



PUBLIC SEMINAR

“ENJOY WITHOUT RESTRAINT!” FIFTY YEARS AGO IN PARIS Sergio Benvenuto

I lived through the May 1968 events in Paris at the age of nineteen as a first year Psychology student at the Sorbonne.

In a few years, when everyone who lived that era will be dead, there will be no experience, only history—the monumental cemetery of life. I thought I'd better hurry and describe my experience before history erases it.

Someone said that May 1968 is an overrated event, because it never really had a major following. According to this commentator, Woodstock, for example, was a far more important event: in the summer of 1969 it attracted over 400,000 youngsters who shared four memorable days of fun and enjoyment in New York State. A Woodstock, however, could repeat itself even today, and there have been smaller scale versions of Woodstock since that historical event. May 1968, on the other hand, can never be repeated.

I think that the strong interest in the events of May 1968, even for those who have never believed in any Socialist Revolutions, lies precisely in its uniqueness. In the fact that it can have no reprises, that it has the glaring mark of an Event, with a capital E. What happened that year was a *unicum*, and this gives it a very special aura: some events are *historical* simply because they are unique, even if they are remembered because of their failures. Certain historical failures often seduce us more than successes that changed the course of the world.

I want to give a witness account of something to which we can never return. Paraphrasing Putin, to want to repeat something similar to 1968 you would need to be *brainless*, but you would need to be *heartless* not to be nostalgic of it¹. Here I intend to use my brain to talk about the heart.

1. WE REBEL WHEN EVERYTHING IS GOING FINE

In those months I was plunged in a state of crazy elation. Not because I was twenty, I would actually go along with Paul Nizan, who said “I was twenty, I won't let anyone say those are the best years of your life!” I suffered for some very private reasons, but I did my best to live up to my dreams. One terrible thing about dreams is that they often come true, and hence fade away. For example, my dream was studying in Paris and following the seminars of Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. And it came true. Despite a certain youthful naivety, I had figured out that those eggheads, practically all of whom lived in the same neighborhood, would have a remarkable impact on world culture. I felt I was in the center of the world, even though I didn't feel at the center of my own world. Everything seemed to be going right, even though the price to pay—separation from those I loved in Italy, poverty—was high. This state of dreamy megalomania was ultimately common to many youngsters who participated in the 1968 events.

¹ Putin's words: “You would need to be *heartless* not to regret the disintegration of the *communism*. You'd need to be *brainless* to want to restore it.”



The feeling was that *everything was finally moving*. Che Guevara had been killed in Bolivia in October 1967, true, but the Tet Offensive by the Vietcong (January 1968) had become living proof that America's adventure in Vietnam was about to fail. For some time already, the anti-Vietnam war protests had been bringing together young westerners from the big cities who identified with this formidable Resistance of a tiny country against the colossal superpower. The Cultural Revolution in China was seducing many intellectuals: it was read as a sort of Dadaist rejection of Authority, starting with that of the Communist Party. They pretended not to notice the obsessively totalitarian side of that Revolution: Mao's humiliating and fanatical cult of personality, the persecution of intellectuals simply for being intellectuals, the repression of pleasure and sexuality. And the Prague Spring of 1968, apparently the opposite of the Chinese Revolution, was seen as proof that even in the dulling Soviet system things could come alive and lead to change. The artistic and literary avant-gardes, the thinkers who would come to be known as post-modern, were coming out of their niches and becoming an influential metropolitan pole of attraction. There was a general attraction to everything "poor": poor theatre (Grotowski, Barba), Italian poor art (Pascali, Merz, Kounellis, etc.), and even a "poor mathematics" (René Thom). Then there was minimalism, the avatar of poverty. The anarchist American group Living Theatre had enthused the "alternative" youngsters of the time in Italy. In a single year I saw their version of Brecht's *Antigone* four times: no stage design, no costumes, no props, only moving bodies, speaking and screaming in an empty space.

We felt the elation of a world that was changing in precisely the direction we'd been hoping. We felt as if anything could happen. Even the most terrible thing conceivable: all-out nuclear war.

Those countries that experienced a fervent 1968—West Germany, France, Italy, Japan—were going through an economic boom. We were a bit like China today; and apparently young people in China today are going through a kind of fierce enthusiasm very similar to ours in that period. In Italy we enjoyed the "economic miracle"; Gaullist France was experiencing the "The Glorious Thirty," the long economic boom between 1945 and 1975; Germany was already the economic engine of Europe. In May '68 the walls of Paris were full of posters against "the Gaullist regime of misery and unemployment," whilst in fact in France at the time

the unemployment rate was 2.6%—a percentage all economists would agree to be physiological. France practically had full employment, whilst in more recent decades the jobless have constantly been several million, always over 10%, but no one has considered raising the barricades. Our radical protest, total and unconditioned, was not the offspring of any crisis, of poverty or of a dark future looming over us: on the contrary, it was a repercussion of the euphoric prosperity—at once economic, cultural and political—of part of Europe. Even those who opposed the 1968 movement cannot help recognizing that *it was a beautiful time*.

Those were the years—in both France and Italy—when university for the masses was introduced: the sons and daughters of classes that had always seen higher education as a privilege from which they were excluded had finally gained access to the austere lecture rooms. Of course the student leaders of the time didn't come from the *parvenus* of university education, but from families for which high schooling was common currency. A sort of osmosis was therefore created between those at the top and those at the bottom of the class: between those who already had an assured future and dreamt of a different one and those who, having gained access to illustrious places essentially alien to them, resentfully rejected their sacredness.

2. THE CENTER

For me at the time Paris was practically the center of the world, so I ended up living in the center of this center: the Île de la Cité, where Notre-Dame oxymoronically faces the Prefecture of Police. A broke student arriving from a poor city like Naples, in 1968 I'd found a place to stay in a small apartment in one of the swankiest corners of Paris: Place Dauphine in the Cité, a triangular square, studded with art galleries and smart little restaurants, which leads to one of the oldest and most famous bridges in Paris, the Pont Neuf. A square frequented by Picasso; and a Catalan restaurant below my house still celebrated those days of glory. In fact, the tiny two-bedroom apartment with kitchenette was a hovel: it even lacked a toilet, or rather it was on the landing, as was still common at the time in old Paris. Luckily, I found myself a lover who lived in an apartment with a bathroom. That luxury neighborhood had other poor residents: a promiscuity between opulence and penury that would be unthinkable today—I would imagine that the same apartment, adequately remodeled, is now being rented for thousands of euros. At the time



Paris was so touching precisely because social classes were still physically mixed. There was all the talk of class struggle, while the classes actually intersected on the staircases and landings, brushing shoulders. “*misery and nobility*”—a coexistence of opposites that, like in my aristocratic and plebeian hometown of Naples, I had found in Paris too.

We students who rebelled at the time were often quite amphibious, part privileged and part paupers. Being Sorbonne students, being able to eat for a pittance at university canteens, was a privilege that gave you the halo of the bohemian. Bohemian poverty was a *twilight zone* verging on the unstable border with the glitter of the creative professions, envied by the sullen greyness of the stably poor. Like acrobats, many of us, wallowing in a plush penury, walked on this high-wire, seldom seized by fits of dizziness.

During that May, living in la Cité was sometimes a problem. At night, after a gathering or a meal in a Latin Quarter restaurant, I didn't know how to get back home: the police had surrounded *le Quartier* in a vice-like grip and you could only enter or leave through the metro, but the last train was at 12:45 AM. So, I had to walk westwards along the Rive Gauche for a couple of miles all the way to the end of the police cordon and then walk back along the Rive Droite to access my island from the opposite bank. Those May nights were wonderful, however. On one side the Latin Quarter with the paving totally torn apart, in darkness because of the broken street lights, surrounded by the smell of dust and tear gas, the shouting and blaring sirens; and on the other, a couple of hundred yards away, Paris as it had always been, majestic, peaceful, the lights reflected in the waters of the Seine. On one side the feverishness of our youth, on the other the lukewarm placidity of a capital that had seen plenty before. Tired and joyful, I would savor the spectacular glittering contrast between the screaming Event and the indifferent perpetuation of things.

3. L'EXCEPTION PARISIENNE

*Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des
rocs².*

-Ch. Baudelaire

At the time Paris enjoyed, and not only among us Italians, a prestige of which only the scraps are left today. At the time, French culture hadn't yet been overwhelmed by Anglo-American hegemony. Paris was respected as an international capital not only in the realms of fashion, cuisine and perfumes, but also as a great cultural power. In Italy, if someone from the bourgeoisie spoke a foreign language, it was usually French. My mother would radiantly tell her friends in Naples: “My son is studying in the capital of the world!”

Though it is true that for the alternative migrating youth culture of the time—beatniks, hippies, and so on—the centers of attraction were above all London and Amsterdam, Paris still remained a sanctuary for old and young of everything that represented a *high alternative culture*. France could still sell its mass culture effectively, and this also made its refined élites stronger—because, contrary to what many intellectuals naively think, in no country are the cultural industry for the masses and the peaks of excellence and quality ever independent but instead walk hand in hand. In those years France exported to the world the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Asterix comics, the *Critical Essays* of Roland Barthes and the songs of Serge Gainsbourg and Gilbert Bécaud, the cinema of Godard and the legs of the ballerina Zizi Jeanmaire, the journal *Tel Quel* and the pop songs of Françoise Hardy, Lacanian psychoanalysis and the pop movies of comedian Louis de Funès... Today that France exports a very limited amount of mass culture, the high Parisian culture, alas, is not what it used to be.

