

**Original citation:**

Goff, Philippe Le. (2014) Capitalism, crisis and critique: reassessing Régis Debray's 'Modest Contribution' to understanding May 1968 in Light of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. *Modern & Contemporary France*, 22 (2). pp. 231-251.

**Permanent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/99115>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Modern & Contemporary France* in 2014 available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09639489.2013.845145>.

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk)

**Capitalism, crisis and critique: Reassessing Régis Debray's 'modest contribution' to understanding May 1968 in light of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme***

*Modern and Contemporary France* (Vol. 22, Issue 2, 2014), pp. 231-251.

Philippe Le Goff

In 1978 Régis Debray argued that rather than threatening to overthrow capitalism, the student and worker revolt of 1968 actually strengthened the mechanisms of capital accumulation in France. Today the historical significance of May 1968 continues to generate much debate and scholarly interest, yet Debray's controversial thesis is largely absent from contemporary accounts of May's impact on post-1968 socio-economic and political change. Adopting the theoretical framework of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, this article shows that Debray's work correctly highlights the ability of post-1968 capitalism to appropriate the critiques of May. In certain respects, Debray offered a prescient analysis of capitalism's 'new spirit' as later described by Boltanski and Chiapello. The article also explores some of the political and theoretical implications of a grave anti-capitalist threat being paradoxically turned into a source of capitalist strength. While highlighting the notable shortcomings in Debray's argument, particularly its deterministic approach, the article suggests that Debray's otherwise stimulating analysis of May 1968 instructively reveals the importance of understanding and explaining capitalism, crisis and critique together.

En 1978 Régis Debray a affirmé que, plutôt que menacer le renversement du capitalisme, en fait la révolte étudiante et ouvrière de 1968 a renforcé les mécanismes d'accumulation de capital en France. Aujourd'hui la signification historique de Mai 68 continue de susciter de vifs débats et beaucoup d'intérêt intellectuel. Pourtant la thèse controversée de Debray apparaît rarement dans des études contemporaines de l'impact que Mai a eu sur les changements politiques et économiques après 1968. En utilisant le cadre théorique du *Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, cet article montre que Debray a eu raison de souligner la capacité du capitalisme de l'après-1968 de s'approprier les critiques de Mai. D'une certaine manière, Debray a anticipé l'essor du 'nouvel esprit' du capitalisme décrit plus tard par Boltanski et Chiapello. Ainsi, l'article se penche aussi sur la question plus large de comment et pourquoi les caractéristiques du capitalisme contemporain émanent de la critique anticapitaliste de Mai 68 ; il examine les conséquences politiques et théoriques du paradoxe selon lequel une menace anticapitaliste est devenue une force capitaliste. Bien qu'il soit nécessaire de souligner les défauts notables dans l'argument de Debray, surtout son approche déterministe, l'article suggère que son analyse provocante révèle pourquoi il faut comprendre et expliquer le capitalisme, sa crise et sa critique ensemble.

Keywords: Régis Debray; May 1968; Anti-capitalism; The new spirit of capitalism; Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello.

## Introduction

On the tenth anniversary of May 1968, while his contemporaries appeared to be waxing lyrical about their ‘revolutionary years’ in a series of official ceremonies and round-table discussions, Régis Debray published a highly critical account of the historical significance of May, *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire*. It was time for a few home truths, Debray believed, and he took it upon himself to spoil the party. The *soixante-huitards* were blind to the reality of their legacy: ‘Mai 68 est le berceau de la nouvelle société bourgeoise’ (Debray 1978, 10). Debray argued that, far from threatening to overthrow the capitalist order, May 1968 was paving the way for the necessary process of socio-economic modernization that would in fact *strengthen* the mechanisms of capital accumulation in France. In 1978 ‘les tables de la loi sont chargées de tous les fruits de Mai’, he contended. ‘Et les fruits ont passé les promesses des fleurs’ (1978, 14). May ‘68 was the midwife of capitalist revolution. Debray’s thesis – highly original for its time (see Reader 1995, 24) - was met with praise and respect as well as a mixture of bewilderment, amusement and anger. Many rejected his assertions as completely misreading the context and nature of May, its socio-economic and political consequences and who should be held responsible for the new society emerging in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Thirty years later there has been continued interest in May’s impact on post-1968 French capitalism (see, for example, Le Goff 2006). Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s superb work, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, offers an exemplary study. Building on the Weberian tradition, in an approach that is also reminiscent of the Gramscian notion of hegemony (1971), the book posits that the capitalist order requires a spirit, that is, a set of beliefs or an ideology, to justify and ‘confer meaning’ on it. These beliefs help capitalism to sustain positive involvement in ‘the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it’ and ‘to elicit the good will of those on whom it is based’ - ‘the people required for production and the functioning of business’. Put quite simply, the spirit of capitalism is ‘the ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 8-12, 485-486). Boltanski and Chiapello discern three successive spirits of capitalism in France: the first emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and was personified by the speculating and innovating bourgeois entrepreneur; after the Great Depression, the second spirit moved away from the individual entrepreneur and towards the large, hierarchical and bureaucratized firm as its spiritual home and the director or salaried manager as its central figure; finally, following the crisis years of 1965-1975, a new spirit appeared that renounced the centralised Taylorist-Fordist organisation of production and labour (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 17-19; Žižek 2009a, 51-52). Thereafter, capitalism gradually developed ‘a network-based form of organization founded on employee initiative and autonomy in the workplace’ (Žižek 2009a, 52), ‘a new, liberated, and even libertarian way of making profit ... to allow for the realization of the self’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 201). Boltanski and Chiapello place May 1968 at the heart of the process that led to the emergence of this new spirit of capitalism. Do they not subscribe, then, at least partially, to Debray’s analysis? And yet Debray is absent from both Boltanski and Chiapello’s work and from many contemporary debates on post-1968 capitalism. It is time to reappraise Debray’s thesis in light of these new studies.

While acknowledging the many critiques that *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* has received,<sup>i</sup> our analysis will adopt the theoretical framework and approach

proposed by Boltanski and Chiapello. Let us establish the basic coordinates of this methodology. Primarily, critique drives the changes in the spirit of capitalism (2005, 27). Therein Boltanski and Chiapello note that critique of capitalism historically takes two distinct forms: the artistic critique, to adopt their term, which attacks ‘capitalism as a source of *disenchantment* and *inauthenticity* of objects, persons, emotions’ and existence more generally, and ‘as a source of *oppression*’, stifling human ‘freedom, autonomy and creativity’; and the social critique, which opposes capitalism ‘as a source of *poverty* among workers and of *inequalities* on an unprecedented scale’, and ‘as a source of *opportunism* and *egoism*’, favouring private interests over collective solidarity (2005, 37-38, emphasis in original). Our argument will follow Boltanski and Chiapello’s interpretation of May ‘68 as ‘a major phenomenon from two contrasting angles’. While 1968 was arguably ‘not a revolution in the sense that it did not lead to a seizure of political power’, it was, at the very least, ‘a profound crisis that imperilled the operation of capitalism’, and was certainly ‘interpreted as such by the economic bodies ... charged with its defence’. Nevertheless, it was by appropriating some of the ‘oppositional themes articulated during the May events’ - those which did not infringe on the process of capital accumulation but merely provided a new paradigm for it to function - that capitalism was able to ‘disarm the critique, regain the initiative, and discover a new dynamism’, as seen from the 1980s onwards (2005, 167-169).

