



Communism as the Riddle Posed to History¹

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On May 24, we admired on television the impressive Paris demonstration called by the central CGT trade union. Throughout the country were other demonstrations. We were jubilant. If the most important workers' union embraced the movement, we had an avenue for hope! We saw proof of this in president General de Gaulle, casting his bait on television: he announced the organization of a June referendum on participatory decision-making for workers in enterprises and for students in the universities. We feared seeing students fall into the trap set, but not much effort was needed to avoid potential demobilization. We learned that the response to the chief of state's proposal was another demonstration in Paris, with new barricades, and nec plus ultra, the burning of the Bourse!

On May 25, at the Ministry of Labor in Paris, negotiations began between the trinity of trade unions, employers, and the government.

On May 27, we learned the epilogue. The content of the so-called Grenelle agreement: increased unemployment benefits and base wages, the workday gradually reduced to forty hours a week, the age of retirement lowered, revised collective agreements, recognition of trade union sections in enterprises, and increased trade union rights. To the horde of hungry dogs, the owners threw some bones to chew on. Some affordable employer concessions to suffocate social change aiming to eliminate ownership itself.

The following day, there was Francois Mitterand, who announced his candidacy for the presidency. The next day, we learned that the secretary-general of the CGT, Georges Séguy himself, went to Renault factories in Boulogne-Billancourt. He presented the agreements to the strikers. Against his expectation, they voted to pursue the strike.

On 29 May we heard the most thrilling news. The 'hero' of the anti-Nazi resistance, "the President," 'the general,' de Gaulle abandoned l'Elysée and took refuge, like a czar, like any common dictator of the 'Third World,' in an army base.

All of this was coming about without elections, without 'palace' maneuvers, without an armed coup d'état, without a Day of August 10, 1792, against the Tuileries, without an attack on the Winter Palace, without a Bolshevik 'avant-garde Party,' and without a long Maoist grassroots war. This is how the slogan 'Be realistic, demand the impossible!' became a reality. Alas! Those who pretend 'genuinely' to represent working people, the leaders of the 'communist' party and the CGT trade union, took fright at the liberation struggle of the same working people. (Naimi 2019: 86-88, 89-91)

Rather than some set of solutions or revolutionary program, May '68 appears to persist in the form of a problem. For someone like Badiou, this problem of '68 belongs strictly to the order of *politics* insofar as the era was defined by, and preoccupied with the question, 'What is politics?' (Badiou 2010: 39-40), while for those like Guattari, '68's

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problematic was *socio-economic* in essence, with “one specific battle to be fought by workers in the factories, another by patients in the hospital, yet another by students in the university. As became obvious in ’68, the problem of the university is [...] the problem of society as a whole.” (Guattari 1984: 66)² And for others still, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, the problem of May ’68 reveals itself to be decidedly *metaphysical* in nature—“Democracy is first of all a metaphysics and only afterwards a politics.” (Nancy 2010: 34)³ Thus it seems that the fate of May ’68 is to remain an eternal site of contestation, always irreducible to any single sequence of events. Hence the suggestion that ‘the meaning of May’ signifies less a resolution of contradictions and more the formulation of a set of problems—the effect of which was a critical interrogation of the inherited figures and institutions of the workers’ movement, which thereby altered the very meaning of communism as such. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the struggles of ’68 stems from these confrontations between the emergence of new social movements on the one hand, and the unions and Party of the Left, on the other.

As the main institutions and organizational forms inherited from previous cycles of struggle, both the union and the Party were either unwilling or unable to advocate for the political and economic demands of an emergent, collective, political subject. That is, if ’68 achieved anything, it succeeded in giving a new meaning to struggle itself: a vision of struggle no longer subordinate to any party line, no longer in want or need of recognition from the established institutions of the Left, and no longer faithful to a notion of revolutionary agency confined to the point of production. From this dual rejection of the classical identification of the industrial worker with the locus of revolutionary potential and the union and party as inherited organs of proletarian struggle, emerged an insurrectionary *praxis* aimed at overcoming the limitations of the union and party as the forms of organization inherited by ’68.⁴

² Or as Guattari says further on: “Significantly, after May ’68, most revolutionary movements failed to grasp the importance of the weak link that had become apparent during the student struggle. Quite suddenly, students and young workers ‘forgot’ the respect that was due to the superior knowledge and power of teachers, foremen, managers, etc. They broke away from the old submission to the values of the past and introduced an entirely new approach. But the whole thing was labelled spontaneism, in other words a transitional manifestation that must be left behind for a ‘superior’ phase, marked by the setting-up of centralist organizations. Desire surged up among the people; it was noted, but expected to quieten and accept discipline. No one realized that this new form of revolt would in [the] future be inseparable from all further economic and political struggles.” (1984: 66)

³ Or as Brault and Naas write in the translators’ foreword: “Democracy must therefore be thought as the incommensurable sharing of existence that makes the political possible but can in no way be reduced to the political. As such, it is first of all a metaphysics and only afterwards a politics. It was May ’68, Nancy argues, that demonstrated all this in an exemplary way and so deserves to be not simply remembered and commemorated but rethought and renewed.” (Guattari 1984: xi)

⁴ While not an outright rejection and abandonment of working-class struggles, this critique of unions, the party-form, and the status of worker-identity as that which determines one’s revolutionary potential, has led to various, and often radically different, conclusions regarding the future of communist politics in a post-68 era. Most notable among these are those from ex-members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Cornelius



What this means from the vantage point of the current conjuncture, however, is an altogether different matter. In other words, while it was the failure of the 1848 revolution that established the aim of seizing state power for an organized working-class anticipating 1910 (Mexican Revolution) and 1917 (Bolshevik Revolution), the theoretical and practical effects that were born out of '68 left its contemporaries uncertain regarding the potential actualization of the possible futures implicated within that year:

After 1848, the world's old left were sure that 1917 would occur. They argued about how and where and when. But *the middle-range objective of popular sovereignty* [i.e. seizing State power] was clear. After 1968, the world's antisystemic movements—the old and the new ones together—showed rather less clarity about the middle-range objective [...]. We have no answer to the question: 1968, rehearsal for what? In a sense, the answers depend on the ways in which the worldwide family of antisystemic movements will rethink its middle-run strategy in the ten or twenty years to come. (Arrighi/Hopkins/Wallerstein 1989: 115, emphasis mine)

At the very least, '68 still merits the title of an event insofar as it refers to a political sequence whose refusal of capital as the structuring principle of social existence opened up new fields of the possible. It marks a period when a generalized antagonism proved itself capable of wresting back what was determined as impossible, via the counter-actualization of its present—thereby initiating an experiment in constructing an anti-state communist form of life adequate to the task of establishing a new norm regarding the relation of the economic and the social.⁵ And yet, all that was promising in the specific reorganization of forms of everyday life that obtained during '68 eventually became so many revolutionary breaks with history that were unable to produce a

