

## DE-SUTURING REVOLUTION

Jana Ndiaye Beránková, Michael Hauser, and Nick Nesbitt, eds., *Revolutions for the Future: May '68 and the Prague Spring* (Lyon: Suture Press, 2020), 324 p.  
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*Revolutions for the Future: May '68 and the Prague Spring*, edited by Jana Ndiaye Beránková, Michael Hauser, and Nick Nesbitt, is a beautifully designed book published by Suture Press. Based in Lyon, Suture Press is an independent publishing house which, apart from *Revolutions for the Future*, has also published a book of interviews with Alain Badiou as well as a book about the work of Senegalese artist Cheikh Ndiaye. They announce their publishing activities as “mnemonic tools,” supporting the activities of the Prague Axiomatic Circle, which is an international collective of scholars based in Prague dedicated to exploring the legacy of Alain Badiou’s oeuvre. *Revolutions for the Future* is the outcome of the 2017 conference “1968–1989: Paris-Prague,” and it was sponsored by the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, which does not share the Badiouist line the Prague Axiomatic Circle follows.

The very first page of the preface defines 1968 as an event which corresponds both to Badiou’s understanding of it as a radical, unforeseen change, here defined as a “re-structuration of the norms of social being,” as well as to Jacques Rancière’s definition, formulated in more general terms, of the event as “that which calls into question the way in which things happen [...] on the political stage.” Rancière’s lecture, from where this quote is taken, opens the volume.

This is followed by an article on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s conceptualization of the 1968 event (Vincent Jacques); a commentary on Lacan’s cryptic remark on the student uprising in 1968 (Étienne Balibar); a discussion of Alain Badiou’s early writings on the critique of suture and the ways this can help us to delineate his theory as a political concept “prohibiting any notion of totality” (Jana Ndiaye Beránková); an exhaustive study of Badiou’s model theory proposing to overcome the difficulties of subjective political thought by combining it with objectless “axiomatic mathematics” (Reza Naderi, p. 117). The dilemma for Reza Naderi, that “it is very hard to imagine a politics without being objective,” is theoretically linked to Sylvain Lazarus’ intervention regarding the interiority of politics, which is “thinking of politics” rather than

demonstrating its objective merits; the politics of interiority and subjectivity, which Nedari summarizes as a theoretical position “where politics itself is unnameable” (p. 94). This is politics emancipated from the classic party line, including the party line of the Marxist-Leninist tendencies as well. The next chapter sets about discussing the Marxian origins of Badiouist thought, introducing the thesis of *Capital* that capitalism is the “immense collection of commodities” as axiomatic, meaning that it is not a thesis subject to proof or a deduction, but merely a given, and as such it is a subjective prescription (Nick Nesbitt, pp. 128–129).

As Beránková rightly states, this project of philosophical unstitching requires a continuous engagement with “the void,” or, as she writes, to suture one’s system to inconsistent and inexhaustible multiplicities of being (p. 88). The 1968 event, both in Paris and Prague, was also a political site of multiple contradictions and strong antagonisms requiring new sets of theoretical tools to engage with its historical legacy and political effect. What kind of “caesura in thought” (p. 95) has 1968 caused, and in what way can contemporary French theory help us in engaging with it? The common thread running through the different theoretical models presented in the book is the de-suturing of the existing discourses of the events and the introduction of a new narrative of 1968, beyond the purely sociological understanding. This should be done, as the editors in the introduction note, with fidelity to Louis Althusser’s formula that “without theory, no revolutionary action.” In the domain of abstract political forms, the book meticulously engages with the outstanding narratives of revolutionary theory, but when it comes to its historical argumentation of the 1968 event, the theory seems to lag behind. The book gives the impression that there is a bar between theory and history, similar to the bar that Balibar describes when presenting Lacan’s four discourses: a fence removing history from theoretical representation, driving it away onto another scene, making it largely inaccessible, or invisible, to the political thought of speculative abstraction. This is especially evident in the way the publication is structured: the first, theoretical part, uniting, in its depth, Paris and Prague, and the second, historical part, mostly relating to Prague, local examples and their failures of socialisms. One axiomatic, the other empirical.

Petr Kužel’s long article in the second, historical, section about workers’ councils, refers to theory only passingly, specifically to Rancière’s division between police and politics, which could be extracted to the same effect from many other systems of political philosophy. Kužel’s aim in the text is “to present *historical facts* hoping that it will create a crucial point of departure for subsequent *theoretical analysis*.” He does that rewardingly, making clear that the Prague Spring was more the result of organizing workers’ councils rather than abstract demands for liberalization, freedom of speech, and humanist socialism. The workers’ councils in 1968, with up to 900,000 members, were a developed labour force in Czechoslovakia, which was marching towards “organizing councils *horizontally* – to create a network of relationships between the councils themselves and to create some form of standing body that could represent the councils” (p. 187).