At the time, the French produced ideas that impressed many of us. This primacy of Paris in the humanities—sociology, psychoanalysis, essays, anthropology, literary criticism and so on—continued throughout the seventies. At the time, the gurus of the protest movement culture were

² “Paris changes! But naught in my melancholy/has stirred! New palaces, scaffolding, blocks of stone,/Old quarters, all become for me an allegory,/And my dear memories are heavier than rocks.



primarily Europeans, like Sartre, Russell, Foucault, Fortini, Adorno, Marcuse, Enzensberger, Habermas. Today's stars of the protest movement are mainly Americans, like Noam Chomsky, Jeremy Rifkin, Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, Judith Butler, Michael Moore. The left today still curses America, but more and more so using the words and concepts supplied by Americans.

Nevertheless, France remains particularly dear to many of us because, historically, it has always been able to create remarkable exceptions instead of rules. Significantly, we would often refer to an *exception française*, whereas rules were imposed and are still set by Anglo-American countries. And it is the stability of rules that confers the most solid forms of power, whether political or cultural. But many of us are still fonder of the French exceptionality.

This is why even today many prefer “the French-style Left”: deep down, they want Socialism to remain the exception and not the rule. The short-lived Paris Commune of 1871—it too only danced the length of one spring—appears as a very beautiful experience, whilst we find the 70 plus years of Soviet Socialism quite terrifying. When the Revolution turns into a regime, the Dionysiac revolutionaries—mostly intellectual—take the mournful path walked by Mayakovski. “Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind,” the poet wrote before committing suicide. In other words, many would like Socialism to remain a game and a feast. Let it remain “French Style.” But a good game can't last too long. And this is what soon made me stray away from the spirit of '68: feasts are great, but life, *hélas*, is not the eternalization of a feast. Feasts do end. And as well as the feast, everything else ends too: the Revolution, love, youth, hope. Everything.

4. NAÏF

When the Parisian May of '68 broke out, I was by no means caught by surprise. That was the year when so many youngsters in so many countries had been struck on the way to Damascus like Saint Paul and had converted to the cause of the Revolution. Instead, I'd been a left-wing activist for years—in southern Italy at the time both political militancy and complete sexual intercourse began precociously. I considered myself a Trotskyist and in Italy I'd been a member of an Argentinian-directed Trotskyist IVth International, known as “Posadist” (from the name of their leader Posadas), which—together with several other delirious prophecies—had as its “minimal” short-term program a political

and revolutionary general strike of the working class masses. In May '68 in France the political program of my tiny splinter group was put into practice to the letter; the program of a group that was considered a clique of fanatics even by the most left-wing extremists. For me the famous '68's slogan “take your dreams for reality” was a fake: those months had been incredible because *the dream became a reality*. If today so many seventy and eighty-year-old friends still remember that time as the most exciting event in their life, it is because they had an almost *unheimlich*, uncanny and disorienting experience: perhaps deliriums can be made a reality!

Even before '68, I already lived like a *soixante-huitard*, a “sixty-eighter.” For example, if I met a stranger my age in the street who seemed to be in trouble, I'd immediately invite him to crash out at my place, sometimes even letting him sleep in my bed. It was one of these guests—whom I'd welcomed in the decaying hotel I was staying in before moving to Place Dauphine—who blighted me with a disease I considered shameful, scabies, *la gale* in French, and which I jokingly called *galica*, Gallic disease. When in the summer of '68 I returned to Italy, I boldly decided—to implement the new course—not to lock the door of my mini apartment in Naples (in Naples!). The result: several sellable objects disappeared from it, including my Olivetti typewriter. I then decided to postpone my *lifestyle* Revolution to riper times.

How naïve I was! Was I naïve because I was young or because I was a Marxist? Perhaps it was a combination of the two. (I admit it, when I meet ageing Marxists, I perceive them as people who refuse to accept their growing old: for me Socialism is a sacrosanct binge of youthfulness, and Communists are eternal students, even if they have a chair at Oxford.)

I was already devouring books by Freud, yet when I moved on to our everyday life I would think in terms of ideal poetry, I didn't understand the prose of the drives. In '68 a friend of mine had an affair with a German student who was a thousand miles away from any political interest; he quickly converted her to the revolutionary fervor. The result was that after a week his *belle* had already displayed a giant poster of Che Guevara in her apartment. But my friend was unimpressed; he found there was something repulsive about her conversion. Today I would immediately understand the reason for his disappointment: the girl not only wished to please her lover, but also to display a sex symbol. It's clear



to me today that if Che Guevara continues to cover the walls of teenage girls—unlike the faces of other heroes of the time, like Ho Chi Minh, Castro, Mao, Russell, Sartre—it's because of his good looks. At the time I talked a great deal about unconscious drives, but the primacy of conscious sexuality still escaped me.

5. A NIGHT IN THE COOLER

As a natural consequence of my past in Italy, I needed no urging to peacefully take part in the earliest demonstrations of the Latin Quarter. When in early May I realized they were turning into prolonged urban guerrilla warfare, I stopped actively taking part and converted to the style of the witness and observer. On the night of May 7, heading home as the fires of the clashes died down, while crossing the Boulevard St. Michel I was grabbed by a CRS squad, the French riot police, and slammed inside a van full of other youngsters, some of whom were bleeding. We were all taken to a large police base where hundreds of victims of arrest had been gathered. When they packed us in a huge bare leaden room, I was authentically terrified. I imagined that, there and then in Paris, something like what would actually happen in Santiago, Chile, in September 1973 after Pinochet's coup was about to take place: that they would drag us out of that room one by one and shoot us. Instead, after being dragged out individually, we were only taken to a yard where various *flics* (cops) limited themselves to beating us with truncheons, punching and kicking us, together with a good dose of insults. Further rations of beatings were delivered to us along the corridors. Then they made us sit before calm and blasé plain-clothed officers who identified us and looked at the palms of our hands; if they were dirty, that meant we'd thrown *pavés*, the typical Parisian cobblestones.

Then they locked me up with around seventy other men in a cage where they'd gathered all non-French citizens. Among the inmates, many said that, like me, they'd been arrested arbitrarily. One was having a meal in a neighborhood restaurant; suddenly a gang of police officers had raided the place and arrested the customers. I understood something that I would explain decades later to younger friends who followed the July 2001 anti-G8 protests in Genoa: at one point the cops receive the order to make a pre-established number of arrests. The wretched badly-paid officers avoid running after the truly violent youths and prefer to take it out on unfortunate passers-by who don't resist arrest, as

long as they *look like* protesters. In many countries, a fierce cowardice distinguishes law enforcers, and the Genoa G8 of 2001 was a blatant example: the police arrested hundreds of youths who were resting or sleeping in a school, the Armando Diaz Institute, and took them to police barracks, where they suffered all kinds of physical abuse and humiliations.

I spent the night in the cell and we were all freed the following morning. This is when I discovered that I was claustrophobic. I'd never been in jail. It was horrible not to know when and if you were going to be released. How many hours or days would I spend crammed in that cage?

The following day I wrote to *Le Monde* to describe my misadventure and to protest. The paper didn't publish my letter, but several very similar to mine describing the situation. Mireille, my French *petite amie*, who was at least twenty years older than me, said to me: "Sooner or later every important foreigner who comes to live in Paris writes to *Le Monde*!"

The kids of the Neapolitan populace had the following motto: "To be a real man you need to have done three things: military service, gone with a whore and spent time in jail." I avoided military service, I'd never been with a whore, but I'd ended up in a cell. Aged almost twenty, I was one third a man.

6. "POOR COPS!"

In June 1968, Pier Paolo Pasolini published a poem that scandalized the left-wing intelligentsia of the time. In this poem, referring to the violent clashes between police and students in Italy, he declared that he sympathized with the police. In those cops wrapped up in ridiculous armors reminiscent of Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, he recognized the poor wretches from southern Italy who'd joined the police force for the benefit of a meager but secure salary. In the ranting students, who studied in the country's most prestigious faculties, he saw the future technocrats, the scions of an arrogant bourgeoisie, who spoke English and French but demagogically posed as Maoists. At the time Pasolini was sternly hushed by all the professors and writers who protected the Protest Movement with their wide wings over the media. In time, I realized how correct Pasolini's vision, without the shades of ideology, had been.



For several years I had the opportunity to observe conflicts between Italian and French students and the police and I eventually began to see them from the point of view of the cop. Forced to stand stock-still for hours with splendid student girls in miniskirts parading by and glaring at him contemptuously, along with male students, dressed in their mock poor attire with jeans and Eskimo coats and who can stroll in campuses they will leave with university degrees, insulting him as a servant of power. The policeman knows he's a servant, because he has no other choice, no other opportunity, and the haughty contempt from the members of the privileged classes becomes a finger in the wound of his own inferiority. Therefore, when the order to attack is finally given, all his *class hatred* comes out. Go down hard on the privileged.

At Valle Giulia yesterday there was a fragment of the class struggle; you my friends (although in the right) were the rich; and the policemen (although in the wrong) were the poor.

-Pasolini, "I Hate You, Dear Students (The Italian Communist Party to the Young!!!!)"

7. LIBERTARIAN LIBERALISM

Younger friends sometimes ask me "why was there a '68? Why only in some countries and not in others, why not in the UK, for example? And what was the relationship between the student movements and the labor movement? And so on." These questions assume that there can be just one answer. Chaos and Complexity Theories are correct in explaining historical emergences because they state that there is no explanation. "A butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can lead to a tornado in Texas." There is never *one* reason but *several reasons*, which converge, always unpredictably, and create the Event.

