



Yugoslavia between May '68 and November '89: Introduction¹

Jugoslavija između
maja '68 i novembra '89: uvod

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Looking back at the recent fiftieth anniversary of *mai 68* and the even more recent thirtieth anniversary of *die Wende*, 'Yugoslavia between May '68 and November '89' traces the impact of these global events on Yugoslavia, a country where the surprising non-violence of student protests was matched only by the shocking violence of capitalist transition. During the last half-century, May '68 has been portrayed mostly as a revolt led by students and workers around the world against state-led industrial society typical both for the US-American hegemony and for the Soviet alternative. As such, the revolution tends to be associated, on the one hand, with NATO member states such as France or the US and, on the other, with members of the Warsaw Pact such as Czechoslovakia or Poland. However, May '68 resonated also in Yugoslavia, a country which not only was aligned neither to NATO nor to the Soviet bloc, but was even the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, a worldwide attempt to oppose both geopolitical blocs. Yugoslavia is thus a rare case of May '68 going beyond the critique of the Cold-War stalemate; a case where this critique of both the US and the USSR was always already the official position of the regime itself; a case where Fordist industrial society common both to the capitalist West and the real-socialist East was challenged by the experiment of workers' self-management, which Yugoslavia introduced two decades before 1968 and abolished two decades after it. What was, then, the object of critique in and following 1968 in a country like Yugoslavia?

But first we should take a step back and ask ourselves if we really need to formulate any of this in terms of anniversaries—not one, but two anniversaries. After all, an anniversary is a bizarre and certainly pre-theoretical mix of the evental and the conjunctural; it is what Fernand Braudel, a key figure in the second generation of the Annales school of history, would call an event, but an event

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removed from us by what he might call a conjuncture. In this respect, May '68 at fifty is neither an event nor a conjuncture; it is an event that happened a whole conjuncture ago. And November '89 at thirty is of course no better.

However, adding November '89 at thirty to May '68 at fifty does not necessarily make things twice as bad. If we look back at what proverbially started in Paris in 1968 from the perspective of what supposedly began in East Berlin in 1989, this at least gives us a chance to move from both the eventual and the conjunctural and grasp the structural, the real interest of Fernand Braudel.

Indeed, according to world-systems theory, the main contemporary successor of Braudelian history, 1989 was a continuation of 1968: a continuation of its liberalism, according to Giovanni Arrighi's assessment at the time (see Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1992), or a continuation of its neo-liberalism, according to Arrighi's revision from a decade later (see Arrighi). Moreover, 1968 itself was a repetition of 1848, according to Arrighi and his colleagues, who saw the bourgeois revolution of 1848 and May '68 as the only world revolutions: just as 1848 was a failed but world-scale return to 1789, so too May '68 was a failed but world-scale return to 1917; and just as the 1848 revolution formed the original Left as a rehearsal for 1917, so too May '68 spawned the New Left as a rehearsal for 1989. In turn, 1848 was, 'in a Hegelian sense, the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of 1789' (Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1989: 98). Which is a peculiar reference by Arrighi and his colleagues, given that Karl Marx refers to G. W. F. Hegel to portray 1848 as a farcical repetition not of 1789, but of 1799, when Napoleon had his *coup d'état*, itself a tragic repetition of the Roman republic.

Hence, the first reason to think about the dates of revolutions is that revolutionaries themselves do it. The Yellow vests movement

started in French social media in May 2018, exactly fifty years after May '68. By November, the movement spread onto the streets of France and beyond: wearing the high-visibility vests that French law had required of them as a safety measure, motorists demanded real safety measures, including the reintroduction of the solidarity tax. In the process, protesters also produced a *tricolore* with three dates on it, one for each colour: 1789, 1968 and 2018 (with the red third of the flag going to 2018). The year 1989 was missing from the flag, of course, no doubt because the revolutionaries of 1989 had approached their revolution as the exact opposite of May '68: a pro-capitalist upheaval, not an anti-capitalist one. But this is just a further example of revolutionaries conjuring up past revolutions, an example that becomes even more telling if we agree with Arrighi and others who, as we just saw, claim that 1989 was a continuation of 1968.

