

May '68: Paving the way for the triumph of neoliberalism? Rereading the event with Foucault and Bourdieu

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Abstract

This article was first presented as a paper, given at [La Maison Française of NYU](#) on 2nd May 2018 as part of the May '68 Week Celebration. May '68 continues to be interpreted in very different and often contradictory ways in France. If some consider it as an anti-capitalist revolution, inheritor of nineteenth-century workers' struggles, others see in it the triumphant advent of today's individualism. For the latter, May '68 heralded neoliberalism. These two opposed interpretations miss the singularity of the event of '68 and misunderstand the ensuing period of neoliberalism.

The fiftieth anniversary of May '68 is not just one more commemoration among many. The "event" of '68 holds a special place in collective representations of contemporary history, both French and otherwise, in so far as we ascribe to it a moment of rupture. But a rupture with regard to what? And opening onto what? Such is the question which divides – both theoretically and politically – those who want to restore the meaning of the "event" of '68.¹

I'm no historian, and therefore don't pretend to advance an authoritative account of the unfolding events, nor even of their causes. Instead I intend to answer a very specific question, one which it is of the utmost importance to clarify. This question is whether, as has often been said – indeed too often for my taste – May '68 paved the way for the neoliberal turn our societies were to undergo in the following decade, and if the historical signification of the event can, in some way, be turned onto a path (*rabattue sur un virage*) that May '68 could have announced, engendered or accelerated.

It is because this interpretation of '68 has had significant theoretical and political effects that this question cannot be dismissed.

¹ This very designation is not without fairly considerable historiographical problems. "May '68": is it a month? Or rather two months, May and June? Is it in fact a period that starts well before and ends quite a long time after? Many historians have chosen to speak of "the years of '68" (*des années 68*) – obviously, a rather curious expression in French. This is the equivalent of the Italian "*sessantotto*". To speak of "May '68" has the advantage of giving the event the clear sense of a historical break, with the attendant disadvantage of masking a rather long phase of political and social history. Another problem for historians: how to make the history of an event not only distended in time, but broken, fragmented and disparate? Some people speak of the May of the students, others the May of the workers or of the peasants. This difficulty concerns the very political unity of the event.

Indeed, today's publications contrast sharply with what has hitherto been the dominant thesis on '68. Its political content is being rehabilitated, thanks to a series of publications giving voice to those "anonymous" and "invisible" participants for whom '68 was primarily an aspiration for equality – or better – an *experience* of equality, and collective activity; particularly through their participation in various "action committees". In the last ten years, we have witnessed a new phase of historiography, which better identifies the fundamentally anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist content of the discourse and actions of '68, unearthing the different aspects of a general contestation of power relations and forms of domination; particularly those exercised against the working class, women and the young. It is sufficient to evoke the posters produced during the revolt – for example those currently on display at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris – to bear witness to the explosive political significance attributed to this revolt by its actors.²

But what may seem obvious when one judges concrete artefacts, when one attaches oneself to facts and words, does not detract from the power of the subsequent interpretations of the event. These interpretations, which may be false and even falsifying – especially when stated by those with high visibility in the relevant media landscapes – have symbolic effects that contribute to the construction of a historical narrative, and thus, by interpreting the past in a certain way, themselves participate in the course of history. For while it may be a banality, it must be repeated: the interpretation of the past is never innocent or neutral. It is a dimension of the present and of the future.

I intend to follow here in the footsteps of Kristin Ross, Emeritus Professor of Comparative Literature at New York University and the author of an important book in this space, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (2002). Analysing the vicissitudes of memory and the mechanisms of confiscation used, she has demonstrated in detail the ways in which the event of '68 was emptied of its strictly political dimensions, and how the anti-capitalist insurgency of young people and workers was transformed by many interpreters into a "youth revolt" against an overly conservative adult society, or a "cultural revolution" against outdated norms.

As she writes, providing a point of departure for my own intervention:

The official story does not limit itself to merely claiming that some of May's more radical ideas and practices came to be recuperated or recycled in the service of Capital. Rather, it asserts that today's capitalist society, far from representing the derailment or failure of the May movement's aspirations, instead represents the accomplishment of its deepest desires. By asserting a teleology of the present, the official story erases those memories of past alternatives that sought or envisioned other outcomes than the one that came to pass. (Ross 2002: 6)

Indeed, not only has there been a *deactivation* of the critical charge of the revolt – an *ignorance (méconnaissance)* of its sociological composition and a *depoliticisation* under

² Exhibition at l'École des Beaux-Arts de Paris, "Images en lutte, La culture visuelle de l'extrême gauche en France (1968-1974)", 21 February to 20 May 2018.

the auspices of a culturalist interpretation – there has been a *fundamental reversal* of its political significance. Thus we inherit the idea of a “neoliberal May ’68”, emerging in two versions, one positive, the other negative. The positive version reinterprets ’68 as a “modernisation”, both necessary and desirable, of society and the capitalist economy – a “modernisation” in line with an ever-increasing acceptance and realisation of capitalism, the market, globalisation, advertising, etc. Meanwhile, according to the negative version, the event is read as corresponding to the emergence of an all-powerful, narcissistic, hedonistic individual, claiming for him/herself an unlimited freedom. This limitless individualism, in its refusal of social constraints and its desire to “enjoy without hindrance”, thus opens the way to unbridled capitalism, the deregulation of finance, the loss of all morality and solidarity.

In this context, I would like to focus on two somewhat problematic points.

The first consists in asking how, exactly, this interpretation of a “neoliberal May ’68” – as misleading as it may be – has contributed to an important change in dominant ideologies, as well as in modes of government. It’s about understanding its relation to the success of neoliberalism itself, extending powerful performative effects. Following Austin, “to say” that May ’68 marks the entry into neoliberalism is “to do,” to help ensure that neoliberalism results. It is therefore not only a question of maintaining that the “neoliberal May ’68” thesis is a false and falsifying interpretation, it is a question of showing that this thesis has affected the course of events, or better, that it has participated in a certain ideological strategy of turning the meaning of ’68 into its opposite. I believe it is in the work of Pierre Bourdieu that we can find the theoretical tools to explain this ideological reversal.

