Jean-Marie Apostolidès

There is, at the origin of this essay, a double hypothesis: on one hand, the events of May ’68 in France constitute a symbolic revolution, allowing the crossing from a patriarchal society to a “fraternal” society, in other words a society in which new groupings – which we call fratries (sibships) – replace former associative modes little by little; on the other, the predominance of the fraternal, egalitarian, and horizontal bond over the former paternal, hierarchical, and vertical bond is linked to the experience of the crowd: to create a fratrie is to prolong the imaginary fantasy relationship that predominates when a crowd gathers to contest the established order. But, in order to understand the importance of the experience of the crowd in ‘68, we must remember the socio-cultural context that led to the revolt.

I. MATERIAL CHANGE

In relation to France immediately after the war, France of ’68 found its materiality and its values transformed. With the Marshall Plan and the economic and social politics of the 4th Republic, the kick-off for the country’s modernization began; but in the French
mentality, it was General De Gaulle’s return to power that was credited with this transformation. With the founding of the 5th Republic and even more so with the end of the Algerian War, the country seemed prey to incessant metamorphosis. Daily life was no longer the same. The population in cities increased, the traditional middle classes (small merchants, artisans, and small business owners, a fragmented peasantry devoting themselves to polyculture) were eaten away, falling from 40% of the active population in 1936 to 14% a half-century later, while the same transformation, though less directly perceptible, affected the industrial bourgeoisie. Members of this class, who, until the Second World War, left their capital as inheritance to their children, found themselves more and more excluded at the end of the 60s: the crisis of the traditional industries like textiles or shoe manufacturing, competition from production in third-world countries, the decline of coal and steel. The great bourgeoisie, which had emerged from the industrial revolution of the 19th century, found itself replaced at the helm by a technocracy whose rules of co-optation developed by means of professional qualification (the grandes écoles system) rather than familial heritage. Henceforth, 85% of the active population was salaried and also received the systems of social protection that accompany a salary (insurance, social security, retirement, etc.). The period called the Trente glorieuses—to recall the expression of Jean Fourastié—raised the living standards of the French. Even if the working class received fewer benefits from these improvements than the rest of the population, the numbers are telling: 57% of workers possessed a car in ’68 as opposed to 24% in 1960, 67% of homes had a television (14% in 1960), 77% had the benefit of a refrigerator (22% in 1960); finally, 56% used a washing machine (previously 27%).

In other words, France entered the society of consumption. France’s entrance was preceded by that of the United States, which then seemed a model of material success and an example to follow, but the French, cramped in their tradition, were confronted with problems whose only solution would emerge from a social and political crisis without precedent in the 20th century. In 1968, the abundance of commodities was accompanied with a new look at objects, attested by the undertaking of the Nouveau Roman or George Perec’s first book, Les Choses, which won the Renaudot Prize in 1965. In cinema, the work of Jacques Tati portrayed changing morals, new behavior regarding children, and the invasion of things into daily life. Films like Mon oncle (1958), and moreover Playtime (1967) or Trafic (1971), showed how contact with commodities leads man to become an appendage of the objects. During the same period, Jean Baudrillard in Le système des objets and situationist theory (Society of the Spectacle was first published in 1967) analyzed the characteristics of the new consumption society.

Beyond their differences, these works all confirm the loss of the absolute produced by the domination of a general system of equivalence. In a universal system of exchange, almost no value can remain sacred.
THE STUDENT CONDITION IN '68

Since the beginning of the 60s, the French university had been overwhelmed by the influx of new students, those from the baby boom generation. Whereas in 1960, the student population was 215,000, this number reached 508,000 in 1968. Despite the opening of new campuses such as Nanterre in 1964, which absorbed more than 15,000 students in 1967, the Parisian universities were packed. The university was also ill-prepared in terms of programs, in spite of the creation of the IUT (institut universitaire de technologie). Of course, sociology and psychology were part of the program since 1958, but these new domains did not lead to any clearly defined career. Humanities, which led mostly to professorship, did not satisfy the concrete needs of the new society. Yet they kept their importance merely for ideological reasons.

If the students still had a social and political cause to defend during the Algerian War, in 1968 they felt an emptiness that led to a withdrawal to individual problems. Membership in UNEF (Union nationale des étudiants de France), a student union that dealt mainly with housing allocation, declined beginning in 1965. Certainly students were still aware of political and social issues, but due to lack of more exalting combat, they went back to their studies.

All of these facts are well known, as is the crisis faced by the main student organizations such as the Communist UEC (Union des étudiants communistes) and the Catholic JEC (Jeunesse étudiante catholique). Perhaps less evident is the global situation that most of the students had to face during that period. In 68, the main aspects of student life were indeed in transformation. Even if in Paris the Latin Quarter remained the geographic and cultural center, the students, who were housed in all of the capital’s neighborhoods, were absorbed into the collective population each night. The notion of the campus à l’américaine was foreign to French universities. Students no longer even formed a close-knit community as was the case at the beginning of the 30s, with its rites, its passwords, and its folklore. On one hand, being too numerous to know each other, they had the impression of being drowned in anonymity; on the other hand, the complexity of the programs of study and competition left little room for entertainment, even if student life is to a certain extent characterized by leisure. Whereas before World War II, students in law or in medicine could easily pass their exams while dedicating a large portion of their time to politics or art, after 1960, it was no longer feasible. The disappearance of student folklore reinforced the feeling of alienation and solitude, which was the fate for the majority of them. Participation in the mass movements in '68 would be the remedy for disconnection from social reality, which characterized student life in the mid-1960s.
THE POVERTY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

If compared to their worker or salaried comrades, students in 1968 were certainly privileged but only because of their future condition. Looking closely, the negative aspects of their situation were numerous. Financial dependence on parents prolonged the adolescent period, along with the ambivalent attitudes that such dependence develops. From the economic perspective, students were in a worse position than their working comrades, even if they knew that this situation would soon be reversed. Food offered was that from the “restau u” or university dining halls (that says it all), and lodging, which most often had neither water nor toilets, was most of the time the “maids rooms” under the roofs of bourgeois buildings. These living conditions pushed the student to hide the mediocrity of his or her condition. Such a situation would be denounced in 1966 by Situationist International in a scathing attack that has remained famous. This text by Mustapha Khayati stigmatized bourgeois culture: it was described as an illusion in compensation for extremely miserable student life. Moreover, the pamphlet analyzed the student as a new genre of consumer, a consumer of culture whose habitus could scarcely be differentiated from those of other groups of buyers in a society ruled by market logic.

