

Segment Introduction

Roberto Nigro, Erich Hörl

In his well-known commentary on the Kantian Text *What is Enlightenment*, Michel Foucault writes: “The question which seems to me to appear for the first time in the texts by Kant [...] is the question of the present, of present reality. It is the question: What is happening today? What is happening now? What is this “now” in which we all live and which is the site, the point [from which] I am writing?” (Foucault 2010: 11).

In his commentary on Foucault, Pierre Macherey (1989) has brilliantly shown that in this text by Kant we see the appearance of the question of the present as a philosophical event to which the philosopher who speaks of it belongs. The question also is: what is the present to which I belong? What does it mean to be a subject? To be subject means to belong both as an element and as an actor to a global process that defines the field of possible experiences. The subject does not exist in isolation but co-exists with other subjects and is part of a global process. According to Foucault, Kant’s text speaks about the membership of the subject to a certain ‘we’.

Foucault also asserts that this question about the present emerging for the first time in the Kantian text will find another example later. However, although he does not specifically name another author, one can legitimately believe there was more than one. For instance, we can imagine that Marx gave a very specific answer to this question when he showed that any form of critique of the present must also be a critique of capitalism. This is the kind of temporality to which we belong: Capitalistic relationships define the field of our possible experience. It is as if Marx suggests that it is impossible to define the ontology of the present without centering the analysis on the critique and genealogy of capitalism.

But let us now imagine that we had to answer these questions today. What could we say in this regard? What is this “now” in which we all live, and which is the site from which we are writing?

We would like to suggest a possible answer to this question. It seems that the most appropriate answer in this case would be to situate our present from within the singular plural event known as 1968: a name and an event that entails, of course, a plurality of meanings.

1968 was a global event under whose name we can gather together different temporalities and events: "anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles, antiracist movements, feminist movements, worker revolts, various forms of refusal of capitalist discipline and control, and numerous others", if we wanted here to follow the account given by Hardt and Negri in their book *Assembly* (2017: 64).

1968 was a historical conjuncture, an encounter, a disjunctive synthesis also characterized by epistemological breaks, by the emergence of new questions and problematizations ranging from the debate on human sciences to the emergence of structuralism, from the crisis of ancient forms of Marxism to the rise of heterodox currents of Marxism, from the appearance of the *nouveau roman* to the beginning of the *nouvelle vague*, to name but a few intellectual, important changes.

Maurice Blanchot gave an interesting account of 1968, when he defined it as a happy meeting, "like a feast that breached the admitted and expected social norms" (1988: 29). For him, 1968 was explosive and spontaneous communication, an event that could affirm itself *without project*. It was *la prise de parole* in the words of Michel De Certeau, the capture but also the dissemination of different undisciplined speeches. 1968, if we wanted to refer here to an interesting formulation by Michel Foucault, was in its broader sense "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (2003: 7). What is quite important to note in connection with the analysis of Foucault is that the appearance of these disqualified or inferior knowledges, i.e., knowledges stemming from below, maps the emergence of multiple points of resistance and of critique: a microphysics of points of resistance disseminated throughout society.

Bearing in mind all of these aspects, let's now note a paradox: when people, probably for the first time with such intensity, started to speak by using their local, marginal, 'from below' knowledge ("and this is by no means the same thing as common knowledge or common sense but, on the contrary, a particular knowledge, a knowledge that is local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity and which derives its power solely from the fact that it is different from all the knowledges that surround it," (ibid.: 7-8)), a specular movement also started and began to denounce the loss of impetus of critique, its disenchantment, paralysis, and unraveled power. It is worth mentioning that we are still part of this movement or feeling that we can probably define as a form of critique of critique.

One could say that the two tendencies (people starting to speak, on one hand, and the denunciation of the loss of impetus of critique, on the other) do not intersect at the same level since the latter has to be interpreted as the attempt to warn against the coming dangers stemming from the beginning of the counter revolution. Counter-revolution has to be interpreted as the (long) process intended to iron out 1968. *May 68 did not happen*, or as Gilles Deleuze elsewhere also wrote: "It was a competition to see who could piss on May 68 the most" (Deleuze 2007: 144). With their article published in 1984 under the title *May 68 did not happen*, Deleuze

and Félix Guattari noted the incapacity of French society to assimilate Mai 68. A double incapacity involved in the term 'assimilate', as Étienne Balibar points out, since it implies both a lack of comprehension and the inability to swallow it (2020: 89).

