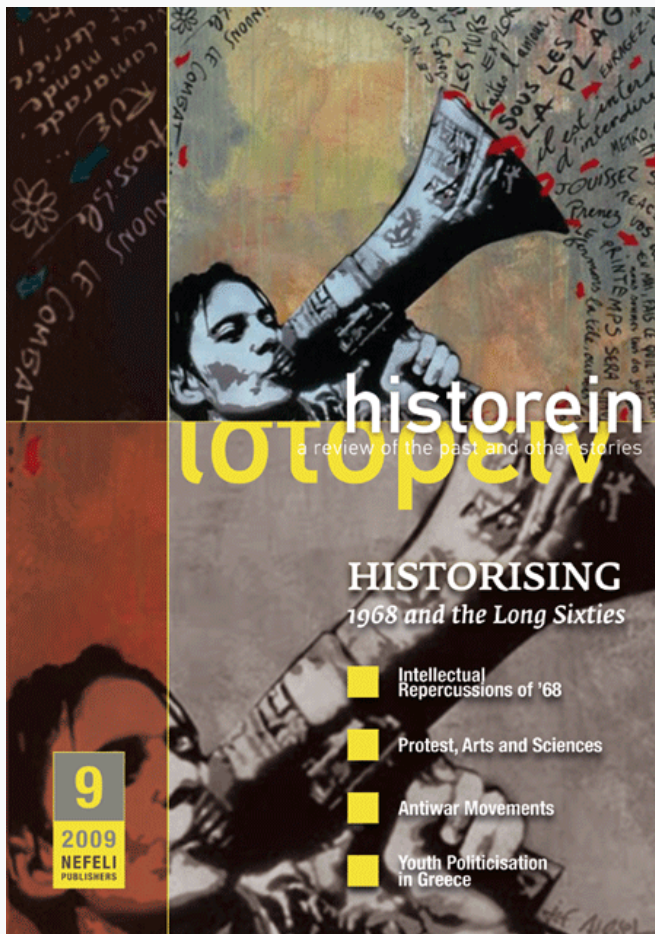


## Historein

Vol 9 (2009)

Historising: 1968 and the Long Sixties



### The Problematic Intellectual Repercussions of '68: Reflections in a Jump-cut Style

Luisa Passerini

doi: [10.12681/historein.19](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.19)

Copyright © 2012, Luisa Passerini



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Passerini, L. (2010). The Problematic Intellectual Repercussions of '68: Reflections in a Jump-cut Style. *Historein*, 9, 21-33. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.19>

*The concomitant process of  
dehistoricisation and mythicisation/  
demonisation of '68*

I would like to start with a clarification of my title. Its first part expresses a terminological and conceptual doubt. It is not immediately evident that one can talk of '68 intellectualism as such, since within the '68 movements and according to their intentions – whatever the outcomes – the very idea of an intellectuality and a theory independent from practice was rejected. The divide between intellectual and manual work was challenged, as were those between the political and the cultural, the leadership and the rank-and-file, and the centre and the periphery. Therefore, the effort I made in order to find appropriate ways of discussing the topic of the intellectual repercussions and the theoretical implications of '68 tried at the same time to extrapolate these as such and to consider them in the context of the general attitudes towards '68 and of its general repercussions. This effort led me to an unsystematic way of proceeding, jumping from one to the other of many stimuli I found on my way of exploring this field – which explains the second part of the title, inspired by the memory of a film director very significant for '68, Jean-Luc Godard, who largely practiced the jump-cut in his filmic narration.

Let us start from the insufficient historicisation (or dehistoricisation) of '68, understood in a double sense: first, *as a lack* in the use of primary sources, especially written and visual, which do exist in great number and various forms, and are still partially unexplored; second and especial-

*The Problematic  
Intellectual  
Repercussions of '68:  
Reflections in  
a Jump-cut Style*

Luisa Passerini

University of Turin

ly, *as a result* of the substitution, in the place of history, of the double process of mythicisation, on the one hand, and demonisation of '68, on the other. Such a doubly insufficient historicisation is closely connected with the unclarity regarding the repercussions, not only intellectual, but also social, cultural and emotional.

As Kristin Ross has noticed with reference to the French May, the event '68 has been emptied of its political dimensions by a confiscation along two lines: biographical and sociological, these being two strategies of dehistoricisation.<sup>1</sup> Thus, '68 has been reduced to the image of a family or generational drama, devoid of violence and of explicit political sense, reduced to a benign transformation of attitudes, a transition to a new bourgeois order and to economic liberal modernity – all this with the consequence of forgetting the refusal of millions of people in the years around '68 to conceive the social in a traditional way, as a sum of separate narrow categories. (Mostly, in this article I refer to '68 as 'the long '68', a process of at least 10 years' duration of social and political unrest all over the world.)<sup>2</sup> At the same time this process of reduction has the effect of diminishing the importance of the struggles against imperialism in which '68 is inserted. I consider this to be a crucial point.

