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MAY 1968: ANTICOLONIAL REVOLUTION FOR A DECOLONIAL FUTURE

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Algeria
anticolonialism
end of history
France
May '68
postmodernism
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In this essay I argue May '68 was (1) in its way an anticolonial revolution, since it was directed against a President and government that had been imposed on France ten years previously by the colons of Algeria; (2) the visible staging of an epistemological break that has marked the contemporary era in which the grounds of knowledge have been switched from history to the spatialized present, from western epistemology based on the linearity of script to the spatialized iconic mode of the image, from diachronic to synchronic forms of understanding.

Confession: I am a *soixante-huitard*, a child of May '68, or perhaps more accurately its product. I was there, in Paris in May 1968, roaming the streets of the Latin Quarter. You will not see me in the photographs of demonstrators lined up in solidarity on the front rows of those opposing

the CRS; I was a bystander, seventeen, just out of high school, watching, coughing from the tear gas, fascinated with the revolutionary spectacle that was unfolding before me. I had gone to Paris in January 1968 to take the Cours de civilisation française at the Sorbonne. The course in French civilization that I was offered over the next few months as the Sorbonne was occupied and taken over for the purposes of revolutionary debate was rather different from the one that had been officially planned. It certainly changed me, and in a profound sense constituted the foundational experience of my own intellectual life. But I want to argue it also formed the site that in some sense provided the *mise-en-scène* for a larger ideological transformation in western thinking; indeed, that it constituted the end of the history of western epistemology as such.

May '68 is still often dismissed by many on the left, and right, as nothing more than a carnivalesque student eruption – a description in fact taken straight from the disapproving conservative reaction of the French Communist Party at the time. Or rather that was what they said at first: they soon changed their tune and clambered on board. May '68 is generally viewed from the perspective of the event that it became, or did not become, not from the events that created it: the most notable thing that I encountered on arrival in Paris was that every time I went to the Sorbonne for my classes, I had to manoeuvre around the many demonstrations, *manifestations*, that were being held in the streets against the Vietnam War (after class, we would then join them). May '68 began as a *tiersmondiste* event. Along with Nanterre, it happened mostly in the Quartier Latin, which at that time was a little third-world itself, full of Vietnamese, Algerians, and West Africans, and their lively cafes and restaurants. Into this mix, the political and theoretical ferment of May '68 was animated by the populist politics of the contemporary Cultural Revolution in China: “nous sommes le pouvoir” (*we are power*), as the slogan put it. If May '68 is still associated with slogans, it is because the slogan was its own irreversible iconic form.

The anticolonial revolution

May '68 in France involved a multiple, complex set of events which have ever since been caught in the process of being reinterpreted from decade to decade, irreducible to the single catch-all explanations of any era (no doubt including this one). Moreover, May '68 was embedded in the networked complexity of a year of protests and revolt globally, some coming before, some after, from the United States to Czechoslovakia to Mexico to West Germany. The protests were against authoritarian governments, racism (Civil Rights), and the Vietnam War, all rolled together for demonstrators in a common abstract

enemy that seemed to encompass all three – imperialism and its racial capitalism.

Was May ‘68 an event at all? With respect to France, the singularity of May ‘68 is already a translation from the plural – since in France May ‘68 is always referred to as “les événements de mai ‘68”. The cryptic, unspecified reference, “the events”, accurately signals the fact that no one has ever quite agreed what they really were, other than that they were certainly something. Their meaning remains elusive, unfixable, untranslatable. Though predictably some have since argued May ‘68 never happened, or, what amounts to the same thing, that nothing happened – what is meant by that is that the events were a kind of non-event, a strange kind of revolution of non-revolution, micro-events that did not add up to a singular nameable historical event.¹ Charles de Gaulle managed to stay in power. The French state did not topple, even if at one point it came close. May ‘68 failed the basic Leninist premise of revolution – the capture of the state apparatus. But like many, perhaps most forms of popular revolt, its aim was less the construction of a new state than the destruction of the old. In this it followed the common trajectory of the historical dialectic between tyranny and democracy: more often than not, the latter is born out of the former. From the point of view of the extreme right, in fact, the danger of tyrants and autocratic tyranny is that historically they ultimately lead to democracy. In truth, it seems that Erdogan, Putin, Xi Jinping are all secretly trying to steer their countries toward becoming democratic states. They just don’t let on.