The second point, which seems to me even more essential, will be to show that, although May ’68 has nothing intrinsically to do with neoliberalism itself, the latter has not been constituted – as is often said – as a logical consequence, but as a generalised contestation of or *strategic response* to the widespread protests of ’68. In this sense, the French neoliberals of the 1970’s provided a sound analysis of the events of ’68, but this was something they did all the better to react against it. It is via Foucault that we can grasp the nature of this response to so widespread a contestation of power.

I will therefore proceed in this double analysis by relying on two major readings of neoliberalism, those of Foucault and Bourdieu, two French intellectuals whose commonality, among other things, is to have taken seriously the *neoliberal phenomenon*. This is not to say that one or the other has the last word on neoliberalism, even less on May ’68. But as I will try to show, I am convinced that their respective analyses permit us to better understand the functioning of neoliberalism, and in particular the relationship between May ’68 and neoliberalism. Their analyses afford us an understanding of how neoliberalism has been the main *response* of the dominant groups – be they political, economic or ideological – to the most profound challenge to the social order to have taken place in France since the nineteenth century. As a major political phenomenon, neoliberalism has not just been a way of responding to economic and oil crises, falling profit rates, or even the exhaustion of gains in productivity. For both thinkers, it

represents a global political response to an equally global political and social challenge. I will thus begin with Bourdieu's analysis, before turning to that of Foucault.

There is, however, a point that must be clarified at the outset to avoid any misconceptions.

We may well ask, why evoke Foucault and Bourdieu in the context of '68? After all, they didn't participate directly in the "events". While they were not at the centre of events, this is the case for most of those we might describe as intellectuals. Foucault was teaching in Tunisia, and returned to France after May '68. He had though participated quite directly in the Tunisian student movements of March '68.³ He later acted on the fringes of leftism – albeit never explicitly enlisted in leftist groups – and would be very active in the creation of the University of Vincennes in the following summer and autumn. Bourdieu remained behind the scenes during the events; reliable witnesses have claimed he spent most of their duration in his laboratory. In fact, he did intervene, but in a very particular manner, and at a distance from the revolutionary discourse that reigned at the Sorbonne.⁴ In any case, neither of them were key theoreticians of '68, as some commentators have suggested.

Indeed, their commonality is that they maintained a certain distance from the hyper-Marxising discourse of the period. They both sought to think outside of the vocabulary of '68, given, it will be recalled, that May '68, with its group discourses and practises, constituted, in Foucault's terms, a "misinterpretation of itself".

The "Neoliberal May '68" thesis

But first let's discuss the certain commonplace which imposed itself at the end of the 70's and has since made '68 into a source of French neoliberalism. A speech made by presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy exemplifies this idea. On 29 April 2007, he denounced "this leftist heritage of May 1968", which imposed on us an "intellectual and moral relativism", which ransacked values and destroyed traditions. He affirmed his desire to "turn the page on May '68", and added, "this election will act to show us if the heritage of May '68 will be perpetuated, or if it will be liquidated once and for all". The most striking argument, however, was this: "See how the cult of money-worship, short-term profit, speculation, how the excesses of finance capitalism were carried in the values of May '68". This usually left-wing critique of capitalism and its excesses thus becomes, in Sarkozy's mouth, a conservative argument: it was May 1968 that gave birth to deregulated finance, becoming responsible for this crisis precisely when he spoke these words.

Sarkozy built his 2007 electoral campaign on an opposition between national identity and the spirit of '68. He reprised the traditional conservative argument that '68 was a

³ Cf. *Dits et écrits II*, "Quarto" (hereafter DE II), pp. 897-898.

⁴ This is because the movement had no need of such spokespeople in this space, having produced its own. As one historian has noted, the movement challenged the traditionally "representative" role of intellectuals. Or, in Foucault's terms, their "universal consciousness". Cf. Brillant 2008: 370.

movement essentially detrimental to culture and institutions. All the ills of society, going back decades, originated from this historical “accident”. But what he added to this classical conservative argument was May ‘68’s role in begetting finance capitalism. This would never have occurred to contemporary conservatives like President Pompidou or sociologist Raymond Aron. For them, what was at stake were the very foundations of social order, family, homeland, culture, and of course capitalism. But never could they have imagined that ‘68 could one day be conceived as a launching pad for globalised, deregulated capitalism.⁵

Indeed, the assimilation of May ‘68 and deregulated capitalism, financialisation or marketisation, did not begin with this electoral campaign. It emerges primarily from an interpretation we might describe as “neo-Tocquevillian”, which consists in maintaining, by a strange ruse of history, that the protagonists of ‘68 – in spite of their General Assemblies and action groups, of their valorisation of collectivity and of public discourse – were perhaps the unconscious agents of the great narcissistic individualist revolution, of which neoliberalism is only one effect among others. This interpretation, in abolishing the political significance of the event, has nourished the formation of a kind of *conservative bloc*, which, beyond the schism between left and right, has as its fundament a hatred for ‘68 – conceived as primarily, if not exclusively, a relaxation of morals, the end of all authority, a decline in educational institutions and the weakening of the State. The famous situationist slogans, “enjoy without chains”, or “it is forbidden to forbid”, would in reality be libertarian slogans, encouraging the wildest of financial speculation. Jordan Belfort, “the Wolf of Wall Street”, is somehow the monstrous child of the revolts of ‘68. ‘68 becomes the “antechamber” or “accelerator” of a new capitalism. And since ‘68 was a global phenomenon, ‘68 becomes the antechamber or accelerator of the globalisation of capitalism. To put it another way, ‘68 would not have been a great moment for the contestation of global capitalism, of criticising the alienation and exploitation proper to it, but, on the contrary, the fundamental moment of regeneration for capitalism, which, thanks to the protest which threatened it, succeeded in changing its skin and thus securing an unexpected triumph for the next half-century.

