

# THE POLITICS OF RADICAL IMMANENCE: MAY 1968 AS AN EVENT

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A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behaviour. But together with this sense of instability ... one in fact discovers something that perhaps was not initially foreseen, something one might describe as precisely the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian theories.

Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

Run, comrade, the old world is behind you.

Paris May '68 Graffiti<sup>2</sup>

This is no time for pretence at objectivity. I shall not even attempt to deny that I am writing this paper as a philosopher trained in Paris in the late seventies by Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault and Irigaray. I belong therefore to what is often described as 'la génération des rendez-vous manqués', or the generation of missed chances, that experienced in real-time the momentous impact of the '68 events. As a consequence, I consider '1968' as the fundamental political myth of my generation, namely as the event that defined the political ontology of the times and regulated social interaction in a variety of realms, ranging from sexuality and kinship systems to religious and discursive practices. These myths are transmitted through narratives - mythologies or fictions, which I have renamed as 'figurations',<sup>3</sup> or cartographies of the present. A cartography is a politically informed map of one's historical and social location, the purpose of which is to enable the analysis of situated formations of power and hence adequate forms of resistance. Michel Foucault worked extensively on the notion of genealogy or counter-memories as a tool to draw the 'diagrams of the present' in his analysis of the micro-physics of power in postindustrial societies.<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari also stressed the importance of immanent analyses of the singular actualisations of concrete power-formations.<sup>5</sup> Feminism also adopted the practice of the politics of locations as a method for grounding its activism.<sup>6</sup> It also perfected the strategy of positive renaming and re-signification of the subject. A location is an embedded and embodied memory: it is a set of counter-memories, which are activated by the resisting thinkers against the grain of the dominant social representations of subjectivity. A location is a materialist temporal and spatial site of co-production of the subjects in their diversity. Accounting for this complexity is therefore anything but an instance of relativism. Locations provide the ground for political and

1. Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures', in Colin Gordon (ed) *Power/Knowledge*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, p80.

2. Marc Rohan, *Paris '68: Graffiti, Posters, Newspapers and Poems of the Events of May 1968*, London, Impact Books, 1988, p66.

3. See Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphosis: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Cambridge, UK - Malden, USA, Polity Press/Blackwell, 2002 and *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Cambridge UK, Polity Press, 2006.

4. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir, 1975 [Discipline and Punish*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1977].

5. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie II*, Paris, Minuit, 1980 [*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987].

6. Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, New York, WW Norton, 1985.

ethical accountability. Remembrance, cartographies of locations, political (dis)identifications and strategic re-configurations are the tools for consciousness raising which were devised by transformative epistemologies such as feminism and race theory.<sup>7</sup>

The structure of this article therefore consists in a reflection on May '68 as a philosophical location and also on the continuing role of the imaginary representations of that event. I will also discuss the extent to which the memories of the event became contested elements in the political struggle for definition of radical politics and theory. The main thesis I want to defend is that the most significant theoretical innovation introduced by the enduring event that is May '68 is what later became known as 'radical immanence'.<sup>8</sup> Back then, it included the notions of political passions, affirmative ethics and the rigorous vision of affectivity which they entail. In the conclusion, I will stress the need to focus the debate more seriously on the radical politics of dis-identification and the political construction of hope in the future as some of the conceptual elements that make May 1968 into the longest month in history, i.e. into an event that endures in time and transposes across generations.

#### ON MEMORY AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

May 1968 as a cluster of interrelated cultural events, artistic practices and theoretical happenings has become part of the collective imaginary. Considering however the extent to which the contemporary form of globalised capitalism both harps upon cultural memories and commodifies them for the sake of consumption, this popularity entails a significant amount of distortion and even wilful ignorance. This is due to the perverse temporality at work in our globalised world: advanced capitalism is an unsustainable 'future eater',<sup>9</sup> driven by all-consuming entropic energy. Devoid of the capacity for critical self-reflection and genuine creativity, global capital merely promotes the recycling of spent hopes, re-packaged in the rhetorical frame of the 'new' and wrapped up in persistent anxiety about the future.

In a schizophrenic double pull of euphoria and paranoia, which confirms Deleuze and Guattari's analyses,<sup>10</sup> the consumerist and socially enhanced faith in the new manages to co-exist alongside the complete social rejection of subversive change and radical transformations. The potential for creating alternative practices of subjectivity clashes with the re-territorialization of desires through the gravitational pull of established values bent on short-term profit. This achieves a disastrous double effect: it re-asserts individualism as the norm, while reducing it to consumerism.

The collective memories of May '68 are inscribed in this social context and consequently partake of its perverse political economy. An example of the schizoid double-pull is the contemporary popularity of images of '68 icons in popular culture, cinema, fashion music and the media. They range from the ubiquitous face of Che Guevara or the young Angela Davis, to the images of Marilyn Monroe, JFK, Martin Luther King and other immortals. Their totemic

7. See Luisa Passetini, *Autobiutto di gruppo*, Firenze, Giunti, 1988 [*Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968*, Hanover, Wesleyan University Press], Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London, Free Association Books, 1990 and Cornell West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*, Monroe, Maine, Common Courage Press, 1991.

8. Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, op. cit.

9. Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters*, Sydney, Reed New Holland, 1994.

10. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie I*, Paris, Minuit, 1972 [*Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, New York, Viking Press/Richard Seaver, 1977] and Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, op. cit.

11. Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *La pensée 68*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985.

12. Bernard Henri-Lévy, *La barbarie à visage humain*, Paris, Grasset, 1977.

13. Zvezlana Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002.

function is sacred or at least post-secular in the sacrificial sense of the term ('they suffered so that we may be better off'). Their symbolic value, however, is clearly inscribed in the current market economy as the commodification of the '68 culture through the hyper-individualistic branding of the faces of its celebrities. This phenomenon is post-ideological and border-crossing: nowadays it includes also Nelson Mandela and Princess Diana in some quarters and resistance or guerrilla fighters and Islamist suicide bombers in others.

Following the schizoid social climate of our times, however, the fashionable currency of 1968 popular culture heroes co-exists with endless celebrations of 'the end of ideologies', especially those of the radical left of the 1960s. Since the fall of the Berlin wall, the public debate around the events of '68 has grown more heated and polemical. This has been especially acrimonious among French intellectuals, most of whom have seen it fit to replace their youthful radicalism with age-worn conservatism: this ranges from the revisionist style,<sup>11</sup> to media-savvy glamour<sup>12</sup> and decent neo-humanism.<sup>13</sup> This movement, known as 'les nouveaux philosophes' peaked in Andre Glucksmann's, Alain Finkielkraut's and Ferry and Renault's indictment of the events of 1968 as a symbol of left-wing authoritarianism.<sup>14</sup> Adding insult to injury, they accused all post-structuralist philosophies of complicity with terror and mass-murder.

Deleuze was one of the first to comment on this hasty and fallacious historical dismissal of critical radicalism in both politics and philosophy - and a reduction of both to the events of 1968. Targeting the fame-seeking narcissism of the 'nouveaux philosophes', Deleuze stressed its political conservatism that results in the reassertion of the banality of individualistic self-interest, as a lesser and necessary evil.<sup>15</sup> This moral apathy is constitutive of the neo-conservative political liberalism of our era and of the arrogance with which it proclaimed the 'end of history'.<sup>16</sup> Against the vanity of these media stars, Deleuze stressed instead how critical philosophers have tried to avoid this pitfall: 'we've been trying to uncover creative functions which would no longer require an author-function for them to be active'.<sup>17</sup> Other leading figures of philosophical post-structuralism like Lyotard and Hocquenghem<sup>18</sup> also took a clear stand against the trivialisation and self-serving dismissal of the spirit of 1968.<sup>19</sup> I shall not pursue this polemic further here, except to say that, forty years later, May '68 does coincide with its multiple afterlives.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, it has to be approached as a complex multiplicity, i.e: as an event that endures because and not in spite of its internal paradoxes and contradictory reception.

## ON POLITICAL PASSIONS

We must accept the ambivalence of May, its archaism and its modernity ... At the time we were caught up in our own mythology. Revolutionary theory was obsolete, but we had not realized it yet. It took years to do that. The great lesson of May was the historical experience of collective

14. See Andre Glucksmann, *La cuisine et le mangeur d'hommes*, Paris, Seuil, 1976, Alain Finkielkraut, *La defaite de la pensee*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987 [ *The Defeat of the Mind*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995] and Ferry and Renault, *La pensee 68*, op. cit.

15. Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness. Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, New York, Semiotext(e), 2006.

16. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace, 1989.

17. Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*, op. cit., p139.

18. Open letter to those who moved from Mao collars to Rotary < wiki/Rotary\_International> wheels, Marseilles, *Agone* (1986) was republished in 2003 with a foreword by Serge Halimi < wiki/Serge\_Halimi> ISBN 2-7489-0005-7 < wiki/Special:BookSources/2748900057>.

19. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacob Rogozinski, 'La police de la pensee', *L'Autre Journal*, 10 (1985): 27-34.

20. Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2002.

21. Cited in Herve Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Generation 1: Les années de 68*, Paris, Seuil, 1988, p.575.

22. Rohan, *Paris '68*, op. cit., p.80.

action which constitutes the social imaginary. The so-called individualism of May was healthy and grounded in group activity. Today, we live in the nostalgia for conviviality and generosity.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit<sup>21</sup>

Motions kill emotion

Paris May '68 Graffiti<sup>22</sup>

A quick survey of the literature produced by the events of May '68 will reveal the recurrence of affect-laden terminology. This is best exemplified by the slogans and the graffiti that symbolise that period. Here is a selection: 'I declare the state of permanent happiness'; 'I am in love with the revolution'; 'Creativity. Spontaneity. Life'; 'Open the windows of your heart'; 'Action must not be reaction but creation'; 'The enemy of our movement is scepticism. All that was ever achieved came from dynamism and spontaneity'. This emphasis on affectivity became central to the conceptual structure of poststructuralist philosophies. Contrary to its detractors, I see these philosophical movements - especially Foucault, Deleuze and Irigaray - as building upon but also taking into account the effects of the '68 experiment. They are consequently moving beyond '68 and laying the foundations for future projects by opposing all totalitarian ideologies, as well as the totalising power of theories. Let me explore this point further.