So, dates of revolutions are important to revolutionaries themselves. But they are important in periods without revolutions as well. In those periods, past revolutions are domesticated like family members who are thrown a party for their birthday, especially for their fiftieth, sixtieth... hundredth birthday. Finally, 1968, 1989 and Yugoslavia meet even at the level where 'Yugoslavia between May '68 and November '89' tries to place itself, namely the level of theory: as Hrvoje Klasić writes (9), the changes brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall included also a new scholarly interest in the Yugoslav May '68, a topic that remained conspicuously marginal in Yugoslav humanities and social sciences until the country's breakup. In this sense, 1989 marks the birthdate of the Yugoslav 1968 as an object of knowledge.

Indeed, a look at sixties Paris from eighties East Berlin poses questions about the legacy of Yugoslavia that ultimately are structural, insofar as their ultimate horizon is the *longue durée* that goes all the

way back to the early modern origins of capitalism, the object of Braudel's first book, his 1949 masterpiece on the Mediterranean. Outside theory, Yugoslav socialist experiment and its defence during the Yugoslav chapter of May '68 belie the commonplace that May '68 fought for socialism in the West and against socialism in the East. And within theory, Yugoslav non-alignment and workers' self-management pose a problem even for the popular Braudelian account (see Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1989: 103–104) according to which May '68 was mostly a revolt against both the US and the USSR. Both these commonplaces about May '68 are complicated by May in Yugoslavia, where the regime was criticised in the name of its own ideals of self-management and non-alignment (which is also why the League of Communists of Yugoslavia was probably the only ruling party worldwide to assess May '68 as a confirmation of its own politics [see Kanzleiter: 85]). *Contra* pre-theoretical opinion-makers, Yugoslav protesters did not protest against socialism as such, despite protesting in the so-called East; *pace* Braudelian theorists, they protested against more than just the forced choice between the US and the USSR (and they were able to do that also because they did not protest against socialism).

Beyond these commonplaces, 'Yugoslavia between May '68 and November '89' aims to rethink our assumptions about May '68 across such divides as the West and the rest, politics and culture, culture and counterculture, and art and critique. As such, it offers us an opportunity to ask ourselves why May '68 was necessary at all in the country that led the Non-Aligned Movement and experimented with self-management as an alternative to both capitalism and state socialism. Estranged in this way, the fact that May '68 did take place even in Yugoslavia can begin to have consequences for our notion of the global May '68, as well as for our understanding of November '89, an event whose

global impact few societies felt as strongly and as painfully as that of Yugoslavia.

In its attempt to sophisticate the state of the art and its focus on the geopolitics of the metropolises in the core of the world-system (Paris, New York, Berlin) and in the Soviet-influenced periphery (Prague, Warsaw), 'Yugoslavia between May '68 and November '89' adds not only the dimension of the semi-peripheral, but the dimension where the semi-peripheral meant the non-aligned and the self-managed, among other things, and was also reflected as such in cultural production. This is way the articles that follow focus on culture and the arts rather than geopolitics, the usual object of study in relation to 1968 and 1989.

Some of the most world-renowned oeuvres produced by the people of Yugoslavia—including Marina Abramović's performance art, the OHO group's conceptual art, the Black Wave film, the Ljubljana Lacanian school, the Praxis school of Marxism, the prose of Danilo Kiš, Milorad Pavić and Dubravka Ugrešić and the poetry of Tomaž Šalamun—began to take shape in the late 1960s and received worldwide recognition by the late 1980s. Together with aesthetic currents from other locales of the semi-periphery of the world-system (notably the Latin American Boom), these and similar phenomena arguably gave a second life to hitherto Europe-based modernism, which by the 1960s was limited to such forms as *nouveau roman* (see Anderson). This final season of European modernism was followed in the core of the system by post-modernism in aesthetics and neo-conservatism in politics, with many protagonists of May '68 becoming so-called New Philosophers, TV intellectuals critical of socialist totalitarianism and revolution in the name of liberalism and human rights. As for Yugoslavia, the final season of European modernism was followed by a party-led suspense of liberal reforms, a crisis of the economic, political and cultural experiment

that was self-management, a dissolution of the state more violent than in any other socialist society, and the emergence of independent successor states. By now, all these states are either in or on their path to the European Union, the institution whose Parliament chose to commemorate the recent thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall by, among other things, equalising the atrocities of fascism with those of communism, the main twentieth-century source of anti-fascism. This indistinction between fascism and its historical alternative seems to be the only non-alignment that awaits ex-Yugoslav societies after the breakup of their common non-aligned country. ♡

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