The proclamations Sarkozy addressed to his campaign rally have strange parallels with a commentary made by Régis Debray much earlier, just ten years after ‘68. In a brief work entitled *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire*, in terms more Marxist than Tocquevillian, Debray accused ‘68 of being, “the cradle of a new bourgeois society”, or further, in a remarkable expression, “a ruse of Capital”. The protagonists of ‘68 have, in this account, only accelerated an extension of capitalism, encouraging an Americanisation of everyday life and a generalised consumerism. This is because they “gave mores” to a new phase of capitalism, which

⁵ Georges Pompidou (1974) explained it as follows: “Believing in nothing, freed from all the traditional bonds, having denied God, family, country, morality, pretending to have a class consciousness while knowing perfectly well that they were not workers, still less proletarians, but with time on their hands, without vocation and consequently without hope, they could only turn to negation, refusal, destruction” (27-28). Raymond Aron (1968) says essentially the same thing when he denounced, in ‘68 “the radical negation of the motherland” (152).

“required them”. ’68, by this account, fired the starting pistol for an accelerated modernisation of old France, propelling it into the era of world capitalism, as led by the United States. In Debray’s (1978) words: “the French way to America passed through May ’68” (39). This reasoning is based upon the idea that the actors of ’68 were “naïve” and “accomplished the opposite of what they believed they would achieve”. “The revolutionaries of May were the businessmen of the genius of the bourgeoisie who needed them” (ibid., 14-15). And, he adds, in very deterministic tones, that “the bourgeoisie needed revolt against it to satisfy its own interests of modernisation”. In short, I quote again, “the strategy of the development of capital required the cultural revolution of May” (ibid., 17). Everything rests on the idea, as Debray writes, that “everything is played out behind the backs of the actors” (ibid., 57). And those who played behind the backs of the actors of ’68 were the agents of German and American neoliberalism making what he describes as “a dazzling comeback”.⁶

The thesis of a neoliberal May ’68 is formulated in 1978, precisely at a time when Giscard’s government develops a rhetoric of “change”, causing Debray to write that “economic liberalism is not married with social conservatism” and that “change can serve as a slogan for the movement of capital” (ibid., 47-48).⁷

Let’s say it outright. This thesis, which is totally false, is of interest to us first because it establishes an explicit link between ’68 and French neoliberalism characterised as the underground and subterranean action of what Debray calls “the great neoliberal capitalism”. Further, because it offers the matrix of a whole theoretical and political literature which repeats this idea today, albeit of course with variations.⁸ Thus, it is common in France to say that the *soixante-huitards* have triumphed since the 1970s, that they have occupied all places of power in politics, economics, and especially in culture. This idea, which I’ve evoked in its negative light, also has its positive side, as I said above, given that many former actors of ’68, those who have succeeded socially and in media, have acknowledged that ’68 was a great moment of modernisation – not least among them Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

I won’t dwell on this interpretation any longer. It has been deconstructed many times. First, by returning the political meaning of their actions to the actors, that is to say by refusing to deprive them of their words and their desires, refusing to see them as passive toys of history or of obscure forces acting behind their backs.⁹ Secondly, by showing that it is based on a classical error in logic which consists in confusing temporal succession and causality – that is to say – in explaining what follows an event as its necessary consequence and thus concealing its fundamental meaning. Finally, because the hatred of ’68 or more generally of the sixties, as Serge Audier has shown, which largely structures

⁶ R. Debray using Henri Lepage’s (1978) book, *Demain le capitalisme*. Cf. p. 59.

⁷ We might remember the slogan of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing: “change within continuity”. Cf. Richard 2011: 343-53.

⁸ Cf. Audier 2008.

⁹ Neo-Tocquevillian and pseudo-Marxist interpretations coalesce here, inasmuch as they rely on a history without subjects. The actors not only don’t understand their actions but are doing exactly the opposite of what they say.

the conservative political discourse in France, Europe and the United States, participates in a rhetoric of decline which is a constant feature of conservatism.¹⁰

I would like to limit my analysis to this paradoxical thesis which makes of '68 the source, origin, antechamber or accelerator of neoliberalism. It must, it seems to me, hold our attention despite, or perhaps because of the strange paradox it entails. This is because it contains, in a completely distorted and perverted form, a certain amount of truth. And it is first, I believe, the sociological analysis of Bourdieu which allows us to understand this fact.

Bourdieu and neoliberalism as “conservative revolution”

Bourdieu's interpretation of neoliberalism in the 1970s is opposed to Debray's pseudo-deterministic explanation, while at the same time reprising some of its elements, albeit in a completely different manner. Unlike Foucault, Bourdieu did not focus on neoliberalism as it emerged during the 70s. It wasn't until the 1980s and especially the 90s that he turned it into an important object of sociological study. However, well before, as early as the 1970s, a number of themes that will later be used to analyse and qualify neoliberalism are already in place in his work, notably the concept of “conservative revolution”; an oxymoron he did not invent – the term having referred to conservative and nationalist movements in interwar Germany.