The atmosphere of decolonizing revolt had been initiated two years before in May 1966 when Mao started the Cultural Revolution, encouraging attacks on all forms of traditional authority with its slogans of “to rebel is justified” and “smash the four olds” (culture, customs, ideas and institutions). While the Cultural Revolution certainly “acted on the students ‘from a distance’”, as Louis Althusser put it in a letter to Maria Macciocchi in November 1968 (Macciocchi 1973, 299; cf. Althusser 2010), what also connected the global protests of 1968 was a proletarian internationalism that was more directly anticolonial, fuelled by the eruption of the Tet offensive in Vietnam, which began on 30 January 1968 and whose effects certainly acted at a distance around the world. Historians now generally acknowledge that Tet was a turning point in the war (Moise 2017). The almost total surprise that the Tet offensive achieved stunned the US military and the US public in equal measure. Although ultimately a failure in military terms, Tet had a huge effect on opinion in the United States: the American public had been consistently told that the United States was winning the war, yet suddenly the Vietcong were powerful enough to attack over a hundred cities simultaneously and even invade the grounds of the new US embassy in Saigon. The famous photograph by Eddie Adams of the summary execution on 1 February of Nguyễn Văn Lém, wearing civilian clothes, by

1 Kristin Ross (2002, 19) cites the sociologist Wolf Lepeneis making this claim in 1999.

General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, sparked a huge revulsion in the American public. A *New York Times* article of 10 March reported that after Robert McNamara's resignation even the new Secretary of Defense did not support the continued escalation of the war. By 31 March, Lyndon Johnson had announced that he would not stand again for President. It was a time of turmoil and violence and backlash from the right: on 4 April Martin Luther King was assassinated; Robert Kennedy's assassination followed on 5 June. The rest of 1968 saw continuing anti-war protests, most famously at the chaotic Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August. These events show the extent to which the Vietnam War and anti-war protest dominated domestic US politics, interacting simultaneously with the Civil Rights movement against the internal colonialism to which US African Americans were (and remain) subjected.

How did this relate to what happened in France? It is true that de Gaulle did not fall immediately, but within a year he was gone. De Gaulle was an autocrat rather than a tyrant. But his power was based on unique political circumstances which ground the basis of my argument: May '68 in France was in its own way, in a fundamental way, an anticolonial revolution.

Although the Vietnam War did not play as direct a role in France as it did in the United States, any *soixante-huitard* would tell you that it makes little sense to ignore the extent to which support for the Vietcong and their revolutionary example during the Tet offensive played a major role in the events leading up to May: student protests against the university at Nanterre morphed with daily manifestations on the streets of the Latin Quarter denouncing US imperialism. And since Vietnam was itself a former French colony where the French had already been roundly defeated by the Vietcong in 1954, here US and French imperialism morphed seamlessly into each other – the US intervention in Vietnam was essentially a continuation of the French colonial war against the occupied Vietnamese. The ongoing events in Vietnam were particularly powerful given France's second defeat just six years earlier in its last major colony, Algeria, and the presence of many Algerians and Indochinese in Paris itself. After the amnesty that followed the Peace of Evian of 1962 which established the independence of Algeria, there had been something of a public silence around that defeat, in part because the political situation of France remained extraordinarily determined by what was never allowed to be called the Algerian War. In short, 1968 was redolent with the continuing legacies of France's failed wars in its colonies of Indochina and Algeria. But there was an additional extraordinary factor that meant that, in a certain sense, France itself was still being determined by its last colonial war and the attempt to sustain an Algérie française.

