

# The Hidden Legacy of 1968

*O Legado Oculto de 1968*

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## 1. Common Imaginations of the 68ers in Historiography

Conventional historical and political wisdom in Western Europe has it that the revolutionary aspirations of the 68ers failed – and that, paradoxically, this very failure constitutes their great success. The movements of ‘68 (to be more precise: their radical wings, whose picture dominates the historical memory in public images und cultural representations) more or less aimed at some kind of anti-authoritarian, anarchist, later on also socialist/communist overthrow of the ruling order. The experience of Paris May 1968, for instance, seems to be mirrored in the catch-phrase “All Power to Imagination” (“L’imagination au pouvoir”). And in West Germany the legacy of ‘68 wandered into the tiny Marxist-Leninist, Maoist, Trotskyist so-called “avant-garde parties” of the 1970s, where self-appointed “professional revolutionaries” read the works of the classics of the radical labour movement and imagined themselves to be part of a class struggle very similar to the class struggles in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even a military guerrilla troop, the Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction), was founded in Germany which committed terrorist attacks against representatives of the old order

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(in Italy see the *Brigate Rosse*). But then, gradually, most protagonists of '68 abandoned neo-“orthodox” left-wing politics and, with the formation of the so-called “new social movements”, turned themselves first into ecologist, third-worldist, pacifist or feminist critics of Western modernity and then, in the process of transformation that lasted for about three decades, they became more and more liberal-leftist apologists of the liberal domestic and world order, conceived as an order of human rights, democracy and liberal market economies. That was the case at least in West Germany, where those transformations could be observed, for instance, in the evolution of the Green Party that was founded around 1980. In France there were shortcuts: The “new philosophers”, such as André Glucksmann, Alain Finkielkraut or Bernard-Henri Lévy, changed as early as the mid-1970s from Maoist radicals into determined enemies of so-called ‘totalitarian’ state socialism. They embraced Western concepts of liberal democracy, and further on acted as aggressive promoters of ‘humanitarian’ military interventions, legitimizing the use of force in order to ‘protect’ human rights.

In parallel to those metamorphoses the narrative about the achievements and shortcomings of 1968 transformed itself as well. Some sort of Hegelian *Weltgeist* and its “cunning of reason” made it that the communist ideas of 1968, against their original impetus, became the seedbed of profound sociocultural change: the radical liberal modernization, democratization, individualization of the Western world. This is the narrative to be found in the autobiographical reflections of former protagonists like Dany le Rouge (Daniel Cohn-Bendit) as well as in the prevailing historiographical discourses.

To quote one of the important historical textbooks produced by German Academia, which speaks of the “unintended salutary effects [of 1968] for the stability of the Federal Republic [of Germany]”, such as “Westernization” and the Germans’ “satisfaction with democracy” as well as their “active participation”: “From this time much reform dynamics flowed into institutions, associations and parties of the entire spectrum, also the conservative one.”<sup>1</sup> Apparently, there was a big step taken towards “successful democracy” – at least, but not only, for the Germans who always had been the rather odd stepbrothers of the “really Western” countries like Great Britain, France and, of course, the United States of America.

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1 Edgar Wolfrum, *Die geglü ckte Demokratie. Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, München 2007, p. 270f. (my translation)

## 2. Counter-Narratives: Competing Imaginations of the 68ers beyond the Establishment, Right and Left

There have always been counter-narratives to this version of recent history. The first one emerged, already in the 1960s and 70s, in conservative circles that objected any change to the proven order of things – resisting anti-capitalist revolution, of course, but also sexual liberation, wide-spread democratic participation and social emancipation of the lower classes, social, economic, and sexual liberation of women, and the like. They complained about the loss of authority – of the state, of traditional political forces, of institutions and churches, of educators and professors, of the expert classes and so forth. The conservative's camp toughest argument against the 68ers was the comparison with anti-democratic totalitarian movements, in West Germany especially with the Nazis. In 2008, at the 40th anniversary of '68', there was a fierce dispute concerning such comparisons, triggered by the book of a former German 68er, Götz Aly. Aly looked back and harshly condemned his own and his comrades' revolutionary commitment, depicting it as a repetition of the anti-Western, anti-liberal "youth movement" (as he labelled it) led by Hitler at the beginning of the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> In his somewhat blunt analysis, Aly was completely missing out on the simple fact that 68 had not been a German event, but a global one. But be that as it may: Those somewhat misguided narratives, stemming from traditional conservatives or from 68er renegades (such as Aly himself), are not prevailing nowadays, and therefore I do not intend to focus on them any longer.

