

# Movements in Time



Movements in Time:  
Revolution, Social Justice and Times of Change

Edited by

Cecile Lawrence and Natalie Churn

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Edited by Cecile Lawrence and Natalie Churn

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# INTRODUCTION

NATALIE CHURN AND CECILE LAWRENCE

The year 2011 marked a notable increase in the global turn towards acts of and ideas about revolution, not the least with the amazing and unexpected participation by people in the U.S. in the form of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The dominance of Western culture and media was reflected in the categorisation of the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and other nations as “the Arab Spring.” Perceptions about revolution can have a wide influence not only in cases of national self-determination but also in terms of how we conceptualise time and our place within history. Yet revolution does not take part only on the national stage: radical social change is constantly being called for globally on the levels of gender, race and class, reflecting a future-oriented view of time that aims to change the thrust of history.

Merely looking into the future is itself a limited way of evaluating approaches through which we can create a more just society. The concept of revolution recalls alternative notions of time, such as the cyclical movements of celestial bodies, suggesting that inherent to the notion of revolution is the idea of repetition of what has already been, and the question as to whether humanity can learn from history, or even perceive plural histories and multiple possibilities for the future. This collection of essays brings together not only discussions on revolutions as social protests and movements that aim to bring about radical political, social and economic transformation; but also essays on industrial revolutions; the need for revolutions in ways of thinking, stereotyping and perceiving; revolutions in technology; in human labour time; and even in the ways in which theory itself can be revolutionary.

Crucial to all of these conceptions of change is how we come to understand time in relation to revolution: as history, as cycle, as arrow, as a series of moments to be seized, as a social construction that we can manipulate, or as something maintained by a political system to control us. Time in revolution is at once opportunity and constraint, yet it is in time that changes occur, and thus time becomes a tool, a vessel through which social change and a more just society can be thought and acted upon.

Philosophers have long critiqued the patriarchal, linear notion of time reflected in national narratives and teleological worldviews, which often function only to reinforce the status quo. Marx himself calls for an end to temporal limitations, while Negri considers the possibilities of *kairos* time, and Deleuze and Guattari focus on the importance of becoming. The concept of becoming is crucial when considering revolutions after the year 2000, with the millennial anxieties around the turning of the century, leading up to more intense apprehension about the Mayan calendar ending in 2012 contorted into U.S. fundamentalist Christian ideas about The End of Times complete with The Rapture. The notions of messianic time featured in Agamben and Benjamin presage these anxieties and anticipations.

Reorienting such thinkers' ideas for current situations, the essays in this volume seek to rupture Western modernity's standardized, patriarchal conception of time, radically intervening in dominant ideas of teleology and linearity. They consider instead marginalised and creative understandings of time, such as the alternative notions of temporality that have been put forward by non-Western belief systems. Indigenous cosmologies, for instance, portray time as cyclical, while Buddhism separates time into tiny moments or even offers possibilities of transcending time.

Time is thus not simply socially constructed notions of clock time and linear conceptions of history, but rather is an encounter that differs according to human experience. Julia Kristeva's work on women's time, for example, outlines the cyclical temporalities and subjective experiences unique to women, while Robert Levine suggests that climate can have an effect on the pace of life in various countries, although postcolonial writers have critiqued this perspective as problematic. Literary, postcolonial and media studies conceive time as something that can be reversed or stopped altogether, portraying history as plural and emphasising the subversive and oppressive facets of time ideologies. Nations are held together by popular conceptions of shared times which often function to exclude minorities and repress their actual histories, while class antagonisms are partly characterised through ideas of productive time, exchange value and leisure time.

This book explores the importance of alternative philosophical and theoretical understandings of time for radical politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Essays within various disciplines, as well as essays that make connections between two or more disciplines, rework several philosophical concepts of the time of revolution and apply those concepts to the concerns of social change. The goal is to determine which ideas are still relevant and which must be adapted in order to address the ever-changing political conditions

and situations of social inequality. The growing interconnections between academic disciplines and between theory and practice have to a large extent been neglected by modern scholarship. Many of the essays in the book cut across several disciplines, presenting an accessible introduction to the work of key thinkers covered in specific pieces, whilst also breaking down barriers between disciplines that can be somewhat forbidding to the non-specialist.

