

## May 68 and the Society of the Spectacle, half a century later



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This year marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most important popular uprisings of the modern era, May '68. Ten million people occupied factories, universities and public buildings throughout the French hexagon, demanding broad and profound changes in social life, and causing, for more than a month, a complete stoppage of the normal functioning of the country's economy and politics. The french May '68 was the maximum expression of a spirit of popular rebellion and desire for freedom that erupted around the world in the late sixties: from the United States of America to Japan, through Mexico, Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia, regenerative social outbreaks arose everywhere.

Perhaps it is not by chance that the previous year, also in France, one of the most acute, revealing and significant social analysis books of the 20th century was published, *The Society of the Spectacle*. It is the seminal work of Guy Debord, writer, filmmaker and, above all, a revolutionary who founded and led the Situationist International, an organization of intellectuals and artists who renewed, promoted and updated the transformative project towards a new society of democratic and

libertarian roots. In the book, Debord studies, through 221 theses written with an abstract and synthetic language, how the dynamics of merchandise and bureaucracy become dynamics of distortion and massive manipulation during the 20th century.

During the past May of 2018 several acts and gestures of remembrance of May '68 were made, and I couldn't help but reflect again on a question that has been in my mind for some years, namely: What relevance and usefulness can it have, today, to remember the facts and ideas of 1968 and think about the theses of the Society of the Spectacle? In this short article there are some notes in response.

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Those who occupy the top of the social pyramid and who possess much more power than the vast majority of people have always used cheating, distraction and lies to promote their interests and protect established social structures. This is a historical evidence that naturally has often been hidden, but which, nevertheless, Machiavelli already starkly exposed in the sixteenth century; the Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, showed once again in his "11 principles of propaganda" in the twentieth century; and, in the 21st century, has been expressed with as much eloquence as cynicism in Robert Greene's bestseller, *The 48 Laws of Power*.

But, while domination has always been a focus of falsehood, it is not until the twentieth century that the old tricks of deception, distraction and lies reach an unprecedented scale, incidence and sophistication, to the point that practically all the dominant social belief system becomes falsified and the whole social order established, manipulated. Guy Debord is one of the most notable and sharp analysts of this phenomenon, which he designates with the notion of "Spectacle".

What exactly is the "Spectacle" and how does it operate?

When the public sphere is dominated by the big journalistic media, and these, in turn, are controlled by bureaucratic, cultural and mercantile elites, the news and opinion trends that appear in the *mass media* and the way in which they are approached, end up resembling a puppet theater where those who decide what the public perceives at each moment are moving the strings from the shadows, and what appears in the view of the people is essentially a spectacle.

Thus, the main objective of much of the news broadcasted by the *mass media*, its

*raison d'être*, is not to report the most important for citizens to be aware of the reality in a more or less objective way and enable them to take deliberate decisions and form contrasted opinions, as befits a democratic society. I wish it were so, but, today, this is merely the justifying and illusory ideology, the deceptive rhetoric of the Spectacle. Rather, the reality is that when we are informed with some news or when a new trend of opinion or debate on a certain topic is generated from a certain event, the primary objectives pursued are, as in every spectacle, first, *to distract and entertain* the viewers, and, second, to *make them feel and think* in a certain way.

Distracting and entertaining the population is like lubricating the gears of the contemporary state-mercantile system. It is essential for its proper functioning. That is why the Spectacle generates and amplifies problems of an insubstantial nature: it is necessary that the population be entertained by trying to solve them and thus remain distracted from the resolution of the really important problems, the fundamental and transcendental issues of contemporary society. Thus, the Spectacle is presented under a multiplicity of aspects (different political tendencies, contrasting lifestyles, conflicting conceptions, ...) to encourage viewers to make a judgment or choose one or the other of these alternatives. In this way, the fundamental social structures, the conventions of the dominant belief system, and the main interests of the powerful elites are not questioned or challenged by the spectators: they are too distracted by other issues that seem more important as they appear constantly in the Spectacle.

For the analyst and researcher Noam Chomsky, distraction is the primordial strategy of social control nowadays; the first reference in his article «The 10 Strategies of Mediatic Manipulation».

