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"The Strangest Disease": May '68 and its consequences

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Abstract

This paper discusses the nature and aftermath of the May 1968 uprising in France, treating it as symbolically representative of the whole radical movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It explores how that movement and its failure to achieve its goals have affected the psychological atmosphere in which we conduct therapy, and also how some of the ideas which were developed might influence our practice. The author uses his own experience and feelings as part of this exploration.

KEYWORDS

1968, depression, liberation, psychotherapy and politics, revolution

1 | INTRODUCTION

> *The strangest disease I have seen in this country seems really to have been broken-heartedness, and it attacks free men who have been captured and made slaves. (David Livingstone, 1874, p. 93)*

In May 1968 I was in my first year of studying English at Cambridge University. We occupied the Old Schools building; I can't remember exactly why, which sums up some of what May '68 was about. What I can remember very clearly, viscerally, is what it felt like: incredibly exciting. There were people going off to Paris, and people arriving from Paris with extraordinary news. Meetings. Speeches. Conversations. Votes. Votes on whether we should be voting or aiming for consensus. Sounds boring? It wasn't. It felt like taking control of our own lives, in a space owned by nobody and belonging to everyone. I think that most people who have been part of any sort of occupation, however mild and temporary, know how extraordinary the experience is.

Having written the above, I thought I'd better check my facts. The internet has nothing to say about an occupation of the Old Schools, or any other part of Cambridge University, in May 1968. It's bizarre to find that an event which has become part of my blood and bone is officially, possibly even actually, non-existent—bizarre, but also symbolic of how the whole of what May '68 stood for has melted away. "Our revels now are ended. These our actors, /As I foretold you, were all spirits and/Are melted into air, into thin air" (William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV Scene 1, 148–150).

Rather like the transformation of Dickens the impassioned social critic into Dickens the benign celebrant of "traditional" Christmas, May '68 in Paris has been reinscribed as a source of modern cultural identities rather than a bruising battle for the transformation of social reality (cf. Ross, 2002). By foregrounding the students with their slogans and airbrushing the nine million workers with their wildcat strikes and occupations, perhaps the biggest stab at revolution that the western world has seen in the last 100 years is made to look like a piece of picturesque heritage. Against all expectation, the factory workers *joined up with and supported* the occupying students, apparently spontaneously grasping and identifying with their most radical positions (Ross, 2002; Vienet, 1968/1992); some of them even turned their production line over to making tools for revolutionary activity—walkie-talkies (Quattrochi & Nairn, 1968, p. 59), posters and leaflets (Vienet, 1968/1992, p. 77). Some specifically stated that the occupations had "nothing to do with wages" (Vienet, 1968/1992, p. 78). This is what terrified and continues to terrify the capitalist state; and every effort has been made to bury it.

The extraordinary exhilaration of May '68 (and occupations before and since) is beautifully described in a novel by Leslie Kaplan—writing about a factory occupation rather than a university one:

> *That something should come from outside, to meet you. To surprise you, to take you away, to raise you up, to undo you, it's there, it's now, we are beside it, we are with it, we feel the pressure and we create it, everything is happening, everything can happen, it's the present, and the world empties itself and fills up again, and the walls pull back, they are transparent and they pull back, they separate, they fade away, they leave room, and it's now and now and now. (Kaplan, 1996, p. 61, in Ross, 2002, p. 141)*

This experience—liberation—is what I want to talk about. This, and what happens when it goes away, is taken away.

2 | MAY '68 AND AFTER

At ground level, May '68 (which, by the way, included much of June) felt like the beginning of something enormous. Only from the bird's eye view of history does it become apparent that—together with other events from that extraordinary year, including the Prague Spring and the Chicago Summer—it was, in fact, the peak of something which started much earlier, and that everything which followed, and which seemed so hopeful at the time, was really a long dying away. That endless disappointment has subliminally shaped much of my adult life.

This is relevant to psychotherapy in at least two ways. One is that many of my generation of therapists were formed by May '68, whether or not we were directly involved; so that both the radical desires we discovered, and their failure to materialise socially, have influenced our theory and practice. The other relevance is that a certain proportion of our clients have been directly or indirectly influenced by the same failure of hope and, like ourselves, have managed it in a variety of ways, many of which manifest in their (and our) reasons for seeking therapy.