*Movements in Time: Revolution, Social Justice and Times of Change* explores case studies that consider ways in which ideologies of time and alternative temporalities can be (or are already) useful for solving conflicts and exposing and overcoming stereotypes and boundaries created around questions of gender, race, ethnicity and socio-economic inequality. Time-perception is often used as a tool for marginalisation, but the alternative temporalities of the subaltern may also provide a way out of current restrictive policies around the world. With a focus on time as an element of radical activism, this book asks: how can visions of the future and the past, becoming time, untimely time, protest time and political time be implemented both theoretically and practically in order to change the way in which time functions as a vital element of social, political and cultural revolution?

Part I examines the relationship between time, revolution and protest, bringing together essays that consider the power of the protester to bring about social change, but also the extent to which protest itself is governed by concepts of time. Christian Garland's opening chapter explores the historical memory of the May 1968 rebellion in France and the eventful year of 1968 itself through the lens of Walter Benjamin's conception of history. Placing the May 1968 fortieth anniversary events within the context of more recent social protests worldwide, he argues that the memory of May 1968 is an animating force that constantly returns to invigorate present protests with the spirit of past social struggles, such that the past, rather than remaining a mere nostalgic memory, becomes a source of action and hope.

Examining activists themselves from a more empirical point of view, Kamilla Pietrzyk evaluates the results of a study on Canadian activists' understandings of and relationships with time. These results, when explored in the context of what the activists are fighting against—globalisation, capitalism and environmental damage—suggest that protesters themselves are not immune from the controlling time concepts of 21<sup>st</sup> century society. She highlights the importance of time management skills for activists, as well as the effect that past- or future-oriented mentalities could have on the success of activism.

John Streamas explores the invention of “colored people’s time” (CPT) as a means through which people of colour could survive oppression and even use time as a force for creativity and resistance. Relating CPT to revolution, he suggests that these concepts of time may be useful for theorising movements such as Occupy in that they present alternate visions of history and the future. CPT releases people of colour from the oppressive linearity of history, enabling grassroots versions of history and giving communities, rather than individuals, the tools with which to create futures. In this way, Streamas argues, people of colour have an important role to play in the Occupy movement.

Concluding the discussion of protest time in Part I, Maria Prodromou considers the relevance of Lyotard’s politics of resistance for the radical politics of the Occupy movement. She suggests that the logic of exchange in capitalism must be broken in order to free the present from its dependence on the future, interrupting the oppressive temporality of capitalism. This can be seen in the examples of the People’s Library and the provision of free food in occupied Zuccotti Park, where people can meet and protest together in moments freed from the future and thus moments where future events are yet to be determined.

Part II presents three essays on the importance of Deleuze’s theory of becoming, from the Eternal Return, to the privileged position of women in regard to transformation, to the technique of resisting the present, concluding with an exploration of nostalgia and retrospective views in relation to the future. Concepts of the past, the present and the future frame our understanding of change and revolution, and it is from the idea that nothing is fixed but rather constantly “becoming” that social transformation can be perceived and enacted. Applying Deleuze’s concept of “becoming” to history itself, Allison Merrick considers the importance for Deleuze of Nietzsche’s Eternal Return, arguing that this refers not to the cyclical repetition of the past but rather a return of the Dissimilar, giving the past a redemptive potential. She argues that it is this virtual excess of that which has not yet happened which provides the conditions for revolution.

Anupa Batra considers Deleuze’s concept of “becoming-woman” as revolutionary as it aims to bring about a transformation in the way our whole existence is structured. Following Deleuze, she argues for a move away from the concept of gender itself, which shapes so much of Western thought, suggesting that subject-forms are repressive and that it is in the process of becoming, rather than subjectivity, that creativity in life can be found. Suggesting that women are in a privileged position in regard to bringing about transformations in structures of thought, she explores

becoming-woman as the process in which this revolutionary exit from gender, and other oppressive categories of Western thought, could occur.

Also following Deleuze, Bryan Nelson explores the revolutionary possibility of resisting the present in order to bring about a new earth and new people. He claims that philosophy, with its task of creating new forms of thought and a future different from the past, has a role in this resistance of the now by rendering democracy's becomings thinkable. Becoming-democratic opens a space for minorities in its function of becoming-minoritarian, challenging the abstract, majoritarian logic of democracy. Becoming-democratic should not be conceived of in relation to an impossible future, but rather only in our resistance to the conditions of the present, in the hope of creating an entirely other, possibly more democratic future.

