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Politics of Desire: Returning to the Intuition of ‘68

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What is the significance of ‘68 in the revolutionary history of the 20th century? We could say that it is the beginning of a crisis and decline: the decline of the hypothesis of revolution through the seizure of power, which had been hegemonic since the Russian Revolution in 1917.

1968 was not only the French May, but a long wave both in time and space that traversed the United States, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Spain, etc. In none of these cases was it about taking over the state through a vanguard party. Thus it expresses an intuition: society is not changed (only) by taking power or even the means of production.

What had happened in the Soviet Union after 1917? Undoubtedly there had been a major shift in political power. Undoubtedly there had been a major shift in the relations of production: the disappearance of the market, of private ownership of the media, of competition, etc. But, the most profound logics of bureaucratic capitalism were reproduced: the rigid division between planners

and doers, the vertical concentration of decision-making power, the cult of expert "science," the Taylorization of work, and growth and productivity as the ultimate goals, for example.

I call it an "intuition" because it was not a clear formulation in the era, but something confused and stuttering, with many different versions. There are still those who critique the Soviet Union within the Marxist-Leninist conceptual framework, those who think that taking power should be complemented by a cultural revolution (that's the message of Mao or Che Guevara). But there is a general hunch that says: *a political revolution is not enough.* What then?

Political Economy, Libidinal Economy

The 1970s in France were years of intense philosophical production. The Argentine thinker León Rozitchner would say: "if the people don't struggle, philosophy doesn't think." In other words, philosophy is not a bubble operating within a closed circuit, but it is fueled by the impetus and problems raised by society. But if the people fight, philosophy makes it maximum effort. And that is what happens in France in the 1970s.

I propose imagining that philosophical productivity as being motivated by the different attempts to take charge of the intuition of '68 on the plane of ideas. During the 1970s, complex elaborations about power, knowledge, sexuality, the imaginary, symbolic exchange, etc. unfolded. This general reconceptualization overflowed Marxism as its exclusive and privileged theoretical framework. And it continues nourishing us to this day.

One of the thinkers who tries to philosophically take charge of the intuition of '68 is Jean-François Lyotard, who had been active in

the autonomist group *Socialisme ou barbarie* during the 1950s and '60s and who experienced the storm of '68 from its epicenter: the University of Nanterre and the March 22 Movement.

Today the figure of Lyotard has become trapped in the notion of postmodernity, but he made many other journeys of thought during his life. For example, in the 1970s he developed a complex philosophy related to desire, in dialogue with the better known ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

What shape does Lyotard give to the intuition of '68? I'll summarize his proposal with only one sentence and then explain it: Lyotard says "*there is no political economy without a libidinal economy*." What does this mean? Very briefly: there is no mode of production that is not sustained by a certain position of desire. In a type of attitude, motivations, disposition toward others, the world, and life in general.

There is no macro without the micro. The revolutionaries that tried to introduce radical social changes without taking the question of subjectivity into account failed miserably. They changed the content without touching the forms and thus reproduced the evil of domination, that is not only outside but also deep within us.

Mutation of the Position of Desire

We have to imagine social transformation then, Lyotard says, as a *radical mutation of the position of desire*.

Why "position"? Because it is not only about changing the object of desire for another, but changing the very *way* of desiring, from the very *place* from which one does it: not only *what* is wanted but

how what is wanted is wanted. Not simply other politicians, but another relation to the political, not simply another job, but another relation to work, and so on.

Wanting other things, wanting differently. The mutation we are talking about means a radical redistribution of the desirable and the undesirable, of what matters and what does not matter, of what moves us and what leaves us indifferent. At the level of the body and the skin, not merely ideologically.

In short, social change, according to Lyotard, is a problem of metamorphosis. A mutation in the very configuration of the human. A certain anthropological stitching bursting at the seams, the production of a different humanity and other possibilities of existence: *a change of skin*.

It would be completely erroneous to see this metamorphosis as a happy, linear, or necessary process, because it is joyful and painful at the same time, it is traversed by cramps or contractions, ups, downs, and detours, leaps and regressions, full of dirt, blood, mud, impurities... It is loved, accepted, but also feared and rejected. Sometimes it is both, for the same person, at the same time.

1968: A regime that regulates energy

What is the dominant position of desire in the 1960s, in the era of Fordism and industrial society? Lyotard speaks of a regime that "regulates" energies that tends to "normalize" bodies and only produce medium, mediocre intensities.

The *sphere of work* is characterized by Taylorism according to which "the worker must be a mixture of orangutan and robot," as Taylor himself said. A standardized definition of tasks, the exclusion of

any forms of participation or affective implication in the labor process, absolute submission to a hierarchy or pyramid structure. The capitalism of the 1960s is extremely repressive and disciplinary: it exercises an authoritarian power that fixes bodies in places and functions. In the factory, of course, but also in the family, the school, the hospital, the army, etc.