According to Robert Young, writing in 1990,<sup>3</sup> May '68 was the time when European revolutionary movements freed themselves from the model of rigid Marxism shared by the communist parties linked to the USSR. Their new model came from the revolutionary struggles of the Third World. Thus Young sees the events of the French May as a consequence of the worldwide anti-imperialist campaign against the war in Vietnam and the joining in a world struggle in which resistance had to be both armed and cultural. I take his position as a basis for this article.

Forgetting or reducing all this has dehistoricised and depoliticised '68, pushing into oblivion a long period of political radicalism and developing a newly Eurocentric or Westerncentric approach. This is not always the case with genres other than history: for instance, while speaking about this long period, I have in mind the extraordinary film by Chris Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (made in 1977 and composed of a clever montage of coeval filmic material, with very good comments); one of its merits is that it situates '68 – understood in an international sense – in the context of the revolutionary events and forms of thought and leadership that took place between 1967 and 1977. It seems to me that particularly visual sources bring back to us the need for a wider historical contextualisation, as some of those which were repropounded in the last months show, for instance the *Cinétracts* – the newsreels produced in France in 1968–69 – or the posters from those years, which include frequent references to the movements in the whole world, from the Zengakuren and Zenkyoto students of Japan to the liberation movements of the (then) so-called Third World.

However, always according to Kristin Ross, an effort to historicise, the going back to primary sources, has been initiated in recent times by various historians, including herself. This effort not only offers new life to '68, but it also deconstructs the weight of liberalism imposed on history and thought after 1989. Indeed, the double intellectual process that has mythicised/demonised '68 is at the root of the theses according to which the repercussions of '68 consisted, on the one hand, in the development of hedonism and individualism, such as argued by Régis Debray and

Gilles Lipovetsky,<sup>4</sup> and, on the other, in the triumph of amoral capitalism and international neoliberalism, as argued by the Italian right-wing intellectual Marcello Veneziani and the French President Nicolas Sarkozy.<sup>5</sup> I will not summarise here these counterposed arguments, not only because I think that they are well-known, but also because I believe that too much attention has been given to them, especially those of the latter.

Rather, I would briefly address the question of the link with 1989. Paul Berman in *A Tale of Two Utopias. The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*,<sup>6</sup> points to that link as a paradox, consisting in the fact that after having gone through the experience of a leftist utopia, the same generation went through the utopia of liberalism in its later age. According to him, the period from 1989 to 1994, which saw the explosion of liberal-democratic revolutions, dwarfs the '68 revolts.

The link between '68 and '89 has been affirmed by a number of scholars. In a general sense, according to Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein,<sup>7</sup> 1968 was, along with 1848, one of the two world revolutions. "Both were historical failures. Both transformed the world." In this perspective, 1968 was the beginning of a process that culminated in 1989.

More specifically, according to Stefan Garsztecki,<sup>8</sup> 1968 marks the beginning of the decline of communism in Poland and it is the turning point in Polish postwar history for the country's breakthrough to democracy in 1989. Similarly, according to Jan Pauer, writing on Czechoslovakia:<sup>9</sup> the Prague Spring of 1968 marked the beginning of the transformation of the whole system in former Eastern bloc countries; it was a democratic awakening of the whole society and an original Czech and Slovak contribution to overcoming Soviet rule and the division of Europe. The '68-'89 link was even perceived by contemporaries. Timothy Garton Ash<sup>10</sup> remarked that in Prague in 1989 people linked the two dates in chanting "Dubček-Havel", and noticed that the Czechs were delighted to point out that the number 89 is 68 turned upside down.

As for Hungary, Daniel Chirot<sup>11</sup> argues that not 1956, when the Hungarian revolution was crushed, but 1968 was the decisive turning point, since that was when the implications of the Brezhnev doctrine became clear, i.e., that fundamental political reform was not going to be allowed. Máté Szabó, while not agreeing with this interpretation, notices that Hungarian intellectuals and artists, particularly the younger ones, were closely following the conflicts abroad, and some of their experiences were recollected in their creative or reflective works, such as the films of Miklós Jancsó; the novels of Tibor Déry, György Dalos, György Konrád; the philosophy of György Lukacs, Mihály Vajda or Ágnes Heller; the scholarship of Hungarian sociologists András Hegedüs or Ivan Szelényi; and Hungarian rock music.

