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May–June 1968: The Exposure

Jacques Camatte

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of capital or to leave it. At that point, we will see that this alternative was revealed by May-June 1968.

The rupture which it has brought about permits us to emerge from a mythicized past which continues to make myths of itself, as well as from an idealized future, vaguely projected, seemingly close at hand but always relegated to the future; it also helps us attempt to grasp all the coordinates of time, find the space and adopt the behavior which will unify the whole in a life, henceforth outside the life of capital.

Jacques Camatte, March 1977

tionary theory becomes, like pleasure, something which is never achieved. One sinks into the undefined and the fleeting.

Possibilities are transformed

At present, life is transformed into branches of learning (Nietzsche); furthermore, the possible is transformed into knowledge. Various researchers in revolution are in quest of the new and as soon as they perceive the slightest tremor or twitch of something unusual, the assertion of the most insignificant original idea, they take hold of it, circumscribe it, theorize about it, and extrapolate its implications. Or else they use it to revise their earlier representation.

In any case, they put together something which is supposed to be operational and fling it onto the market. The originator of the insight or deed discovers that his or her intuition or impulse is vulgarized, capitalized. They cannot help being disgusted by what they were able to do and even of themselves. Possibilities are transformed into representations and even when, occasionally men and women might have it in their power to conceive and work something out and thus to live, they have the sensation of *deja vu*, the feeling that it is banal, inessential; that it isn't worth the trouble. Discouragement is the result and it is all the more acute because they realize that with the various theoretical elements, with the different possibilities for materializing projects which present themselves, there are infinite combinations.

Only by throwing oneself into another dynamic, by adopting another frame of reference other than capital, is it possible to avoid all this perversion-destruction. And as the catastrophic phenomena inherent in the development of our world are confirmed, the abolished obstacles will clearly be recognized as abolished and men and women will have to choose: *either to remain in the community*

In the text which follows, May-June 1968 is considered as a moment of fundamental rupture: the emergence of the revolution but not the revolution itself. This approach involves defining, demarcating and predicting what the communist revolution would be in the phase of the real domination of capital¹ over society — the earlier proletarian revolutions having taken place in the phase of the formal domination of capital. May-June 1968 is considered as a prologue to a vast historic drama which now, several years later, ought to be aware of its characteristic acts. The principal actors are no longer the same.

In 1968 it was the students and the new middle classes (all the wage workers who took part in the process of the circulation of capital) who were involved; it was they who pulled the proletarians from their lethargy and made them enter upon the stage of history. Henceforth, the party² of tomorrow would no longer regroup strictly proletarians, but would have to be the expression of a wider unification. This led to the consideration of the formation of an enormous class of human beings standing opposed to capital because they are wage slaves of capital. At the same time this involved elucidating the phenomenon of profound proletarianization which is affecting the established society, and the fact that the proletariat must negate itself in order to bring about the revolution.

Examining the process of unification of what some would call the revolutionary subject resulted in documenting the phenomenon of racketization, and this required abandoning any sort

¹ The formal and real domination of capital: Marxist term referring to historical periods in the development of the capitalist system. The former is in its initial stage when the social and property relations of capital have been established, but its culture does not yet dominate and the State does not directly represent the interests of the bourgeoisie. The latter comes when capital comes to dominate and define all phases of human activity including the State, culture, leisure, etc.

² Camatte refers here not to a formal, organizational party (which he has no use for; see below), but rather the coming together at the point of revolution the groups he mentions.

of formal or informal group activities, but it did not undermine the analysis of May-June 1968 — thus acknowledging its importance.

May-June '68 — A reaffirmation

A comparison of the history of the workers' movement and the revolutionary upsurge following May 1968 will indicate that what appeared at that time was merely the reaffirmation of something that had been found already in the 1920s; this confirmed the character of discontinuity of May 1968 which demonstrated that we were not contemporaneous with our epoch. The originality of that moment thus seemed restricted by the efforts to readapt historically and this explains the wild fashions, the instantaneous spread of Wilhelm Reich's ideas, the demand for the end of art for its realization, the various attempts to create communities, the infatuation with non-authoritarian education (which was already visible earlier), with organic farming, biodynamic, *anthroposophie*, but also the affirmation of the sacred, the fascination with the occult, and the development of a so-called irrational current.

