

## ***May 68 in theory (and in practice)***

by PATRICE MANIGLIER

translated from French by Guillaume Collett

### **Abstract**

A true event cannot merely be the object of already given theories: it challenges them and interrogates the very sense it makes to practice theory in general. This is eminently true of May 68 in France: it has been an event for “Theory.” However, its theoretical implications have been too often obfuscated by hasty interpretations that projected on it some vague *Zeitgeist* aptly coined “68 Thought.” In order to avoid such simplifications, we need to get back to the perception of the actors of the time and to how they themselves identified those theoretical stakes. It so happens that they in part were conflated with the reception of “structuralism.” The article will patiently try to understand how such abstract theoretical constructions could be deemed at stake in the social and political com-motion of those two months.<sup>1</sup>

“May 68 in theory”: the expression is ambiguous. To ask what May 68 has meant for theory can mean to be interested in the event’s theoretical representations – and particularly their ultimate ability or inability to account for the event’s reality, which is to say what happened not in theory but *in reality* or *in practice*. But the expression “May 68 in theory” can have another meaning, which would consist in knowing whether something of the event traversed theory itself. It is in this second sense that I would understand the title of this article, for one simple reason: an authentic event is something which throws into crisis the very categories through which we apprehend it. The event is thus not only an external object of theory but also an internal variation. Theory cannot be content with representing events; it must express them. Hence, the question that will occupy me is as follows: to what extent have theo-retical disciplines – and particularly those which concern themselves with uttering truths about us (and about theory) – been traversed by May 68? Has May 68 taught us something about what “theory” is or could be? As such, in what follows I will be concerned with the manner in which May 68 has been perceived by its contemporaries as a theoretical event.

Nevertheless, one finds that for many it has been understood as the event which put an end to structuralism. Accordingly, on 30 November 1968 the newspaper *Le Monde* published

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<sup>1</sup> Original French version published in *La Part de l’Œil*, “L’œuvre d’art entre structure et histoire”, n°32, 2018-2019.

a centre spread entitled: “Has structuralism been killed off by the movement of May?”. Perhaps one remembers the famous phrase “Structures don’t march in the streets!”, which had been written on the blackboard in the room where Greimas and Barthes taught – to which another mischievous mind had added “Barthes neither!”. This is also the thesis developed by Henri Lefebvre, who had already written several texts against structuralism, which had been published in a volume entitled *L’irruption de Nanterre au sommet* (1968), where he explains how May 68 is history’s revenge against those thinkers who denied its importance and attempted to chase it away. This thesis would recur in Kristin Ross’ two books, *Fast Cars and Clean Bodies* (1996), and *May ‘68 And Its Afterlives* (2008).

To understand why structuralism is central to interpretations of May 68’s meaning for theory, one has to remember that only two years before, in 1966, structuralism was considered as the framework able to grasp the present moment in theory. A 1966 issue of the journal *L’Arc*, dedicated to Sartre, opened with the following:

1945, 1960: to measure the progress made between these two dates it is enough to open a newspaper or journal and to read a few book reviews. [...] We no longer speak of “conscience” or of the “subject”, but of “rules”, “codes”, “systems”; we no longer say that man “produces meaning”, but that meaning “happens to man”; we are no longer *existentialist* but *structuralist*. (Pingaud 1966: 1).

Many more documents attest to the present-day theory of the time conflating itself in the minds of its contemporaries with the irruption of structuralism. Yet suddenly, the events of the non-theoretical present would belie their purported theorization!

My objective in this text is to evaluate the pertinence of this avowed death. I will do so in three stages. Firstly, I will reconstitute the reasons why some saw in May 68 the date of structuralism’s expiration. Next, I will explain why I think this interpretation is inexact. I will maintain, to the contrary, that structuralism gets to the heart of May 68 because it proposes a non-historical concept of the event alone able to take the measure of its characteristics. May 68 has become the model of those gigantic events which nevertheless do not make history. Because of this, the event’s very reality was doubted. I maintain that such doubt stems from the event being measured against the order of historical transformations, and that structuralism gives us tools to re-think the event, such that it is not reducible to its inscription in history, and thus to grasp the significance of the event of May 68 for re-thinking the category of the event itself.

## 1. May 68, here lies structuralism

Two fairly unknown authors agreed to act as structuralism's coroners, being tasked with signing its death certificate in the November 1968 issue of *Le Monde*. The first, Mikel Dufrenne, was a French philosopher working in a phenomenological tradition close to Merleau-Ponty's, who distinguished himself as an aesthete. The other wrote under the pseudonym Epistémon, and was none other than the psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, then teaching at Nanterre University. Epistémon had just published a book entitled *Ces idées qui ont ébranlé la France* [*These Ideas that Have Shaken France*] (1968a), in which he wrote: "May is not only the student riots in Paris [...] it's also structuralism's death certificate" (31). Though they were far from being the only ones to share this clinical diagnosis. Moreover, they drew on critiques anterior to structuralism, particularly those of Jean-François Revel on the one hand and Henri Lefebvre on the other. They would come to be fairly influential. Kristin Ross would return to this thesis in a work ranking amongst the best written on May 68. Many others would see in May 68 the bridge between structuralism and post-structuralism.

What are their arguments? Their two texts on May 68 share roughly the same argument, as do virtually all those that hold to this line of reasoning. They begin by distinguishing between structuralism considered as a methodology found in the human and social sciences, and structuralism considered as an ideology or totalizing philosophy. They enshrine the methodology and immunize it in principle against criticism, focusing their criticism instead on its various philosophical appropriations (often, but not always, targeting the work of Foucault). They therefore try to denounce the way in which the dominant ideology – in other words, the discourses that serve to perpetuate a given system of domination and exploitation – use these philosophical appropriations to interpret the scientific findings of the human sciences, in order to serve their own ends. In fact, according to them, this generalized structuralism is defined by four principal traits: the refusal of history, the rejection of the dialectic, contempt for humanism, and finally contempt for the irrational, the imaginary, the poetic – in short, anything unable to be constituted as object of a positive science. Let us approach these different traits one at a time.

The rejection of history. According to them, structuralism maintains an intrinsically frozen, immobile, invariable conception of human reality. Hence, Epistémon writes:

The mode and spirit of structuralism were implanted in France during a time when social and university structures were frozen [...] In a certain way, this philosophy is a translation of the anonymity, tyranny and sclerosis of our society. (Epistémon 1968b).