One of the early slogans that first appeared on the walls of Paris on 13 May 1968 was "Dix ans, ça suffit!" Why were ten years quite enough? Ten years of what? If we backtrack to 13 May 1958, then we unearth the secret of May

‘68: for 13 May 1958 was the date of what Frantz Fanon described as the “ultracolonialist *coup-d’état*” of the colonial Algerian generals in Algeria and simultaneously in mainland France. As Fanon observed in *El Moudjahid* in June 1958, “General de Gaulle’s arrival in power is the direct consequence of the war in Algeria” (Fanon 2018, 601, 607). The protestors of May ‘68 sought to remove what was, literally, a French government created by the Algerian colonial regime that had ruled France since the Algerian army’s 1958 putsch against the unstable and in its view unsympathetic liberal and socialist governments of the Fourth Republic. Organized by the former Governor-General of Algeria, Jacques Soustelle, on 13 May 1958 *pied-noir* leaders together with the French army in Algeria seized control of government buildings in Algiers, and created a new government termed the “Committee of Civil and Army Public Security”. This was not simply an Algerian settler revolution in the manner of the United States in 1776 when white settlers sought independence from the metropole, for the *pieds noirs* in complete contrast desperately wanted Algeria to remain part of France. French army units loyal to Generals Jacques Massu and Raoul Salan, commander-in-chief of the army in Algeria, subsequently took control of Corsica, and then planned to land in Paris. From the first, Soustelle’s overriding objective had been for Charles de Gaulle to become President of France, since he assumed that de Gaulle would be sympathetic to the Algerian settler cause. In the face of this Algerian revolt and what looked like an impending civil war, the French President, René Coty, duly invited de Gaulle to head a new government. De Gaulle agreed, on condition that a new constitution be drafted. This became the basis of the Fifth Republic, which gave him as President far more power.

Once he had established himself, and consolidated his grip in Algeria, de Gaulle then in fact began to move towards giving Algeria independence – at which point the disillusioned army generals formed the Organisation armée secrète (OAS), and made several attempts to assassinate him (the most nearly successful becoming the subject of the novel and film, *The Day of the Jackal*). By 1962 Algeria was independent, but France continued to be governed by the President and the government put into power by its rebellious Algerian colonial generals. The general amnesty after the 1962 Evian Accords meant that the actors in the Algerian War were removed from public scrutiny, while the immigration of just under a million angry *pieds noirs* from Algeria to France shifted the political balance to the right. May ‘68 was a rebellion against a deeply conservative government led by a war-time leader from the Second World War which had been imposed on mainland France by disgruntled Algerian settlers, a situation that François Mitterand accurately described as a permanent *coup-d’état*. The political aim of May ‘68 was to end it. To free France from the rule of its own settler colonial regime.

Living under this apparently permanent colonial legacy, in which France had been paradoxically defeated both by the *pieds noirs* and the Algerian National Liberation Front, was one reason why many of the early demonstrations that took place in Paris were focused on the enduring legacy of the previous colonial war in which France had also been defeated, Vietnam, but which continued under new management (Ross 2002). The many “manifestations” against the war were debated and organized in places that embodied the ethnic mixture of the Latin Quarter which was then simultaneously the subaltern space of Paris and an embodiment of the contemporary transculturation of radical intellectual perspectives beyond the confines of the European. As Jacques Rancière put it in 1997, “‘68 was an event inscribed within a certain type of political memory, and that memory was bound up with decolonization” (1997, 32). May ‘68 was a decolonial revolution, even if France itself was by then a largely postcolonial state, its empire abandoned in defeat or integrated into mainland France.

France had already lived through a uniquely radical anticolonial phase in the 1950s and early 1960s, spearheaded not by the French Communist Party, which, fatally for its own reputation and power, had supported an *Algérie française*, but by left-wing political activists and intellectuals such as Daniel Guérin, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Valier, together with the Francophone and international anticolonial leftists such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, V. N. Giap, Che Guevara, Pierre Jalée, Ho Chi Minh, Tran Duc Thao, Malcolm X, and Mao Zedong, many of whose writings were read or reread by French intellectuals after 1967 in the much loved revolutionary paperback series “Petite collection Maspero”. Their political presence was also pivotal to the influential review *Partisans* which Maspero published from 1961 to 1972. Some of these writers, as well as others such as Albert Memmi, had also charted the ideological and psychic effects of colonialism (and resistance) on colonized people, and on the colonizers themselves. While Sartre was still a presence, as the names just cited suggest the intellectual sources of the revolutionary ferment of 1968 were, quite remarkably and for the first time in any European country, the radical work of third-world anticolonial intellectuals. It was to this international body of Francophone anticolonial work that Anglo-Saxon postcolonialists first turned in the 1980s and 1990s, reviving and reinterpreting the French tiers-mondist cultural legacy that would eventually return renewed, reinterpreted and reconfigured, as postcolonialism, to France at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

