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# May 1968 in France:

## *Just another episode in an intense decade*

**With the exception of those periods of history in which some event of great tragic magnitude or a profound upheaval of the structures of society took place (for example, the two World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the French or Russian Revolutions), it might not be at all easy to find another decade in history that concentrated as many important events as those to be found in the sixties.**

Making no attempt to be exhaustive, let us remember that in Africa during the sixties some twenty-five new countries were created; that the Catholic Church held the Second Vatican Council; that in the USA the coloured population managed to get a series of civil rights legally recognised for itself that had traditionally been denied them; that against the backdrop of a very tense Cold War situation, conflicts between the two sides increased even more in different parts of the world (Cuba, Vietnam, the building of the Berlin Wall); that the attempt to gradually democratise a Communist regime, the Czechoslovakian, ended in the repressive intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops; that in South and Central America there was a radicalisation of positions that oscillated at its most extreme poles between American interventionism and armed revolutionary movements; that in the Middle East the war between Israel and the Arab world again degenerated into a situation of open warfare; that in democratic Western Europe the dictatorships in Spain and Portugal still survived, moreover in a comfortable position of international respectability, and that in Greece the army colonels had the audacity to perpetrate a coup d'état; that in Mao's China the so-called Cultural Revolution took place, which, from a distance and from a contemporary perspective, it was not at all easy to make sense of; that the USSR and the USA embarked, for reasons of military interest and political prestige, upon a technologically spectacular space race, from Gagarin's first orbit of the planet to Armstrong's first small step on the moon.

The sixties produced, moreover, a very considerable series of legendary images, profoundly representative of certain attitudes to life or new situations in the spheres of politics, the cinema, music, religion or social customs, quickly becoming omnipresent icons in that society which, with the introduction of television to most homes in the West, for the first time managed to create a referential set of images on a global scale. The faces of John F. Kennedy, Pope John XXIII, Martin Luther King, Che Guevara or Mao Zedong; the images of Marilyn Monroe, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones or James Bond; the scenes of the assassination of Kennedy, or the dead body of Che, or the first man setting foot on the moon, or the naked girl running terrified along a road in Vietnam after being burnt

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by napalm, or the mini-skirt made popular by Mary Quant, or the appearance of the bikini on Mediterranean beaches, or the increase in the use of trousers in women's clothing... To this whole series of things and events, we could add a great deal more: the appearance of the hippie movement, with their surprising look of loose, flowing flower-patterned clothes and their rejection of the capitalist urban lifestyle; the birth-control pill making its appearance on the market; the major

massively-attended gatherings, whether protesting about the Vietnam War or standing up for equal rights for coloured people or going to rock and folk music festivals; the moral legalisation of drug-taking among certain sectors of the young; the performance of the first heart transplant operation; the citizens of Prague defying the Soviet tanks...

Some of the things I have just listed, and which had an obvious impact and influence all over the West, produced toned-down or delayed effects in the Catalan-speaking countries due to the filters that the ideological and moral censors of the Francoist regime had in place with the aim of hampering their reception. Therefore, it was not until the early seventies that most of them actually made an appearance in this country. Also, in our context, of a well-consolidated dictatorship and unqualified national oppression, the priorities for change necessarily had far more specific and basic objectives: on one hand, political democracy; on the other, the legal acknowledgement and social normalisation of the Catalan language, culture and identity. In the sixties there were many initiatives all over the Catalan-speaking Countries —needless to say varying according to the territory— that tried above all to make such elementary and undeniably reasonable aspirations come true. Among the most aware and most active university students, in Barcelona, Valencia and Palma, quite different things were perceived as equally desirable, in a synthesis of anti-Francoism, the assertion of identity and participation from a peripheral position in the wave of nonconformity among the young people in the West born after the Second World War: the rejection of the dictatorship and the demand for political freedoms; but also the reading of *Nosaltres els valencians* or *Els mallorquins* and at the same time of the founding or informative texts of the ideologies prohibited by the political system then in power; and participation in the campaigns promoting Catalan and the enthusiastic attendance at *Nova Cançó* concerts; and the rejection of the structural authoritarianism that still mostly characterised the family or the schools;

and the sympathy with the struggles of the countries in the so-called Third World against imperialism; and the songs of the Beatles and Joan Baez or Bob Dylan; and the adoption of a deliberately garish outward appearance and the passion for the “new cinemas” in the art-house cinemas; and the idea of the university and students as a sort of avant-garde that had the historic duty to promote a great liberating catharsis...

