

# The revolutionary romanticism of May 68

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The spirit of 68 is a powerful beverage, an intoxicating mixture, an explosive cocktail composed of various ingredients. One of those, and not the less important one, is revolutionary romanticism, a protest against the foundations of the modern industrial/capitalist civilization, its productivism and its consumerism, and a unique combination of subjectivity, desire and utopia - the "conceptual triangle" that defines 1968, according to Luisa Passerini.

Romanticism is not only a literary school of the early XIXth century, but one of the main forms of modern cultural criticism. As a structure-of-feeling, and a world view, it can be found in all spheres of cultural life - literature, poetry, painting, music, religion, philosophy, political ideas, anthropology, historiography and social sciences. It begins in the mid-XVIIIth century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, runs through German *Frühromantik*, Hölderlin, English Pre-raphaelites, William Morris, Symbolism, Surrealism and Situationism, and is still with us. It can be defined as a rebellion against modern capitalist society, in the name of past or pre-modern social and cultural values, as a protest against the modern disenchantment of the world, the individualist/competitive dissolution of human communities, and the triumph of mechanisation, mercantilisation, reification, quantification. Torn between its nostalgia for the past and its dreams for the future, it can take regressive forms, proposing a return to pre-capitalist ways of life, or revolutionary/utopian ones, when the feelings for the lost paradise are invested in the hope for a new society. [1]

Among the authors most admired by the rebel generation of the 60's we can find four thinkers who decidedly belong to the revolutionary romantic tradition, and who tried, like the Surrealists a generation earlier, to combine the Marxist and the Romantic critique of civilization : Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch. While the first two were popular among French rebels, the third one was best known in the US, while the last one had an impact mainly in Germany. Of course most of the youngsters who went into the streets in Berkeley, Berlin, Milan, Paris or Mexico City never read these philosophers, but their ideas were diffused, in thousand and one ways, in the flyers and slogans of the movement. This applies particularly, in France, to Debord and his Situationist friends, from whom the imaginary of May 68 derived some of its most audacious dreams, and some of its most striking formulae ("Let imagination seize power !") . However, it is not the "influence" of these thinkers that explains the spirit of 68, but the other way round : the rebel youth looked out for authors who could provide ideas and arguments for their protest and for their desires. Between them and the movement there was, during the 60's and the early 70's a sort of spiritual "elective affinity" : they discovered each other and influenced each other, in a process of reciprocal recognition.

In his remarkable book on May 68, Daniel Singer perfectly summarized the meaning of the "Events" : "it was a total rebellion questioning not just one aspect of the existing society but both its ends and means. It was a mental revolt against the existing industrial state, both against its capitalist structure and the kind of consumer society it has created. It was coupled with a striking revulsion against anything coming from above, against centralism, authority, the hierarchical order". [2] The *Great Refusal* (Marcuse's famous expression, in fact borrowed from Blanchot) - of capitalist modernisation, of authoritarianism and patriarchy - is one of the main "writings in the wall" - in all the meanings of this expression - of the French May 68, as well as, probably, of its equivalents in the US, Mexico, Italy, Germany, Brazil or elsewhere.

It should be stressed that it was *not* motivated by any crisis of the capitalist economy : on the contrary, those were the high days of the “30 glorious” years of capitalist growth and prosperity. This is important in order to avoid falling again in the trap of expecting anti-capitalist rebellions only – or mainly – as a result of more or less catastrophic downturns of capitalist economy : there is no direct correlation between the ups and downs of the Stock Market and the rise or fall of anti-capitalist - or revolutionary - struggles ! To believe the contrary would be a regression to the sort of economist “Marxism” which predominated in the Second and Third Internationals.