Here, I mainly want to highlight one point about the connection between '68 and '89 as a series of liberalising revolts: namely, that not only '68 assumes a wide variety of meanings in the context of these countries, but also that a plurality of different meanings concerns the terms "liberal" and "liberalism", which are used in reference to '68 in at least four variants: the traditional *laissez faire*, *laissez passer*; the kind of freedom vindicated by '68; the liberalisation advocated by 1989 movements in Eastern Europe; the international neoliberalism of today. A confused meaning of liberalism forcing all these together has been imposed on a process that is regarded as having originated in '68,

so that its consequences have been attributed to '68 itself. Therefore I consider this confusion to be part of the process of dehistoricisation and concomitant mythicisation/denigration of '68.

Before concluding this first part of my article, I would like to point out that similar tones resonate in the discourses on '68 and the double process I mentioned in different parts of the world and not only in a Eurocentric perspective. Let me take into consideration for a moment the Mexican student movement of '68, which consisted in a decisive occupation of public space and strong affirmation of democracy and the principle of dialogue, as the beginning of a critical revision of the forms of government and culture against an authoritarian regime. The Mexican '68 ended with the massacre of 300–400 people in Plaza de las Tres Culturas at Tlatelolco on 2 October 1968; it was a political drama, followed by the jailing, until 1971, of hundreds of political prisoners. According to Carlos Monsiváis,<sup>12</sup> a form of mythicisation of those events has taken place in Mexico that has transformed a political and human tragedy into an embodiment of the suffering of national youth, forgetting to indicate the real causes of the revolt and to name those who were actually responsible for the massacre. This myth is accompanied by a sense of middle-class guilt, the cancellation of any hope of progress, and the subordination to the presumed advantages of capitalism. José Woldenberg has written in 2006 about a collective amnesia that erodes everything and generates silence, simulation and oblivion, as well as a void in Mexican history.<sup>13</sup>

I cannot but notice the difference but also the similarity with the great production of written material on '68 in Europe which – accompanied by an insufficient historicisation – is often comparable to a deafening silence, not a real silence, but a void full of words of exaltation or denigration. I hear resonances between these judgements on Mexico and many other voices: to return to France, for instance, Marcel Gauchet, in his early 2008 article in the special issue of *Le Débat* about the French May, said May '68 is scarcely historicised and hardly the object of novels and films.<sup>14</sup> The same tones can be found in Jean-Pierre Le Goff's essay in the same special issue: the relationship between the present and '68 oscillates between nostalgic fascination, on the one hand, and the accusations that view '68 as the cause of present-day evil, on the other.<sup>15</sup> Still in the same issue, Bénédicte Delorme-Montini<sup>16</sup> insists on the fact that, since it is the polymorphous object only of an embryonal (*histoire embryonnaire*) – not an accomplished history –, '68 is particularly dependent on the developments in the present. According to Delorme-Montini, the experience of direct democracy, coupled with the temporary abolition of social barriers and that this period is considered a form of public happiness by its protagonists, cannot be reduced to either populist militancy or libertarian hedonism. Such political heritage can be found in the opposition to liberal globalisation that has been growing since 1995 and which has given, she believes, new life to '68 and opened the possibility for the rehabilitation of its political nature.

Let us face the fact that in the subsequent decades, the heritage of '68 – which in a previous book Jean-Pierre Le Goff had defined "impossible"<sup>17</sup> – has been in various cases turned upside down. To take just one, rather striking, example: political ecological movements, while continuing and prolonging some of the features of '68, have developed – contrary to the triumphant perspective of that period – a catastrophic view of the present and future. A similar overturning might have taken place for what concerns intellectuality: what cannot be isolated from the context of the '68 movements has become increasingly isolated in subsequent decades.

### *Personal experience and memory*

Given the prevalence in public discourse of the dehistoricised view of '68, and the insufficiency of research on its intellectual repercussions, I have turned to some rudimentary inquiry that might help to orient future research. I have resorted to that particular kind of source that is memory and personal experience – with its ambivalent status between primary and secondary sources – not only because it has been one of my favourite areas of research and reflection, but also because it seems to me that it might be refreshing and useful to re-address some questions concerning '68 and its repercussions. A note of hope that personal experience and memory might still have a positive and constructive role today is suggested, for instance, by a survey sponsored by *Le Nouvel Observateur* in March 2008<sup>18</sup> on the positions expressed by Sarkozy on May '68: of the French people interviewed on whether they agreed that the consequences of '68 were as bad as he said, 74 per cent disagreed, 18 per cent agreed, while 8 per cent declined to answer. Many of those who said 'no' were people who had actually voted for Sarkozy. Perhaps the so-called 'masses' are not so completely lost as we are often tempted to believe these days.