More interesting to me are some critics of '68 who came – at least partially – from within: left-wingers who felt some kind of unease while watching street fighting and the oblivion of the established traditions of left politics, and late-comers who realized the flipside of socio-cultural liberalization and so-called 'emancipation'.

### a) Pier Paolo Pasolini

The first example, the first exemplary protagonist is the Italian writer and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, an unorthodox communist, who mourned the "anthropological revolution" that had been going on in Italy since the

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2 Götz Aly, *Unser Kampf: 1968 – ein irritierter Blick zurück*, Frankfurt am Main 2008.

end of the 1950s. In his *scritti corsari* (corsair writings) in the early 1970s he deplored the vanishing of Italy's traditional culture – or precisely: its traditional regional cultures – which he conceived to be fundamentally rural, catholic, but also rich in its diversity, and class-structured – besides the peasants there were other subalterns like workers and subproletarians with their respective moral universe, relatively autonomous and independent of what Pasolini thought to be the 'bourgeois' culture.

In the process of industrialization and modernization which he saw taking place in an accelerated manner this old world with its distinct values was apparently in a process of vanishing; in one of his most iconic articles Pasolini compared that process to the fate of natural life under modern capitalism; the article's heading read: "the vanishing of the fireflies" (*La scomparsa delle lucciole*). And the traditional Italian world gave way to a homogenous, standardized and conformist mode of living and thinking which served the interests of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. To Pasolini, this new world was a society of consumerism devoid of real life and real experience. Its main agencies were television and advertisement and the development of a traffic infrastructure which erased all spatial distances between towns and countryside and between historical regions. And the Italian rebels of 1968, although they had emancipatory and democratic aims, did nothing against the destruction of this culturally and ecologically rich old world. In Pasolini's view, the 68ers were the sons of the bourgeoisie who did not care about the poor, about the workers and peasants, but despised them. In his poem *Il PCI ai giovani!!* (The Communist party to the youth) he attacked the students, who on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968 in Valle Giulia near Rome fought a violent battle against the police, and declared that he stood firmly on the side of the policemen "because the policemen are sons of poor people / They come from peripheral zones, rural or urban". To Pasolini the Italian policemen seemed to be part of the "Wretched of the Earth", about whom Frantz Fanon had written, while the leftist students represented the bourgeoisie which destroyed traditional life and culture in favour of a uniformed modern civilization.

In this view, what Marx already had prophesized in the Communist manifesto of 1848 became real only now, in the 1960s – and in a totalitarian way: the destruction of all traditional social relations that once gave meaning to life and dignity to individual human beings.

## b) Michel Houellebecq

The second exemplary protagonist, exemplary as a critic of 1968 who came from “within”, shall be the French writer Michel Houellebecq, one generation younger than Pasolini. Houellebecq is an eminent critic of the 68ers. In his novels as well as in his essays and interviews he does not hold back his contempt for them because he thinks of them as the ones that radicalized the individualist and “competitivist” tendencies of modern capitalistic societies. In his novel “Les particules élémentaires”, published in 1999, he depicts the hippie and New Age movements of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, longing for so-called sexual liberties and self-fulfilment and the destruction of families that comes with it. And he points out that in his view there was nothing new and original about the hippies and leftists of that time. In fact, they just followed the course of modern history with its dynamics towards dissolution of all traditional values and ways of communitarian life. The sexual liberation in France had been under way already some years before 1968, and the protest movements of ‘68 only accelerated this process. Following the 68ers’ assault on already weakened traditions and bonds nothing was left of the old ideas about the meaning of personal and collective life. In *Les particules élémentaires* Houellebecq tells the story of two brothers abandoned by their hippie mother, making their way through the world of the 1980s wandering around the esoteric “new age” experiments of instant far-eastish religions, meditation, “free sexuality” and so on, at the same time all assembled in a new commodified industry of personal self-fulfilment.

In Houellebecq’s view the 68ers – at least in their revolutionary afterlives in the 1970s and 80s – were not a radical opposition against capitalism but merely its agents, capitalizing and commodifying more and more sectors of social life. Their culture – rock and pop music, sexual libertinage, drugs – opened new sectors for commodification and commerce. The basic liberal capitalist principles of naked self-interest and universal competition were transferred from the economic sphere into the sphere of the personal, in particular sexual relations. In *Les particules élémentaires* as well as in his first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* Houellebecq shows how a second marketplace, a market besides the economic one, has been established: the sexual market where attractiveness – not money – is the means of payment. On this combat field, in this fight of everyone against everyone, of course there are winners and losers as in the economic sphere. Permanent