Castoriadis and Jean-François Lyotard: "Some of the most acute theories of class dilution originated from lapsed Marxists, precisely ex-luminaries of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*: Cornelius Castoriadis [...] and Jean-François Lyotard. They were among the first to come up with a *post-worker* doctrine. When Lyotard warned us in 1979 against the totalitarian risks involved in *grand narratives*, he did not mean the Bible or the Quran; he targeted the master narrative of the historical mission of the proletariat. The ascending bourgeoisie had claimed to bring prosperity, peace, and freedom, and we know what it meant. Likewise, so Lyotard argued, the proletarian pretension of emancipating humankind is a fraud. Marx's dream has led to a Stalinist nightmare. All we can do is hope for small narratives—fragmentary partial reforms. Castoriadis and Lyotard excel at debunking the idea that the proletariat could and should replace the bourgeoisie: this was the only communist theory they ever knew." (Dauvé 2019: 19)

⁵ Andrew Culp's notion of 'virtual communism' is instructive here with respect to *counteractualizations* enacted via mass mobilizations: "[I]f communism is 'not a *state of affairs* which is to be established' or 'an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself,' then communism may still be on the horizon—not as the communism of capitalism, but as a revolution that 'abolishes the present state of things.' Furthermore, this virtual communism is a fresh set of problems posed by life itself and not an ideal state or a pure politics [...]. Virtual communism thus proceeds by opening 'a space for political construction and experimentation' that creates a rupture, not by reactivating a potential that has been limited by capital but 'by retraversing and reconfiguring the economic, the social, the political, and so on' [...]. While virtual communism does not hold the certainty of historical passage held by those theorizing the commons emerging within capitalism, it does map out a terrain of struggle for forms of life that already believe in this world." (2015: 103)



determinately anti-capitalist future. Thus, if, in 1844, Marx could still confidently write that “Communism is the riddle of history solved [...] and knows itself to be this solution” (1972: 84) after ’68 and no longer certain of itself, *communism now appears as the riddle posed to history*.⁶

That said, it is still necessary to ask whether or not we remain its contemporaries fifty years on. In other words, this is to ask whether the problem that has come to preoccupy the Left of today is still the search for the forms and organization of political subjectivity capable of ushering in a qualitative transformation of capital. For as Badiou suggests, today “we have the same problem and are the contemporaries of the problem revealed by May ’68: the classical figure of the politics of emancipation was ineffective.” (2010: 47) In what follows, I would like to propose that our relationship to May ’68 is more complicated than any straightforward affirmation or rejection of our contemporaneity with the political sequence that bears its name and date. Moreover, it is only by understanding why we cannot simply affirm or reject all that is implied in Badiou’s assertion of a singular problem as that which binds us to ’68 that we are able to grasp how our relationship to ’68 involves, by necessity, both responses. While it may be the case that what we share with ’68 is our search for an answer to a singular question—*what form will collective subjectivity take such that it is adequate to the abolition of itself and its present state of affairs?*—what is also made clear is that both the context and possible solutions this question solicited in 1968 are substantively different from the context and solutions that are currently in existence.

In this way, we are forced to recognize that if there is a double bind proper to ’68, it is of an altogether different nature than the properly dialectical trap, which confronts us today. Inasmuch as ’68’s double bind was marked by a “becoming-revolutionary without a revolutionary future,” (Deleuze 2004) what defines the double bind of the current conjuncture is the Left’s division within itself between those who call for a reinvestment in the Party-form and parliamentary politics and those who reiterate their commitment to the recomposition and furthering of extra-parliamentary struggle. That is to say, unlike the movements of ’68, the current cycle of struggles no longer find themselves in a condition solely defined by the existence of a revolutionary process that lacks an attendant, and emancipatory, future. Rather, contemporary social movements are circumscribed by the temptation of engaging in either a melancholic reflection on the

⁶ The full passage reads: “*Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being—a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.*” (Marx 1972: 84, emphasis mine)



past but in the form of the grounds for revolutionary struggle in the present, or a farcical repetition of this past pure and simple. And so, in the concluding section of this essay, it will be demonstrated how it was Blanchot rather than Badiou who best captured the double bind that serves as the political horizon for '68's contemporaries: the dialectical trap of *melancholic reflection* and *farcical repetition*.

No longer simply bearers of a shared problem, to be a contemporary of '68 is to think and act against the temptation of the former—which substitutes an historical materialist analysis of the present for the derivation of 'lessons' that are said to be immediately applicable in the present (an approach that incorrectly presupposes an unchanged composition of the relation between Capital and Labour)—while rejecting the parochialism of the latter, which “anxiously conjure[s] up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes” whilst failing to produce a “new scene in world history”. (Marx 1972: 595)

Badiou's 'Four May's'

“I would like to begin by asking a very simple question: why all this fuss about May '68 [...] 40 years after the event? There was nothing of the kind for the thirtieth or twentieth anniversary.” (Badiou 2010: 44) Thus begins Badiou's reflections on the fortieth anniversary of the events of '68. And not without justification, for it is indeed strange that May '68 becomes worthy of national commemoration only once forty years of silence have passed. Beginning with this question, Badiou identifies two dominant modes of responding to this question. On the one hand, there is a set of answers that can be said to be pessimistic, which suggest that it is possible to commemorate May '68 precisely because it no longer has any socio-political influence on the present.⁷ In other words, such a view holds that commemoration is possible precisely because what was really achieved through the events of May was the establishment of the conditions of possibility needed for neoliberalism to emerge.⁸ On the other hand, there are those answers that are decidedly optimistic—ranging from arguments that view this commemorative moment as looking towards the past for the inspiration needed to

⁷ “We can now commemorate May '68 because we are convinced that it is dead. Forty years after the event, there is no life left in it.” (Badiou 2010: 47)

⁸ “The libertarian ideas of '68, the transformation of the way we live, the individualism and the taste for *jouissance* have become a reality thanks to post-modern capitalism and its garish world of all sorts of consumerism [...]. Sarkozy himself is the product of May '68, and to celebrate May '68 [...] is to celebrate the neoliberal West.” (Badiou 2010: 44)



change the present, to those who still hold on to a certain image of insurrectionary politics, which is said to contain the promise that another world is indeed possible.⁹

Contrary to these positions, and emphasizing what he takes to be May '68's irreducibly complex character, Badiou argues that there are not *two* but *four* different May's:

[T]he reason why this commemoration is complicated and gives rise to contradictory hypotheses is that May '68 itself was an event of great complexity. It is impossible to reduce it to a conveniently unitary image. I would like to transmit to you this internal division, the heterogeneous multiplicity that was May '68. *There were in fact four different May '68's*. The strength and the distinctive feature of the French May '68 is that it entwined, combined and superimposed four processes that are, in the final analysis, quite heterogeneous. (2010: 45, emphasis mine)

In place of both optimistic and pessimistic mystification, says Badiou, the reality of 'May 1968' was that of a political sequence whose realisation was due to the coordination and combined effects of (i) the student/university uprising, (ii) the general and wildcat strikes organized by workers, and (iii) the protestations, which arose most notably from young people, oppressed social groups, and cultural workers. Hence, Badiou continues, it is precisely for this reason that it comes as no surprise that the symbolic sites of '68 are "the occupied Sorbonne for students, the big car plants (and especially Billancourt) for the workers, and the occupation of the Odéon theatre." (2010: 51)

While each of these segments of '68 correspond to the first three iterations of May, what is it that constitutes the supposed 'fourth' May? And what is its relation to the university, factory, and struggles over everyday life? According to Badiou, this 'fourth May' is nothing other than the generalization of what one could call an 'absolute refusal' or 'absolute rejection' of the movements of '68 and their relation to previous cycles of revolutionary struggle. This was a form of collective refusal, which centered on two elements that, historically, have been seen as theoretical and/or practical givens regarding the question of how best to achieve revolutionary transformation: *the classical model of how revolutions are to proceed* and *the subject of history*.