To understand this qualification of “conservative revolution”, we must refer to a text that was part of a body of work which was to have resulted in a large book on May '68 and its effects.¹¹ The text, which I regard as fundamental, dates from 1976, and appeared in issues 2-3 of *Actes de la recherche en science sociales*. It's entitled “*La production de l'idéologie dominante*”, and, as the title suggests, seeks to capture the tropes of the ruling class' worldview in the early 1970s, and following the shock of May '68 (Bourdieu and Boltanski 2008: 58). It thus analyses the new ideological matrix of the “modernisers” of society, that is to say, following Bourdieu and Boltanski's formula “the dominant faction of the dominant classes”. These “generative schemas” of the new dominant ideology, impose themselves on all who are in office and in positions of power. The common language of the state and of the economic world, this discourse ensures the cohesion of the oligarchies which function in what Bourdieu and Boltanski call the “neutral places” of technocracy: neither left nor right, where different groups meet who will form this ideological matrix which itself appears neutral. What the two sociologists show is the deeply rooted nature of a discourse of innovation and modernisation – readily qualified as technocratic in the 1930s – which had become dominant in the 1960s across such institutions as the ENA, Sciences Po and the Commissions du Plan, and which had as its

¹⁰ Cf. Hirschman 1991.

¹¹ This text was to have been part of a very large collective work, of which, Luc Boltanski claimed in 2008, “the pivot was a reflection of May '68, its origins, its consequences, and the aim (was to be) a theory of power and social change” (50). Boltanski cites the texts which constitute this enterprise: Bourdieu, Boltanski, Maldidier 1971, and Bourdieu, Boltanski, Monique de Saint-Martin 1973.

structuring idea the notion that a “third way” was possible between *laissez faire* capitalism and State socialism. This path would be one towards the “modernisation” of capitalism, through the creation of new institutions and new management and decision making tools. The key conviction is of the absolute and indisputable necessity of modernisation. The social world is seen through the lens of a past which is always already outdated and which blocks progress. The role of the State is therefore to “unblock society”, to play mobility against immobility, to privilege the open over the closed, the new over the old, and attack acquired rights and privileges. Since the vision of the social world is organised on this axis of dichotomies between past/future, blocked/unblocked, old/new, the fundamental opposition between the left and right is “outdated”, and, in the same stroke, as is politics itself.

This ideology is not a simple representation, it is a discourse which guides action, giving it meaning and direction. It is a performative discourse which, in the guise of describing what is, dictates what must be done to make it so. This is why this politics masquerades as technocratic, neither left or right, nor the two at once. It’s not a utopia, it’s a paradoxical imaginary that can only choose what is necessary and which illuminates economic science or social science and statistics more generally. It acts to bring about the tendencies which can be anticipated and which conform to the interests of the ruling class, according to a logic the authors of the text dub the “fatalism of the probable”. It is thus a depoliticising politics, a politics aimed at the abolition of the politics it judges outdated. All that counts is efficiency, performance and innovation. The dominant ideology contributes to the realisation of that which it presents as inevitable precisely by presenting it as inevitable – like a law of history, in a mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy. It makes happen voluntarily what it supposes to be inscribed in the facts, it causes itself to exist. Politics is made only to realise what is inscribed in objective tendencies, only to fulfil constraints beyond which nobody can do anything. Thus, we encounter both a progressivism and a fatalism. A “desire for the inevitable” (Bourdieu and Boltanski 2008: 76).

As such, claim the authors, we pass from a “declared conservatism” to a new type of conservatism, one which they describe as “redeployed conservatism”. It’s no longer a matter of defending tradition, of preserving what exists, it’s about changing things, and even accelerating that change. This is the ultimate lesson that these “dominant factions of the ruling class” draw from ’68, whose Giscardism is, in a sense, the political figuration of the period. For this, they must prevail over the declining and dominated factions of the ruling classes who seek to “conserve to conserve”, that is to say, to protect their positions and avoid elimination.¹²

This “redeployed conservatism”, a technical and scientific optimism advanced by fundamentally innovative and modernising elites, is cleverly disguised as progressive in the fight against “primary conservatism”, which it nevertheless needs in order to pass as progressive. This “progressive conservatism” seeks to change in order to persevere. It

¹² Bourdieu and Boltanski repeat Michel Poniowski’s claim in his *Réflexions pour 1985*: “growth does not work without a function of elimination” (quoted in Bourdieu and Boltanski 2008: 78).

needs to want change, to make change its driving principle, to want subjectively what we have seen elsewhere is foreseen as inevitable.

As Bourdieu and Boltanski (2008) thus write: “to recognise conservative thought only in its reactionary form, the very one that redeployed conservatism is the first to fight, is to always fight a losing battle” (71).

This analysis of ideology seems to me particularly valuable when applied to the beginnings of French neoliberalism, and in particular the careful way in which Giscard d’Estaing conceived his politics of modernisation in the wake of ’68. In the preface to a book by elected Giscardian Alain Giotteray, Giscard delivers a very clear diagnosis of the nature and causes of the crisis of May ’68. France, he explained, revolted “against its inadaptability to its time” (Giotteray 2008: 60). ’68 was therefore “a step in the march of time” (ibid., 60). And what to do in the face of this “explosion of inadaptability?” Reform, explained Giscard, must aim at the “centre” of society – that is to say – at minds and mores. It is necessary to educate the French so that they are finally of their time, in particular in the transformation of the State and public policy through decentralisation and encouraging autonomy. It is, as Griotteray notes, a matter of urgency, given that modern societies are not “safe from mischief”, that is to say, from social revolution (ibid., 104).¹³

In short, Bourdieu and Boltanski demonstrate that one of the consequences of ’68 is an acceleration and *metamorphosis of conservatism*. Of course, this transformation begins before ’68, but it reaches prevalence in its wake, becoming the dominant *ideological response* to the period of critique of which ’68 was harbinger.

What therefore differentiates the analyses of Régis Debray and Pierre Bourdieu? For the former, the events of ’68 contain within themselves the neoliberalism which will prevail, and this because neoliberalism is part of a historical necessity inscribed in the objective laws of capitalist development. In this type of ultra-deterministic analysis, subjectivities are necessarily deceived by the revolutionary illusions which veil the invisible movement of structures, the secret action of the laws of history.

