melville contends, the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of “becoming-imperceptible” is a more valuable tool for conceptualizing revolution in today’s digital landscapes. From this is developed the notion of a “digital de-subjectivation” which would correspond not so much to a *connectivist* “becoming-everyone” but more to a collective “becoming-less” subjective, and in a manner which cannot be digitally encoded and monetized.

Andrew Culp’s article “Accelerationism and the Need for Speed: Partisan Notes on Civil War”, is another which engages contemporary approaches to revolution, developing a series of theses on varieties of accelerationism, considering each one as a varying dialectical response to capitalism. Three main approaches are identified, relating to the “rebound”, “speed”, and the “techno-scientific dream of a technological fix”. As we also find in Armand’s article, cybernetics is then engaged, in relation to how it has been used by certain recent accelerationists. In the final section, the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of the “war machine” is addressed in terms of its contribution to a rethinking of contemporary resistance, not in its communist iteration if by this we mean a project of “global hegemony to defeat capitalism”, but rather communism understood in terms of partisanship. What Culp terms the “partisan war machine” adopts not a universal perspective but a partial and problematizing one specific to each case, an approach which is considered to offer the “only true image of revolution”.

Along with the greater theoretical emphasis placed on identity politics and new social movements, mentioned earlier, one of the key effects of May ’68 on theory was a further reinvestment in post-colonialism as well as greater attention paid to non-European struggles. In “What Pulsates in Pessimism around May ’68”, Cristina Pósléman shows that “*la pensée ’68*”, focusing here particularly on Deleuze and Guattari’s work, nonetheless continues to be critiqued on the basis that it does not succeed in these respects. In her article, Pósléman critiques the contemporary claim (found for instance in Rancière, Badiou and Žižek) that Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of immanent desire conceives of emancipation from contemporary capitalism in a way that is both ineffective and which leads to Eurocentrism. In order to articulate this defense of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, Pósléman engages their work in relation to Franz Fanon’s critique of French colonialism, as well as in relation to key Marxist, psychoanalytic and phenomenological works treating, or made to articulate with, questions of colonialism and desire.

In a similar vein, Cristian Alvarado’s “From the Ethos of the Nostalgia of Mourning to the Promise to Come: Rhizome, Revolution, and Utopia” addresses the revolutionary praxis of the intellectual output of the Ecuadorian-Mexican Marxist thinker Bolívar Echeverría, in relation to the work of Deleuze, demonstrating Deleuze’s influence on Echeverría’s work. Engaging both these thinkers, Alvarado questions the obsolescence of Left-Statist revolutionary ideas in relation to questions of post-capitalism, and within the context of twenty-first century socialism and its actual collapse within Latin-American geopolitics. Ultimately, Alvarado’s text seeks to take into consideration an experience of impossible

realism anteceding May '68, as a way to reformulate the revolutionary praxis of the Latin American Left.

The final article, Drigo Agostinho's "Transversality and Institution", anticipates the next issue of *La Deleuziana* on "The Schizoanalytic Clinic", but develops its analysis of Guattari's clinical concept of transversality primarily with reference to one of the key contexts in which it was developed, namely May '68. May '68's relevance to the Guattarian concept of transversality, as Agostinho shows, is transversality's inseparability from the problem of the institution, absolutely central to May '68 contestation of power. Agostinho demonstrates how the notion of transversality is inseparable from a rethinking of the organization of social life, be it at the level of political groups or in psychiatric hospitals. Moreover, Agostinho explains how this Guattarian concept allows for a renewal of psychoanalysis insofar as it transforms our understanding of the unconscious, now to be conceived as fundamentally social. Indeed, Agostinho argues that, for Guattari, the institution is itself to be conceived as a "unit of subjectivity".

\*

I would like to extend thanks and acknowledge a debt of gratitude owed to the Editorial Board of *La Deleuziana* for their extensive help with every aspect of putting this issue together and for their tireless work and valuable advice offered throughout the process. Thanks to the authors for intensively and creatively engaging with the themes of the call for papers, for their rich and varied contributions and for the amount of work that went into each article. Additional gratitude is owed to Riccardo Baldissoni and Francesco Vitale, and I would also like to single out the work of Jeanne Etelain without whom this issue would not have been possible in its current form, as well as Jean-Sébastien Laberge, Sara Baranzoni and Paolo Vignola. Emilia Marra produced the issue's final cover graphic and I would like to thank her for her skill and inventiveness. We hope you enjoy reading this issue.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alliez, É. and Lazzarato, M. (2016). *Guerres et Capital*. Éditions Amsterdam: Paris.
- Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. ([1999] 2017). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Deleuze, G. ([1990] 1995). "Postscript on Control Societies". In G. Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. M. Joughin, 177-82. London: Columbia University Press.
- Guattari, F. (1984). *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, trans. R. Sheed. London: Penguin Books.
- Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Mason, P. (2015). *PostCapitalism. A Guide to Our Future*. London: Allen Lane.