It must be clear that my effort is very tentative and I devote only the central part of my article to it, a soft core, so to say, while in the last part I will go return to more general considerations. From this tentative perspective, I would like to look at some specific disciplinary fields, resorting first of all to my own experience and memory in the field of cultural studies and history, in what concerns Britain and Italy.

The tendency to break down the division between theory and practice, a tendency shared by common sense and by a scientific approach in the social sciences was already present in movements and theories pre-existing '68. In the European case, some roots of this tendency lay in the experiences and ideas of minority groups, such as the Provos and the Situationists,<sup>19</sup> but also in new trends in the social sciences such as the intention to break down the division between the subject and object of research in sociology. If we try to situate '68 in a longer intellectual history, in some aspects and some countries of Western Europe, the movement of ideas noticeable in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the socio-historical sciences was a move away from focusing on institutional objects towards a social dimension. In history and sociology it meant going from movements and parties to the social classes. There was a transformation within the socio-historical sciences that announced '68, which in its turn deeply influenced these sciences. It is not by sheer chance that the universities that stressed the new social science – Nanterre in France, Trento in Italy and the London School of Economics – all became centres of agitation.

At the same time, the germs of a cultural approach had started appearing in works such as those by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, who had been trying to show the connections between the cultural dimension and society. This was the case especially as regards the subaltern classes, but this passage also included pointing to the appropriation of culture by the liberal bourgeois tradition and its canons.

The novelty was that 1968 brought subjectivity onto the scene. Of course the term 'subjectivity' already featured in Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere*. Not by chance Gramsci became an impor-

tant theoretical reference for a transdisciplinary field of studies such as cultural studies, especially in Britain. His work is indeed a point of confluence between the British and Italian experiences of cultural studies, although his intellectual influence is stronger in Britain than in Italy. I particularly think of Stuart Hall, who has taught us to find inspiration in Gramsci for postcolonial studies, especially for what concerns the relationships between race and class. Hall's understanding of cultural studies places them at the centre of the political developments through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The origins and developments of cultural history and studies can be considered to be an interface of the passages and fractures that have characterised the relationship between politics and culture, and that today are relevant for opening a line of reflection on the political nature of intellectual work. The cultural approach implies a revisitation of various disciplines such as anthropology, literary criticism, sociology, law, geography and changes in their epistemological statutes as well as transdisciplinary relationships. Cultural studies and history are not only a reply to the crisis of the humanities, but also to extra-academic realities. That is why they tend to configure themselves as a challenge to disciplinary languages and not so much as a 'new discipline'. At the same time they are co-opted and institutionalised in special areas – sometimes interstices – of academic life or 'alternative' institutions.

The hypothesis that I would like to make is that many changes in the intellectual and cultural landscape induced by '68 were actually a product of a complex mixture of 'defeat' and 'victory': for example, the creation at the institutional level of new disciplinary trends such as cultural studies was in part an effort to bring into the academy the cultural struggle and to politicise it, while also the consequence of a withdrawal from direct political action and a recycling of political personnel.

The transdisciplinary nature of the social inspiration in the 1960s and 1970s seems evident to me for what regards the emergence of the practice of oral history, which existed in various forms before a proper international movement emerged under this name at the end of the 1970s. While it appeared to be at the time a mainly Westernocentric movement, oral history was not such in its essence, given its important antecedents in African studies and its subsequent global developments after the 1990s. Oral history existed in the 1950s and 1960s in various countries, Italy for instance, as a history of the subaltern classes. But after 1968, the term and concept of 'subjectivity' was applied directly to the social movements of students, workers and women, at least in some Western European countries, and referred to the subjective level of the revolutionary masses. This type of subjectivity involved attention to daily life and the relationship between the individual and the collective. In fact, what today is called cultural history was sometimes defined as the 'history of subjectivity' in Italy in the 1970s.

In the fields that I know better, cultural history and oral history, I believe that there can be no doubt that '68, especially if understood as a process that lasted at least a decade, resulted in a transposition of personnel and ideas from a direct application to the field of politics to an intellectual and emotional investment in the field of intellectual research.

This coincides with what Robert Young wrote in 2004 while revisiting his *White Mythologies*: in the 1960s, the contact between European and North American revolutionary theory and politics,

on the one hand, and the anticolonial movements of the Third World, on the other, produced a 'third space' of a new kind, on which a global resistance to imperialism could be built. From '68 onwards, a large number of intellectual works produced in the course of anticolonial struggles was combined with critical and dissident Western discourse and used against the hegemonic and Eurocentric or Westerncentric forms of power. This political conjunction produced a form of theoretical intervention that was called postcolonialism. Generally speaking, poststructuralism owes a lot to such conjunction.