If France had its major anticolonial intellectual era in the 1950s and 1960s, after Algerian independence in 1962, as resistance to colonialism broadened to the international arena with the Vietnam War, the French also organized their first decolonial intervention during which they sought to challenge and interrogate the mindset that was the intellectual legacy of their own colonial,

colonizing culture that had been established from 1830 onwards. With some exceptions (largely from writers of colour), such interventions were primarily addressed to politics and culture rather than to race or racism, since French republicanism continued to propagate the self-serving belief that French culture was inherently non-racist. By the 1960s, French left intellectuals were preoccupied with developing a revolution in the revolution against the fundamental intellectual foundations of their own society which survived as a living legacy in the visible form of a government imposed by France's last colony. The radical restructuring created the basis of the intellectual interventions of the 1960s – in politics, Marxism, philosophy, and culture – against the historicist mode of thought that had dominated France (as Europe) since the imperial era of the nineteenth century and had colluded with its ideological project. This comprised an internalist critique which utilized methods developed in Eastern Europe for deconstructing the hegemony of the European historicist knowledge structures that had provided the intellectual foundations of European imperialism. It complemented what was going on in the political and intellectual sphere – the reception and incorporation of different knowledge formations developed in the third world by anticolonial intellectuals that had challenged the orientalist epistemology of European thought.

The structuralist epistemological revolution

It has often been suggested that the structuralist revolution of the 1960s was seriously at odds with the activist politics of May '68, that its "science" was technocratic, corporatist, and anti-humanist, but this point of view entirely misses the extent to which structuralism was a decolonial intervention against the colonialist legacy of the foundational knowledge structures of the status quo in France. Structuralism was the first postcolonial intervention against the traditional institutional intellectual formations that still blithely lived on from the days of the French Empire. The structuralist protest against nineteenth-century historicism and the hierarchy of values preached by its aesthetics of taste and civilization was inspired by the radical linguistics of Eastern Europe that had been developed since the 1920s, by Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Nikolai Marr, and others, who had critiqued Western European historical philology as racist, hierarchical, and imperialist and sought to develop alternative models (Young 2013).² The whole basis of European aesthetics, which permeated into almost every field of the humanities, from literature to music to philology to philosophy, was structured on the basis of cultural refinement, which was achieved through individual taste, evaluation, and discrimination. Indeed, the Humanities in particular