For Bourdieu, things are quite different. Admittedly, the new conservative ideology presents itself as having revolutionary aspects – it captures the imperative of change for its own benefit – but it is not contained in the events of ’68. It is an ideological *response* to ’68, to its critiques of capitalism and the State, emerging from certain factions of the ruling class. These modernising factions capture the critical energy of ’68, on the one hand to help liquidate declining factions of the dominant class, in order to save what is most essential. On the other hand, they turn it against the protagonists of ’68 to combat a genuine threat of subversion of the social order.

As Boltanski (2008) would later write: “the main question, in the first half of the 1970s, is to put an end to the powerful critical movement that accompanied and followed May ’68” (68). And to do this, it appeared that the best way was to embrace criticism and channel it into a modernisation of capitalism and of society. In short, as Tancred famously

¹³ [Translator’s note: Griotteray’s expression is “à l’abri d’un mauvais coup”, which has no adequate translation in English. A direct translation would be something like “sheltered from a bad blow”, with the word “coup” of course retaining its explicitly political sense. “Mauvais coup” however is more generally translated as “no good” or “mischief”].

claims in Guiseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*: "everything must change so that nothing changes". The essential point is that the neoliberal response is one which seeks to neutralise criticism and to redeploy it in favour of the established order.¹⁴

This is the sense in which Bourdieu will describe neoliberalism as "conservative revolution". It is, in reality, a change in the mode of domination, once principally made by the "State nobility". This mode no longer consists of the refusal of change in the name of the established order, but of the orchestration of social change which is favourable to certain factions within the dominant social groups. The expansion of this ideology from the new elites to the broader "field of power" is thus inseparable from the struggles that take place between factions of the ruling classes.

But the most important thing here seems to me to underline, like Bourdieu, that the interpretation of '68 as the "neoliberal moment", as intrinsically neoliberal, individualist and hedonistic, is part of this ideological reversal, which is properly that of conservatism. This interpretation is in fact part of a metamorphosis of conservatism itself, which wants to promote the modernisation of society, which values innovation everywhere and disqualifies everything which is old.

In a word, and following Bourdieu and Boltanski, to consider '68 as the source or essence of neoliberalism is to participate in the conservative revolution or, if you like, to contribute to the revolutionary conservatism of neoliberalism, insofar as it is to make of "revolution" a central theme of the new conservatism. The essence of neoliberalism, if essence there is, is precisely on this ideological level, this historic reversal which sees a repossession by "the right of change" – of all the themes and symbols which had traditionally been anchored on the left. This is an ideological reversal that still produces considerable effects, since it consisted in confiscating from the left the themes of reform and even the problematic of "revolution".

I leave to one side here the sociological analyses made by Bourdieu of '68 itself, which appear in hindsight at the same time partial and disappointing. It is, in this context, all the more surprising that the book he had published in 1964 with Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les Héritiers*, had so important an effect in the constitution of the critical discourse of the students in '68. Bourdieu, precisely because he believes himself to have all of the analytic tools appropriate to the crisis of '68, misses the event by not wanting, or being unable, to see beyond the mechanical effects of sociological causes proper to the world of higher education. One could summarise his thesis thus: '68 was an effect of the devaluation of students' degrees caused by their multiplication.¹⁵

¹⁴ It is from this same perspective that we must also understand the work of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their book *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*. They show that in the field of management neoliberalism is not so much an extension of '68 but a response by reversal. For them, the dominant classes have responded to a number of strategies ("artistic critique") by redeploying them as instruments of domination. However, one of the weaknesses of their work, which was also a flaw in the analyses of the text from '76, is that they say nothing about the *specificity* of neoliberalism. They are content to view neoliberalism as a response and a reversal, without truly investigating its logic.

¹⁵ This phenomenon especially affects what he describes as the "dominated disciplines", the most exposed to the devaluation of diplomas. Sociology for the boys and psychology for the girls are the "luxury refuges", says Bourdieu, indeterminate positions for an uncertain future, and in which the gap between aspirations and objective chances is most keenly felt. Those excluded from the race (teachers or junior

'68 would be explicable by a logic of the frustration of hope for a social future no longer guaranteed by degrees. A thesis with an immense flaw, found elsewhere in neo-Tocquevillian or neo-Marxist pseudo explanations, in that it denies any relevance to the speeches and desires of the protagonists, who become nothing more than the toys of a logic they cannot possibly grasp – taken in as they are by a rhetoric equal parts radical and unrealistic. The realism that Bourdieu advocated, contrary to Marxist, anarchist, or situationist rhetoric, was to take the form of the democratisation of the university.

Foucault and the Crisis of Governmentality

Foucault's account of '68 is of a completely different manner.

I want to summarise it directly. May 1968 forced those who governed to respond strategically, not just ideologically, to the protests, to offer a practical response to these counter-conducts (*contre-conduites*), repressing them of course, but also and above all by changing the techniques for leading individuals and of governing society. Neoliberalism must therefore be understood as a positive, productive, and not only ideological *strategic response* to the generalised critique of the modes of government of the governed that took place in the 1960s and 70s.

To understand this analysis, we must recall that he maintains at a distance grand explanations taking the form of a "ruse of reason" or a "ruse of history", whether neo-Tocquevillian, neo-Marxist or sociological in the Bourdieusian sense. He especially refuses any analysis in terms of ideology. What counts for him are the techniques, procedures and devices (*dispositifs*) of power. Better, or more precisely, from 1978, what matters to him is what he calls "governmentality", or the "conduct of conduct". Governmentality is a concept which aims to understand how individuals who have the means, those who govern, try to organise relations between themselves and other individuals, the governed. It consists in trying to conduct these latter individuals by arranging a certain space within which they will evolve, and this is achieved not by forbidding them to do this or that, but by considering them as free individuals – albeit while in reality they are not – thus obliging those who exercise this conducting power to anticipate what individuals can and cannot do. It is in this sense that governing is an art, that it must develop a whole science and technology based on the possibility and probability of adverse strategies, of resistance or flight, on the part of the governed.