This action program, as it was called, was the full political demand of workers to make national their demands for self-managed socialism, which they were hoping to see ratified at the XIV Communist Party Congress, in the event interrupted by the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. In a way, one could say that the Soviet *Union* intervened in Czechoslovakia to suppress a *union* of soviets (councils). Kužel's narrative, based on official documents, gives us a very complicated picture of class struggle within the socialist state: between workers' councils and unions, between managerial workers' councils and political workers' councils, all leading to the conclusion that the emancipatory politics of equality in 1968 happened within the state apparatuses, thus having a lasting historical effect (p. 193). I hesitate to agree with this conclusion regarding the primacy of the political struggles waged within the state, but it is empowering to read a narrative of a political mass movement where it is the workers, not students and intellectuals, playing center stage in history.

Jan Kober's contribution extends this argument even further by showing the role of the official socialist lawmakers' involvement in reforming the legal codes in order to create concrete conditions for the "full assertion of personality" in socialism, which was seen as the precondition of socialist self-management (p. 203). This meant that it was necessary not only "to radically transform the content of the law, but also its organization and overall system" (p. 209), which is the very form of the law. In Czechoslovakia, these reforms had already begun in 1961 by slowly abandoning Roman Law, based on the legal dualism of "private" and "public" law, and paving the way for the new socialist law: one that would erase the boundary between the state and people's organization and thus create the conditions for the "self-government of the society" (p. 204). We need more of these studies. They could help us down the road to better understand the post-socialist legal revisionisms that happened through the abolition of the 1960s progressive reforms and going back to pre-1948, that is, the pre-socialist system of law, which was presented as non-ideological and natural - in other words, as the capitalist and the bourgeois system of law.

Jan Mervart's contribution looks at the Association of the Left, a tiny ultra-left organization led by charismatic philosopher and writer Egon Bondy, which challenged the official self-management socialist reforms arising out of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the New Left, and Trotskyist perspectives. Bondy was especially vocal in criticizing the regression of self-management into technocratic management, defending the idea, at moments, "that a return to Buddha could revive Marxist philosophy" (p. 269). The bureaucratization of self-management is a leitmotif in several articles in the volume, often comparing it with Yugoslav self-management, which is presented as an official and rigidified application of self-management socialism within the state. Katarzyna Bielinska is most explicit in her proposition, arguing that in Yugoslavia "mainstream Marxism-Leninism played the role of the ideology of the bureaucracy, justifying its rule," which she speculatively contrasts to abstract opposition described as "Marxist Humanism" (p. 285).

In Yugoslavia, the main promoters of Marxist humanism were the Praxis philosophers, dissidents who in 1989 “rapidly transformed into legitimizing discourse of a new regime” (p. 303). The quote is taken from Joseph Grim Feinberg’s postscript to the volume, a strong denunciation of dissident ideology as an existential, individualistic, and moralistic renewal of bourgeois norms. In his reading of Czechoslovak dissidents, Feinberg suggests that 1989 was the fulfillment of their demands for a civil society, democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, and individual freedom, yet all these demands avoided the main social and economical issues related to workers, state, and self-management. If the August 1968 invasion did not manage to completely uproot the autonomy of workers’ councils and their subjectivity, then the dissident revolution of 1989 accomplished what the invasion did not. The dissident ideologies accomplished this by shifting the focus of politics from the workers to the intellectuals, and changed the meaning of solidarity by focusing “increasingly on supporting one another” (p. 309); that is to say, supporting their own class. As a result, the dissident revolution “fought for simple, widely accepted goals like the rule of law and respect for civil rights” (p. 310).

Now, when all the economic structures of workers’ councils, unions, and any form of workers’ solidarity have been destroyed, the only thing left for us are the subjective traits of these mass emancipatory movements. Subjectivity, or a revolutionary subject, which had been a watchword of the Hegelian Marxists of the 1960s, Feinberg writes, has “faded from dissident discourse” (p. 308). One way to record this political subjectivity is through experimental practices, especially through experimental practices of art, poetry, film, music, theatre, which the Czechoslovakia of the sixties and the seventies had in abundance. Apart from the analysis of Egon Bondy, the book unfortunately does not deal with these examples. One would like to read a chapter on the Dziga Vertov Group (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin) film *Pravda* made in 1970 in Czechoslovakia. This experimental essay-film gives a different picture of the post-1968 contradictions, portraying the socialist state contradictions within the global capitalist contradictions through a subjective disjunction of words and images, truth and representation, theory and practice. This artistic rendering of political truth could help us to suture the book’s scattered subjects of Badiou, Paris, the avant-garde, self-management, technology, state socialism, democracy, capitalism, and dissidents into one complex form overdetermined by contradictions.

Sezgin Boynik