2 See also Galin Tihanov's essay in this issue.

were invented as an educational tool to produce and reproduce not simply knowledge but as importantly cultural sophistication in the upper classes, and thus ensure their difference from the uneducated classes and ensure their reproduction (Balibar and Macherey 1981) – while the world of the upper crust itself involved the greasy pole of class aspiration wonderfully analysed and portrayed by Marcel Proust. Western knowledge was based on a system of hierarchy, of the milestone achievements of the great figures of civilization and the ability to distinguish classics, or major versus minor figures. While at one level finesse and elegance were a matter of personal judgement made by the intellectual elite, evaluation and refinement were developed into an analytical method through the foundational assumption of historicism which represented culture and civilization as progressing forwards towards current European norms. Literature, language, art, it was claimed, became ever more sophisticated in their journeys through time from primitivism to modernity. History, too, was deployed as the narrative of civilizational progress. If peoples who happened to live at the same time (though in diverse places) displayed different levels of cultural achievement (from the “primitive” to the vulgar to the advanced) it was because though living contemporaneously in terms of historical time, they were allegedly living in different eras in terms of their intellects and civilizations. Cultural refinement morphed seamlessly into the differential structures of racialism produced by the social sciences and sciences: so “savage” peoples offered a form of living history, whether of the past which Europeans had long gone beyond, or, in psychology and psychoanalysis, of individual human progression from child to adult. Historical philology traced the evolution of languages on this basis and, as in other fields, it casually authorized or mirrored the ideological racist assumptions of imperialism by assuming without question the superiority of European languages and their speakers, sometimes explained by the physical difference of racial types (as for example in the work of Léopold de Saussure, Saussure’s brother). It was this mindset that the early East European structuralists critiqued with their analytical method in which every social phenomenon and product was considered on a level playing field of equality. For them, languages did not evolve upwards like the branches of a tree, they developed by continually crossing with each other through processes of hybridization. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss was one of the very first to recognize that the structural methods of Trubetzkoy could be utilized to analyse all other aspects of culture – comparatively but without, crucially, requiring the investigator to evaluate them in a hierarchy. Lévi-Strauss thus articulated the hinge of the two current meanings of culture – a refinement of intellect and the arts that identifies the aesthetic world of superior classes, or the total social and material cultural milieu of a particular society (Williams 1988; Young 1995, 29–54). His radical intervention was to argue that “primitive”

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thought could be quite as rational and sophisticated in its logic as western thought. Few of the French structuralists who followed in his footsteps were directly concerned to undo imperialist hierarchical perspectives in relation to non-western cultures, though some made attempts in that direction. Their primary concern was decolonial, to undo the hierarchies of taste and evaluative criticism that permeated the lingering colonial culture which they lived and breathed in Europe.

From a theoretical perspective, May '68 represents the moment, in so far as we can imagine a single historical moment for such things according to the logic of narrative time, of a profound epistemological break in the conceptualization of knowledge in western societies. It was a lateral event that repeated across the globe and continues to repeat today. As a lateral, rather than a single definable event, it constituted, to cite a phrase from Franco Moretti in another context, a "crack in the form" (Moretti 2000, 65).

The crack in the form

What kind of crack though? I begin with the startling observation made by Althusser in one of his letters to Macciocchi that May '68 was "the *most significant event in Western history* since the Resistance and the victory over Nazism" (Macciocchi 1973, 320). Despite the invocation of "Western history", Althusser's description is resolutely Francocentric; though himself hospitalized at the time and therefore not directly involved in the events of May '68, he was nevertheless busy in those years working for a different kind of revolution in France: an epistemological insurgency of the kind that he claimed had occurred with Marx, and which his pupil Michel Foucault then extended in *Les mots et les choses* to a theory of knowledge in itself. Both of them were indebted in this argument to Gaston Bachelard's notion of an epistemological break which entailed an early philosophical attack on the historicist narrative whose dominance Bachelard argued had itself become an obstacle to thought. May '68 marked the eruption of an epistemological fissure, the instant when French society broke out of its historicist clutches. It was France's first postcolonial moment, the time when the French began to emerge not from their immaturity as Europeans imagined they did in the Enlightenment, but from the hierarchical racialist thinking that the Enlightenment had gone on to produce (Foucault 1984; Kant 1996; Eze 1997).

As Althusser implicitly suggested, the revolutionary moment of May '68 signalled the end of traditional Marxism as espoused by the Communist Party at a politico-theoretical level. In its practice, May '68 enacted the transformation of revolutionary theory from the hierarchical Leninist model of the

capture of the state apparatus to Maoist cultural revolution, or what today we might call decoloniality (Foucault 1980, 57). The transformation of Marxism that occurred around May 1968 indicates the decline of the most influential philosophy of historical understanding of which Marxism was a part and of which Hegel was the origin. It remained the dominant political and intellectual paradigm for many intellectuals globally up until the end of communism itself in 1989, a paradigm which Marxism had preserved well into the twentieth century as the fundamental framework of knowledge though foundationally it did not differ from historicism in general, of any political persuasion. Ultimately, what undermined it was not just the critiques of Hegelian history (Young 2004) but also the transformations that had been taking place throughout the twentieth century of our understanding of time itself, which physicists had long been arguing could no longer be considered simply linear (Rovelli 2019).