To understand the consequences of May one must also understand May itself. Returning to Debray via Boltanski and Chiapello, it shall be argued that Debray’s analysis of May 1968’s long-term effects was highly prescient; he was correct to highlight the ability of capitalism to absorb some of the May movement’s logic, namely the artistic critique, and his essay offers some stimulating insights into how we might seek to understand and explain such a process. Yet we shall challenge Debray’s view of the causes and nature of the May-June revolt and how this related to the changes in post-1968 capitalism. He fails to see that we are dealing with the supreme paradox of a major and potentially revolutionary crisis of capitalism strengthening the capitalist system, and not a superficially anti-capitalist carnival that was, in the last instance, part of the logic of capitalist development.

### **Debray and May ‘68**

Debray was not in France in 1968. Far from the improvised barricades that punctuated the boulevards of the Latin Quarter, his political commitment had taken him to Latin America where he had joined Che Guevara’s Bolivian campaign until his arrest and imprisonment in 1967. He remained incarcerated in Bolivia until 1971. On the face of it this may seem largely inconsequential, but Debray’s absence does in fact have a notable impact on his interpretation of events – both positive and negative – and is therefore worth our consideration and comment.

One of the inherent problems with analyses of May 1968 is that many are from those who were there, in the streets, living and breathing what became a formative event of their lives. With such a personal experience comes an emotional attachment and, by extension, a staunch defensiveness like that of a proud parent – all of which inevitably flow into historical accounts and debates.<sup>ii</sup> Henri Weber exemplifies this issue perfectly. In the opening lines of *Vingt Ans Après: Que reste-t-il de 68?* (1988, 10) he asks of May’s legacy: ‘que reste-t-il de nos amours?’, at which point those readers looking for a rigorous critique free from self-congratulatory nostalgia undoubtedly abandon the book. Accusations of crude partisanship are not

applicable to Debray who, while sharing broad ideological lines with May's actors, did not take part in *les événements* and could therefore legitimately claim to produce a less partial appraisal (see Debray 1978, 87-88). By the same logic, however, Debray's perspective is problematic. By virtue of his belief that human rights are 'exclusivement européen[s]' and that 'la démesure des inégalités planétaires' will continue until the capitalist West's exploitation of the Third World is forcibly overthrown, any revolt within the industrialised, bourgeois West represents 'l'imposture des dissidences officielles' (1978, 89). It is certainly through this Third Worldist lens that Debray sees May 1968 as a non-event. May was, for him, the moment at which the French youth and workers dipped their toes in the sea of radical emancipatory politics, always knowing full well that, unlike any *true* revolutionary, they would never jump in head-first: 'l'idée même de sauter le pas (de prendre les risques d'une rupture) hérissait les avant-gardes ouvrières (qui ne firent rien pour développer les virtualités anticapitalistes qui se dessinaient ici et là dans le mouvement ouvrier)' (1978, 29). Note here that Debray does in fact acknowledge the 'anti-capitalist potential' of May '68. The movement did provide a possible platform for a major 'rupture'. And yet he also believes that such a break was not, and ultimately could not have been realised. Due to 'la réalité matérielle des pays capitalistes développés', rather than an agent of emancipation, the striking French workers seem to represent in Debray's eyes – though he does not use the term himself – the so-called 'aristocracy of labour':

1968 marque ... le moment où le mouvement ouvrier, dans sa masse, se découvre solidaire des mécanismes impérialistes de pompage du surtravail mondial et de la nouvelle division internationale du travail, dont il est très insuffisamment bénéficiaire, mais somme toute bénéficiaire. En conséquence de quoi, le prolétariat européen ayant bien plus à perdre que ses chaînes à la Révolution mondiale, la plus grande grève de l'histoire de France peut se terminer avec et sur la satisfaction de revendications dites quantitatives. (1978, 42)

If workers of Europe had once proclaimed in the Internationale that 'we are nothing, let us be everything', by the 1960s they were now chanting 'we have something, let us have more' (see 1978, 55: 'le but du Mouvement de Mai n'était pas de *faire*, mais pour les étudiants d'*être* (mieux) et pour la majorité des ouvriers d'*avoir* (plus)'). Domestic reform, not international revolution, would serve this need. 'La principale affaire de la classe ouvrière française (dans son immense majorité),' Debray argues, 'c'est de réduire les scandaleuses inégalités sociales qui prévalent encore dans le pays, moyennant une distribution plus équitable des revenus. En termes plus crus : améliorer notre part du gâteau, mais sans casser le four ni le moule à tarte' (1978, 43). In exchange for forgetting about the international class struggle, the French working class were prepared to take their thirty pieces of silver and profit from a capitalist imperialism that exports 'le plus gros des inégalités qu'il fabrique à l'extérieur de ses frontières géographiques et sociales' (1978, 60). 'Les antagonismes de classe, au sein de chacune de ces nations,' Debray asserts, '[s'effacent] derrière une solidarité *de facto* fondée sur l'exploitation en commun du marché mondial' (1978, 40). Until such global inequalities are brought to an end, the European can merely 'enlever son grain de sable murailles de la forteresse-Occident, en prêtant main forte aux « barbares » en lutte, hors les murs, contre notre barbarie sophistiquée' (Debray 1978, 89-90). In short, as long as the imperialist centre, including its workers, continues to prosper

through exploiting the labour and resources of the Third World periphery, any self-professed revolutionary movement in the developed West is, for Debray, a fraud and a 'parody' (Weber 1979, 70; 1988, 38). Indeed, Keith Reader reminds us of the unique characteristics of Debray's essay. 'Subsequent texts', Reader states, 'drawing on and articulating superficially similar themes in a less radical, more postmodernist way (Gilles Lipovetsky's *L'Ere du vide*, for example, which all but voids the events of any substantive social content by viewing them as a herald of 'me generations') have tended to blunt the radicalism of an analysis for which "the overthrow of the capitalist system remains the only wager compatible with our dignity, and it is not an unreasonable one' (Reader 1995, 24-25). The temptation to lump together Debray and Lipovetsky – a temptation Kristin Ross (2002, 185) succumbs to, asserting that 'Debray's characterization of May's goals is, interestingly, identical to that of Lipovetsky: "the emancipation of the individual"' – is therefore reductive and misleading. Debray does recognise the collective, social dimensions of May and the centrality of the struggle to tackle social inequality. The point is that in his eyes 1968, despite its pretensions, was ultimately a movement for social reform, not social revolution; it demanded to share in the benefits of international capital, thereby ultimately – and lamentably - reinforcing the system's continued reign.