I will limit my comments to the French example, which I know better. If one takes, for example, the famous flyer distributed, in March 68 by Daniel Cohn-Bendit and his friends, “Why sociologists ?”, one finds a most outspoken rejection of anything that goes under the label of “modernization”, identified as “planification, rationalisation and production of consumer goods according to the economic needs of organized capitalism”. Similar railings against industrial techno-bureaucracy, the ideology of progress and rentability, economical-scientific imperatives and “the laws of science” are pervasive in many student documents from those days. The sociologist Alain Touraine, a critical observer of the movement, takes into account, using Marcusean concepts, this aspect of May 68 : “The revolt against ‘one-dimensionality’ of the industrial society administrated by the economical and political apparatus cannot burst out without having ‘negative’ aspects, i.e. without opposing the immediate pressure of desire to the constraints, pretensely natural, of growth and modernisation”. [3] To this one should add the protest against the imperialist and/or colonial wars, and a powerful wave of sympathy - not without “Romantic” illusions - with the liberation movements in the poor countries of the Third World. And, last but not least, among many of the younger activists, a deep mistrust of the Soviet model, considered as an authoritarian/bureaucratic system, and, for some, as a variant of the same paradigm of production and consumption as the capitalist West.

The Romantic spirit of May 68 is not only made of “negativity”, of rebellion against an economical, social and political system considered inhuman, intolerable, oppressive and philistine, of symbolic acts of protest, such as burning cars, those despised symbols of capitalist commodification and possessive individualism. [4] It is also full of utopian hopes, of libertarian and surrealist day dreams, of “explosions of subjectivity” (Luisa Passerini), of what Ernst Bloch called *Wunschbilder*, images of desire, which are not only projected in a possible future – an emancipated society, without alienation, reification, social or gender oppression - but immediately experimented in various forms of social practice : the revolutionary movement as collective feast - and as collective creativity in new forms of organization - the attempt to reinvent a free and egalitarian human community, the shared affirmation of one’s subjectivity (particular among feminists), the discovery of new ways of artistic creation, from subversive and irreverent posters to poetical and ironical writings in the wall.

The vindication of the right to subjectivity (Luisa Passerini) was linked to the radical anti-capitalist thrust that pervaded the spirit of May 68. This dimension should not be under-estimated : it permitted the – uneasy – alliance between the students, the various Marxist or Libertarian *groupuscules*, the new social movements (women’s liberation) and the workers and trade-unionists who organized – in spite of their bureaucratic leadership – the biggest general strike in French history.

In their important book on the “new spirit of capitalism”, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello distinguish between two kinds of anti-capitalist critique – each one a complex combination of emotions, subjective feelings, indignations and theoretical analysis - which somehow came together in May 68 : I) the social criticism, developed by the traditional labor movement, which denounces the exploitive nature of capitalism, the misery of the dominated classes and the egoism of the bourgeois oligarchy which confiscates the fruits of progress; II) the artistic critique, a radical challenge to the basic values of capitalism, in the name of freedom and authenticity, against a

system that produces alienation, disenchantment and oppression. [5]

Let us examine more in detail what Boltanski and Chiapello understand by “artistic critique” of capitalism : a critique of capitalist disenchantment and inauthenticity, of the misery of daily life, of the de-humanisation of the world by technocracy, of the authoritarian oppression. Instead of liberating the human potentialities for autonomy, self-organisation and creativity, capitalism submits all the individuals to the “iron cage” of instrumental rationality, and to the mercantile imperatives of commodity production. The expression forms of this critique are borrowed from the repertory of feast, play, poetry, “liberation of speech”, while its language is inspired by Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and Surrealism. It is anti-modernist insofar as it insists on disenchantment and modernist when it emphasizes liberation. One can find its ideas already in the small artistic and political “vanguard groups” of the 50’s – such as “Socialism or Barbarism” (Castoriadis, Claude Lefort) or Situationism (Guy Debord, Raul Vaneigem) – before it exploded in the student revolt of May 68. [6]

In fact, what Boltanski and Chiapello call “artistic” is essentially the same phenomena that I refer as “romantic” critique of capitalism. The main difference is that they attempt to explain it by a “bohemian style of life”, by the feelings of artists and dandys, as best formulated in the writings of Baudelaire. [7] This seems to me a much too narrow approach : what I call romantic anti-capitalism is not only much older, but has a much broader social background. It is rooted not only among artists, but also among intellectuals, women, students, as well as all kinds of social groups whose life-style and culture are negatively affected by the destructive process of capitalist modernisation.