At any rate, in Complexity Theory we can identify, through the tangle of chaos, particular *attractors*. Everything varies, but something—a cause?—attracts chaotic fluctuations towards a constant.

For the commotions of '68, particularly in France, we may identify five attractors: **Libertarian Liberalism**, **Dionysism**, **Spectacularism**, **Fraternism** and **Dadaism**.

Former French president Sarkozy stated that we should finally bury the cultural heritage of '68, and

in particular its underlying *relativism*. This sounds like nonsense at first: our ideas of the time sounded by no means relativistic, on the contrary, they were as *absolutistic* as they could be—"History is always the story of class struggle," "the revolutionary proletariat on the one hand, the bourgeoisie and imperialism on the other," and so on. But perhaps the absoluteness was a cover behind which the specificity of our *ekstasis* shone: asserting a radical enthusiastic secularization. Indeed, for Sarkozy "relativism" was a term used to denigrate what others call *secularization*, i.e. the most specific trait of modernity.

This doesn't mean we were nihilists. Nihilism means thinking that the highest values are of no worth. Of course, our North Star was The Revolution: an idea at once confused and precise, messianic hope and a studied lifestyle in the present life. Authentic nihilism excludes Revolution; on the contrary, it tends to result in an acceptance of reality as it is, of the prevalent present. Today, the authentic nihilist starts a family, works in information technology, invites his old uncles to dinner, goes to church on Sunday; in short, he pretends to be happy. The nihilist doesn't hope, whereas Hope was our theological virtue, the only important one of the three: the impatient hope in a society at once just and true; true because just and just because true.

If we strip '68 of all its Marxist superstructures, we find a mental structure that has since gone a long way: the rejection of all prefixed hierarchies, of authoritarianism in all its forms. In other words, the libertarian and liberal Good News.

Were we liberal Marxists? A famous Italian writer, Anna Maria Ortese, said that the Marxism of the Neapolitan intellectuals after the First World War was an *emergency liberalism*. The Marxism of the years around '68 was an impatient liberalism. We were made impatient by the slow progress of the modernization we were experiencing.

Significantly, it was in May '68 that a huge libertarian movement reappeared, something we had hardly heard any mention of for decades. The boulevards filled with forests of red and black flags, half communist and half anarchist. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the symbol of '68 in France, was a self-confessed anarchist. Now, the main enemy of anarchism is not capitalism, but the State in all its forms, and any form of petrified hierarchy. After all, the most prestigious Marxist of the time, Louis Althusser, had distinguished himself for his analysis



of “Ideological State Apparatuses.” The French State, strong and centralized, was certainly regarded with greater antipathy than capitalism (which, besides, at the time was often a State capitalism). The true enemy was the strong powerful State, whether Gaullist or Jacobin, the police State or the Soviet State. And repulsion for the State is not only physiognomic of anarchism, but of liberalism too. Libertarianism is a radical form of liberalism. Significantly, in the United States anarchism is perceived as a form of far right extremism and not far left like in Europe. The *hybris* of ‘68—in comparison to the socialist and communist tradition of our fathers and grandfathers—was the outbreak of this *lust for freedom*. In other words, it was our roundabout way of converting to liberalism without showing it.

8. PEOPLE OF FREEDOM

“It is forbidden to forbid”—such a famous slogan, and such a liberal one! On the one hand we were in the wake of a declining Marxist tradition that in countries like France and Italy came down to us straight from our seniors and the professors we adored; on the other, we already saw the dawn of the liberal-populist avalanche that would tear solidarity apart in the name of the absolutism of our individual desires. Somewhat like those bright northern summers when the sun sets at midnight and rises again a few seconds later as the light of dawn. We mixed up the dawn and the dusk.

In the decades to come we shifted from the hidden primacy of left-wing anarchism to the hidden primacy of right-wing anarchism. Consider the student protests of the time, the core of which consisted in the right of students, even ignorant ones, to criticize and scoff at their professors. Fifty years later, in a higher education system inspired more and more to the Anglo-American liberal model, is it not the students who lay down the law? Today it’s the grades students give the academics that decide whether the latter will be hired or confirmed by a university. The students are the end-users who pay, so they should establish what they ought to be taught and how; the customer is always right. For at least the last twenty years in Italy students have had no esteem for their professors, people who can’t use a computer as well as them, and who don’t wish to become fashion models or journalists like them; a result that goes well beyond the expectations even of the most radical ‘68 ideology. As for politicians, they’ve lost any divine aura of priests of Power, just as we hoped at the

time: today the media mocks them, we talk about their affairs with escorts or porn stars, their approval ratings have hit rock bottom.

Today authoritative power comes not from the People—who remain a transcendent category—but from “the most.” Not from the majority—a government hardly ever expresses an absolute majority of citizens, but always only a relative one. The *Pleriquae*, the most, represent the number that confers authority. In the same way, you’re considered a great writer if “most” buy your books, you’re a popular politician if “most” find you likeable, you’re a celebrity if “most” have heard about you, “you exist” if “most” see you appear on TV, and so on. Today democracy has turned into a *plerique-cracy*.

9. OPEN LOVE

At the time, *open relationships* were theorized and practiced—another very *liberal* idea. Karl Popper, until then still virtually unknown to us, had already written about the open society as the political equivalent of the open couple. Of course, even in ‘68, the dictates of passion irrupted in relationships, even resulting in jealousy, but they were frowned upon: a free sexuality had to be a non-tragic sexuality. Sex had to be joyful and playful, never too serious, because we were making history and nothing else. The couple, in other words, was being reinterpreted in terms of *laissez-faire*, in contrast to the protectionism of our parents.

A friend and peer said to me: “We took part in the ‘68 movement because it was the best way to pick up girls.” This was partially true. Before, during and after ‘68 the most common way to *draguer* (pick up) girls your age was going to a dance. I too had learnt the most fashionable dances of the time like the twist or the sirtaki, yet the hunting ritual of the dance party, *la boom* in French or *balletto* in Italian, disgusted me. In the nightclubs you could also dance to slows, pressed against your dancing partner. You invited an unknown girl to dance, you would hold her tight and inevitably an erection would set in, which the damsel could easily perceive on her groin or belly. If in one night she happened to dance with ten boys, she would collect ten erections.

For us “different” kids of the alternative left, seduction, whether you exercised it or were its object, did not merely consist of fluctuating bodily forms, but also of words: encounters with our female “comrades” at meetings and gatherings allowed us



not only to match up with women more compatible with our “abstract furies” (an expression used by the writer Elio Vittorini), and theoretically more open to sexual consummation with few or no objections, but also to exercise the verbal phallicity we *highbrow* boys cherished so much.

It is often said that only one feature of ‘68 has enjoyed long-lasting success in the West: sexual liberation (and I would add, a non-repressive indulgent laissez-faire attitude towards children). This is true; since then relations between the sexes have changed, equality between men and women has taken a great many steps forward, with many states recognizing homosexual unions, abortion becoming legal, and so on. In the end, those were the years that saw the decline of a centuries-old image of femininity that dated back more or less to medieval courtly love. We clearly perceived the sharp contrast with those even just ten years older than us who still lived in a sexual and ethical world from a previous age. In my southern Italy it was crucial for any well-to-do girl to safeguard her virginity until the day of her indissoluble marriage. Before reaching this target, couples would resort to the so-called *cosciata*, a thigh job: the girl would tighten her naked thighs and her partner place his penis between them, without penetrating her but only thrusting it against the vulva and the clitoris and eventually ejaculating on the latter. Then, over a period of a few years, virginity for girls turned from precious virtue into a burden to shake off as soon as possible. This mutation of mores—the extension to women of sassy shameless sexual attitudes, previously the prerogative of males—had begun before the emergence of the ‘68 protest movement. Particularly in Scandinavian countries, imbued with Lutheran austerity, the change had begun years earlier. I would say that the famous Sexual Revolution was not a product of ‘68, but rather the opposite: the movements of the time gave a revolutionary political coloring to a process of secularization and democratization, even in the sexual domain, which is instead something quite *liberal*.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci wrote that the Socialists of the 1910s had to bend over backwards to convince so many good people, including many women, to take part in meetings and gatherings of high political value; but then *liberamoristi*, the advocates of free sex, came along and “everything went to the dogs,” we would say today. Socialists preached a serious Revolution, that lot wanted a farcical one. Today, however, it’s quite

clear that the advocates of free love have triumphed in most parts of the world, whilst Socialists of all kinds have failed practically everywhere. *Freedom* in love has been more successful than economic *equality*. Indeed, in recent decades inequalities, especially economic ones, have vastly increased. The ideas of W. Reich, Cicciolina and Jenna Jameson have proved to be stronger than those of Gramsci and Mao.

10. DIONYSISM: “THUS ACTED ZARATHUSTRA”

The authentic spiritual *patron* of ‘68 wasn’t Marcuse or Che Guevara or general Giáp, but Friedrich Nietzsche, even though very few of us had read him. But one fundamental idea came from the German thinker and was popular especially in French: that we should oppose the Apollonian forms of institutionalized life with a carefree Dionysian vitality. We wanted pure *dépense*, pure squandering (Georges Bataille). And significantly, in most of the philosophies of ‘68—Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Vattimo, Negri, Badiou, etc.—we find in Nietzsche a fundamental benchmark.

The artistic vanguards that seemed to have become popular at the time were enlightened by the excessive, tragic and swarming figure of Antonin Artaud. Every culture of every era is contradictory; our cultural idols were two authors who were ultimately opposites: Artaud and Bertold Brecht. On the one hand Artaud’s highly irrational *theatre of cruelty*, on the other Brecht’s rational *epic theatre*. How to combine the inhuman Dionysism of Artaud and the reflexive human compassion of Brecht? Not only the theatre, but also the cinema, the literature and the art of the time attempted to amalgamate two poles that once defined us and lacerated us (after all is not every era and culture intimately defined by what lacerates it?).