Along with books, cinema constituted one of the havens of student imagination during this period. Cinema was at once the place where one dove into a more adventurous existence than real life, and the privileged vehicle of new values. In that sense, films from the New Wave modeled the sensitivity of the students from the sixties more than political discourses of the elders, and prepared the advent of the fraternal tradition by making the young into heroes. Let us remember that the success of this cinematographic movement began with François Truffaut’s Four hundred blows, a film which tells the difficult life of a fourteen-year-old boy (the story is partially autobiographical), the victim of a lack of affection from his parents and the narrow-minded strictness of his teachers.

Culture provided students with an “imaginary place” where they could live their social situation in disguise. One characteristic emerged from the research conducted at the time, particularly that of Bourdieu and Passeron: student life took place in a time and space separate from the “real” social universe. Even if they were not excluded, the students at least found themselves marginalized, locked up in a specialized space that prolonged their status as minors and individuals without responsibility. Indeed, those who had to take jobs in order to obtain pocket money were rare, and even when they did, they most often became high school assistants, in other words without leaving the educational space. Like the student world, the universe of culture was cut off from traditional social reference points; this is why students were not only privileged consumers of culture, they were also its objects and its incarnation. Their time was the reverse of work time; it was defined by leisure, as time wasted, the only crucial dates being those of exams.
We have seen that the space itself besieged by students also engendered autonomy and marginalization. In Paris, this space had its implicit boundaries and its obligatory routes. Its center was the Latin Quarter and its privileged stops were cafés, movie houses, the Luxembourg Gardens, the Sainte-Geneviève or Sorbonne Libraries, places that the filmmakers of the New Wave chose as décor for their first short films. Insofar as they escaped the constraints of salaried life, students equally favored economic practices that did not participate in market exchange: bartering, the donation system, ostentatious spending, potlatch gift exchanges. In short, they lived the fragility of their situation in the form of a stretched present without tomorrow that ceaselessly renewed itself. While their condition was defined by its transient character and the real objective of studies was to finish them, in other words to make students do away with their status as students, the interviews reported by Bourdieu and Passeron showed on the contrary that students did not envision the future, less because they scarcely worried about it than because they did not recognize its face. When they were questioned regarding the concrete prospects after their studies or where they saw themselves in the next three or four years, the majority could not respond, except for the medical students for whom the future was more foreseeable.

In other terms, if the student perceived the mediocrity of his future existence, rather than facing it, he took refuge in daydreams no longer rooted in the reality he confronted. Thus one can say that the students’ condition established the internal contradictions we previously mentioned. They were privileged but remained in a state of absolute dependence. They were fascinated by new objects but could not appropriate them. With the exception of the Situationists, they did not yet see that the world of things did not stop with objects, that it constituted a general manner of existence linked to both capitalism and the city. Even if they apparently rejected the abundance of commodities, they also accepted it, especially when it came to new intellectual products conceived as toys and offered for their appetites.

LYRIC CONSCIENCE, TRAGIC CONSCIENCE

Because the baby boom generation was divided between a traditional heritage that has become obsolete and dysfunctional and a new environment built from recent technologies and the well-being that accompanied a constant call to hedonism, this generation oscillated between a tragic conscience and a lyric conscience. This term, originally encountered in the work of Milan Kundera, was borrowed by François Ricard; I shall adopt it in my turn because it unveils one of the fundamental attitudes of the baby boom generation, that which comes from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Ricard proposed a certain number of behavioral traits defining the children born between approximately 1942 and 1948. What characterizes the first-born of the baby boomers is foremost an innocence, a frivolity, and absence of doubt that sometimes
borders on senselessness. This applies particularly to young North Americans (Canada and the United States), on whom the guilt of World War II and the ambiguities of the heroic heritage weighed less heavily than their European counterparts. As Ricard wrote, neither they nor their parents “had to blame themselves for the death camps or for collaboration with the enemy”. However, many elements of the lyric conscience were found in France on the eve of the events of ’68. The first of these traits was a sort of faith, of confidence in life, which was marked by all-out optimism. Numerous individuals from that generation shared the same implicit belief that everyone was, if not fundamentally good, then at least perfectible. They believed in the virtues of dialogue, negotiation, and example. It sufficed to discover what wasn’t working in order for a problem to find its solution. Bad people only committed evil out of ignorance or because they were stricken with an illness that had not yet been diagnosed, and it was necessary to care for them. Problems could only be solved by the combined virtue of dialogue and respect for all opinions.

That generation also wanted to be loved for its virtue, its audacities, its taste for adventure, its attraction to all things new and brilliant. They attempted to spread these characteristics around them and even to spread them across the globe. It was a generation that grew with the development of airlines; they took advantage of the ease of available transportation in order to depart to conquer the world: India, Mexico, or Canada. It was a generation that traveled heavily, brushing with the exterior world, comparing its own situation to that of other countries. They borrowed any ideas, any artistic forms that seemed desirable from other nations, particularly the United States. To use the words of René Girard, mimetic desire was a dominant trait of the baby boom generation.

On the psychological level, the lyric generation also possessed remarkable characteristics. They stood firm on their rights, a rupture with the preceding generation, and were bearers of a new optimistic vision of the world that they wished to spread everywhere. Because of this, they knew not only that they constituted a group, a class, but that they dreamed of forming a community, an assembly of beings who would share the same ideals and would live transparently one and all. This led to the fact that they implicitly condemned all that separated individuals – knowledge, class divisions, the social division of labor, and sexual differences. For this generation, ideal politics would lead to the elimination of barriers: it was necessary to fraternize, to live in close union with thy neighbor, who is also one’s fellow creature, one’s brother. This generation naively wished for the entire earth to be devoted to pleasure, prosperity, and peace. These were the key words of the flower generation in the United States, which many young French people adopted after the burgeoning of May ’68. Movements such as feminism, the gay movement, or compassion for victims, which began after ’68 and still lives today, found their roots in the Christian sensitivity of the lyric generation.
In France and in the majority of European countries, the lyric conscience was tempered by an opposite tendency, the tragic conscience, which found its origins in heroic culture and, since World War II, in the incapacity to assume its legacy. The baby boomers were at once fascinated by violence and the incapacity of utilizing it for a cause directly linked to their daily preoccupations. The colonial wars were over; the revolutionary ideal was abandoned in the East and in the USSR; showing strength meant turning to other countries such as Vietnam, China, or Cuba, which seemed to have taken up the torch of the revolution. Mao’s China, which broke with the USSR in 1963, launched its cultural revolution in 1966. This fascinated France’s youth enough to spur the development of a Maoist movement à la française after ’68 whose influence would be felt until the middle of the following decade. As for Fidel Castro, he remained an enduring revolutionary reference. Regarding the Vietnam War, the baby boomers of the Left would be unanimously against it.

