

‘This is what you should think’, ‘This is what you shouldn’t think’, ‘This is what’s possible or impossible, old or new, relevant or irrelevant.’

It is within this murky inverted present and swamp of bad memory that the various social movements that make up the slow reassertion of the radical Left in France have had to find their way. The strikes and demonstrations of winter 1995; the hefty score of votes for the two Trotskyist candidates in the April 2002 election; the *altermondialiste* movement; the protests against retirement reforms and the CPE (*contrat première embauche*); the ‘no’ vote on the European constitution; the labour and student movements of this past winter – all these events and projects that have unfolded in the last fifteen years bear a relation to the incomplete process opened up by the 1960s’ insurgencies. And they give a very different kind of testimony to the somewhat unbelievable persistence of the question of ’68. An event on the scale of ’68 revealed the contingency of the social order and of authority in general – that is, its lack of foundation and the chaos at its core. Precisely because of its excess, it continues to serve, in an unscheduled and unpredictable way, as a powerful historical trope, capable of generating panic among the elites, as well as offering a way to understand and reframe the political currents, trajectories and movements that have followed it. For it is precisely the excess of an event that makes it outlive its own immediate chronology, destabilizing those histories or political agendas that make no room not only for events such as May ’68, but for any questioning of the status quo at all.

Notes

1. Chantal Ackerman, *Les Inrockuptibles* 638, 19 February 2008, p. 16.
2. Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Ce grand cadavre à la renverse*, Grasset, Paris, 2007, p. 265; and Alain Finkielkraut, cited in Daniel Bensaid, *Un Nouveau théologien: Bernard-Henri Lévy*, Nouvelles Editions Lignes, Paris, 2007, p. 55.

Mexico 1968

The revolution of shame

Bruno Bosteels

On 2 October 1968, violent repression put an end to 123 days of student–popular militancy that had raged through the streets of Mexico City. Tanks invaded the Tlatelolco neighbourhood around the ‘Plaza de las Tres Culturas’ (named for its combination of pre-Columbian ruins, colonial church, and modern apartment buildings); soldiers stormed the plaza and, quickly occupying combat positions, started shooting in what would later be justified as a legitimate response to ‘sharpshooters’ firing from rooftops. By nightfall, over two hundred students, bystanders and residents had been killed. Ten days later, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz inaugurated the Summer Olympics, just a stone’s throw away from the university where everything had begun.

‘October 2’, or ‘Tlatelolco’, as the massacre is commonly referred to, also put its stamp retroactively on any interpretation of the events leading up to the brutal repression. Because of the deaths and detentions that followed, the history of the afterlives of 1968 in Mexico is unlike that of France. Whereas May ’68 in Paris almost immediately

received a (now-canonical) series of interpretations from academic disciplines both old and new, in Mexico it seems as if the experience of 1968 had, by force, to pass through more experimental means, including dozens of poems, novels, testimonies and memoirs. Only recently, with the release of new documents, have the facts at long last begun to dissipate the rumours and uncertainties that for decades continued to surround the watershed year of 1968 in Mexico. We might even argue that, despite Nicolas Sarkozy's recent attacks against May '68 in France, attacks that perhaps do little more than flatter the nostalgics, it is in Mexico that the legacy of '68 is still open. How – aside from the historical facts – are the events of that year lived at the subjective level? And to what extent is the current disarray of the Left in large parts of the world preinscribed in the way events such as 2 October were subjectivized forty years ago?

Paz with Marx

We can gauge this response at a well-nigh psychoanalytical level in the poem that Octavio Paz composed the day after the massacre in Tlatelolco, titled 'Interruptions from the West (3)'. At the time Paz was living in India as Mexico's ambassador. From this voluntary exile, he reflected upon the revolutionary myth in a series of four poems, as so many 'intermittencies' from the West into the East: two about the revolutions in Russia and Mexico, and two about 1968 in Mexico and France. The third poem is based on a letter Karl Marx wrote to Arnold Ruge, five years before the uprisings of 1848. In this period the soon-to-become co-author of *The Communist Manifesto* was likewise living in exile, but even from the Netherlands he felt shame for the dismal state of Germany. 'The mantle of liberalism has been discarded and the most disgusting despotism in all its nakedness is disclosed to the eyes of the whole world', writes Marx, before anticipating the scepticism of his correspondent:

You look at me with a smile and ask: What is gained by that? No revolution is made out of shame. I reply: Shame is already revolution of a kind.... Shame is a kind of anger which is turned inward. And if a whole nation really experienced a sense of shame, it would be like a lion, crouching ready to spring.¹

History, no doubt, repeats itself, but after tragedy now comes the time not of comedy or farce but of melancholia. What in Marx's letters is still a subjective wager to revolutionize shame against the brooding scepticism of philosophers such as Ruge becomes in the hands of Paz an ambiguous act of introspection regarding the possible shame inherent in any revolution.