For Foucault, '68 is the culmination of a deeper and broader crisis of forms of power, or to use a typical Foucaultian expression, '68 is the most acute moment of a "crisis of governmentality".¹⁶ By a crisis of governmentality we must understand a sharp moment of criticism of the way in which we are governed, and even more so of the ways in which we are made subjects by our times. The crisis of governmentality is also a crisis of subjectivity, in the very precise sense that what is criticised is the way in which social

teachers) question the race itself, and the law which seems to preside over their exclusion. This double crisis in the fields of both student and teacher is synchronous, and gave May its explosive character.

¹⁶ Cf. on this concept and its genesis, Sauvêtre 2013.

relations and institutions steer us more fundamentally, participating in the constitution of our subjectivity.

This crisis of governmentality is possible only when the relation to oneself imposed upon each of us in families, schools, the media – in the network of institutions and social relations – is subject to a fundamental attitude of criticism. In other words, it takes place when there is a collective capacity for self-criticism, that is to say criticism of what institutions want us to be in order to govern us – since the act of governing necessarily has as its aim an ontological or anthropological effect of constituting subjectivities.

'68 is therefore the name of a moment in which there is a refusal, and a strategic shift of what the powers want us to be as subjects. To sum up Foucault's explanation, we could say this: the years around '68 are traversed by one of those great historical crises that see the governed radically criticise the way in which they are governed, challenging the modes of power and the means used by those who govern to conduct them. It is a struggle of the governed for another government, for another way of being conducted. The governed do so not only by means of new ideologies, or of old ideologies revisited, but via "counter-conducts", which, of course, are accompanied by counter-discourses. A crisis of governmentality takes place when the counter-conducts multiply, intensify and densify, acquiring at a certain moment a critical mass which very directly menaces the coherence of the system of powers in place. But '68 is a mass refusal to be governed in the established ways in all sectors of existence, it is a moment when power in all its forms is contested – not only State power, but all powers. What is called into question is, in Foucault's words, "a kind of permanent oppression in everyday life", and in any case in all social institutions (DE II: 901). For him, what happened was a passionate interrogation by many people of concrete problems – those of individual and collective existence, problems of sex, the body, medicine, madness, the exercise of justice, the school and the university, etc. – which were unacknowledged by the political discourse of the time. '68 is the moment when questions which Foucault had tried to pose for so long, alone, on questions of madness or medicine, become the object of an intense "cultural mobilisation", according to his expression, during which professionals will try to invent new relations: teachers, doctors, nurses, judges, lawyers, etc., but also women and children in families.¹⁷ We are therefore dealing in '68, and perhaps more fully, if we leave the French context, in the 60s and 70s, with a general struggle against norms, against types of power demonstrating a certain coherence, as dispersed and fragmentary as their battles are, which Foucault will call a specific political rationality of powers at a given time.

'68 opens a period when one might pose, in a radical fashion, questions like those of madness and psychiatry, those of punishment and prison, those of sexuality and its repression or expression, etc. In other words, questions which concerned everyone and often intimately, and which had long been regarded as marginal, minoritarian or secondary, would become, with '68, central, large-scale, and principal. '68 is a movement of the margins towards the centre. The whole political landscape shifts: everything

¹⁷ Cf. "Une mobilisation culturelle", in DE II, pp. 330-31.

becomes political because everywhere there is the question of norms and of power relations. '68 is inscribed in a period of history, that of the end of the twentieth century, when the great question is that of power, or, as Foucault says in an interview, that of the "over-production of power" manifested in Stalinism and fascism.¹⁸

Foucault therefore proposes an analysis of so-called "current" struggles, but those which echo other great crises of governmentality throughout history. The "current struggles" have a set of characteristics that distinguish them from those of other periods, be they feudal or capitalist. These last struggles have not disappeared, but for Foucault they are no longer the contemporary struggles of the mode of modern governance. These "current struggles" constitute "insurrections of conduct"¹⁹ directed against the "effects of power as such", and not just against power in general, nor against social domination in general nor capitalist exploitation in particular. They are struggles against the control that is exerted over bodies, but also over subjectivities. They are, more precisely, struggles against the administrative assignment of identity, against "government by individualisation". This is to say, they are struggles against a power that seeks "anything that can isolate the individual, cut them off from others, divide communal life, force the individual to fall back on himself and to attach himself to his own identity" (DE II: 1046).

These struggles are not for or against the individual, but against the submission of subjectivity to identities fixed by administrative and juridical categories, which make us the subjects of objectifying categories which function as little subjective prisons, which oblige us to play roles predetermined by relations of domination imposed on us, and which tell us what we are supposed to be. In historical terms, these are struggles against the "pastoral practices of the State" (*pastorat étatique*), that is to say, struggles against the State administration of the well-being of individuals, from school to the grave. They are pastoral in the sense of working to care for each individual in particular, by knowing them intimately, by individualising them as much as possible, as exemplified in the practise of confession. The struggles of '68 are in this sense comparable to these struggles of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries against the pastoral practices of the Church, acting essentially to take power from the clutches of a secularised pastoralism functioning as an apparatus of the modern State.

A theory of power emerging from the practices of May '68 but which is deployed against the dominant discourse of '68

Foucault sees in these struggles emerging from '68 the chance to understand better the nature of power, or rather how it is exercised.²⁰ But this knowledge could only be produced against the discourse of '68. In effect, the problem, according to Foucault, is precisely that "what was happening did not have its proper theory, its proper

¹⁸ Cf. "La philosophie analytique de la politique", in DE II, p. 536.

