FOCUS: MAY '68 AND ITS PHILOSOPHERS: PARIS, BEIJING, LJUBLJANA

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Introduction: 1968 Thought and its Usual Suspects

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Conceived 51 years after the global workers' and student revolt of May 1968, this Focus will break down the theoretical and literary legacy of May into three intervals of 17 years. In 1985, 17 years after 1968, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut published a book, *La pensée 68*, in which they canonized the view that the theoretical underpinning of May '68 was provided by French structuralist thinkers, notably Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Lacan (see Ferry and Renaut 1985; for the English translation, see Ferry and Renaut 1990). Seventeen years later, in 2002, Kristin Ross's book *May '68 and its Afterlives* effectively replaced this canonical image with the notion that French structuralists were all either completely absent or showed at least great reserve during the events of May and that, moreover, the closest theoretical allies of the protesters and strikers were in fact the main philosophical targets of structuralist anti-humanists, namely Jean-Paul Sartre and Herbert Marcuse with their schools of humanist Marxism (see Ross 2002). Seventeen years after Ross's seminal book, it may be time to negate both the thesis from 1985 and Ross's antithesis from 2002, and ask the following simple question: why, despite the massive presence of Sartre and Marcuse, and the equally massive absence of Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu and Lacan, but also Gilles Deleuze and Louis Althusser, has the memory politics of May '68 during the past half-century included the canonization of structuralism and post-structuralism at the expense of none other than humanism, be it Marxist or non-Marxist?

Why, whether we look in 1985, 2002 or 2019, do we find May '68 closely associated with thinkers who were occupied with the critique of humanism even as they followed Karl Marx, such as Althusser, or Martin Heidegger, such as Derrida? A Marx without Sartre or Marcuse, a Heidegger without Marcuse or Sartre – these seem to be the philosophers of May '68. Or, in positive terms, Marx *avec* Mao, Heidegger *avec* Žižek.

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This positive dimension, where Althusser reads Marx with Mao Zedong, and where Derrida reads Heidegger with an apparatus that very soon became the first toolkit even of Slavoj Žižek, is also the dimension where the philosophy of May '68 becomes as global an affair as the revolt itself. With Mao publishing his 'Little Red Book' only four years before 1968 (see Zedong 1964; for the English translation, see Tse-tung 1966), and with Žižek putting out his Derridean defence of Heidegger merely four years after 1968 (see Žižek 1972), the philosophy of May '68 becomes an affair that is grounded as much in Beijing or Ljubljana as it is in Paris. As such, it becomes something different altogether, a philosophy that is about philosophy but also about politics and literature. This explosion of 'la pensée 68' eastwards of France – and southwards, as it were, of philosophy – is the concern of this Focus.

Opening the Focus, articles by Simon During and Rok Benčin find different ways to navigate between the heated immediacy of a participant's point of view and the pacifying mediation of a sociological perspective. Both articles present this alternative in terms of the event and its consequences. And both valorize Maurice Blanchot's early, almost real-time, interpretation of May '68 to reject the above alternative as a false choice offered by the dominant reception of the event. Beyond this reception, they find a moment in modern history when politics was reducible neither to activism nor to social planning. For During, this is a politics of general secularization (where the modern fate of religion becomes the contemporary fate of culture, ethics and politics itself); for Benčin, it is a politics of immediacy (where affirmation needs no mediation by parties, unions or sociological categories).

This emphasis on politics enables both Benčin and During to offer globally relevant observations of mostly French events and interpretations. Suman Gupta's contribution can be read as supporting such global insights by expanding the French framework in the direction of China, India and Yugoslavia. Building on Blanchot's writings, like Benčin and During, Gupta looks at the university as an institution that belongs to the mainstream image of May '68 as a Parisian affair, but was in fact much more radically revolutionized in China, India and other societies where Maoism entailed abandonment, rather than occupation, of the university.

Yugoslavia is a peculiar chapter of this history, a non-aligned country that belonged neither to NATO nor to the Soviet bloc and a self-managed economy that resembled neither Keynesian capitalism nor real socialism. The Focus closes with a pair of articles on the philosophy that emerged in this peculiar geopolitical and economic situation. Marko Juvan's contextual approach is supplemented with a textual interest in the work of the early Žižek, which is then the focus of the article by Kaitlyn Tucker Sorenson. Half a century before his recent globally publicized debate with Jordan Peterson, Žižek started as a member of a neo-avant-garde circle in Ljubljana, the capital of the northernmost federal republic of socialist Yugoslavia. Looking at his early Slovenian-language texts, both Juvan and Tucker Sorenson offer us a glimpse into the philosophical formation of the figure who has done as much as anyone in France itself to embed 'la pensée 68' into the global cultural landscape.

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