The 1968 generation made subjectivity into a real issue, which became all the more poignant and ethically urgent as a way of accounting for the moral and political bankruptcy of recent events in European history. The first was the Second World War and the long shadow of fascism. Slogans such as: 'We are all German Jews', which were chanted by the demonstrators, reflect persistent scepticism on the part of the '68 generation about the role played by France as an alleged opponent of Nazism. Self-reflexive doubts were later echoed by claims made by Foucault that philosophers like Deleuze were completing the de-nazification of European philosophy. Nazism marked also a violent disruption in the history of philosophy: it chased away, or brutally murdered, the thinkers who had developed critical theory, notably Marxists, psychoanalysts and other opponents of Western supremacy. 1968 in France marks the return of critical theories into a Continent that had savagely eradicated them. Their re-implantation back into the public debate became a crucial point for the poststructuralist generation and it fuelled its critique of all forms of totalitarianism. France acted as the regenerator of a self-reflexive and critical Continental philosophy of the subject.

A second aspect of European history that deeply affected the events of May '68 and the radical philosophies that followed was colonialism. The self-aggrandising and ethnocentric mystifications that surrounded French colonial history had been criticised by Fanon, Genet, Sartre and de Beauvoir - the previous generation of critical thinkers. There is no question that the May '68 generation came of age politically during the Algerian liberation

war and first experienced political violence in the anti-colonialism rallies and movements.<sup>23</sup> The persistence of the post-colonial question in the work of the post-structuralists is undeniable, as Foucault's problematic involvement with the Iranian revolution shows.<sup>24</sup>

The third world-historical manifestation of European domination that haunted the thinkers of May '68 was obviously Marxism. In order to appreciate this it is important to remember the sheer size and influence of the French and Italian Communist parties through the 1960s and 70s, in order to measure the scale of the opposition the younger Leftist generations had to face. This opposition to totalitarian authoritarianism, however, could not leave Marxist ideologies unscathed. The generation that came of age politically in 1968, introduced - with Althusser - a radical critique of the orthodoxy of Marxism, upheld by the (Western) European Communist parties, which acted as the moral guardians of anti-fascism. With Lacan, they also challenged the authority of the International Psychoanalytic Association, who managed Freud's legacy with great rigidity. The new forms of philosophical radicalism developed in France in the late 1960s were a vocal critique of the dogmatic structure of communist and of psychoanalytic thought and practice. The generation of the poststructuralists appealed directly to the subversive potential of the texts of Marxism and psychoanalysis, so as to recover their anti-institutional critical stance.

Their radicalism was expressed in terms of a critique of the humanistic implications and the political conservatism of the institutions that embodied Marxist and psychoanalytic dogma. Contrary to today's revisionist thinkers who flatly equate communism with Nazism, the poststructuralists respected the specificity of these historical events. They did not reject the bulk of Marx and Freud, but rather endeavoured to recover and develop the radical core. In their view, the crux of the problem was the theory of the subject which is implicit in these theories: under the cover of the unconscious, or the bulk of historical materialism, the subject of critical European theory preserved a unitary, hegemonic and royal place as the motor of human history. This is the implicit humanism that triggered the criticism of thinkers like Foucault, Irigaray and Deleuze (to name only my favourite ones). The rejection of humanistic assumptions therefore took the form of unhinging the subject, freeing it respectively from the dictatorship of a libido dominated by oedipal jealousy, and from the linearity of a historical *telos* which had married reason to the revolution, both of them vowing violence. This creative critical stance will generate long-term discursive and political effects.

The philosophical generation that proclaimed the 'death of man' was simultaneously anti-fascist, anti-colonialist, post-communist and post-humanist. Moreover, they rejected Euro-centrism and the classical definition of European identity in terms of humanism, rationality and the universal. They stressed instead the need to open it up to the 'others within' in such a way as to re-locate diversity as a structural component of European subjectivity. Best expressed in Julia Kristeva's idea of becoming 'foreigners to ourselves',<sup>25</sup>

23. Hamon and Rotman, *Generation I*, op. cit.

24. Janet Afsar and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution. Gender and the Seduction of Islamism*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005.

25. Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, Paris, Fayard, 1988 [ *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991].

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<https://solismail.uu.nl/Exchange/IntroGes.gw>  
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26. Luce Irigaray,  
*Entre l'est et l'ouest  
De la singularite  
a la communite*,  
Paris, Minuit, 1997  
[*Between East and  
West, From Singularity  
to Community*, New  
York, Columbia  
University Press,  
2002].

27. Helene Cixous,  
"Mon Algerie"  
in *Les Inrockuptibles*,  
20 August,  
magazine archive  
n. 115, 1997,  
p.70. Translation  
in English: "My  
Algerie, in other  
words, to depart  
not to arrive from  
Algeria", *Tri-Quarterly*  
100 (Fall 1997):  
259-279.

28. Gayatri  
Chakravorty Spivak,  
"French Feminism  
Revisited: Ethics  
and Politics" in  
Judith Butler and  
Joan Scott (eds)  
*Feminists Theorize the  
Political*, New York,  
Routledge, 1992.

29. See Jacques  
Derrida, *Cosmopolites  
de tous les pays,  
encore un effort!*,  
Paris, Galilee, 1997,  
Massimo Cacciari,  
*Cosmofilosofia dell'  
Europa*, Milan,  
Adelphi, 1994,  
and Deleuze and  
Guattari, *Mille  
plateaux*, op. cit.

