

May-June 1968—The Exposure (excerpt)

Jacques Camatte

FE Note: What follows are thoughts on the revolutionary upsurge which shook France 20 years ago. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the message is that revolt is possible in modern society. In ours today, it is not the cops which prevent revolt, but the inertia of what is—the weight of the present.

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Even before 1968...young people took over the streets and destroyed everything in their path without articulating the slightest political, trade-unionist or other demand. They were expressing the inexpressible: the insanity and their desire to rid themselves of it. But where does this madness come from? May-June 1968 visibly exposed its origins.

The exposure even cuts through the extensive recuperation which has taken place since May 1968. Advertising has understood the profound desire of human beings and since it essentially employs a language of diversion, it has to know exactly what it is dealing with. The desire for communication, for nature, for a more leisurely rhythm which is both more human and more universal, has to be diverted toward the consumption of capital, either in a form which is both material and representational for those with money-capital or else simply in a representational form for those without.

The emergence of these profound desires, even if they are incorporated in representations which remain within the realm of capital, has exposed another essential component of our world: marxism as repressive consciousness. Marxism is everywhere the most effective force opposing the passionate desire to live; anarchism in its non-violent and individualist forms still retains certain elements of rebellion. It is due to marxism that the capitalist mode of production was able to achieve real domination and could become universal. In fact, without marxism, the capitalist mode of production could not have penetrated into regions such as those controlled today by the USSR, China or the African countries. In this sense, it plays the same role as christianity vis-a-vis the Roman Empire. The true universality of the Empire was, in fact, brought to it by the religion which, at its origins, had called for its destruction...

The mechanism of perverting rebellion...consists of outbidding on the left, where each person wants to be more left, more extreme than the person who has just been recognized as such because of a contribution to the so-called revolutionary debate. As a result, human beings no longer have time to structure their revolt before it is contemptuously pointed out to them that it lacks foundation, truth, that there is something more revolutionary than what they propose. Revolutionary theory becomes, like pleasure, something which is never achieved. One sinks into the undefined and the fleeting.

At present, life is transformed into branches of learning...; furthermore, the possible is transformed into knowledge. Various researches in revolution are in quest of the new and as soon as they perceive the slightest tremor or

twitch of something unusual, the assertion of the most insignificant original idea, they take hold of it, circumscribe it, theorize about it, and extrapolate its implications. Or else they use it to revise their earlier representation.

In any case, they put together something which is supposed to be operational and fling it onto the market. The originator of the insight or deed discovers that his or her intuition or impulse is vulgarized, capitalized. They cannot help being disgusted by what they were able to do and even of themselves. Possibilities are transformed into representations and even when, occasionally men and women might have it in their power to conceive and work something out and thus to live, they have the sensation of *deja vu*, the feeling that it is banal, inessential; that it isn't worth the trouble. Discouragement is the result and it is all the more acute because they realize that with the various theoretical elements, with the different possibilities for materializing projects which present themselves, there are infinite combinations.

Only by throwing oneself into another dynamic, by adopting another frame of reference other than capital, is it possible to avoid all this perversion-destruction. And as the catastrophic phenomena inherent in the development of our world are confirmed, the abolished obstacles will clearly be recognized as abolished and men and women will have to choose: either to remain in the community of capital or to leave it. At that point, we will see that this alternative was revealed by May-June 1968.

The rupture which it has brought about permits us to emerge from a mythicized past which continues to make myths of itself, as well as from an idealized future, vaguely projected, seemingly close at hand but always relegated to the future; it also helps us attempt to grasp all the coordinates of time, find the space and adopt the behavior which will unify the whole in a life, henceforth outside the life of capital.

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