

PROVOCATIONS

The 1968 revolution and our own

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Half a century after May 1968 events in Paris (and elsewhere), the time has come to reflect upon the similarities and differences between the sexual liberation and feminism of the 1960s and the protest movements that flourish today, from LGBT+ to #MeToo. Although an immense abyss separates the revolt of the 60s from today's protests, we are now witnessing a similar reappropriation of the energy of protest and revolt by the capitalist system.

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One of the well-known graffiti slogans seen around Paris in 1968 was: "Structures do not walk on the streets." In other words, one cannot explain the large student and worker demonstrations of that year in the terms of structuralism (which is why some historians even posit 1968 as a date that separates structuralism from post-structuralism, a movement that, so the story goes, is much more dynamic and prone to active political interventions). Yet Jacques Lacan claims that this, precisely, is what happened in 1968: *Structures did descend onto the streets*—the visibly explosive events were ultimately the result of a structural shift in the basic social and symbolic texture of modern Europe.

The consequences of the 1968 explosion have proven him right. What effectively happened in its aftermath was the rise of a new figure of the "spirit of capitalism": Capitalism abandoned the Fordist centralized structure of the production process and in its place developed a network-based form of organization

founded on employee initiative and autonomy in the workplace. Instead of a hierarchical-centralized chain of command, we now get networks with a multitude of participants, work organized in the form of teams or projects, a focus on customer satisfaction, and a general mobilization of workers thanks to their leaders' vision. This new "spirit of capitalism" triumphantly recuperated the egalitarian and anti-hierarchical rhetoric of 1968, presenting itself as a successful libertarian revolt against the oppressive social organizations of corporate capitalism and "really existing" socialism.

The two phases of this new "cultural capitalism" are clearly discernible in changes in the style of advertising. In the 1980s and 1990s, direct references to personal authenticity or quality of experience predominated; later, one can note more and more the mobilization of socio-ideological motifs (ecology, social solidarity). With the latter, the experience referred to is that of being part of a larger collective movement, of caring for nature and the welfare of the ill, poor, and deprived, of doing something for them. Here is a case of this "ethical capitalism" brought to the extreme: Toms Shoes, a company founded in 2006 "on a simple premise: With every pair you purchase, TOMS will give a pair of new shoes to a child in need. One for One. Using the purchasing power of individuals to benefit the greater good is what we're all about. ... Of the planet's 6 billion people, 4 billion live in conditions inconceivable to many. Let's take a step toward a better tomorrow." The sin of consumerism

(buying a new pair of shoes) is paid for and thereby erased by the awareness that a person who really needs shoes got another pair for free. The very act of shopping is simultaneously presented as participating in the struggle against the evils ultimately caused by capitalist consumerism.

In a similar way, many other aspects of 1968 were successfully integrated into the hegemonic capitalist ideology and are today mobilized not only by liberals, but also by the contemporary right in their struggle against any form of “socialism.” “Freedom of choice” is used as an argument for the benefits of the precarious work: Forget the anxieties of not being sure how to survive in the near future, focus on the fact that you gain the freedom to “reinvent” yourself again and again, and can avoid being stuck in the same monotonous work ...

The 1968 protest focused its struggle against what organizers perceived to be the three pillars of capitalism: factory, school, and family. As the result, each domain was submitted to post-industrial transformation: Factory work is more and more outsourced or, in the developed world, reorganized along the post-Fordist lines of non-hierarchical, interactive team-work; permanent, variable, privatized education is increasingly replacing universal public education; multiple forms of flexible sexual arrangements are replacing the traditional family. The left lost in its very victory: The direct enemy was defeated, but it was replaced by a new form of even more targeted capitalist domination. In “postmodern” capitalism, the market is invading new spheres that were hitherto considered the privileged domain of the state, including education and prison and security. While “immaterial work” (education, affective labor, etc.) is celebrated

as the work that directly produces social relations, one should not forget what this means within a commodity economy: that new domains, hitherto excluded from the market, are now commodified. In other words, when we’re in trouble, we no longer talk to a friend but pay a psychiatrist or counselor to take care of the problem; parents pay babysitters and educators take care of their children, and so on.

