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Historising: 1968 and the Long Sixties



Contentious Historisation. The Conference on "1968, Forty Years Later"

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When the journal *Historein* decided to organise a symposium in Greece to commemorate the 40th anniversary of 1968, we could not have envisaged, a year earlier, either the extent of the commemoration nor the direction it would take. We did not want a symposium for '68 veterans, not did we wish to simply cover the events of this *anno mirabilis*. We wanted to include all of the facets and phenomena of "The Long Sixties" – as the decades of 1960 and 1970 have been called – without descending into a recital of particulars. We imagined a symposium that would look at what had changed in theory, in the social sciences and in culture, explore the effects of those years on social movements and collective subjects, examine the changing meanings of culture and cultural practices, and their effects at the academic level and their theoretical perspectives. In the call for papers for the symposium, we wrote that 1968 brought to the fore ideas and societal dynamics which challenged old theories and ideologies. Utopian ideas and attitudes circulated, which in subsequent years diffused into different fields, from feminism and ecology to counterculture as well as academic courses and research.

Therefore we decided to title the symposium "The Utopian Years: 1968 and Beyond. Movement Dynamics and Theoretical Implications 40 Years Later". We intended not just to invite historians, as is generally the case with *Historein*, but people from many different fields. At some point, however, we decided to include alternative ways of representing the past, including cinema and art exhibitions. We met with the Thessalo-

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niki Film Festival and the State Museum of Contemporary Art and decided, together, to create a triptych of events in Thessaloniki and Athens, including a film festival on 1968 (May 5–14), an art exhibition entitled “Revolution, I love you” and the conference, part of which was held in Thessaloniki. We also published an event ‘newspaper’ (a single sheet containing background articles and the entire event programme), entitled *Μέρες του '68* (Days of '68), a poster and gave a joint press conference.

The symposium's the 24 papers and discussions raised to four main issues: First, the historiisation of ‘1968’ and the transfer of history and memory between generations and different moments of the same generation; second, the relationship between the “long Sixties” as a global event and the Parisian May '68; third, the relationship between the political and the cultural dimensions of the events; and, fourth, their impact on the theoretical debates and the cultural turn of the social sciences.

How does ‘1968’ become history?

There was no disagreement that 1968 and the rebellious circumstances of the two decades surrounding it were treated according to the myths they had created despite an ever-growing scholarly literature. Interpretations were linked to the changing concerns of the broader political agenda, and this was also the case with anti-war movements. Tom Gallant and Marilyn Young spoke about the relationship between the movements against the Vietnam and the Iraq wars. As regards the broader '68, which was largely based in universities, it was to be turned into history by the very generations that were shaped by it. In this way the image of '68 was designed by the “generation of '68ers”, and within more-or-less the same timeframe afterwards, it changed their experience. Certainly nostalgia was a constituent quality of this case of auto-historicising, but to the degree in which the experience of those years was formative, a need for continuous dialogue was created. The itinerary of this generation was marked by the reflexivity on its past experiences. For instance, when a decade ago *Historein* published a special issue on *ego-histoires*, with contributions from historians formed in the 1960s, the dominant concept was ‘defeat’ and ‘loss’.¹ Now the dominant point was that despite being ‘defeated’, '68 has indeed changed the world. Despite the changing attitudes, the theoretical debates that have prevailed in the historical reconstructions of '68 are, possibly, a projection of the debates of this period about the unity of theory and praxis. Certainly the involvement of the '68 generation in the historical construction of its own experience was particularly productive because it elaborated ideas, concepts and approaches which became a component of the cultural turn, which changed the field of (and not only) social studies during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Luisa Passerini). Moreover, it was observed in the discussion that within this discursive framework, '68 was used as a metaphor for the concept of history as such. However, in a paradoxical way, Alessandro Portelli noticed that while the '68 movements gave a momentum to oral history as well as “people’s history”, what really happened as regards May '68 was that its history was based either on the history and statements of its leaders, or on the intellectual leadership of the May 1968 movements. During the conference, the relationship between generation and history, either as a re-appropriation of the contentious past or as a path-dependence of it, was a constant preoccupation.

Portelli, reporting on relevant research, emphasised the significance of the family environment for the youth rebellion of the 1960s in Italy. For a broad range of Catholic families it was their social sensitivity which acquired radical political dimensions. For others, the “grassroots” folk, the traditional family rebelliousness, even as a “invented” past, played a significant role. There was always some anarchist or antifascist uncle to play the role of the inspiring hero. Portelli stressed the persistence of those values in daily professional and social life even today, despite the prevalence of an image of the transformation of the ‘68ers into stewards of modern capitalism. He emphasised that the educational role of the generations had indeed changed. He stated that because the rhythm of change is so fast, from 1950 onwards the younger generations have educated the older ones. According to him, the arrival of memory studies into historical studies is linked with the challenge to institutionalised knowledge during the long sixties. “If we look at ‘68 from the sidelines,” Portelli asked, “what history emerges?” He insisted on the lateral, heretical, minority traditions which comprise one body of memory of *its own and within* the social movements, prepared to support its basic premise that ‘68 left a deeper impression on people than it did on institutions. Nevertheless, in public history, the question of the changing meaning of ‘68 in France from decade to decade was less dependent on the subjective treatment of the generation which narrates its images than on the broader historical context (Jean-François Sirinelli).