We should fully reject this view of May. It is the first of Debray's claims regarding May itself that should be contested if we wish to understand the relationship between 1968 and the new spirit of capitalism in France. One must, contrary to Debray's view, fully assert the anti-capitalist, revolutionary dimensions of the movement. As Ross shows in her astute and stimulating study of the memory of 1968, a narrative of May '68 has been constructed around consensual notions of 'a merry month' of 'youthful free expression', creativity and 'libertarian good will'; a 'good-natured "cultural" event' and sexual revolution that provoked a 'benign transformation of customs and lifestyles', leading many to overlook or simply forget the fact that May-June 1968 was 'the largest mass movement in French history, the biggest strike in the history of the French workers' movement', the only post-war 'general insurrection' in the industrialised West (Ross 2002, 3-9). Is Debray guilty of helping to forge such a distorted history? To a degree he arguably is: he places great emphasis on the 'cultural' aspects of May and its libertarian rejection of the authority of both the patriarch (De Gaulle) and the party (Lenin) (see 1978, 26-30, 41-42), he explicitly denies the conflictual nature of events (see 1978, 9, 21-22) and while not disputing its sincerity he certainly treats the movement – particularly the students - with an air of patronising derision that was shared by his ideological antithesis, Raymond Aron (1968), for whom 1968 was a 'psychodrama' and a carnivalesque protest of the *filis à papa du XVIème arrondissement*. But it would be mistaken to suggest that Debray re-writes history. As we have seen, he is keenly aware that May-June witnessed the greatest strike in French history – it does not '[recede] into the background' of his analysis as is characteristic of the 'official story' of 1968 (Ross 2002, 8) - and he acknowledges its anti-capitalist potential. Rather, Debray's error is that he challenges what the events actually signified, arguing that the student movement and general strike were not subversive or revolutionary in and of themselves. Yet how, one wonders, could a strike of nine million workers be viewed as a benign non-event or a hollow façade in which a desire for wholesale political and socio-economic change was not central to the causes and overall logic of the movement? We should in fact recall that the workers and students utterly 'paralyzed France and evoked the spectre of the disintegration of state power' (Žižek 2009b, 158).

This leads us to the second point of Debray's thesis that is contentious: the causes of the 1968 revolts. Accounting for the roots of unrest, Debray proposes a theory of a two-speed post-war France. The first France of industry and technology was dynamic and prosperous; its rapid post-war economic growth was unprecedented, assuring France its place amongst the world's leading economies. Meanwhile the second France of Catholic patriarchy, Gaullist paternalism and Napoleonic hierarchy – traditional values and customs that had long been institutionalised in the family, education, business and the state - were contradicting the modernizing economy, to the point that the anachronisms of French society became 'anti-économique[s]' and were beginning to threaten 'la rentabilité de la société anonyme France' (Debray 1978, 11-12). Therein Debray locates the function of the May movement. The crisis acted as a self-correcting act for French capitalism; it synchronised what had become jarring, harmonising the two antagonistic Frances in a profitable union. Debray goes so far as to suggest that 'la stratégie du développement du capital exigeait la révolution culturelle de Mai' (1978, 17). 'La France ... de l'apéro et de l'institut, du oui-papa oui-patron oui-chéri', he describes, 'recevait l'ordre de décamper pour que celle du software et du supermarché, du news et du planning, du know-how et du brain-storming puisse étaler ses bonnes affaires, enfin chez elle' (1978, 13). May '68 was the midwife of an old capitalist society pregnant with a new, more profitable one. Expanding on the historical significance of 1968, Debray invokes the Hegelian Ruse of Reason, according to which 'the great men of history ... become the instruments of an ulterior rational design of which they themselves may remain oblivious and to which, without being clearly aware of it, they are sacrificed' (Tucker 1956, 270). Hegel's ruse struck again in 1968, Debray affirms. Its victims this time were the students and workers of France. Unbeknown to them, they were accompanied by a cunning fellow traveller that would ultimately eclipse the sincerity of their actions:

Comme les grands hommes hégéliens le sont pour le génie de l'univers, les révolutionnaires de Mai furent les hommes d'affaires du génie de la bourgeoisie qui en avait besoin. Ce n'est pas leur faute, mais celle de l'univers, où l'on ne choisit pas de naître. Ils accomplirent donc le contraire de ce qu'ils croyaient réaliser. L'histoire n'est jamais si rusée que lorsqu'elle fait affaire avec les naïfs. (Debray 1978, 15)

It soon becomes clear that this forms the philosophical underpinning of Debray's two-speed France theory. Indeed, Debray's view of May's causes and historical function appears to reinforce his critique of May itself, and vice versa. For Debray the revolts were a crisis in a qualified sense: a self-generated internal malfunction to be resolved through capitalism deploying its own means to serve its own ends. Such a teleological interpretation, in which the significance of May-June is to be judged according to its consequences, certainly compounds his view that, in order to facilitate its preordained goal of reconciliation rather than rupture, May was 'le plus raisonnable des mouvements sociaux' (Debray 1978, 12).

Many would now agree that French social relations were a major cause of 1968, particularly amongst students and young people. Many would also agree that in the 1960s the explosion of credit-fuelled consumerism contradicted traditional values of thrift and saving – Daniel Bell explores the clash in the United States between Protestant asceticism and materialist hedonism in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) – altering the way people engaged with capitalism and therefore giving rise to a new capitalist spirit (cited in Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 28).

However, Debray's suggestion that the revolt was propelled by the need to realise the socio-political conditions required by capital should be challenged. While Debray's Hegelian analysis is certainly thought-provoking and unique, his argument ultimately remains unsatisfactory for those who seek to understand and explain the uncertainty and ambiguity that follows a moment of rupture such as May 1968. Such a reading, accurately described as 'crude economic determinism' (Hewlett 1998, 156), accords inevitability to a wholly contingent system. Though it shall indeed later be argued that we can now see the manner in which May 1968 ushered in a new spirit of capitalism, that is not to say that there is a 'logical progression' (Hewlett 1998, 153) from pre-1968 to post-1968 capitalism or that the 1968 revolts and the subsequent socio-economic order were somehow capital's preordained goal.

So what was May 1968? 1968 in France was unique in that it combined the artistic and the social critiques of capitalism outlined earlier – which are not always compatible, as Boltanski and Chiapello highlight (see 2005, 38-39) – to form an unprecedented twin attack on capital by students and the working class (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 169). Though these two critiques converged and defined the May-June revolt as a whole, the social critique was largely characteristic of the workers' movement. Workers, particularly those in traditional industrial sectors, mobilised against 'the restructuring and modernization of the productive apparatus undertaken in the 1960s' that directly threatened them (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 169). Their revolt could be seen as the result of the Gaullists' economic policy and as 'a response to the prolonged exclusion of unskilled and semi-skilled workers from the benefits of growth', both of which led to a mass mobilisation under the traditional socialist slogans of 'capitalist exploitation' and 'the egoism of an "oligarchy" that "confiscates the fruits of progress"' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 169-170). In May '68 the artistic critique, meanwhile, which emanated from a wide range of historical and contemporary sources - Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and Marcuse; Surrealism, Situationism and the US hippie movement - was given 'an unprecedented audience, inconceivable ten years earlier' when these themes were largely confined to small political and artistic avant-garde groupings (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 170). Predominant amongst the heterogeneous student movement, the artistic critique attacked the alienation of capitalist society, the inauthenticity and 'poverty of everyday life', the 'dehumanization of the world under the sway of technicization and technocratization' and the modern world's suppression of autonomy and creativity. They denounced the 'hierarchical power', paternalism and authoritarianism in the spheres of work, production and the family, and demanded autonomy, self-management and creativity in the workplace and emancipation from 'patriarchal control' for women and young people in the home and in society more generally (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 170).