One should, of course, not forget the real achievements of 1968: The movement radically changed how we treat women’s rights, gay rights, racism, and so forth. After the glorious 60s, we simply cannot engage in public racism and homophobia in ways that were still possible in the 1950s. The 1968 movement was not a single event but an ambiguous one in which different political tendencies were combined—which is also why it has remained a thorn in the heel of many conservatives. In his 2007 electoral campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy remarked that his great task was to make France finally get over 1968. The irony of this remark is that Sarkozy’s very ability to be the French president, with his clownish outbursts and marriage to singer Carla Bruni, is in itself a result of the changes in customs brought about by May of that year.

So there is “their” May 1968 and “our” May 1968. In today’s predominant collective memory, “our” basic idea of the May demonstrations in Paris, the link between student protests and worker strikes, is forgotten. The true legacy of 1968 resides in its rejection of the liberal-capitalist system, in a “no” to the totality of it best encapsulated in the formula: *Soyons realistes, demandons l’impossible!* No to the idea that true utopia is the belief that the existing global system can reproduce itself indefinitely; that the only way to be truly

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK is a Hegelian philosopher and Communist political activist, working on the dialectical-materialist reading of German Idealism. His recent publications include *Incontinence of the Void* (MIT Press, 2017) and *Reading Marx* (with Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda, Polity Press, 2018).

“realist” is to endorse what, within the coordinates of this system, cannot but appear as impossible. The fidelity to May 1968 is thus best expressed by the question: How are we to prepare for this radical change, to lay foundations for it?

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The first step in this direction is to arrive at a clear cognitive mapping of our predicament. Perhaps, we can begin by doing something rather elementary: When we read a piece of news, we should do so alongside another piece of news—only such a confrontation enables us to discern the true stakes of a debate. Let’s take reactions to an incisive text: In the summer of 2017, David Wallace-Wells published the essay “Uninhabitable Earth” in *New York Magazine*, which immediately became a classic. It clearly and systematically describes all the threats to our survival, from global warming to the prospect of a billion climate refugees, and all the wars and chaos this will cause. Rather than focusing on the predictable reactions to this text (accusations of scaremongering, and so on), one should read it with two facts in mind that are linked to the situation it describes. First, there is, of course, Donald Trump’s outright denial of ecological threats; then, there is the obscene fact that billionaires (and millionaires) who otherwise support Trump are nonetheless getting ready for the apocalypse by investing in luxury underground shelters where they will be able to survive isolated for up to a year with fresh vegetables and fitness centers.

Another example is an opinion piece Bernie Sanders wrote in the *Guardian* alongside a piece of news about him. Last October, Sanders published a sharp commentary on the Republican budget in which the title tells it all: “The Republican budget is a gift to billionaires: it’s Robin Hood in reverse.” The text is clearly

written, full of convincing facts and insights—so why didn’t it resonate more strongly? We should read it in the context of the outrage that exploded when Sanders was announced as an opening night speaker at the Women’s Convention in Detroit. Critics claimed it was bad to let Sanders, a man, speak at a convention devoted to the political advancement of women’s rights. No matter that he was to be just one of the two men among 60 speakers. Lurking beneath this outrage was, of course, the reaction of the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party to Sanders: its uneasiness with Sanders’ leftist critique of today’s global capitalism. When Sanders emphasizes economic problems, he is accused of “vulgar” class reductionism, while nobody is bothered when leaders of big corporations support LGBT+.

What make the Trump movement minimally interesting are its inconsistencies—recall that Steve Bannon not only opposes Trump’s tax plan but also openly advocates raising taxes for the rich up by to 40 percent, and has described the process of using public money to save struggling banks as “socialism for the rich.” Bannon recently declared war, but against whom? Not against Democrats from Wall Street, not against liberal intellectuals or any of the other usual suspects but against the Republican Party establishment itself. After Trump fired him from the White House, he continued fighting for Trump’s mission at its purest, even if it sometimes pits him against Trump himself—let’s not forget that Trump is basically destroying the Republican Party. Bannon aims to lead a populist revolt of the underprivileged against the elites. He is taking Trump’s message of “government by and for the people” more literally than Trump himself dares to do. To put it bluntly, Bannon is like the brownshirts with regard to Hitler; he represents the lower-class populist base Trump will have to get rid of (or at least neutralize) in order for him to be accepted by the establishment and

function smoothly as head of state. That is why Bannon is worth his weight in gold: He is a permanent reminder of the antagonism that cuts across the Republican Party.