As Artaudian Dionysians, could we have any moral limits? At the time intellectuals would take advantage of the differences between Latin and Greek to oppose *morals* and *ethics*. Or rather, *morals* / *ethics*, as it was written at the time (the slash representing what would then be expressed as *versus*). The two terms mean the same and come from two words meaning “custom”; but, whereas the word of Latin origins, *morals*, was something contemptible to condemn, the word of Greek origins, *ethics*, was something to extol. “Morals” was the rejected ethics, i.e. the ethics of everyone else who wasn’t us—“moralism”, sexual in



particular, and the social hypocrisies. We saw ourselves as amorally ethical.

Dionysism is the sacral product of an extreme secularization: atheism, when taken to extremes, finds a divinity in Dionysus. The difference, therefore, between liberal-capitalist secularization and ours lay in this alone: the former had no room for the sacred, only for private interest and money; whilst instead we thought about life in sacral terms. Even if the sacred we looked at was that of the Tarahumara of Mexico or the Nambikwara of Brazil, not that of the pope or the protestant pastors. Our rejection of every institutional religion, “Western, male and white,” indicated a sacral dimension of which we felt the grip without seeing its shape. *The Revolution* was our apocalyptic divinity.

11. DIONYSISM: MAY NIGHTS

In May ‘68 I had an affair with a Brazilian actress, Nadia, at the time a star of the vanguard theatre in São Paulo. She’d smiled at me invitingly at a meeting of the Foreign Students Committee of which I was a member and on her left cheek she had a large ungainly plaster. She told me that a few weeks back she had seen from the window of her Latin Quarter hotel police truncheoning Jean-Luc Godard, whom she personally knew, while he was filming the riots. She began shouting “Godard, Godard!” and a *flic* threw an explosive stick against her face, making her faint... Of Italian stock, *Guevarista* and *Castrista*, as expected of a Latin American of her generation, aged 26, Nadia had the habits and manners of a prima donna: she wore her mauve varnished nails extremely long, spent a fortune on beauty products and boasted of a photo shoot featuring her nude body published in a Brazilian magazine. In short, she had no problems combining her guerrilla creed and the paraphernalia of the movie star she would soon turn into. She became the mandatory female star—and practically always mandatorily in the nude—of the Brazilian cinema of commitment, and later a *telenovelas* star.

Our affair continued until June: then I went to Italy for the summer holidays, Nadia went back to Brazil and it all came to an end. At the time she talked to me extensively and with great emotion about her culture and her country, which I visited many years later, giving me the impression of travelling back in time to May ‘68.

Nadia and I had a world of fun: day after day militant life, sex, cinema, theatre and the best

restaurants. She introduced me to important theatre critics and historians. She also introduced me to Glauber Rocha, at the time the top Brazilian filmmaker—films he directed such as *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* and *Terra em transe* had captivated Parisian audiences. Rocha was already on the downhill path of polymorphous drugs consumption, from LSD to coke, which had led him to making films that were more and more idiosyncratic and to dying prematurely aged 43. Nadia and I absolutely agreed on one thing: that Rocha and Godard were the “most anti-imperialist” film directors—and therefore the best. Together we would go to the meetings of our committee and take part in the forums at the occupied Odéon theatre, which were then permanent, 24/7, and took place with the silent consent of the theatre’s director Jean-Louis Barrault—it was the French version, revolutionary and short-lived, of Speaker’s Corner in London’s Hyde Park. Nadia had a lot more money than I and would treat me to meals that until then, alternating between canteens and self-service restaurants, I’d never indulged in, and she taught me to eat escargots. The Latin Quarter, even during the toughest days, when the general strike had paralyzed the country and providing supplies for the city was extremely difficult, always kept its libertine, sparkling, pleasure-loving tone. The cinemas and theatres were open as always and the restaurants were full. On one side the dilapidated or burnt cars, on the other long queues outside the independent cinemas for the latest independent movies. The exceptionality of the event attracted extra masses of tourists to Paris; you didn’t feel isolated in this besieged citadel, but on the contrary it gave us pleasure to see people from all over the world coming over to admire us. Most foreign newspapers and magazines were putting us on their front pages and covers. The May ‘68 events had nothing brutal or fanatical about them, the violence had the rhythm of a cheery dance. A moveable feast, not of hatred, but of provocation.

In ‘68 we petit bourgeois could finally allow ourselves a little magnificence. After all, Revolution has always been a luxury for the young—or, for the rich, the luxury of poverty. In this respect, Revolution is akin to sport: in both fields the players are young.

Between us, in those years, the barrier between poverty and wealth seemed to have been abolished: being short on money didn’t prevent you from prodigally taking part in History. Even if you were poor, you could allow yourself all sorts of things—



even if it meant having to shoplift. Althusser would steal books during his manic phases, even though with his salary as professor at the *École Normale Supérieure* he didn't need to. At the time the rule was: never steal from private individuals, but it's legitimate, sacrosanct, to steal from enterprises, especially supermarkets and bookshops. I stayed in Paris as a student until 1973, and throughout all those years I did indeed have very little money: but I do not remember it as a period of misery and destitution. How did I manage to live the life of the *branché*, "connected," intellectual in such an expensive city? I don't know the answer myself. I responded to my financial poverty with a prosperous *train de vie*. As Jacques Brel sang, *on vivait de l'air du temps* (We lived on the air of the time). You could live a life of poverty that wasn't barren, void, scanty, slow, exhausting, but instead colorful, chaotic, adventurous, sprawling. A temporary youthful swinging and paraded poverty—not a destiny, not a stigma, but the dark bottom of a brilliant lifestyle.

Nadia and I indulged in amorous walks along the Seine. At the time young lounging squatters occupied the *quais*, but they were, and still are the realm of couples. We were both excited and happy, the banality of the romantic walk in that postcard setting was atoned for by the backdrop of the historical event we thought we were witnessing—we would traipse along, she in a miniskirt, me in jeans and with an erection, like any silly young couple, but we felt like a couple who strolled on the Neva in St. Petersburg must have felt in November 1917, or like in the future yet another couple could have felt walking along the Spree in Berlin on November 9, 1989... Yet ours was not love, but merely bold joyful sexuality.

My impression is that in May '68 there was a lot of sex—wasn't it the spring, after all?—but not much time or room for true love. Sure, a halo of transcendence is necessary to any sexual relation for there to be any true emotion. This halo that transfigures the sexual spasm is usually referred to as love—but in those moments the halo came from our being participants, so we thought, of history. Too much in love with what we were living through to fall in love with any man or woman.

12. DIONISYSM: "A SUITABLE CASE FOR TREATMENT"

If asked which films best represented that season, I would definitely include Karel Reisz's *Morgan*, A

Suitable Case for Treatment, a 1966 film from the UK. The leading character, Morgan, is a communist artist with a working class background and a passion for wild animals. He incarnates the quintessence not only of what we wanted to be but also of what, alas, many of us actually ended up being. Morgan refuses to accept the fact that his former middle-class wife (played by Vanessa Redgrave, who would later become a British Trotskyist leader) means to marry a prosperous reassuring stiff-upper-lipped art gallery owner. Morgan gets up to all sorts of tricks, including abducting his ex-wife and planting a bomb under her future mother-in-law's bed. Morgan, whose favorite places are Marx's tomb in Highgate and London Zoo, reads British life in the key of an African savanna and sees himself as Tarzan. On the day of his former wife's wedding, he dresses as a gorilla and, like King Kong, bursts into the hotel where the wedding party is taking place, causing havoc. One of the most famous scenes from the film shows Morgan, still in his gorilla costume, with the head and fur on fire, speeding on a motorbike to dive into the Thames. He eventually ends up in a psychiatric clinic.

This film features all the themes that would polarize our turbulent generation after '68: the environmentalist passion for untamed wildlife ("Beneath the pavement, the beach," another famous May '68 slogan); extolling madness as an idiosyncratic form of political dissent (the anti-psychiatry movement of Laing and Cooper, Deleuze and Guattari's Schizoanalysis, the freeing of psychiatric patients in Italy with Franco Basaglia); the osmosis between surrealist performance and desperately communist militancy; the *pietas* for King Kong, a gigantic losing *Id*, a fragile unique specimen captured and massacred by the Super-Ego of technology; free innocent sex, as between animals; a violent happening to affirm our tameless difference. Morgan's failure, tottering between imprisonment and the madhouse, appeared to us as an oxymoronic victory: his sterile rebellion against the destiny of someone who "chose" to be born of poor parents did not afflict us, but added to our mops of fluttering hair a halo of nobility, that of fighting for lost causes. Did not Sartre—he who for many of us was still the inspiring mind—claim that we should "act without hope?" It was by losing, thrown into prison or into a psychiatric asylum, and being mocked that in its own oblique way the Revolution would triumph. Morgan's zoomorphic delirium on the one hand celebrated our misfit magnificence and on the other allowed us to fondly make fun of ourselves.



13. “PASSION FOR THE REAL”

Much has been said about the utopian drive of ‘68, but in actual fact our generation was decisively anti-utopian, if by utopia we mean a millenary wait for something yet to come. We kids of ‘68 were instead quite consumed by what Alain Badiou calls “passion for the real”—a characteristic, he thinks, of the entire “short century.” For us it wasn’t enough to make plans, dream or hope, but ideas had to be immediately transferred to the real! We were in a hurry to experience with maximum intensity—even with the help of amphetamines, cannabis or LSD—not the slowness of a project but the dizzyingly precipitous present. As David Rousset said, “normal men don’t know that everything is possible”—whereas we abnormal women and men said that even the impossible can happen.

