

# May '68 Demystified\*

**TAKIS FOTOPOULOS**

In the past few months, May '68 has become something like the Che t-shirts! Both have become ubiquitous and therefore, if either you are in conservative London, or in “progressive” Paris and Athens, the newspapers and magazines published by the traditional Left (both reformist and anti-systemic) are full of insets and special editions devoted to the celebration of May '68. Similar special events were organized also by cinemas and exhibitions. At the same time, pitiful adventurers of the Daniel Con Bendit type, are pulled out of the naphthalene to impudently declare that May '68 is dead –despite the fact, of course, that they personally did everything possible to bury it! As a result, we now see the strange phenomenon that everyone feels the need to celebrate the anniversary of May '68: from the traditional Left to well known media expressing the Establishment views. How is this paradox of the universal recognition –and exploitation– of the event explained? Is it perhaps because the events that took place almost simultaneously in several countries of the geographical North at the time (USA, Germany, France, UK, Italy, etc.) and are characterized by the term “May '68” never put (or were even capable of putting) the System in real danger, contrary to the prevailing mythology?

Naturally, the specific events, as has always been the case with every historical event for which there is no “objective truth”, are interpreted according to the interpreter's paradigm, which is based on his/her own world-view, values and beliefs.

Thus, the reformist Left celebrates May '68 because it sees in it a sperm of the reformist World Social Forum and of the “rights' Left” (i.e. the Left which is struggling not for systemic change but for defending the rights of women, immigrants, minorities, etc.). This is based on the mystification of the fact that May '68 did indeed lead to a certain change in gender relations, teachers/students relations and, social relations in general, promoting individual autonomy, which, up to then, had been undermined by the System's hierarchies, but also by the various “collectivist hierarchies”, either of the formerly “actually existing socialism” in the East, or of the socialdemocratic welfare state and the bureaucratic unions in the West.

On the other hand, the antisystemic Left celebrates May '68 as an attempt of antisystemic change in Western Europe, which well transcended the usual uprisings of the last century, raising demands which questioned, not only the unequal distribution of economic and political power, but also every form of social power as well-- the very power relations and structures of any hierarchical system. The meaning of post-Enlightenment Progress itself and consequently of economic growth and consumerism was directly questioned, as well as, indirectly, the Society-Nature relationship. Therefore, for the antisystemic Left, May '68 was a point of inspiration and an example for the future.

May '68 included of course these trends and many more, as the social groups that were

mobilized and took part in this hugely significant event were –politically and socially-heterogeneous, ranging from politically aware students and radical members of the working class fighting not only against the “system” and their employers, but also against the bureaucratic leaderships of their unions up to apolitical middle class hippies. However, most of us who took any part in these events in France, or in the rest of the Western Europe and the USA, were well aware of the fact that the dominant trend in May '68 was that of overthrowing the “system” –in the broad sense of a hierarchical form of social organization, whether “capitalist” or “socialist” (in both its versions of the formerly “actually existing socialism” and socialdemocracy)– as well as its values. The rationale behind this trend was that no previous social system had ever succeeded in really liberating humans from the domination of various elites, even though the socialist system had succeeded in better satisfying the basic needs of all citizens with respect to the capitalist one. However, the rebels of May '68 took for granted the achievements of both the formerly “actually existing socialism” and of socialdemocracy and were fighting for total freedom in the sense of individual and collective autonomy and true democracy at every level. That is, in fact, they were fighting for what we call today ***Inclusive Democracy***<sup>[1]</sup>, i.e. the political project which theorises the historical autonomy project, creating a synthesis of the socialist and democratic traditions along with the antisystemic currents within the “new social movements” which emerged in the aftermath of May '68 (i.e. within the feminist and Green movements, minority movements and so on).

The experiences and consequences of the May '68 insurrection constituted a basic element in the formation of the Inclusive Democracy project. According to ID's view, what followed May'68 was not just the result of the capitalist elite's plots and of the defeat of the Left, as some naive theories of the Left suggest, which do not have any qualms in welcoming neoliberal globalization<sup>[2]</sup> (being promoted, as a reward, by the transnational elite's media as “the new Communist manifesto”<sup>[3]</sup>!). Instead, it could be argued that it was because of the contradictions of May '68 and of the new ‘systemic trends’ in capitalist development that capitalist neoliberal globalization became dominant and the new social movements – following the dominance of the “realists” within them –degenerated into either lobbies for the satisfaction of the social and economic demands of the elites within women, minorities, etc., or into governing political parties– as was the case with the West European Green parties which enthusiastically supported the criminal wars of the transnational elite. In other words, what followed May '68 in this view could be explained in terms of:

- the spontaneous and, hence, disorganised character of May's uprising, as a result of the lack of any kind of political project, strategy and tactics,
- the role of the traditional Left and particularly the French Communist Party and the unions controlled by it in converting the antisystemic demands from below into ‘normal’ reformist demands, giving a golden chance to the elites to defuse the crisis,
- the intensifying capitalist globalization at the time of the May '68 events, as a result of the mass expansion of transnational corporations – a process that was in direct contradiction with socialdemocratic statism– which the working class (already being decimated by technological developments) and the other movements could not stop at the time. Not surprisingly, the neoliberal ideologues made full use of the May demand against statism (‘forgetting’ in the process the twin demand against capitalism!) in order to institutionalize the severance of “dependence on the state” and the freeing of markets, which has led to the present highly individualist society – a society which of course has nothing to do with the demands and ideas of May '68.

It is not therefore, surprising that the System itself celebrates (commercialising it in the process) the burial of May '68, as well as that of Che. The question is what exactly the traditional Left celebrates about, when, at a time of a deepening multidimensional crisis, is faced with its eclipse<sup>[4]</sup> —if not demise— as a result of the lack of a new universalist project and strategy after the collapse of the socialist project?

---

\* The above text is based on an article first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the Athens daily Eleftherotypia of 7/6/2008.

---

[1] See Takis Fotopoulos *Inclusive Democracy: 10 Years Afterwards* (Athens: Eleftheros Typos, May 2008).

[2] see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

[3] see for example: *The Observer* (15 July 2001); *The Sunday Times* (15 July 2001) and *The New York Times* (7 July 2001).

[4] Steven Best (editor) *Globalised Capitalism, the Eclipse of the Left and Inclusive Democracy* (Athens: Koykkida, May 2008).