competition, the incessant need to perform better, to appear smarter and to come up as more interesting, extravagant and seductive requires permanent self-perfection – and leads, inevitably, into despair. The “liberation” of ‘68 was addressed against the traditional social order and rigid hierarchies. It became, as a widespread slogan, the guideline of new modes in personal life and generated, in Houellebecq’s view as well as in Pasolini’s, a society of radical individualistic hedonism. “Liberation” came at a price, and the cost of it were not only misery and resentment, the despair of the losers on the liberal sexual markets, but more generally a life as unbound, solitary and selfish monad eventually for everybody, a life devoid of any values other than the economic, consumerist ones, devoid of any deeper, for instance religious meaning. The heroes of Houellebecq’s novels are on a search for the good life, for a life that includes love and some kind of metaphysical consolation – but they cannot reach their goal. “The West”, Houellebecq tells us in an interview on his novel *Platform* (2001) – and by “the West” he means the modern, post-68 liberal world expanding into every angle of the globe – “the West is unsuited for humane life. There is only one thing you can do in the West, that is: earning money.”<sup>3</sup>

### c) The Californian Ideology

But is there really a causal connection between the thoughts and actions of the 68ers and the late-modern, postmodern, radical liberal capitalist societies of at least today’s Europe and North America? What kind of evidence is there for the claims of Pasolini, Houellebecq and the like? A comprehensive investigation of that issue would be too broad a subject for this short essay. A quick look into one remarkable interface between hippie culture and new capitalism must do: “Californian Ideology”, as it was first depicted by English media theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in 1995, brings together both these cultures.<sup>4</sup> Barbrook and Cameron reported an observation they made in watching cultural, economic and political developments on the American west coast, most notably in San Francisco and its surroundings. In their view some of the 1960s bohemians and counter-cultural

3 Michel Houellebecq, Interview with Christian Authier, in: Michel Houellebecq, „Ich habe einen Traum“. Neue Interventionen, Köln 2010, p. 29-43, 36 (my translation).

4 Richard Barbrook/Andy Cameron, *The Californian Ideology* [1995] <http://www.imaginaryfutures.net/2007/04/17/the-californian-ideology-2/> (May 04, 2023).

hippies, student protesters and civil rights activists with their “libertarian principles” and their ideals of “democracy, tolerance, self-fulfillment and social justice” first turned towards technological progress as the main means for achieving their social aims. An “electronic agora” would emerge, those “community media activists” thought, following the theories of Marshall McLuhan, where “the power of big business and big government would be imminently overthrown by the intrinsically empowering effects of new technology on individuals.”

Although on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1969 the hippie protest in San Francisco’s People’s Park was violently crushed by Californian armed police, in subsequent years a fusion of the New Left and the New – neoliberal and neo-conservative – Right of Californian governor Ronald Reagan emerged in the spirit of American libertarianism. Hippie anarchism and left-wing political liberalism joined radical economic anti-state liberalism, the democratic “electronic agora” merged with the capitalist “electronic marketplace” and formed, as Barbrook and Cameron name it, a “bizarre hybrid”. The digital artisans accepted “that individual freedom can only be achieved within the constraints of technological progress and the free market”. The result, more than twenty years after the first depiction of Californian Ideology, is the realm of the Silicon Valley cyberlords<sup>5</sup> of Apple, Google, Facebook and the like, managing new internet-based capitalism in the name of universal values like freedom, equality (of the users) and democracy. In his novel *The Circle* (2013) Dave Eggers provides a fascinating literary depiction of this brave new world. Empirical knowledge in the view of critics of these technological developments seems to suggest that this new matrix is far off the original ideas of Californian bohemians on social emancipation and ‘ecotopia’ and with its sophisticated tools of behavioural control it resembles more a new private (USA and the West) – public (China) totalitarianism. Certainly, it is not a rejection of capitalism, but merely the late modern or postmodern gestalt of the “iron cage” of modernity whose emergence Max Weber announced already a hundred years ago. The “automatic subject” of capital, as Marx called it, rules modern mankind who in fact is not the conscious subject of its own history and social reproduction – only now, 150 years after Marx’s diagnosis, the automatic subject is symbolized by and incarnated in the digital mega-machine.<sup>6</sup>

5 Cf. Ian F. Svenonius, *Censorship Now!!*, 2015, p. 95-107.

6 Tomasz Konicz, *Inteligência artificial e capital*. [http://www.obeco-online.org/tomasz\\_konicz9.htm](http://www.obeco-online.org/tomasz_konicz9.htm) (June 25, 2020).

### 3. May 1968 in France: Revolutionary Practice

The narratives mentioned above, be it the affirmative ones of the former protagonists of 1968, meanwhile gone liberal, and the historical textbooks which adopted their view, or the critical ones, for example Pasolini's or Houellebecq's, are generalizations and simplifications that do not take into account how different the movements were, on a global scale as well as in their respective national and regional contexts. As a historian one would have to do meticulous research on individual political programmes, forms of action, on the whole range of ideas that were uttered, on different motivations of the various groups of protesters, their social and mental situations, the trajectories of the activists after the great event and so forth. A host of historians did work of such kind but here is not enough space to expand on the piles of historical research that was done up to now.