Identification of the theoretical paradigm which haunts the May ‘68 interventions and subsequent transformations could begin with a symptomatic statement written by Althusser in *Pour Marx*, published by François Maspero in 1965 (Althusser 1965, 1969). It’s a passage in which Althusser is developing an idea which, arguably, can be linked to Bruno Latour’s later network theory in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991). Althusser is writing of the principles necessary to “commit oneself to a Marxist study of Marx’s Early Works (and the problems they pose)” which involves, he argues, “rejecting the spontaneous or reflected temptations of an analytico-teleological method which is always more or less haunted by *Hegelian principles*” (Althusser 1969, 62). Instead, Althusser argues, it is necessary “to apply the Marxist principles of ideological development to our object”. These are:

- (1) Every ideology must be regarded as a real whole, internally unified by its own *problematic*, so that it is impossible to extract one element without altering its meaning.
- (2) The meaning of this whole, of a particular ideology (in this case an individual’s thought), depends not on its relation to a *truth* other than itself but on its relation to the existing *ideological field* and on the *social problems and social structure* which sustain the ideology and are reflected in it; the sense of the *development* of a particular ideology depends not on the relation of this development to its origins or its end, considered as its *truth*, but to the relation found within this development between the mutations of the particular ideology and the mutations in the ideological field and the social problems and relations that sustain it.
- (3) Therefore, the developmental motor principle of a particular ideology cannot be found within the ideology itself but outside it, in what *underlies* (*l’en-deça de*) the particular ideology: its author as a concrete



individual and the actual history reflected in this individual development according to the complex ties between the individual and this history.

I should add that these principles, unlike the previous ones, are not *in the strict sense ideological principles, but scientific ones*: in other words, they are not *the truth* of the process to be studied (as are all the principles of a history in the “future anterior”). (Althusser 1965, 59, 1969, 62–63)

What we have here is a typical instance of Althusserian anti-Hegelianism: we need to pursue not the truth of something, conceived as its internal essence or historical origin, but its relations to the field of other entities that surround it, outside it: “to the relation found within this development between the mutations of the particular ideology and the mutations in the ideological field and the social problems and relations that sustain it”.

This is a symptomatic statement: comparable assertions can be found throughout Althusser’s work. But it can also be taken as emblematic because it signals what was in ideological terms the real revolution that would be staged, performed, in the streets of Paris: an epistemological shift against the form of thought that had dominated European thinking from the early decades of the nineteenth century up to that point in the twentieth, namely Hegelian historical understanding – in a word, historicism. The truth of something is not inside it, either as its essence or its hidden historical origins that formed it, but in its relations to its outside, to the “relations that sustain it” in the present. Althusser was proposing a different epistemology in which substance or time were no longer the explanation and meaning of things.

Althusser’s critique of Hegelian historicism would prove to be the most controversial theoretical reworking of Marxism because it challenged not simply Marxism, but the broader ideological historical framework within which Marxism had developed, namely historicism as such. Michel Foucault describes the birth of this moment in *Les mots et les choses*:

The Classical order distributed across a permanent space the non-quantitative identities and differences that separated and united things: it was this order that held sovereign sway ... over men’s discourse, the table of natural beings, and the exchange of wealth. From the nineteenth century, History was to deploy, in a temporal series, the analogies that connect distinct organic structures to one another. This same History will also, progressively, impose its laws on the analysis of production, the analysis of organically structured beings, and, lastly, on the analysis of linguistic groups. (Foucault 1970, 218–19)

According to Foucault, this transition from the Classical age occurred in the space of twenty years. In Foucault’s terms, Althusser was one of those at the

forefront of effecting the next shift from History as knowledge to knowledge conceived in the present of its formation, the meaning of any object or phenomenon derived not through identifying its interior essence or history or historical formation but from the network of its relations to what lies outside it. The past no longer hides the truth of things. It is rather, as it seems today, full of guilty secrets.