Above all, we must understand two essential points regarding May itself. First, both the social and the artistic critiques were fundamentally anti-capitalist; they were opposed to capital accumulation and were conceived as an alternative socio-economic and political system. Second, the events of 1968 were a grave crisis of capitalism in France – students and workers united to grind production and by extension the country to a complete halt, paralysing De Gaulle's government as a result. Debray, then, does not accord enough significance to May itself. His belief that May did not truly threaten the functioning of capital is implicit throughout his analysis and certainly stems from his Third Worldism. That is not to say that he rejects its impact and significance. He sees how an anti-capitalist mobilisation paradoxically worked for the benefit of capitalism. However, he does not go far enough, and the full extent of

the paradox eludes him. Contrary to Debray's thesis, there was no inevitability to the crisis benefiting the capitalist system, which renders the post-1968 changes in capitalism even more extraordinary. Rather than 1968 as a superficially anti-capitalist carnival in which society was meeting the needs of capital through a revolt that was part of the logic of capitalist development, it was a major crisis of capitalism – one which cannot be ascribed to any logical process - that forced capital to meet some of the needs of society in the decades following 1968 in order to legitimise itself in the face of a major anti-capitalist revolt. To the issue of capitalism's response to May we shall now turn.

### **Capitalism and May '68**

In order to understand May's impact on capitalism and appraise Debray's thesis of post-1968 socio-economic modernization, it is first worth reflecting on the characteristics of contemporary capitalism and liberal democracy. Perhaps the most pertinent development is that themes previously at the heart of 1968's anti-capitalist artistic critique – rights for women and minorities, ecological issues – now assume a key role in mainstream political and economic discourse. Consider environmental concerns. From the 1960s to the 1980s ecology was a potent arm of the anti-capitalist struggle; it was an ideological attack on the 'power of capital' in which environmental damage and destruction were explicitly linked to capitalism's 'pursuit of profit at any price' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, ix). Today, however, ecology is now the site of capitalist innovation and profitability. Far from an anti-capitalist slogan, we are encouraged to invest in the 'green economy'. That which was once denounced as the cause of the disease is now hailed as its remedy (see Žižek 2009c, 18-19). Such an astonishing reversal is true of 1968's artistic critique more generally. As a response to the denunciation of hierarchy and the demands for authenticity and autonomy in the 'exploitative' workplace that were central to the ubiquitous critique of capitalism during the crisis years of 1960s-70s, in the 1980s management techniques and the organisation of labour began to appropriate the anti-capitalist slogans of 1968 in order to justify the system in the face of intense, protracted contestation. Reforms began to be implemented 'with a view to making working conditions appealing, improving productivity, developing quality, and increasing profits' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 97). As such, in contrast to Fordist or Taylorist forms of production and working conditions, the new spirit of capitalism is characterised by the values of flexibility, 'autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphic capacity, multitasking (in contrast to the narrow specialization of the old division of labour), conviviality, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts' - all of which are 'taken directly from the repertoire of May 1968', leftism, and the workers' self-management movement (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 97).

The original critique was, then, decontaminated and denatured; the harsh, antagonistic elements were filtered out, and the hitherto incompatible was rendered compatible. May's themes were divorced from their anti-capitalist critique of socio-economic exploitation and were 'autonomized', that is, 'represented as objectives that are valid in their own right', thereby neutralising the May movement, for capitalism's new spirit successfully legitimised itself by responding to part of the critique and appearing to meet demands that the previous spirit failed to satisfy (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 96-97). This *récupération* also gave capitalism a new creative

impetus that did not undermine the fundamental logic of capital accumulation as the critique originally intended but, on the contrary, worked *for* the system. ‘The new spirit of capitalism triumphantly recuperated the egalitarian and anti-hierarchical rhetoric of 1968’, Slavoj Žižek notes, ‘presenting itself as a successful libertarian revolt against the oppressive social organizations characteristic of both corporate capitalism *and* Really Existing Socialism – a new libertarian spirit epitomized by dressed-down “cool” capitalists such as Bill Gates and the founders of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream’ (2009a, 56). Žižek offers a characteristically colourful analysis of the rise of a consumer-oriented ‘cultural capitalism’ which, as he argues, forms the cornerstone of late, postmodern capitalism. At Starbucks, the socially conscious corporate juggernaut par excellence, he observes how their ‘It’s not just what you’re buying. It’s what you’re buying into’ advertising campaign reveals that:

the price is higher than elsewhere since what you are really buying is the “coffee ethic” which includes care for the environment, social responsibility towards the producers, plus a place where you can yourself can participate in communal life ... And if this is not enough, if your ethical needs are still unsatisfied and you continue to worry about Third World misery, then there are additional products you can buy. (Žižek, 2009a, pp. 53-54)

Žižek goes on to cite the Starbucks’ ‘Ethos Water’ program. Much more than a standard capitalist enterprise working for its shareholders, it is, according to the Starbucks website, ‘a brand with a social mission’ (cited in Žižek 2009a, 54). Žižek traces the origin of this ‘cultural surplus’ back to May 1968. Capitalism responded to May’s critique of alienated consumption and the inauthenticity of everyday life with a consumer-oriented capitalism that provides a real experience. Consumption is now ‘the time of the authentic fulfillment of my true Self ... and of caring for others, through becoming involved in charity or ecology’ (2009a, 52-53). What may appear as the narcissistic individualism of rampant neoliberal consumerism is in fact paradoxically underpinned, justified and celebrated as an invitation to take part in something much larger than the individual consumer. With organic, Fair Trade products ‘we are not merely buying and consuming, we are simultaneously doing something meaningful, showing our capacity for care and our global awareness, participating in a collective project’ (Žižek 2009a, p. 54).