For his part, Mikel Dufrenne writes, more subtly:

May was the violence of history during a time which considered itself "without history"; and structuralism, as the philosophy of this system, is badly placed to think this irruption

of contingency which is not a mutation of the system, but its denunciation (Dufrenne 1968).

We can see that for the latter, it is not a matter of saying that structuralism denies the very existence of change, which would indeed be absurd, but that it denies these changes being the result of a contestation, by certain elements, of key traits of the system to which they belong (or in which they are locked). The famous discontinuity thesis attributed to Foucault's *The Order of Things* (2001 [1966]) is interpreted in this way. Maintaining that change amounts to a discontinuous jump from one system to another is to ignore the fact that the second system could be the result of desystematizing or deconstructive forces acting in the first. It is thus to ignore that there is more to a situation<sup>2</sup> than functional systems capable only of reproducing themselves; that there are dysfunctional elements that destroy the system. This is what structuralism would be unable to think.

Second trait, negation. This dysfunctional element that undoes a system's harmonious efficiency, is not necessarily something positive that would be transcendent or radically external to cultural or social systems, as one might consider to be, for instance, the specific exigencies of a universal human nature that is buried under the system's rigidity but always able to return as an eruption of life within death. One could suppose that this dysfunctional element is negation's only power. This is why structuralism is considered as an anti-dialectic. And it is this second characteristic of structuralism that would have been belied by May 68: the power of negation – and of the particular form it takes in history, namely violence – to construct reality, or this singular reality which we call history. Epistémon (1968b) is particularly clear on this point: "May 68 is the surging forth in history of a 'wild' negation".

And like many other commentators of this period, he sees in this return of negation Sartre's revenge against structuralism, but the Sartre of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*:

Sartre first described in his book the passive, anonymous forms in which individuals are alienated – this is what he calls the practico-inert – and then he showed how a group introduces negation into history and shapes itself (rather than being shaped), invents itself by breaking from a passive and anonymous society, which an American sociologist had called during this time the "solitary crowd". (Epistémon 1968b)

It is true that Sartre does not claim human history to be the complex, offset, tortuous reality corresponding to the positive intentions or fundamental necessities of an eternal humanity; he maintains, on the contrary, that freedom exists only as negativity in act. Hence the importance of violence.

Conversely, structuralism would be unable to make room (*place*) for negation since behaviors are determined by how they accomplish a function internal to the system, and there

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: The French term "situation", which the author makes frequent use of in the present text, is translated as "situation" throughout to maintain the allusion to Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*]

is only room (*place*) for what contributes to the functioning of the system. This echoes a common objection to structuralism, that of overlooking conflict when analyzing its objects; that is to say, languages, societies, neuroses, texts that are incompatible with the very idea of system as *coherence*. This is therefore a criticism of what we could call the positivism of structuralist ideology.

May 68 would therefore have refuted structuralism, in the sense that it would have opposed to it in action a *de facto* figure of change that is neither an evolution dictated by the system's exigencies, nor a mutation as one system transforms into another, but rather a contestation of this system on the basis of a point that itself would be unassignable – not necessarily because it derives from some subjective transcendence, but because it conflates itself with an aimless negativity.

The concept of history which May 68 would have rehabilitated thus cannot be reduced to the idea of change alone. It implies three traits: continuity, negation, sense. Since if history is not the simple succession of systems, but the inscription of pure negations in new systematic organizations, this then means that this succession must have some kind of sense, that history cannot simply be reduced to one historical state's replacement by another, but rather that it resides in the continuous and permanent labour of a negation which does not cease to prolong itself from one historical state to another, and thus which searches for and deepens itself along this course. To think May 68, one should therefore think an event that, while not obeying transcendent laws of history, makes history through the very manner in which it never ceases to escape it. Here we find a first figure of the tension which I believe to be effectively constitutive of one of the most important philosophical aspects of May 68: the tension between the categories of the event and history.

The third trait which they attribute to structuralism is that of anti-humanism, or the way that structuralism marginalized the human. On the contrary, May 68 would be a revenge of humanism. Dufrenne affirms that:

[May 68] put into question what, for structuralism, goes without saying: the reign of the system in this time without history where the *épistémè* alone is given a history, where man is no longer anything but an uncertain and precarious concept for science and a raw material for technocracy, which explains its dreams, fabricates its needs, orients its opinions. (Dufrenne 1968)

Structuralism is taken to establish that not only are systems indifferent to human subjectivity, but would go as far as operationalizing precisely this subjective dimension, dreams, thought, desires. Anti-humanism does not consist in negating the existence of subjectivity, but in making it recognize a functionally determined existence. Certain systems need souls, others don't, and souls would be seen to exist as long as systems needed them to (or so long as systems needed them). In particular, this would be Foucault's thesis while, in *The Order of Things*, he affirms that the notion of humanity depends on a certain system of the production

of knowledge. The essence of alienation is therefore not that subjective exigencies don't have a place in the social world, but on the contrary that they are conflated precisely with their operational functioning.

Finally, the last trait of structuralism that May 68 would have rendered obsolete, is what we can call its *positivism*. Though here it is meant in the sense that positivism is a form of scientism. That is to say, a way of thinking leading us to believe we can objectivize human phenomena and approach them with the same coldness through which we observe planets, cancerous cells, or fluid dynamics, to which we would oppose the *irreducible* character of the imagination, which pertains as much to human reason as to humans' power.

The revenge of history, the revenge of the dialectic, the revenge of humanism, and finally the revenge of the imagination – these are considered the four traits by means of which May 68 practically refuted a theory, that of structuralism.