Here we have a form of synergy which constitutes the transnational context of '68 in a historical perspective, synergy being understood, following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as "the increased effectiveness or achievement produced by combined action or cooperation – that exceeds the sum of the individual effects". However, many studies on '68 have hardly taken notice of this. Or they have to some extent taken into account the struggles in Latin America, but much less those in Africa, and for what concerns Asia, Vietnam has been taken into consideration, but not Japan, which is an absolutely crucial place for '68, even if it took place in 1967 or 1969 in that country, as it has been noticed.

Japan might be interesting for the question of intellectual repercussion. I have one example in this respect, drawn from a paper by Koichi Yamada,<sup>20</sup> which starts with his memories of the massive demonstrations of students at the University of Tokyo, where he was studying economics at the time, and ends, after stating that conspicuous changes were taking place in the world economy, with the consideration that around 1968 a change in thinking or perception within economic science also took place. The year 1968 was pivotal for intellectual thought in economics in the sense that young present-day economists seem to be dominated by classical thinking that emphasises rationality and price mechanisms, while economists of the 1968 generation tend to maintain some faith in the way Keynes viewed the world, as an imperfect system where prices do not move smoothly. The Japanese example is telling for both the issue of synergy and that of difference in generations for what concerns intellectual and political attitudes.

In order to find some comparative references in other disciplinary fields, I have tested the ground with some brief interviews, done by telephone and email, with protagonists of '68 in some other countries. Until now I have referred to France, Italy and Britain, while also mentioning Mexico and Japan. Therefore I have started interviewing people from Germany, a country which follows the first three in the list of countries about which I know at least a little.

First I interviewed – following the path of my own networks – Friedrich Hermann, a protagonist of the development of the KPK (Karlsruhe Physikkurs), a new way of teaching physics, which originated in Germany and is now diffused all over the world. He indicated a synergy between the guiding lines of the '68 movement and the formulation of the language of science, especially in the area of the communication of science and its transmission in schools. The influence of '68 was not a direct cause; rather, it was part of an intellectual atmosphere which fostered parallel developments. In fact the principles of the KPK had been laid down by the physicist Gottfried Falk in the late 1960s/early 1970s. The group around him was politically active in that they held seminars on nuclear weapons and later on Ronald Reagan's 'star wars' programme. The phys-



ics that was created in the University of Karlsruhe physics faculty criticised institutional physics. First of all, it developed a strong trend towards anti-authoritarianism in its challenging of the traditional language of physics, which was completely reformulated in terms of daily life experiences and experiments. Secondly, some KPK publications, although written for everybody, were directed explicitly at girls, challenging the view that they should find physics more difficult than boys. Thirdly, the KPK engaged in transdisciplinary exchanges with branches of chemistry undergoing similar transformations. Even today, my interviewee said, the KPK generates strong opposition in Germany; while being neither directly political nor ideological, it challenges the conservative views within this discipline and therefore stirs controversy.

Then I interviewed Axel Bichler, independent writer and philosopher who was studying in Berlin in 1968. He started from a general remark: according to him, the intellectuality of '68 was directed against the system, in the effort to try to understand the enemy. Present intellectuality, he argued, is in most cases not oriented in this sense, thus confirming my initial hesitancy about terminology. However, he also indicated the deep innovation that took place in the field of philosophy, especially the philosophy taught in schools and universities, which before 1968 usually did not make any reference to sociology and psychology, in other words to Marx and Freud. Both of them – to say it in a figurative way – entered German schools after 1968. In reply to a question of mine, Bichler too agreed that it might be more correct to talk about synergies, since in fact the Frankfurt School had been active before 1968 and its thought had influenced many of the protagonists of the '68 movement in Germany.

As a third interviewee, I had Katharina Oeding, a biology teacher, who went to study in Berlin in 1968. According to her, one influence of '68 is that it included teaching on sexuality in the teaching of biology, in schools that have generally become more open and free. She also mentioned the fact that relevant changes, like the post-'68 introduction of new aspects such as molecular biology to teaching, is based on research that had already started before '68, thus confirming the hypothesis of indirectness and synergy.