Paz sent his poem to *La Cultura en México*, a cultural supplement of the magazine *Siempre!*, where it was not published until after the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games. At the same time, he submitted his letter of resignation as ambassador to president Díaz Ordaz.

Interruptions from the West (3)

(Mexico City: The 1968 Olympiad)
for Dore and Adja Yunkers

Lucidity

(perhaps it's worth
writing across the purity
of this page)

is not lucid:
it is rage

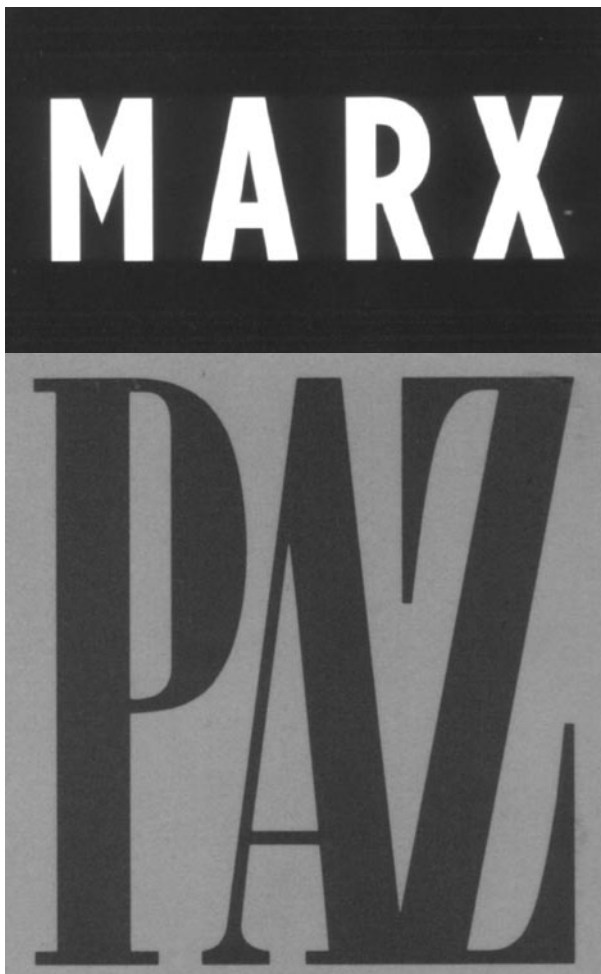
(yellow and black
mass of bile in Spanish)
spreading over the page.
Why?

*Shame is anger
turned against itself:*

*If
an entire nation is ashamed
it is a lion crouching
ready to spring.*
(The municipal
employees wash the blood
from the Plaza of the Sacrificed.)
Look now,
stained
before anything worth it
was said:
lucidity.²

Various tendencies are present at once in this poem, structured around a parallel in which the blood on the public square corresponds to the ink thrown onto the white page. In between, there appears bile, at once yellow and black. Together with rage or fury, shame is the text's circulating term, the one that subjectively articulates politics and writing. As opposed to the blood and the ink, however, the bile has no place to go except inwards, marking the moment of the lion's crouching. It is the moment when shame becomes rage, or when rage turns inward, back upon itself, so as to double into shame. The question then becomes whether this turning inwards produces a resource sufficiently powerful to give way, after all, to a leap. A leap of faith that will have been, precisely, a leap into the void, since it has no ostensible place at its disposal, no foothold either on the public square or on the poet's white page.