Since then, it is clear to what extent the triumph of fascism in its various guises, the triumph of Stalinism, the devastation of World War II and the inhibitions generated by the Cold War had caused a setback difficult to overcome but which, nevertheless, was eliminated within a few years. This resulted from the introduction of other elements (in particular ecology), from the discovery of the importance of other living beings and also, for some (at least during recent years), the agonizing problem of over-population.

May-June 1968, and especially the events which followed, introduced a new element: the unmistakable existence of the impasse. The fascist catastrophe, in fact, had made it possible to avoid the problems: is there still a revolutionary subject? Does the proletariat still have a historic mission to fulfill? Will the revolution be a classical one? Can there still be a revolution?

it plays the same role as Christianity vis-à-vis the Roman Empire. The true universality of the Empire was, in fact, brought to it by the religion which, at its origins, had called for its destruction.

As we said in 1968, the profound phenomenon is the search for *Gemeinwesen*⁵; today we can also include the search for unmediated being and life beyond the recuperation of movement, communication and imagination. This can be seen in the attraction which crafts have for so many young people (recuperable by capital, as we have mentioned elsewhere) and in various attempts to form communities. Admittedly this frequently takes on unhealthy aspects. But the most severe critics (who are correct as far as the present is concerned) have no understanding whatever of the profound aspirations; they also forget that it is impossible to eliminate fashion and faddism abruptly and thoroughly.

Affirming this profound aspiration as well as understanding it are made difficult because of the perception of a perverted world in which human beings have become *users* of capital. Human beings find themselves in a world where there is no longer use value or exchange value and where *they themselves appear in the mode of being capital*. Like capital they are a given magnitude which should increase. We can no longer say "realize their value" as this brings us back to value. The mechanism of perverting rebellion shows this in a striking way. It consists of outbidding on the left, where each person wants to be more left, more extreme than the person who has just been recognized as such because of a contribution to the so-called revolutionary debate. As a result, human beings no longer have time to structure their revolt before it is contemptuously pointed out to them that it lacks foundation, truth, that there is something more revolutionary than what they propose. Revolu-

⁵ *Gemeinwesen*: Loosely translated from German as "community," although it appears in the French version also un-translated and there is some dispute among us as to its exact English representation.

From this point on there is a rupture between the nervous system and the normal agent, the hand — an intolerable rupture which ought to be eliminated. Even before 1968, especially in Sweden, there were riots which revealed this situation: yoking people took over the streets and destroyed everything in their path without articulating the slightest political, trade-unionist or other demand. They were expressing the inexpressible: the insanity and their desire to rid themselves of it. But where does this madness come from? May-June 1968 visibly exposed its origins.

The exposure even cuts through the extensive recuperation which has taken place since May 1968. Advertising has understood the profound desire of human beings and since it essentially employs a language of diversion, it has to know exactly what it is dealing with. The desire for communication, for nature, for a more leisurely rhythm which is both more human and more universal, has to be diverted toward the consumption of capital, either in a form which is both material and representational for those with money-capital or else simply in a representational form for those without.

Marxism as repressive consciousness

The emergence of these profound desires, even if they are incorporated in representations which remain within the realm of capital, has exposed another essential component of our world: Marxism as repressive consciousness. Marxism is everywhere the most effective force opposing the passionate desire to live; anarchism in its nonviolent and individualist forms still retains certain elements of rebellion. It is due to Marxism that the capitalist mode of production was able to achieve real domination and could become universal. In fact, without Marxism, the capitalist mode of production could not have penetrated into regions such as those controlled today by the USSR, China or the African countries. In this sense,

The disguise was all the more complete because of the accomplishment of the fascist movement (aided, moreover, by Stalinism), namely, the real domination of capital over society. What had never been experienced or lived could appear to be a way out; just as from a superficial viewpoint, the anti-fascist struggle itself could appear to be a way out: it could appear to be the prelude to the revolution.

We thus considered everything appearing since May 1968 in the light of things which developed in the 1920s and conclude that the various problems had been conjured away and that the same thing must not happen in our day if we want to avoid the extinction of the species.

