

TWO CRITICAL POINTS FOR A MAY 68 REVIEW

Slavoj Žižek

Abstract

May 68 has influenced and conditioned many current considerations on «revolution». Nevertheless history cannot be taken as an «objective» event since it always implies the time from which it is considered. In this article we propose two inflection points, two critical perspectives to interpret and transform, fifty years later, something of these events named «May of 68».

Keywords: structuralism, subject, sex, revolution, domination.

Historical events are sometimes taken as absolute points. Either to idealize them, or to detest them, they are considered as fixed phenomena anchored in time. If we accept this concept of «event» as a point of the past reviewed nowadays but at the same time given, it is only possible as an impossible approximation - the distance towards it always persists, it verifies the syncopated reality of our experience.

The events of May 68 have the peculiarity of being historical facts, but at the same time permeable. They are revolutionary facts. And because of that it is possible to carry out a criticism about them, not in the destructive sense of it, but in a sense similar to the Kantian one: what are the conditions of possibility to speak today, in the post-era era, about May 68?

1. THEIR '68 AND OUR '68

Now that the 50th anniversary of the May '68 events in Paris (and elsewhere) is approaching, the time has come to reflect upon the fact that, although an immense abyss separates the revolt of the 60s from today's protests, we are witnessing today a similar re-appropriation of the energy of protest and revolt by the capitalist system.

One of the well-known graffiti on the Paris walls of '68 was: «structures do not walk on the streets,» i.e., one cannot explain the large student and workers demonstrations of '68 in the terms of structuralism (which is why some historians even posit 1968 as a date that separates structuralism from post-structuralism which was, so the story goes, much more dynamic and prone

to active political interventions). Jacques Lacan's answer was that this, precisely, is what happened in 1968: structures DID descend onto the streets - the visible explosive events were ultimately the result of a structural shift in the basic social and symbolic texture of modern Europe.

The consequences of the '68 explosion prove him right. What effectively happened in the aftermath of the '68 was the rise of a new figure of the «spirit of capitalism»: capitalism abandoned the Fordist centralized structure of the production process and developed a network-based form of organization founded on employee initiative and autonomy in the workplace. Instead of hierarchical-centralized chain of command, we get networks with a multitude of participants, organizing work in the form of teams or projects, intent on customer satisfaction, and a general mobilization of workers thanks to their leaders' vision. This new «spirit of capitalism» triumphantly recuperated the egalitarian and anti-hierarchical rhetoric of 1968, presenting itself as a successful libertarian revolt against the oppressive social organizations of corporate capitalism AND «really-existing» socialism.

The two phases of this new «cultural capitalism» are clearly discernible in the change of the style of advertising. In the 1980 and 1990, it was the direct reference to personal authenticity or quality of experience that predominated, while later, one can note more and more the mobilization of socio-ideological motifs (ecology, social solidarity): the experience referred to is the experience of being part of a larger collective movement, of caring for nature and the welfare of the ill, poor and deprived, of doing

something for them. Here is a case of this «ethical capitalism» brought to extreme: Toms Shoes, a company founded in 2006 «on a simple premise: with every pair you purchase, TOMS will give a pair of new shoes to a child in need. One for One. Using the purchasing power of individuals to benefit the greater good is what we're all about. /.../ Of the planet's six billion people, four billion live in conditions inconceivable to many. Let's take a step towards a better tomorrow.» The sin of consumerism (buying a new pair of shoes) is paid for and thereby erased by the awareness that one of those who really need shoes got another pair for free. The very participating in consumerist activities is simultaneously presented as participating in the struggle against the evils ultimately caused by capitalist consumerism.

In a similar way, many other aspects of '68 were successfully integrated into the hegemonic capitalist ideology and are today mobilized not only by liberals, but also by contemporary Right, in their struggle against any form of «Socialism». «Freedom of choice» is used as an argument for the benefits of the precarious work: forget the anxieties of not being sure how one will survive next years, focus on the fact that you gain the freedom to «reinvent» yourself again and again, to avoid being stuck to the same monotonous work...

The 1968 protest focused its struggle against (what was perceived as) the three pillars of capitalism: factory, school, family. As the result, each domain was submitted to post-industrial transformation: factory-work is more and more outsourced or, in the developed world, reorganized along the post-Fordist non-hierarchical interactive team-