30. Deleuze, *Two  
Regimes of Madness*,  
op. cit., pp.233-4.

31. Rohan, *This '68*,  
p.91.

32. With thanks to  
Gayatri Spivak for  
this formulation.

this deconstructed vision of the European subject is active also in Irigaray's thought about Eastern philosophy<sup>26</sup> and in Cixous's reappraisal of her Algerian Jewish roots.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's vocal advocacy of new postcolonial subjects asserts the non-centrality of European hegemony,<sup>28</sup> as did Foucault's enthusiastic reaction to the Iranian revolution. The work of Jacques Derrida, Massimo Cacciari and Gilles Deleuze, points strongly in this direction as well.<sup>29</sup>

## BECOMING POLITICAL.

May '68 is more of the order of a pure event, free of all normal or normative causality. Its history is a 'series of amplified instabilities and fluctuations'.

There were a lot of agitations, gesticulations, slogans, idiocies, and illusions in '68, but this is not what counts. What counts is what amounted to a visionary phenomenon, as if society suddenly saw what was intolerable and also saw the possibility for something else. It is a collective phenomenon in the form of: 'give me the possible, or else I'll suffocate ...' The possible does not pre-exist, it is created by the event. It is a question of life.

Gilles Deleuze<sup>30</sup>

The wind is blowing. Must try to get a life.

May '68 graffiti<sup>31</sup>

Deleuze speaks of the European Left of the 1960s and 1970s in terms of a specific sensibility, a creative imaginary and a desire for change that constitutionally clashes with the guardians of the *status quo*: the judges and managers of truths and the clarity fetishists.<sup>32</sup> Deleuze distances himself from both the nefarious illusion of revolutionary purity, which engenders violence and the universalistic utopian element of Marxism, which inflates the intellectual to the role of representatives of the masses. In a much more grounded and ascetic tone, Deleuze and Guattari set the desire for transformations or becomings at the centre of the agenda. Politics is ultimately a matter of transformations in the very structures of subjectivity. It is about engendering and sustaining processes of 'becoming-minoritarian'. This specific sensibility combines a strong historical memory with consciousness and the desire for resistance. It rejects the sanctimonious, dogmatic tone of dominant ideologies, Left or Right of the political spectrum, in favour of a production of joyful acts of transformation. The spontaneous and rather anarchical aspects of this practice combine with a profound form of asceticism that is today the determination to focus on and build upon micro-instances of activism, avoiding over-arching generalisations. This humble yet experimental approach to changing our collective modes of relation to the environment, social and other; our cultural norms and values, to our bodies, ourselves, is the most pragmatic manifestation of the politics of radical immanence.

There are two key arguments in the philosophical critique of subjectivity

inaugurated by poststructuralist theorists. The first is the emphasis on the embodied and embedded nature of the subject, which results in unlimited confidence in lived experience. This translates into the politics of everyday life and renewed interest in the present. Both ideas are expressed in the key feminist notion that 'the personal is the political'. I will return to this in a later section.

The second key argument is a focus on the dynamic interaction of Sameness and Difference. 'Difference' is not a neutral category, but a term that indexes exclusion from the entitlements to subjectivity: to be 'different from' means being 'less than'. The equation of difference with pejoration is built into the tradition which defines the Subject as coinciding with/being the same as consciousness, rationality and self-regulating ethical behaviour. By extension, Otherness is defined in negative terms as the specular counter-part of the Subject. As I argued elsewhere, this results in making entire sections of living beings into marginal and disposable bodies: these are the sexualised, racialised and naturalised others (Braidotti, 2006).

The idea that difference as pejoration is constitutive of the self-asserting power of Sameness is foundational. This concept is crucial to critical theory since '68 and in my assessment difference constitutes one of its major innovations. It produces a renewed concern for and theoretical interest in processes and social practices of otherness, marginality and exclusion. The negative charge attributed to difference marks both world-historical events such as European colonialism and fascism and also discursive events internal to the history of philosophy itself. Because the history of difference in Europe has been one of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications, critical intellectuals and activists since 1968 have made themselves accountable for its effects.

The refusal to dis-connect the actual lived experience from theoretical considerations, as well as the determination to read them alongside each other is central to the enchanted materialism of the '68 era and of its radically immanent politics. No longer orthodox Marxist, this materialism, focussed on embodiment and lived experience, engenders a politics that takes seriously affects, sexuality, pacifism, human rights and sustainable futures. The clearest expression of this politics is less the joyful insurrection of May '68 than the more reflexive bio-political *ethos* of new activist movements that were initiated then, like Amnesty International and 'Médecins sans frontières'.

Deleuze and Foucault criticised openly both the liberatory potential of Marxism and also the limitations of 'gauchiste' or left-wing political presumptions, as well as the inertia of the political establishment.<sup>33</sup> They were equally suspicious, however, of the humanistic assumptions of the claim to universal human rights, or the Kantian idea of the universal and self-correcting validity of human reason. They stress instead the need to unveil power relations where they are most effective and invisible: in the specific locations of one's own intellectual and social practice. One has to start from micro-instances of embodied and embedded self and the complex

33. Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, 'Les intellectuels et le pouvoir', *Estiv*, 49, 1972, pp3-10 ['Intellectuals and power' in D.F. Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977].

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web of social relations that compose the self. One has to think global, but act local.