The nineteen sixties were certainly intense and turbulent, years of furious historic agitation. And yet, we should perhaps ask ourselves whether the events I have just referred to really were the most substantial of the period, those that most deeply affected the profound structure of Western societies. Or whether perhaps the changes that in the long run would be more decisive and long-lasting took place hidden from view, without making a fuss, as if their silent nature did not warrant them being part of the category of protagonists of history. When talking of the sixties, under no circumstances can we ignore that a whole host of events took place that were very decisive, beyond the fact of whether or not they gave rise to powerful media icons. Let us look at a few of them: the sixties generation was the first not to have suffered the Second World War; economic growth made it possible for the part of the population with access to consumer goods to increase considerably; television was beginning to be a fixture in every home, whereby popular mass culture diffused by technology definitively replaced



**Exuberance is Beauty (L'exhuberància és bella),**  
Jaume Plensa (2007). Mixed media and  
collage on paper, 84 x 30 cm

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centuries-old traditional culture; the introduction of the welfare state gradually spread to new areas of society; access to university by middle- and working-class young people began to be possible; social and moral customs were gradually freed from all kinds of intransigence, in our case very specially that of National Catholicism; hierarchic and arbitrary authoritarianism lost respectability in the spheres of the family, politics, teaching or personal relationships;

women began an irreversible process towards the recognition of their legal, social and job equality; industrial workers were able to become the beneficiaries of mass tourism...

All in all, and starting especially from this series of economic changes that affected the social structure, the decade gave rise to numerous phenomena that produced many profound changes.

**And in this context, what exactly did May 1968 in France represent?** Did it by chance include anything specific that we could not find in at least a significant number of other events of the time? Did it have an international influence, for example, greater than the hippie or the pacifist movements or a greater influence on social customs and thinking than those of the new musical trends or the avalanche of mass audiovisual culture that became a feature of most people's everyday lives? Perhaps the student revolution in Paris was ideologically more consistent than those in California, Mexico or Berlin, Barcelona or Madrid. Or might one think that the reasons for Paris 1968 were fairer and better founded than those for the mobilisations that were reacting above all against the American presence in the Vietnam War or against Franco's dictatorship? In my opinion, the Paris revolt was more than anything important for being representative of many of the upheavals and the historic expectations that characterised the sixties. In the first place, it was an act of public assertion by part of the young (the university students, petit-bourgeois and more or less enlightened people), which as a whole had just then taken the stage as a visible social sector, by no means insignificant in terms of numbers, something made possible by the first stage of the West's economic recovery after the Second World War. From then on, it became essential for the agendas of the political parties and the public institutions to consider young people as a group meriting the status of protagonists and as the targets of specific policies. Moreover, May 1968 was an expression, to a large extent instinctive, of the unease felt by a minority of young Westerners in the face of a political situation and a model of society that they perceived as unsatisfactory. The reaction materialised in the adoption of an attitude of rejection towards the liberal democracies, which they judged with the severity only those who have had the historical fortune not to have suffered totalitarian regimes can allow themselves, and also of consumer capitalism.

The response to that situation gave rise in Western Europe to a revolutionary political stance that, with the hindsight of the forty years that have since transpired, was quite inexplicable. That the alternative to liberal society or state socialism could be sought in Maoism or Trotskyism or that the replacements for the official social-democratic or communist parties of Western Europe could be organisations of an assembly-based or cellular nature conceived after an indigestion of Marxist-Leninist literature is something that can only be explained if we take it to be the symptom of a state of profound confusion or of a naivety, both infantile and messianic, when imagining expectations for the future organisation of human societies. All in all it was the expression of an ideological elitism that, based on overwhelming contempt for the true reality of life, believed itself legitimised to subject society to rigid book-like doctrinaire templates. As was to be expected, these ideas produced absolutely no results. Thank goodness. Equally, in the sixties in the West there was another quite visible expression of nonconformity: that of those who rejected the economic model that aspired to continual growth based on the instilling in citizens of the need to over-consume in order for a large quantity of superfluous products to become essential. For them, consumer society became one of the *bêtes noires* of the period. Escape from the urban world and compulsively productivist capitalism and the wish to return to more primitive ways of life in contact with nature were the reasons that made many young Europeans and Americans head for the islands of Ibiza and Formentera, Morocco or Nepal. As always, some of those who professed these attitudes were authentic and others less so.