As regards the classical model, the fourth May embodied a shared rejection of the Leninist outline of revolution (or what Badiou, in his essay on Sylvain Lazarus, calls 'the bolshevik mode of politics' [2005: 39]) across these various social movements: a vision of revolution that proceeds via workers' parties, backed by labour unions, all while

⁹ "This commemoration [...] may mask the vague idea that a different political and societal world is possible, that the great idea of radical change, which for 200 years went by the name of 'revolution' [...] is still quietly spreading, despite the official pretence that it has been completely defeated." (Badiou 2010: 45)



professional revolutionaries organize the masses in the bid to seize state power.¹⁰ For Badiou, it was this rejection of revolutionary orthodoxy—which was characteristic of the fourth May—that ultimately laid the grounds for the unification of the student, worker, and cultural struggles active during '68. And it is for this reason that Badiou will go on to define this fourth May as a collective attempt to construct “a vision of politics that was trying to wrench itself away from the old vision [...], [a politics] seeking to find that which might exist beyond the confines of classic revolutionism.” (2010: 57)

In addition to this collective rejection of ‘classic revolutionism,’ the other defining characteristic of this fourth May was its rejection of working-class identity as being the sole determinant of one’s revolutionary potential. For Badiou, this rejection, founded upon the idea that ‘the classical figure of the politics of emancipation’ was ‘ineffective,’ had its validity confirmed by his own experience of factory workers welcoming himself and his university colleagues during a march to the Chausson factory in Reims:

What happened at the gates of the Chausson factory would have been completely improbable [...] a week earlier. The solid union and party *dispositif* usually kept workers, young people and intellectuals strictly apart [...]. The local or national leadership was the only mediator. We found ourselves in a situation in which that *dispositif* was falling apart before our very eyes. This was something completely new [...]. This was an event in the philosophical sense of the term: something was happening but its consequences were incalculable. What were its consequences during the ten ‘red years’ between 1968 and 1978? Thousands of students [...] workers, women [...] and proletarians from Africa went in search of a new politics [...]. A political practice that accepted new trajectories [...] and meetings between people who did not usually talk to each other [...]. At that point, we realized [...] that if a new emancipatory politics was possible [...] it would turn social classifications upside down [and] would [...] consist in organizing lightning displacements, both material and mental. (2010: 51-60)

Thus, says Badiou, to commemorate and reflect upon the events of '68 means to necessarily confront and understand it as a political sequence that was realized only because students, workers, cultural producers, and historically marginalized identity

¹⁰ Or as Badiou recounts from his own experience of May: “At the time we assumed that the politics of emancipation was neither a pure idea, an expression of the will nor a moral dictate, but that it was inscribed in, and almost programmed by, historical and social reality. One of that conviction’s implications was that this objective agent had to be transformed into a subjective power, that a social entity had to become a subjective actor. For that to happen, it had to be represented by a specific organization, and that is precisely what we called a party, a working-class or people’s party. That party had to be present wherever there were sites of power or intervention. There were certainly wide-ranging discussions about what the party was [...]. But there was a basic agreement that there was a historical agent, and that that agent had to be organized. That political organization obviously had a social basis in mass organizations that plunged their roots into an immediate social reality [...]. This gives us something that still survives today: the idea that there are two sides to emancipatory political action. First there are social movements [...]. Then there is the party element, which consists in being present in all possible sites of power, and of bringing to them [...] the strength and content of the social movements.” (2010: 53)



groups (the youth, women, Algerians, etc.) shared one and the same horizon of struggle—replete with its dual rejection of the politics of parliamentarianism, party-led unions, and transitional programs, and the figure of the worker as the sole bearer of revolutionary potential. Reflecting upon his own text written in the later months of 1968, Badiou would go on to write: “the obsolescence of a strict Leninism centered upon the question of the party, which, precisely because it is centered on the party, continues to subordinate politics to its statist deviation. It is clear that the question of organization [...] is indeed central to the lessons of May ’68.” (2010: 69) Moreover, it was a political sequence whose guiding question was the following: “What would a new political practice that was not willing to keep everyone in their place look like?” (2010: 60) It is precisely in this sense that 1968 is said to mark the birth of a political subjectivity defined by a defiance of the social positions (‘places’) allotted to it by capital. Or as Kristin Ross writes, and in a manner similar to a Badiouian theory of the subject:

May was a crisis in functionalism. *The movement took the form of political experiments in declassification, in disrupting the natural ‘givenness’ of places; it consisted of displacements that took students outside of the university, meetings that brought farmers and workers together, or students to the countryside [...]. And in that physical dislocation lay a dislocation in the very idea of politics—moving it out of its [...] proper place, which was for the left at that time the Communist Party.* (2002: 25, emphasis mine)

And so, despite the post-war ascendancy of communist parties throughout Western Europe in general and France in particular—a period when parties achieved a number of their intermediate objectives, such as the “full organization of the industrial working class and a significant rise in their standard of living, plus accession to a place in the state political structure” (Arrighi/Hopkins/Wallerstein 1989: 85-88)—the early 60s began to reveal the Party as an institution that had outlived its utility, insofar as it proved itself incapable of responding to the demands of a shifting composition of the working-class (whether concerning the demands of the feminist and gay liberation movements or regarding France’s ongoing colonial campaigns in Algeria). From the vantage point of Party politics, demands such as these were viewed as secondary or tertiary concerns (at best) relative to those of the industrial working-class.

To make matters worse, whatever symbolic gestures of solidarity the PCF gave domestically, it nullified internationally. Ever since the Charonne massacre in 1961, where an estimated two hundred Algerians were killed at the hands of the Paris police, the French Communist Party has continuously “referenced [...] the deaths at the Charonne metro, as well as to the martyrdom of Audin and Alleg, or the sacrifices of Iveton and Maillot, to bear witness to its anticolonial engagement.” (Balibar 2018) But for all of the authenticity contained in the Party’s bearing witness to these massacres, it was future socialist president François Mitterand, who in 1954, while serving as Interior



Minister, summarized France's position regarding Algerian Independence in the following terms: 'Algeria is France. The only possible negotiation is war.'