This tongue-in-cheek analysis is certainly amusing, but that should not conceal a serious point Žižek is exploring, and one which is highly revealing in our current political conjuncture. At a time when never before have so many been so deeply cynical about the possibility of fundamental socio-economic and political change, denying their own subjective agency and rejecting any notions of collective emancipation as dangerous, abstract utopianism, there is a depressing truth in the fact that, for many people, the consumer power of the individual is all that remains in our late capitalist society. A sobering dose of ‘pessimism of the intellect’ would suggest that perhaps we have finally arrived at the Fukuyamean historical terminus. We are no longer citizens or students, but clients and customers, valued and empowered only in monetary terms. Agency has been reduced to the choices we make at the market, social justice to charitable donations.<sup>iii</sup> Issues that were once inherently political have been successfully depoliticized to the point that causes once understood as social justice against the systemic socio-economic effects of capitalism are now fully within the domain of capital. ‘The marriage of social enterprise and profit’ – one of the logical consequences of the neoliberal revolution - has given birth to a new breed of

‘social entrepreneur’ whose crude and unashamed maxim is ‘make money from doing good’.<sup>iv</sup> Prevailing structures, which may in fact perpetuate such socio-ecological problems, cannot, and moreover should not be altered - history shows that there are ‘no alternatives’ to enterprise-led solutions to social problems, so why risk not only compromising the only proven method of helping the poor and vulnerable, but also missing out on a potentially lucrative investment opportunity (see Žižek 2009c, 17-19)? From capitalist contradiction to propping up the neoliberal consensus, the mechanisms at work behind this dramatic shift in critique are all too clear: capitalism effectively denatured May’s artistic or cultural critique and rebranded it as the human face of neoliberal capitalism. Or, in Debray’s words, ‘le néo-capitalisme avance masqué de toutes les vertus de la contre-culture’ (1978, 60). And we now all know what that mask conceals. The financial crisis has, to be sure, placed our discussion of capitalism and crisis right back on the agenda to an extent perhaps not seen since the events surrounding May 1968 itself. Unlike previous crises, however, what remains largely elusive is the critique. If the growing wave of indignation against the exorbitant injustices and inequalities of neoliberal capitalism - not to mention international capital’s increasing contempt for democracy – is to be articulated into rigorous, theoretical critique capable, at the very least, of producing a more tolerable form capitalism,<sup>v</sup> an even greater ‘optimism of the will’ is undoubtedly required.

May’s critique is, then, in part, a victim of its own success. In receiving widespread attention and recognition, the critique pays the price of seeing ‘some of the values it had mobilized to oppose the form taken by the accumulation process being placed at the service of accumulation’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 29). One need only cite Henri Weber’s acerbic rebuke of Debray, written in 1979, to understand the extraordinary manner in which themes that were once perceived as the laying the groundwork for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism were ultimately used to the benefit of that very system. Themes emerged in the wake of May ‘68, Weber contends, that opened up new spaces for anti-capitalist mobilisation:

Debray does not perceive its [May’s] long-term subversive effects: egalitarian and democratic aspirations (‘self-management’) ... the women’s liberation movement, the sexual minority movements ... movements for reducing prices, consumers’ movements, movements of tenants, prisoners, soldiers, lawyers, teachers, medical workers, journalists ... (1979, 69)

Caution is to be advised, however, and he adds an essential caveat:

Obviously these movements, and their demands, are not revolutionary by definition; where they are inward looking and cut off from one another and the labour movement they can even assume a conservative role. The subversive charge they carry only becomes active to the extent that they can integrate themselves into the hegemonic advance of the whole labour movement. (1979, 69)

Despite acknowledging the distinct possibility that these sites of ideological contestation could serve to reinforce the power of capital, he nonetheless remains optimistic:

But it is precisely the spread and the intensity of egalitarian and democratic aspirations throughout the social fabric which provides the labour movement

with the objective base of a broad anti-capitalist class alliance, however ineffective may have been its efforts so far to adopt them and integrate them into its political strategy. (1979, 69)

Weber instructively illuminates the problems facing anti-capitalist critique. He is, in a sense, both right and wrong. During the crisis years in the 1960s-70s the demands and movements he cites were indeed loaded with an anti-capitalist, subversive sting that had the potential to derail capital accumulation. But he has no illusions and is acutely aware of the potential for *recuperation*. And, contrary to his hopes, that is exactly what began to happen from the late 1970s onwards. Weber's 'long-term subversive effects' – which are largely derived from the artistic critique – were turned from a genuine threat into some of the defining characteristics of Boltanski and Chiapello's new spirit of capitalism. His list of potentially revolutionary social contradictions of capitalism now reads like the manifesto of an ambitious yet respectable liberal-progressive parliamentary candidate. (Given Weber's journey from Trotskyist militant to card-carrying Socialist in the mid-1980s, it could almost be said that as his once anti-capitalist ideas were absorbed into the mainstream he himself followed suit.) One cannot fail to note that while he scoffs at Debray's thesis, it would appear that the new spirit of capitalism has vindicated Debray more than Weber and certainly many other observers thought possible. All the 'énergie' of May, Debray presciently affirmed in 1978, 'a été ... soigneusement mise à bénéfice par le système même contre lequel elle avait été dépensée'; May's critique was 'transformée par les divers appareils d'Etat en réformes, lois-cadres, statuts, règlements, amendements, secrétariats d'Etat et ministères (des réformes, de la condition féminine, de la qualité de la vie, du travail manuel, de l'environnement, des jeunes, du désir, des nouvelles énergies, des idées nouvelles, etc.)' (1978, 18, see also 60). Unlike his contemporaries, Debray had already foreseen certain fragments of capitalism's new spirit in 1978. More significantly, and to his credit, Debray also discerned the manner in which the capitalist State could appropriate and assimilate these anti-capitalist themes for its own ends. *Modeste contribution* therefore correctly and importantly grasps the essential idea that one should not divorce capitalism, crisis and critique, but understand and explain their interaction as interdependent forces.

Debray, Boltanski and Chiapello, Žižek, and even Weber (albeit unwillingly), all offer different variations of essentially the same conclusion. All compel us to reconsider the relationship between a socio-political or economic crisis, revolt or revolution, and the aftermath. When Debray asks, 'serait-il interdit à ceux qui n'y furent pas d'essayer d'articuler ce que Mai est devenu ?' (1978, 88) he hits on the crucial and often problematic issue regarding May's legacy. As with any major revolt one should not focus solely on the disruption of May-June 1968. To understand the significance of May we must also consider what happened after the streets and picket lines were cleared across France. We must ask how the revolt transcended the euphoric moment of rupture and was inscribed into a longer process of ideological contestation between those who remained committed to (re)actualizing its political possibilities and those who sought to appease or debunk its universality. True revolt or revolution does not end when the last shot is fired - it casts a shadow over an entire historical epoch. Eric Hobsbawm (1990, xi) once wrote apropos of the French Revolution that 'part of the history of the Revolution is what ... [the nineteenth] century made of it ... The nineteenth century studied, copied, compared itself to, or tried to avoid, bypass, repeat, or go beyond the French Revolution'. Are Hobsbawm's assertions not true, *mutatis mutandis*, of May 1968? The May movement did not have