In Rochelle Green's contribution, nostalgia, as a kind of homesickness for the past, can be influenced by judgements of present conditions and thus used to support an active turning towards an unrealistically glorified past, as is often seen in extreme politics. In her analysis of the nature of nostalgia as a full emotion in relation to concepts of hope in the work of Ernst Bloch, she asserts the importance of hope as revolutionary time. She argues that hope, despite its ideological similarity to nostalgia, involves a different understanding of time that is not afraid to look ahead; a radical concept of time that asserts the potential of the future in the present, thus providing a revolutionary mentality with which we can work to overcome exploitation and alienation.

Part III explores Untimely Time, namely times which may be deemed by those in power as a form of threat or subversion, as embodied in the concept of revolution. Natalie Churn considers the Australian example of contradictory notions of "bogan" time. She suggests that the hypocritical stereotyping of classes based on how they use time functions to reinforce existing social hierarchies. Leisure time is scorned when enjoyed by the working classes, yet at the same time leisure forms an integral part of the Australian stereotype. While carnivalesque times in the Australian calendar allow for these hierarchies to be briefly exposed, social movements should make overcoming these working class time stereotypes a major part of their agenda by making public the real questions behind the stereotypes.

Time stereotypes are also a major concern for Dalbir Sehmy, who discusses the stereotyping of Sikhs following the 9/11 World Trade Centre bombings. The Sikhs' memory of the 12<sup>th</sup> of September as the anniversary of Sikh bravery in the Battle of Saragarhi has been corrupted by stereotypes and violence based on the turbaned image of Osama bin Laden, reinforcing the Western view of the Sikh male as associated with

temporal concepts of primitivism and dirtiness rather than progress and civilisation. While Sikh beliefs emphasise moving with the flow of time, Western ideologies of terrorism and fear emphasise cycles of hate and the control of time. Sehmby thus calls for more inquiry into plural visions of time in order to counter the momentum of hate and discourage future cycles of violence and stereotyping.

Amanda Conroy suggests that the Western right-wing movements responsible for much of this hate and stereotyping attempt to create an alternative historical trajectory based on nostalgic nationalism, essentially reversing time and characterizing themselves as the saviours of history. She identifies the white male as the majority member of these movements. Her essay reinforces the need for change, just as 21<sup>st</sup> century revolutions have been cognizant of the need to confront and engage with the effects of centuries of patriarchy.

Alison Hulme describes China as embodying two contrasting visions of time: Western perceptions of a fast-growing economy and a huge-scale industrial revolution conflict with the “slower” traditions of Confucianism and communism. Yet China’s fast revolutionary time can only be enjoyed as long as China does not exert too much power on the world stage. As far as the West is concerned, the path towards capitalist democracy has already been written, reflecting a logic that believes all aspects of change follow Western neo-liberal logic. On the other hand, Hulme suggests we should view this interweaving of fast development and slower foundations as forging a unique path to social change that is being negotiated from both above and below.

Returning to the Occupy movement, Enqi Weng considers that Singaporean attempts at Occupy Raffles Place did not succeed partly because, despite many Singaporeans’ discontent with the government, the protestors had no long-term plan for change to back up their protest. She explores the popularity of Wikipolitics, suggesting that the making of important political decisions cannot necessarily keep up with the increasing speed of technology and social network activism. She thus warns that revolutionary protest, especially when encouraged through social media, should also take into account the long-term implications of bringing about fast change in a world where decision making is still governed by the human need to ponder wisely.

Part IV encompasses essays that consider the different ways in which politics and history can be explored from various philosophical or political perspectives. The first two essays focus on capitalist labour time as a source of struggle and as something to be overcome in order to create a



more just world, while the next three contributions consider history, progress and ideas of “perfecting” time from a range of perspectives.