If on the one hand the lyric conscience facilitated the invention of a new fraternal culture that was opposed to the patriarchal society, on the other hand the tragic conscience allowed leftist groups to gain influence and success during the ten years that followed the May 68 revolt. These contradictory elements coexisted within the same generation, even sometimes within the same individual. They created tension at the heart of one’s being, the only outlet of which was destructive action. The lyric conscience was deployed in the present and toward the future, whereas the tragic conscience seized the negative legacy of the past. Hedonism and joie de vivre constituted a fundamental dimension of the lyric conscience, as did compassion for those who did not have access to happiness. This conscience was also founded on the idea that the world could be improved, postulating that with the help of compromise and negotiations, one would reach a consensus and attain perfection. It was also characterized by a quite primitive pragmatism, in other words in the belief that if something succeeded, it was because it was good and, consequently, should be preserved. Inversely, if something failed, it was because it was bad and should be gotten rid of.

The tragic conscience diverged on many points. It began with an absolute pessimistic confirmation, the knowledge the world was radically bad. The individual who embraced this “tragic” understanding took it as a point of reference and saw the world through this pessimistic lens. Once positioned as the basic postulate, the tragic sentiment is reinforced by the discrepancies between the inherited heroic imperative and the knowledge that the glorious years were finished, at least in France. The veritable struggles took place elsewhere, in the third world, in South America; the heroic times would reappear in Europe in a distant future, probably following a catastrophe allowing human history to start over with a more stable foundation. Caught between a past that was too heavy and too brilliant a future in which the contradictions of the present would be abolished, the tragic mind
felt crushed and powerless. In this mind, melancholy and sometimes bitterness developed, making it damn its own era in an absolute fashion. For the tragic conscience, not only was the world bad, it could not be improved. Thus emerged the necessity for a revolution that would correct evil and bring back good. The sense of catastrophe accompanied the tragic conscience, which sought unhappiness to at once punish men for their frivolity and to assure the return of true values, those of the founding fathers.

In the French intellectual tradition, the tragic conscience possessed a long history, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Guy Debord and beyond. On the eve of ‘68 in France, the temptation was to reject the society of consumption, i.e. pleasure, due to the imperfections it brought and the injustices it generated. However, what we can clearly identify today was imperceptible thirty years ago; each of the participants in that era was divided between the lyric sensitivity and the tragic one.

**PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF THE CITY**

While the setting of the preceding generation’s sensitivity was patriarchal, rural, and provincial, that of the baby boom generation was democratic, urban, and Parisian. Parents had their eyes turned toward the past, children toward the future. The city from then on was the place where everything happened. It was made of rapidity and change, while rural life was characterized by slowness and permanence. One favored movement, the other stability. If the city’s sonorous essence is the confused noises of all modern devices (radios, cars, mechanical tools, etc.), then the country is characterized by silence. Only the country allows one to listen to the multiple voices of nature, those that come from the interior of the self or from the animal world. The passionate ties of love or hate of rural life stood in contrast against the neutral relationships of urban life. In the city, social status has the upper hand over the individual. In the country, it is the opposite.

The two decades after the war were accompanied by a new reflection on the city, illustrated by the work of Paul Chombart de Lauwe, Henri Lefebvre or François Choay. During the same period, the Situationists invented a new science — psychogeography — which they abandoned in the mid-60s for a more traditional revolutionary engagement. The project deserves mention. They proposed the following definition of it: “The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” For them, it was about not separating knowledge from its effects on man; they wished to develop knowledge that would include and emphasize the subjective dimension in order to provoke changes. Psychogeography ultimately aimed for a conscious transformation of space along with a modification of being. What we must retain for our purposes is that psychogeography is presented as an imaginary science attempting to unify incompatible worlds. While social sciences imply
an objective gaze, psychogeography is founded on radical subjectivity. Psychogeography challenges the utilitarianism of the social sciences with its unmotivated nature: drifting finds its end in itself; it possesses the gratuitousness of a game. Reading Guy Debord’s accounts of drifting published in 1956 in *Les lèvres nues* or the novel by Michèle Bernstein *La nuit*, which is presented as a lengthy drifting through Paris during which a young couple fuses their love in several ways, it is understood that the city is interpreted by the Situationists less as a rupture than as a turning away from the country. The city became a forest or a labyrinth, an unsettling and magical place where all encounters were possible. It was also a place of absolute subjectivity; its heroes explained themselves to no one; devoted to leisure, they wasted their time and refused the work that characterized the urban milieu.

II. THE EXPLORATION OF NEW BEHAVIOR

In 1968, the city was the setting for a large-scale psychogeographical experiment. Paris became the location of a “great game,” the objective context – time and space – was diverted from its aim, removed from the world of work and transformed in the parameters of experimentation. Even if it was not yet the “revolution” for which some were hoping, the social movement allowed the exploration of new behavior that would become permanent in the following decade.

