A Revolutionary Process Never Ends

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER TALKS WITH ANTONIO NEGRI

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER: In the years that preceded May 1968, the Situationists had an uprising in mind, but it had happened one century before. It was the Paris Commune of 1871, in which Marx saw the dawn of communism. The historical situations, of course, were widely different. The Paris Commune surged in reaction to the Prussian invasion and the betrayal of the Versailles government, which surrendered France to the enemy. The Versaillais surrounded the capital and starved the Communards to death, eventually gunning down those who survived. But it wasn't this grim story that Henri Lefebvre heatedly debated with Guy Debord in the dead of night. They were trying to bring out the festive energy that had driven the Paris Commune and outlasted its fate. "Proletarian revolutions will be *festivals* or nothing," they proclaimed.[1] The Parisian May was a festival. Whether crowding the Théâtre de l'Odéon or erecting barricades all over the Latin Quarter, the insurgents experienced anew the fever and euphoria of revolution. Unlike the Paris Commune, however, the '68 revolt wasn't brutally crushed. It dissipated as miraculously as it had started, and it is still impossible to figure out for sure whether it was the last poetic revolution of the nineteenth century or "the beginning of an era," as Debord maintained in a report he wrote in 1969, just a few months after the events:

> The largest general strike that ever stopped the economy of an advanced industrial country, and the first *wildcat general strike* in history; revolutionary occupations and the beginnings of direct democracy; the increasingly complete collapse of state power for nearly two weeks; the resounding verification of the revolutionary theory of our time and even here and there the first steps toward putting it into practice; the most important experience of the modern proletarian movement that is in the process of constituting itself in its *fully developed* form in all countries, and the example it must now go beyond—this is what the French May 1968 movement was essentially, and this in itself *already* constitutes its essential victory.[2]

Today, nearly twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the sudden collapse of "real socialism," as the Soviet regime used to be called, you're arguing that "communism" once again has become a festive idea. The concept of multitude that you have elaborated with Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno, and others was a first step in this direction. Is there anything in the events of May '68, as Debord summarized them, that could illuminate this aspect of the "common" inaugurated by the Commune?

ANTONIO NEGRI: Debord's text is extremely interesting, but it also finds its limits in the immediate exaltation that was the French May, the Parisian May. The events of May '68 certainly were a sign anticipating the crisis of the socialist bureaucratic system. They allowed for the possibility of overcoming "real socialism," of recovering freedom.

SL: What did you make of those events?

AN: My own relationship to May '68 is, in fact, rather complicated. The Parisian revolutionary process was concentrated into a mere two, three weeks, maybe two months at most, and it completely disrupted power in France. In Italy, that process lasted ten years, and we were able to experience it through all its phases and in all its movements: from the factories, where it originated, to universities, schools, the powerful feminist movement, and daily life.

SL: Could May '68 have happened again in 1977 in Italy, when it seemed ready to sweep away the entire country?[3]

AN: Who knows? From there, the sky was the limit.

SL: And you didn't want it.

AN: No, we didn't. The Autonomia movement was different from the French May, which was still about toppling the State. Our problem was how to push toward an extreme modernization. That's when the new history started. The Italian movement might not have had the fervor of the Situationist rhetoric, but its spread in depth and continuity was exceptional. That long moment of the Italian May, from 1967 to 1977, had that same ambiguity the Situationists perceived in May '68 and which characterizes certain revolutionary phenomena. But 1968 was also the beginning of something else. And that ambiguity, the fact of being at once in the past and in the present, justifies its interest, its enormous importance. The year 1968 was the beginning of postmodernity and, subsequently, the end of the modern. Situationist critique can get us through many doors, but we must understand that there were movements behind it all, a multitude of movements. And there was industrial organization.

SL: The Situationists' ideas set the stage for the French uprising, but no one had

foreseen that the protest movement, started in the university, would have such a snowball effect on the entire country.

AN: The Situationists surely were intelligent people. They understood the revolutionary process, from both the critical and the constructive points of view. And yet, strangely enough, they found themselves in a gridlock. They were convinced that the process had begun with the Jacobins during the French Revolution, continued with the revolutions of 1848 and 1871 in France, and of 1917 in Russia, and that it was now heading for its conclusion. That was, of course, quite plausible, and it was easy to believe in the excitement of 1968. In Italy, in fact, the Situationists arrived quite late. It wasn't until 1968 that I first read one of their documents, the pamphlet on the poverty of student life in Strasbourg.

SL: The full importance of Situationism as a cultural movement was felt mostly after the fact. I was very active in the French student movement against the Algerian War in the early 1960s, when the Situationists were at their peak, but I only became aware of their existence—paradoxically—in New York, in the mid-'80s. They were the last radical avant-garde in the West, and their ideas permeated the events of May '68.