Considering Antonio Negri’s argument that capitalism conceives of time in terms of productivity, Bradley Kaye theorises unproductive time as not only a form of resistance but also of empowerment for marginal groups. He suggests that subjects labelled disabled or mad are excluded from work and other aspects of society as a result of capitalism’s ideologies about work. Using the example of the active refusal of work in Hermann Melville’s novella *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, he connects this unproductive time with Negri’s conception of Love. With the possibilities of advancing technology positing a revolutionary shift in the mode of production, a future metrics of time may be possible where unproductive time does not mean the exclusion of marginal groups.

Revolutions and protests around the world have highlighted the precarious situations of many people and peoples in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Alexander Brown explores precarity as a temporal phenomenon where not only the time of labour but also the other, social times of life are exploited for capital. Using Negri’s concept of liberated time as a departure point, he suggests that it is in the present moment that revolution must liberate time from capital. Drawing on examples from the 2011 revolutionary movements, he argues that revolution is not an event situated in the future but rather a way through which the potentiality of the present can be realised. This liberated temporality is being realized daily in struggles on the streets, despite the ruling classes’ attempts to deny the people their own future.

Brad D. Hume takes an agnostic position, arguing that messianic time necessitates a kind of weak teleology that foresees the possibility of humans creating a more just world in the face of current conditions. He sees the abundance and technological innovations of today as not necessarily leading to more justice and equality. Hume suggests that late modernity attempts to prevent revolution by promoting the myth of free-market economics as non-political, whereas in reality change is not given a chance as it threatens those in power. History may well provide a crisis which will bring about revolution, but by then it will be too late. Thus we must critically examine the material production of the world today if we are to find a way to make the world a more just place.

M.F.N. Giglioli explores the relevance for the early 21<sup>st</sup> century of the writings of two nineteenth-century thinkers, Georges Sorel and Vilfredo Pareto. Despite their many differences, both promoted political theories that downgraded the importance of political change and the concept of

modern society, positing progress as an ideological myth. Giglioli considers the relevance of their writings for thinkers at the turn of the century who announced the end of history. Both thinkers represent two differing yet similar attempts to problematize the perception of revolution as constituting a fundamental break with history. Sorel questions the value of duration as a mark of success and sees revolutionary politics in the glorious instants of collective action, while Pareto maintains that a necessary condition of an intellectually defensible investigation in social matters is a radical separation between theory and practice.

Taking a theophilosophical standpoint, Christos Retoulas argues that understanding revolutions and their relation to time necessitates an inter-encapsulating approach. He describes progressivism as a mere palliative of the modernist economic system in capitalism and argues that as a result of enlightenment, the right and left remain in a state of deep fusion. Exploring the concepts of *aeon* and *chronos*, he suggests ecumenical Romanity as an example of an incommensurable revolutionary path. He argues that revolution is not just about structures and forms but also functions on a deeply personal level.

The essays in Part V present various revolutionary possibilities for creating or expanding time, as well as new ways of viewing or understanding time in order to bring about social change. Łukasz Kamiński identifies the increasing speed of technology as a phenomenon with which the human body cannot keep up, a deficit that is being countered by the growing use of drugs that enhance mental performance and remove the need to sleep for several days. Yet our obsession with finding extra time to be productive signals a problem for human freedom in a society that is increasingly coming to reflect the drugged worlds of dystopian novels. This chapter examines whether such ideas of physically cheating time are being (or will be) forced on workers, what the implications of such a future could be, and whether organized resistance is required to prevent this.

Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson consider the possibility of utopia as a temporal phenomenon with implications for social change. Through an investigation of the positions of Deleuze, Benjamin, Negri, Agamben and Bonanno, who all locate the experience of revolution in the present, they argue that revolution must have a temporal utopian dimension if it is to overcome the entrapment of modern societies within the homogeneous empty time of capitalism. Revolutionary theory must restore the subjective aspect of time and advance multiple temporal zones over linear teleologies if it is to overcome the homogenizing tendencies of time in capitalism.

Identifying some of the problems of the tendency towards present-mindedness in today's world, Linda Levitt discusses the Clock of the Long Now as a symbolic representation designed to remind viewers of the importance of thinking about the future in the present, thus creating a "long now." She suggests that environmental issues and problems of inequality must be conceived within a deep time perspective if we are to save humanity from its own destruction. She calls for a revolution in thinking about time, and while the Clock of the Long Now may be merely representative, its makers emphasise the importance of a hopeful, future-oriented mentality in order to bring about social change.