What is more, in a series of critical reflections on the PCF's ongoing ambiguity regarding anticolonial struggle, and whose publication would earn him expulsion from the PCF, Balibar writes: "There is no question that in the years between 1958 and 1962, no opposition to the colonial war could have triggered a historically effective mass mobilization without the CGT, without the Communist Party." (2018) Any domestic mobilization against French colonization could not take place without the support and means of a communist Party, whose underlying nationalism made it a "surprising concentration of contradictions in which the legacy of the working class's patriotic role in the anti-fascist resistance and the worst 'great power' (or medium power) chauvinisms, cemented by the influence and mimicking of Soviet nationalism, are mixed together." (Balibar 2018) In the end, it was due to the PCF's hesitation in formulating a clear position regarding the struggle waged by the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), that an opportunity for furthering the aspirations of internationalism was ultimately missed:

The opportunity was missed to forge an organic unity in struggle between French workers and immigrant workers. For both, internationalism remained [...] a calculus of convergent interests, not a common practice in which one learns little by little to know each other, to overcome contradictions, to envisage a shared future. (Balibar 2018)

Errors such as these came to be viewed *neither* as accidents *nor* as aberrations, but as the actual functioning of a Party-based strategy of vying for State power. That is, if the missed opportunity for building a really existing internationalist tendency is as grave an error as it appeared to have been, it is only because this jettisoning of internationalism is not simply one error among others; rather, it was the inaugural gesture of the PCF at the very moment of its ascendancy: On 8 May 1945, just as France celebrated the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation, French colonial soldiers massacred Algerians who were out demonstrating for liberation to reach them not only in Algiers, but in Sétif and Guelma as well. Reversing Marx and Engel's dictum that the proletariat 'has no country,' and in the aftermath of the Second World War, it is no exaggeration to claim that both Mitterrand and the PCF 'defended the interests of the working-class' in decidedly nationalist terms.

Showing that this was no longer a Party in opposition to the capitalist mode of production and to its cycles of so-called primitive accumulation within its colonies, experiences such as these would serve as the material basis for the 'fourth May's' analysis of the PCF and its unions as having effectively substituted class struggle for class collaboration. Thus it is no surprise that, in light of de Gaulle's call for a referendum



alongside public assemblies for workers and students, respectively, Paris saw both immigrant workers and students respond by sacking the Paris stock exchange (the Bourse) and erect a new series of barricades: “We feared seeing students fall into the trap set by [...] de Gaulle. But not much effort was needed to avoid potential demobilization. We learned that the response to the chief of state’s proposal was another demonstration in Paris, with new barricades, and [...] *nec plus ultra*, the burning of the Bourse!” (Naïmi 2019: 86)

Viewed in this light, the notion of there having been not two, but ‘four May’s,’ retains its analytical usefulness insofar as it allows us to conceive of ’68 on its own terms: as a form of politics whose horizon of struggle was one that rejected past and present iterations of left-wing politics and gave consistency to a collective subjectivity via the fourth-May-as-diagonal “that links the other three [May’s].” (Badiou 2010: 57-58) Thus, in following Badiou we are necessarily led to the conclusion that it was only by virtue of the diagonal function of the fourth May that ’68 succeeded in giving a new meaning to struggle itself: a vision of struggle no longer subordinate to any party line; no longer in want or need of recognition from the established institutions of the Left; no longer faithful to a notion of revolutionary agency confined to the point of production—thereby making it possible to (briefly) live in reality what we have long been promised to be in truth: *non-alienated, collective, and thus free*.

1968 - ????

Today, however, things do not seem as clear as they did during 1968. Not only was the beginning of the year marked by a failed right-wing coup composed of various currents belonging to the renewed white supremacist currents at the heart of the history of the United States. The radical left (at least in the United States and UK) is increasingly confronted by an internal split between that portion of the Left that has invested its energies and belief in progressive change in candidates and parties on the parliamentary left and the extra-parliamentary portion of the Left, which remains ever-skeptical of achieving the radical transformation of our social totality via presently existing political institutions and organizations.¹¹ This alone is already a significant divergence from

¹¹ As Jason E. Smith has correctly summarized: “Far from meshing together in a seamless continuity, or mutually reinforcing one another in friction-less feedback, socialists in the US (and the UK) will have to start again, this time from the structural and radical incompatibility or contradiction between these two forms of power [mass movements and electoral politics]. With the defeat of Sanders (and Corbyn), and with the necessary historical and strategic considerations that such defeats compel, they will most likely have to renounce the assumptions that permitted their participation in these failed electoral campaigns to begin with. These campaigns did not bring into being a ‘new politics,’ one that reversed the order of historical effectivity, subordinating movements initiated by broad masses of people to the call and command of elected politicians. Reforms brought about in the political sphere will be imposed on the state



Badiou's assessment of our relation to the legacy of '68. For if we are the contemporaries of '68—and if '68 were truly defined by the diagonal function of this 'fourth May,' which united various social movements via their shared rejection both of the Party-form with its unions and of the electoral process—then, from the vantage point of the present, this consensus forged during '68 has now been put into question.

That said, such an analysis was already put forward in 2015 by Plan C's Keir Milburn. In his article "On Social Strikes and Directional Demands," Milburn notes how one of the key contributing factors that has led to this impasse is the failure of the movements of 2011 to bring about the desired and/or expected level of change. As he puts it: "[A]n impasse was reached in both the pure horizontalist rejection of representative politics and the initial attempts to address the crisis of social reproduction autonomously from the State and capital." (2016) Reflecting upon SYRIZA and the limitations of a straightforwardly parliamentary approach to radical change, Milburn, in my estimation correctly, underscores the fact that electing various Left-leaning parties into power reveals what is inherently limiting about this reinvestment of the Party-form. These limitations are due, either to compromises made between the elected government and the EU, or by the EU, IMF, and World Bank's isolation of said government in order to elicit the desired set of austerity measures, thereby rendering it amenable to the demands of the market: "Neoliberalism [...] seeks to either replace points of democratic decision with pseudo-market mechanisms or, where this isn't possible, insulate points of political decision from pressure and influence from below." (Milburn 2016)¹²

If it is precisely the 'fourth May's' shared anti-state, anti-party, and anti-parliamentarian orientation that is lacking and whose absence is felt in the Left's current division within itself, the solution cannot simply be further calls of support for a 'diversity of tactics.' This is precisely because when the parties of the Left have ended up in power, what we have seen in the past and may see again in the near future is the repression of all those extra-parliamentary groups' struggles, even though the very existence of these groups has helped to build a political climate favorable to the Left as a whole. This was a tendency that realized itself in post-68 France, though the best-known example is that of the Italian Communist Party's 'historic compromise.' In the recent

by years and even decades of confrontations with movements that are willing to fight for themselves: at their own initiative, for objectives they themselves formulate. The current course of events, disturbing as it is, will provide ample opportunity for such efforts." (2020)

¹² Of additional importance here is Yanis Varoufakis' anecdote regarding a conversation between himself and Christine Lagarde (head of the IMF). As the story goes, after Varoufakis informed Lagarde that it would be mathematically impossible for Greece to repay its debt according to the austerity measures proposed by the IMF, Lagarde in fact agreed with his economic calculations but replied that the austerity package was something that *must* be done—a telling remark, as it reveals the function of the Troika as the set of institutions who secure the smooth running of neoliberalism regardless of the material needs of those who live in debtor countries.



years leading up to 2021, we have also seen echoes of this from Corbyn's Labour Party. For instance, in Labour's 2017 manifesto, one reads that the Labour Party will promise to rectify the damage done by Theresa May's cutting of funds to police and emergency personnel (Labour Party 2017: 46-47). This rectification of the austerity imposed by Conservative leadership, however, is no less compromised in terms of its 'socialist' principles insofar as its proposed solution is the addition of 10,000 more police officers on the streets to, ostensibly, 'keep our communities safe.' And all of this while Corbyn was meeting with well-known grime MCs (e.g. JME), all of whom come from communities that are at the highest risk of being harassed, beaten, wrongfully stopped and searched, verbally and physically assaulted, or worse, by the police themselves. So what are we to take away from all this?