Almost all modern disciplines in the humanities at least were developed in the nineteenth century on the basis of historical understanding: History was the king of the disciplines. To take a familiar example that Foucault invokes, consider language: in the eighteenth century, the primary way to try to understand language was to speculate on the relation of the diversity of languages to the single Adamic origin of language represented in the Bible. By the nineteenth century, as Europeans encountered Sanskrit and other non-western languages, the way to understand language shifted towards historical philology: to know a language was to know where it came from, its history which gave it its relation to earlier languages as part of a so-called language “family”. According to August Schleicher’s Stammbaum model, all western languages could be represented historically in the form of a tree which traces their growth from earlier languages to the present – that common history constitutes their only relation to other contemporary languages – a continual process of refinement and separation. In 1916 in his *Cours de linguistique générale* Ferdinand de Saussure lays alongside this traditional diachronic model (which he repeats but today is generally left unread) an alternative synchronic model of how language can be understood not in terms of its historical origin, but as a system in which individual words and sentences generate meaning through what lies outside them, by their relation to what they are not. We might compare Althusser’s description of relations rather than essence with this perspective. It was not until after 1945 that the implications of Saussure’s work were taken up substantially in other disciplines in the movement known as structuralism, of which Althusser was held to be an exponent.

Structuralism gets little traction these days – if students are taught it at all, they are generally encouraged to dismiss it. But structuralism was not simply another theory, which fell out of fashion after its high point certainly in France around the time of May ‘68, to be succeeded by the next, but rather constituted a shift in the paradigm of knowledge, of our ways of thinking. The move from understanding any object of knowledge from a historical perspective to its functional relation to what surrounds it in the present has been part of the profound paradigm shift that I am describing. You could argue this goes back not only to Saussure but also to Émile Durkheim, from whom Saussure appropriated the method. But I am precisely *not* looking for an explanatory narrative of historical origins: I want to describe the dynamics of a broader transformation in the way in which we decide how to come to know the object of our study.

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To take a further example, let us consider the ways in which educational institutions have approached the study of literature. The invention of the modern sense of the word “literature” at the beginning of the nineteenth century was inextricably linked to the development of nationalism and the Herderian idea of a national culture. The study of literature began in the Renaissance as a component of a general classical education – the origin of the Liberal Arts – which involved reading and learning about all forms of knowledge and social practice of the classical age, for example Roman Law and Politics, as well as what we would now call its literary texts. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, literature, with a capital L, was transformed into a specific field in which literary writing was divided up according to different vernacular languages of composition, whose works were each held to represent something of the essence of the national culture (in this formation, English literature included all the literature written in English in the British Isles; in the past thirty or forty years, with the rise of nationalisms, Irish and Scottish literature has been subtracted from it, but the nationalist basis continues). In its individual isolated national formation, the study of literature moved away from a focus on poetics and rhetoric, to the full history of an alleged specific literary tradition. To go to university to study English Literature, for example, was without question assumed to be an activity in which in order to know about it competently, you studied its history – its alleged origins in Anglo-Saxon, and then medieval literature through the Renaissance to the present day, “from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf” in Terry Eagleton’s mantra. To learn about English literature was to learn the history of English literature and to experience its evolution across the centuries. Such a study would include a course on the History of the English Language, in which in a parallel mode you learnt about the evolution of the English language through the same periods. The great monument of this historical philological approach in English remains the Oxford English Dictionary. But consider the development in this century of an older concept which has been around for two hundred years but which has now become increasingly dominant, namely that of World Literature. If you take a World Literature course, you do not study the literature of a particular language. You may study much literature in translation, as you engage in a comparative study of world literature through consideration of literary genres, on a David Damrosch model, and take courses on different literatures of the world almost all of which, except perhaps for a course on Shakespeare, are contemporary. But even Shakespeare today is not so much studied historically, in his own particular moment, but as “Global Shakespeare”, that is as the Shakespeare who has become a world writer translated into many languages and produced in theatres around the world. The historical depth model of the study of individual literatures embedded in and creating their specific national language has been transformed into a surface model in which like a drone fitted with a camera you cruise above the surface of the world, charting the literatures of the world from above while touching down here and there to sample the local fare. The temporal depth model has