In important ways, the movement which can be symbolically identified with May '68 was at war with the mainstream organisation of society—a war with relatively few deaths (from suicide and overdoses as well as state violence), but a war all the same. That war was lost. The trauma of defeat, together with the triumph of victory on the other side, has shaped our culture; and understanding this helps us understand our experience as psychotherapists. Those who lose wars, especially civil wars, tend to become exiles: frequently, in this case, internal exiles, exiles from their culture—exiles from their own earlier selves.

The most common way to manage trauma is through dissociation. I know survivors of the radical'60s and'70s who *simply won't talk about it*, changing the subject if it is raised; and others who claim to feel only contempt for their younger selves. Because revolutionaries tend to be people of energy and independent thinking, many of the "May '68 generation" who abandoned the struggle have become rather rich and successful and often speak as if they now understand what life is really all about, having outgrown their earlier naïve idealism.

There is no doubt that the May '68 movement was hugely naive about capitalism and failed to distinguish it from social conservatism. As Marx well understood, capitalism is not fundamentally conservative at all: the past is constantly being swept away to make space for theme parks and factories, and if some particular radical initiative

increases or is neutral with respect to the rate of profit—if Che Guevara can sell t-shirts, or if gay rights lead to the Pink Pound—capitalism has no problem, its alliance with conservatism is only a marriage of convenience, and indeed vice versa (DiNunzio, 2016; Kolozi, 2017; Marcuse, 1964). So the revolutionary movement of May '68 eventually won many of the battles that don't threaten capitalism—some of which are hugely important, some not so much—and none of the ones that do.

But the May '68 movement also left a crucial legacy of knowledge about what liberation *is*: something which doesn't necessarily arrive through greater social justice and equality for different identities of race, gender, and sexuality—important though these things are, there are ways in which they can take us *further away from* revolutionary transformation as well as closer to it, because it can appear as though capitalism alone is able to give them to us. But what capitalism cannot give us is an end to alienation.

Leslie Kaplan went on from the passage I quoted earlier, where she beautifully described the experience of liberation:

> *Love can create this feeling, or art; it is rare to feel it in society, where one is almost always confronted with a kind of obligatory inertia, where the activity one pursues, the activity that one can pursue, goes almost always in hand with the painful feeling of its limitations. But during the strike we could touch it with our fingers, rub our hands across its back.*
> *(Kaplan, 1996, p. 63, in Ross, 2002, pp. 141-2)*

Kaplan quite rightly suggested love, art, and revolution as sources of this experience; she omits to mention drugs, music festivals, and therapy.

Psychotherapy, especially some forms of group therapy, turns out to be a very powerful way of experiencing the authentic, intimate, creative collective subjectivity which Kaplan encountered in the factory occupations of May '68. It is possibly, potentially, closer to revolution than the other routes, since it demands more active exploration and transformation of our subjectivity—a touch of what Kristin Ross described in May '68:

> *The political subjectivity that emerged in May was a relational one, built around a polemics of equality: a day-to-day experience of identifications, aspirations, encounters and missed encounters, meetings, deceptions and disappointments. The experience of equality … constitutes an enormous challenge for subsequent representation. (Ross, 2002, p. 11)*

This is certainly a major reason why I have chosen to facilitate hundreds of workshops over the last 35 years, and why people have attended them. They get you *high*, in a way which is collective rather than individual, and which feels at least to some extent articulated with one's everyday life. This last point is the weak one, however: it almost invariably happens at the end of a residential workshop that someone speaks about "going back to real life." I always respond in the same way: that it's all real, all life, the workshop as much as the quotidian, the quotidian as much as the workshop. And then it quite frequently happens that a shared fantasy develops of "not going back," of somehow keeping the spontaneity and closeness of the workshop going indefinitely.

Apart from all the very real promises and commitments that would be broken by keeping the workshop going (like a holiday fling which leads to the lovers running away for a new life together)—apart from that, what drains conviction from the fantasy is the conscious or half-conscious realisation that to make it possible—to solve all the questions of time, money, venue which immediately arise—*the whole of society would have to change*. The same combination of despair and hope, essentially, that I have already identified: this is what it would take, and maybe it would be worth it.