The other problematic aspect of Boltanski and Chiapello’s otherwise outstanding and seminal essay, is their attempt to demonstrate that, in the last decades, the “artistic critique”, separating itself from the social one, became integrated and co-opted (“*récupéré*” in French) by the new spirit of capitalism, through its new style of management, based on the principles of flexibility, greater autonomy in work, more creativity, less labour-discipline and less authoritarianism. A new social elite, often active in the 60’s and attracted to the “artistic critique” has broken with the social critique of capitalism – considered to be “archaic” and associated with the old communist left – and has joined the system, taking managerial roles. [8]

For sure, there is much truth in this picture, but rather than a smooth continuity between the rebels of 68 and the new managers, or between the desires and utopias of May and the latest capitalist ideology, I see a deep ethical and political gap (sometimes in the life of the same individuals). What has been lost in the process is not some detail, but the main point : *anti-capitalism*... Once divested from its anti-capitalist content, the “artistic” - or romantic - critique of capitalism ceases to exist, loses any meaning, and becomes a mere ornament. Of course, capitalist ideology can integrate “artistic” and “romantic” elements in its discourse, but they have been emptied of any concrete social significance and perform as advertisement. There is hardly anything in common between the new industrial “flexibility” and the libertarian utopian dreams of 68. To speak, as Boltanski and Chiapello, of “capitalisme gauchiste”, is a pure nonsense, a *contradictio in adjecto*.

What is then the heritage of 68 today ? While I can agree with Perry Anderson that the movement has been thoroughly defeated, that many of its participants and leaders have become conformists, and that capitalism – in its neo-liberal form – emerged in the 80’s and 90’s not only as triumphant but as the only possible horizon, I would argue that we are seeing, in the last few years, the upsurge in world scale of a new broad social movement, with a strong anticapitalist component. Of course, history never repeats itself, and it would be vain and absurd to expect a “new May 68” in Paris or elsewhere : each new rebel generation has its own unique combination of desires, utopias and subjectivity. The international mobilization against neo-liberal globalisation, inspired by the principle that “the world is not a commodity”, which took the streets in Seattle, Prague, Porto Alegre and Quebec, is – inevitably – very different from the movements of the 60’s. It is far from being

homogeneous : while its more moderate participants still believe in the possibility to regulate the system, a large section of the movement – well beyond its organized Marxist or Libertarian components– is outspokenly anti-capitalist, and in its protest we can find, not unlike 68, a unique combination of the Romantic and the Marxist critique of the capitalist order, of its social injustice and of its mercantile greed. One can already perceive not only analogies with the 60's – the strong anti-authoritarian, or libertarian, tendency - but also some important differences : the ecological and the feminist dimensions, who were very incipient in May 68, are now key components of the new radical culture, while the illusions on “really existing socialism” (whether Soviet, Chinese or other) have practically disappeared.

This movement is only beginning, and it is impossible to predict how it will evolve, but it has already changed the intellectual and political climate in several countries. It is realistic, i.e. it demands the impossible...

## Notes

1. I have developed this interpretation of romanticism in my book, with Robert Sayre, *Révolution et Mélancolie. Le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité*, Paris, Payot, 1992, soon to appear in English at Duke University Press.
2. Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution. France in May 1968*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1970, p. 21.
3. A.Touraine, *Le Mouvement de Mai ou le Communisme utopique*, Paris, Seuil, 1969, p. 224. See also the insightful essay by Andrew Feenberg, “ Remembering the May events ”, *Theory and Society*, n° 6, 1978.
4. Here is what Henri Lefebvre wrote in a book published in 1967 : “ In this society where things are more important than human beings, there is a king-object, a pilot-object : the automobile. Our society, so called industrial, or technical, has this symbol, a thing invested with prestige and power (...) The car is, in the neo-capitalist countries, an incomparable and perhaps irreparable instrument of deculturation, of internal destruction of the civilized world”. (H. Lefebvre, *Contre les technocrates*, 1967, re-edited in 1971 as *Vers le cybernanthrope*, Paris, Denoel, p.14.
5. Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, pp. 244-245.
6. *Ibid.* pp. 245-246.
7. *Ibid.* pp. 63-84.
8. *Ibid.* pp.283-287

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\* From “Thesis Eleven”, n° 68, February 2002.