THE CROWD EXPERIENCE

The experience of ’68 was first associated with the crowd. During the days of May, many public demonstrations were held on campuses or in the streets both in Paris and the provinces. Only mentioning the most significant ones, let us remember the fighting in Nanterre on January 26, the public manifestations against the Vietnam War in February, the numerous meetings in March in Nanterre which led to the suspension of classes until April 1. On March 29, there was the gigantic sit-in in Nanterre, on April 12 the anti-Springer demonstration in Paris, the march of the CGT (Confédération générale du travail), the PC (Parti communiste), and the PSU (Parti socialiste unifié) on May 1 from Place de la République to Place de la Bastille, the May 2 demonstrations in Nanterre in support of 8 expelled students, the May 3 meeting in the courtyard of the Sorbonne stopped by the police, but which continued with several demonstrations in the Latin Quarter. On Monday, May 6, following the court appearance of several students from Nanterre (among them Daniel Cohn-Bendit) before the disciplinary committee, new demonstrations occurred in Paris and the first barricades were erected. On that occasion, unrest in the capital spread to the provincial universities. On Tuesday, May 7, a large demonstration occurred from Place Denfert-Rochereau to Place de l’Etoile; on Tuesday, May 8, from the Halle-aux-Vins (Jussieu) to Place Edmond-Rostand; on Thursday,
May 9, a public meeting at the Sorbonne was followed by the occupation of the university; on Friday, May 10, various gatherings in the Latin Quarter took place and ended with the erection of new barricades; on Saturday, May 11, the occupation of Censier University occurred. After the truce on Sunday, May 12, demonstrations began again, taken over by the unions. In the afternoon, two hundred thousands people marched in Paris from the Gare de l’Est to Place Denfert-Rochereau. Students continued the march to the Champ de Mars. In the provinces, numerous demonstrations took place in major cities. On Tuesday, May 14, an assembly in Nanterre declared the university “free and autonomous” while many schools and universities were occupied. On Wednesday, May 15, aside from the wild strike at the Renault factory in Cléon, the student occupation of the Odéon Theater happened in Paris, changing the theatre into a daily gathering place. During the two days that followed, the Renault factories (in Flins and then in Boulogne-Billancourt) went on strike, which led to the formation of a march from the Latin Quarter to Boulogne-Billancourt to show student support to the working class.

From that day on, daily gatherings, endless discussions, and support committees for one cause or another occurred everywhere. With the government having issued an order for the expulsion of Daniel Cohn-Bendit on Tuesday, May 21, many student demonstrations occurred in the evening and during the night on Wednesday, May 22. These demonstrations continued for two more days in Paris, with Friday, May 24, a new night of barricades which lasted until six in the morning in the Latin Quarter. On Monday, May 27, the great meeting in the Charléty Stadium took place where Pierre Mendès France refused to speak. On May 29, new demonstrations of the CGT occurred from the Bastille to Saint-Lazare, which was answered on Thursday, May 30, by the demonstration in support of General De Gaulle on the Champs-Elysées.18

Thus the events of ’68 were closely tied to the experience of the crowd, so fundamental to the baby boomer sensitivity. This experience was the mold into which the youngs poured their relationship to history and it would mark their entire lives. In the crowd, the human being loses his individual bearings as his will melts into that of the group. He is no longer himself but a cell in an immense collective body. This strong impression of belonging to a community is accompanied by a feeling of power. The frontiers of the self lowered, the individual is permeated to the core of his being by the force of collectivity. The future seems to open up when thousands of individuals march together, arm in arm, singing the same anthems, chanting the same slogans, animated by an identical anger, forming only a single body. It is not an illusion but a real impression that something is happening. The human being feels what a bomb cannot feel at the moment of its explosion: that destruction takes place, generating something new.
The experience of the crowd dissolves social coherence. In place of hierarchies between people, the need to identify with others becomes urgent. One instinctively fights for the cause of the oppressed, becomes their voice. Class identity ends by melting into the crowd. If ordinary national identity has become obsolete, then a new identity emerges from the collective encounter. Closeness is felt again toward those individuals who seemed separate beforehand. From this discovery, something brand new can emerge. The experience of the crowd translates into a predominance of the present over the past, of the voice over writing, of emotion over rational analysis, contrary to the ordinary experience in which reasoned knowledge of events transforms the past into History. In the experience of the crowd, History happens concretely like an immediate experience. It is no longer knowledge from books but action. The events are lived here and now. What counts is the movement that destroys the securities, the references, and the barriers of the past.

The crowd experience is intoxicating; like the drug experience, it asks for renewal. Following Gérard Mendel, we shall call upon the Freudian concept of the oceanic feeling: the feeling of omnipotence is exacerbated all the more as the Self merges into vague totality. This experience is accompanied by a pleasure that might even be compared without exaggeration to sexual pleasure, since both (by different means) end with the fusion of the individual into the totality that surpasses it, the amorous couple in the case of sexuality, the collective body in the experience of the crowd. If the function of the amorous encounter is biological reproduction, that of the crowd is social reproduction. It is society in its entirety that attempts to escape death and seeks to renew itself in this violent and spontaneous expression. The solitude that follows the demonstration is allied with depression. After sharing such strong feelings with others, each finds himself alone, reduced to his own strength. He feels abandoned; he is as deprived as the small child who, calling for warmth, seeks fusion once again with the maternal body, with absolute love. How can symbiosis with the crowd be experienced again? Militancy, adherence to dogmas, submission to the “party” or the “group” would all be behaviors aiming to prolong the crowd experience in the daily life until the mid-70s. Then, creation of the *fratrie* would take the place of the former political affiliations.

Thus the crowd must be understood as the primordial experience of the baby boomers and the filter through which their future practices flowed. On the occasion of these demonstrations, they understood that something new could arise, that they could not only emerge from the rut of the past but also invent new social forms. For them, this discovery was the equivalent to what had been the war experience for their parents and especially their grandparents. Through the crowd, they formed a new fraternal society.
THE SPACE AND TIME OF REVOLT

The experience of the crowd takes place in a different time and space that enlarges events and transforms them into historical moments. This experience embodies the essence of revolution. It is the manifestation of a human explosion, which is first manifested at the level of the body before having an impact on things. Beings that were separated before gather to join in a collective body and to transform their *habitus*. Considered in a *social framework* that endows it with immediately perceptible relief, an episode thus seems greater, more imposing than it would outside this framework. No more than the French Revolution or the Commune did the crisis of May ’68 fail at this rule. If the Latin Quarter remained the center of the whirlwind, then the processions spread its image throughout the capital and the media expanded it to the country. In Paris, public spaces were besieged in function of their symbolic value, which was utilized, recuperated, or diverted: the occupation of Censier (May 11), the Sorbonne (May 13), the Odéon (May 15), the student march to the Renault factories in Boulogne-Billancourt (May 17), the fire at the Stock Exchange (May 27). Two universities dedicated to letters, a theater specializing in the avant-garde repertoire, a state-run factory, symbol of the working class, and finally the Stock Exchange, temple of the merchant economy; the choice of location for operations was made in function of its symbolic power. Graffiti in the entry hall of the Odéon summarized the promotion of this theater as a place of national representation: “When the National Assembly becomes a bourgeois theater, all bourgeois theaters become National Assemblies”.20