to attain and thereafter exercise political power for it to dramatically alter the French socio-economic and political landscape and for part of its logic – whether as its reversal and negation, as many *soixante-huitards* argue, or as its completion, as Debray believes - to enter the post-1968 era. May's status as a major crisis and threat is evident in the response of the government and industry (see Hewlett 1998, 159-166; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 177-195); they knew wholesale reform was essential for 1968's political defeat and its revolutionary spectre to remain just that: a distant spectre and not a political reality threatening the capitalist State once again. Is this not the logic behind Nicolas Sarkozy's repeated assertions during the 2007 presidential election that France must 'turn the page' on May 1968? Sarkozy's obsession with the need to consign 1968 to the dustbin of history reveals his belief that, despite the short-term defeat of the May movement, the anti-capitalist spectre of May '68 is still haunting France. A comprehensive 'counter-revolution' - led by himself, of course - is therefore required to finish off the work successfully started by capitalism's new spirit in neutralising anti-capitalist critique and to ensure the final victory of the neoliberal consensus that has eluded successive French governments (Hewlett 2011, 65-69). For Sarkozy, Alain Badiou (2007, 48-53) argues, it is not enough that 'empirical communism' was buried in France after the defeat of 1968; Sarkozy wants to go further and rid France of all traces of the 'communist hypothesis' lest it re-emerge once again. Although soon after Sarkozy's election the unraveling of the financial crisis prompted an abrupt end to many of his neoliberal aspirations - the emperor had no clothes, even in Sarkozy's eyes - the ideological motivations behind his attack on the spirit of 1968 nonetheless remain clear.

It is *this* legacy of 1968 that renders Debray's claim that capitalism completed the work of May somewhat dubious. But it would be equally wrong to suggest that the new spirit of capitalism symbolises 1968's absolute defeat. A wave of major social and moral reform swept France in the wake of 1968: there was a rise in ethical and ecological awareness and minority rights; France saw the modernization of social relations and reforms of the workplace encouraged greater autonomy and more egalitarian, anti-hierarchical structures; corporations, meanwhile, are now obliged to demonstrate their 'corporate social responsibility' and green credentials. These achievements should not be dismissed or trivialised. One should certainly avoid a reductionist view of May in which the artistic critique is presented as its sole meaning (see Lipovetsky 1983, 1986), thereby completely overlooking the centrality of May's Marxian social critique, for which post-1968 capitalism represented anything but a success. Yet in many ways May's artistic critique did succeed. Debray was undoubtedly correct to suggest that the May movement reshaped capitalism in this respect. Elements of May's critique were recuperated by French capitalism, which led to a long-term stabilisation after the period of short-term revolt that found its apogee in 1968 and producing with it a dramatic transformation in the French socio-economic and political system - albeit within the logic of capital as opposed to renouncing the system *in toto* as the critique was originally conceived. This is, then, success in a qualified sense, for a dramatic change is not total or absolute, and indeed the persistence of the capitalist mode of production is the obvious and crucial difference between the demands of the 1968 movement and the form of their post-1968 realisation.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Critique and the 'spirit' of capitalism**

Let us now turn our attention to the role of critique as a motor in the changes of the spirit of capitalism and consider some of the political and theoretical implications of the paradoxical phenomenon of a grave anti-capitalist threat being turned into a source of capitalist strength. Though an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms capitalism deployed in response to the critiques of 1968 goes far beyond the scope of this article, it is worth very briefly summarising some of Boltanski and Chiapello's observations, thus expanding on our earlier discussion of capitalism's appropriation of its own critique. In the short term, they note, the 1968 crisis was interpreted in terms of the social critique by government and industry. As such, demands associated with 1968's social critique were addressed (notably in the numerous laws and decrees passed from 1968 to 1973), resulting in substantial advances in workers' wages and rights, income equality and social security (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 177-184). Capitalism's immediate response therefore sought to defuse the crisis by agreeing to some of the workers' demands. By the mid-1970s, however, due to the additional costs of such socio-economic concessions, and against the backdrop of recession and sustained political contestation and disruption to production in spite of workers receiving major gains, it became clear that capitalism's first response had failed and 'new solutions' were sought to resolve what was becoming a protracted state of crisis for capitalism in France (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 199, 184-198). Thus began capitalism's second reaction, in which the crisis was now interpreted and addressed in terms of the artistic critique. With the support of those *soixante-huitards* who had championed the artistic critique back in 1968, some of whom now held office in Mitterrand's government, working conditions and the organisation of work were transformed, as we have seen. Capitalism therefore constructed a new narrative of the crisis, offered a new response and, ultimately, forged a new ideology to justify engagement in capitalism once again: a new spirit. 'Autonomy was exchanged for security, opening the way for a new spirit of capitalism extolling the virtues of mobility and adaptability, whereas the previous spirit was unquestionably more concerned with security than liberty' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 199). By addressing a different critique, this strategic re-think over time allowed employers to recuperate the concessions granted to workers in the initial response to the social critique. Boltanski and Chiapello succinctly explain that, in this regard, 'the displacements operated by capitalism allowed it to escape the constraints that had gradually been constructed in response to the social critique, and were possible without provoking large-scale resistance because they seemed to satisfy demands issuing from a different current' (2005, 199-200).

We can, therefore, draw at least two conclusions from the impact of critique on the spirit of capitalism. First, May 1968's critiques did not challenge capital accumulation in the long term. The critiques undoubtedly played an important role in improving capitalism, yet the extent to which they were also a driving force behind capitalism's 'displacements and transformations' - changes that are 'not always conducive to greater social well-being' - reveals the overall weakness and ineffectiveness of the critiques (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 200-201). Indeed, it is worth noting that not only did capitalism's triumphant revival from the 1980s onwards correlate with an increase in social deprivation, but capitalism's appropriation of the artistic critique did not lead to an anti-capitalist political realignment behind the social critique in France, even despite the rising social inequality. In fact the opposite was true. During the 1980s-90s, France saw the demise and eventual collapse of the social critique as a major political force, which enabled capitalism to abandon its concessions to that critique further still - hence the

interesting correlation between the history of the spirit of capitalism and the history of the critiques of capitalism (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 178, 200, 324-327). In 1978 Debray appeared to have foreseen the long-term demise of the social critique. As we have already noted, he claimed that, during and as a result of 1968, the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism had been superseded by the aim to simply ‘améliorer notre part du gâteau, mais sans casser le four ni le moule à tarte’ (1978, 43). ‘Le départ du Commandeur en avril 69 est l’effet à retardement de Mai, tout comme la défaite idéologique du léninisme fut précipitée par l’éclosion antiautoritaire’ (1978, 41), Debray contends; following 1968 France entered ‘un âge de fer, sans relief ni valeurs’, in which ‘l’abandon de la dialectique’ and ‘la fin de la politique commencerait une involontaire mais confortable servitude’ (1978, 31-32). One cannot dispute Debray’s analysis here. In the decades following 1968 France gradually abandoned the idiom of the ‘revolutionary overthrow of capital’ and the radical reshaping of society and began to think in terms of pragmatic evolution more akin to Anglo-Saxon reformism. Perhaps we can expand on and explain this idea of political stabilisation and the rise of a new capitalist spirit through the Gramscian notion of hegemony. May 1968 was a major crisis of hegemony for the capitalist class in France; the revolt shattered the political and socio-economic consensus, leaving capitalist rule vulnerable and exposed. In order to prevent continued unrest and avert the risk of an even greater revolt it was imperative to shore up the consent of the masses, the political mechanism Gramsci perceives as the defining characteristic of the Western capitalist political order, and one which explained its resilience and enduring resistance to revolution in the face of successive economic crises. To serve this end in France, concessions were granted, as we have seen. ‘But there is little doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential ... the decisive function’, Gramsci explains (1971, 161), that is, the fundamental process of capital accumulation and the political order designed to serve its continued functioning.<sup>vii</sup> By these standards the reforms and concessions granted in response to May-June that were successful on two accounts: they removed the threat of revolt in the long term, to such a degree that the critique associated with the events of May was no longer an influential force in French political life; and moreover the manner by which that was achieved did not impede the creation and flow of capital. On the contrary, this period of hegemonic realignment arguably produced a more dynamic and productive form of capitalism in France. Debray’s assertions (1978, 39, 43) that ‘la voie française vers l’Amérique passait par Mai 68’, that ‘ceux de Mai croyaient porter en terre le capitalisme, ils inhumèrent en fait leurs dernières illusions socialistes’ are undoubtedly correct, both politically and economically, although he questionably accords the responsibility for this ‘marche vers la normalisation’ to the actors of May rather than the success and resilience of capitalist hegemony.