However, in both the case of the doctrinaire revolutionary movement and in that of those who to a certain extent rejected the Western way of life, we are only talking about a tiny minority of young people. And yet, the immense majority, who had certainly not been to university and were only familiar with the versions of ideology that the authorities offered them, would over the years eventually incorporate into their habitual lifestyles some of those attitudes and appearances that had been introduced as acts of dissent by the protagonists of the tumultuous sixties youth revolution. Up to now, the balance made of all this, in films or in fictional and non-fictional literature, by some of the creators who generationally and ideologically identified themselves with May 1968 is neither condescending nor myth-making. This is the case of Olivier Rolin in the novel *Paper Tiger* or of Bernardo Bertolucci in

the film *Dreamers*. One of the male characters in the film would be a not very smug example, in some ways a caricature, of that amateur Maoism practised in many cases by those taking part in the Paris revolt.

If considering that May 1968 in Paris was above all important because

it was representative of the moods of the sixties rather than for the specific substance that defined it were a correct assessment, it would be necessary to shed light on the cause that might explain why over the last four decades it has become one of the great historic fetishes of the period, so much so that it has remained permanently alive as the subject of interest in the attention of the Western media and has been the subject of frequent fictional and non-fictional recreations. As I see it, there is a series of reasons that

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explain why it has acquired the status of a 20<sup>th</sup> century myth. Firstly, because it has been considered the chief European contribution to the Western phenomenon of youth revolt, conceived, developed and projected far more by the USA.

Secondly, because Paris has been historically perceived, at least in Western Europe and from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a privileged stage for the gestation of the ideas, the artistic proposals and the outlooks on life that contributed to shaping the future of the West. Thus, the 1968 revolt was yet another event taking place on a stage on which European public opinion already took it for granted that events of historical importance inevitably developed from time to time. Thirdly, the French cultural and intellectual world saw in the events of the Paris revolt a chance to claw back positions as the centre of the creation of ideas and attitudes perceived as progressive, at a time when the English-speaking world had already well overtaken them in both the sphere of mass culture and in the proposal of new ideas and new social and moral customs. French nationalism, within which evidently the cultural elites also have to be included, found in the mythicisation of its own revolution a resource and a chance to fulfil the need to see itself and show itself once more as a leading player in history.

**All in all, what I feel was actually historically important** was “sixties-ism” in an overall sense and not Parisian “sixty-eightism” in particular. And today, from the perspective of the forty years that have passed, I think that the balance of the decade is inevitably one of light and shade. With the peculiarity, moreover, that from many of those elements that were objectively positive, in the long run collateral effects have derived that can be seen as negative. One example: the disappearance of the authoritarianism of those considered superior (father, mother, teacher, governor) represented a gain in dignified communal living, but in the long run it has also been seen that it eventually degenerated into an undermining of the very principle of authority, even when exercised with respect and dialogue, so much so that an attitude became socially widespread that refused to acknowledge the right to pre-eminence of those who are wiser or have more experience or more representative legitimacy or greater merits based on work and effort. Another example: relationships between parents and children or between couples are now kinder, emotionally more direct and warmer than fifty years ago. However, over-protective love and the predisposition to satisfy needs in advance has led to many families bringing up children to be comfortable and to believe that a life awaits them in which everything will be gifted without them having to make much effort. This has given rise to weak apathetic personalities, lacking the energy needed to face up to the adversities that in their lives they will undoubtedly encounter. There has also been a loss of the capacity for commitment, and as a result a banalisation, in relationships, in both teenagers and adults. Light and shade, to be sure.