However, the poem also seems to draw a comparison between the official policy of erasing the traces of violence and the general poetic procedure of what Paz, in another poem ('Letter to León Felipe') from the year before, about the death of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, calls 'to erase the written'. Here, as elsewhere in his work, Paz follows what



is a quintessentially Mallarméan procedure, based on a principle of erasure or subtraction.³ To write means to subtract one word from another; it means forever to precipitate oneself towards the fugitive moment when the already written vanishes and presence becomes absence or lack. As a result of such abolition, the real never fully manages to represent itself; on the contrary, it erupts in the interstices of the representable. This is where the poetic operation appears to be uncannily analogous to a political process. The disappearance of Che Guevara, for instance, surely marks the site of a possible political event, but if this possibility appears in a poem, it is because the process gives rise to a vanishing term, similar to the unachievement, *el inacabamiento*, that is proper to poetry according to Paz. Politics, too, would intervene in society according to a principle of delinking comparable to the writing of poetry, when the latter undoes the links between words so as to establish itself in the very space of the tearing apart.

Yet the ease with which these texts affirm their own metapoetical principles should alert us to the fact that we are faced with a purely structural approach. Such a perspective may very well

expose the lack intrinsic to any given system of representation, but without exceeding the limits of a mere recognition of this lack. The process, in other words, may well lay bare the site of a possible event, but the latter is nowhere sustained by a subsequent fidelity. The void is a pathway to what we unconsciously already are, by indicating that which we lack from the origin, but nobody dares to take a leap to affirm what we will have become.

In Paz's poem there also appears a formal complicity, if nothing more, between clarity or lucidity, *limpidez*, and purity or cleanliness, *limpieza*. Thus, the shame that is conjured up can be read in a variety of ways. The most obvious attributes shame to the ambassador, if not to the Mexican people as a whole, over the government's despotic intervention. Another reading would link shame to the very task of the poet who has been unable to say anything worth the effort, *algo que valga la pena*, whereby *pena* also means shame in Mexican Spanish. Words themselves would provoke in the poet a sensation of being superfluous, as if all of a sudden it was he who felt inept. Finally, even this poem, which is so often quoted as the poet's last claim to fame on the side of the Left, could also be read as if to say that it was the student movement itself that did not have a chance to say anything worthwhile.

The same ambiguity reappears in the short poem dedicated to May '68 in France (written originally in French):

Interruptions from the West (4)

(Paris: The Lucid Blind)

In one of the suburbs of the absolute,
the words had lost their shadows.
They traded in reflections, as far
as the eye could see,
and were drowned
in an interjection.

Paz's poems about 1968 thus already allude to the limits of student activism. Perhaps the students said nothing that was worth the effort; perhaps they drowned in mere anarchical outbursts and agrammatical graffiti. We are already in the midst of the critique of the revolutionary myth that we find in so many later essays by Paz.

In fact, if we confront these poems with the analysis of 1968 in 'The Other Mexico', which Paz added as a postscript to *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, it becomes increasingly difficult to grasp the exact sense of his outlook. The essayist never stops pointing out the typical impudence of any desire for justice to right the wrongs in this world. For the poet, the lucidity of the youth is inseparable from a certain blindness. Innocent, ambitious, even audacious, the integrity of the students should also show a bit more modesty and shame. Paz puts it thus in the thinly veiled autobiographical poem 'San Ildefonso Nocturne':

The boy who walks through this poem,
between San Ildefonso and the Zócalo,
is the man who writes it:
this page too
is a ramble through the night.
Here the friendly ghosts
become flesh,
ideas dissolve.
The good, we wanted the good:
to set the world right.
We didn't lack integrity:
we lacked humility.

Hamlet's cursed cause, to right the wrong of a time out of joint, would also have been the ideal of the student movement: not to let justice haunt the country as an

intangible ghost but, on the contrary, to animate the spectre so as to break the wrongs of a truncated modernity. For Paz, though, the desire to incarnate justice in action carries within it the seeds of its bureaucratic deformation. For this reason, the poet will ever more openly support the cause of political liberalism, as in his speech upon receiving the Alexis de Tocqueville Prize a few months after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It is the rejection of this fatal temptation within the revolutionary myth that explains Paz's veiled critique of 1968 in his poems and essays. The students lacked modesty or shame; they had been sinfully disingenuous, as though the excess of innocence constituted proof of heightened guilt. In 'San Ildefonso Nocturne', Paz adds:

The guilt that knows no guilt,
innocence
Was the greatest guilt.

Only one option then remains open: to combine critical thinking in the liberal tradition with a revitalized vision of modernist art. 'True, criticism is not what we dream of, but it teaches us to distinguish between the specters out of our nightmares and the true visions', Paz concludes. 'Criticism is the imagination's apprenticeship in its second turn, the imagination cured of fantasies and determined to face the world's realities.'⁴ By comparison, we can only infer that the student movement, or 1960s' radicalism in general, is the apprenticeship of the imagination in its first round: innocent, fantasizing, and sickly.