¹⁹ Cf. DE II, p. 549. Cf. also the "passage from the pastoral care of souls to the political government of men" and on "insurrections of conduct", cf. lesson of 8 March 1978, in Foucault 2004a: 234 and *sq.*

²⁰ Cf. The discussion with Gilles Deleuze, "Les intellectuels et le pouvoir", DE II, pp. 1182-83.

vocabulary”. And so, the task at the level of philosophy was precisely to give to ’68 its proper theory, its proper vocabulary (DE II: 889). We cannot, therefore dissociate the development of Foucault’s work from his environment. His interest in the arts of governance, the forms or conduct of governmentality, as well as the forms of antagonism and resistance which are in a way their corollary – those he will describe as “counter-conducts” – owe a great deal to ’68 and to the political, social and cultural activities linked both to the era’s leftism and counterculture. These are activities in which, unlike Bourdieu, Foucault was directly involved, whether in France or in the United States. Indeed, we can see that Foucault is conscious of this debt when he claims that, “it is certain that without May ’68 I would have never done what I did in relation to the prison, delinquency and sexuality” (DE II: 900).

Foucault was plainly in step with what he described as the malaise of the times, and which was linked to the question of “power” as a dimension of all relations of individuals at the most immediate level – the most concrete or empirical. This is what he calls the great discovery of ’68, that of “new political objects”, “a series of domains of existence, corners of society, nooks of lived experience which have been hitherto quite forgotten or completely disqualified by political thought” (DE II: 919-20). It’s a little as if ’68 had made his areas of interest the focus of everybody – as if his books, which according to him were like “autobiographical fragments” (DE II: 1567), now bore witness to the entirety of an era. Beginning in ’68, Foucault reinvented himself. Not only had he found a favourable context for his earlier work on madness and medicine, but a formidable encouragement to deepen his interest in “new political objects” as linked to individual existence.

The Foucauldian theory of power tries to capture this moment through successive displacements. The *theoretical apparatus (dispositif théorique)* established by Foucault from ’77-78 is entirely linked to his experience of counter-conducts and direct struggles against specific formations of power. This intellectual apparatus is not only a way of reading the contemporary situation, it is produced by this situation. More precisely it is a conscious, considered production of the political and ethical experiences Foucault had with what he will describe as “counter-conducts”. We might even say, building here on the work of Laurent Jeanpierre and Patrice Maniglier at the Pompidou Centre, that this Foucauldian apparatus is one of the residual effects of the theory of May ’68. Foucault’s work in the 70s and 80s is best understood as a prolonged theoretical effect of the crisis of governmentality in the 60s and 70s. Indeed, the very concept of a “crisis of governmentality” should be understood as an effect of the ’68 period.

And at the same time, Foucault found the means to enter this conjuncture by taking a counter position to the dominant discourse of hyper-Marxist, fragmentary leftism, by establishing a theory of ’68 *against* the Marxist lexicon of his time. This is what the “Foucault effect” amounts to: accentuating, exacerbating the open contradiction in ’68 between, on the one hand, the questioning of power relations in all the domains linked to existence – the emergence of feminism, the gay and environmental movements, but also non-conformist psychoanalysis and pedagogy – and on the other the Marxist claim to give lessons on the meaning of history while remaining “powerless to confront these problems” (DE II: 1414).

Far from following the leftist *doxa* of the period, he takes a contrary position. For this Marxising leftism knows nothing but the repression of the State, and thus refuses to understand the complexity and subtlety of strategies of power. We already see this counter position played out in his analysis of the apparatus (*dispositif*) of sexuality in *The Will to Knowledge*, the book in which he attempts to disillusion those leftists remaining under the influence of Freudo-Marxism. It will be the same with liberalism. Foucault grasps that power is not simply repression, he understands that we cannot simply oppose repression and liberation. This is a reason why he will try to theorise instead with the couplet of “power–critique” or of “governmentality–counter-conduct”. Government, as conductor of conduct, does not only repress, it incites, stimulates, encourages, guides and channels. In a word, it produces. This is the great lesson he draws from his knowledge of the texts of the technicians of power, those like Bentham. These texts are very different from the great theories of political philosophy, in that they focus on the art of governing and not on grand justifications of power.

The Neoliberal Strategic Response

In what way is neoliberalism a strategic response to the crisis of governmentality to which '68 bears witness? By neoliberalism, like liberalism elsewhere, Foucault does not designate a theory or theories but “arts of governance”, means of conducting the conduct of others (cf. Foucault 2004b). According to the hypothesis that we defend here, and even if Foucault didn't explicate this point, the framework and even the logic of his analysis leads us to think that neoliberalism such as it began to take shape in the 70s is a strategic response to the crises of governmentality in the 1960s and 70s.

The relations of power are inseparably and immediately strategic relations of confrontation, agonistic relations. To act upon others, to structure their eventual field of action – according to one of his formulas – is to be confronted with resistances or counter-conducts, is to encounter the freedom of subjects, their capacity for insubordination, for flight, their critical relation to plans made for them. And those who govern must always face this possible disobedience, these strategic responses which aim for another government of others (*gouverner autrui autrement*), which aim to displace the extant form of power exerted on others. It is in this context that we must understand neoliberalism. Not as a response to the crisis of capitalism – the diminished rates of profit or as a revenge of dominant classes – an explanation which is far too limited, but as a response to a mass critique – at the same time loud and diffuse, and in any case general – of the multiple forms of governance of individuals. This is the methodological lesson taken from May '68: we must understand the relations of power *beginning with* resistance, as we said above. We must start from the forms of resistance to understand the strategies that are deployed to respond to and to reduce them.²¹ '68 had been an

²¹ “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, DE II, pp. 1044-45.