Then, in the following decades, we had to learn to be passive: understand that everyday life has its reasons that political and philosophical Reason knows not. Therefore, many years later, we could say: “We wanted to change the world, but the world changed us.”

Today things have changed, even in the far left, largely sheltered in the pristine and quaint parks of the American campuses or within the walls of snotty European schools: no one in the left thinks that the task to accomplish today is transposing their idea onto the Real, but simply that of shedding light on alternative possibilities, thinkable but impracticable. Not surprisingly, in the wake of Derrida, deconstruction, a purely academic exercise, became fashionable: no longer the deconstruction of social structures, but only of texts. What remains of the left is once again millenarianistic.

14. THE VIOLENCE OF THE MAJORITIES

Some also condemned the totalitarian tendencies of ‘68 hidden behind the feast of direct democracy. We anticipated the Rousseauian project of direct democracy—going beyond representative politics. But a totalitarian drive is intrinsic to direct democracy, because it aims at *unanimity*. Our ideal was a single undivided will coming out of our meetings, but then the minorities, slipping into the position of anti-revolutionary fringes, had to be eliminated. At the time the idea that the specificity of democracy is precisely that it guarantees space and protection to minorities, that “the people” are always *divided*, hadn’t become clear yet.

In those days a “Lambertian” (from the name of their founder Pierre Lambert) Trotskyist organization was very active and their university section was called FER, “Iron,” and indeed they were a particularly cast-iron group. I didn’t know then that a particular member of this group, with the *nom de guerre* of Michel, was a student called Lionel Jospin. During the meetings at the occupied Sorbonne every time a representative of the Iron group tried to speak, they would be deluged with yelling, hissing and a general racket from the Trotskyists of other organizations. Instead, representatives of the PCF or other moderates were allowed to speak freely. The boycotting of Lambertians at meetings was systematic, to the point that a representative of the Students Committee we elected calmly said: “if the representatives of FER are rejected by such an overwhelming number of comrades, we must take that into account and exclude them from our meetings.” No one was shocked by such a proposal until a considerably more judicious student intervened and said: “not allowing minorities to speak is the denial of democracy.” We hadn’t thought about it! Our sovereign meetings—which in the course of time the young leaders of the radical groups learned to effectively manipulate—were gradually leading to the Terror. Unanimity preannounces totalitarianism.

I would often go to the meetings at the Amphitheatre of the Sorbonne with Mireille, who’d worked alongside artist Victor Vasarely for some time and was well-acquainted with the Parisian artistic and intellectual circles. She had just come out of an unsuccessful relationship with a Bulgarian semiologist already famous at the time, Tzvetan Todorov. Particularly attracted to men with a non-French passport, and younger than herself, she took advantage of the spring of ‘68 to fall in love with me, too much of a kid compared to her. She had seduced me with her Guermantes salon style of French, all disenchanted wit and tasty neologisms. From her I learnt to “speak Parisian,” in other words to construct even the most trivial conversation aiming at a linguistic jewel. She would wander around with me to enjoy that May of ‘68. I experienced those events from two points of view: my own, that of a twenty-year-old too tuned into the passions of the time, and that of a knowing *dame*. It was as if during the French Revolution I had lived with the sans-culottes in the company of Madame de La Fayette. She would trouble me by saying: “your comrades think they’re against the professors, but can you see that after much ranting they then do exactly what their *profs gauchistes* say? They simply repeat more chaotically the concepts and slogans of their teachers. This student protest ultimately achieves the



dream of the professors.” She herself taught Latin and French in a Paris high school.

At those chaotic Sorbonne meetings anyone who turned up could vote, so Mireille raised her hand too. We both tended to vote for the most radical motions, me to be coherent with my revolutionary urge, Mireille because she thought it would lead to more fun. After a long evening of debates and voting, as we left she exclaimed: “We’ve been so good, me and you! We always voted with the majority.” I hadn’t noticed. In the past I’d always found myself voting with the minorities, and now, thanks to May ‘68, I found myself nice and cozy between the blankets of the majority. This is what the buzz of May ‘68 really consisted of: for once, finally, the eternal minorities were experiencing the thrill of being a majority.

15. FANS

In 1992, travelling through Pisa, I found myself at the very heart of a demonstration, with youngsters clashing with the police, with charges and tear gas. A violent vanguard confronted the officers on the frontlines with the girls and the other accomplices at the rear, along with other urban guerrilla dynamics. I felt like I was back in the sixties. I soon realized, however, that the demonstration was related to a soccer match. It was a way to feel main players after having been merely spectators. But in their shift from passive audience to active demonstrators, those kids in Pisa weren’t all that different from the youngsters of ‘68: we too were bored with just being spectators of the TV news—we wanted news coverage for ourselves too. The desire to be the center of attention is what both politicized and non-politicized youngsters have in common.

In short, the great political demonstrations had their mainspring in a profound need that finds fulfillment in political content as much as in sporting rivalries. Back then the enemies were the fascists and Capital, today the supporters of another soccer team; in both cases the police are the enemy at hand to take it out on. The political contents were the more superficial motive, whilst the deeper reason was youth; the hormonal necessity to stir up trouble out of resentment for a world perceived as too orderly, hence the muscular need for risk and war.

Perhaps the “long-lasting” cultural trait that identifies the European generations of the 20th century is not politics but the struggle between David and Goliath: the fight against the Goliaths of power. The cultural model of clashing with the police, preferably on

spring days, maybe after drinking large quantities of beer, is far deeper than opposing school reforms or protesting against the G8 leaders. This is the deepest *identification*: the way, in other words, in which European civilization has interpreted what we suppose is common to all human beings, i.e. the searing strength of the martial drive in the years of youth. These forms of enthusiasm, both with regard to sports competitions and to the bellicose political domain—Olympia and Thermopylae—are the oldest European interpretations of youthful surplus energy.

In 1970 the Italian Southern city of Reggio Calabria was turned upside down by a *jacquerie*: a mob leader captained a prolonged urban guerrilla war gathering groups of “troublemakers” to protest against the government’s decision to make Catanzaro the Calabrian regional capital city instead of Reggio. At the time, our cosmopolitan noses smelt the foul odor of a revolt for fatuous provincial motives—it was a guerilla war that had nothing to do with the cause of the Proletariat! So, I spoke about it with a friend somewhat older than myself, trying to interpret the revolt in terms of refined politics, of economic conspiracies and intrigues by the ruling Christian Democratic Party at that time. Why else would hundreds of people take to the streets every single day to fight with the police? My friend, more politically mature than I, said: “But it’s for the fun of it! Those people are having the time of their life, plus they’re mostly unemployed and have all the time in the world.” For me that was an epistemological revelation: recognizing the non-structural and non-transcendental dimension of political events, but the playful, sporty and libidinal one. That *insight* went well beyond Marxist-ish structuralism and structuralist-ish Marxism: the will to fight as part of an adrenaline-charged need on which any political ideality hinges on.

16. LEADERS

The best known figure, “the face of May ‘68,” was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, celebrated outside France too. Born in 1945, he was the son of German Jews who had fled to France escaping nazism, and he studied in France, though being a German citizen. A self-proclaimed anarchist—albeit a red and black one, with plenty of Marxist overtones –, he was hated not only by the French Communist Party, but even the bolshevik part of the leftists mistrusted him. His sense of humor and oratory brilliance turned him into the symbol of the student movement. On May 22 the French government exploited his German citizenship to expel him from the country; an



expulsion that was only revoked in 1978. Later, Cohn-Bendit would become one of the most important leaders of the German and French “Green” movement.

So, we listened to Daniel Cohn-Bendit. The audience needs to see the incarnation of blazing, spectacular and multiform movements in a face and a body: in Germany this was Rudi Dutschke’s fate, in the USA to Angela Davis among others and in France to Cohn-Bendit. I thus understood the qualities that distinguish a leader, even if in this case he was a leader who led absolutely nothing, because ‘68 was an avalanche that fuelled itself, with no captains or strategists. The fundamental quality for a leader is *to be reassuring*. In the middle of the all the mayhem, he would speak calmly, but firmly and convincingly. In other words, *la force tranquille*—the slogan that led to Mitterrand’s victory at the 1981 presidential elections.

Were we not Dionysian? Yes, but we were also human beings. And human beings, even if they are anarchists or Nietzscheans, when they’re a mass, need leaders. And the leaders must always have something paternal about them, even when very young.

17. SPECTACULARISM: “OUTSIDE THE FACTORIES”

“The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.”

-Guy Debord

Emulation was a crucial factor for the ‘68 movement. Before the May events I had followed with envy the exploits of German and Italian students who, already in the winter of ‘68, had attracted media attention with their conspicuous demonstrations. Paris moved late, people immediately said, to ape the Italian and German students.

The first two weeks of the May events only involved students. Then a delegation of factory workers came to the occupied Sorbonne. In the auditorium, one of them said: “Before now, the workers thought that you students were a bunch of spoilt kids who spent their time dancing and drinking whisky. Now they’ve seen that you know how to fight too.” And he added: “Today all the newspapers and TV networks are talking about you. But remember that the backbone of the system is us, the workers. And when we take action...” And indeed they did take

action, and the student protests were rightly overshadowed. But what made the workers of certain large industries take action in France—like later in Italy, during the so-called “hot autumn” of 1969—was a sort of fraternal emulation that was already at the time taking on the form of media exposition: “will the front pages continue to be occupied by the student demonstrations, or by our own?”