(i) ΣΥΡΙΖΑ is Greek for Despair

In terms of a collective subject whose consistency is drawn from a shared horizon (consisting of principles, analyses, and strategies), it would be more accurate to say that, today, we are witnessing the undoing of the 'fourth May's' unifying function, which can be seen in the internal split between electoral and extra-parliamentarian approaches. And just as "we must not forget [...] that May '68's last slogan was *élections piège à cons* [elections are a con]" (Badiou 2010: 56) one possible slogan that captures the parliamentary Left's rehabilitation of electoral politics—Pablo Iglesias' PODEMOS in Spain, Alex Tsipras' ΣΥΡΙΖΑ in Greece, Bernie Sanders' bid for heading the Democratic Party in the US, and the UK Labour Party previously led by Corbyn—is the idea that 'elections are a mode through which class struggle *can again* be waged.' Viewed from the present, however, 2021 appears to mark the failure of the parliamentary Left's consolidation of power in the wake of the Arab Spring, the 15M movement, and so on. What is more, nation-states have enacted the policies of increasingly authoritarian regimes, whether the Chinese Communist Party's passage of the Security Bill effectively eliminating the long-standing 'one country two systems' policy regarding Hong Kong, or the passage of the 'terror bill' effectively criminalizing public dissent by the Duterte-led Philippine Democratic Party (PDP-Laban).

It is in the wake of social democracy's defeat in its bid for State power, and in light of the anti-police uprisings that began as a response to the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the US, that the parliamentary Left has reorganized itself at the local level, targeting city politicians while identifying possible seats that can be assumed within local office. In contrast to the rights-based and juridical character assumed during the initial formation of the Black Lives Matter movement (which demanded for the State's upholding of formal equality regardless of race in light of the policing of black



and brown lives) the George Floyd Rebellion reoriented public discourse around an explicitly abolitionist character, calling either for the abolition of the police *tout court*. Moreover, unlike its previous rights-based iteration, both the gains and setbacks of the Rebellion differed from city to city and state to state due to its confrontation with a police force that has grown increasingly explicit in its white supremacist function (e.g. police officers openly displaying blue lives matter and far-right symbols on their person), a State ill-equipped to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the various attempts by liberal ‘organizers’ to neutralize the rebellions revolutionary aspirations by supplanting the language of abolition for that of ‘defunding.’

As many experienced on the streets and read about in the various independent media outlets of the Left, what appears as the reaffirmation of their fidelity to ‘grassroots organizing’ on the part of the liberal organizers whose true function is to reinforce statist capture, is but the worst form of localism since this strategy’s function, and overall effect, is that of directing popular support for increasingly militant forms of struggle away from the struggles themselves and toward the voting booth. To take but one recent example, at a moment when 54% of Americans felt that the extra-parliamentary act of burning down the third police precinct was a *justified* response to the police murder of George Floyd, organizing efforts aimed at winning local elections hindered, rather than furthered, the development of a degree of popular support for a direct attack against the State the likes of which has not been seen in the United States in at least fifty years (Impelli 2020). And yet, this reorientation of electoral campaigns with an eye on potential gains at the municipal and/or city level misses the problem posed by questions of *autonomy*—whether from traditional Leftist institutions, or from currently existing political parties committed to a strategy of dual power.

Understood on their own terms via the immanent criteria proper to the political upheaval that conditioned their unfolding, the tactics and experiments in *autonomous* forms of increasingly militant organization employed during May ’68 in France, or between 1969-1978 in Italy, were not a set of solutions to the problem of an exhausted and impotent image of revolutionary politics. More than anything, they inaugurated the Left’s decades-long search for a solution. Thus we are compelled to say that the post-workerist conception of *autonomy* cannot serve as a substitute for the actualization of novel forms of the composition and organization of struggles, if for no other reason than the fact that what autonomy achieved during this period was a rupture, or qualitative difference, established with the classical vision of revolution as such. This rupture enacted a ruthless criticism of the Left at a moment when leftists felt trapped by the false choice between the capitalism of the U.S. and the Stalinism of the USSR, without determining the strategies and organizational forms of the politics to come. To say this, however, is not to denounce *autonomia* or autonomist organizing as such, but to



acknowledge what current leftist movements should reasonably expect from the struggles we have inherited. Or as Gilles Dauvé puts it:

All previous unrest or insurrectionary periods had resulted in the creation of new forms, whether party, union, or autonomous body. In the West and in Japan, since the demise of the Spanish Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) in 1937, no far-left party with strongholds in the workplace has been founded and has managed to fight on. Nothing comparable to early twentieth-century social democracy, Stalinist parties, or the 1930s CIO. Syriza is just about capable of moderating unrest in Greece: it proves incapable of putting forward a platform alternative to mainstream bourgeois politics. (2019: 4)

Absent those forms of organization required for the construction of a revolutionary horizon, the trap laid for both the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary Left is the treatment of the *problems* that previous cycles of struggle posed to themselves as the *solutions* to the crises of the present. Autonomy presents itself as a problem and not as the practical resolution of the problematic already discovered in '68 ("the classical figure of the politics of emancipation was ineffective") and taken up again during the 1970s in Italy, such that the problem of autonomy today remains a problem of constructing forms of collective subjectivity adequate to the demands of abolition. "What new forms of political organization are needed to handle political antagonisms? As in science, until such time as the problem has not been resolved, you have all sorts of discoveries stimulated by the search for a solution." (Badiou 2010: 63)

(ii) The Fetish for Organizational Form

While the problem of the organizational forms assumed by current struggles relative to the organic composition of capital remains as urgent as it was in 1968, attempting to resolve these issues by specifying a particular figure or subject-position is, in fact, an insufficient ground upon which to establish contemporaneity since this was a problem that every historical period had to pose and answer for itself—even if the solutions to this problem assumed different names such as *sans-culotte*, the peasant, the slave, the colonized, and of course the worker. That said, what continues to bind us to the events of 1968 is the fact of a shared problem: what form of organization must struggles take in order to carry out a qualitative transformation of capitalist social relations while constructing social relations that are communist in substance? A problem made all the more urgent since it implies that the kinds of organization inherited from the workers' movement are not only ineffective, but must be left behind altogether; and it was precisely this rejection that rendered the struggles of '68 capable of establishing a break with its own history. Just as with the movements of '68, the current conjuncture



presents the Left with the task of constructing forms of struggle that aid and further the construction of anti-state communist social relations as well.