AN: The Situationists' idea of the revolutionary experience was in fact inadequate to the situation. May '68 was a great *passage*, but they considered it something completed: "We've done it. We gave the revolutionary process its highest form!" But it wasn't true. Recently, I watched Peter Watkins's wonderful film *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* [2000] again. He brought together a number of Parisian independent cultural workers with the intent of restaging the 1871 Commune.[4] A six-hour film came out of that experience. Watkins let them speak the way they would today, and you get to see the Versailles government, the revolutionaries, and the National Guard in dialogue as if they were on *Apostrophes* [the popular Bernard Pivot literary TV show]. The only fictive element in the film is the presence of television. So it's the old and the new. It's the old rebellion reexperienced in an entirely new form, because a revolutionary process is never over. In fact, the events of 1968 transpired quite differently from the revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In '68, the class struggle occurred in Italy while theory was produced in France, whereas in the nineteenth century, the class struggle occurred in France while theory was being produced in Germany. Michael Hardt wrote a beautiful text on that. It was Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault who theorized what was happening in Italy.

SL: The philosophy of '68 took shape in France after 1972, beginning with Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, and directly contributed to the Italian movement, especially through Guattari. The two currents mutually reinforced each other—a rare instance of a theory blending so directly with a political movement.

AN: That's true. And it was such a strong concentrate, an absolute event. In Italy, the German May 1968 was very important, too. During that entire period, Germany was much closer to Italy culturally, especially through the university. But I am convinced there was something else that made France special. It was the last colonialist country in the strong sense of the word. It was also a country where the Communist Party was extremely important. Even Guattari kept voting for the Communists. With '68, France became a point of rupture, with waves rippling through it and spreading all over.

SL: French philosophers also theorized what was happening in the United States, but not the situation in France.

AN: Yes, this is quite extraordinary. From the point of view of a history of facts, or events, France was completely behind. De Gaulle and the French Right imposed authoritarian forms that completely blocked the revolutionary process. In Europe, on the contrary, the movement of transformation accompanied the decolonization process. Today, we find in postcolonial thought the same thinking that led to the overture of May '68. It is impressive to see how Antonio Gramsci, for example, was used by both the Italian movement and Indian postcolonialism. In the same way, we find a whole series of reflections on ideology, on the production of subjectivity, in both Foucault and Edward Said. The very strong synthesis that occurred is what now enables us to speak of the *contemporary* instead of the postmodern. For me, it's an extremely important distinction. The *post-* presupposes a continuity between what happened and what is happening today, as if 1968 were something that continued, that pulled modernity toward hypermodernity or postmodernity. But that's not the case. There was a jump, a division in history, a rupture.

SL: There have been all sorts of ruptures over the years. Frantz Fanon, for instance, initiated the theory of decolonization, much earlier, in 1961.

AN: Yes, and I believe this episode of May '68 and this series of ruptures became absolutely fundamental for the socialist movement after 1968. In fact, the revolutionary process that resumed afterward took on a significantly different shape. My Italian comrades, for their part, are absolutely convinced that the events of 1977 in Italy were the deciding factor. And I tell them, yes, that's true, but we can't understand anything unless we take into account—and that's the importance of 1977—that we had ten years of preparation behind us. That's also what the Situationists, in their enthusiasm, hadn't understood. The idea of

From left: Troops charging the crowds in Berlin, March Revolution in Prussia, 1848. Communards pose with the statue of Napoleon from the toppled Vendôme Column, Place Vendôme, Paris, May 1871. Gustave Courbet ninth from right. Photo: Hulton Archive/Getty Images. Saint Petersburg, October 1917. Photo: Keystone/Getty Images.

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AN: But at the time, Europe was the world. Today, we are focusing on Islam and on fundamentalism in general, in order to block everything.

SL: To block what—the emergence of the multitude?

AN: Yes, and this could be achieved through the imposition of a state of war or a state of exception. Also by enlisting people in order to establish a consensus.

SL: You have suggested that Empire has replaced the Nation-State.

AN: My problem was to identify some political forms that correspond to globalization and figure out what type of sovereignty is replacing notions like people and nation.

We came to understand that capitalism was more important than any particular form of State government. That was the real issue in 1968, and we weren't able to change it. Capitalist development has already bypassed it. On that level, we finally won: The State stopped being the Nation-State. We understood that through work, through the activity of singularities, which are distinct from masses or classes, and we could move from class struggle to a new form of social activity. The working class as such could turn into a multitude. And that's huge.

SL: The multitude is to Empire, then, what the social classes were to the Nation-States. The United States has been trying to impose its hegemony over globalization, and Empire has begun to become a reality—but the multitude remains virtual. It is mostly defined by its potential to produce and to produce itself.

AN: Multitude isn't just a concept for political science. The cognitive dimension of work and knowledge, of immaterial labor, is absolutely essential. The multitude has something to do with the network, and a certain independence of cooperation.

SL: But to return once again to the theorization of May '68 and its aftermath, French philosophers were mostly concerned with desire, not with work. Paradoxically, it was the Italian Workerist movement that introduced the notion of zero work.

AN: Work also expresses a desire. It was clear that the relation between work and daily activity had become more intimate. The emancipation of the masses would occur through the shift from paid work to the liberation of work. That's what we need to talk about when we speak of '68. It was the beginning of an era, not an ending. □

ANTONIO NEGRI IS A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER AND THE AUTHOR, MOST RECENTLY, OF *THE PORCELAIN WORKSHOP: FOR A NEW GRAMMAR OF POLITICS* (SEMIOTEXT(E)/MIT PRESS, 2008). (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

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