I did have an experience of leafleting outside factories in Italy. After World War II, the Italian government decided to turn the indolent Naples region into an industrial hub and the wonderful Gulf of Pozzuoli was devastated by a long series of foul-smelling factory workshops. My Trotskyist comrades and I would go outside the polluting Italsider steel plant at the end of shifts to sell our little communist newspaper. On those grey winter afternoons, the workers looked anything but revolutionary: they were tired, slow moving and looked like they couldn’t wait to get back home to sit in front of the TV to wait for dinner. A comrade, an intellectual, like all of us who were trying to sell the Revolution to the revolutionary class, said to me: “It looks like the workers are sick and tired of being at the center of history!” In ‘68, however, it looked like the workers were finally ready to play the game that was expected of them: not only *being* (intrinsically) a revolutionary proletariat, but also *seeming it* (extrinsically).

At the political and economic level, the effects of ‘68 were irrelevant, or even null. The Gaullists and their allies became stronger and the left would only come to power thirteen years later with Mitterrand. The consistent salary increases achieved with the great strikes of May ‘68 were entirely neutralized within a year thanks to inflation and later by the devaluation of the French franc. In Italy, the dominance of the Christian Democrats—and the center-left alliance of which they were the pivot—lasted until 1992. Great Britain and Germany had left-wing governments in the seventies, but these led to the triumph respectively of Thatcherism and Helmut Kohl. Ultimately, the only successful ‘68 was the American one: it’s true that Nixon won the presidency in 1969, but opposition to the Vietnam war led to U.S. surrender in the area. Since the eighties, the West seemed to have turned its back on Marxist or anarchist proposals, however...

Is this globalized world that some loathe also a child of these “few”? Indeed, after ‘68 what the situationist Guy Debord called *the society of the*



spectacle dramatically affirmed itself. Of course, as a Marxist, he spoke about it to stigmatize it, but because of his stress on spectacularity Debord can in a way be considered the most representative theoretical figure of the time. In fact, May '68, in spite of everything, marked the affirmation, entirely new, never seen before and overpowering, of the society of the spectacle. Precisely because '68 is important not for its realistic economic or political effects, but for its "cultural" ones, i.e. for the formation of our current feeling-in-the-world.

This was the turn: "*what counts is that the world talks about us.*"

History has a hidden side (economic processes, diplomatic intrigues, and so on, that we can do little or nothing about) and a spectacular one we can all take part in if we wish. Many say that the most important event of the new century was 9/11. In actual fact, those attacks have by no means changed the economic, political and military order of the world. We consider it history-making only because it was of maximum spectacularity—also thanks to the footage we were all able to see. The important thing is for an event to be *photographed*. And the May '68 events were photographed over and over! Silent history changes the world, ordinary human beings stud it with fireworks thinking they're making history.

18. SPECTACULARISM: AT THE THEATRE OF REVOLUTION

Nonetheless, a difference between then and now does exist: in the years around '68 media visibility was a corollary of participation; today participation is a corollary of media visibility. We wanted *to count something in society*, while today it seems to me that the most important thing is *to appear to society*. Around that time *the famous theatre and cinema director Carmelo Bene* declared "I appeared to the Virgin Mary!"; today the important thing is to be able to say "I appeared to the People," in particular through television sets. Today we've moved on from social utopias—writes Peter Sloterdijk—to individual utopias: everyone wants riches, admiration and fame. And indeed everyone can be famous for fifteen minutes.

In 1989 in Beijing something very similar to May '68 in Paris occurred. Both the French '68 and the Chinese 89 were undone, the latter with the power of tanks, the former with the power of democratic elections, which gave de Gaulle and his coalition a

landslide victory in June 1968. One thing that particularly struck me about the images from Beijing was that many of the banners shown by the students protesting in Tienanmen Square were written in English: to inform western journalists and audiences was an essential part of an action that was only apparently domestic. I was also struck by a photo of a student apparently haranguing the crowd: around his head he was wearing a ribbon with ideograms announcing his unlimited hunger strike and around his neck a Japanese camera. That photo of a photographer, with a Canon hanging from his neck, seems to me an emblem of the *reflectiveness* every revolt needs today. Modern insurrections are not only action: they are also images, reflexes and reflections that generate actions and decisions.

May '68 too was an inextricable cluster of media, actions and spectacularity. The French May was undoubtedly photogenic. And, significantly, it had its epicenter in two theatres: the old amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, which staged the feverish comedy of direct democracy, and the permanent forum at the Odéon theatre. Through a sort of atavistic reflex, the revolutionary melodrama found its generative locations in theatre halls.

The presence of audiences—larger and larger as the protests spread—was crucial to springing the insurgent violence. At first those ready for anything were few, but those who went to watch to them, hoping to witness an Event, were in their thousands. These spectators, bored of waiting for the show to begin, at one point decided to act themselves, turning into the fiercest of insurrectionists. So many dandies who had fun watching the news-making incidents live would the next day, or the same day, start thrashing about bare-chested behind a barricade dragging piles of bricks and chains. In a Revolution, like at a premiere of the Scala in Milan, the audience constantly risks becoming the main spectacle. But the vanity of *glamour* is the stamp of every form of democratic participation. This is why Plato, who equally hated the theatre and democracy, called the latter a *theaterocracy*.

Ultimately, the French Revolution (the real one of 1789) has such a remarkable historical prestige precisely because it was the first reflectively spectacular Revolution. At the time Paris offered itself as a huge stage for a long and complex historical tragedy divided into various acts and full of *coups de théâtre*. The French Revolution, a splendid historical romance, launched the spectacular phase of Western history.



The celebrated *tricoteuses*, who during the Terror would knit away and make comments between executions, are often quoted as an emblem of folk cynicism. At the time, with no TV, it was in the public squares of Paris that the great bazaar of history offered itself in all its epical clarity.

But what makes the *tricoteuses* part of the revolutionary iconography is the fact that, though apparently only spectators, they became participants. The audience becomes the protagonist: the oldest dream of any democracy. We have a Revolution when this short circuit between spectator and actor takes place. The real feverish, euphoric and memorable phases of democracy are those in which those watching the spectacle offer a spectacle themselves, generating action.

So, May '68 had a superior gleam to that of other rebellions of the time, because it gave the sensation that the human beings involved lived more intensely, like in a novel or film. This concentration in time and space produced the optical effect of a social process that was finally *visible*. May '68 condensed stories that were in theory long and complex within the Aristotelian unity of place, time and action; in just over a month. The Revolution is a dream—but is not this dream the project of democracy itself?—because through it we can live in the glorious glimmer of history.

Vice versa, a failed representation of a war or insurrection can be fatal to its historical significance. For example, Afghanistan's war against the USSR, in many ways more historically relevant than the Vietnam war, never had any mythological significance for us, we didn't experience it, simply because it wasn't filmed or sung by the media. Instead, Vietnam is one of *our* wars; thanks to all the American films, we were involved in it.

19. FACES

The difference between us and the previous *engagée* generation was also physiognomic. Before '68, the authentic communist had *grit*. In Italy in '68 it was Communist Party leader Enrico Berlinguer, who died in 1984, in particular who displayed this very grit. Brecht said that hatred of injustice makes the brow grow stern. The communist's jaw gave his face a severe incensed look, like a bitter grimace of disgust (towards, of course, the infamy of the capitalistic world) mitigated by an iron icy will to work hard and seriously, with a no nonsense

attitude. Bony unsmiling faces; constructive and nervously poised for action.

Our faces, instead, perhaps because of our long hair and beards, expressed very different ways of being-in-the-world: faces at once playful and wild, somewhere between the irresponsible clochard who lives beyond any respectability and the rock star who exhibits a studied eccentricity. No longer the mournful routine of deaf action, but the spectacularity of a rowdy provocation. In the words of the historian Ferdinand Braudel, we'd shifted from a *longue durée* revolutionary style to an *événementiel* one. From long duration to burning everything at once in an Event.

20. FRATERNISM: KINDNESS

Fraternism is not collectivism—the latter term was not used, because it evoked the system of the USSR, which quashed any dissent. Fraternism socialized our Dionysian *impetus*: it was the collective side of an urgency, above all a subjective one, of breaking all the limits of what I would call the home economics of society. For many, in fact, '68 meant the explosion of an individualistic *hybris*, despite the *sound and fury* of the socialist slogans.

Significantly one of the films that best represents the era is Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*. It has nothing socialist about it: it's the story of two drug couriers who cruise through part of the States on their choppers. Over-men beyond Good and Evil who hang out with libertine whores, take LSD trips, and so on. An epic *road movie* in the wake of Kerouac and Vittorio Gassman (in Dino Risi's 1962 movie *Il Sorpasso—The Easy Life*, from which the title "Easy Rider" derives), it expressed our purely nomadic passion: permanent mutation, never resting in the certainty of moral norms or consolidated institutions. It's no coincidence that *trip* became the common term to indicate a hallucinogenic experience. But was all this not the poetic, hence radical, form of a *Stimmung* that later became the very essence of neo-liberal modernity? Flexibility, *deregulation*, speed, mutation, globalization: all words that exalt the Heraclitean passion for modernity, its intolerance against any long-lasting senile lying comfortably on the already-achieved. In *Easy Rider* too what ultimately counts is the fraternity between the two main characters.