In 1970, the same year in which Paz's talks on 'The Other Mexico' were published in Mexico, Jacques Lacan taught a very similar lesson to his students in his seminar *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Also seemingly familiar with Marx's correspondence with Ruge, Lacan addresses the *soixante-huitards* with a typical provocation:

You will say – Shame, what for? If this is the other side of psychoanalysis, it amounts to very little. To which I respond – You have more than enough. If you don't know it yet, get yourselves analysed a bit, as they say...

He finally adds:

The point is to know why the students feel superfluous [*de trop*] with others. It does not at all seem as though they see clearly how to get out of all this. I would like for them to realize that an essential aspect of the system is the production – the production of shame. This translates itself – into impudence.⁵

Both Paz and Lacan suggest that the reverse side of the subversive project is the desire for a new absolute. A truly lucid analysis or criticism, by contrast, would broach the topic of shame without fear of touching upon a point of the impossible; that is, without fear of discovering in shame a welcome hideout – perhaps the only one after anxiety – of truth. The other side of psychoanalysis must be an inescapable shame.

Politics remains

These early readings of 1968 give us insight into the melancholy itinerary of so much radical political thinking today. The ghost functions as the analyst along this itinerary, revealing the sinister presence of a void in the midst of the social order. About the apparition of despotism in the supposedly liberal German society, Marx had written to Ruge:

That, too, is a revelation, although one of the opposite kind. It is a truth which, at least, teaches us to recognise the emptiness of our patriotism and the abnormality of our state system, and makes us hide our faces in shame.⁶

For Marx, of course, the analysis cannot be limited to a recognition of the emptiness of power, nor is it enough merely to blush or cover our faces; it is also necessary

to revolutionize shame itself, to exceed the empty place of power through a radical transformation of the structure as such. To take the lion's leap. But if the emphasis falls on lack as the essential point of the entire system, then the new radical politics-to-come will consist in keeping steady in shame, without giving in to the impudence of wanting to fill the empty place of power; that is, without giving in to the metaphysical temptation to give body to the ghost of effective justice. Such is the answer with which Ruge actually anticipates today's critics of Marx:

It is sweet to hope and bitter to give up on all chimeras. Despair demands more courage than hope. But it is the courage of reason, and we have come to the point where we no longer have the right to keep fooling ourselves.⁷

Today, the only courage of reason, for large parts of the Left, would seem to consist in persevering heroically in despair – or in euphoria, which is but the other side of the same melancholy process. As Slavoj Žižek writes: 'Enthusiasm and resignation, then, are not two opposite moments: it is the "resignation" itself, that is to say, the experience of a certain impossibility, that incites enthusiasm.'⁸ The lion should never take the leap, but this does not keep him from roaring. With the aim of keeping the place of power necessarily inoperative or empty, it calls radical that which is only the crouching down or the retreat of politics in its essential finitude. Turned back upon itself, shame indeed hides many corners where it can accumulate the reserve of an inexhaustible radicalism. This is not rage accumulated before the attack; it is shame as the rage of defeat put in the service of a new philosophical lucidity, foreign to all wagers except the interminable critique of its own spectres. Let me quote one more time from 'San Ildefonso Nocturne':

Rage
Became philosophy,
Its drivel has covered the planet.

Once yellow, the bile turns black. According to the theory of four humours, it does not produce rage but melancholy – that is, etymologically, black bile. Did not Freud already highlight this tendency in the melancholic to become philosophical, by splitting its consciousness into a critical instance capable of representing as object that other part of it that suffers the loss – whether real or imaginary? This process aptly describes the philosophical trajectory of so many ex-enthusiasts of 1968. From observing defeat after the fact, it seems to be only a small step to proclaim the original inexistence of the lost cause – or to assert that only lost causes are ever worthy of our defence.

Giorgio Agamben, also writing from exile about the scandals of corruption and repentance in Italy in the 1990s, felt the need to revise Marx's optimism. 'Marx still used to put some trust in shame', he recalls: 'But what he was referring to was the "national shame" that concerns specific peoples each with respect to other peoples, the Germans with respect to the French. Primo Levi has shown, however, that there is today a "shame of being human", a shame that in some way or other has tainted every human being.'⁹ If, after Auschwitz, shame points to an insuperable human condition, and if, furthermore, those who in the past might have turned shame into a stepping stone – nations or peoples – are absent today, then it appears that the only conclusion to be drawn for any politics-to-come is a retreat, or exodus, from the very idea of revolutionizing shame.