Martin Savransky explores the relationship between modern, Western scientific knowledge as based on dualities of subject-object and nature-culture, and the scientific, historically linear conception of temporality which informs it. He argues that the present of this modern temporality is in fact destabilised and betrayed by the many hybrid temporalities which inhabit it, by an ecology of temporalities. He suggests we can envision a non-modern notion of revolution as a constructive, creative event that does not prescribe a radical break with the past but rather a rearrangement of the relations between entities, knowledge-practices and their multiple temporalities into new, unanticipated configurations.

In Part VI, the essays look at particular examples or scenarios when considering the notions of time necessary to understand and enact revolution. Considering the 2011 revolutions in some Arabic-speaking countries through the lens of Benjaminian thought, Antoine Chollet suggests that revolutions must abandon the homogeneous, empty, future-oriented time of progress of the oppressors in order to bring about change in the present. He suggests that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were not planned with an outlook to the future in terms of defining a future form of government but only aimed to overthrow the current regime, focusing on a "now-time." Acknowledging that abandoning ideas of the future and progress can result in new regimes of terror (as in the case of the Paris Commune), Chollet argues that many revolutions may not have happened at all if people had deliberated on the future consequences of radical shifts in power.

Moving away from two dominant concepts of time in revolution, namely the Hegelian idea of time as future-oriented or Benjamin's messianic time as suspended or frozen in an eternal present, Tania Rispoli proposes a third possibility that describes the specific temporality of 21<sup>st</sup> century struggles. She views time as related to the flexible, contingent nature of things—each event has its own time. In this conception, the time of revolution is governed by the logic of encounter, but also results from

the intersection of different times. Rispoli describes the idea of a federation of independent times which she proposes could change the mode of production and create new times of life.

Thomas Pieragastini continues the book's exploration of the relationship between time and revolution by posing some important questions about the place of theory when talking about real revolution. As many historical revolutions have resulted in police states that were as controlling and terrifying as those that they sought to overthrow, he asks what it is about the concept of revolution that comprises its inherent tendency towards autodestruction. He identifies this failure as a temporal issue in that the material amplification of conflict occurs in material moments with real effects, whereas the non-particular conceptualization of revolution itself is an atemporal notion, and it is in the conflation of these two manifestations that the autodestruction of the revolutionary project presents itself. The attempt to materialize atemporal concepts in material moments must be abandoned: revolution must be separated from teleology, in order to avoid setting up revolution again for failure.

Using the example of the Mau Mau revolution, Mickie Mwanzia Koster draws a comparison between African time, which is said to emphasise the past and present yet has the aim of transforming the future, and revolutionary time, which also aspires to a new vision of the future. She suggests that the oath rituals of Mau Mau warriors opened portals to the past through which warriors could be connected to their ancestors, but also emphasised the urgency of addressing the present aims of the revolution. This subaltern, African treatment of time and revolution is significant when considered in the greater context of the "Arab Spring" events of 2011 and 2012, especially for interpretations of power and protest not covered by the Western media.

Placing Carl Schmitt, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Derrida in conversation with each other, Lewis Levenberg considers the importance of the intersections of their thought as well as their silences for addressing political and temporal problems. Identifying three streams of focus in this dialectic relationship—alterity, aesthetics, and futurity—he argues that these delineate the conditions required to consider revolution in its historical context. Levenberg suggests that it is only at the limits of this discourse that revolutionary shifts in historical perspective can be conceived, as the exceptional ruptures in modernity, or revolutions, transform our conceptions of temporality, modernity and reason into the very rules of politics.

Concluding these discussions on time and revolution, Cecile Lawrence explores the nature and genesis of the Occupy Wall Street movement in

the U.S. She concludes that after progressives in that country had come close to giving up on there ever being any movement against the increasing amount of economic, social and political assaults being perpetrated against the country's residents, people rose up in a manner that ironically reflected the very strategies of the indoctrinations to which they began to object. The people were sent an "order," so to speak, to "occupy" a specific place at a specific time and they did, so as to reject Capital's decades long orders to the people as to where to be, what to do and at what time.