analysis in practice of previous power relations, and remains an analysis of later forms of power. We must therefore return to '68 to understand neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, or at least its “utopian object” (*point d'utopie*), is to replace these administrative and legal assignments of which the social State has been the propagator and universalising agent – through a social regulation by the market, or more precisely, by the logic of the market: namely, competition. It acts to lighten the direct subjectivisation by categorisation and administrative objectivation by bringing into play other mechanisms which are those of the market, thus leaving room for an appearance of more “play” between individuals and between individuals and institutions. For example, instead of administratively managing the problem of poverty, in distinguishing good and bad poor people, in categorising the different sorts of poverty, etc., it would be enough to pay a minimum subsistence income which would permit the poor to survive and to participate in the “market game”. In a word, the government must consist in both creating social spaces with are as similar as possible to the market, and also giving everybody the means to participate in this “market game”. We could perhaps go further and ask if the neoliberal art isn't really about making the new “power games” become the “market games”, in order to reconceal the relations of power which had been updated, problematized and questioned in '68.

This substitution gives apparent satisfaction to the participants in contemporary struggles, by granting them a greater freedom of action and of choice, but it also forces them to play the game of competition, since neoliberal society is, ideally at east, entirely regulated by competition. It responds to these struggles against the subjugation of identity by the State with a generalised economic subjectivation. Rather than having to deal with the mad, with students, the sick, soldiers, housewives or employed women, workers in the public or private sector, it treats everybody the same, like economic agents considered all equally capable of calculating and reacting to the variables of their environment, to the oscillations of the market in which they act and evolve. It depoliticises power relations – the universality of the citizen or even that of the subject of rights is no longer considered foundational, only the subjectivity of economic man is considered, in the capitalist and entrepreneurial mould. It responds to the counter-conducts aimed at identitarian and categorical objectification with a generalised economic conduction, making sure that all individuals function in terms of competition – and this is achieved via a deployment of governmental procedures and through the arrangement of society as an ensemble of competitive markets, transforming institutions into companies and imposing everywhere the imperative of competition. In a word, the utopian horizon of neoliberalism consists in replacing coercive and disciplinary relations – and the social State's modes of administration – with competitive relations, and it consists in constituting individuals as economic subjects by the organisation of their environment as a market. This strategy therefore draws, in a way, on the Western anthropology which had followed the Christian pastorate, in order to mass produce “economic man”.

To the fundamental question, according to Foucault, of contemporary struggles: “who are we?” the new form of government answers: “you are economic man with the task of

optimising your allocation of resources”. Or else: “you are human capital who must make your investments profitable”. Or again: “You are your own companies, obliged to unceasingly improve, exceed, and ultimately exploit yourselves, in order survive and to beat the competition”.

The historic success of neoliberalism is to have found a way to respond to the great crisis of power felt at the end of the twentieth century, by shifting the problem onto the economy, trying to make the economy a place where ideally the question of the relations of power will not be posed – since everyone will go their own way by pursuing individual goals of maximisation. This strategic response aims to economise relations between individuals and between individuals and institutions, ideally to hide the question of power and cause market mechanisms to function everywhere. It’s in this sense that Foucault accords a great deal of theoretical importance and strategic value to Gary Becker and his extension to infinity of the economisation of human relations.

Conclusion

In what way do these analyses of Bourdieu and of Foucault shed light on our present? We depend on ’68, because this event and its related struggles and practises, have contributed a little to what we have all become. But we also depend on it indirectly, in terms of the ideological responses and (conversely) strategies for which it has been put to use. And these responses amount, principally, to neoliberalism. On the ideological plane, such as is related to Bourdieu, it’s certain that the hitherto progressive themes of “reform”, “change”, “progress” or even “revolution” have changed their meanings and their political allegiance. Those who govern are the champions of a “revolution” which certainly did not change the most important and determinative social relations. And as for the mode of neoliberal governance, as envisaged by Foucault, if we are still far from the realisation of a society entirely determined by the mechanisms of competition, and if all individuals do not yet identify as “human capital” it seems difficult to deny that the current path leads straight to it.

But there is another lesson we must learn. We sometimes ask if another ’68 is possible. Instead we should first ask ourselves if all the lessons have been drawn from the events of the last fifty years, and if we have been able to learn the right lessons contained in the analyses produced after the event, for instance those of Bourdieu or Foucault. If we are dealing with a new conservatism, a “progressive conservatism”, at least in part, how are we to fight on the ideological plane against this reversal of words and of values? I’m not sure that “progressives” have yet managed to find the right answer, particularly in France. Indeed, has this theft not continued, in the discourse and themes of the new President of the Republic and his movement, “*En marche*”?

On the other hand, if all forms of power give rise to antagonisms, to forms of resistance and confrontation that are specific to them, we must ask ourselves what is particular and new about “current” struggles, practices, counter-conducts, those which are contemporary with neoliberalism; and in what ways do they sketch other possible

horizons? This is the task of critique, which is not only that of denunciation, but which must also be practical and pre-figurative. Foucault went so far as to say that it had to have a positive task, “to promote new forms of subjectivity by refusing the type of ‘individuality’ that has been imposed on us for several centuries”.²² These counter-conducts were, for Foucault, the “experiences” of another world, and if Foucault did not provide a thorough theoretical analysis, he certainly experienced them in person.²³ Foucault saw in '68 the revitalisation or the reinvention of collective practices, of experiences, of movements that did not seek so much to “seize power” as to disengage from power, and fundamentally transform it in the sense I will happily call “collective”. We must ask ourselves in what ways our resistances and counter-conducts today can be more than just resistances and counter-conducts, can constitute alterations in action, and thus powerful alternatives to the capitalist system.

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²² “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, DE II, p. 1051.

²³ We should not neglect the book of interviews he conducted with a young man, Thierry Voeltzel, which precisely relates to the struggles of homosexuals and more generally those in their 20's in the aftermath of '68. Cf. Voeltzel 2014.

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