In order to tentatively answer the question, though, what could be some sort of hidden but lasting legacy of 1968, a book published by the French historian Ludivine Bantigny should be taken into consideration. Its title reads: "1968: De grands soirs en petits matins"<sup>7</sup>. Bantigny did extensive research not only in Paris but in a lot of archives around France. In her study, she shows the variety of actors in nearly all sectors and layers of French society, from university and high school students to factory workers, from artisans, peasants, neighbourhood committees, to intellectuals, visual and performing artists. These actors had most diverse reasons for their respective protests, therefore there was a lively debate about every aspect of social life. In a way May '68 in France (as well as '68 in general) could be characterized as a broad societal conversation, a celebration of debate and discourse embracing society as a whole. Documents show that there was much talk about all sorts of issues, be it in the sphere of labour and of culture, of the way of living (and living together), of politics of course, and the slogan "L'immagination au pouvoir" points to an explosion of imagination, creativity and the desire to change everything. Another important slogan was: "Let us change life" (*changer la vie*). Speaking of slogans on posters and of graffiti on the walls: There were plenty of them, in the French May of '68. And many of them endured the passing of time: "Have ideas!" was one of them, or "Sous les pavés: la plage" ("Beneath the pavement: the beach"), or "Ne travaillez

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7 Ludivine Bantigny, 1968: De grands soirs en petits matins, Paris 2018.

jamais!” (“Never work!”) and later on “faire mai” (“doing May”), which symbolized the longing for a total rupture with the structures and modes of the “administered world”, as German critical theorist Theodor Adorno had put it. An eruption of feelings and emotions took place: the feeling of discontent with the constraints of modern industrial “productivist” and consumerist life. In a romantic manner, the “68ers” revolted against modern capitalistic partitions of labour and of personal time, against the rule of labour over the lives of humans and against the separation or “alienation” – to put it in the Marxist language of the time – of human beings from one another and from their own inner selves. This longing for an entirely different way of being in the world might have been – for a short historic moment – the most significant and most fundamental idea (or, rather, the most significant and fundamental emotion) of the movements of 1968, even if not of each and every one of its participants, but – to speak in terms of German philosophy –, as the very essence of these movements, as the *zeitgeist*. And sure, that longing was a collective feeling, a collective idea and emotion, as Ludivine Bantigny shows, describing the iconic contemporary photographs that have become part and parcel of the trajectories of ‘68, displaying the smile and laughter, the pure joy and cheer of the protesters discovering themselves as actors of history taking their lives into their own hands and trying to overthrow the world. 1968 was not the birth of a new and radical form of individualism and egotism, Bantigny concludes – turning herself against the 68ers-bashing by Houellebecq and others –, but an experience of the collective, of community, of communion. Asked if ‘68 triggered an individualisation of lifestyles Bantigny replied: “I cannot imagine a higher amount of collective action, of solidarity than that what goes on in May 68 in France.”<sup>8</sup> At the risk of appearing apolitical and romantic it might be claimed that this could be a trace leading us to the hidden legacy of ‘68 – a ‘sign of history’ (*Geschichtszeichen*) in the Kantian sense, a sign that points into the future of 68, straight to our present.

The problem, though, is that this May 1968 was only a moment in time, an ecstatic experience of departure from daily grind. The abolition of alienation and of the many partitions and separations of modern life seems to us, “reasonable” modern adherents of the reality principle (as Freud named it in opposition to the pleasure principle), nothing but a daydream.

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8 Interview in the German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung (taz)*, May 10, 2018 (my translation).

The ideas of the 68ers, now speaking in the “cool” terms of structural functionalist sociology or of Luhmann’s systems theory, aimed at dedifferentiation (“Entdifferenzierung”) – something that seems impossible in complex modern societies with all their independent and interdependent spheres and institutions of social action.

Therefore, instead of dwelling on how realistic or unrealistic the dreams of ‘68 of “changing life” were, maybe the spirit of ‘68 and the 68ers might also be approached by examining their critique(s) of modern capitalist society and its multiple burdens on humans.

## 4. Radical Theory

### a) The Situationists

In France and Italy and even more in West Germany ‘68 constituted a rediscovery of Marxism. In Germany many of the radical activists of ‘68 found themselves to be members of tiny so-called Communist Parties in the early 1970s where they read and discussed extensively the classics of Marxism-Leninism, to find a way to proletarian revolution. By doing so, they more and more re-enacted the debates of the class struggle of the 1920s, only now without any involvement of the real proletariat. In France, however, there emerged something new in the field of theory: the Situationist International.