One evening, hounded by police charges in the alleys of the *Quartier*, we sheltered in the occupied Sorbonne, where some doctors and medical students



took care of us. They feared that our clothes may have been drenched in the toxic gases from the bombs the police used at the time and made us take most of them off. Those doctors were all delightful; they'd come to us from time to time to ask how we were: "*vous sentez-vous bien camarades? Tout va bien, camarades?...*"

From the rooftops we could follow the scenes of guerilla warfare developing in the quarter. Some of the youngsters involved were obviously not students but authentic urban warfare specialists—and they were referred to as the Katangese, because the rumor was that they'd trained in Congo fighting with the secessionists of Katanga. They were like the Black Blocs of the demonstrations of more recent years. Remarkably agile, they could keep in check a police force well trained against urban uprisings. These athletes of urban warfare had no specific ideology and like medieval soldiers of fortune they rushed to wherever events were heating up. At the time Paris was the place to be. I don't believe there was an organization behind their activism.

From the rooftops we lived through the action while also being able to indulge in the pleasures of contemplation. And we all felt like brothers, pampered by those delightful doctor comrades. I think that on that fresh May evening we all felt the elation of a world distinctly split into two, into black and white: on the one hand evil that in vain raged against angelic warriors, on the other a fraternity that was finally being applied. It is often said that the Western left embraced the mottos of *liberté* and *égalité* neglecting *fraternité*. It's an absolutely false statement: the project of equality is only a façade (Marx was opposed to it) and what really pushes people towards the radical left is the dream of an unlimited fraternity. You want no one to be a stranger to you, you want everyone to be friends; above all, you dream of a universe made up of *kind people*. When you hate liberalism, it's because you identify it with a world of selfish individuals who snarl at you on crowded sweat-smelling buses where everyone is treading on each other's feet, to the ethics of sly storekeepers who only smile to grab more money from you. When we think of the lewdness of '68, it's hard to think that ultimately what we wanted was a world that would finally genuinely and with no hypocrisy believe in *good manners*. From the rooftops of the Sorbonne, that being all together made us feel like giants who dominated the future and were defeating evil.

I disavowed all the *ideas* that nourished my experiences of the time; I by no means disavow my *experience* of that period.

21. FARCES

For some, the fraternity of '68 was a fulguration from which they never recovered; they were immobilized by the lava, like the human plaster casts found in Pompeii. Their dream is that '68 will rise from its ashes like the phoenix and be resurrected in another more or less madcap and generous people's movement. In Italy we had a repeat of '68 in '77, with ensuing university occupations and stone-throwing rallies; but this was an exclusively Italian phenomenon, a symptom of the country's specific frailty, without the cosmopolitan charge of '68. Some '68 nostalgics felt the elation of those years during the great protests of the so-called no-globals against the G8 meetings in Seattle, Porto Alegre, Genoa, etc.; or in the demonstrations against the war in Iraq of 2003. Or in the Paris *banlieue* riots of 2005. We should however remind these *dreamers* of Marx's statement that history only repeats itself as farce.

22. DADAISM: GOTHIC PEE

I realized as early as 1966—when the first mass demonstrations in Italy without the patronage of the Communist Party began to take place—that the aesthetics of the anti-American protests was definitely changing, that they were becoming Americanized. It was a new wave of Dadaism. A naturalist iconography, a typical "socialist realism" of the Left, was being replaced with the signs and styles of Pop Art: the forms of our generation had become those of Allen Ginsberg, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Bob Dylan, of New York's Bread and Puppet Theatre or Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, as well as of Brits like Peter Brook, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and so on. '68 marked the turn towards a cultural Anglo-Americanization of youth, which continued triumphantly in the following decades, even if our main concern was still setting up the Revolutionary International, whilst the youngsters of today belong to *the youth international* and abide to the American Way: they all listen to Anglo-American music, wear jeans, use American-designed computers and love the same (obviously American) films, and so on.

To help understand the Dionysian spirit of '68, I would like to tell a personal anecdote, an unflattering one for me. In the winter of 1970 I



undertook a car journey from Paris to Lorraine with two philosopher friends and my explosive French girlfriend of the time, Françoise. We stopped in Reims and, feeling the cold, we went for lunch near the city's magnificent cathedral, which none of us had ever visited before. After a hot lunch accompanied by a fine Rhine wine, we visited the Notre-Dame. For some reason, on that day the cathedral was completely empty; no priests and no worshippers, but only the four of us, tipsy and Dadaistic. My young Marxist friends took advantage of the situation to steal a couple of chairs and a few votive candles, whilst Françoise, remembering that this was the place where for centuries the kings of France had been crowned, kneeled down before me and engaged in a long deep fellatio. The twilight was turning to dusk and the last rays of the wintery day penetrated through the splendid stained glass windows casting all around us the shadows of a suspended stunned time. Then we three males chose a bas-relief on the wall and urinated together, simultaneously, intersecting our streams on the gothic stones. I still remember the rivulets of the yellowish liquids dripping on the grey marble surface.

Why did we do it? In those same months I'd read in one breath Erwin Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* and I loved the gothic. My hard studies at the time included the artistic heritage of the Middle Ages. I did not, unlike the futurist Marinetti, wish to destroy Venice and rebuild it with steel machines and I'd always found the past more beautiful and moving than the present. A schism of the spirit hence led us on the one hand to venerate works of art and on the other to vandalize monuments symbolizing monarchic or religious power. It was a way of proving to ourselves, and by extension to the entire world, *that we had no limits*. That we dared to tarnish even the masterpieces we admired. We practiced the hyperbolic figure of an unbounded opening towards the possible, which cares not for what it absentmindedly steps on. Today I would like to go back with Françoise (who in the meantime has become a French Culture Ministry manager...) to Reims Cathedral and do something to make amends.

23. FUTURIST QUATTROCENTISM

One could say: you wanted to be eccentrics at all costs. But eccentricity is something different, it's a British feature. Parisian dandies like Baudelaire were eccentrics, but precisely because they were anglophiles. Eccentricity makes sense in a culture

filled with individualistic philosophy like the British: the shamelessly lonely individual who defies the tastes and beliefs of the masses. We, on the other hand, were not socialist dandies, even if the way we dressed had its importance. We were rather epigones of surrealism: a vanguard that put itself forward as an aristocracy that could be made universal. "Doing crazy stuff," to surprise, to shock, was not a way to distinguish ourselves from others but a way of being "new" that we suggested not to all, but to anyone. We thought that anyone could pee in holy water basins, as Françoise did.

In the years after '68 I belonged to a *bande*, as the French say—a group of friends, young men and women—who'd get up to anything. One member, an artist, would paint our faces in an Op Art style and then we'd go round Paris—and at the time no one really took any notice. Another friend, a Fourierist, had launched an anachronistic way of dressing, so from time to time we'd go round dressed in 15th century style clothing. I know that at the time in New York's Central Park they did worse (or better) stunts, but we didn't do all this just to make an exhibition of ourselves. We were instead imbued with a vanguardist culture. Even our lifestyle wasn't "realist," it didn't reproduce the world as it was, but aimed at being *pointed towards the real*: what was important was not reflecting the world, but changing it aesthetically. Hence an anti-naturalistic artificiality: our very own bodies had to be rewritten. Our ideal artifices had to forge the world.

24. "BUY THE REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM!"

Did May '68 have a program? Absolutely not. Several organizations had their own programs, but as a whole, what did we ultimately *all* want? What we wanted was nothing but what was happening. Like Nietzsche, we only wanted the eternal recurrence of what was happening.

Some strait-laced friends of the time, though communists, seemed quite unimpressed by the *chienlit*, the chaotic masquerade, as de Gaulle had described it using a Rabelaisian expression. For them politics was a Cartesian process: there's a political project, a program deriving from it and an action plan to implement. One evening at the permanent forum of the Odéon, some candid spirits spoke to criticize the movement's lack of program. So, a young man started impersonating a theatre usher and going round the aisles shouting "*achetez le programme! achetez le programme!*", "buy the program!" All burst out laughing and I think most



finally understood: asking a movement for clear and distinct programs was ridiculous. Ultimately, May '68 preannounced the liquid society of which everyone speaks today. It was as if a crowd of musicians, each with their own instrument—from a trumpet to a mouth harp, from a piano to castanets—had suddenly found themselves with no conductor, playing an exhilarating symphony for several weeks. Occasionally history works these orchestral miracles: when diversity does not cause a cacophony, but, as if by magic, an almost accomplished melody.

25. COMMUNISM WITHOUT THE COMMUNIST PARTY

The Movement could not have a program, but the Communist Party did. So, the true great enemy of the '68 movement, both in France and in Italy, was the Communist Party. More so the French one, as the Italian one, more skillfully, tried to ride the tiger. At the time, in France the Italian Communist Party was considered open, intelligent and flexible, whilst the French one seemed closed, foolish, stubborn and dogmatic³. (Indeed, since the eighties support for the French party has continued to shrink, whilst the heirs of the Italian party make up the largest part of the Italian left, the Democratic Party; the main party of the Italian left, largely made up of former communists.) The paradox is that the activists of these communist parties took part in the '68 movement intensely, but in the position of “the old” that most of the movement wanted to leave behind. The two great Communist parties, the Italian and the French, proved to be local branches of the USSR system, which most of us loathed, whether we accused the Soviet regime of “revisionisms” (like the Maoists), of being “a bureaucracy that dominated the workers’ states” (like the Trotskyists), of being “a statist dictatorship” (like the anarchists): the important thing was to reject it. In later years, for many of us that loathing for Soviet despotism emerged as even more important than the loathing for capitalism, leading to a conversion to liberal democracy (*nouveaux philosophes* included) a decade or so after '68.