However, with regard to the problem posed by questions of organizational forms, of equal importance is the need to address what one might call the *fetish for organizational form*, which refers to thinkers and positions that, despite theoretical and/or practical differences, give primacy to **(i)** the *forms* assumed by struggles in the course of their unfolding, to the detriment of developing analyses of the shifting compositions of collective subjectivity, which serve as its content, or **(ii)** to the analytic and logical *forms* required for providing a materialist account of the current status of the capital-labour relation. Regarding the former, it is in the midst of Sergio Bologna's reflections on the virtues and limits of the Italian cycle of struggle spanning from the 1960s to the late 1970s, that he inadvertently provides us with an exemplary case of one variant of this fetishism of form:

Despite having apparently left a void in its wake, despite having apparently only laid bare the crisis of political forms, including the crisis of the party-form, 1977 has to be considered one of the greatest anticipations of the forms and contents of political and social life seen in recent years. After 1977 there is no turning back, despite all the errors committed [...]. *1977 was a year in which the wealth and complexity of problems was such that the political form able to contain and organise them all adequately could not be found.* (Wright 2017: 184, emphasis mine)

Interestingly enough, even Badiou himself asserts the primacy of organizational form, rather than embarking on the development of the theoretical categories necessary to account for the ways in which the historically specific content of antagonism and anticapitalist activity renders equally novel forms of organization possible. As he puts it: "the question of organization [...] is indeed central to the lessons of May '68." (2010: 69) In terms of the present moment, addressing this formalist fetish appears to be one more problem inherited by (or one more lesson to be learned from) the contemporaries of May. And yet, this formalist fetish had already been criticized in the years immediately following these events.

In his 1972 reflections on the limits proper to the Student-Worker Action Group at Censier, François Martin explains his assessment of the group's eventual re-centering around questions of labour and worker-identity as a regression: "the unions represent labour power which has become capital [...]. The representatives of variable capital, of capital in the form of labour power, sooner or later have to associate with the representatives of capital who are now in power." (Dauvé 2015: 86) For Martin, this reaffirmation of labour and worker-identity was a regression precisely because the very forms of struggle available to collective actions were limited to a concern with the rights of labor, which gave rise to a form of organization—the union—that forecloses any possibility of communism as that "positive transcendence of private property and



human self-estrangement.” Martin’s conclusion: “There is only a capitalist, namely ‘unionist,’ organization of the working class.” (Dauvé 2015: 87) Thus, the problems that structure the present of May’s contemporaries is a rejection of the two-fold structure of the formalist fetish: a refusal to treat logical and theoretical forms of analysis as concretely revealed in practice, and a refusal of the various attempts at rehabilitating inherited forms of struggle that have outlived their usefulness in the present.

However, if both Badiou and Bologna fell prey to this fetishism of forms of organization, it is in the recent work of thinkers such as Joshua Clover—despite its inestimable value in having provided a systematic and historical account of the development of riots into strikes (and back again)—that one finds the best example of the other side of this formalism, concerning the status of the relationship between epistemic forms of analysis and the phenomena under investigation. Regarding the current relation of capital’s socio-economic structure to the possible existence of the long sought-after agent of abolition, the prospect of the Left’s present and future capacity for the self-determination of both the form and organizational structure assumed in the course of a struggles unfolding is perhaps even more urgent than in 1968. And it is within such a context that we must begin by emphasizing what Clover so carefully lays out: The strike and the riot continue to be, in large part, overdetermined by the accumulation and production of value—and this, in spite of everything that is redeeming in Marx’s notion of the ‘multiplication of the proletariat,’ which refers to the process that follows from capital’s increasing turn away from production and toward circulation and consumption (reproduction) for the extraction of value.¹³ That is, the multiplication of the proletariat, for both Marx and Clover, is still a process of generalized precarity rather than the generalization of a collective and antagonistic subject.

And it is precisely because of this generalized precarity that Clover rightly speaks of surplus rebellions, circulation struggles, and riot-prime as novel forms of struggles given their position within the arc of capital accumulation. Neither a revival of previous forms of rioting (e.g. bread riots) nor a faithful reproduction of prior instances of rebellion waged by social groups that maintain an indirectly market-mediated relation to a wage, what distinguishes surplus rebellions and circulation struggles from these prior iterations is precisely the fact that they are practical attempts at resolving the issues of social reproduction within the sphere of circulation as the site both of consumption and of capital’s current means of self-valorization. That said, these are not forms freely

¹³ As Clover writes: “The long-term tendencies are apparent, and the signs we might expect to indicate a secular reversal nowhere to be seen [...]. In this context, class might be rethought in ways that exceed the traditional model [...] with its relatively static and sociologically positivistic ‘working class’ and accompanying forms of struggle. Given the relative dwindling of this form of labour, Marx must mean something else when, arriving at this conclusion regarding surplus populations, he proposes that ‘accumulation of capital is therefore multiplication of the proletariat.’” (2016: 159)



chosen and constructed by surplus populations, but, as we are told, are the products of the value-determination and overdetermination of contemporary struggles. Their novelty, then, appears to come not from the self-determination of surplus populations but from the overdetermination of the value-form itself. It is for this reason that, just as the history of the workers' movement failed in staving off a capitalist form of self-organization via the union, surplus rebellions and circulation struggles, too, find themselves assuming organizational forms determined by cycles of value accumulation rather than by the modalities of (lumpen-)proletarian agency.

Thus we are compelled to ask: If, as Clover has painstakingly shown, an adequate theory of the riot is necessarily a theory of crisis, such that it is only by understanding the shift of capital flow from production and trade to finance and circulation that one can grasp what is essential in the riot as the way in which struggle manifests today, to what extent is this an already foreclosed or overdetermined image of the nature of the ongoing cycle of struggle today? For, as Clover writes: "*The riot, for all its systematically produced inevitability [...] is the form of struggle given to surplus populations, already racialized[,] [...] whose location in the social structure compels them to some forms of collective action rather than others.*" (2016: 168, emphasis mine) If riot-prime as the political form surplus rebellions assume in the current conjuncture is determined by the forms of value to which it is indexed by its location in the social structure, how, then, is this not a theory of the riot that results in an understanding of *riot prime* (circulation struggles) as an instance of value-determination, as opposed to a counter-determination of capitalist social relations by surplus populations themselves? Interestingly enough, one possible beginning toward addressing this problem is to be found in Clover's own articulation of the correspondence between the form of struggle and cycles of accumulation:

strike as the form of collective action that struggles to set the price of labor power, is unified by worker identity, and unfolds in the context of production; *riot*, struggles to set prices in the market, is unified by shared dispossession, and unfolds in the context of consumption. Strike and riot are distinguished further as leading tactics within the generic categories of production and circulation struggles. We might now restate and elaborate these tactics as being each a set of practices used by people when their reproduction is threatened. Strike and riot are practical struggles over reproduction within production and circulation, respectively. [...] They make structured and improvisational uses of the given terrain, but it is a terrain they have neither made nor chosen. The riot is a circulation struggle because both capital and its dispossessed have been driven to seek reproduction there. (2016: 46)

What is striking in this passage is that what comes to define both the strike and the riot is not simply their position within the circuit of capital, but how their primary concern is one of resolving issues of reproduction while only conditionally unfolding as struggles of



circulation or production. And this is precisely what is demonstrated here with the definition of strikes and riots as tactics employed in struggles over reproduction. However, to say, as Clover does, that “a theory of riot is a theory of crisis” (2016: 1), obviates this methodological separation between struggles and their conditions such that crisis *acts* through riots. If nothing else, it is by maintaining (if not deepening) this antagonism and separation between struggles and their terrain, that one can avoid conflating determinations of value with determinations of social movements/uprisings/etc. A separation between determining-condition (production-circulation) and determining-agent (proletariat, surplus populations) such that, despite their limitations, the particularly promising content of riots and strikes is not simply equated with the compulsion of value. That is to say, if the reproduction of labour power and the self-valorization of capital simply name “the same activities [...] seen from different positions,” it is also the case that struggles over reproduction can be more or less reproductive of value, and suggests the possibility of a mode of struggle that reproduces itself without reproducing the value relation itself.

