

Jean-Jacques Lebel

NOTES ON POLITICAL STREET THEATRE, PARIS: 1968, 1969

THE 'EVENTS OF MAY' 1968 in Paris, initiated by students against conservative university policies, spread to workers striking for higher wages and better working conditions. Lenora Champagne captures its utopia-like atmosphere:

The events of the Barricades, where a festive spirit reigned and collective decision making and animated discussion took place; the formation of action committees which solved problems as groups and aided striking workers and their families; the instances of anonymous collective creation of wall posters [. . .] – these provided the crucible of action where themes and structures of the May Movement could be tested. There was a briefly-lived utopia, which took the form of an 'anti-society' or 'counterculture' opposed to existing social relations and proposing new ones.

(*Sub-stance* 18/19, 1977: 59)

Here Jean-Jacques Lebel, one of the key players in student street actions, emphasizes the connectedness of casting off (social) oppression and (personal) repression.

From the early twenties, when the Paris Dadaists enacted the *Trial of Maurice Barrés* in the St. Julien le Pauvre Park, to the recent theatrical events of a political nature performed in the streets, there is a long story of militant

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outsiders and anti-artists for whom the cultural industry is just another aspect of capitalism and, as such, must be destroyed. On the other hand there are non-political Fluxus-type events, arty-farty happenings, and street shows such as those organized by the Groupe de Recherche de l'Art Visuel which claim to be 'unintentional' and not aimed at the destruction of the existing social structure. These events are still concerned with the history of art, of theatre, or of culture in general and tend to be quickly absorbed into the art market, the 'avant-garde' department of Madison Avenue, and wind up as the latest form of entertainment for Jackie Onassis. It is important not to confuse the art of revolution with its commercial and bourgeois imitation.

1968

The May Revolution dynamited the limits of 'art' and 'culture' as it did all other social or political limits. The old avant-gardist dream of turning 'life' into 'art,' into a collective creative experience, finally came true. All of a sudden the corruption and stupidity of the old world's 'cultural specialists' became obvious to everyone. Along with the rest of the power elite – the bankers, the army chiefs, the managers and tycoons – the cultural industry moguls are the first to be eliminated by any liberation movement. They should know when to disappear.

Exciting socio-dramatic events occurred in the streets of Paris in May, primarily because the 22nd of March Movement made it clear to everybody that 'power is in the streets' – or, as the Motherfuckers put it: 'the streets belong to the people.' The first stage of an uprising (the barricades, the mass demonstrations, the street fighting between the government forces and the radicals, as well as such events as the burning down of the Stock Exchange, which occurred on May 24th), the first stage of *any* revolution, is always theatrical. The May uprising did not turn into a full-blown civil war or a traumatic blood bath comparable to what happened in Mexico in October when the grenaderos murdered at least 200 students. Nevertheless it certainly was a surprising chapter in a class war which most people thought long over and finished. The May uprising was theatrical in that it was a gigantic fiesta, a revelatory and sensuous explosion outside the 'normal' pattern of politics. Ten million workers went on strike in mid-May. It was the largest general strike in the history of industrial civilization and the one that came the nearest to upsetting the entire economic structure. Most plants were occupied by the workers, the universities by the students, and, at one point, the government and the ruling class were powerless. Then the so-called 'Communist' party and its unions came to de Gaulle's rescue and accepted a ridiculous compromise. The workers were persuaded to go back to work by their bureaucratic 'leaders.' One by one the factories were re-occupied by the police and their 'rightful owners.' Once again the social-democratic and

counter-revolutionary 'Communist' party had saved the capitalist system from collapsing under the pressure of the workers and students. It was a very close shave – and the living proof that a full-scale economic and social revolution is possible in any industrial country, regardless of what the reformist and Stalinist theoreticians pretend.

Such was the context of the deep psychic change experienced by hundreds of thousands in May. The results of this individual as well as social change were immediate: human relations were freer and much more open; taboos, self-censorship, and authoritarian hangups disappeared; roles were permuted; new social combinations were tried out. Desire was no longer negated but openly expressed in its wildest and most radical forms. Slavery was abolished in its greatest stronghold: people's heads. Self-management and self-government were in the air and, in some instances, actually worked out. The subconscious needs of the people began to break through the ever present network of repressive institutions which is the backbone of capitalism. Everywhere people danced and trembled. Everywhere people wrote on the walls of the city or communicated freely with total strangers. There were no longer any strangers, but brothers, very alive, very present. I saw people fucking in the streets and on the roof of the occupied Odéon Theatre and others run around naked on the Nanterre campus, overflowing with joy. The first things revolutions do away with are sadness and boredom and the alienation of the body.

Street theatre as such started to pop up here and there in mass demonstrations, such as the 13th of May, which gathered more than a million people. Large effigies appeared of the CRS (French riot police), of de Gaulle and other political clowns. Short, funny theatrical rituals were performed around them as they burned. When the officially subsidized Odéon Theatre was occupied by the movement, many small groups of students and actors began to interpret the daily news in the street in short comic dramas followed by discussions with the passing audience.