been changed to one of surface, from time to space. Today, in the same way, appreciation of and sensitivity to difference has moved from historical difference to cultural difference. We are now primed to be totally sensitive to cultural differences in the present, alert to the complexities of the relations of the same versus the other, but increasingly view History not as another country where they also do things differently but from a Whiggish perspective of the present which encourages us to judge the differences of the past through the morality of the norms of the present. Rhodes must fall; the vertical must become horizontal. Time has been flattened out into a continuous present. Even historical thought has been reconceptualized, not according to the dialectics of past and present, but as a rhizomatic surface network of interaction between different cultures and times.

Many contemporary shifts in the way objects of knowledge are conceptualized have followed in the same direction. Such transformations of relations between time and space are in certain ways what philosophers and cultural theorists have tried to describe through the term *postmodernism*, which significantly operates at once as a conceptual and historical reference. What I have been discussing here has also been described through the phenomenon of the shift from historical to postmodern structures of knowledge. Postmodernism is often presented as a particular set of theories, or an alternative philosophical framework of anti-foundationalism, without acknowledging the extent to which it represents a much more profound transformation of society's grounds of epistemology and ontology so that we now only live in the present. It is not that we have never been modern, but rather that only now have we become truly modern, in its etymological sense of existing only in the now of the present. Or to put it another way, we have been witnessing a profound shift from Hegel to Deleuze: "Perhaps one day this century will be known as Deleuzian", as Foucault provocatively remarked, two years after 1968 (Foucault 1977, 165).

This radical epistemological and philosophical shift from historical depth to surface relations was in some sense but the *hors d'oeuvre* whetting and preparing the appetite for a more profound transformation that occurred at the turn of the twenty-first century, namely the effects of the irruption of new technology and the sweeping effects of digitization which have transformed the primary form of knowledge itself from linear text to image, from time to space. Poststructuralist textolatry, the hyper-emphasis on text (and text alone, without its historical context), such as we find in the work of Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida, was a first defensive move against its contemporary evanescence as message was transformed into medium. Text with its grammar, syntax, and narrative still draws on and performs a model based on linear, temporal understanding. The explosion of images that has occurred with the development of computing, the internet, and the interminable apps that now define how we access knowledge means that text has become increasingly an adjunct to the image, rather than, as before, where

the image performed the role of illustration for the text. Text today gets broken up into fragments, text boxes, slogans, blocks without significant linear narratives as in Instagram, where the linear text has given way to an image; or Twitter, in which the narrative aspect of text has been reduced and curtailed so that text becomes a snapshot, a clip – just as the most famous writings of May ‘68 are the short slogans written on the walls. Text today has been reduced to the iconic slogan, the lettering of a brand. Literature has been reduced to maps and graphs. The Humanities, to adapt Gilbert Simondon, have moved from providing the historicist foundations of the imperial worldview to a system of defence designed to safeguard human beings from technics. But we can no longer be safeguarded from technology: technology is no longer simply functional: it has become part of our being, at the expense of historical consciousness (Stiegler 1998).

From the 1960s to today, humans have been experiencing a transformation of knowledge comparable to that Foucault described occurring between the Classical age and the nineteenth century. Behind it lies the invention of photography itself, which Vilém Flusser characterized as the second turning point in human cultural history, succeeding the first that had been constituted by the invention of linear writing (Flusser 2000, 7). While photography introduced new modes of understanding and knowledge, it is only digitization that has succeeded in enforcing those new forms as hegemonic and destroying the era of fidelity to the text, to writing, to narrative, the linear, and the literal – the whole foundation on which western civilization and its culture has been based.

May ‘68 marked the historical political fulcrum of that epistemological transformation that initiated the era of infidelity towards the text. The shift from the linear to the lateral, time to space, metaphor to metonymy, vertical to horizontal, diachronic to synchronic. And how do we remember and think of it now? By the image. Blanchot was so right to predict that “we shall therefore never *write about* what took place or did not take place in May” (2010, 94).³

3 See Robert Stockhammer’s essay in this issue.

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