The first conclusion we are compelled to draw from this strange predicament is that class struggle is back as the main determining factor of our political life. It is a factor in the good old Marxist sense of “determination in the last instance”; that is, even if the stakes appear to be totally different in various situations, from humanitarian crises to ecological threats, class struggle lurks in the background of each and casts its ominous shadow.

The second conclusion is that class struggle is less and less directly transposed into the struggle *between* political parties, and more and more is a struggle that takes place *within* each big political party. In the U.S., class struggle cuts across the Republican Party (the party establishment versus Bannon-like populists) and across the Democratic Party (the Clinton wing versus the Sanders movement). We should, of course, never forget that Bannon is the beacon of the alt-right while Hillary Clinton supports many progressive causes like fights against racism and sexism. However, we also should never forget that the LGBT+ struggle can be coopted by mainstream liberalism against the “class essentialism” of the left.

The third conclusion concerns the left’s strategy in this complex situation. While any pact between Sanders and Bannon is excluded for obvious reasons, a key element of the left’s strategy should be to ruthlessly exploit divisions in the enemy camp and fight for Bannon followers. To cut a long story short, there is no victory of the left without the broad alliance of all anti-establishment forces. One should never forget that our true enemy is the global capitalist establishment and not the new populist right, which is merely a reaction to its impasses.

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Does this mean that we should dismiss the struggle against sexual discrimination as a secondary appendix to the “real” economic struggle? Absolutely not. What we should do is the exact opposite: expose the struggle against sexual discrimination to an immanent critique.

In the aftermath of 1968, the French “progressive” press published a series of petitions demanding the decriminalization of pedophilia, claiming that this would abolish the artificial and oppressive culturally constructed frontier that separates children from adults, and would extend to children the right to freely dispose with one’s body. Only dark

THIS "FIGHT AGAINST DISCRIMINATION" IS AN ENDLESS PROCESS THAT FOREVER POSTPONES ITS FINAL POINT

forces of “reaction” and oppression could possibly oppose this measure, argued the signatories, which included Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Louis Aragon, Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean-François Lyotard. Today, pedophilia is perceived as one of the worst crimes, and instead of fighting for it in the name of anti-Catholic progress, it is associated with the dark side of the Catholic Church. In other words, the fight against pedophilia is today seen as a progressive task directed at the forces of reaction. The comic victim of this shift was former 1968 leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who, still living in the spirit of that era, recently described in an interview how while working in a kindergarten during his younger

years, he regularly played masturbatory games with young girls. To his surprise, he faced a brutal backlash and demands that he be prosecuted and removed from his seat in the European parliament.

This gap that separates the 1968 sexual liberation movement from today's struggle for sexual emancipation is clearly discernible in a recent polemical exchange between Germaine Greer and feminists who swiftly reacted to her critical remarks on #MeToo. Their main point was that while Greer's main thesis—that women should sexually liberate themselves from male domination and engage in an active sexual life without any recourse to victimhood—was valid in the 1960s, the situation is different today. What happened in between, they argue, is that the sexual emancipation of women (their assuming an active sexual life with the full freedom of initiative) was itself commodified. In other words, while women are no longer perceived as passive objects of male desire, their active sexuality itself now appears (in male eyes) as permanent availability, as an ever-readiness to engage in sexual interaction. Under these circumstances, when women say “no” it implies a rejection of this new form of sexual subjectivization, a rejection of the demand that women not only to passively submit to male sexual domination, but also act as if they actively want it.

While there is a strong element of truth in this line of argumentation, it is nonetheless problematic to ground the authority of one's political demands on a victimhood status. The basic characteristic of today's subjectivity is the weird combination of the free subject who experiences himself as ultimately responsible for his fate and the subject who grounds the authority of his speech on his status as a victim of circumstances beyond his control. In this context, every contact with another human being is experienced as a potential threat—if a person smokes or casts a covetous glance at me, he has already hurt me. Today,

this logic of victimization has been universalized, and reaches well beyond the standard cases of sexual or racist harassment—consider the growing financial industry of paying damage claims. The notion of the subject as an irresponsible victim involves an extreme Narcissistic perspective: every encounter with the Other appears as a potential threat to the subject's precarious balance. The paradox is that today's dominant form of individuality as the self-centered psychological subject overlaps with the perception of oneself as a victim of circumstances.