The artists and intellectuals assembled in this tiny avant-gardist group, founded in 1958 around Guy Debord, during the late fifties and the sixties published a journal and some brochures, complaining the total alienation of everyday life in advanced capitalist society – a society which they named the “society of the spectacle” (this was also the title of Guy Debord’s most famous book, published in 1967) – the “spectacle” being the totality of the universe of commodities and its reflection and reproduction in the products of cultural industry – advertising, television, the mass media, the art market.<sup>9</sup> Life in advanced capitalist, “affluent” society, as it was perceived in the 1960s, “is reduced to an imminent accumulation of spectacles, a triumph of appearance where ‘all that once was directly lived has become mere representation’”<sup>10</sup>, condemning humans to an existence in passivity,

9 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Paris 1967.

10 Wikipedia, Situationist International (May 04, 2023).

boring entertainment and the substitute satisfaction of pseudo-needs. All one can see in this world of spectacle is spectacle and commodity. At this point of, what Debord called, the second industrial revolution, alienated production is complemented by an “additional duty of the masses”: “alienated consumption”. This diagnosis is a result of observation of daily life in Western societies as well as an advancement of the originally Marxian theory of the commodity fetishism: the rule of the things and their mechanisms of exchange over the human beings and the society that produce them. Thus Debord and his few companions of the Situationist International developed, on grounds laid by Marx, an advanced political theory that was very innovative and surely, compared to everything else that was virulent in the politicized 1960s, the most radical show in town. During the time of its existence the Situationist International tried to get influence on public debates by “constructing” “situations” – that meant: breaking with the order of everyday conduct and the ordinary perception of the commodified world by means of, for example, psychogeographical *dérive* (drifting around towns in a free, non-directional manner)<sup>11</sup> or setting quite playful artistic events in public.<sup>12</sup>

In 1966 some situationist students at the University of Strasbourg published a pamphlet that became quite widespread during the times of the revolt: “On the poverty of student life”<sup>13</sup>, where they not only lamented that education had become the mere means of producing white-collar middle-range employees and managers (*les cadres*), while missing any deeper meaning of self-formation and insight into the richness of life, but tried a depiction of the political and social status quo of the modern world. This status quo was characterized by the dictate of economy and the state, not

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11 “In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there... But the *dérive* includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities.” (Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995, p. 50).

12 Wikipedia, see above. Another tool of this fight against the totally commodified world was the *détournement*, the turning of expressions of the capitalist system against itself, for example the slogans and logos against the advertisers.

13 *On the Poverty of Student Life: A Consideration of Its Economic, Political, Sexual, Psychological and Notably Intellectual Aspects and of a Few Ways to Cure it* (French original: *De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier*). The author was, according to Wikipedia, Situationist International: Mustapha Khayati.

only in the advanced capitalist society of the industrial West, but also in the “bureaucratic”, so-called socialist countries of Eastern Europe, China and Cuba. The generalized colonization and suppression of human life, in the Situationists’ view, was not met by any opposition in the established political forces: The left-wing parties in the West, social democrats or the strong communist movements in France or Italy, as well as the ruling communists in the East, formed themselves a part of the global dictatorship of economy and state. Therefore, the Situationists’ revolutionary programme consisted in the abolition of the general context of the rule of commodities and spectacles. Unlike the protesters of 1968 the Situationists would not march under the portraits of Ho Chi-Minh, Mao Zedong or Che Guevara. For them those “revolutionaries” represented the “concentrated spectacle” of bureaucratic state capitalism (or of advanced capitalism in times of crisis), being merely the flipside of Western “diffuse spectacle” of advanced, affluent capitalism with its abundance of commodities. Consequently, the pamphlet “On the Poverty of Student Life” made the radical case against labour. Contrary to the ideology of the established labour movements – the socialist parties and trades unions – the text claimed the goal of the abolition of labour in favour of a new kind of free activity. The real “proletarian revolution” should lead to a general reign of or administration by workers’ councils and to the self-abolition of the proletariat instead of a dictatorship of the working class which classical Marxism had always proclaimed. The rupture with the modern bourgeois world of spectacular capitalism had to be a total one.