Social time was reversed: while daytime is generally dedicated to work, numerous meetings took place during the night. With the first strikes (that of Sud-aviation in Nantes on May 14) and the first factory occupations, leisure time took the place of work time; there where previously one had produced, now one discussed, reflected, fraternized. The hierarchical relationships decomposed; people who ignored each other the day before discovered common interests in each other. They identified with one another. During the course of that month of agitation, an intense voicing of opinion was witnessed,21 which propelled people who were previously unknown to the forefront while casting others to the shadows. Paris rediscovered both the tradition of popular insurrections and that of festivals. Orchestras settled at the Sorbonne, giving it the atmosphere of a children’s fair. Each of the participants was conscious of the fragile character of social conquests—beginning with free speech—and of the temporary aspect of demonstrations. If there was indeed a suspension of social roles, status, hierarchies, obligations, routine, and daily duties, if the markers of identity disappeared, this did not last long. There was thus the feeling of urgency: one had to carry out definitive actions, accomplish gestures that would be changed into images, so that each could engrave the presence of them in his/her memory. At the same time, an unconscious desire was manifested to prolong this suspended time, to stretch it to its limit. As much among the par-
participants of the events as among those who dreaded the consequences, the feeling was shared that something essential was happening, that one was in the process of making History, of inventing it, in other words, of making it come to pass. In other terms, the participants of May ’68 were conscious of the necessity to place their action in a more global framework in order to give it impact in the future. In order for their action to become comprehensible, it had to be inscribed in an heroic genealogy; it somehow had to put together a repetition of the past (particularly the insurrectional past) and an inauguration. On this dual condition, their action could become an element reinforcing the symbolic system and could change into a foundational act.

Thus everything seemed to incline May ’68 to become an important episode of collective history, one of those memorable events heavy with consequences on the symbolic level. Indeed, those few weeks took place in a particular time and space, like those of traditional festivals, a sacred space in a sense. The suspended economy during that time (total stoppage beginning on May 17) left space for reversed practices: where there had been abundance, there was now scarcity (gasoline, for example, whose normal distribution in Paris did not begin again until the beginning of June); on the other hand, where rarity had been beforehand, abundance appeared: a multiplication of exchanges between individuals, the abolition of ancient hierarchies to create new ones; the appearance of new behaviors, particularly collective and festive ones; finally, the proliferation of cultural signs that would survive for a long time afterwards. Where market exchange had dominated, gift appeared, a practice based on heroic culture, the very foundation of the symbolic system. For one month, France became a vast faculty of letters: the more or less complete suspension of ordinary activities, imposed leisure activities, constant general discussions, the refusal to envision the future.22

III. MAY ’68 BETWEEN HISTORY AND MEMORY

Under the apparent unity of the May 68 events, numerous elements played on the contrary, which prevented its transformation into an unanimously accepted myth. In many domains, as Jean-Pierre Le Goff understood it, it had to do with an impossible inheritance because of its ambiguities and contradictory aspects. Caught between the modernization of France’s archaic structures and the total rejection of capitalism, the May movement does not have a clearly defined place. Thus, these events never acquired the historical dimension for which they seemed destined. This historic dimension could perhaps have been achieved if the promises of the revolt had been kept, but such was not the case.

The contradiction between archaism and modernity nevertheless produced a tangible result in the moment. With ordinary time and space turned upside down, for
one month Paris became a place of *simulation* where everything, and the opposite of everything, could be expressed and experimented with. This “universal fiction” did not transform into History. That does not mean its absence of consequences, far from it. Only there was no balance between the proposals made and the results obtained. Everything remained within the *permissive space*, prisoner of the playful character that ceaselessly accompanies the crowd.

For an event to acquire a symbolic dimension and to transform into a myth of origin, it must be accompanied by a conscious and collective will to rupture with the past and present itself as a foundational act, in other words as a revolution. Caught inside a clearly defined social framework, it must escape its immediacy, its sensitive dimension, to be accepted by public consciousness. In other words, it must escape the realm of Memory to become History. This was the case at the moment of the French Revolution, even if, as Tocqueville showed, the Revolution put the finishing touches (in numerous respects) on the practices inaugurated under the absolute monarchy.23 In ‘68, the collective will was present, as well as the desire to break with the past. By opening a permissive space, the revolt immediately quenched its thirst at the source of collective creativity. The spatio-temporal framework of the event was itself clearly defined. And yet May ‘68 did not become a revolution and did not change into History. The baby boomer generation did not surge into History whose door was wide open before it. Having quite quickly imposed its values on the whole country, this generation then refused to assume the symbolic weight of its victory, in other words its historic responsibility. It is in this refusal itself that one must seek the reason why May ‘68 does not occupy a clearly marked place in the collective imagination. The events are known down to the details, dozens of volumes having been dedicated to that period; the facts can be analyzed and understood with intelligence; and yet they can not be symbolized, in other words, they cannot acquire a mythical place in the national imagination as did the French Revolution, that of 1848, the Commune of 1871, or the Resistance. The process of symbolization is still closely linked to patriarchy, while the revolt of ‘68 presented its abolition. Just as the task of mourning assigns to the deceased person another place in a group, so does the task of symbolization moves an event from Memory to History, transforming it into a major event. This *task of symbolization*, begun in the heart itself of the May events, was never finished by the social participants. They loved the experience of the crowd too much to surpass it. Rather than constructing from scratch from the original shock of the May events, on the contrary they seized any old pretext to renew the intoxicating experience of being together, in the original spontaneity and generosity. Aware of the contradiction they faced—breaking with patriarchy on one hand, symbolizing their action on the other—they chose rupture rather than the heroic image. In other terms, they obtained the power but without the markers traditionally associated with it.
THE VICTORY OF THE VANQUISHED

The excesses of the ’68 revolt quickly brought a backlash, namely a Chamber entirely dominated by the right during the elections of June ’68. Some then feared that the Gaullist order would be back, but this electoral victory, far from signaling the return of patriarchy, rather meant its decline. Incapable of resolving the old problems, the previous generation abandoned the ideological terrain to the new one, that of the baby boomers. It is as though they had secretly ratified this graffiti: “O dear gentlemen of politics, behind your glassy gaze you shelter a world on the path to destruction. Shout, shout, people will never know enough that you have been castrated.”