Capitalism’s means of absorbing what were previously anti-capitalist ideas for its own ends is, in fact, our second conclusion regarding critique (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 201). Instead of looking for the failures of May in the movement itself and attempting to theorise its defeat, we should focus our critical gaze on capitalism and its extraordinary ability to appropriate what was once its negation. Debray erroneously does not see 1968 as a major crisis of capital, yet unlike his contemporaries he does note the paradox that a movement at least claiming, as he perceives it, to be working for the overthrow of capitalism led to the strengthening of the system. ‘Qu’importe que le développement des contradictions engendre sans cesse perturbations et disparités, donc désordres,’ Debray describes, ‘si la machine est devenue apte à fabriquer de l’ordre supérieur aux désordres qui l’engendrent et qu’il

suscite sans cesse'. He notes advanced capitalism's capacity to integrate 'ses phases de désorganisation, non comme faux frais du développement, mais comme ses éléments moteurs', concluding that 'ce qui s'exclut se complète, ce qui perturbe stabilise, ce qui attaque renforce' (1978, 24). Does Debray's superb description of capitalism's inherent ability to flourish in the face of its impending implosion not allude to that most fascinating and fundamental characteristic of capitalist modernity, creative destruction? The transformation of the spirit of capitalism during the post-1968 period was a clear manifestation of the awesome process of capitalist creative destruction in action, absorbing and appropriating ideas, critiques and socio-political phenomena that were not only formulated outside of the domain of capital accumulation, but that were consciously *opposed* to it. Here one can appreciate the brilliance of Boltanski and Chiapello's work. Rather than simply highlighting the manner in which the inner mechanisms of capitalism drive creative destruction, as Schumpeter famously explains, they demonstrate how foreign and even hostile forces can fuel this process. Hence while Schumpeter (1976, 83) states that 'the fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the new consumers' goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organization that capitalist enterprise creates', Boltanski and Chiapello discern the May-June revolt's role in opening up the field to these processes of competition, innovation and renewal. Since anti-capitalist critique paves the way for new forms of capitalist enterprise, these two antagonistic forces appear to work together dialectically. The transformation in post-1968 capitalism, propelled by this dialectical motion, was thus a truly modern scene; both capitalism and critique are dancing on a knife-edge between creation and despair. Such a paradoxical cycle, such a 'unity of disunity' proves itself worthy of Marshall Berman's sublime portrait of the experience of modernity: we find ourselves 'in the midst of ... a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish' (Berman 1983, 15). It is capitalism's adaptability, its ingenious displacements and mutations, and above all its extraordinary ability to 'thrive on crisis and catastrophe' which explain, for example, ecology's political trajectory from a vehemently anti-capitalist slogan to the USP of the 'green economy', for, as Berman observes in his reading of Marx's theory of crises: 'the crises ... can open up empty spaces for new investment and redevelopment; they can force the bourgeoisie to innovate, expand and combine more intensively and ingeniously than ever: thus they may act as unexpected sources of capitalist strength and resiliency' (Berman 1983, 103). To cite another pertinent example of capitalism's all-engulfing permeation, its boundless ability to make profit even from its apparent negation, Debray's former comrade Che, once the personification of communist revolution, has been transformed into a major consumer brand (see Žižek 2009a, 57). It follows that 'the capitalist system has proved infinitely more robust than its detractors – Marx at their head – thought' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 27). Underestimating capitalism's dynamism, creativity, and therefore its enduring strength, was indeed Marx's and, by extension, the left's greatest error. Thus rather than question Debray's ideological sincerity or present him as a fifth column capitalist (see Ross 2002, 185; Weber 1988, 88-89), his essay should be praised for its diagnosis of the paradoxical relationship between critique and capitalist resurgence through the means of creative destruction. When Debray – albeit momentarily – goes beyond the otherwise stifling economic determinism of his analysis he offers some insightful contributions to our understanding of capitalism, crisis and critique. Recalling that 'tous les systèmes sociaux ... n'ont pas la chance d'être en crise: il en coûte énormément au système dit

du « socialisme réel » de ne pas pouvoir se payer du désordre’, Debray invites the reader to account for the causes and to confront the implications of a system that can find ‘order out of disorder’; we are compelled to contemplate the fact that ‘dans le système capitaliste développé, la crise est un état normal, le signe de sa bonne santé, le ressort de ses progrès. C’est l’ordre qui serait sa mort’ (1978, 24). Whether modern capitalist societies have indeed reached ‘la maturité homéostatique des systèmes complexes’, rendering them ‘à la fois plus vulnérables aux variations aléatoires de l’environnement, mais aussi assez souples pour intégrer les menaces de rupture dans la stabilité dynamique de l’ensemble’ (1978, 24), whether inequality and injustice can only be meaningfully conceptualised and confronted at a global level, and whether the limits of anti-capitalist critique can be overcome are all important issues raised by Debray that should command our continued attention.

Overall, May ‘68, the post-1968 socio-economic changes in France and the rise of the new spirit of capitalism present another object lesson in the flexibility and resilience of the capitalist system. ‘But’, Boltanski and Chiapello reveal, ‘this is also because it has discovered routes to its survival in critiques of it’. ‘It is probably this surprising capacity for survival by absorbing part of the critique that has helped to disarm anti-capitalist forces’, they conclude (2005, 27), and so now should we.