The impact of the brochure on the “poverty of student life” and of the Situationists and their analyses is hard to measure. Without any doubt only a small minority of students and workers were attracted by those radical protagonists. On the other hand, there were about 100.000 copies circulating in France before May 1968 and some of the Situationists played a major role in the occupation committee of the Sorbonne University in the days of the “events”. And a lot of the emerging slogans and graffiti, later on iconic features of ‘68, were inspired by them. Thus, they seem to have been a true avant-garde, with all its shortcomings, but also its glory, as they themselves claimed a year later. In 1969 their journal published a résumé under the title: “The Beginning of an Epoch”, where the Situationists tried to show to what degree they played the role of a driving force in what they perceived to have been the most significant and most radical revolutionary event since the Paris Commune of 1871. The great achievement of the

movement of '68 was the mobilisation of the working class, visible in the huge strikes in May and June 1968, encompassing millions of workers and leading to a near shutdown of the French economy and almost to the overthrow of President Charles de Gaulle's government. For a short historical moment of joy, play and celebration there seemed to be a tiny possibility of proletarian revolution and new forms of self-determination by workers' councils.<sup>14</sup> "Whatever might have happened later, in our eyes, the movement alone was a great historical victory", the Situationists declared in September 1969.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the chances of May 68 might have been, the theory of the spectacle is a major intellectual achievement of the Situationists who were at the forefront of political and societal thinking.

### b) Rudi Dutschke and the SDS (Socialist German Students' Association)

In West Germany, the conditions, motifs and political goals differed from those in France, but – concerning the hidden legacy of the 68ers – one can also witness an analogy: a marginal radical current of the movement, the so-called "Subversive Action" in Munich and Berlin that was very much influenced by the situationists. Some later members of "Subversive Action" signed the "Manifesto of the Situationist International" in 1960, where the following claim was made: "The alienation and oppression in society cannot be put right – not even in detail – but can only be rejected in its entirety with this society itself. Any real progress is obviously linked to the revolutionary solution to the complex crisis of the present."<sup>16</sup> Some of the members became leading activists of the student revolt of the late sixties. The most iconic figure of the Socialist German Students Association – the most important organization of the students' movement –, Rudi Dutschke, at first belonged to the Subversive Action. Dutschke is very interesting because he not only was the best-known speaker and agitator of the students' movement and the head of its anti-authoritarian wing, but he also incarnated the most specific feature of the German movement, its commitment with 'theory' and the obsessive reading of the revolutionary classics – not only Marx (his early

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14 Situationistische Internationale, *Der Beginn einer Epoche. Texte der Situationistischen Internationale*, Hamburg 2008, p. 260 (my translation).

15 *Ibid.*, 276.

16 Helmut Reinicke, Rudi Dutschke. *Aufrecht gehen, 1968 und der libertäre Kommunismus*, Hamburg 2012 (my translation).

writings in the first place) and Engels, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, but also Marx's early socialist predecessors, and his successors in the 2<sup>nd</sup> International, then the anarchists Bakunin and Kropotkin, the classics of Western Marxism György Lukács and Karl Korsch, the theorists of the colonial world and of guerrilla warfare, Frantz Fanon and Mao Zedong, neo-Marxists and so on, in order to understand how modern capitalist society works and under which conditions and with which strategies it could be overthrown.<sup>17</sup> The radical German students also read, as is well-known, the works of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, like Horkheimer's and Adorno's "Dialectics of Enlightenment" and Herbert Marcuse's "One-dimensional Man". With the Frankfurt School they learnt that modern society is a totality, a universal delusional context of reification, that human life in advanced capitalism is dominated by culture industry and that even the Marxist ideas of alienation and reification might in the meantime have become non-applicable concepts: "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced."<sup>18</sup> Rudi Dutschke in particular, at the same time talking about the revolutionary fights of Che Guevara and Ho Chi-Minh, for a short moment seemed to have understood that a 'revolutionary solution' should not consist in the replacement of capitalism by a state-socialist administration and redistribution of wealth. Instead, he called into question the fetishistic character of commodities-producing society as a whole.

Dutschke wrote on the „existential disgust“ of the existing society “that talks about freedom and subtly and brutally suppresses the immediate interests and needs of individuals and peoples.” “New and radical needs develop in battle, such as the desire to finally liberate the totality of the productive forces from the fetters of capital and democracy, to finally by all means subject them to the conscious control of the producers.”<sup>19</sup>

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17 Rudi Dutschke, *Ausgewählte und kommentierte Bibliographie des revolutionären Sozialismus von K. Marx bis in die Gegenwart*, in: Reinicke, op. cit., p. 225-253.

18 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, Mass. 1964. <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/64onedim/odmcontents.html> (May 04, 2023).

19 Uwe Bergmann, Rudi Dutschke, Wolfgang Lefèvre, Bernd Rabehl, *Rebellion der Studenten oder Die Neue Opposition*, Reinbek 1968, p. 75 and 91.