After General De Gaulle’s retirement in 1969, the culture of victimization, glorified during the revolt, would gradually stretch to all echelons of society. The ideological transition did not occur smoothly. The government of President Pompidou, haunted by the specter of revolts, submitted to the most conservative part of its electorate. During those years of interregnum, a president with a liberal education was seen falling back nervously onto outmoded values for fear of new ideas desired by the youth of his country. However, under this surface opposition, a redeployment of forces was achieved. The hostility of political power toward its youth, particularly those with Leftist leanings, indifference and the contempt it represents, hid the rapid integration of this same youth in the workings of society. They came in droves, not as individuals but as a “generation.” For those who desired it, the door not only opened, it opened wide. With the help of economic expansion (it continued until the oil crisis of 1973), they were quickly in control of public affairs. The former rebels of ’68 seized power particularly in the domains related to culture: the world of arts, cinema, music, and theater; the world of editing, the daily or weekly press; advertising and the ensemble of the media, and of course, teaching. When the law on bank checks was modified, they were also seen in banks that created branches everywhere that needed open-minded, competent executives: “To speak frankly, your money interests me,” said one of these dynamic executives on advertising billboards. In numerous posts related to culture and education, former members of the anti-establishment appeared who, at the price of a few compromises and renunciations that were less painful than they had assumed, discovered the secret pleasures of management. And because they were intelligent, they possessed an analytical capacity refined by several years of theoretical critique, they attained directorial positions, which allowed them to exercise a certain influence on the country’s ideological future. Those among their comrades who remained in the “margin” would not fail to reproach them for it.

Thus, while one part of the generation of ’68 chose to remain on the side of the dispossessed, to work in factories, or to opt for a marginal and “grainy” life in Lozère, another part seized command. The latter, who had become what Gramsci
called organic intellectuals of the State, adapted their anti-establishment ideals to the new situation made for them, staging — on themselves first, then on the spheres of activity they controlled — the transition from the culture of heroism to the culture of victimization.

When we speak of the 68 generation’s seizure of power, we do not limit it to the issue of cultural elites. Behind the most widely mediatized intellectual figures who would set the tone from then on — André Glucksmann, Bernard-Henri Levy, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Serge July, Patrice Chéreau, Patrick Modiano, to only name a few — was an entire tribe, large in numbers and united around the symbolic murder of the Father, who defined the political, economic, and ideological future of the country. In ’68, the entire class of baby boomers reached the age of adulthood; it is thus as an age group, as a fratrie, that it began to count. They represented an enormous potential market. It was thus to satisfy their tastes and values that commodities would be created after ’68.

From the beginning of the 70s, the inheritance of the revolt took on ever-increasing importance in artistic, intellectual, or university circles. Thus, the vanquished of ’68 were in reality the true victors. Dynamic, enterprising, enthusiastic, bearer of a message of happiness, anxious — after some moments of hesitation — to put the benefits of consumption within everyone’s reach, they became purveyors of a new democratic ideology which they applied anywhere they could spread the network of their relations. Their arrival on the cultural market would give unprecedented development to the 70s. Retrospectively, we have the impression of dynamism in all of the domains of creation, from social sciences to art, and including cinema, pop music, or philosophy. Human sciences, linguistics, and history also blossomed anew. All aspects of social reality were explored, gauged, analyzed in their hidden dimensions. There was no longer simple interpretation of events or language; the “hidden structures” were analyzed, the ruse of reason denounced, the ideological illusion stripped bare by her bachelors, even. All that carried the seal of the new was welcomed with a mix of generosity and critical mind that testifed to an intense intellectual life. The position of the generation of ’68 was ideal, since if on one hand it held the real cultural power, then on the other it promoted a mode of thinking and values that seemed to perpetuate the fight against the traditional dominant order. In such a climate, the slightest discovery took on the appearance of a great conquest. Readers had often the impression of exploring obscure continents under the banner of young audacious mentors who knew how to quit the land of stale tradition. The visible intellectuals then reaped all of the benefits, those of youth, power, and protest.

The cultural program of the baby boom generation can be summarized in one word: liberation. It is the equivalent of the word “enlightenment” for the XVIIIth Century
philosophers. It is a meaningful noun for those who cleared the air from the war of ’40. The Liberation, the one in 1944-45, would not have succeeded without the support of the allied forces who allowed them to chase away the occupiers. In that context, the true French liberation was May ’68; it was taken over by the young generation; by this generation only, without foreign help, they put on the finishing touches in the following decade. In 1970, it was no longer only about getting rid of prejudices. It was necessary to liberate from their constraints all those who seemed chained to the culture of heroism, from then on discredited in most of its aspects. They wanted to liberate the working class, oppressed peoples, women, homosexuals, the mentally ill, the handicapped, in other words any person who did not enjoy free and total access to material well-being. Helped by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, these young intellectuals exposed the alienations inherent in bourgeois society. As words themselves imprison, some came to wish for the liberation of the language caged by the “police of good speech”. If liberation was the all-purpose word, then equality was the supreme value. Sensitivity to injustices and hierarchies was exacerbated; the relationships between men/women, bosses/employees, teachers/students, and parents/children were seen with a fresh eye. All that carried the trademark of hierarchy became suspect. Authority was discredited in all its forms. Equality and democracy spread in all milieux and were established between all beings. Racism became the bête noire monitored in the slightest comments. If no one outwardly declared themselves a racist, it is because there was a unanimous consensus against this attitude. Racism became the new taboo. Daily life was sifted through; under the influence of feminism, macho behaviors were flushed out; the traditional conception of love disappeared under criticism; not only was the sexual division of domestic work singled out, so was the role of each parent in the education of children. Few couples would survive a radical criticism that spared no aspect of existence. Like in ’68, they dreamed of a superior life accessible to all, a life of masters without slaves. And this upsurge of positive feelings seemed all the more generous because it came from people who felt profound sympathy for the oppressed, who themselves lived like the oppressed. In short, they hoped to finally achieve this utopian community that was the dream of the fratrie.