1969

The main problem, then as now, is to propagandize the aims and means of the revolutionary movement among those millions who, while not actually being hostile, have not yet taken part in the action. Since the mass media are totally controlled by the State, all they pour out are lies befitting the State's psychological warfare. French public opinion is manipulated into submission with techniques similar to those used by Franco or Stalin, if more 'liberal' (i.e., clever). Communication is strictly one way: from the top down. Newspapers, leaflets, handmade or printed posters, and movies (modestly distributed because of police censorship) proving insufficient to inform people, let alone to help them *express themselves*, we are trying to use

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street theatre as a means to provoke encounters and discussions among people who usually shut themselves off from each other.

The project we have just worked on was the preparation of the anti-imperialist week preceding Dirty Dick Nixon's visit to de Gaulle. The mass of the French people are unaware of the political and economic penetration of American capitalism in Europe and in the Third World; so we devised a campaign on this subject. Some groups destroyed obvious symbols of what Malcolm X called *dollarism*: the offices of IBM, American Express, Pan American Airways, TWA, etc. By coincidence the composer Xenakis, who works for IBM, came to lecture at Vincennes a few days before Nixon's arrival. 'All I am interested in is beautiful music,' said he. Rotten tomatoes took care of him. But no music, however 'modern,' goes anywhere near the beautiful noise of an expensive computer used by the army being broken to bits by a bunch of happy kids. Other groups gathered around the idea of using street theatre to provoke free discussions and awaken people to the fact that imperialism is present in their daily life. Besides, we had been tired of the more conventional militant means of expression ever since we realized that the revolution, even in its less glorious preparatory work, must be fun to do.

Our group was made up of about forty students from Vincennes University. One had some previous experience in 'theatre,' two or three had worked in movies. All the others were totally inexperienced and were brought together mostly by their desire to work out some different means of political activity. Our orientation was agit-prop, yet we wanted to be creative and not just limited to old political clichés – above all we considered 'theatre' only as a means of breaking down the Berlin Wall in people's heads and helping them out of their state of passive acceptance. We didn't give a shit about 'art' – we were interested in sabotaging capitalism by helping to blow its arsenal of images, moods, perceptual habits, and tranquilizing illusions of security.

Most of the students involved were bored by the sociology, the philosophy, and the economics they were more or less studying and were certainly hip to the meaninglessness of the 'knowledge' they were supposed to be acquiring. So we started out by having several long talks on the political and personal state of emergency we were, and are, living in. A few of us had heard of experiments in political street theatre made in Frankfurt by the German SDS or by other such groups in London, New York, Rome, and San Francisco. Nobody had actually seen any 'guerrilla theatre' though. Some were familiar with the Living Theatre but criticized it as too 'arty' or 'not directly political enough' or 'non-violent' (the company was admired more as an anarchist community than as a theatre group). Actually no one had a definite idea of how or where to start and it took some time to work up the idea of theatrical cartoons on the subject of imperialism. Finally we cut four archetypal characters out of our mental storybook:

The Third World Peasant (the immediate victim of imperialism).
 The Guerrillero (the peasant turned revolutionary).
 The Ugly White Man (Nixon, the Ruler, the Wall Street King).
 The Army Officer (General Motor, the capitalist cop).

Then we stuck together a synopsis of straightforward actions – not really a storyline but a series of simple ideograms – something like frame-by-frame shots. No dialogue since we would be working in noisy subway stations and streets, but we wrote some phrases and words on pieces of cardboard which were brought out during certain actions or yelled out during a demonstration. When needed, the costumes were exaggerated and funny. The general outline, which varied according to circumstances and mood, usually ended with General Motors being killed by the Guerrillero and the Ugly White Man being killed by the rebelling peasant, who seizes the UWM's money and burns it or distributes it to everyone (the bystanders yelling: 'Long live the Workers' Councils! Long live libertarian socialism!' etc.).

While the four actors are performing, about five others kneel in a circle around them to clear the small space which they need. Meanwhile about ten other people are busy putting up posters and painting slogans on as many walls as possible in the immediate vicinity. Six or eight others stand by to participate in the discussions or to protect the actors in case of trouble with the police. The group has on occasion used collective self-defense so as not to let any of its members get busted – in such cases it also depends on the help of the audience and bystanders – since it is politically important not to let the police interfere with the 'play' or discussions. As I write this the piece has been performed eight times in the subway and once in the street. The piece lasts only about two minutes but it is not uncommon for the discussions to go on for more than an hour, vigorously and passionately. These free discussions enable many who would not 'normally' dare to do so to transgress the law of silence and accomplish direct communication (similar to what happened in May when the streets were liberated for a while of the Police State's rule). We consider this a modest but valid answer to the problem of information and communication since the people who partake in these impromptu discussions usually blast off on their particular experiences in whatever here and now situation they are alienated by: *their* factory, *their* office, *their* school, how the union bureaucrats betrayed *them*, how *they* think *they* should get rid of the owners and run the factory. The debate often centers on reform vs. revolution, on whether to work within the system or to overthrow it. The conversations often get quite technical. It is interesting that such a large number of the working population actually is aware of the revolutionary movement, its motivations and problems. This indicates that more people expect another revolution, soon, than one would think: 'But this time it will be a real one, we will go all the way, we will take it into our own hands, we won't let the social-democrats and the bureaucrats fuck

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it up, we won't give back the factories we occupy . . .' These words spoken by a young steelworker after one of our performances last week made us think that even theatre can lead to revolution – if that's what you really want it to do.