However, not all discourses denouncing the loss of intensity of critique warned against the dangers stemming from the counter revolution. On another level the denunciation of the loss of impetus of critique also met and still meets the detractors of 1968. This has to do with the fact that some analyses recognize the seeds for the triumph of neoliberal rationality in the spirit of 1968. It is a widespread thesis that takes different forms in the analyses of different authors. For Slavoj Žižek, for instance, the spirit of 1968 is essentially individualist and bourgeois: hence it prepared the triumph of neoliberalism. From a different perspective, authors like Luc Boltanki and Ève Chiapello see that a large part of the critique of 1968 at work in the student's movement, in particular, has been largely recuperated and used to modernize the system of production. Even though these positions do not complement one another, they share the idea that the emergence of a neoliberal governmentalism is not only the result of a counter revolution but also the deployment of seeds ingrained in 1968. Against these assumptions, one should assert the necessity to pay attention to the meaning of the idea of individualism, since it is a concept that seems to be at the root of both 1968 and its deployment in neoliberal practices. As Balibar remarks, the idea of individual freedom takes two different meanings and even opposite trajectories depending on whether it is considered from capitalist, market-oriented logic or from a working-class autonomy perspective (*ibid.*: 113, footnote).

As you remember, our initial point in these pages or, if you like, our thesis here, was based on the following apparent paradox: the more forms of critique spread, the more the feeling that critique is losing its intensity grows. The more different forms of critique and resistance emerge and are disseminated in different points of society, the more a feeling of melancholia pervades us.

It would be no consolation to remark that if we deserted for a moment our focus on short cycles of history to devote our attention to long periods of time, the situation would not improve.

Certainly, it makes sense to say that in order to grasp the ontology of the present, in order to understand how we have been trapped in our own history, one should equip him- or herself with bifocals, as Pierre Rosanvallon suggests: On one side, the focal length of a short history like that which began in the 1960s and, on the other side, that of a long history dealing with the modern project of emancipation (Rosanvallon 2018: 12-13).

However, despite enlarging the focal length, the sentiment of melancholia remains. It is likely that we are so accustomed to this feeling of powerlessness from before the Leviathan that we will never be rid of it. One should incidentally re-

mark that Walter Benjamin coined the concept “left-wing melancholy” in 1931, not to indulge a negativistic quiet, but to investigate possible transformative politics.

Next, the melancholic mood took other forms in some of his fellow travelers. With Adorno and Horkheimer, for instance, we instead face a pessimistic perspective. The Frankfurt School philosophers developed in-depth studies about new forms of authoritarianism, domination, and submission of the entirety of society to the market-oriented logic of capitalism. In particular, their focus is on the subsumption of culture and social relations. They also destroy the myth and illusion that art, or culture in the broader sense, could still constitute the last bulwark against the expansion of capitalist valorization. In their account, the emergence of the cultural industry cannot but shatter this last hope since the cultural industry only subdues and closes the creativity of the artist. Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer give an interpretation of capitalist domination where its power is omnipresent and totalitarian.

If we cross the line, that is to say go beyond left-wing melancholia, we can recognize the same diagnosis in the account of other influential thinkers. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Heidegger also maintains that the theories of progress have reached their point of exhaustion. Heidegger even enlarges the focal length by encompassing a metaphysical perspective. In that way the genealogy of capitalism and technological devastation can be retraced back to the Greek/western metaphysical rationality which began with the platonic moment. We could still include other authors in our broad account. During the 19th century different authors from very different perspectives have studied the processes of industrialization, rationalization, automation, and massification of society. From the representatives of the Hegelian left through Nietzsche, Freud, Weber, Heidegger, Bloch, Sartre, and the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, to name a few, there was a keen interest in the study of the new challenges stemming from the industrialization and massification of society. These authors did not work on the same object, indeed their research had very little in common. Yet they all contributed to an understanding of the development of productive forces and the relations of production on an abstract and impersonal level. In this regard, a common point between these disparate research topics can be formulated as that they all contributed to liberating the philosophical way of thinking from metaphysical residues. By doing so, they allowed social and economic transformations to be considered in historical terms (De Feo, 1992: 347-348). This was certainly an important contribution.

However, they also completely overturned the understanding of the processes they were analyzing. Their theoretical patterns became the starting point for an ideology of totalitarian and technological domination of capital. This was also the starting point for catastrophic and pessimistic interpretations concerning the fall of critique and the disappearance of any form of resistance.

Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that the web of misunderstandings and illusions in which contemporary thought is caught stems from its failure to register that critique only speaks the language of subjectivity and that subjectivity cannot be reduced to an *effect* of capital and technological domination. In forgetting that subjectivity is both *constitution* and *subversion*, dominant forms of contemporary thought have become entangled in the illusion that the disappearance of the subject could only lead to the fall of critique. Classical philosophy, henceforth deprived of a subject and unable to analyze new emerging forms of subjectivity, ended up hypostatizing critique in a movement that constantly address itself could not but engender the twin figures of nihilism and powerlessness.