3 | LACAN's JAGUAR

A persistent rumour (see for example, Starr, 1995, p. 38; Turkle, 1979, p. 86) says that the student leader Dany Cohn-Bendit, having been expelled from France to Germany, was smuggled back across the border in late May 1968 in the

boot of Jacques Lacan's Jaguar. This is apparently, in the classic phrase, "almost certainly apocryphal," although as usual in such cases no one bothers to say how we are supposed to know; I prefer to think that it is true, because it should be. If May '68 had "succeeded," this incident would, I suppose, have been equivalent to Lenin's sealed train through Germany to Moscow in 1917 (Merridale, 2017).

The immediate reason for the quote marks around "succeeded," which emerged of their own accord in the process of writing the thought down, is that, if Cohn-Bendit had become a Lenin figure, May '68 would have failed. Cohn-Bendit was identified as a leader of a leaderless movement by the media, primarily because he was willing to speak as one. He was hardly to blame for that (even the most radical figures of May seem to have had a soft spot for him—for example, Vienet, 1968/1992, p. 30); but if the movement had then been willing to *follow* him, its potential would have been over. And since this is almost always what happens in such situations, could we say that May '68 succeeded by failing? Or at least, that it had only two realistic possibilities, to fail by succeeding or to fail by failing? Is this in fact the truth for all utopian (that is, realistic) political manifestations? I don't know. But if this *is* so, it in no way diminishes the value and necessity of such events.

The point is that the meme of Lacan smuggling Cohn-Bendit across the border is not really to do with Lenin; it is to do with the return of the repressed, smuggled into consciousness by being disguised as something else (for example, a large, fierce, black carnivore). Lacan features in the story as psychopomp, leading the soul back from the underworld. And is this not what therapy is or should be about?

May '68 itself had little direct effect on the therapy world. The larger movement, however, clearly did; most obviously in the United States, with the rise of Radical Therapy and its cognates (Totton, 2000; see also two anthologies, Radical Therapist/Rough Times Collective, 1974, and Wyckoff, 1976). Humanistic therapy and the Growth Movement were of course already under way, but became rapidly politicised in the late'60s and early'70s. The crucial realisation, in my view, is as important now as it has ever been: that *the personal is political*, that politics doesn't stop in the voting booth or even on the shop floor, but follows you home and into the living room, the kitchen, and the bedroom.

Deeply influenced by political developments, Carl Rogers produced an important book, *Carl Rogers on Personal Power: Inner Strength and its Revolutionary Impact* (1978), in which he explained that, having claimed for many years that person-centred therapy had no political implications, he now realised that it was *all* political, root and branch. In the seminal book *Gestalt Therapy*, first published in 1951, it had already been said that from a therapeutic viewpoint "there is reason to smash up, to destroy . . . the whole system" (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951/1973, p. 401); in the 1970s "left gestaltists" like the Polster and Polster (1974) and Stevens (1977) took up the radical banner. And while Eric Berne was not noticeably moved to smash the state, his protege Claude Steiner wrote a brilliant and influential analysis of personal and political power (Steiner, 1981).

The radicalisation of therapy in the 1970s was clearly a response to what was happening on the streets, but it also had intellectual sources, one of which was the work of Wilhelm Reich: not only the originator of body psychotherapy but one of the best theorists of the relationship between psychotherapy and politics, and founder of the Sex-Pol movement—in other words, a key grandparent for *Psychotherapy and Politics International*. (He is also specifically a grandparent for my own work as a therapist—my original trainer was trained by someone whose trainer was trained by Reich, making me a member of the fourth generation).

I first encountered Reich's work in 1968: he was taken up enthusiastically by revolutionary movements in both France and the United States, largely through his irresistibly entitled apologia *The Function of the Orgasm* (1942/1983), available in a convenient paperback edition. Reich was rightly valued for the connections he made between sexual, psychological, social, and economic repression (Reich, 1933/1975), grounded in pathbreaking practical work in making sexual information, contraception, and abortion available to young working-class people in Vienna and Berlin. He was also an important figure in the Vienna Polyclinic, which offered affordable psychoanalysis to ordinary working people (Diercks, 2002; Sharaf, 1984, p. 67).