Despite all this, I think the way May 1968 in Paris has been used as a scapegoat in recent years is completely unjustifiable, it being virtually declared directly and exclusively responsible for all the ills that today characterise European society. The case of Nicolas Sarkozy would be the perfect example of this. In his programmatic book *Ensemble*, published a few months before he was elected president of the Republic, he dedicates quite a number of pages to analysing what he calls the responsibility of the May 68 generation. This is neither the time nor the place to analyse his words. Just to state that the list of awful consequences he attributes to May 1968 includes almost all the defects that would supposedly characterise,

from his point of view, present-day France. In actual fact what Sarkozy does is use a strategy quite habitual in politics and the media: to choose one single element and attribute to it all the responsibility for all things considered negative. In this way a complex very heterogeneous situation is reduced to a single factor and therefore a prescription can be found for it that can easily be presented as capable of sorting out the situation that has been diagnosed as inadequate. It is the formula that gives such good returns in politics and the media of proposing simple solutions for very complex problems. One example: claiming that an education system can be improved simply by changing the laws. Furthermore, pointing to one single element as being exclusively responsible for a particular situation has another practical advantage: it means that the overall system within which the elements considered

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negative arise does not have to be critically analysed. In another area, religion, we can find a parallel example: for fundamentalist Catholics, the Second Vatican Council, due to its more tolerant and liberal concept of religious practice, must have been responsible for the fact that many practising Catholics have stopped going to church.

With the decision to attribute the origin of all that is wrong to the generation of 1968, Sarkozy is trying to avoid having to state clearly what degree of responsibility the current social model has in the existence of these alleged collective ills. In short, what he is doing is looking for a scapegoat to enable him not to have to question critically a good number of the structural elements that characterise our political, economic and social system. In truth I feel that in all honesty the explanation for the immense majority of the negative aspects of today's society cannot be found if the only thing resorted to is the legacy of 68. The consideration of leisure and compulsive consumerism as priorities in our lives; the models of personal triumph projected by the mass media; the overrating of the present, the lack of interest in the past and the lack of care about the future; the comfortable attitudes inevitably created by a welfare state that offers social benefits as if they were an acquired right and not a good that has a cost that the citizens have to assume; the rootless feeling caused in individuals by their adherence to a global society to the point of turning them into extra-terrestrials that no longer feel tied or committed to their closest surroundings; the recalcitrant individualism of believing that one's own interests are the only thing that really counts; the social apology for materialistic values over and above those that have a non-productive dimension, whether altruistic or artistic-cultural; the impact of immigration on community cohesion, both in the neighbourhood and in schools; the weakening of the links of family and inter-generational solidarity... Who could be so bold as to claim that all these phenomena, and so many similar ones, are the result of the evils of 1968? I think the sixties were a period on the whole positive, which in no way represented a break with a previous golden age in which the lost values that we now yearn for were supposedly prevalent, that 1968 was above all a happening that took place on a marvellous

stage in the hands of stage managers that historically have been characterised for having the skill to pass themselves off as designers of the future of the West, and that the sixties and 1968 in particular also produced multiple side-effects that certainly deserve to be valued negatively.

Will power; making an effort; always trying to do one's best; searching for excellence; making a strong commitment to others; responsibility as a rule in private and public affairs, and active and positive involvement in collective matters. The worst thing that those of us who believe these are socially and humanly desirable and enriching attitudes and values could do is conclude that their absence or even non-existence is merely a consequence of some isolated event and not of a whole series of factors that are quite complex and heterogeneous. Let us not just scratch the surface; let's also find out what the pernicious effects are that a system produces, that of the West, which on the whole has the undeniable merit of being the one that has produced the most socially satisfactory results in all history. Choosing a particular event as a scapegoat to be held responsible for the negative aspects of a situation by nature very complex is always a sterile path. Simple solutions have never helped to solve complex problems. And much less so if when tackling the analysis of the present we combine the catastrophist diagnoses with nostalgia for a past (I must confess that when I look back at history I find it impossible to place) in which supposedly the good things now lost were present in abundance II