By extension, what is central to poststructuralist theory is the critique of the inertia, the repressive tolerance and the deeply seated conservatism of the institutions that are officially in charge of knowledge production, especially the university, but also the media and other institutions. Foucault explicitly singles out for criticism the pretension of classical philosophy to be a master discipline that surveys and organizes other discourses. In his archaeological and later genealogical work, Foucault opposes this abstract and universalistic understanding with a notion of philosophy as a tool-box, a very pragmatic and localised analysis of power relations within the exercise of philosophical reason.<sup>34</sup> The philosopher becomes no more than a provider of analytic services: a technician of knowledge.

Deleuze redefines philosophy in the 'problematic' mode as the constant questioning of the humanistic 'image of thought' at work in most of our ideas with the aim to destabilise them in the 'nomadic' mode.<sup>35</sup> Arguing against its meta-discursive tendency, Deleuze redefines philosophy instead as a radical form of immanence. Thinking in this critical mode proposed by the French poststructuralists consists in locating the affects and especially the political passions which sustain the theoretical process. Both Foucault and Deleuze accept the decline of rationality as the dominant vision of the subject and as a human ideal, but they also reject the pitfall of cognitive and moral relativism by stressing that the crisis of classical subjectivity is not a catastrophe, but rather the expression of the irrepressible vitality of thought. Rejecting both the plaintive mode of nostalgia and the glorification of the aporetic, Deleuze proposes instead a radical redefinition of thinking as the activity that consists in reinventing the grounds for subjectivity. Philosophy is the act of creation of new forms of thought and of collective experiments with ways of actualising them.

If we accept that one of the main traits of the spirit of '68 consists in refusing to separate philosophy from not so much '*LA politique*' (organised politics) as from '*LE politique*' (the political movement in its diffuse and rhizomic forms of becoming), then we must also see feminism as an eminent example of political subjectivity and activism.

#### WE HAD COURAGE, BUT LACKED CAUTION<sup>36</sup>

I'm sick of the masquerade. I'm sick of pretending eternal youth. I'm sick of belying my own intelligence, my own will, my own sex. I'm sick of peering at the world through false eyelashes.

Germaine Greer<sup>37</sup>

Politics is not change.

Kate Millett<sup>38</sup>

34. Michel Foucault, 'Orders of Discourse', *Social Science Information*, 10, 2 (1971): 7-30, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/053901847101000201>.

35. Gilles Deleuze, *Empirisme et subjectivité*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1953 [*Empirism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, C.A. Boudas (trans), New York: Columbia University Press, 1991] and *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1962 [*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (trans), New York, Columbia University Press, 1983].

36. With thanks to Moira Gatens for this felicitous expression.

37. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, London, Granada, 1970, p61.

38. Kate Millet, *Flying*, New York, Paladin, 1976, p469



Happiness is a new concept.

May '68 graffiti<sup>39</sup>

I will not even attempt at a comprehensive theoretical account of the most significant aspects of feminism in the late '60s. The scale of such a project would be daunting by most historians' standards. In the last decade, worldwide teams of feminist thinkers and activists have accomplished the feat of canonising the main features of radical feminism<sup>40</sup> and have produced standard works of reference on the subject of feminist philosophy.<sup>41</sup>

I just want to stress one single feature of the complex galaxy that was the second feminist wave in (then Western) Europe, namely the extent to which women of that generation dis-engaged themselves from the dominant model of the patriarchal family, but also from both the institutions of classical post-war female emancipation and the masculinist models of liberation proposed by the radical European Left of the day. This became an experience of radical dis-identification from all operational socialisation patterns which led to the collective discovery of the deep singularity of becoming-political. Both the experience of dis-engagement and the recasting of subjectivity as complex singularity form the core of the feminist politics of radical immanence.

We tend to forget today that radical feminism was a rebellion not only against the traditional forms and images of power such as paternal authority in the family, the state and society. It was also an attack against the mystique of the revolutionary chief or leader, whose machismo leaves no doubts. In their study of the political culture of 1968 in Paris, Hamon and Rotman analyse the practice of political leadership in the May '68 rebellion in terms of messianic revolutionary figures who were capable of both evoking and channelling the Dionysian forces in their audience. The archetypal political leader of the times, for instance Daniel Cohn-Bendit, was the mystic revolutionary endowed with 'the demonic faculties of rising at will the temperature of an audience, a modest gathering of friends or a compact crowd'.<sup>42</sup> The 1968 movement in this respect was both a social laboratory and also a microcosm that reproduced social mechanisms of control. These included the male domination of the key leadership positions.

Radical feminists were the first to denounce the mystique of the revolutionary leader and the traditional form of masculinism that it perpetuated.<sup>43</sup> This quarrel with the organised Left is present in every single document and theoretical text written in those days and will remain a feature of feminist practice in a variety of political cultures throughout what was then Western Europe. It is a particularly complex and painful quarrel: the feminist practice of political separatism must be read in reference to this particular context: it expresses the failure of the allegedly radical Left to interrogate and unseat its entrenched masculinism.

Feminism was a leaderless movement propelled by collectively shared radical aspirations to freedom, the respect of diversity, social and symbolic justice, pacifism, anti-racism and the 'politics of everyday life'. It was a

39. Rohan, *Paris '68*, op. cit., p66.

40. Barbara A. Crow (ed), *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2000.

41. Alison M. Jagger and Iris Marion Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Malden, Mass., Blackwell, 1998.

42. My translation. Original: 'la faculté démoniaque d'élever à volonté la température d'un auditoire, modeste noyau d'amis ou foule compacte'. Hamon and Rotman, *Generation 1*, op. cit., p275.