The problem of the historicisation of ‘68 emerged also in another, performative way. On the morning of the second day of the symposium, a body of students stormed the central University building, where the conference was being held, and demanded its closure until the end of the ongoing student occupation. Indeed, the symposium was conducted under the threat of being suspended either by the student occupation or as the result of a lock out by the University Senate. The negotiations with the students revealed the difference, the incompatibility and the non-translatable comparisons of meaning with those that occur in major conflicts, similar to the one we were studying. The fact that the symposium was concerned with 1968 did not mitigate, in the eyes of the student activists, its status as a component of a formalised system of knowledge with which they were demonstrably manifesting their dissent. They asked: “To whom does 1968 belong, to us who realise it in the streets, or to you who study it?”; and said “History is written in the streets” and “You are not occupying yourselves with history but with necrophilia”. Finally, we agreed that the students could enter the lecture hall, read their communiqué (which was also provided to the interpreters for simultaneous translation), distribute their leaflets, and invite the participants to their demonstration, without disrupting the symposium.

There was something ironic in the air because at this session Dimitris Papanikolaou was speaking on the “enjoyment” factor in demonstrations, analysing a song by Dionysis Savvopoulos, and Yiannis Stavrakakis had loaded the video with the famous scene where a student violently interrupts Lacan during a lecture, arguing with him and then dousing his head with a glass of water. In that scene Lacan was speaking about the authoritarianism which lurks in every rebellion. The incident with the students became a topic of discussion several times during the symposium. “Long live May 2068” they graffitied with red spray at the Propylaia, the monumental entrance to the university, implying that the best historical facts are those that will happen in the future or that history has not yet happened. However, the short film with Lacan also became a topic of discussion. Considering Lacan’s position to have been also authoritarian, Portelli’s reaction was

typical. In one sense, the “many ’68s” had also a physical presence at the symposium. In any case the arrival of the students was of interest because it posed the *problématique* of the relationship between the political events of the *here-and-now* type (“the future is now” of the Paris May) and the historical event. What is there? Indifference or appropriation? Some conference papers but also our experience of the social movements in the 1970s and 80s (for example, the slogan “EAM, ELAS, Polytechnio” connecting the spirit of the wartime resistance with the anti-dictatorship movement) suggest not so much a lack of concern for history as to the question with what means is the historical past transformable into evidence for the search for and the representation of the identity of the movements. Syrago Tsiara referred to the “production of knowledge within challenging participatory processes”. History’s role in the formation of the subjectivity of social and generational movements is a much more complex issue.

One or many Mays?

Throughout the symposium there was some tension over the question on whether there was a Greek May? If we are referring literally to May 1968 in Paris, then naturally there was only one. The political press of the Left was wary, if not negative, about the student rebellion (Polymeris Voglis, Vaggelis Karamanolakis). However, if we change perspective and look at the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, i.e. within the the span of “the long sixties” – in other words if we presume that there were many “Mays” – then of course there was a Greek ’68; it just did not happen in 1968 and it was limited to one episode. Movements such as July 1965, the Polytechnic of 1973, and the sit-ins of 1979 (in protest against Law 815, which set limits on the time students had to graduate) could be included in this symbolic May.

Perhaps it is therefore necessary for us to speak about an “international 1968” in terms of a “radial perspective” (from Paris to the periphery) or about a “cultural transformation” of the movement of one country to the other, as Kostis Kornetis has suggested. The radial perspective involves a centre-to-periphery schema, and the concept of national exceptionalism, replication, misreading, and even parodies (evident in the contribution of Soti Triantafillou). In contrast, the model of “cultural transformation” involves a wide spectrum of reflective and creative readings and extemporisation.

The change in perspective means a change in readings as well. In accordance with the political reading, the demands of ’68 differ from the struggle against the dictatorship. However, in line with a cultural reading (Kornetis, Nikos Papadogiannis), which takes account of the many modes of expression, attitudes, styles, friendships, etc., the facts are of course different, but they have elements which allow them to belong to a period with common characteristics, which could still overstep the political periodisation as well. For example, the Polytechnic of 1973 has fewer characteristics in common with the anti-Junta movements of the first period of the dictatorship and more with the ‘regime change’ (*Metapolitefsi*) of 1974 to 1978 (Papadogiannis). In the discussion, the French ’68 was characterised as a “master frame” – with regard to the corresponding facts which happened afterwards in many countries (Christine Agriantoni) – or as a “transfer” which the same participants applied to their practices, at the time as they realised them.