Paz's poem not only tracks the melancholy path followed by many now-retired '68ers; it also announces the possibility of a different response, summed up much later in the collection *The Tenacity of Politics*, also published in Mexico. 'To call upon the tenacity of politics refers to resistance both in theory and in political practice in the face of the various attempts to declare its dilution, if not its end', the editors explain. 'Because despite the diagnostic or the desire of its extinction, politics remains, tenaciously.'¹⁰ If we want to avoid the complicity of the empty page with the false cleanness of the official

story, this will involve not so much a figure of subtraction as one of forcing. Instead of unwriting the written, the injunction would be to write the unwritten. Perhaps this is how the Mexican students understood one of the culminating moments of their movement when, on 13 September, hundreds of thousands marched through the capital during the so-called 'silent march', their mouths taped up with adhesive so as to show the degree of contained rage and self-control. 'This march of silence is the answer to the injustice', one of the speakers finally proffered: 'We have begun the task of making a just Mexico, because liberty is what we are gaining every day. This page is clean and clear.'¹¹

Even the utopia of the student movement cannot avoid the truth glimpsed with special lucidity by the melancholy trend of political philosophy: namely, that the leap takes place in the void. A political subject has no ground to stand on, no stable identity or social link; instead, the lion's leap takes off precisely from anxiety, even shame, provoked by the delinking of society itself. The subject exceeds melancholy, however, by twisting shame into rage so that something else may take place. Disorder, or the lack of the order in place, produces *coraje*, in the double sense of the expression: both rage or anger and also courage or tenacity. 'Anxiety means lack of place, courage means assuming the real by which the place splits into two', Alain Badiou writes. 'Courage positively realizes the disorder of the symbolic, the rupture of communication, whereas anxiety calls upon its death.'¹² By uncovering the emptiness of the symbolic order, shame always runs the risk of falling in the opposite extreme, which consolidates the unchanging necessity of the structure of lack itself as part of the human condition. Tenacity, by contrast, consists in the wager for a different order.

This means writing history not from the perspective of the state but from the subjective principle of equality that universally resists the excessive power of the state. This makes all the difference between those who fatally privilege the massacre of Tlatelolco and those for whom the vitality of the movement, during the three months prior to 2 October, was able contagiously to traverse the rest of Mexico City.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, 'Letters from the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, Lawrence & Wishart, London/International Publishers, New York, 1975, p. 133.
2. Octavio Paz, *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz (1957–1987)*, ed. and trans. Eliot Weinberger, New Directions, New York, 1987, pp. 225–7, translation modified. Subsequent poems cited also appear in this edition.
3. See the readings of Mallarmé in Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, Seuil, Paris, 1982, pp. 69–128.
4. Octavio Paz, 'The Other Mexico', *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Grove, New York, 1991, p. 325.
5. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVII: L'Envers de la psychanalyse (1969–1970)*, ed. Jacques Alain Miller, Seuil, Paris, 1991, pp. 211, 220. See also Jacques-Alain Miller, 'On Shame', in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2006, pp. 11–28; and Joan Copjec, 'May '68, the Emotional Month', in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Lacan: His Silent Partners*, Verso, London and New York, 2006, pp. 90–114.
6. Marx, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 133.
7. Arnold Ruge, quoted from the Spanish edition of Marx, *Escritos de juventud*, trans. Wenceslao Roces, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1982, p. 442. This is one of the few editions containing the complete exchange between Marx and Ruge.
8. Slavoj Žižek, 'Beyond Discourse-Analysis', in Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Verso, London and New York, 1990, pp. 259–60. See also Žižek, 'Melancholy and the Act', in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*, Verso, London and New York, 2001, pp. 141–89.
9. Giorgio Agamben, 'In This Exile (Italian Diary, 1992–94)', in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 132.
10. Nora Rabotnikov, Ambrosio Velasco and Corina Yturbe, eds, *La tenacidad de la política*, UNAM, Mexico City, 1995, pp. 8–9.
11. Quoted in Ramón Ramírez, *El movimiento estudiantil de México*, vol. 1, Era, Mexico City, 1969, p. 314.
12. Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, p. 177.