In truth, all these traits converge on a single word, which is the proper name of what May 68 contests and which characterizes structuralism as much as the society in which it appeared: *technocracy*. According to this view – and as Henri Lefebvre had maintained in a series of articles written throughout the 1960s, collected together in *L'ideologie Structuraliste* (1975) – structuralism was a result of the dominant ideology's interpretation, or rather misinterpretation, of the work of the human sciences, which it used to propagate a worldview that suited it: a technocratic ideology. Technocratic ideology echoed these supposed structuralist traits and enabled an equivalency to be established between the latter and the former. More recently, Kristin Ross' magisterial *Fast Cars and Clean Bodies* has developed this thesis in detail. But such an interpretation of structuralism as technocratic ideology relies on a conception of the relations (pertaining) between ideas and social reality corresponding exactly to a theory of reflection, an ideology reflecting a situation. There are certainly objections to be made to such a social theory. Jean Pouillon was already remarking in the above-mentioned issue of *Le Monde* that "this link that Epistémon establishes between structuralism and a contested social order is rather the translation of a simplistic sociologism, which is certainly not of Sartre's own making" (Pouillon 1968), and that, conversely, structuralism offers more nuanced instruments with which to engage this kind of question. Nonetheless, the fact remains that May 68 was rigorously perceived as a protest against the technocratic order.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Many of May 68's social actors and commentators invoked this critique of "technocracy". For example, one finds it in the short text Castoriadis co-wrote with Edgar Morin and Claude Lefort, entitled *Mai 1968: la Brèche [May 1968: The Breach]* (1968). One also finds this critique in Sartre who considers the event as a humanist protest against the instrumentalization of existence. But this reference to technocracy isn't only invoked by May 68's enthusiasts. On the contrary, Raymond Aron will oppose May 68 in order to defend the technocratic requirements of modern industrial societies since, as he explains in *The Elusive Revolution: Anatomy of a Student Revolt* (published in the autumn of 1968 [English translation 1969]), he sees in May 68 an impasse and even considers it absurd with regard to these abovementioned requirements. He maintains that contemporary industrial societies are fragile. Thus, they require that we each agree to realize a small part of their larger social project by willingly submitting ourselves to a discipline that is partly militant, in exchange for a continuous amelioration of our own conditions of life and indeed of the lives of the

However, is this way of making structuralism fall back onto technocracy so as to better oppose it to May 68 well founded? Does structuralism not conceal resources that help shed light on the specificities of the mysterious, enigmatic, uncertain event that was May 68?

## 2. A structuralism of the event

### 2.1 Reestablishing the facts (of the relation of the structuralists to May 68)

Let us begin by recalling a fact (*un fait*), or rather a series of facts, which renders the interpretation of the relations between structuralism and May 68 discussed above rather strange. The works of the majority of authors associated with structuralism resonated most strongly in the decade following May 68. Foucault, of course, but also Lacan, Deleuze, and Althusser (clearly in a tortuous fashion but also very profoundly), as well as Derrida and Barthes, without mentioning a thinker such as Lyotard who was evidently always critical of structuralism but who sought to overcome it in its entirety. The only major “structuralist” who always appeared indifferent to and even annoyed by May 68 was Lévi-Strauss himself which, moreover, did not prevent a number of his students from distancing themselves from their teacher at this point.

We can make two immediate objections to what I have just put forward. The first consists in objecting that these authors always had an either distant, skeptical or indifferent relation to May 68 – this is particularly Kristin Ross’ position in her book.<sup>4</sup> The second admits that

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majority of people. Aron maintains that industrial societies can only function by following one of two possible paths. On the one hand, we have the socialist path, which is necessarily authoritarian and which plans this collective organization but, because of this, sacrifices individual freedoms. On the other hand, we have the liberal path, which on the contrary entrusts competitively run private companies with the responsibility of determining the best way to organize a society’s division of labor, thereby giving the social sphere greater autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Both systems are equally technocratic, but they negotiate contemporary industrial societies’ technocratic requirements differently. Aron’s avowed and ardent hatred of May 68 can be accounted for by his conviction that a third way doesn’t exist (in particular, he is opposed to the idea of “self-governance” which one finds notably in Lefort and Castoriadis during this period). As such, the contestation of technocratic capitalism can have one of two possible outcomes. Either, it gives rise to a mere masquerade amounting to nothing more than a waste of time, or it gives rise to an authentic reorientation of the mode of production resulting only in the establishment in France of a Sovietesque regime.

<sup>4</sup> One finds a certain exaggeration in Kristin Ross’ diagnosis. For example, she forgets to mention that Jacques Lacan immediately signed a petition in support of the rioting students – along with Sartre, Gorz, Klossowski, Lefebvre, Nadeau, Blanchot, Duras, Mascolo, Leiris, and Sarraute – that appeared in the 10 May 1968 issue of *Le Monde*, which is to say at the very beginning of the movement. She also doesn’t remember that he came up with the notorious phrase “May 68 proved that structures take to the streets”, nor the extent to which he himself challenged the authorities in his discipline such that in the 1970s he became a symbol of revolution for that generation. Lacan certainly never compromised on his project by serving the interests of the political groups that approached him, but one cannot say that he was hostile toward May 68. Likewise, Barthes published an article entirely consecrated to May 68 in the November 1968 issue of his journal *Communications*, titled “The Writing of the Event”. The article was certainly a little critical of May 68, not because he was opposed to the entire sequence of events but rather because he wanted to defend a particular interpretation of them. It’s no use pointing to the role that thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, Derrida,

they were indeed close to May 68, but adds that this was precisely because they were not structuralists – and that they said it often enough. Let us consider these two objections one by one.

Regarding the first of these, let us formulate the following remark. Firstly, I think that we cannot measure the proximity of a thinker to an event like May 68 solely through their physical participation in a series of events (*faits*). Even if this is not a negligible consideration, this criterion alone does not suffice, firstly, because May 68 cannot be conflated with the sequence of events (*faits*) that unfolded in France in May and June 1968. May 68 is the proper name of a political benchmark, of a decision made about the present, a subjective orientation that provides bearings reaching far beyond the present and even to today. Hence it doesn't matter if, for example, Deleuze was there on the streets for a few days during May or June 1968; what matters is that he always asserted his fidelity to May 68, that it orientated his work and was an avowed source of inspiration, to the extent that he included it in the "bibliographic note" that he sent to *Magazine Littéraire* in 1988: "Distinguishing features: travelled little, never joined the Communist Party, was never either a phenomenologist or a Heideggerian, never renounced Marx, never repudiated May 68". Furthermore, and for the same reason, this implies that the proximity of an event like May 68 to a thinker's work should rather be evaluated according to the resources that those who made of it a reference point found, or didn't find, in its expressions. It doesn't matter whether or not Foucault, Lacan, Barthes or Derrida subjectively recognized themselves in May 68, if they provided resources for those who did subjectively define themselves through May 68.

However, one could admit that these authors provided subjective resources for a certain spirit of May 68, but object that they were precisely not structuralists: they fell within what is called post-structuralism.