43. Millet, *Flying*, op. cit.

H. Marika Meijer,  
leader of the  
radical lesbian  
Purple September  
movement in  
Amsterdam in the  
late sixties, on the  
VPRO television  
program dedicated  
to the seventies,  
February 1996

passionate and deeply humorous movement, that believed both in the power of collective thinking and in laughter to undo the rigidity of middleclass seriousness. It had a touch of anarchy about it, but remained coherent in its aims. It was fundamentally a youth movement, speedy and disrespectful in its pursuit of sometimes utopian ideals; as one of the leaders of the Dutch radical feminist movement put it recently: 'we were a monument of impatience'.<sup>15</sup> Feminism developed its own distinctive narrative and political style, stressing the utopian dimension of political work; it thus inaugurates a visionary mode of thinking where the poetic and the political intersect powerfully.

Furthermore, because it emphasises women's shared experience of everyday oppression, feminist thought leads to a political reappraisal of affectivity. 1968-inspired feminism can be redefined as the passionate belief in the positivity of differences, on the part of women who no longer recognised themselves as the 'second sex'. A feminist could thus be defined as someone who longs for and tends towards the empowerment of other social practices and representations of her being-a-woman. Men can be included in this strategy, provided they agree to critique dominant forms of masculinity.

Thus, feminism can be described only in terms of wilful choice, but also of desire, that is to say unconscious motives and orientations. This highlights the importance of a political analysis of affectivity and a critical reappraisal of the notion of desire itself. I will return to this in the next section. Not the least aspect of the '68 legacy is the extent to which feminism believes in desire as the positive affirmation of one's longing for plenitude and fulfilment; a form of felicity, or happiness. Feminists wanted to free in women - across the broad social spectrum - their desire for freedom, justice, self-accomplishment and well-being. The aim was to bring into positive representation that femininity which phallogocentrism had coded negatively and thus to do justice to all that women, in their great diversity, are capable of becoming. Feminism gave us a measure of the possible. Implicit in this project is the aim to infuse into our dead-serious, death-bound culture a joyful sense of possibility, to restore dignity to the pursuit of happiness in a collective and not individualistic manner and to cultivate an often gratuitous gesture of hope for the future.

#### FAITH IN THE REVOLUTION, HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Politics begins with our desires and desires escape us, in that they are the driving force that propels us.<sup>16</sup>

Let's be realistic, let's ask for the impossible!  
My desires are reality!

May '68 graffiti<sup>16</sup>

Because of the emphasis on the positivity of desire, it is impossible to understand the specific political economy of affects of '68 without reference to psychoanalytic politics. The main psychoanalytic insight concerns the

15. Brandom, *Metamorphoses*, op. cit., p262

16. Roban, *Body '68*, op. cit., p86

importance of the emotional layering of the process of subject-formation. This refers to the affective, unconscious and visceral elements of our allegedly rational and discursive belief system.<sup>47</sup> To put it bluntly: the political does not equate the rational and the revolution is not the same as the irrational. Religion may well be the opium of some masses, but politics is no less intoxicating and science is the favourite addiction of many others.

The poststructuralist approach builds on the psychoanalytic notion of an open-ended or non-unitary subject activated by desire. Deleuze and Guattari especially take the instance of the unconscious not as the black box, or obscure god, of some guilt-ridden subject of Lack, but rather as a receptor and activator of gratuitous forms of unprogrammed orientations and interconnections. This situates sensuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core values in the discussion about the politics of contemporary non-unitary subjects. Equally central to this generation of philosophers is the focus on power as both restrictive (*potestas*) and productive (*potentia*) force. This means that power formations are both monuments and documents, in that they are expressed in social institutions and in systems of representation, narratives and modes of identification. These are neither coherent, nor rational and their makeshift nature, far from diminishing their effectiveness, is crucial to their hegemonic power. The awareness of unconscious processes translates into the recognition of the instability and the lack of coherence of the narratives that compose the social text. Far from resulting in a suspension of political and moral action, this political sensibility becomes for the poststructuralists the starting point to elaborate sites of political resistance suited to the paradoxes of this historical condition.

The legacy of psychoanalysis allows us to challenge received ideas about the rationality of political subjectivity. Let us take a simple notion, such as faith in social progress, the revolution or the self-correcting powers of democratic governance. In a psychoanalytic perspective, the operational concept here is faith itself. Psychoanalysis is a sober reminder that all beliefs are acts of faith, regardless of their propositional content. All belief systems contain a hard core of spiritual hope - as Lacan put it: if you believe in grammar, you believe in God.

This insight also challenges the traditional equation between political subjectivity and critical oppositional consciousness and the reduction of both to negativity. It also has implications for the discussion about post secularism because it casts a new light on the role of spirituality in social and critical theory even and especially in the allegedly secular western democracies.<sup>48</sup> Here I will focus on the link between oppositional consciousness and creativity or affirmation.

What is at stake in this debate is the need to overcome the tradition of thought we inherited from the Hegelian-Marxist dialectics of consciousness. This scheme of thought inscribes negativity at the core of critical consciousness as one of its pre-conditions. The assumption is that the task of critical theory is both to identify, confront and if possible overcome the social and material

47. William Connolly, *Why am I not a secularist?* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

48. For further analysis see my article: 'The postsecular turn in feminism', forthcoming in *Theory Culture & Society*, Summer 2008.

49. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, op. cit.

conditions that are assessed as negative or objectionable. A paradox is thus formulated, namely that the same conditions which are a mark of negativity also engender productive conditions of resistance or counter-action.<sup>49</sup> This process of both identifying and overcoming the negative conditions is the core business of oppositional consciousness. As a result, the task of the critical thinker is to provide adequate representations, sharp social analysis, informed diagnoses or critical cartographies of real-life conditions. The critical mass of theory therefore is negativity revisited and transformed so that it can be re-worked into a source of counter-truths and values, which also result in overthrowing the negative instance.

Contrary to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition that equates oppositional consciousness with negativity, or unhappy consciousness, the radical spirit of May '68 teaches us that more is to be gained by foregrounding the creative or affirmative elements of this process of critical theory. What it boils down to is that the conditions for political and ethical agency do not rest solely with the negative instance of the present, or more specifically with the purpose of overthrowing the negativity. They are not oppositional in this reductive sense, but rather affirmative in that they aim to mobilize creative and productive forces. The capacity to highlight the creative element in the critical work of both identifying and analyzing power relations is directly linked to the importance that is attributed to the imagination and other affective sources. First among them: a creative memory, a flair for alternative genealogies or counter-memories, passion for justice and a generous concern for possible futures and sustainable social alternatives.

This combination of critical acumen and creative potency is what I value most in the post-'68 philosophies. Feminism put it clearly by voicing the need for a 'double-edged vision' of critique and creativity<sup>50</sup> that goes beyond complaint and denunciation, to offer empowering alternatives. Lenin's world-shattering slogan: 'what's to be done?' mirrors a lost world when the social consensus - at least in the political left - was that the philosopher's task had always been to interpret the world, but that the point now was to change it. Much has happened to the world and to people's desire for change since such an imperative saw the red light of day. In the climate of fear and anxiety that marks the post-industrial societies of the global era since the end of the Cold War in 1989, the question 'what is to be done?' tends to acquire a far less imperial and definitely more pathetic tone. What can we do to cope with the fast rate of changes? With the crumbling of established certainties and values? The evaporation of dear and cherished habits? How far can we go in taking the changes? How far are we capable of stretching ourselves? Or, to paraphrase the neo-spinozist teachings of Deleuze: how much can our bodies - our embodied and embedded selves - actually take?

The ethical lesson of May '68 is that there is no logical necessity to link political subjectivity to oppositional consciousness and reduce them both to negativity. Political activism can be all the more effective if it disengages the process of consciousness-raising from negativity and connects it instead

50. Joan Kelly, 'The Double-edged Vision of Feminist Theory', *Feminist Studies*, 5, 1 (1979): 216-227. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3177556>.

to creative affirmation. In terms of the crucial relationship to sameness and Difference, this means that the dialectical opposition is replaced by the recognition of the ways in which otherness prompts, mobilises and engenders actualisation of virtual potentials. These are by definition not contained in the present conditions and cannot emerge from them. They have to be brought about or generated creatively by a qualitative leap of the collective imaginary.

#### DIS-IDENTIFICATION AND EMPOWERMENT

For them a return to normality was out of the question. They had gone through a voluntary disenfranchising from consensus politics and a rejection of predominant values which were both irreversible. For many of my generation, their coming of age coincided with a falling out of step with a society they had failed to transform. Whether they became, as a few did, dangerous drop-outs, eventually destroying themselves in the process of 'fighting the system', or ended up as detached cynics on the sidelines of the system, or even as apologetic achievers reluctantly caught up in the system, in their hearts and minds at least, never fell in again.

Marc Rohan<sup>51</sup>

If only they'd give us enough time!

Paris May '68 Graffiti<sup>52</sup>

Transformative politics involves a radical repositioning on the part of the knowing subject, which is neither simple, self-evident, nor free of pain. No process of consciousness-raising ever is. Feminist theory over the last thirty years explored this issue from the initial slogan 'the personal is the political', through the politics of location,<sup>53</sup> into the multiple situated perspectives of today. In post-structuralist feminism, this has also been discussed in terms of dis-identifying ourselves from familiar and hence comforting values and identities.<sup>54</sup> Identities are, to a large extent, imaginary tales, which project a reassuring but nonetheless illusory sense of unity over the disjointed, fragmented and often incoherent range of internal and external fractures that compose them. The project of developing a range of possible alternative, non-phallic, anti-racist and post-nationalist subject positions is related to the process of dis-identification from established, hegemonic identity-formations. Balibar argues that dis-identification is the key to democratic politics in that it implies the recognition of the non-unitary structure of the self and openness towards the other.<sup>55</sup> This dis-location is one of the key elements of the learning process that sustains radical politics.

Dis-identification involves the loss of cherished habits of thought and representation, which can produce fear, a sense of insecurity and nostalgia. Many of the '68 generation reported such reactions when it was all over and they had to face the difficult task of coming to terms with the aftermath of the

51. Rohan, *Paris '68*, op. cit., p30.

52. *Ibid.*, p70.