In the *sphere of consumption*, it is the absolute triumph of exchange value: any object can enter and circulate in the system if it can be exchanged for money. Nothing is sacred, nothing is "untouchable," everything can be *profaned*: be sold, bought, commercialized. Money is the absolute mediator, that destroys all others: the old precapitalist codes that once governed and production and circulation of goods. In the end, there are not things, there are not people, there are not activities, there are not knowledges nor beliefs: there are only different masks of exchange value.

The "human type" that is produced and reproduced then is the "homo economicus" who saves, calculates, negotiates, defends their interests, works, is docile, sober, serious, moderate. It is not about being "without desire," but rather a desire that is obedient and open to the abstract.

The drift of desire in 1968

Based on this, how can we understand the movements of the 1960s? They are not social movements, localized and limited, with demands and vindications, but rather *drifts of desire*. Movements of the tectonic plates of society.

On one hand, they suppose a gigantic *withdrawal* of desire that drains the sap from the established channels and objects: the

traditional family, factory work, serialized individualism, authority, money, consumption and property, romantic love as ownership of the other, etc. A gigantic and invisible erosion: the type of human proposed by bureaucratic capitalism is not criticized or denounced, but rather is deserted en masse, through a displacement of libidinal investment.

People no longer want what they used to want. Desire does not allow itself to be organized through established institutions, disciplinary power is not capable of producing and reproducing a certain type of body, the youth do not recognize or conduct themselves as "homo economicus" and the system seizes up.

On the other hand, desire becomes available in another way, it starts to function differently, it invests in different things and other "values": autonomy in opposition to discipline and authority; the intensification of passions in opposition to instrumental links with the world; the community in opposition to hermetical individualism of social atoms. The political and countercultural experiences of the 1960s give shape to a true parallel society composed of communitarian spaces and attempts, networks of support, and impassioned links. Social desire flees toward an "outside."

Erasing the intuition of '68

How are the 1960s understood today? For the right, they are the "scapegoat" toward which all contemporary fears are redirected: thus, the '60s – and not policies that remove protections and make life more precarious – are to blame for the decline in values, the generalized disorientation, and the "chaos" of contemporary society.

But the movements of the 1960s are also critiqued from the other side. In a curious complicity with the right, today we see leftist critics lash out against them. They tell us that '68 was at its core a *liberal* movement that accelerated the emergence or consolidation of consumer society and "modernity," fragmented the working class, promoting individualism, rejecting all tradition and discipline in the name of narcissism, etc.

In general, these analyses make no sense. But it is important to read the subtext of the critiques: *a politics of desire must be abandoned to return to the classic forms of politics.* The Party and the (electoral) conquest of power, the representation of the people identified as victims, identity or morals as springs and levers, the left, etc. The only possible horizon of a politics of emancipation would be, according to these critics, to defend the social state being dismantled.

Thus they seek to *erase the intuition of '68.*

My idea is precisely the opposite. If neoliberalism is so strong today it is not only because it tricks and it represses, but because it presents itself as *obvious* and *desirable*. It is necessary to read the neoliberal counterrevolution of recent decades not simply as an attack on working class composition and wages, but as a *counterattack in terms of desire*.

In the 1960s, the movements went first and power pursued them, chasing young people who ran away and taking them back home, etc. Today it is exactly the opposite. Let's think about Airbnb (one example among thousands): neoliberalism leads the initiative and leftist politics are limited (in the best of cases) to "regulating." Capital reads the deep social currents, it captures desire, it knows how to translate all energies into money, it invents and creates.

And meanwhile the left only aspires to impose this or that tax on the market flows.

If today the forces of emancipation are so effectively weak it is precisely because they have lost contact with the intuition of '68. They no longer dispute over desirable or undesirable forms of life, they are limited to critical opinion, politics of communication, the resistance that doesn't resist anything.

Taking the initiative again can only consist of once again waging the dispute on the plane of desire: what type of humans are we and do we want to be? But we have to do so in changed conditions because today we live in another economy of desire, very different from that of the 1960s.

2018: A regime that preys on energy

What is the dominant position of desire today? Lyotard, in 1974, in a few visionary pages, speaks of a "predatory" energy regime.

The "predator" is not simply the vampire that sucks blood. The figure is distinct, more complex, more interesting: the predator exalts energies (to rob them), preys on overexcited energies.

Today it resonates powerfully with financial capitalism, extractivist policies, unregulated speculation, the penetration of capital in layers of living beings (human and nonhuman) that had remained untouched, pillage, looting, and sexist violence as forms of conquest. What is known as neoliberalism.

And desire? Neoliberalism not only represses or disciplines, but it also *intensifies energies*: it mobilizes, agitates, stimulates.

The "human type" that it produces and reproduces is no longer the "homo economicus," but what we could call the "maximizer" motivated by the desire for *always more*. The maximizer doesn't seek savings, moderation, sobriety, or seriousness, but *the indefinite overcoming of his or herself*: continuous formation, maximum flexibility, constant evaluation, permanent competition, etc.