Here I would reply with the following two points. Firstly, for certain of these authors, this thesis is simply false. It is a view that is historically counterfactual if extremely widespread, and which for this deserves all the more to be firmly dismissed. Of course, they may have wanted to pretend that they were not and never had been "structuralists", but this was only a very ad hoc and tactical maneuver explained by a necessity to distance themselves from it faced with the confusions surrounding the category of "structuralism". Hence, if Foucault may well have said, and repeated throughout the 1970s, that he had nothing to do with structuralism, the following must be remembered: *The Order of Things* was supposed to be subtitled "An Archaeology of Structuralism"; it is enough to read the work to realize that this subtitle describes it well: it is an attempt to diagnose the theoretical event that is structuralism using precisely a structural method. This same goes for Deleuze: it is enough to read the 1967 article "How do we Recognize Structuralism?" (2004 [1967]) to realize that in it we find all the themes from his two early works, *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and *Logic of Sense*

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etc. could have played in the years immediately after 1968. See François Dosse's *History of Structuralism* (1997, 1998).



(1969). As for Lacan or Barthes, for a time they both *practiced* structuralism. In short, one can find here a trait of structure within structuralism itself, namely that it conflates itself with the very movement by which it refutes itself. For other authors, such as Derrida or Lyotard, it is completely correct to say that they were always critical of structuralism. Yet, on the one hand, this distance had nothing to do with the supposedly technocratic or alienating character of structuralism, nor with the will to rehabilitate history, the dialectic, humanism or poetry: it had much more to do with taking it in an even more anti-dialectical direction. On the other hand, we must recognize that their thought is inseparable from its engagement with structuralism, and that a significant part of their most important works presents itself as a diagnosis of structuralism taken as the cutting edge of thought, precisely as we find in the texts by Foucault and Deleuze.

All these remarks lead us to a conclusion: structuralism is not a univocal doctrine that we could summarize in several traits. Commentators have always shared this view. Though they have done so in order to distinguish the structuralist methodologies that were introduced into the human sciences, which they respect, from the supposed philosophical extrapolations carried out by thinkers such as Foucault and others, which they denounce. However, this distinction is incoherent – all the more in its relation to May 68 – since they criticize precisely the scientific, positive aspect of structuralism.

I have suggested a way out of this difficulty by positing that structuralism is a space of problems posed by the introduction of structural methods into the human sciences, meaning that the space of structuralism should be considered in a structuralist way as a space of dispersion of diverse positions whose identity is given precisely by the set of their reciprocal relations.<sup>5</sup> Having in part a philosophical nature, these problems ground and account for the pertinence of a speculative intervention in this domain. This explains why structuralism cannot fundamentally be opposed to post-structuralism: the latter is but one of the attempts to philosophically address what is played out at the heart of structuralism, which post-structuralism then transfers to structuralism's analysis of the phenomena that interest it. I have already pointed out this curious phenomenon consisting in structuralism being systematically marked by its own refutation. Hence, post-structuralism is not external to structuralism; it is one of its modes of actualization. We therefore must define structuralism as an *event*, which is to say an internal variation, and we must grasp it at the point of its own rupture (*extase*), understanding this word (*extase*) in its etymological sense: that which is unable to be held within itself, whose identity is precisely that of exiting itself. This is why I think it is better to speak of (post-)structuralism, putting the prefix "post" in brackets, so as to express this internal, essential, equivocity constitutive of structuralism itself.

In order to understand this thesis, it is now necessary to show why the reading that led structuralism to be opposed to May 68 is incorrect, and misses completely the reality of what was played out.

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<sup>5</sup> [TN: See Maniglier (2005, 2006, 2010)]

## 2.2 An erroneous interpretation of structuralism

The following is perhaps the most decisive point, regarding what concerns us: wherever it made an impact, the structuralist approach did not deny the possibility of the event but rather thought it more deeply and radically, indeed detaching it from the lexicon of history and of historicity, showing that there is something in the very concept of event that is irreducible to historical categories.

### 2.2a Structure or mutation

I have striven to show, and particularly in my works on Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, that far from constituting what Henri Lefebvre considers as an “eleaticism”, the introduction of structuralist reforms into the social sciences responded to a recurring problem in all of the domains into which they were introduced (albeit each time involving complex modifications). This problem can be formulated in a very general way: What must be the nature of these entities constituting cultural phenomena in general – be they linguistic or parental, mythologies, political or religious institutions, ideologies, etc. – if they are to be understood as both existing only through their repetition (what Derrida calls their iterability) and also as varying through their very repetition? Hence, Saussure’s concept of language (*langue*) rests on a very simple observation which he summarizes in a crucial passage: “French does not *come* from Latin, it *is* Latin, the Latin which was spoken at a given date and within given geographical limits” (de Saussure 2006: 101). This is the difficulty in determining what establishes the identity of two acts of speech, a problem that gives rise to a large part of the conceptual apparatus of structuralism that Saussure would develop.

What is it that makes *caballus* and *cheval*<sup>6</sup> two different linguistic realities? If you say it’s obvious since they are very dissimilar sounds, and maybe even dissimilar significations, you commit an error. The fact is that very different sounds can very well correspond to the same word. Two pronunciations of “*cheval*” – spoken by two different people or indeed by the same person – can vary in accent, speech tempo, intonation, timbre, at least as much as the difference between *caballus* and *cheval*. For example, if I say the “*chvéïl*” we can easily understand that it is identical to “*cheuvâle*”. In other words, the sole criterion of *resemblance/dissemblance* cannot be relied upon to distinguish between what Saussure calls a “synchronic” identity – that is, the identity of two occurrences of the same linguistic entity which is simply realized differently (“*chvéïl*” and “*cheuvâle*”) – and what he calls a “diachronic” one (“*caballus*” and “*cheval*”).

It is in order to resolve this problem that Saussure develops the idea that the identity of a linguistic term is defined by its differences (not by its positive and substantial qualities) and

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<sup>6</sup> [TN: horse in Latin and French, respectively]

also by their dual character. This means that a term's differences can be established only on the condition of the production of another difference on another plane, in other words only by being a sign. Lastly, these differences can only be established thanks to their partially formal character, since a linguistic entity can only be defined by the position that its differences occupy in a system, a position that is totally abstracted from its concrete forms of realization (what Saussure calls "substances").