Interestingly enough, it is here that Clover nominates the commune as the form of life to come, where “both production and circulation struggles have exhausted themselves” (2016: 191). Unlike its more historically frequent siblings in the riot and strike, the commune appears as a privileged form due to its capacity for reproducing non-valorizing modes of struggle that do not entail the reproduction of the value relation as its necessary precondition: “Alongside these classic circulation struggles, it can be no surprise that Occupy Oakland centered on a communal kitchen signaling the centrality of surplus population to the encampment.” (Clover 2016: 179) And yet, on this account, what gives rise to the commune as the future form assumed by struggles over reproduction, is not any number of social movements or variations of heterogeneous collective subjects, but “a spreading disorder [...] that now seems to belong not to riot but to the state, to what had previously been itself a violent order. Against this great disorder, a necessary self-organization, survival in a different key.” (Clover 2016: 187)

No longer able to satisfy even the least of life’s reproductive requirements within the production or circulation process, the commune, as presented here, emerges as a form of self-organized survival whereby an individual’s own reproduction can no longer be had whether via the state or the market. This, however, is an image of the commune as indiscernible from the realization of increasingly severe capitalist crises, where the realization of the commune is identical to the realization of capitalist immiseration made absolute. And so, it is by insisting upon the separation of struggles from their conditions that strikes and riots will no longer be defined by their place within capitalist society. By acknowledging the riot and the strike as reproduction struggles, we can, at the very least, begin to develop an account—not simply of the ways in which capital establishes the boundaries of a given dispute—that differentiates between the determinations of



capital and the determinations of collective subjectivities that avoid reproducing both labor and value in the process.

Without noting this difference, it is difficult to see how the commune can be said to be “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor” (Marx 1985: 60), since it is only when productive labour ceases to be a class attribute and an attribute of society as a whole that our collective activity is concretized as a classless form of social reproduction. Hence, the suspicion regarding the claim that circulation struggles necessarily give rise to the riot as their dominant mode of antagonism, which implies that the determining agent of the riot is not its participants but the socio-economic preconditions for the accumulation of value, and clarifies the problematic equivalence at the heart of Clover’s dictum: “a theory of riots *is* a theory of crisis.” For what is achieved by means of this “analytical correlation between the present shape of accumulation and the leading tactic of action” is not the delineation of “the contours of a ‘leading subject’ or organization, but precisely its impossibility” (Toscano 2016), such that it is neither surplus populations nor a recomposed (lumpen-) proletariat but *value* that riots in the streets.

«UNE AUTRE FIN DU MONDE EST POSSIBLE»

Given the preceding analysis, it would seem that there is good reason to agree with Badiou’s claim regarding our contemporaneity with ’68, insofar as ours is a time defined by a search for an adequate resolution to the problem discovered in occupied universities and barricaded streets (i.e. the classical figure of revolutionary subjectivity has been found to be ineffective). That said, what is perhaps the more interesting and relevant point to underscore is that despite Badiou’s best efforts, the ‘double bind’ characteristic of ’68’s cycle of struggles and of which we are the contemporaries, is of a qualitatively different kind than that which characterizes the historical and political-economic situation of today. And it is precisely on this issue of acknowledging what continues to bind us to, while distancing us from, ’68 that the political writings of Maurice Blanchot become relevant.

Writing in December of ’68, Blanchot articulated what Badiou would only come to argue forty years after the event.¹⁴ Namely, that the problem confronting the

¹⁴ This statement should not be taken as an implicit critique or some thinly veiled *ad hominem* at Badiou’s expense. Badiou himself admits such a point in a moment of self-criticism in his reflections on the fortieth anniversary of ’68: “The fourth May ’68 is seeking to find that which might exist beyond the confines of classic revolutionism. It seeks it blindly because it uses the same language as the language that dominated the conception it was trying to get away from [...]. They were—to use the beautiful, colourful language of the Chinese once more—‘raising the red flag to fight the red flag’ [...]. What we failed to see at the time was that it was the language itself that had to be transformed, but this time in an affirmative sense.” (2010: 57)



movements of '68 was the question of developing novel forms and organizations of struggle that would adequately resolve the crisis experienced in the face of the notion of revolutionary subjectivity born out of 1917: "*May, a revolution by idea, desire, and imagination, risks becoming a purely ideal and imaginary event if this revolution does not renounce itself and yield to new organization and strategies.*" (Blanchot 2010: 106) Given the benefit of our vantage point it would not be controversial to say that the movements of '68 largely failed to develop the forms that struggle must take relative to the historical and material conditions of the 1960's. This is not to say that May '68 was itself a failure, for its singular achievement was to reconceive the political horizon of future struggles to come. This being the case, we can say that the double bind proper to '68 is characterized by the realization of a "becoming-revolutionary without a revolutionary future" (Deleuze 2004). That is, '68's achievement was its recognition of the inefficiency and impotence of a certain dogmatic image of revolutionary thought, and its demonstration of this historical break through the collective practices embodied by each of the 'four May's.' That said, and in addition to the prescience of his analysis, Blanchot's reflections gain further significance with respect to the task of determining whether or not our contemporaneity with May extends beyond this shared problem and includes the same double bind.

Towards the end of the very same series of reflections, Blanchot provides his analysis of what, in the wake of '68, it will mean to participate in, and organize on behalf of, the ruptures, insurrections, and revolutions to come. In light of the theoretical contribution of what we could call Badiou's contemporaneity thesis (i.e. the seeking out of new forms for political subjectivity and its attendant organizations that would ensure its reproducibility), Blanchot's contribution is that of highlighting two particular dangers, or threats, that await revolutionary politics after '68. Politics after '68, says Blanchot, finds itself confronted by:

(a.) *The temptation to repeat May*, as if May had not taken place or as if it had failed, so that it might someday reach its conclusion. Thus we see the same tactics of agitation that had meaning and effect in February-March-April poorly and painfully retried [...].