## Conclusion

Considering that the causes and historical significance of May ‘68 continue to generate considerable interest, it is surprising that Régis Debray’s ‘modest contribution’ to the debate appears to have been largely forgotten. Elegantly explaining the rationale behind his intervention, Debray notes that ‘le tâche de l’intellectuel n’est pas de distribuer l’aménité, mais d’essayer d’énoncer ce qui est ; son propos n’est pas de séduire, mais d’armer’ (1978, 87). It seemed to Debray in 1978 that the collective back-slapping of former *soixante-huitards* concealed an inconvenient truth: the self-generated capitalist crisis was a self-correcting act, producing an even stronger capitalism which enabled metropolitan France to plunder the resources, exploit the labour and enslave the people of the Third World with greater efficiency. We have noted the flaws in this otherwise provocative and stimulating assessment of 1968. To a certain extent Debray also underestimates capitalism, although in different ways than his critics. For him, the only possible explanation of capitalism’s appropriation of its critique is a form of economic determinism: capitalism subconsciously required the critique, hence the revolt was a response to the call of capitalism. But convenient determinism is not good enough. 1968 was a major crisis and real threat to capitalism. Yet it was in spite of this that capitalism neutralised the threat through appropriating the critique. One cannot, therefore, endorse Debray’s view of May ‘68 and post-1968 socio-economic modernization as the fulfilment of capitalism’s inevitable ‘rational design’. However, there is a kernel of truth in this Hegelian ruse, for until critique of capitalism overcomes its inability to fundamentally challenge and overthrow the mechanisms of capital accumulation as it originally desires, capitalism, much like Hegel’s universal Reason, will continue to neutralise its critique, normalise crisis and take strength from weakness to meet its own ends, as it did so effectively during the post-1968 era.

With the benefit of Boltanski and Chiapello’s excellent study, it is clear that Debray also illuminates the often overlooked paradoxical impact critique can have in driving transformations in the capitalist system. Contrary to those who believe that, to borrow Winston Churchill’s gibe at Clement Atlee, Debray’s ‘modest contribution’

has much to be modest about, the shortcomings of Debray's approach and conclusions do not render it worthless, as many of his detractors would lead us to think. While his analysis falls short in places, it certainly succeeds elsewhere in the questions it poses, the ideas it stimulates and the challenges it presents. And if that is not worthy of our critical re-engagement, particularly in this period of capitalist crisis, one wonders what is.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For two recent examples, see Wark (2011, 2-3), Rancière (2009, 194-197). In the preface to English edition of their work Boltanski and Chiapello reply to some of the critiques they have received (see 2005, xviii-xxvii).

<sup>ii</sup> See Hewlett (1998, 147-148) for a discussion of May's problematic historiography.

<sup>iii</sup> This and the following analysis paraphrase Žižek's critique (2009c, 13-20) of 'liberal communists' and the contemporary function of charity.

<sup>iv</sup> See talk by Noam Kostucki at TEDxWarwick 2011, University of Warwick, 5 March 2011. Available at <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/knowledge/themes/04/noamkostucki/>

<sup>v</sup> To understand critique of the financial crisis, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme's* analysis of the development of critique is highly instructive: 'The formulation of a critique presupposes a bad experience prompting protest, whether it is personally endured by critics or they are roused by the fate of others. This is what we call the source of *indignation*. Without the prior emotional – almost sentimental – reaction, no critique can take off. On the other hand, it is a long way from the spectacle of suffering to articulated critique; critique requires a theoretical fulcrum and an argumentative rhetoric to give voice to individual suffering and translate it into terms that refer to the common good. This is why there are actually two levels in the expression of any critique: a primary level – the domain of emotions – which can never be silenced, which is always ready to become inflamed whenever new situations provoking indignation emerge; and a secondary level – reflexive, theoretical and argumentative – that makes it possible to sustain ideological struggle, but assumes a supply of concepts and schemas making it possible to connect the historical situations people intend to criticize with values than can be universalized'. While the ongoing crisis has certainly provoked much indignation, critique has yet to reach this secondary level. Our task today, then, is clear: 'the work of critique consists in translating indignation into the framework of critical theories, and then voicing it' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 36). Similarly, Debray states that 'quand on veut faire – pas même la Révolution, n'importe quoi et mieux encore – l'indignation tous azimuts et le dégoût majuscule ne suffisent pas. Vient tôt ou tard le moment d'enlever ses gants et de faire du mot à mot avec la prose du monde' (1978, 28).

<sup>vi</sup> Of course that does not mean that the original critique has been resolved. A panel discussion entitled 'Can we be green and profitable?' (Alumni Knowledge Exchange Day, University of Warwick, 21 May 2011) reveals the problem facing 'eco-capitalism': 'With climate change a very real problem, businesses know it makes sense to look at renewable energy sources ... But is it really possible to be green and profitable? Aren't subsidies necessary to get new technologies off the ground, and is it really fair to expect the taxpayer to subsidise 'green' energy in a free market?' (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/knowledge/themes/sustainability/greenandprofitable/>). What remains unspoken here is whether the threat of environmental catastrophe can be resolved within the domain of capital. Ultimately, if we *cannot* be green and profitable, does climate change not therefore transcend the limits of the market, the only apparent answer?

<sup>vii</sup> One cannot help but note the similarities between Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Boltanski and Chiapello's Weberian theoretical model: 'the dynamic impact of critique on the spirit of capitalism ... takes the form of a strengthening of the justifications and associated mechanisms which, while it does not challenge the principle of accumulation itself, or the need for profits, partially satisfies the critique and integrates into capitalism constraints that correspond to the points of most concern to its detractors' (2005, 28-29).

## References

Aron, Raymond. 1968. *La Révolution Introuvable: Réflexions sur les événements de Mai*. Paris: Fayard.

---

Badiou, Alain. 2007. *De Quoi Sarkozy Est-Il Le Nom?* Paris: Nouvelles éditions Lignes.

Berman, Marshall. 1983. *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. London: Verso.

Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève. 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Debray, Régis. 1978. *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire*. Paris: Maspero.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hewlett, Nick. 1998. *Modern French Politics: Analysing Conflict and Consensus since 1945*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hewlett, Nick. 2011. *The Sarkozy Phenomenon*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

Hobsbawm, E.J.. 1990. *Echoes of the Marseillaise: Two Centuries Look Back on the French revolution*. London: Verso.

Le Goff, Jean-Pierre. 2006. *Mai 68, l'héritage impossible*. Paris: La Découverte.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. 1983. *L'Ère du vide: Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*. Paris: Gallimard.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. 1986. 'Changer la vie' ou l'irruption de l'individualisme transpolitique'. *Pouvoirs* 39: 91-100.

Rancière, Jacques. 2009. *Moments politiques: Interventions 1977-2009*. Paris: La Fabrique éditions.

Reader, Keith. 1995. *Régis Debray: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press.

Ross, Kristin. 2002. *May '68 and Its Afterlives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schumpeter, Joseph. 1976. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Tucker, Robert C.. 1956. The Cunning of Reason in Hegel and Marx. *The Review of Politics* Vol. 18, No. 3: 269-295.

Wark, McKenzie. 2011. *The Beach Beneath the Street: The everyday life and glorious times of the Situationist International*. London: Verso.

Weber, Henri. 1979. Reply to Debray. *New Left Review* 115: 66-71.

Weber, Henri. 1988. *Vingt Ans Après: Que reste-t-il de 68?* Paris: Seuil.

---

Žižek, Slavoj. 2009a. *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*. London: Verso.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2009b. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London: Verso.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2009c. *Violence*. London: Profile Books.