The chapters summarised above conceive of time and revolution in multiple, complementary and contrasting ways. Yet it is precisely this multiplicity of views and treatments that form the strength of this collection. As an undercurrent that flows through and connects human life on so many levels, time is at once both hidden and controlling, reminding us that the moment of change must be seized before time itself, our creation, escapes us, or that to enact change we must escape or recreate time, or do something totally new with time. There has never been a better time to consider how ancient and modern, philosophical, indigenous and marginal conceptions of time and temporality might be employed in a quest to reconcile alternative histories, and to bring about radical social change.



# **PART I**

## **PROTEST TIME**





# A SECRET HELIOTROPISM OF MAY '68: HISTORICAL POSTPONEMENT, MIMESIS, AND NOSTALGIA

CHRISTIAN GARLAND

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined or spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt. . . . They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude. They have a retroactive force and will constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism, the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history.

—Walter Benjamin

Graffiti from the 2006 revolt in France, which defeated the proposed CPE (*Contrat Première Embauche*) allowing employers to fire younger employees more easily and without reason given, put it best: “Groping for the lost thread, humanity will rediscover itself” (Bureau of Public Secrets 2006). This chapter will seek to offer a critical and historical indictment of the fortieth anniversary recollections of the events of May 1968 in France, recalled as one such process of nostalgic commemoration or recreation.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Walter Benjamin noted, “Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our existence has assigned us” ([1940] 1999, 245).

The events themselves are of key historical and political significance, remaining to this day an image of the future that brings to mind Marx’s “spectre that is haunting Europe” ([1848] 2004, 3). The events were the first major rebellion “against modern consumer and technical society,” as

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<sup>1</sup> For the best first-hand participant accounts of the events of May 1968, see Brinton (1968) 2005; Gregoire and Perlman (1970) 2005; Quatrocchi and Nairn 1998; Vienet 1992. Good critical analyses and reflections include Feenberg, Freedman and Kellner 2001; and Willener 1970, which also include documents of the time, unavailable elsewhere.

President de Gaulle noted with some trepidation at the time (quoted in Vignet 1992, ch. 8). May '68 also offers what might be called “a secret heliotropism,” to use Benjamin’s words ([1940] 1999, 246), mapping a topography of moments between past and present and, it will be argued in the course of this paper, the appearance of a weak messianism—the recurring return of the repressed. In the course of this paper it will be further contended that nostalgia, while it can be reassuring, is indeed always illusory: in its false sense of security as much as in its retrogressive narrative in which is found not so much a *temps perdu*, but a circumnavigation of the past, a substitute for remaking the present and creating the future: a future that breaks with that version of history assigned for us, which as Marx observed “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living”(Marx [1852] 2010, ch. 1).

With each successive decade that is added to “remembering” the events of May 1968, there seems to be a renewed effort to banish the awareness of their real historical meaning, but even as this sets out to explain the past, it denies it, seeking instead to offer an assurance that cannot be guaranteed. The affirmation of the present, the existent, aims to recognise a vision of the past, but only one in its own image imputed with its own conditions and demands—as can only be expected. Reviewing the anniversary commemorations taking place from the safety of 2008, one could be forgiven for believing the events under discussion to not in fact be “the concern of history” but a clichéd retrospective of distant events apparently unconnected with the present, the meaning of which cannot be grasped or understood. An attempt to counter this version of events might take as its standpoint Benjamin’s maxim that nothing that has ever happened can be regarded as lost for history, discerning in the smug commentaries and chiding op-ed pieces, the obligatory testimonies of wondrous left-to-right journeys and conversions, a definite discomfort that despite their own gloating reassurances, what happened across France in May 1968 could happen again, that however much they would seek to sanctify and eternalize the present, history demands otherwise.

## **2010 and 2011: The Global Return of the Repressed and the Unsettled Score of History**

2010 and 2011 marked a radical shift in perspective for the social subject. This could be seen as a generational realisation and revolt, though those who remember the similarly diffuse and radical searching of the 1968 revolts for a non-doctrinaire practice have seen more than a few similarities.