(b.) *The temptation to continue May*, without noticing that all the force of originality of this revolution is to offer no precedent, no foundation, not even for its own success, for it has made itself impossible as such [...]. [E]verything is posed in other terms, and not only are the problems new but the problematic itself has changed. In particular, all the problems of revolutionary struggle, and above all of class struggle, have taken a different form. (2010: 108, emphasis mine)

By virtue of Blanchot's diagnosis, we too arrive at what distinguishes the political condition of 1968 from that of the present conjuncture. Unlike '68's double bind of a really existing revolutionary process devoid of a revolutionary future, it is these two



temptations that form the double bind proper to our present, which is that of a dialectic between *melancholic reflection* and *farcical repetition*. So if we are to claim the existence of a double bind proper to our present, it is not defined by the logic of a 'becoming-revolutionary without a revolutionary future'—for what can be said about the current composition of the progressive and radical Left is that, at the very least, each segment offers some vision of an emancipated future world (and this is true regardless of the degree to which their respective proposed futures have been more or less theorized). Rather, what we are seeing today is a Left caught between the temptation to prolong a political sequence that in reality has already come to pass, or to faithfully emulate the images of struggle that became associated with '68 as a whole. Moreover, and to perhaps make matters worse, the double bind of melancholic reflection and farcical repetition is one that pertains to *both* the parliamentary *and* extra-parliamentary segments of the present day Left (whether this be in the guise of a nostalgic reinvestment of the Party-form as object of the desire for revolution, or as embodied in the mass mobilizations whose form and organization simply repeat the past in the present).

However, unlike the fetishization of organizational form that persists throughout Badiou's critical reflections of this period, and by recognizing the existence of a problem proper to struggles that persist beyond '68 as something distinct from its characterization as a problem of the exhausted figure of revolutionary subjectivity at the moment of its revolutionary-becoming *à la* Badiou, Blanchot is able to critically reconceive the necessity of developing new forms of political organization alongside novel modalities of praxis. For this is what is at issue with Blanchot's warnings regarding the double-bind of political struggle in the wake of '68. In other words, Blanchot's identification of the melancholic and farcical dimensions of the cycle of struggles post-68 is simultaneously a critique of a period of which he is a part: a critique of the content of struggle, and only subsequently a critique of misguided attempts at rehabilitating what are essentially obsolete strategic and practical forms. Thus, to affirm the truth of Blanchot's insight is to acknowledge that to be a contemporary of '68, in the Badiouian sense, is to remain caught within the double-bind of *melancholic reflection* and *farcical repetition*. What is more, not only does one's contemporaneity with '68 signal the manner by which one remains tied to a past, whose material conditions and modes of composition are no longer capable of affecting the present conjuncture; for contemporaneity is itself a sign that the problem that shapes and gives meaning to revolutionary struggles today has been poorly posed.

If the problem identified by Badiou is an insufficient ground for establishing contemporaneity it is because it presupposes a shared, intuitive or common sense understanding, of the very definition of communism as such. It is as if *everybody knows* that it is only by abolishing capital that the freedom of some will no longer require the immiseration of others, and thus *no one can deny* that, after '68, we still remain



communists via a fidelity to communism as an Idea as opposed to maintaining a party line defined by a dogmatic belief in a historically validated program. And yet, *it is the very existence of a shared understanding (common sense) of the very idea of communism, let alone the possibility of its real existence, that '68 has shown to no longer be certain.* It is in this sense that Badiou's contemporaneity thesis remains a poorly posed problem, since it takes the rupture effected by '68, which suspended one's ability to treat terms such as communism as an idea that is as clear and distinct as it is self-evident, as the very grounds for the question that guides theoretical and practical activity. To say that it is the problem of the continued absence of novel organizational forms necessitated by the historical and material conditions of 1968 is poorly posed is not to dismiss the relevance of forms that our struggles can and may assume. Rather, it is to acknowledge the manner by which this formulation of the problem proper to the reality of communist struggle presupposes the primacy of the form of organization over the content of self-organizing activity.

Interestingly enough, Badiou briefly recognizes this aporia as one of the defining experiences of the French Left in the midst of '68 itself: "the secret truth, that was gradually revealed, is that this common language, symbolized by the red flag, was dying out. There was a basic ambiguity about May '68: a language that was spoken by all was beginning to die out." (2010: 55) Insofar as Badiou is right to claim that May '68 marked a qualitative break with the PCF and CGT as twin personifications of communism ("May '68 [...] posed a huge challenge to the legitimacy of the historical organizations of the Left, of unions, of parties, and of famous leaders"), our problem is not simply a question of undoing their conflation of the proletariat with the figure of the industrial worker. Rather, it is a question that inquires into the existence and meaning of a communism shorn of the theoretical and practical dogmas of the historical organizations of the Left, raised to the level of orthodoxy. And yet, if our problem is one of discovering a new figure of revolutionary subjectivity, what remains unclear is the manner by which this definition of politics can be said to belong to the continuum of Events constitutive of what Badiou, quite seriously calls, the 'Idea of Communism.'

It is for this reason that we maintain that, after '68, we are confronted by the fact that the answer to the question 'what is the meaning of communism?' or 'what is communism?' can no longer take a self-evidentiary form.¹⁵ Moreover, the very absence

¹⁵ We would do better in taking up Joshua Clover's insight regarding the shifting terrain of struggle post-68, since it is Clover, rather than Badiou, who is able to grasp the relevant problems and questions that define our present and will shape the struggles to come: "the imagined course of capitalism→socialism→communism that has been with us at least since 'Critique of the Gotha Program,' and was a kind of common sense of the worker's movement a century ago, was premised on a historically concrete situation in which industrial production oriented social organization, and worker control of that sector gave onto total expropriation of the expropriators. Is that still true? Is there still a worker's movement in that way? Even if there were, does the hard limit of climate collapse mean that the



of a self-evidentiary reply signals to us that, today, communism presents itself in the form of a problem; a problem that is itself the ground for reinventing, redefining, or renewing the search for the political process that remains incommensurable and mutually excludes the logic of both capital and ‘really existing socialism.’ To affirm Blanchot’s dictum that, after ’68, “all the problems of revolutionary struggle [...] have taken a different form,” is to acknowledge the fact that communism, too, has taken a different form. No longer the solution to the riddle of history that knows itself to be such, and after ’68, *communism appears as the very riddle posed to history.*

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unfettering of industrial production on which that particular vision of the emancipation from labor was premised is not survivable? To the extent that any of these questions have answers, they all point away from the promise of what we now call socialism as a program of emancipation. It seems more to be a progressive management strategy for capital. It will ease some misery. It will point itself toward managed competition and greater democracy in a fraction of workplaces. Those are all to the good. I honestly don’t know if this contemporary iteration of socialism is, in addition to its limited gains, a blockage to movements that could meaningfully challenge capital. That is a serious and undervalued question [...]. History has not been kind to the notion of a progressive, step-by-step shift that arrives at a qualitatively different social arrangement. The good news is that, if we take the logic of ‘combined and uneven development’ seriously, it suggests that there is no historical requirement to pass through the lower stage to get to the higher stage. If we no longer believe in a ratcheting, incrementalist motion that ends in emancipation, we have to sit with the knowledge that the leap down either course will mean forgoing the virtues of the other.” (Büscher-Ulbrich/Lieber 2021: 169-85, 169-70)



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