However, this is only one aspect of his response. The whole purpose of what he calls the "theory of value" is to show that linguistic entities superpose two different aspects of variation: one he calls difference proper and the other he calls opposition. Their permanently displaced interplay is what causes the repetition of a term to become its own variation.<sup>7</sup> Here it is important to understand two things in particular. Firstly, this analysis allows Saussure to distinguish between two types of variation – variations in speech and variations in language (*langue*) – on the basis that the former does not correspond to a variation in structure, whereas the latter signals a structural mutation. We therefore see that, for Saussure, the concept of structure is above all a tool for distinguishing between what constitutes a genuine event and what is just a repetition in another form. In short, it enables him to distinguish between intrastructural variants, on the one hand, and the structure's variations, on the other. Secondly, structural mutation is not an evolution. In other words, a dynamical principle – what physics calls a dynamical system – does not animate the system that defines its elements by their structural position; the system's internal logic is not what gives rise to changes in the structure. The system opens onto but does not determine its own transformation. This gives us a conception of becoming not as *evolution* but as *opening*.

It turns out that it is for similar reasons that Saussure's concepts will be introduced into anthropology, psychoanalysis, and literature. Lévi-Strauss is perhaps one of the most interesting cases, because it is *a priori* the most improbable. It has been forgotten that in his work, the concept of structure is conflated with that of "transformation group". This was already present in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), though in a slightly confused way, and it becomes particularly clear in the immense undertaking that is his *Mythologiques* project, the first volume<sup>8</sup> of which was published in 1964 and thus crossed paths with May 68. This means several things. Firstly, we can say that in Lévi-Strauss, as with Saussure, there exist only variants: an object has a structure because it is a variant of another object. We are dealing with a profoundly metamorphic vision of the world. Next, this means that structure has nothing to do with a principle of functional totalization (that is, the totalization of a set): if a set is structured, it's because it is a variant of another set relating to the first through relations of co-variation. Elements' interdependence comes from outside, it comes from the ways in which they transform one another into other elements, such that the sets to which elements belong are variants of one another. For example, a myth is structured not because

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<sup>7</sup> For the details of this theory, see Maniglier (2006).

<sup>8</sup> [TN: The first volume is *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques*, Volume 1]

its elements have a kind of functional coherence – for instance, following the grammatical model of the sentence – but because it can be established as a variant of another myth with which it communicates through relations of inversion (high becoming low, feminine becoming masculine, excrement becoming food, and so on). This point is essential, since structuralism's assimilation into technocracy came from those who systematically confused it with functionalism.<sup>9</sup>

However, this is not all. As we saw, Saussure uses the concept of value to construct a concept of system that is in constant variation even if it is non-evolutionary. In the same way, Lévi-Strauss built his concept of “transformation group” in such a way that each group always leaves open what he calls an “empty square” (*case vide*), through which it communicates with another myth. Even better, he explains that the science of myths is itself a myth: it doesn't communicate with its object through representation (by being adequate to its object), but through structural transformation. Hence, theory hardly stands above and away from its object.<sup>10</sup>

Similar remarks could be made regarding all the texts participating in the structuralist venture.

When Althusser returns to the concept of structure to propose a philosophy adequate to historical materialism, it is obviously not in order to deny the “revolutionary” (*révolutionnable*) character of historical situations. On the contrary, it is to insist on their proper contingency, which he does using the concept of overdetermination – itself linked to the introduction of structuralist concepts into Marxist analysis. It is a question of proposing a conception of politics that escapes the dialectical schema of alienation and disalienation. The self, the subject, is never what is determinant in a revolutionary situation. What is, is the accumulation of contradictions between different levels of the structure, which becomes concentrated in one spot.

Likewise, when Foucault introduces the concept of *episteme* in *The Order of Things* (2001 [1966]), he doesn't define it by its internal coherence, in the manner of a formal system, but indeed by the set of differences constituting it by separating it from other *epistemes* – in other words, by its position in a transformation group. The Renaissance, the Classical Age, Modern Times and the contemporary moment, do not succeed one another by each passing into the next, but by exploring the diverse variants of what finally appears as a structure: the structure, if we can put it this way, of Western ontology. This is itself a fragile structure since, for Foucault, it is a question of defining today by the way in which the play of variations that had dominated for four centuries undoes itself in this ultimate variant – namely, the structuralist venture itself. Here, again, the concept of structure is used to grasp variations found elsewhere than where we observed them, by relying only on smaller or larger resemblances between statements. Hence, the defining difference is found not between Marx and Ricardo,

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<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Maniglier (2005).

<sup>10</sup> See particularly Maniglier (2008).

but earlier, between the analysis of wealth and economic history. The concept of structure is a diagnostic tool. Its aim is to bring us closer to the effective loci of the event.<sup>11</sup>

In none of these intellectual trajectories, therefore, is it a matter of denying the reality of eventality (*l'événementialité*), which is to say each reality's capacity to become other, to change, and to change in a way which isn't endogenous but the result of incalculable contingencies leading in unforeseeable directions. Hence, it is entirely false to consider structuralism as a doctrine unable to think the variability of human situations. On the contrary, structuralism has been one of the most formidable attempts to *found* this variability.

As such, it is entirely correct to say that it always opposed itself to the category of history, but precisely because history doesn't allow us to grasp eventality in and of itself.

## 2.2b The event against history

History is just a manner of apprehending and producing – but also, in certain ways, of enclosing and reducing – the variability which we ourselves are, even within the texture of our lives. This thesis is very clearly articulated in Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* (1962), just as much in Foucault's *The Order of Things*, but also in all of Deleuze's philosophy, which is one of the reasons for its affinity with structuralism. In all these cases, it is a matter of thinking a non-historical becoming.

Lévi-Strauss' argument is both simple and powerful. We can summarize it as follows: history is only a particular, local, apprehension of becoming. It is ours, that of historical societies, which understand and think about themselves by projecting the actual state of their differences onto the past state of their differences, rather than projecting it – for instance – onto the diversity of animal species or the play of celestial constellations. Considering history as the essence of becoming is therefore nothing else than an ethnocentric projection.

In Foucault one finds a similar approach, as we see in *The Order of Things* when he tries to show that history can only appear as the grid of intelligibility of all phenomena (human and non-human, moreover, since we are dealing with a history of life and even of the universe) thanks to the manner in which knowledges give themselves their objects at a given time. Hence, history began in the nineteenth century and is already in crisis which, for Foucault, is precisely the structuralist challenge: letting history pass (away). Here again it is a matter of relativizing history.

Likewise, for Deleuze. For him, it is always a matter of extracting a non-historical concept of the event, and even a non-chronological concept of time. History defines and measures the event as a transition, the passage from one historical state to another, whereas Deleuze seeks to give us the means to grasp the event as a reality in itself that cannot be conflated with what happens to given states of affairs.