But more than anything this anti-Communist Party polarization, beyond our Lenin-esque

³ I don't like to say it, but I think this difference between the two main Western communist parties derives from the fact that the PCF leadership had working class origins, whilst more flexible middle-class and intellectual components dominated in the PCI.

rationalizations, signified our *rejection of reality*. In those same years Lacan distinguished between reality and the real: “passion for the real” necessarily involves a rejection of the “existing reality,” this was the conception of the time. The Communist Parties and the USSR were the Communism of a grey disappointing *reality*; ours was the Communism of dreams. *True Communism* is always the one that doesn't *yet* exist. We wanted to shift the dream onto reality, *ipso facto* denying reality. Our Communism was supposed to be revolutionary at once in the Trotskyist and the Bergsonian sense: we spoke of “permanent Revolution,” in other words of an infinite process that never rests in the already achieved, a sort of *élan vital* (vital impetus) that no achievement could ever soothe.

26. LUXURY TRENCHES

Sociologists wonder why America's '68 was the work of students from the country's best universities, of youngsters in short who already belonged to the privileged classes or had become privileged by reaching the top of the American academic system. The Parisian May '68 was also mainly acted out by the students of the prestigious Sorbonne, in any case not by provincial students. In other words, ours was the rebellion of an affluent caste of youngsters full of hope.

In the summer of '69 violent conflicts involving Catholics and police took place in Derry, Ulster. Friends of mine travelled there and told me that the clashes there were quite different from the student rebellions we'd seen in Italy, France or Germany: those kids who were rioting in the streets *really were poor!* Indeed, there was no refined Marxist theory behind their actions: their flag was by no means Socialism or Communism, but Irish ethnicity and Catholicism. The authentically poor cannot see too far ahead, they only see what's closer to them: an ethnic belonging by birth and random religious categorization. The poor truly experience the blind contingency of life.

27. THE PROLETARIAN SWANSONG

But what about the '68 of the workers? And the African American rebellions parallel to the student protests? Did the beautiful strangeness of '68 not consist in this Parallel Action—using the words of Musil—that saw on the one hand the rebellion of the privileged in the name of the destitute, and on the other the revolt of the destitute who aspired to their slice of privilege?



I think the workers of the great factories felt themselves privileged in some way, and as such they raised their voices. They realized that being part of large scale industries gave them some power, especially media power: a strike involving thousands of factory workers is big news!

I also think, however, that deep down, in contrast to the classic workers' struggles—going on strike and fighting whilst remaining proud workers—in '68 most workers actually expressed their rejection of the factory worker's condition itself. The Marxist discourses concealed the true epochal turn: that the real secret dream was not giving all power to the working class but simply ceasing to be factory workers. Perhaps by becoming trade unionists, the most classic way by which a factory worker manages to no longer work as such. '68 was the first step—albeit with a Marxist glossing—of a process that has led to “armies of freelancers,” to the slow but decisive transformation of so many workers into one-man businesses, mostly down at heel ones. Instead of working for the Renault army, for example, opening up a small enterprise that produces spare parts for Renault; or managing a B&B. '68 was the beginning of a long march that led to the triumph of the Berlusconi people in Italy.

28. A PERSUASIVE NARRATION

I definitely don't envy the twenty-somethings who share more or less the same thoughts we had 50 years ago. At the time professing ourselves revolutionaries made us feel in the eye of the storm of history. The world then seemed polarized between the Socialist universe on the one hand and the capitalist on the other. Declaring ourselves to be Communists meant feeling the wind in the sails of our lives and those of history. The top philosophers, journalists, authors and most of our best-loved professors confirmed each day that the fundamental hiatus was the one we were taking part in. Of course, even today there are personalities—even renowned ones, like Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek – who read the world following a Marxist grid, but alas, the great conflicts troubling the world today seem to have impertinently slipped away from this grid. At the moment one of the raging wars is between the Muslim world on the one hand and the Judeo-Christian on the other, and another between Sunnis and Shiites: an opposition miles away from the “correct” categories. The most important historical fact of the last two decades is probably the rise of capitalist and autocratic China to major world power, capable of conditioning the democratic ones.

What has all this to do with the prophecies and hopes of Marxism?

Just like now, at the time the majority of people were not left-wing. The media talked so much about us that we didn't realize how minoritarian we actually were, not only among the general population, but even among our peers. In the summer of '68 the Italian weekly magazine *L'Espresso* published the results of a detailed sociological research project on young Italians aged 16 to 25: what emerged was a generation even more conservative than the previous. It was only during the seventies that the spirit of '68 became really widespread (and that's when I abandoned '68 thinking). Some noticed this dyscrasia and launched the famous distinction between “acting minority” and “silent majority.” We of the left represented the former, the masses uninvolved in politics, but that vote for the conservative and ruling parties, represented the latter.

Yet, compared to today, there was a fundamental difference. At the time, though we were a minority, the most persuasive narration was ours: even those who opted for capitalism actually reasoned according to the dominant Marxist way of thinking in Italy and in France. Today the winning narration is not Marxist, but Liberal and free-market oriented; even those who vote for the left explain themselves through the Liberal and free-market narration. At the time we had the illusion of belonging to the winning camp, but for years now Marxists cannot escape the bitter feeling of belonging to the losing one. Today, undoubtedly, thinking what we thought at the time is far more heroic and anti-conformist. Being Marxists today represents a true dissent, whilst our diversity was too largely participated and feared; it was so cozy, so photogenic.

29. “THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH...”

My ideas today are as far as they could be from those of the '68 movement. So, why am I so moved as I write these pages? Is this shiver not a sign of the fact that that era was the climax of something that deep down I still am? Some friends say to me reproachfully: “In the end you're still a kid from '68!” And I know that they're ultimately right. What's left inside me of that era? Beyond the mere political contents?

I'd say a sort of basic instinctive contempt for all kinds of institutions, which always end up only



existing for their own sake. At the time we “the radicals” harbored several idols and legends, but none of these were “institutional”—they were never the Party, the University, the Trade Union, the Church or the Corporation. We drastically aimed at the ultimate goals and the means represented a dead weight. Reformism was the means we had to overcome in order to reach our End. ‘68 was militant against any rhetoric of deep-down belonging: all that counted was *participation* and *expression*, getting things done, *not belonging*. Not even belonging to the Party: and, indeed, we split up into a myriad of tiny groups. Our generation idealized statelessness—and deep down I have remained stateless. In the same way as the symbol of May ‘68 was stateless: Cohn-Bendit. Statelessness is the grim face of cosmopolitanism.

Something else still preserves me as “someone from ‘68”: an insufferable aversion for any form of socio-syntonic hypocrisy, for all the conventions and ceremonies that make up most “human” relations. At the time we could, and we were obliged to, shout out loud even to a dearest friend all the ill we thought about whatever they were saying or doing. *Being sincere* was ultimately the fundamental dictate of everyone who took part in the movement. After fifty years, I have barely adapted. Still today, when at a dinner I hear someone talking rubbish about any topic, I am irresistibly tempted to utter: “look, you’re talking bullshit!” This was the authentic freedom I enjoyed then: not the strikes or street protests, not the lisergic parties or orgies, but this being able to say, into anyone’s face and in any situation, what I thought. And the opposite was also true: at the time friends told me the most awful things, but it didn’t bother me. On the contrary, I was grateful to them for enjoying their freedom to criticize me. Even today, I’m not hurt if someone demolishes me, as long as they do so without malice. If someone tells me an unpleasant truth about myself, how not to be grateful to him?

Then, in the years, I learnt that we need to respect the other’s narcissism—and our own. That, in the words of Pirandello, it is too hard to show our naked mask. But perhaps I am bestowing on ‘68 a privilege that belongs to youthfulness in general.

30. THE SMILE OF THE SHE-WOLF

Why do I remember certain details of the time so well while I’ve forgotten so many others? What kind of measurement, often unjust and even vile, do our neural networks use to weave the image of what

we’ve experienced? I sometimes despair because I cannot remember every single day and hour of my most interesting past. In the end, we are our memory; the less memory we have, the less we are. And because as we grow older we lose memory, with old age we become less.

The whims of my memory include the precise recollection of a night spent sleeping, or rather keeping vigil, inside the occupied Sorbonne lying on camp beds beneath the lush bombastic frescoes of Puvis de Chavanne. A young illustrator on LSD spent a good part of the night talking to me, and in particular about his encounter—crucial to him—with Anna Magnani, the famous Italian actress. Her performance of Verga’s *The She-Wolf* had been triumphantly acclaimed in Paris and it had enthralled my comrade. He went to congratulate himself with her in the dressing room, mumbling: Magnani, with an enigmatic smile, offered him a red rose and addressed him with some cryptic words I can no longer remember. A theatre actress is usually homaged with flowers, whilst here the opposite happened. He told me with a broken voice that he thought the flower and the words she addressed to him were a sort of prophecy of the days we were experiencing.

But, as I write these threads of memories, where does the heart wrenching feeling that instead of having experienced these events I have *missed* them come from? Every past, however intense and enthralling, is still... past. It has betrayed us by passing. This is what those who have idealized ‘68 will not accept: that that era failed us in a way. Not only because it created unfulfilled promises and expectations. Deep down, the past wrenches our hearts because it reminds us that our life could have been different—not better, just different. And that *not everything* has been lived through. Madness! How could we live through *everything*? Yet this was exactly our boundless project: living through everything, *going all the way*, of both day and night dry up the immense sea of banality.

So, thinking back to the time we lived so intensely, I also ultimately perceive it all as a *missed experience*. Is this only a feeling of mine, or also of many others who lived through those events?