The importance of the distraction and entertainment of the population was also highlighted in 1995 by neoliberal ideologist and White House adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who coined the concept of *tittytainment* to designate a new form of entertainment that aims to deliberately sedate and appease the vast majority of the population. According to Brzezinski, it is necessary that the population does not cause disruptions in the established order, that is, that they don't think about important issues, that they don't organize outside the dominant system and that they don't act to substantially improve society. Thus, *tittytainment*, "[...] a mixture of mediocre and vulgar entertainment, intellectual rubbish, propaganda and psychological and physically nourishing elements that would satisfy the human being, would keep him conveniently sedated, perpetually anxious, submissive and subservient to the dictates of the minority that would decide its destiny" (Gabriel Sala, Pamphlet against human

stupidity), is an important tendency of the Spectacle, especially in the last decades.

But, just as important or even more than the *tittytainment* is the other fundamental objective of the Spectacle, namely: that spectators who are prone to think about political, ethical and social issues, think and feel in a certain way without being aware that their thinking and sentiment has been imbued and carefully directed through events generated by the Spectacle and comments orchestrated by the Spectacle. We can designate this tendency of the Spectacle with the term "social engineering" or "massive ideological and psychic manipulation".

While the majority belief today is that events first emerge and then become news, the reality, in my opinion, tends to be the other way around: very often it is the mass media that give rise to and make certain events possible, and very often the events are generated and directed, in a deliberate as well as hidden way, in order to give rise to certain news and debates that, in turn, imbue a certain feeling and/or thought in the population of spectators.

Actually, the effective social reality and the Spectacle are strongly intertwined. This is how Debord explains it in a lucid passage: «One cannot abstractly contrast the spectacle to actual social activity: such a division is itself divided. The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the support of the existing society.»

In other words, the Spectacle inverts and shapes the consciousness of the spectators and makes them accomplices of a distorted reality. The triumph of the Spectacle is the realization of what Malcolm X warned already in the 1950s: «If you aren't careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.»

In summary, the fundamental purpose of the media Spectacle is always to generate certain effects in the spectator without him being aware of this primordial purpose of what he is seeing, hearing, reading or what he is participating in. The Society of the Spectacle is a form of society in which the main social relations are strongly conditioned or directly driven by the Spectacle.

But the Spectacle is not an exclusive phenomenon of the mass media. Although this constitutes its main focus, the Spectacle goes further. It intrudes in the individual life, in the personal psychic experience, generating dynamics in which we ourselves live as an spectacle, that is, dynamics in which it is more important the appearance than the being. For example, when a person is traveling and is more concerned about the pictures and comments that they share on the social media than for the quality of their experience and their interaction with their surrounds, we can say, without a doubt, that the Spectacle has interfered in his personal life. This is how that was stated by Guy Debord in 1967: "Social life has suffered the decline of being in having, and of having in simply appearing".

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May 68, in its best aspects, can be considered an anti-spectacular revolt. Although the dynamics of the Spectacle naturally did not cease to operate and influence the events at any time, an important part of the French population managed to question the whole social order, distancing itself from the tendencies of the Spectacle and opening the doors of a substantially more authentic way of life.

And this is probably the most important thing of May 68. That's why this is a historical phenomenon that, half a century later, should be remembered and reflected upon. Although today we can develop (r)evolutionary approaches that are more comprehensive, accurate and mature than those of 1968 and we are able to carry out experiences that surpass the one of then in several aspects, there are, nevertheless, some elements that emerged with force in that memorable spring that we should be very aware of, and, as much as possible, recover and cultivate to conceive and put into practice the (r)evolutionary processes of the 21st century.

It was not about routine demonstrations or vindicating strikes in 1968. And, despite the ingenuity of much of the movement, it was not a mere revolt of young dreamers. Nor was it, as some claim, the opening party of the New Social Movements: environmentalism, the hippie counterculture and other emerging trends had a certain role in the events -they were not its protagonists. And, undoubtedly, 1968 was not a mobilization encouraged and remote-controlled from the mass media, as there have been some in recent years.

May 1968, despite its shortcomings, immaturities and mistakes, was a *great*

*revolutionary attempt*, which, in its best aspects, reminds us that, whether as a society, or as individuals, we can disconnect, we can emancipate ourselves, we can liberate... from the dynamics of the Spectacle. As we do it, we encounter several difficulties, no doubt, but we also achieve a more authentic life, that is, a more lively and invigorating life.

«*Plutôt la VIE*».

Blai Dalmau Solé  
Alt Empordà, 23th of November 2018