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<sup>11</sup> This is explored in further detail in Maniglier (2013).

These are only some indications, but they permit me to suggest with a degree of precision why I think it possible to maintain that those who have been associated with structuralism seek a conceptual framework that defines its objects by their mutability. That is, they posit that an object is nothing else than the set of different ways in which it could be different, which they conceptualize in such a way that a historical definition of the object is avoided. In fact, this difference is not solely that which connects the object to its predecessor and successor in the order of time, but also that which connects it in depth to all sorts of other possible variants that are ultimately very distant both in time and space.<sup>12</sup>

It would be necessary to show that what has been called post-structuralism is but a continuation of these authors' quest for a concept of non-historical becoming – and that never does this signify a return to history.

It may be that May 68 was not a moment when history returned, but on the contrary the production of an event which precisely did *not* make history, and that this is why an essential part of what played out in May 68 was able to resonate so closely with these diverse scientific and philosophical investigations.<sup>13</sup> According to this view, May 68 was a structural event. This proposition requires us to now specify further the concept of history.

## 2.2c History as metaphysics

History is a representation of variation. To grasp this representation, it is necessary to understand that it is a metaphysics, in the sense that it concerns the very being of the situations it deems historical. Thus, I would like here to restore this metaphysics, given that it has never been articulated as such by anyone in particular and given that no one would really be able to recognize themselves in the following account – even if I am, nonetheless, convinced that it is this kind of category that we have in mind when we speak of history. Therefore, the concept of history that I am putting forward here has, above all, a heuristic function.

This metaphysics can be summed up as follows: Each being, insofar as it is, defines itself by the manner in which it gives rise to another, and subsequently erases itself when faced with yet another being, thus it is defined by its relation to the arrow of time. We are the result of what we have been and the origin of what we will become. Put more axiomatically, what *is* is constituted as self-abolishment of what has been and as self-abolishment in what will be. Being thus conflates itself with its own genesis. Let me emphasize that it is not simply a matter of affirming that each being has a history, but that it *is* its own history or a moment in a history. History is the name of a certain regime of existence.

This has several implications, which are equally ontological traits.

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<sup>12</sup> If one wishes to know more, see Maniglier (2011).

<sup>13</sup> This is doubtless close to what Lacan meant, when he responded to Lucien Goldmann – who sided with the graffiti at the Sorbonne, “Structures don’t march in the streets!” – that if May 68 had demonstrated something it is indeed that structures marched in the streets!

— The trait of transition or of continuity. This supposes that there is an actual passage from the predecessor to the successor, a continuity that abolishes. All being is transitional.

— The trait of negativity. This continuity has both a constitutive and negative character: the being of a term is conflated with the disappearance of a term within it (which we will call the predecessor) and its own disappearance between another (which we will call its successor). This negativity can implicate the intrinsically conflictual character of each historical being, just as it can implicate violence, but these are only secondary characters founded on the essential negativity of the being of history as such.

— The trait of linearity. The historical hypothesis also supposes that each being can be defined in its very being by its position on a line, in other words that the form of the becoming is linear.

— The trait of globality. This linear character leads in turn to a double horizon of globalization. On the one hand, if there is only one dimension, this means there is an at least *de jure* possibility of establishing a longitudinal cut which thus vertically gathers together the whole of a position (what Althusser called an essential cut). On the other hand, and for the same reason, if there is only one dimension and each being is but the negation of a prior one and is itself negated by a third, this means that each being can be defined by its unique position in a global set of successions.

— The trait of subjectivity. This ontology implies that the constituted becomes constituting, since variation comes about through its internal powers. An element of subjectivity must thus be introduced, which is to say the reversal of passivity into activity. History *is self-made* (*se fait*), in the strong sense, meaning that it makes itself.

— Finally, the trait of finality. The universe has a history, life has a history, humanity has a history, societies have a history. Or, more precisely: the universe is a history, life is a history, humanity is a history, and all that *is* is historical. The specificity of human action in this metaphysics relates to the fact that humans have representations that are as much the causes as the consequences of their actions such that, in humans, the process of reversal (whereby the constituted becomes constituting) takes on a particular form, which pertains to consciousness. According to this view, politics is nothing else than the attempt to orientate historical becoming rather than be subjected to it. But once again it is important to remark that this reversal of passivity into activity, of the constituted into the constituting, is already inscribed in the very ontology of the being of history insofar as it is historical. Nonetheless, in particular conditions, history can become conscious of itself, and it is the challenge of the politics of emancipation to *control* historical becoming. In this sense it is normal to think that the goal of all politics is necessarily to aim for the accession to a historical state in which the becoming of this state corresponds well to the genuine aspirations of those who are constituted in it.

And this is how we can interpret May 68 as a “return of history”, in the sense that a human collectivity would take its destiny back into its own hands and decide to shape it in accordance with its own requirements, and not those of the constituted system. Yet, it seems to me

that this reading of May 68 disregards what is essential to the event, which is that it does not correspond to this classic schema of the event that makes history.

### 3. May 68: an event without history

#### 3.1 May 68 did not make history

We have good reason to believe that the difficulty May 68 presents us with hinges on the fact that it was a major event that nonetheless did not make history. What are the reasons for this?

First of all, May 68 took history by surprise in the sense that it did not correspond to how the actors of the period understood the laws of history – and I am thinking in particular of that major actor that believed itself to be the agent of this global history, namely the Communist Party and the trade union organizations corresponding to it. In fact, May 68 was not a part of the organized working class but of an uncontrollable and heroic group of students who exhibited at every stage the greatest possible irresponsibility. What is more, time has shown that the reason why May 68 did not make history was not because it was *inconsequential*. Of course, it did indeed have some spectacular consequences, but these were totally disproportionate in relation to the event's magnitude: the biggest strike in Western history, in terms of numbers, not only failed to give rise to a change in regime, it did not even give rise to a change either in government or in politics. And in particular, we see clearly how such an analysis of the event in terms of its consequences obliges us to define the truth of the event *a posteriori* by that which in the event would make history. This necessitates that we separate out what ultimately came to be inscribed in the event – essentially everything relating to the “liberalization of morals” – from what was not – namely, everything relating to the theme of “working class power”, which subsided in the years following 1968 to the point that today it has completely disappeared from the political field.<sup>14</sup>

However, this inconsequence is not only an observation made *a posteriori* in light of the events following May 68, such that we could categorize it as a *failure*. Of course, revolutions that didn't make history are legion in what we call – precisely – history. But any conception of these events that is properly historical will try to redefine them by their position within the actual unfolding of history: either by seeing in them failed attempts running counter to history (this view doesn't require a global and metaphysical vision of history), as is the case in Raymond Aron's (1968) understanding of May 68; or, on the contrary, by perceiving these events as lighthouses showing the way from afar and reminding us of the nature of the unresolved underlying contradictions. In his book on *Left-Wing Melancholia* (2017), Enzo

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<sup>14</sup> If May 68 took place, it's because there was an encounter between the student uprising and the workers' movement. This central aspect of May 68 fell by the wayside. Those who sang “this is just the beginning, let's keep up the fight” must have recognized that this was not the beginning, on the contrary: the working class was abandoned after deindustrialization and the emphatic rise in exploitation accompanying globalization.