Buddy Style

The victory of the ’68 rebels led to a modification of human relationships, of which the abolition of hierarchies and symbolic signs is the most visible marker. Given the archai sm of traditional culture and the constraints that the dysfunctions of old values pressed upon the majority of the population, the sudden crumbling of the signs of hierarchy was unanimously felt as a liberation, even by the supporters of authority. It was as though they suddenly found themselves rid of a lead shell that oppressed them. In place of relations frozen in outdated formalism, a “buddy style” was seen to emerge, inherited from the revolutionary tradition, that was
little by little assimilated to more progressive, Trans-Atlantic uses. It arose as the condition of relaxed interpersonal relations in a context of tension and uncertainty. Hierarchical differences belonged to the past, while new behaviors represented the advent of liberty and equality among humans.

The “democratization” of human relations was signaled in the change of clothing (the suit-and-tie ceased to be a daily obligation) and in the signs of recognition. The use of the informal voice occurred more frequently; the use of the first names tended to replace the old forms of distinction, such as “sir,” “madam,” “doctor,” “professor,” “His Grace,” or “Father,” which were still in use up until ’68. The defamation of hierarchical markers leading to a greater proximity between people, individual differences also dwindled to the advantage of an identity behavior. From then on, the ideal consisted less in distinguishing oneself individually as becoming integrated into a group. The individual no longer wished to remain outside in a separate position, which implied individual responsibility and judgment. The individual refused to be an individuality; he/she wanted to be like the others. In the work context just as in private space, it meant agreeing together on choices, making decisions in common, reaching a consensus.

The elimination of markers of status, which gave the impression to everyone that they belonged to an immense middle class with undefined outlines, criticism of authority, and the advent of the buddy style only allowed for quantitative differences between people. Symbolic differences gave way to differences of possession. Today, only purchasing power allows the distinction of one person from another, endowing each with an indication of consumption.

The adoption of the buddy style defined adherence to the ideals of ’68 and facilitated exchanges, which multiplied and accelerated in the decade that followed. Even still today, it constitutes a sign of recognition among people who share an identical culture. In place of symbols of hierarchy, signs of identity were established, images that characterized new mediations between human beings. If its effect was a democratization of knowledge, the buddy style at the same time instituted a cultural monopoly to the baby boomers’ benefit, who, once they had come into power, would have the tendency to shut the door behind them, citing one another and excluding the art forms or intellectual expressions that did not emanate from their cultural circle. It is not a matter of decline of intellectual life, for the culture market had never flourished so much: these practices being of the same mode as monetary circulation—the same components, participants, books, ideas, passed from hand to hand—the more they quoted one another, the more intense intellectual exchanges seemed, the more books were sold, and the more the public flocked to theaters, movie houses, and museums. Thus, since the 70s, culture moved to the quantitative order. If today we witness breathlessness in the
creative domain, it is because the buddy-buddy system instituted an underhanded sort of censorship on which new ideas stumble. Media coverage of intellectual life confused visibility with originality for the greatest profit to the culture dealers. The union between the intellectual milieu and television generated production of the same: people only spoke about what was already known; they repeated the same ideas, the same formulas, because, intellectual and artistic creations having the same status as commodities, they were modeled after one another to become consumable. At the same time, by making creation a media object, they practiced a ruthless selection of new talents; doors only opened for a handful of chosen ones. If young people today have difficulty establishing themselves in the domain of ideas and artistic creation, it is because in France and elsewhere culture has become a “market” controlled by the beneficiaries of the ’68 revolt.

CONCLUSION: MAY ’68 AND THE SOCIAL REBUILDING

Since the end of World War II, France has found itself in a paradoxical situation. Burdened with too heavy a past—heavy because prestigious—France had difficulty confirming its situation as a second-rate power, facing the United States and the USSR. Even if France had a debt—a material and intellectual one—toward America, many Frenchmen—encouraged by the President himself—were not willing to honor it. Their anti-Americanism was all the more virulent because its causes were misconstrued. Even if the Fourth Republic was a dynamic period on the level of economic and material “reconstruction,” it was also a sluggish time from the political and intellectual point of view. The return to power of General de Gaulle in ’58 offered a remedy to the situation, still without healing the sick country. This was the origin of the revolt of youth tired of being treated as minors. The youth revolted in ’68, stirring the entire country in its rejection of patriarchy. Even if the gesture of the rebels was ambiguous, its causes were profound, more spiritual than material. Its causes must thus be sought more in the realm of psychology than in the realm of politics or material economy. May ’68 was first and foremost a revolt against waiting, against the absurd: “Sartre, be clear, be brief”.

The crisis generated the sidelining of existentialism, associated with the absurd: the baby boomers no longer wanted a world without meaning. For them, the experience of the crowd was primary; it gave implicit meaning to all of their steps. It was necessary to prolong it, to give it concrete expression in a new dynamism. The acceptance of a society of consumption came from the fact that this society was finally understood as a permanent expression of the crowd in the domain of industrial production.

If the youth revolt did not have meaning, in other words direction, at least it made impact on the whole of society. Faced with the degeneration of the social fabric,
the revolt reanimated collective dynamism. The May events brought effervescence, a widespread manifestation of mania pulling France from the melancholy that had seized it since 1945. Even if the discourse of the rebels bore the stamp of utopia, or rather because of its utopian character, it allowed for social reform. In that sense, it meant a return to social origins, thus religious ones, insofar as the two form but one. We do not mean religious in the strict sense, since ’68 contested all paternal figures, including God. We should rather compare the effervescence of French youth to that of traditional fair. It meant a return to the sacred, with the transgression of forbidden acts, the disruption of the daily, and the messianic character of youth behavior. Their action, this mix of sentimental gregariousness, of civil disobedience, and sexual debauchery, was allied with a sacred trance, the transgressional sacred. In that way, their action allowed for a return to origin, to the source of the social bond. It allowed for the reinstatement of collective discourse, to surpass the absurd to make sense of it again. The revolt instinctively found the path of the sacred again. It indeed brought about the creation of a new community body, the fratrie, and a revival of the social fabric, a rejuvenation of images. From then on, the French quit the cycle of melancholy. This new psychological tone was in line with the economic dynamism, the social body got its second wind at the very moment when the future promised material happiness to all. Seen in this light, May ’68 was an event of considerable impact.