As mentioned above, such statements only appeared in a short moment of history. Later on the radical German 68ers returned to class politics and a traditional ‘proletarian’ understanding of socialism and began agitating the working class – without any success, as is well known.

The final example for a theoretical development that might count as legacy of 1968 for our times will be the theory of value-criticism developed mainly by the non-academic German philosopher and historian Robert Kurz.

### c) Robert Kurz and the Critique of Value

Robert Kurz, born in 1943, belonged to the generation of ‘68. He studied at the provincial University of Erlangen, without taking a final exam, and in the 1970s he became a member of one of the many tiny communist parties that arose from the experience of ‘68.<sup>20</sup> In the eighties he and some of his political activist comrades made a turn to theory, by rereading the works of Marx and applying his concepts to late capitalist world. In 1986 they founded the journal “Marxist Critique” that was renamed “Krisis” in 1989, marking their renunciation of Marxism and their claim to think with Marx beyond Marx. Today the journal bears the title “Exit”. Kurz published plenty of articles, also in newspapers (one of them being the “Folha de Sao Paulo”), and more than a dozen books, among them one rather best-selling one, the “Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus” (“Black Book Capitalism”).

Kurz and his collaborators were influenced by the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and its notion of the totality of modern capitalist world, and also by the German school of the “New Reading of Marx” (with Helmut Reichelt and Hans-Georg Backhaus as main protagonists), which is rather unknown in other parts of the world. In the eighties they developed their own theoretical paradigm of the “critique of value”, which means: They did not interpret Marx as a philosopher of history and thus rejected Historical Materialism as a trans-historical concept in the tradition of idealistic philosophy. Instead they concentrated on what they perceived to be the core of Marx’s work: the critique of capitalist political economy and its basic categories treated in the first chapters of *Capital*: commodity, value, money, abstract labour, capital, and the fetishist character of

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20 Cf. Klaus Kempter, A importância da crítica do valor e da crítica da dissociação-valor para a ciência da história. Sobre a relevância persistente de Karl Marx [2016]. [http://www.obeco-online.org/klaus\\_kempter.htm](http://www.obeco-online.org/klaus_kempter.htm) (June 25, 2020).

those categories: the pursuit of economic processes under the rule not of conscious producers and consumers, but of the “objective appearance” of an autonomous self-motion of commodities and money, the “automatic subject” of capital. To Robert Kurz this basis of modern life, this general context of modern society is erroneous and wrong. There is no chance that the working class as such, being an integral part of this proceeding of the automatic subject of capital, could overthrow this erroneous world in the name of labour, one of its basic categories. So the problem is not the domination by capitalists but the rule of capital in the sense of an abstract system that is characterized by commodity-production in order to pile up money, making each and every human being into a part of this irrational domination by things and transforming everything and everyone into a commodity with a price tag.

In an article, published in 1986, “The Crisis of Exchange-Value”, Kurz not only laid the groundwork for his theory but also diagnosed that by taking Marx’s theory of labour value seriously, one could now perceive the final crisis of the modern world. He referred to the “Grundrisse”, where Marx claimed that “Capital itself is the proceeding contradiction in that it strives to reduce working time to a minimum, while at the same time it sets working time as the only measure and source of wealth.” With the microelectronic and digital industrial revolution this “historical limit” is reached: Capitalism now produces millions of superfluous people because the effects of the rise in productivity in the present and the future will be greater than the effects of the expansion of production. The proceeding of capital in our times, at the end of the capitalist history of modernization, Kurz holds, is highly destructive. It not only undermines its own source of value, human labour, but it also destroys the foundation of human life in devastating the natural resources of the planet and, in a scramble for the stakes of a shrinking mass of value, it brings about wars on every level of the globalized world, from street gang fights of the superfluous poor in deindustrialized cities to imperial wars on an international scale to secure the resources for the weakened capital machinery and maintain the security of the shrinking isles of wealth as long as it is possible.

Today there is no social theory that can compete – in terms of its potential to diagnose what is happening to all of us, on a worldwide scale – than Robert Kurz’s critical theory. Therefore, it also could be, by means of providing a powerful instrument to diagnose the ongoing crises of modernity,

a crisis that now is on its way to destroy humankind, a decisive means of transformation.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude this rather impressionist tour, a few aspects have to be summed up: First of all, the mainstream narrative on the modernizing effects of 1968 is correct, although it is also true that those effects were more or less in tune with the evolution of capitalist modernity more generally, and that the revolt did not much more than to accelerate processes that were already on their way. The criticism rendered by Pasolini and Houellebecq is just the flipside of the prevailing liberal success story. Whether one tends towards the positive or the negative valuation is a matter of temper, of political preferences or of the self-perception of being on the winners' or the losers' side of history. And surely it is a question of how deeply one feels identical with late-modern or postmodern subjectivity as it has evolved over the course of the last decades. There has to be some romantic or nostalgic sense of loss and a feeling of misplacement in the world as it is to agree with, say, Houellebecq.