Against this nihilistic trajectory, one should recall that critique is an *alethurgic practice* (a manifestation of truth in the broader sense given by Foucault to these terms) revealing itself through subjectivity. If one wants to recognize the new forms of critique, one has to simultaneously study the metamorphosis of subjectivity. The fragmentation and dissemination of critique today reflects the fragmentation of subjectivity. One can consider this fragmentation as the result of new modes of capitalistic production. But simply viewing life and subjectivity as invested, subjugated, managed, and controlled by capitalistic processes remains insufficient as life and subjectivity are constantly solicited, produced, and formed. In the interstices of these processes, life resists and resistances multiply. In this regard, we have also to witness that the term subjectivity as we are using it no longer refers to just a human or anthropological dimension, requiring instead the articulation of a new conception of *human*. Subjectivity is the name for the social machines. This term does no longer implies an opposition between human being and machine and does not lead to ideas of dehumanization and alienation. Gilbert Simondon recognizes that humans and machines belong to the same ontological level. What resides in machines is a human reality, a human gesture fixed and crystallized in machines. His reflections can be put in continuity with the words of Deleuze and Guattari, who in the *Anti-Oedipus* affirm that the question does not consist in comparing humans and machines but in putting them in relation. to show how humans are a component of machines In 1992, Guattari also wrote:

"It's a question of being aware of the existence of machines of subjectivation which don't simply work within the 'faculties of the soul,' interpersonal relations or intra-familial complexes. Subjectivity does not only produce itself through the psycho-genetic stages of psychoanalysis or the 'mathemes' of the Unconscious, but also in the large-scale social machines of language and the mass media- which cannot be described as human." (Guattari 1995: 9).

It is probably by pursuing this analytical trajectory that we will be able to overcome the feeling of powerlessness and nihilism and be able to grasp the powers of a non-teleological critique, even in the misery of our present time.

The following essays focus on three modalities of critique: Didier Debaise contrasts different ways of side-taking within metaphysical thinking in his contribution “Critique of Naturalist Thought: From Naturalism to Perspectivism in Contemporary Thought”. He formulates a critique of the modern concept of nature that follows a bifurcation between ‘real’ and ‘apparent’ nature and subjugates the multiplicity of beings in a unified order. Following Alfred North Whitehead (and referring to Eduardo Viveros de Castro et al.) Debaise outlines a metaphysical perspectivism and thus an alternative way of inhabiting the earth and including different modes of existence. In this theory of critique every being is conceived as a subjectivity with a specific perspective, where everything that exists is viewed in the same univocal logic and all subjectivities are conceived on the basis of their possessive relations to the world.

In his critical audiovisual analysis in his contribution “Flows of People. Comments through Migration Discourse in the Video *Bibby Challenge*” Mathias Denecke discusses the close relationship between ‘water’ and ‘migration’ via concepts such as ‘refugee flows’ or ‘waves’. Denecke is particularly interested in the political dimensions of these concepts, which migrants discursively seem to produce as ‘not yet controlled’. By considering the filmic footage as well as means of sound production the chapter shows how the video *Bibby Challenge* contributes to recent migration discourse by posing the question, “what remains unheard when we speak of the refugee flow as a matter of course?” (273) Denecke refers to the history of the concept ‘liquid crowd’ in order to open up the metaphorical relations between people and aspects of water. The chapter shows that it is precisely the metaphorical connection to ‘flow’ and ‘liquidity’ that designs movements of people as controllable and steerable.

In his chapter “Being Lonesome Amongst the Many. Of Bloom and Multitude” Michel Schreiber concentrates the term multitude in conjunction with current modes of production and existence. He interweaves and transverses publications by Paolo Virno with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who describe “subjectivity as [an] unstable and ever changing” (281) part of production. Reading their concepts through the lens of Tiqqun, Schreiber shows “how subjectivity is simultaneously produced and neglected through a preliminary sharing” (282). In doing so he evolves a new critical analysis of the term of multitude and asks whether we encounter Bloom, who is lonesome among others and self-estranged, within the multitude? With Tiqqun he wants to step back from the “analysis of becoming, relationality, and processes and go somewhere else.” (285) Bloom is outlined by Schreiber as a circular (argumentation-) figure of a schizophrenic existence, marked by a principle incompleteness, a radical insufficiency. Describing this as the base of human existence Schreiber concludes, “subjectification of the many as a singularity in multitude cannot exist without the desubjectification of the singular beings in their mode of existence as Bloom.” (289)

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