Then I had the chance of being put into contact<sup>21</sup> with a protagonist of the Mexican '68, Joel Ortega Juárez, a militant who experienced jail and who recently wrote a book of reflections about his political and intellectual biography, *El otro camino. Cuarenta y cinco años de trinchera en trinchera*.<sup>22</sup> In reply to my questions, he immediately reminded me that in order to assess the intellectual repercussions of '68, we should take into account the fact that tens of thousands of youth who had participated in the movement have become teachers and professors. He acknowledged that after '68 in Mexico there was a real renaissance in science, culture and politics; all the fields witnessed enquires and reflections that had never taken place before. "We discovered our country," he said. He thus confirmed what Carlos Monsiváis has written, that the Mexican '68 induced a relevant intensification of the study of Marxism as the main analytical weapon in order to understand society, although this process has not been able to avoid dogmatism and vulgarisation. According to Ortega Juárez, the proliferation of Marxism in universities, which had started before '68 and peaked as a consequence of the wave of political militants exiled from Latin America in the 1970s – a point that supports Robert Young's point about the connection between anticolonial struggles and '68 – disappeared after the fall of the Berlin Wall. For Adolfo Gilly, 1968:

*la ruptura en los bordes*,<sup>23</sup> the very important influence of the French May on the imagination of Mexican students of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and the Instituto Politécnico Nacional has to be coupled with the memory of the Cuban revolution of 1959 that originated at the University of Havana. According to Gilly, the confrontation of '68 in Mexico contributed to accelerating technological innovation and the transformation of capital, the reorganisation of work and the use of information; it changed the forms of imagination and planning.

Finally, in his interview Joel Ortega Juárez clarified the position he expressed in his book, in which he wrote not only that, reconsidering his 45 years of political militancy, he always tried to reconcile a communist belief with the aspirations to freedom, equality and fraternity, but also that he sees a continuity between the utopia of the 1960s and the libertarian struggle that a modern left must lead these days, reformulating liberal thought. Liberalism – he said in his interview – is not to be understood as the capitalist liberalism of *laissez faire, laissez passer*, and neither as the present-day type of liberalism, but in a radical sense, sensitive to social problems; in his mind, it is meant to refer to the “gran fiesta libertaria” that was the Mexican '68 against authoritarianism, with a meaning quite opposite to the continuity that Sarkozy established between '68 and wild neoliberalism. According to him, the Mexican left should go back to the liberal roots of the national state, before the advent of the authoritarian and corporative tendency that in the 1920s and 1930s transformed the Mexican state into an apparatus for the control of society.

I would like to add to these interviews of mine those done by Virginie Linhart,<sup>24</sup> daughter of Robert Linhart, a protagonist of French '68 and a founder in 1960 of the Union des jeunes communistes marxistes-léninistes, which recommended its militants to go and work in a factory; he did, working for a year at Citroën, and wrote a famous book, *L'Établi*, on his experience. His daughter has interviewed some 23 children of '68ers, some of whom had their biographies included in *Génération* (edited by Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman)<sup>25</sup> and who call themselves “children of '68”. While regretting that they were raised in situation in which they never came first, because they came always after politics, and recognising that “transmission was very difficult for our parents, because they were too involved with the present”, they find tones like this to assess the legacy of their parents: “I have made mine some of the principles of those years: the idea that everything is political, the challenging of authority, the struggle for the equality of sexes, and feminism, while rejecting others: militantism, sexual freedom, denunciation of bourgeois order, acceptance of drugs,” with the consequence, Virginie Linhart says, that: “I live in a constant negotiation within myself between the values that were imprinted in me when I was a child and the present world I live in.” Or, as one of her interviewees admits: “We, daughters of feminists, have become very homely, sticking to domestic happiness, with rules, regulations, conformism, but we bear feminism within ourselves, we were born with it.”

What do we get out of these fragments of memory and experience? First of all, a confirmation of the observation by Ellen Willis that what is missing from current debates about the 1960s is its “emotional experience”.<sup>26</sup> Then we get the sense that the intellectual consequences of '68 are countless and remain yet to be explored; that they must be sought out especially in the areas of teaching and transmission, and largely also in the fields of transdisciplinary research; and finally that, in the field of political intellectuality, inversions have taken place, and at the same time they

should take place in a more reflexive and explicit way, for instance, in a multiple understanding of the concepts of libertarian and liberal.

### *Indirectness and synergies*

In his important book *La pensée anti-'68*,<sup>27</sup> Serge Audier delineates the process whereby the '68 revolt left some positive sediments in the fields of both practice and intellectual creation. "Sediment" is a word used by Cornelius Castoriadis (*sédimentations positives*) in order to indicate that modern revolutions, in spite of having been defeated, left a legacy that transformed societies and were at the same time the yeast for future transformation and for the formal institution of certain rights, freedoms and guarantees that make society more liveable. Thus, the positive importance of May '68 is that it made visible for all that the site of politics is everywhere, it is society itself: everything that in the relationships between people has something to do with authority and power can be considered political and become a battlefield.