From 2010 and especially 2011 onwards, social rebellion has appeared and ignited across the world, and a direct historical line can be traced to that of May 1968. From the UK student protests of November and December 2010 to the momentous “Arab Spring” that opened 2011 by toppling at least two entrenched dictatorships, to the global Occupy movement (Kingsley and Gabbatt 2011) which began with Occupy Wall Street and spread to over 900 cities and saw thousands of protests worldwide closing the year, the spurious notion that rebellion and contestation of the conditions of existence is “from another time,” has been conclusively debunked across the globe. In the UK, 2010 closed with mass student protests destroying both the image of contentment and passivity of a generation and literally Conservative Party HQ. In England in August 2011, riots erupted in Tottenham, a poor area of north London, after the death of yet another black man at the hands of armed police, before spreading like wildfire to more than forty areas of the UK capital, and then virtually every major city and a number of smaller places over the nights of 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> August.<sup>2</sup> In the intervening six months since and following major studies into the disturbances, the overriding reasons for involvement from participants have been anger at their experience of social deprivation, poverty, and police repression.<sup>3</sup> At the time, these rebellions were dismissed as nihilistic looting and “not political,” but the accounts of many of those involved give a different perspective on what happened. These voices, of the ignored and the invisible, also warn of “more to come” this year and in the years ahead.<sup>4</sup>

Moving to a global context, Occupy has succeeded in throwing into glaring contrast the widespread discontent with a global system which in the movement’s famously direct words, cares only about “the 1%” of billionaires—the capitalist class—and which sees “the 99%” merely as dispensable and disposable labour to be exploited for profit, so far as their labour is needed at all. Occupy is especially significant for spreading *globally*: the commonalities of different people unifying and linking their particular experiences in particular locations—superficially at great distances from each other, but compressed across space and time and virtually overcome by the unified linkage of struggles. The Occupy Movement remains unbowed and undefeated as an ongoing developmental

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<sup>2</sup> See Garland 2011 and Harper 2011 for more detailed analyses of the events.

<sup>3</sup> For analyses on the causes of the riots, see Lewis et al. 2011b; the video by Afshar et al. 2011; Jackson and Jeffrey 2011; and Prasad 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Such voices sometimes find an audience in the news media. See for instance the articles in *The Guardian* by Lewis et al. 2011a and Dodd 2011 regarding both riot participants’ and a police chief’s warnings regarding the future.

process of 2012, while the harshness of winter—just like the harshness of state responses—means a relative but only temporary hiatus to re-group for the spring and summer ahead.

Occupy may have come seemingly “from out of nowhere”—as social rebellions frequently appear to—but as the subterranean material forces which manifested in this and other faces of social rebellion are themselves the return of the repressed in history: the class struggle, struggles around gender, ethnicity and sexuality and other fights against oppressive social relations of all kinds, *never went away*, there has been no end of history, and there never will be however much the apologists and defenders of this present “state-of-things” may wish in vain that there were.

Elsewhere, the rebellion spoken of here has manifested in the outright refusal of and resistance to the “necessity” for austerity measures to shift the burden for the ongoing crisis of capitalism back onto society in order to try to maintain profitability following the first paroxysms of 2007-08, illuminating the gloom of trying to survive under such “painful but inevitable” conditions of precarious material survival and submission to such an order-of-things. As Mike Davis has noted,

As the fates of previous *journées révolutionnaires* warn us, spring is the shortest of seasons, especially when the communards fight in the name of a ‘different world’ for which they have no real blueprint or even idealised image. . . . It’s a frighteningly long road just to reach the starting points of earlier attempts to build a new world. But a new generation has at least bravely initiated the journey. (2011)

The rebellions of 2011, in some of its specific manifestations winningly referred to by Davis as the “‘hot’ Iberian and Hellenic summers,” and “the ‘occupied’ fall in the United States” (2011) have been conspicuous in their militancy but also the absence of doctrinaire party lines and ready-made ideologies. The many media and academic critics of these specific faces of the rebellion have dismissed them as lacking any clear programme or defined alternative, but have also paradoxically tried to dismiss them for their non-ideological “incoherence,” as if previous revolts, such as those of 1968, were defined by Communist Parties or Trotskyist sects. The somewhat inchoate nature of the rebellions in Europe, and indeed the Occupy Movement, can be seen as a mark of their authenticity, however, which Rosa Luxemburg understood as the way in which such social rebellion develops and takes its own form through spontaneity, noting “the spontaneous element has played such a predominant role not because the . . . proletariat is ‘unschooled,’ but because the revolution can’t be school-mastered” (quoted in Frölich [1939] 2010).