But Reich's importance to the May '68 era goes further than this. In the early 1970s two of his early political pamphlets were published in the UK in pirated editions by people I knew: one of these, *What is Class Consciousness?* (Reich, 1934/2006) is an enormously influential critique of orthodox revolutionary-party politics, which argues that

the left failed in 1930s Germany because, unlike the Nazis, it did not address the problems of everyday life which were what really concerned most people. "No such thing as class consciousness? Why, it's to be found in every nook and cranny of everyday life" (Reich, 1934/2006, p. 19)

What Is Class Consciousness? could almost be read as a primer for radical politics in the age of Trump and Brexit:

> *We hardly need to supply detailed arguments to prove that we failed to speak the language of the broad masses—the nonpolitical or ideologically oppressed broad masses—who in the end assured the triumph of reaction. The masses did not understand our resolutions, or what we meant by socialism; they did not and still do not trust us. . . . While we presented the masses with superb historical analyses and economic treatises on the contradictions of imperialism, Hitler stirred the deepest roots of their emotional being. (Reich, 1934/2006, p. 4)*

It also spoke directly to the students and workers of Paris in 1968, with its emphasis on the need for radical politics to grow out of "everyday life" (a phrase taken up strongly by the situationists, for example, Vaneigem, 1967), and its insistence that a real revolutionary movement must wholly reject bourgeois moralism: "the fundamental problem of a correct psychological doctrine is not why a hungry man steals but the exact opposite: Why doesn't he steal?" (Reich, 1934/2006, p. 11).

4 | DEFENSE D'INTERDIRE

What May '68 most deeply offers to psychotherapists is the reminder that most of the problems people bring to therapy are social—and therefore, political—in origin. It seems pretty obvious that what attracted 9 million workers to spontaneously join up with the students, many of them occupying their factories, was their aversion to the lives which capitalism prescribed for them. The "extremist" slogans of May '68 worked, and continue to work, because they identify and slice through the unendurable problem of everyday life. (These and many more can be found scattered through books like Vienet, 1968/1992 and Gray, 1974/1998.)

Défense d'interdire—Forbidding is forbidden

Ne travaillez jamais—Never work

Prenez vos désirs pour la réalité—Take your desires for reality

Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible—Be realistic, demand the impossible

La barricade ferme la rue mais ouvre la voie—Barricades close the street but open the way

Je t'aime! Oh! dites-le avec des pavés!—I love you! Oh! Say it with cobblestones!

A whole paper could be written on each one of these slogans; and I want to expand a little on one or two of them. *Ne travaillez jamais*—Never work—is in some ways the most radical of all, striking at the heart of capitalism, the sale of labour. Superficially it is ridiculous: for every organism, to live demands work, and productive work, as Reich like many others recognised, is central to a satisfying life. But "work" here means "wage labour," following orders, stupefying boredom: this is the reality of work for the vast majority living in capitalist societies. The mental effort needed to parse the slogan and see the distinction it is making between work as creation of meaning, and work as meaningless drudgery, is itself a political education. The UK state is currently trying to enlist therapists to get unemployed people back to employment—therapy as coercion. By refusing, and by recognising that work under capitalist conditions is damaging, we are connecting ourselves back to the May '68 slogan.

Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible—Be realistic, demand the impossible. The May '68 movement anticipated, and no doubt influenced, the more recent Occupy movement, in its realisation that to make specific demands, however confronting it seems, is actually to state the terms of surrender: "If you kindly give us this we will stop the occupation, go back to work" The employees occupying FNAC stores stated: "We . . . have gone on strike not for the satisfaction of our immediate demands, but to participate in a movement which has currently mobilized ten million intellectual and manual workers" (Vienet, 1968/1992, p. 78). Demanding the impossible is the difference between revolt and revolution. It is "impossible" not in the sense that it cannot happen, but in the sense that the authorities cannot grant it without ceasing to be the authorities. For therapists, the slogan stands among other things as a direct repudiation of the "depressive position" (Hinshelwood, 1994).

Je t'aime! Oh! dites-le avec des pavés!—I love you! Oh! Say it with cobblestones! This epitomises the character of the March 22 Movement which sparked off the Sorbonne occupation: witty, startling, surrealist, and utterly extreme. *Les pavés*, the cobblestones, were what demonstrators pulled from the road to hurl at riot police, as demonstrators continue to do all over the world. The slogan makes the connection, so irresistibly experienced by so many, between the overwhelming excitement of revolution and the overwhelming excitement of falling in love. Again, it challenges the reasonable, "realistic," "adult" position which so many therapists adopt towards life, pointing out like Lacan's description of *jouissance* (Fink, 1995, Ch. 7 and *passim*) that there is something more that has to be taken into account.