Traverso has studied this affect that is consubstantial with revolutionary traditions precisely because they are necessarily punctuated with failure. He has shown that this melancholia is not opposed to revolutionary hope but rather intrinsically determines it, as a return of the victims, a rebirth of the extinguished flame, an accomplishment of what was only announced. But the case of May 68 is more complicated. So complicated, moreover, that those who were defeated do not even figure in Traverso's list of vanquished leftwing traditions.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not one considers the category of failure to be adequate to the task of thinking May 68, this inconsequence of May – which, nonetheless, struck all of its contemporaries – is also internal to the event itself. This is the essential point. May 68's refusal to issue demands, to develop programs, to formulate declarations of intent, was one of the traits that most impressed its contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> This manner of refusing to define in advance an action's purpose and direction (*le sens de l'action*), in other words, this refusal to define the event *historically*, is wholly characteristic of May 68 and, moreover, gave rise to theories of the event wholly characteristic of the experience of May. Here I am thinking of the work of Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, who both insist that an event or political moment can never be defined by its historical finalities, but on the contrary that it is characterized by its way of shaking up historical categories and making appear as potential subject of history a term which until then wasn't represented.

In fact, the event's calling into question of historical categories has been noted by all those who have sought to think the event. We can point to the philosophy of the Sartre of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which identifies in the event a moment of pure negativity which corresponds to no determined project. But we can also think of Raymond Aron who, right in the

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<sup>15</sup> May 68 is a curious revolution, a missed opportunity. In truth, we do not know the vanquished well. We know who are the vanquished of the Commune: just think of The Communards' Wall [TN: a monument that includes sculpted bodies in Paris' Père Lachaise cemetery, in memory of the Communards shot there]. We have the images of their swollen, executed bodies; we know the words of Louise Michel. We also know who the victims of the Prague Spring are. But, for May 68, we almost have only images of triumph. Such is the maximal ambiguity of May 68 as event: as a revolution, it's a missed opportunity which we celebrate as a success, mourned by no great revolutionary leader, as Marx had done after 1848 or after the Commune. The absence of a chapter on the vanquished of 68 in Enzo Traverso's book (and of an acknowledgement of this absence) is all the more symptomatic given that, by contrast, the book includes a long commentary on the absence of melancholy following the defeat of the labor movement in 1989. Particularly so, given that Traverso shows how the latter translates the crisis of revolutionary temporality, and considering that he understands that this absence of the vanquished of '89 depends on the false belief that there was no reason to mourn '89 given the abject conditions and repugnance of the carceral regime inherited from Stalinism, which itself could not be mourned at the time. Nonetheless, much more was defeated in '89 just like in '68, as much in France as in former Czechoslovakia: those who believed in the existence of a communist alternative to Stalinist abjection – namely, anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists, situationists, spontaneists, autonomists, feminists, libertarians. In short, this engulfed mass also known as the people, for whom there is not even an epitaph; but also, simply put, the *workers*. These are the true vanquished of May 68, who deserve to be mourned now more than ever.

<sup>16</sup> Hence, when questioned by Sartre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit clearly articulated the decision of those involved in the events to not issue demands since, as he explained, the role of an avant-garde is not to guide the masses, but to open up a breach into which the masses can step in a manner of their choosing. See Cohn-Bendit (1968).

very middle of May 68, criticized the actors involved for lacking a positive or programmatic dimension to their social critique, which he considered to be immensely irresponsible. And of course, all of Deleuze's and Deleuze and Guattari's work never ceases to defend the thesis that an event should not be evaluated in terms of its historical consequences or lack thereof, but rather that it has its own substantiality consisting in the localized opening of a possible that it renders sensible. Moreover, with Guattari, Deleuze expended an extraordinary amount of energy defining what they called a *minoritarian* politics, which consists precisely not in wresting power away from the State, nor even in the attempted construction of historical identities, but, on the contrary, in making heterogeneous becomings consist<sup>17</sup> at their own "molecular" level where they are fully realized without lack or regret. Indeed, it is possible to consider that an immense portion of Foucault's work goes in the same direction: that of defining a politics within the ambit of the State, inscribed not in the founding events of a political community but in events whose value is determined by their "resistances" to the defined closure of the space of politics.

In a text entitled 'May '68 Didn't Happen', Deleuze and Guattari (2007 [1984]) insist that the categories of success and failure are indifferent to the event, that the event has value in itself, which is determined by the new distribution of possibles in a situation to which it gives rise, and by the social actors' worthiness to what happens to them. The latter refers to the invention of protocols of subjectivation that would enable the social actors to become something else, as determined by what they presuppose the event (and thus themselves) will become (*l'hypothèse de cet événement*). Thus, we see that the three great systems of thought that met around 68 – Sartre's non-dialectical thought, (post-)structuralism, and what I would willingly call speculative Leftism – all consist simply in attempting to philosophically grapple with this experience of an event that exceeds its own historicity.

### 3.2 Plurality of anti-historical concepts of the event around 68

We could consider the detour via (post-)structuralism – which I have wanted to present here as a framework adequate to thinking the event – to have been quite useless. The question is finally knowing which of these three traditions was best able to construct this non-historical concept of the event, and which was best able to shed light on May 68 – or, for the same reason, any event worthy of this name.

To conclude, I would like to explain the differences between a thought such as that of Badiou and Rancière, as different as they may be, which I suggest we call "speculative Leftism", and what I have already suggested we term "(post-)structuralism", in order to show why I consider the latter to be the one best suited to grasping the regime of eventality, which

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<sup>17</sup> [TN: the verb to make "consist" refers here to being laid out on what Deleuze and Guattari call a "plane of consistency", which is the molecular dimension referred to in the text above]

is ours today. It is quite tempting to conflate the two problematics. However, I consider them to be profoundly different, even if they share the same goal: producing a non-historical concept of the event.