However, what emerged from the different perspectives is the transnational character of the events. "1968" not only prohibits us from a national reading on the subject, but it could be seen as one of the phenomena in the experience of world globalisation. It was correctly emphasised, however, that this distance does not obstruct the national reading. For example, '68 acquired symbolic dimensions in the 2007 French presidential elections, through Sarkozy's denunciation of it, and its adoption as an element of identity on the part of the socialists of the Left (Sirinelli). In Greece again, as noted by Yannis Voulgaris, the Polytechnic marked the delayed establishment of the antifascist hegemony, more than two decades after other Western European countries. But the relationship between the '68 movements and antifascism is interesting. In some countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain and Greece, it meant a revival of the renegotiation of the antifascist experience. In other countries such as France and the UK, it did not. Placing '68 in the history of the twentieth century, Voulgaris also alluded to the relations between 1968 and 1989, saying that the incorporation by the Western democracies of the anti-authoritarian version of the spirit of '68 increased the Cold War distance between West and East because the new progressiveness was based on a tradition and way of thinking that was different from the Cold War dichotomies. From this perspective, between the Western world which embodied the spirit of '68 and the Eastern which suppressed it (Damian Mac Con Uladh), the system which collapsed was that which adapted itself the least to the new spirit.

Nevertheless, in the underlying debate between the political and the cultural readings it was emphasised that the change of perspective could lead to the perception of a soft '68, in which its folklore aspects are emphasised and its political dynamics underestimated, or the strong politicisation of the cultural. It was this transgression of the borders between the political and the cultural, of performance and protest, said Joachim Scharloth and Martin Klimke, which gave rise to the "direct action" of students in occupations and happenings.

The theoretical quest

Did '68 really change the field of theoretical investigation and social studies? The awareness of the social use of science had nothing to do with its good or bad use, but with the concept of the practice which is called "science", with its modulation in a particular environment and with particular priorities (Kostas Gavroglu). From this point of view, the criticism of academic and scientific practices which sparked off '68 undermined the belief in the objectivity of science. Social science did not change, observed Dimitris Sotiropoulos, but appeared side-by-side with critical social theory in the bookshops and the university syllabus. The first stayed with its classic references – Marx, Durkheim, Weber – while the second displayed a new set of classic references: Althusser, Poulantzas, Balibar, in the first phase; Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, Jameson, Deleuze, Guattari, in the second. The new theoretical frame of reference was characterised by Yiannis Stavrakakis from the appearance of a Lacanian Left (Laclau, Žižek, Badiou) which replaced the Freudian Left as a frame of reference (Frankfurt School, Marcuse, Reich). In contrast with the affiliation of the Freudian Left to the utopia of desire and the origin of pleasure, the Lacanian Left can be characterised by scepticism regarding utopia or anti-utopian radicalism. From this perspective "Something else is possible, but not everything".

This theoretical shift, observed Luisa Passerini, has to be viewed using the concepts of *indirectivity* and *synergy* rather than through an immediate and direct impact of '68. Indeed '68 marks a passage from the modern to the postmodern, but this needs to be seen within the changes of information channels and communication models, within the cultural climate and of course within human paths. However, why was the “cultural turn” the major theoretical consequence of 1968? Starting from the lyrics of Dionysis Savvopoulos – “The square was filled with the meaning that contains something of those fires” (Η πλατα ήταν γεμάτη / με το νόημα που 'χει κάτι απ' τις φωτιές) – Papanikolaou alluded to the theoretical ramifications of “*jouissance*” (extreme pleasure, orgasm). The song is built around the moment of a *jouissance* which is constantly sought after and whose loss becomes a cause for melancholy but also a new understanding of the political. Taking Roland Barthes' post-May '68 writing as a case study, Papanikolaou argued that the physical as well as emotional eruption of social energy experienced in the late 60s provided many poststructuralist theorists the platform to rethink the decentring of the subject and its relation to historical time. For the later Barthes, the climactic possibility of *jouissance* results in culture (and the political) being re-read, or rather retraversed through and through, in order to produce the “I like” and “I don't like” of a decentred subject. As a consequence, *jouissance* introduces the further possibility of a radically different positioning of the subject within historical time. On the one hand, *jouissance* as a physical/orgasmic transcendence of definite standards and borders makes the subject conscious of them and of the subject's own position within them, while at the same time effecting their radical undermining. On the other hand, *jouissance* initiates a radical physical presence. While the subject has been decentralised and deconstructed, the return to a body penetrated by *jouissance* introduces a different possibility of experiencing historical time *in the process of unfolding*. This poststructuralist reading of *jouissance*, shaped by the experience of the long 1960s, provided the then emerging field of cultural studies with a major theoretical platform from which to analyse novel types of politicisation and historicisation of the subject.

Finally this symposium on May '68 witnessed an incessant and rich flow of discussions, with the participation of a new generation of scholars and an audience of young people.

NOTE

- 1 *Historein* 3 (2001), “European Ego-histoires: Historiography and the Self, 1970–2000”.