It is no accident, I think, that Lacan, himself by no means politically radical, became a sort of hero for much of the May '68 movement: he reinstalls *desire* at the heart of psychoanalysis, distinguishing it strongly from rational wants and needs. *Prenez vos désirs pour la réalité*—Take your desires for reality . . . Discussing the same issue, Peter Starr used the word "desire" as a near-parapraxis:

> *More than anything it was their desires, their symptomatic misunderstandings of Lacanian theory, that served to perpetuate the commonplace image of Lacan as leftist radical this rumour so clearly expresses. (Starr, 1995, p. 38)*

Or is it possible that Lacan himself misunderstands his own theory—that his own character structure prevents him from recognising its radical implications, just as Freud's character structure did for his theory? As with Bob Dylan, where collective wisdom contradicted his own insistence that he was "just a musician" and recognised that the supposedly apolitical surrealistic songs were actually more radical than his after all slightly platitudinous early agitprop work.

5 | CONCLUSION: STRANGE DISEASES

The same defeat of hope which I have discussed in the wake of May '68 is still, has always-already been, a black iron rail running right through the centre of our culture. The "strangest disease" David Livingstone described in the epigraph to this article is now called "depression," and just as he said, it affects those who are enslaved; that is, most inhabitants of western societies. I don't mean in any way to diminish the enormous suffering of the caged and chained Africans to whom Livingstone was concretely referring; only to say that there is more than one form of slavery, and wage slavery is not a trivial imprisonment. The longer capitalism lasts, the more it represents itself and is experienced as a closed system from which there is and will always be no exit.

This is an illusion, however; and an illusion of a kind with which psychotherapy has some experience. We spend a great deal of our time working with apparently closed systems of thinking and feeling—depression, OCD—and developing ways to open up the possibility of exit. Wilhelm Reich, as usual, put it eloquently and dramatically in *Cosmic Superimposition* (1951/2013, Ch. 1), when he describes social reality as like a stage in the midst of a vast meadow, where most of us insist on staying on the stage of false performance and reject the door that leads out onto the meadow, where we can find all the richness of wild spontaneous existence.

My argument is that all therapists are in one way or another concerned with promoting freedom in our clients—helping them to loose the chains that bind them. But somehow it is often hard for us to admit that those chains are in many ways not the problem of an individual, but of a society. Just as the situationists said to nihilists in 1968, we perhaps need to say "therapists—one more step if you want to be revolutionaries."

From one point of view, the "strangest disease" is depression. From another point of view—that of the capitalist system and its functionaries—the "strangest disease" is hope, and the defiance that hope nurtures. Why do workers and consumers persist, against all reason, in rejecting the system, and striving to escape it? If we therapists choose to serve the system, we can nod wisely and come up with new DSM categories of disfunction like Disruptive Behavior Disorder and Oppositional Defiance Disorder. Or alternatively we can choose to tell clients, "Yes, your unhappiness makes sense to me—and it's not your fault, there is something wrong not with you but with the way we live."

Dainius Pūras, who holds the unwieldy title of "the UN's Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health," issued a remarkable statement on World Health Day 2017 in which he said:

> *The dominant biomedical narrative of depression as a "burden" on individuals and societies is shortsighted and insufficient for developing appropriate responses in policy and in practice.... We should not accept that medications and other biomedical interventions be commonly used to address issues which are closely related to social problems, unequal power relationships, violence and other adversities that determine our social and emotional environment. There is a need of a shift in investments in mental health, from focusing on "chemical imbalances" to focusing on "power imbalances" and inequalities. (Pūras, 2017, para. 12-19)*

Pūras stops short of suggesting what would be a more appropriate response to the issues he lists, apart from shifting investments. The radicals of May '68 would not have hesitated: "Say it with cobblestones!"

I intended at this point to safeguard my credibility by making some sensible and emollient concluding statement of moderation. But I find myself unable to do so: reading and thinking about the May '68 movement has restored my tattered and torn belief, as a therapist and as a human being, in the possibility of revolutionary change.

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