The maximizer is the "wolf" of Wall Street: deranged, always doped up, wasteful, preying on sexual contact, over-accelerated, excessive, impatient, impudent, shameless. Always high: the type of intensity that neoliberalism proposes to us is that of a *high*.

From bored to overwhelmed

Neoliberalism no longer tells us no ("you cannot") but rather yes (you can and you should). It no longer forces us as an external power, but rather one that is internal and voluntary. It does not repress enjoyment (or it does not put enjoyment in repression), but it arouses it. It is a modulation of desire that seems much more difficult to escape.

But this also occurs: Neoliberalism, on taking charge of desire, mistreats it and provokes enormous suffering. We must start from that discomfort, from that suffering. What do I mean by this?

The old regulating regime repressed, disciplined, and rigidly fixed bodies in places and functions, producing massive *boredom*.

Boredom, as life without passion, as the minimization of enjoyment, was a major force in the revolutionary contestation of the 1960s. "Down with a world in which the guarantee that we will not die of starvation has been purchased with the guarantee that

we will die of boredom," the Situationist Raoul Vaneigem wrote in a quote that became a popular slogan.

The predatory regime mobilizes, forces, demands, thus producing what we colloquially call being *overwhelmed*. A mixture of anxiety and stress due to the overload of tasks, the uninterrupted mobilization of mental energies, the constant stimulation of attention, unlimited working time confused with life.

From bored to overwhelmed, from the repression of life (channeled, reigned in, corseted) to the mobilization of life (overloaded, overexcited, overstimulated). From overwhelmed to "tiredness," an exhaustion which is spoken about in thousands of everyday conversations and that is not that of the worker turned into an "orangutan and robot," but rather mental fatigue from stress, anguish, and guilt for not "always being up for it." And from tiredness to depression: the radical fall in energy, the loss of motivations, the B-side of the predatory regimen.

Today desire is electrocuted and segmented. *Electrocuted*, from being pressured and strained by external requirements. *Segmented*, in the interruption and constant discontinuity, the fragmentation and corrosion of any duration.

The drift of desire in 2018

At the end of *One-Dimensional Man*, his celebrated essay critiquing the society of the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse situated the following Walter Benjamin quote: "Only for the sake of the *hopeless* ones have we been given hope."

It remains that way. Hope lies in the discomfort generated by the imperative to perform, among those who say "I can't anymore," "I don't want anymore."

The anguished, the suffocating, the exhausted, the dejected, the overwhelmed, the saturated, the burdened, the burned out, the electrocuted. They are the ones who can (we can) puncture the dominant position of desire today: the always-more.

But, what interrupts today? How do we remove ourselves from the performance imperative? How do we desert the figure of the "maximizer"? What is needed is a new attack on the "libidinal economy" of neoliberalism, on its organization of desire. A sort of *blackout* of our desiring energies.

This "struggle" is not necessarily epic, heroic, and collective. We shouldn't underestimate personal blackouts and desertion that takes place drop by drop. For example, David Le Breton has researched subtle ways of disrespecting the mandate to "be one's self," to be constantly connected and available, to always be up for it. He speaks of "silence" and "walking." He proposes seeing them as forms of *political* resistance. As active flights from the noise of permanent connection, as ways of making contact again, not with the Self, but with one's own desire, as exercises of paying attention to one's own force (rhythm, body, breathing), as non-commodified enjoyment, that do not "capitalize," that are not means to an end.

There are also instances of collective blackouts. Some fragments of society then begin to vibrate together. Sometimes they are demanding something and other times they are not, sometimes they have a well-developed discourse and other times not: what is important is that they are organized in such a way that the neoliberal form of life is questioned. Living differently, getting the

taste of a different existence. For a period of time, there is an end to anguish, to anxiety, the crazy hamster wheel. Energies are transferred from work and consumption to sustaining a moment of collective life. We no longer want to be in any other place than where we are. We have all the time in the world. The maximum concentration of energy. Exhaustion, but *happy* exhaustion. Many of the pathologies of everyday life vanish and desire is regenerated.

Living with dead times and enjoying the obstacles

On the walls of Paris in '68 someone writes: "to live without dead time and to enjoy without obstacles." It was a slogan against boredom. But today we can no longer simply oppose life to death, liberation to repression, the new to the old, intensity to boredom, the outside to what is on the inside. The blackouts are precisely dead times in which we stop to think and recover contact with our desire as a center of gravity. It is not about breaking – with one's parents, with work, with the surroundings –, but of *interrupting* the predatory logic of relation with everything. It is not about leaving society for "liberated zones," but of pushing for transformation *here where we are*. It is not about living in a permanent high, but of affirming other intensities (more subtle, with highs and lows) and other relations with them.

The only thing that can substantially change things is to start living differently. That is the intuition of '68. Today it is only the conditions and the terms of the challenge that have changed.

Some References

Libidinal Economy, Jean-François Lyotard (Continuum, 2004).

On the regime of the always-more, see for example *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, by Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot (Verso, 2014)

Romper y mechar, un diálogo entre el 68 y el 15M