53. See for example, Adrienne Rich, *Rich, Blood, Bread and Poetry*, WW, Norton, 1987.

54. See Teresa de Lauretis, 'Eccentric subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness', *Feminist Studies*, 16, 1 (1990): 115-150; and Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

55. Etienne Balibar, *Nous, Citoyens d'Europe? Les frontières, l'état, le peuple*, Paris, Editions de la Découverte, 2001.

insurrection. Change is a painful process, but that is no reason not to engage in it, as the conservatives recommend. The point in stressing the difficulties and pain involved in the quest for transformative politics is to stress the dignity these processes deserve and to raise the awareness of the complexities they involve. This is especially true of processes of dis-identification, which touch upon the in-depth structures and inner scaffoldings of one's identity. Considering the role played by unconscious instances, moreover, shifting our imaginary identifications is not a wilful operation, like a change of clothes. Psychoanalysis taught us that imaginary re-locations are complex and that the task of working them through is as time-consuming as shedding an old skin. Moreover, changes of this qualitative kind happen more easily at the subjective level, as indicated by psychoanalysis. Their translation into a public discourse and shared social experiences is both problematic and risky. Spinozist-Deleuzian feminist political thinkers like Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens argue that these kinds of transformations are the result of 'collective imaginings' - a shared desire for certain transformations to be actualised.<sup>56</sup>

Let me give you a series of concrete examples of how dis-identifications from dominant models of subject-formation can be productive and creative events and of how they support democratic politics. I already indicated earlier the extent to which feminist theory is based on a radical dis-engagement from the dominant institutions and representations of femininity and masculinity, to enter the process of becoming-minoritarian or of transforming gender. In so doing feminism combines critique with creation in the quest for alternative ways of embodying and experiencing our sexualised selves.

Race discourse is also a significant area. The awareness of the persistence of racial discrimination and of white privilege has led to serious disruptions of our accepted views of what constitutes a subject. This has resulted on the one hand in the critical re-appraisal of blackness, and on the other to radical relocations of whiteness.<sup>57</sup> Diasporic subjects of all kinds express the same insight. Multi-locality is the affirmative translation of this negative sense of loss. Following Glissant, the becoming-nomadic marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances.<sup>58</sup> Every event contains within it the potential for being overcome and overtaken - its negative charge can be transposed.

Finally, I would like to refer to Edgar Morin's account of how he relinquished Marxist cosmopolitanism to embrace a more 'humble' perspective as a new European.<sup>59</sup> This process includes both positive and negative affects: disappointment with the unfulfilled promises of Marxism is matched by compassion for the uneasy, struggling and marginal position of post-war Europe, squashed between the USA and the USSR. This produces a renewed sense of care and accountability that leads Morin to embrace a post-nationalistic redefinition of Europe as the site of mediation and transformation of its own history.<sup>60</sup>

The politics of radical immanence grant a privileged role to the experience

56. Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Post and Present*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999.

57. See Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Culture and the Alliance of Race*, London, Allen Lane; The Penguin Press; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York, Routledge, 1991; Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*, London, Verso, 1992; and Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti, 'Introduction', in Griffin and Braidotti (eds), *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, London, Zed Books.

58. Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

59. Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

60. Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, London, Verso, 2002.

of radical disruption of established patterns of thought and modes of relation, be it dis-identification, de-familiarisation or dis-enfranchisement. I see this experience as both a method and a strategy that engenders critical distance and empowers alternative modes of subject-formation. Once this kind of in-depth, affective as well as cognitive gesture of separation from the self-evidence of one's location has taken place, there is no going back. As Rohan suggests, some of the generation of May '68 never quite fell back in again. This is the keynote to the tune of becoming-nomadic or minoritarian: vacating one's acquired or inherited familiar premises in order to produce an outward-bound, multi-relational practice of subjectivity. The beneficial or positive aspects of this process of becoming balance the negative aspects. The benefits are epistemological but extend beyond; they include a more adequate cartography of our real-life conditions and hence higher levels of self-knowledge. It is a productive form of dis-enchantment that enhances the lucidity of critical thinking and therefore clears the grounds for more adequate and sustainable relations.

Sustainability expresses the desire to endure, in both space and time. In Spinozist-Deleuzian political terms, this sustainable idea of endurance is linked to the construction of possible futures, in so far as the future is the virtual unfolding of the affirmative aspect of the present. An equation is therefore drawn between the radical politics of dis-identification, the formation of alternative subject positions and the construction of social hope in the future. This equation rests on the strategy of transformation of negative passions into affirmative and empowering modes of relation to the conditions of our historicity.

In order to appreciate the full impact of this, we need to think back to the perverse temporality of advanced capitalism, with which I started this essay. In so far as the axiomatic of capitalism destroys sustainable futures, resistance to it entails the collective endeavour to construct social horizons of endurance, which is to say of hope and sustainability. It is a political practice of resistance to the present, which activates the past into producing the hope of change and the energy to actualise it. In so doing it processes negative forces and enlists them to the empowering task of engaging with possible futures. Hope is an anticipatory virtue that activates powerful motivating forces: counter-memories, imagination, dream work, religion, desire and art. Hope constructs the future in that it opens the spaces to project active desires onto; it gives us the force to process the negativity and emancipate ourselves from the inertia of everyday routines. It is a qualitative leap that carves out active trajectories of becoming and thus can respond to anxieties and uncertainties in a productive manner and negotiate transitions to sustainable futures. The politics of immanence results in affirmative activism that expresses the hope that, as the May '68 graffiti put it ever so eloquently: Dream + Evolution = Revolution.