Therefore, according to Audier, *la pensée-68* is not the one that Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut<sup>28</sup> attributed to the *maitres-à-penser* writing of the 1960s and earlier, but rather that of thinkers such as Cornelius Castoriadis, Louis Gruel, Claude Lefort and André Gorz, who opened the way to a democratic political thought, and prolonged aspects of the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Less spectacular than the positions of those who argued for the end of humanism and the subject, these authors have developed in the thirty years from the 1970s to the 2000s a more complex line of thought pointing to the future.

For instance, according to Audier, Gruel sees in '68 the crisis of the maintenance of a common (shared) world, the weakening of the objectivity of the institutionalised world, or of the 'natural' imposition of the rules of social life, the supposed evidence of hierarchical arrangements, and the radical change in attitudes towards the established forms of professionalism. In other words, a transformation of subjectivity was extended to the world of knowledge, through the critique of cultural models of education transmitted through schools, the critique of medical knowledge, the creation of a new ecologism, also on the basis of the relationship between the new forms of knowledge developed by the ecological movements and the struggle against the war in Vietnam.

According to Audier, Castoriadis in particular has highlighted the contribution of '68 to bringing to an end the belief of being, or wanting to be, masters and owners of nature. The criticism of a pseudo-rational pseudo-dominance of nature, not to be confused with an anti-scientific or anti-technological discourse or with an anti-modernist position, is part of an integration of the ecological critique into democratic theory and is very far from the progressivist ideology that preaches to raise the standard of life whatever will happen – this type of ecological thought being an intellectual repercussion of '68.

In this approach, in spite of dogmatisms and defeats, the movements of the 1960s have left as their legacy some intellectual orientations that reformulate what is alive of the questions and aspirations of the years of protest: the need for individual emancipation in respect to traditional

structures, the search for participation in social and political life, the aspiration to more equality and the rediscussion of economicism and productivism. Audier's effort tries to isolate the intellectual contributions from the more general impact of '68, without cutting them off from their political implications. In order to explore the relationship between the intellectual and political repercussions, I found it useful to resort to a device that historians are warned never to use, since history must not be done – we are taught – using 'if' and 'but'. I want to propose a detour precisely in this sense, following the example of the German philosopher Claus Offe.

In a seminar given at the European University Institute in Fiesole in the 2000–2001 academic year, Offe made the "counterfactual" hypothesis that '68 had not taken place. This "experimental elimination" of '68 allowed him to formulate four hypotheses in a decreasing order of optimism: the 1968 movements engaged in the subversion of dominant codes, "code" here meaning an institutionalised norm of selection and evaluation. In particular, the students of the second half of the 1960s were engaged in deconstructing the codes of postwar German society and in distinguishing true from false differences. The first hypothesis is that, if they had not done that operation in the cognitive space of postwar society, there would not have been feminist and ecologist movements, green parties, vindications of the rights for ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. A second definition is of '68 as a symptom, an epiphenomenon of a long-term liberation process. In this case, if '68 had not taken place, the same process would have happened in any case, probably later on, less spectacularly and perhaps thanks to the political elites. A third definition/hypothesis is that '68 movement did not do anything new, but made certain processes irreversible; had it not happened, we would have lost its protective effect against regression towards authoritarianism, racism, supposedly "natural" gender roles, traditionalism in education and so on. A fourth definition/hypothesis – derived according to Offe from Agnes Heller – is that '68 favoured the emergence of a culture of political postmodernism, giving up any distinction between true and false and therefore devaluing moral universalism and denying any difference. In this case, the result of liberation would have been a condition of indifference. Offe puts a question mark on the imputation of this result to 1968; therefore he does not say what would have happened if '68 – defined in this way – had not happened.

The most controversial and enigmatic is the last one, the relationship between '68 and postmodernism. Here, however, it all depends on the definition we give of postmodernism. If we leave out the insistence on indifference implicit in Offe's fourth hypothesis, we can find a more encouraging definition such as the one given by Marianne DeKoven,<sup>29</sup> according to whom some aspects of 1960s radical politics and countercultures embodied simultaneously the final flowering of the modern and the emergence of the postmodern. While for DeKoven modernity refers to the period beginning in the Enlightenment and continuing until the emergence of postmodernity in the course of the 1960s, the postmodern has emerged from the 1960s radical and countercultural movements of subversive subcultural production and reception, of postcolonialism, of racial and ethnic studies, of cultural studies, of feminist and queer studies. In this perspective, postmodernism is seen as the locus of resistance from within.

What is most important in this approach, I believe, is the effort to understand what was at stake in the 1960s in order to assess the progressive potentialities of our present moment. These are,

in spite of the present gloominess (it is a very bleak present, for instance, in the country where I come from), immense. I say "immense" from the point of view of the present, but looking at a medium scale and a *longue durée* length of time.