2 These numbers were reported in the magazine M, No. 20, “Mai 88,” p. 11. Nevertheless, the Communist Party does not share this view of things. For Waldeck Rochet, for example, if “if national wealth had increased enormously” since De Gaulle’s coming to power in 1958, the worker’s condition, on the other hand, had not ceased to deteriorate: “However, workers only witnessed increasing difficulties for them and their families.” Les enseignement de mai-juin 68, Paris: Editions sociales, 1968, pp. 19-20.


4 “Regarding the traditions that integrated, at least symbolically, the student milieu of the past, they crumbled and today remain attached to marginal groups. […] Perhaps because they remained more bourgeois or because they led to more traditional professions, faculties like medicine or law today constitute the last refuge of professional rituals.” Pierre Bourdieu et Jean-Claude Passeron, Les héritiers. Les étudiants et la culture, Paris, Minuit, 1984, p. 53.


6 «The real poverty of the student’s everyday life finds its immediate, fantastic compensation in the opium of cultural commodities. In the cultural spectacle the student finds his natural place as a respectful disciple. Although he is close to the production point, access to the real Sanctuary of Culture is denied him, so he discovers “modern culture” as an admiring spectator. In an era when art is dead he remains the most loyal patron of the theaters and film clubs and the most avid consumer of the packaged fragments of its preserved corpse displayed in the cultural supermarkets. Consuming unreservedly and uncritically, he is in his element. If the “Culture Centers” didn’t exist, the student would have invented them […] Incapable of real passions, the student seeks titillation in the passionless polemics between the celebrities of Unintelligence» On the Poverty of Student Life, part I

7 “The student condition allows the breaking of temporal frames of social life or the inversion of its order. The experience of a student is first and perhaps above all feeling free to go to the movies whenever and, consequently, never on Sunday like the others; it is exercising one’s wit to weaken or overturn the great oppositions that imperiously structure leisure as much as the activity of adults; it is playing at ignoring the opposition between weekend and week, day and night, time consecrated to work and free-time. More generally, the student tends to dissolve all of the oppositions that organize life by subjugating it to constraint, for example those oppositions that separate chatting from regulated and directed discussion, free culture from imposed culture, scholarly exercise from personal work.” Les héritiers, pp. 48-49.
MAY '68 AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CROWD IN FRANCE

9  For the author of the pamphlet On the Poverty of Student Life, their flight into an unreal world comes from the fact that they cannot take account of their present situation and their foreseeable future: “The requirements of modern capitalism determine that most students will become mere low-level functionaries, serving functions comparable to those of skilled workers in the nineteenth century. Faced with the prospect of such a dismal and mediocre “reward” for his shameful current poverty, the student prefers to take refuge in an unreally lived present, which he decorates with an illusory glamor.» On the Poverty of Student Life, translated by Ken Knabb.
10  Long ago, Herbert Marcuse saw in the hippy movement of the 60s a new form of alienation, which he called repressive desublimation, encouraged by liberal capitalism. When young people devoted themselves to love, they no longer thought of opposing the system.
15  Ivan Chitchkov best understood its implications and wrote these comments around 1963 regarding drifting, which he practiced more than all others: “Drifting (through acts, with one’s gestures, walking, encounters) was exactly to totality what [the right] psychoanalysis is to language. Let yourself go through words, says the analyst. He listens until the moment when he denounces or modifies (one could say diverts) a word, an expression, or a definition. Drifting is certainly a technique and almost a therapy. But, just as analysis with nothing else is almost always advised against, continual drifting is also a danger in the sense that the individual who advances too far (not without a foundation, but…) without protection is threatened by rupture, dissolution, dissociation, disintegration.” In “Lettres de loin,” I.S., No. 9, p. 38, ed. cit., p. 402.
19  Gérard Mendel writes: “The oceanic feeling necessarily presents a dual aspect: as it is, certainly, and a source of jouissance; but the other aspect represents an ensemble of affective positions that we propose to call the feeling of abandonment; no longer the reunion with the “Great Everything,” but the memory of tearing and of everything painful that followed in moments of archaism.” A History of Authority, Paris: Editions de La Découverte, 2002, p. 74.
22  The Louis Malle film, Milou en Mai, is an excellent illustration of this.
23  Alexis de Toqueville, L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution.
24  Les murs ont la parole, p. 28.
25  The election of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1974 would make up for lost time and, without changing anything fundamental in the direction of affairs, would allow the advent of a social and intellectual liberalism that would then pass as the discreet wind of liberty.
27  This seizing of power “from below” would be completed by a seizing of power “from above” at the moment of François Mitterand’s to the Republic’s presidency in 1981.
29  It is particularly Claude Duneton’s work, Parler croquant (Paris: Stock, 1973) that launched this approach to language to the public. For a critique of this ideology applied to the debate on language in Québec, see Danielle Trudeau, Léandre et son pêché, Montreal: Editions Hurtubise HMH, 1982.
30  This is true except in the daily relations with administration, which in France constitutes a permanent core of resistance to change. The functionaries thus played a role equivalent to that of printers who traditionally oppose all spelling reforms. Tax forms, for example, as well as certain survey questionnaires, still contain notions such as “head of household,” implicitly masculine, which scarcely has sense in contemporary context when the woman often holds this title.
31  It must be noted that this “democratization of morals” resulted in its share of negativity. If on the one hand it was a liberation from traditional, maladjusted, and inefficient bonds, then on the other it produced a crushing of individual positions for the group’s benefit. Consensus was sought to the detriment of individual solutions, which would often be more audacious. Conformity and mediocrity were imposed each time a difficulty presented itself, and the tyranny of the group was as heavy as the abuse of authority could be.
32 The development of computer communication (the web) would occur later along the same ideological lines of cost-free access and universality of means of exchange, today both contested by market lobbying. 

33 Today there is neither direct censorship nor a frontal attack of bothersome ideas or men outside of paradigms defined as anti-victim – racism, for example. The time of heroism is definitively over and decisionmakers in industry and culture would never pose as censors, which would be counter to the ‘68 ideology. To kill a book or an author, it suffices not to report on it in the media, in other words to prevent people from talking about it even if it is purchased in great quantities. 


35 Our interpretation opposes the analysis of the Situationists for whom May ‘68 was a proletarian revolution. 