One cannot get rid of the suspicion that, by getting so fanatical in advocating “progress” and fighting new battles against cultural and sexist “apartheids,” the politically correct cultural left is trying to cover up its full immersion in global capitalism. Its space is the space in which LGBT+ and #MeToo meet Tim Cook and Bill Gates. How did we come to this? As many conservatives have noticed (and here they are right), our era is characterized by the progressive disintegration of a shared network of customs that ground what George Orwell approvingly referred to as “common decency.” Such standards are increasingly dismissed as a yoke that subordinates individual freedom to proto-fascist organic social forms. In such a situation, the liberal view of minimalist laws (that we should only regulate social life to the extent that it prevents individuals from encroaching upon, or “harassing,” each other) reverts into an explosion of legal and moral rules, an endless process of legalization/moralization called “the fight against all forms of discrimination.” If shared mores are no longer allowed to influence the law, and only the fact of “harassing” other subjects can, who—in the absence of such mores—will decide what counts as “harassment”? There are, in France, associations of obese people that have demanded that all public campaigns against obesity and for healthy eating habits be stopped, since they hurt the

self-esteem of obese persons. The militants of Veggie Pride condemn the “specieism” of meat-eaters (who privilege the human animal over others—for them, a particularly disgusting form of “fascism”) and demand that “vegetophobia” should be treated as a kind of xenophobia and proclaimed a crime. And so on and so on: incest-marriage, consensual murder, and cannibalism ...

The problem is here the obvious arbitrariness of the ever-new rules. Let us take child sexuality: One can argue that its criminalization represents unwarranted discrimination, but one can also argue that children should be protected from sexual molestation by adults. And we could go on: The same people who advocate the legalization of soft drugs usually support the prohibition of smoking in public places; the same people who protest the patriarchal abuse of small children in our societies worry when someone condemns members of foreign cultures who live among us for doing exactly this (say, Roma preventing their children from attending public schools), claiming that this is a case of meddling with other “ways of life.” It is thus for necessary structural reasons that this “fight against discrimination” is an endless process that forever postpones its final point, a society freed of all moral prejudices which, as philosopher Jean-Claude Michéa put it, “would be on this very account a society condemned to see crimes everywhere.”

It is crucial to see how this excessive moralism is the obverse of the acceptance of the global capitalist system. Oprah Winfrey’s triumphant speech at the Golden Globe awards enthralled the public so much that it brought her into the orbit as a potential Democratic presidential candidate against Trump in the

2020 elections. Her speech is a model of doing the right thing for the wrong reason in politics. The right thing was her demand to shift the focus from privileged actresses complaining about sexual harassment to millions of ordinary women who are exposed to much more vicious daily violence. Remember how many of the celebrities accused of sexual harassment, beginning with Harvey Weinstein, reacted by publicly proclaiming that they will seek help in therapy? A disgusting gesture if there ever was one! Their acts were not cases of private pathology, they were expressions of the predominant masculine ideology and power structures, and it is the latter that should be changed.

The wrong reason is that Oprah as a liberal ignored the link between this great awakening of women and our ongoing political and economic struggles. At approximately the same time as the Weinstein scandal began to roll out, the Paradise Papers were published, and one cannot help but wonder why nobody demanded that people should stop listening to the songs of Shakira or Bono from U2 (the great humanitarian, always ready to help the poor in Africa), because of the way they avoided paying taxes and thus cheated public authorities of large sums of money. Or why people weren’t calling for the British royal family to get less public money because they parked part of their wealth in tax oases. Meanwhile, the fact that Louis C.K. showed his penis to several women without their consent instantly ruined his career. Isn’t this a new version of Brecht’s old motto, “What is robbing a bank compared to founding a bank?”? Cheating with big money is tolerable while dropping your pants in front of various women makes you an instant outcast? ●