It is no small coincidence that this worldwide revolt should appear at the same time as life is becoming that much harsher for so many, with populations told by their governments that they can only hope things might get better by first enduring yet more prolonged social suffering. This is the reality behind such apparently unfortunate facts as unemployment, cuts, and indeed, all “austerity” measures: in order that a minority with much to lose can keep all of it and accumulate yet more, the majority with nothing to lose must be made to suffer further still. To be sure, many, in fact most of the 1% also want to change existing society, though certainly not in the way hoped for by the 99%—the overwhelming majority. What is meant by this is that even as this system enters further crisis, the 1% want interventions by the state and others to better adapt to the imperatives of capital and sustain profitability at all costs. In practice this means all remaining social threads unpicked, all collective social goods eliminated, and for the 99% to suffer even more austerity for even longer, leaving an even more fragmented, atomised and “flexible” army of precarious, hireable and fireable labour so far as it is required at all; the state maintaining this order through force at all times, ideally with as many as possible believing this to be natural, inevitable and most of all a “painful but necessary” adjustment to the “reality” of 2012. The rebellious social body fragmented and disorientated by more than 30 years of neoliberal hegemony, and the re-composition of class relations, demands otherwise however: “For this is the sound of the quick that is heard in the ears of the dead” (Swinburne 1860, line 2). None of these individual manifestations of social rebellion are by themselves enough to bring about the social revolution, however authentic they are, and however much they may strive to, but they are the recurring and jarring reminder to the (temporary) and imagined victors of history that their own version of events remains in question, that their days of plenty are numbered, and that their world will not last.

### **May 1968 to the Twenty-First Century “Time-of-the-Now” (*Jetztzeit*)**

The rebellions of the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century marked the re-appearance of a rupture of the “homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin [1940] 1999, 252-253) playing out the hollow continuum of the would-be Masters of the Universe, and their supposedly untouchable world. In such rebellions can be discerned a definite chronicity back to May '68 and its as-yet unfulfilled promises. The significance of May '68 should not be ascribed solely to the events

themselves but in how this connects to the intervening four decades and their chronicity with the present, if we are to develop our understanding of it and once more find that historical moment of “rupture” in the continuum of what passes for history, which as Marx famously observed “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” ([1852] 2010, ch. 1). Indeed it seems a grasp and sense of history is vital if we are to make sense of our present situation, which is, of course, the starting point for contestation over the form of life that we all live, and, to a great degree, are forced to live in our own era.

“May 1968” continues to provide a unique example for those wishing to understand contemporary history in the context of a revolutionary rupture, which called into question every aspect of life under late capitalism. The movement of occupations, strikes and “action committees”—at its high point encompassing more than 10 million people—no less than the sense of joyful festivity lucidly expressed in poetic graffiti, and passionate revolt expressed in riots amid the inverted architecture of barricaded streets, remains the largest-scale and furthest-reaching social revolt of its kind in recent memory. The events are often misleadingly referred to simply as “student protests” as if the rest of French society merely watched itself be consumed by revolution from the safety of their TV screens. The “explosion” of May 1968—to use President De Gaulle’s own description—may have found its initial spark in the student revolt, but only in so far as this was symptomatic of the underlying tensions in wider French society. May 1968 also comprehensively debunked the myth that in the affluent society of purchase power and technocratic efficiency, the concept of class struggle was all but dead. Indeed, it may be argued that prior to May 1968, consumer capitalism had few real critics outside the group of thinkers loosely referred to as the “Frankfurt School,” or in the equally unsparing theory of the Situationists, whose trenchant critical diagnoses were largely overlooked until they found direct expression on the streets during the month of May. Of course, a number of those associated with the “’68 Generation,” came to refer to the events as a turning point in the sense that they lost hope in the possibility of revolutionary social change, and the development and subsequent dominance of postmodern and post-structuralist thought in France during the 1970s can be seen as indicative of this. The May 1968 rebellion illustrated the ability of a significant number of the population to take direct control of their own lives through collective action. It also demonstrated the spontaneous power of mass social revolt unencumbered by the proclamations of parties and political game playing.