The potentialities are immense if we think of the considerations put forward by Robert Young: the potentiality of prefiguring postmodern utopias on the basis of the conjunction which has started taking place between the North and the South of the world – in symbolic terms – that is nourishing postcolonial studies. Immense potentialities of reformulating utopian projects, not in a universalistic form, but linked with daily life, with the critique of crazy consumption, and with the too many unsustainable aspects of so-called development. These would be potentialities of inversion, from retreat to action, in various fields including intellectual grounds.

In order to conclude, I see also some potentialities in our work as intellectuals. I have been trying to show that the principles of indirectness and synergy have been working historically in the relationships between '68 and its antecedents, as well as between '68 and its future. The two principles might also apply to our future. Jean-Paul Sartre said once: "Why should '68 not happen again?", loyal to his principle of the *pourquoi pas*. I think that we can say, more modestly: "Why shouldn't indirectness and synergy take place again? And more specifically with reference to our own intellectual work in relation to possible political developments? Could this work have some value in a constellation of synergies for a possible future change of the world? Why shouldn't we do this work of ours as if it might converge into a larger process of liberation?" I would like to conclude precisely with this question: *Pourquoi pas?* Why not?

## NOTES

- 1 Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- 2 See Luisa Passerini, *Utopia and Destré*, Chapter 3 of *Memory and Utopia, the Primacy of Intersubjectivity*, London: Equinox, 2007.
- 3 Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd ed., London/New York: Routledge, 2004.
- 4 Régis Débray, *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire*, Paris: Maspero, 1978; Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide. Essai sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Paris: Galilée, 1983.
- 5 Marcello Veneziani, *Rovesciare il '68. Pensieri contromano su quarant'anni di conformismo di massa*, Milan: Mondadori, 2008.
- 6 Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*, New York: Norton, 1996.
- 7 Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements*, London: Verso, 1989, p. 97.

- 8 Stefan Garsztecki, "Poland", in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (eds), *1968 in Europe. A History of Protest and Activism, 1956–1977*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 179–187.
- 9 Jan Pauer, "Czechoslovakia", in Klimke and Scharloth, *1968 in Europe*, pp. 163–177.
- 10 Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*, New York: Random House, 1990.
- 11 Daniel Chirot, *What happened in Eastern Europe in 1989?*, in Vladimir Tismaneanu (ed.), *The Revolutions of 1989*, London/New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 19–50.
- 12 Carlos Monsiváis, "Notas sobre la cultura mexicana en el siglo XX", in *Historia general de México. Versión 2000*, México: El Colegio de México, 2005, pp. 957–1076.
- 13 José Woldenberg, "Prólogo. Historia personal del pasado", in Joel Ortega Juárez, *El otro camino. Cuarenta y cinco años de trinchera en trinchera (The other way. 45 years from one trench to another)*, México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 2006, pp. 15–20.
- 14 Gauchet Marcel, "Bilan d'une génération", *Le débat* 149 (2008): 101–111.
- 15 Jean-Pierre Le Goff, "Mai 68: la France entre deux mondes", *Le débat* 149 (2008): 83–100.
- 16 Bénédicte Delorme-Montini, "Regards extérieurs sur 1968. Polymorphie d'un objet d'histoire embryonnaire", *Le débat* 149 (2008): 66–82.
- 17 Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68, l'héritage impossible*, rev. ed., Paris: La Découverte, Paris 2006.
- 18 *Le nouvel observateur* 2264 (27 March 2008).
- 19 See Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68. Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.
- 20 Koichi Yamada, *Japan 1968: A Reflection Point During the Era of the Economic Miracle*, Economic Growth Center, Yale University, Center Discussion Paper no. 764, 1996.
- 21 I thank Leslie Hernandez Nova for this contact.
- 22 Ortega Juárez, *El otro camino*.
- 23 Adolfo Gilly, *El siglo del relámpago. Siete ensayos sobre el siglo XX*, México City: Itaca/La jornada, 2002, pp. 65–83.
- 24 Virginie Linhart, *Le jour où mon père s'est tu*, Paris: Seuil, 2008.
- 25 Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman (eds), *Génération*, Paris: Seuil, 1987.
- 26 Quoted in Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited. The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*, Durham/London: Duke UP, 2004, p. 289.
- 27 Audier Serge, *La pensée anti-68. Essai sur les origines d'une restauration intellectuelle*, Paris: La Découverte, 2008.
- 28 Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *La pensée 68. Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* and *Idem, 68–86. Itinéraires de l'individu*, Gallimard, Paris 1987.
- 29 DeKoven, *Utopia Limited*.