Departure from this world

Admittedly, in May-June 1968 and especially during the French high school disruptions of 1973, the impasse where we find ourselves is clearly visible: the more we struggle against capital, the stronger it becomes. Subsequently, the years 1974–76 marked a setback. Once again leftist revolutionary rhetoric regained credibility because of events in Chile and Greece, experiences at Lip as well as the revolution in Portugal. However, in this latter case, the impasse clearly presented itself once again. This impasse is what men and women must become conscious of if they are to decide to abandon the old representations and to finally decide to undertake a new dynamic, a departure from this world.

In fact, 1975 did mark a turning point, but one which was not as determining as had been hoped. The crisis spread and deepened. On the political level, the USA pulled out of Indochina and closed the expansionist phase of United States imperialism but also of leftist agitation. Moreover, this crisis which does not end and which never becomes revolutionary is the most obvious expression of the impasse in which one flounders while searching for a determining contradiction at the heart of capital — a contradiction which

would allow the potentially revolutionary subject to be thrust into the revolution.

The concern of this crisis is different: to expose the impasse by destroying outmoded beliefs, certainties and attachments to the past; to set beings in motion because their former representations are crumbling and people can't live without anything to hang onto — even though at the present time most human beings live the emptiness, the vacuity (achievement of the universal!) which we discussed in “Scatologie et resurrection.”³ Emptiness is the complement of the aggregate full of capital which secretes and structures it. This means that, without an extensive recognition of the impasse, the crisis will resolve itself in a fashion favorable to capital, namely in the strengthening of its despotism.

This view has the chance of imposing itself because various obstacles to a different evolution of productive forces, the myth of the USSR as the country of communism, of China as a substitute model, etc. The same goes for their corollaries: the necessity for the party, for a world-wide unified theory valid for everyone, for the imparting of consciousness, for revolutionary violence, etc., as well as the myth of the neutrality of science, benefactor of mankind. And the crisis in all institutions removes them as centers of diversion of rebellious human energies; this will leave the way clear for the manifestation of human restlessness.

Struggling at the heart of capital

To a certain extent, the events following May 1968 comprise the confusion-exposure that Bordiga⁴ was expecting from the Russians

³ “Dialogue avec Bordiga,” an article in the November 1975 *Invariance*, Camatte's French language journal. *Invariance* is available from J. Camatte, B.P. 133, 83 170 Brignoles, France.

⁴ Amadeo Bordiga: Marxist theorist associated with the Italian communist left (anti-CP) who Camatte collaborated with until disagreements over Bordiga's support for a formal party.

and the world capitalist system. At present, the discrepancy between reality and what is professed is tending to disappear because it becomes more and more obvious to everyone that, for example, there is nothing communist about the USSR. This is acknowledged even at the center of those parties which used to defend the communism of Moscow most vigorously.

However, an affirmation of the revolution such as Bordiga conceived it is lacking. This indicates the extent to which ideals and generous impulses have been distorted and perverted. To remain within this analysis would only touch the surface of the phenomena; the point is to make it obvious that struggling at the heart of capital's dynamic can lead only to such aberrations. Moreover, in a more or less grotesque manner, and with excesses on every side, this idea is tending to be recognized at the present time even if it sometimes results in the most unmitigated defeatism, i.e., social transformation is not possible because men always need a master.

The irruption of May-June 1968 literally shook up people's thinking; it was so bewildering that to explain it, some evoked the irrational or a resurgence of “primitive” behavior. For these people, May 1968 consisted of an enormous catharsis and, it thus follows, of an exuberant celebration. These two aspects cannot be denied, but they are mere epiphenomena.

In reality, we caught a glimpse of the biological dimension of the revolution — I would say, now, of the transformation which must take place in order for our species to continue to live. With the development of capital (although the phenomenon is there in embryo long before capital imposes itself) human beings are robbed of movement, speech and imagination. May 1968 called for their liberation-recovery. The biological insanity which is engulfing the species was exposed; to the extent that human beings no longer possess movement because they no longer carry out a given “task,” and because they are becoming useless in material (and even intellectual) production, they are alienated through loss of any concrete possibility to create and are imprisoned in this incapacity.