The “speculative Leftists” think the event through the categories of interruption or exception. By definition, an event cannot be deduced from a historical state nor derived from a new historical state. For them, the event exists only as an exception to a state of affair or to the normal functioning of a situation and all its possible regularities. Yet, because of this, the event has a transcendent character, in the sense that it befalls the situation via a pure exteriority. This transcendence of the event is perfectly explicit in Badiou: the event is an extra-being, and being, under the law of structure, knows no events. But we find the same clear-cut opposition in Rancière. Politics proper doesn’t take the laws of the police into account: thus, there is nothing political about the police and, because of this, it becomes more difficult to know which of the two plays the more important role in the momentary emergence of a political process. Politics is pure exception, radical discontinuity.

On the other hand, “(post-)structuralist speculations” lead to a thought of the event arrived at not by means of the category of exception (from the event to structure), but via that of opening (from structure to the event). They strive to determine a concept of system which is open, not despite but because of its systematicity, and which therefore leaves an empty place for the event through its very manner of forming a system.

For the former, the event always fundamentally transcends ordinary experience, it is an exception to the current order of things in a way that is both pure and radical. For the latter, something in the very functioning of this regularity makes the event possible. Evidently, the event doesn’t correspond to a possibility of structure, which is a meaningless formulation since an authentic event is precisely a reconfiguration of the field of the possible itself – in other words, a structural variation. Nevertheless, the field of the possible is that of structure, which is constitutively liable to being rerouted into one or several new space(s) of possibility. In other words, the event is a point of deformation (*surrection*) at the heart of a system of other possible systems which more or less determine it. As such, we shouldn’t define the event in terms of the transition it effectuates between two systems; rather, we should define each system as a particular modality of, or viewpoint on, the mutation.

Two consequences follow from this:

1/ In the context of (post-)structuralism, the event always informs us about the structure it relates to; it informs us by relativizing the structure, which is to say by establishing it as a variant of other structures of which it is only a possible or effective transformation. This is how we should understand Deleuze and Guattari’s thesis that systems (situations) are *defined* by their points of deterritorialization. In the context of “speculative Leftism”, the event tells us nothing either about the structure it relates to or its place within the field of possible structures. Here, structure and the event, the rule and its exception, are in direct confrontation. It is true that the irruption of the event makes the contingency of a situation appear, but this contingency immediately becomes absolute. There is no way to relativize it. With regard

to the event, everything happens as if the situation counts for nothing and could be otherwise. Conversely, for (post-)structuralism, the event makes an always relative contingency appear that is always tied to a deeper space of – structural – variation, which, moreover, can itself be nested within more general spaces of structural variation such that structures of structures are what are varying.

2/ Furthermore, these two orientations don't articulate thought and politics in the same way. In both cases, knowledge doesn't have transcendent priority over (*position de surplomb*) the event. Nonetheless, for "speculative Leftism", to know the event one must investigate the experience of struggle in a situation, as that which sheds light on what it was that was being struggled against (structure). For "(post-)structuralism", a knowledge of struggles or a "minoritarian" knowledge is one that relativizes itself as it produces itself. Theory's function is therefore nothing else than to intensify our immersion in the event so as to be worthy of it. This proceeds by means of relativization: what we thought was eternal is redefined as a variant, and what appeared to be necessary is now contingent. The very categories of knowledge – e.g., society or culture – appear now as variants nested in a larger group of variants: totalization becomes a space of variation, the question of totalization being reposed in another way and at another level.

I admit that this is only a starting point. But it helps us figure out the alternative, disjunctive spaces constructed by a non-historical concept of the event.

## Conclusion

What should we take away from these reflections on May 68 and structuralism? What lessons should we draw from these reflections today? First of all, this: don't judge an event by its historical impact. Rather, history should be judged by its ability or inability to inscribe the event. May 68 took place. Whether or not we are able to do something with it, our world – this world that wants to hold onto only those elements of 68 that resulted in it – has been relativized. This is to say that it has been plunged into a set of structural mutations in terms of which it must now be redefined. The fact that we are unable to break free from (*faire traverser*) our situation using these real alternatives does not mean that these possibles have no existence. Rather, it means that our reality today is only able to hold itself together thanks to a whole set of operations that prevent us from sensing this defined, precise, determined contingency exposed by the event. Our task is therefore, first, to restore the event as the precise manifestation of this field of structural variants, and to resist all attempts to reduce it to a sense of history, which comes down to nothing else than justifying our current state of affairs. An event can never be reduced to that which makes one historical state pass into another; it is always that which redefines a situation by means of the determined set of mutations with which the event communicates virtually.

Though, perhaps, there is a second lesson. Today, this non-historical concept of the event makes many people feel – in a more or less confused manner – impatient and even lassitude. Badiou entitled one of his collections *The Rebirth of History* (2012). Rancière's recent texts are aware of the need to reintroduce a concept of history. We have doubtless grown weary of these events that don't make history; we have grown weary of the possible, we want the actual. It's simply the case that we have grown weary of losing. Furthermore, we sense that forms of totalization of becoming are returning, no longer content to affirm eventual singularities in a dispersed manner but now rather seeking to redefine something like a global horizon of historical transformation. Seeking to avoid a global catastrophe is already to appeal to history, by taking stock of the present in terms of its future consequences.

Perhaps, because of this, we are also in the process of leaving 68 behind. Since May 68 has been the model of these events that haven't made history, and in which we have now lived for fifty years. May 68 has accompanied all those discourses affirming that power couldn't be taken, that one had to content oneself with the immanence of movement – as one finds in discourses inspired by Subcomandante Marcos, or in commentaries on Nuit Debout or Occupy.

We are thus at a crossroads. Either we abandon the category of event in order to reconstruct a notion of history – but this would have to be a notion of history reincorporating what has reclaimed its rights under the name of event – or we conserve it, in which case we would need to be able to also propose another conception of history.

Regardless of which orientation we choose, this concept of history would have to be a concept of what May 68 relativized though didn't render obsolete. Our task is to confront this terribly self-assured world in which we live with the unrelenting realization that it is never anything more than a possible among other possibles and that, regardless of whether or not it accepts it, the outlines of its contingency were drawn by these events whose proper name is May 68.

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