But beneath this layer there is a legacy to be found, actively forgotten by being buried under a pile of extensive "narrative labor", primarily by several of the then leading figures.<sup>22</sup> Ludivine Bantigny's studies show that the idea that there was something radically new in the events of May '68 is not just nostalgic illusion. In her sources she discovered a sense of communality and a wish to make history by building a new world beyond the coercive systems of modernity. For a short moment in time 1968 gave a glimpse of the demand of many people to break with the old order and try something new. The theoretical approaches presented in this article, the critical theory of the Situationists, who gave some cues to the activists of '68, as well as Robert Kurz's critique of value which is, in a way, an offspring of the discussions of '68, are legacies of the radical thinking of that time which can help us to understand how modernity works to make all life wrong.

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21 By the way, while there may be only a few translations of Kurz's articles into English, there are but quite a number of them into Portuguese: <http://obeco.planetaclix.pt/> Cf. also *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, ed. by Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nicholas Brown, Chicago/Alberta 2014.

22 Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its afterlives*, London 2002, p. 3.

Right now, in our days of school shootings and terror attacks, of devastation of the natural world and military destruction of vast parts of the planet, a time of continual financial and economic crises, of worldwide migration on unprecedented scale, with millions of refugees without perspectives of finding a proper place in the world and with disgruntled right wing populists arising in the most wealthy countries of the earth, it should be time to be realistic and try the impossible, because the “possible” we are doing day by day will end in catastrophe. A different society and a different life are deeply necessary in our days of an unfettered and at the same time declining world system. Much more than in 1968 it is time for revolution, a revolution very much in the sense of the radicals of ‘68: not an immanent one of social progress within the frame of commodity production but one that transcends the modern world. In other words, a revolution like Walter Benjamin announced it in a famous critique of Marx: “Marx said that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But perhaps things are very different. It may be that revolutions are the act by which the human race travelling in the train applies the emergency brake.”<sup>23</sup>

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23 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I, 3*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser, Frankfurt a. M. 1974, S. 1232; English version cited in: Anselm Jappe, Preface to Credit unto Death, in: [https://libcom.org/library/preface-credit-unto-death-anselm-jappe#footnote4\\_fqbpnsf](https://libcom.org/library/preface-credit-unto-death-anselm-jappe#footnote4_fqbpnsf) (May 04, 2023).

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**RESUMO:** A sabedoria acadêmica convencional sustenta que os movimentos políticos da década de 1960, contra suas intenções conscientes de derrubar a sociedade 'burguesa', levaram à modernização liberal radical, democratização e individualização, e, portanto, à estabilização dessa sociedade. Contrapondo-se a esse tipo de complacência surgiram narrativas alternativas: Críticos como Pier Paolo Pasolini e Michel Houellebecq lamentaram a perda de profundidade cultural e moralidade comunitária, bem como a vitória do consumismo e de um modo de vida padronizado e conformista que veio com essa modernização aclamada. Sob essa camada de valoração pode estar enterrado um legado que vale a pena redescobrir: uma vontade romântica de reinventar a vida (e o viver em conjunto), bem como uma crítica fundamental à modernidade e suas formas insanas – trabalho, valor, dinheiro, estado, lei etc. – desenvolvidas pela Internacional Situacionista e pela *Wertkritik* alemã. Nos dias de hoje, no final cataclísmico da modernidade, esse legado revolucionário anti-moderno pode ser mais relevante do que nunca. **Palavras-chave:** Movimentos de 1968, Modernização Liberal, Individualidade, Pasolini, Houellebecq.

**ABSTRACT:** Conventional academic wisdom has it that the political movements of the 1960s, against their conscious intentions of overthrowing the 'bourgeois' society, led to radical liberal modernization, democratization, and individualization and therefore stabilization of that society. Counter to this sort of complacency ran alternative narratives: Critics like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Michel Houellebecq mourned the loss of cultural depth and communal morality as well as the victory of consumerism and a standardized, conformist way of living that came with this hailed modernization. Beneath this layer of valuation there might be buried a legacy worth to be rediscovered: a romantic will of reinventing life (and living together) as well as fundamental criticism of modernity and its crazy forms – labour, value, money, state, law etc. – developed by the Situationist International and German *Wertkritik*. In our days, at the cataclysmic end of modernity, this revolutionary anti-modern legacy may be more relevant than ever.

**Keywords:** 1968 movements, Liberal Modernization, Individuality, Pasolini, Houellebecq.

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