The Mood 68: The Year of Living Dangerously

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Fifty years after, the Paris student movement of May 1968 remains a very significant historical event and a highly attractive page of the twentieth century. The proof to this is not only the number of books and articles and dissertations written about the events of '68, but also the magnitude of debates which has been developed around the legacy of this period of time.

However, all these controversies and celebrations around May '68 have not been able to repeat the 'Mood 68' as it was experienced as a "year of living dangerously" by many youngsters around the world. This 'Mood 68' was expressed by idealism, rebelliousness and self-righteousness of millions of students around the globe, who where in search of what Martin Luther King, Jr called a "revolution of values".

Not surprisingly, the students of '68 were asking for the creation of a 'Ministry of Imagination', not expecting that 50 years later young people would live indifferently in a world where imagination is expelled from our everyday politics and the mood would rather be around values like success, money and power. But to those who were part of that experience, the fact of being there was to participate in an adventure that represented its own working existence.
Though not a political revolution, May '68 was undoubtedly a social questioning of the conservative and patriarchal norms of the French society of the 1960s. Moreover, it was an explosive cultural revolt against the petrified values of the Gaullist bureaucracy which lacked innovation and needed social and political re-organisation.

But more than anything else, May '68 was a cross-class social movement that crumbled old social barriers and grumpy values of the French and European worlds. It was a multi-faceted, multi-layered and multi-dimensional civic experience, but it was also an important libertarian moment in the history of twentieth century.

As such, May '68 was a holy moment of social creation that brought together for the first time students, working groups, Trotskyists, Maoists, anarchists, surrealists, homeless people, philosophers, filmmakers and many other categories of the French population.

As a moment of freedom of thought and imagination, it was the aesthetic manifestation of hundreds of slogans, graffiti and posters. "It is forbidden to forbid", "Power to imagination" and "Be realistic: Demand the impossible!" said some of the May movement's slogans.

Fifty years later, most of these slogans appear to us as being tremendously naive, surrealistic and psychedelic. So the question remains: how should we describe May '68? Was it an absurdist street theater, as was it pointed out by the Situationist Guy Debord, the author of the famous The Society of the Spectacle?

Or was it, the "death of God", as pronounced by the famous French writer and Minister of Culture, Andre Malraux? Also, some like Alain Geismar, one of the leaders of the student movement of '68 analysed the events of May as an "accelerator of history".

For others, like Regis Debray, the French writer and thinker, who was a member of Che Guevara's guerilla in Bolivia, the events of '68 "let loose in France the spirit of individualism of the 1980s and 1990s".

As for some ex-Maoist leaders like Roland Castro, presently a famous French architect, the idealist and humanist spirit of May '68 prevented the decline of the French society into an urban terrorism a la Baader-Meinhof in Germany or The Red Brigade in Italy. According to Castro, this was due to the fact that the French Maoists of '68 knew well that there were limits to their leftist utopia.

But let us not forget that the events of May '68 were deeply transformational for two generations of French philosophers, who were staggeringly impressed and influenced by the youth movement and the will of the French students to change the world.

As such, May '68 was also a meaningful event in the history of French and European intellectualism. We all remember the famous images of Jean-Paul Sartre, speaking to the workers...
of the Renault factory of Boulogne-Billancourt, and those of Michel Foucault practising the Athenian art of parrhesia (fearless speech) with a loudspeaker.

As a matter of fact, Foucault built up all his cutting-edge genealogy of imprisonment and surveillance around the experience of May '68. Therefore, the main philosophical questioning of post-'68 intellectuals like Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari and Lyotard consisted in understanding, criticising and containing the reproduction of social norms which, according to them, were at the origins of all forms of cultural and political dominations.

As for the famous founders of the group Socialisme ou Barbarie, namely Cornelius Castoriadis, Edgar Morin and Claude Lefort, who influenced the student leaders of '68 like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the impetus of the events of May was to rethink democracy in terms of autonomy and self-organization of the society.

This process of rethinking social creation and cultural values was also expressed as a time of sweeping change for French women. A new generation of French feminist intellectuals and artists represented by famous figures like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Agnes Varda supported by Simone de Beauvoir inspired the creation of consciousness-raising groups and had a great impact in criticising sexism and gender harassment.

As a result of this tsunami of changing values the Women's Liberation Movement was born followed by the criticism of the patriarchal order and the construction of a new feminist theory. Accordingly, a new generation of French feminists presented the idea that women were autonomous political subjects and had the power and capability of political action separate from men.

In the years post-'68 a new social creation was experienced by students, feminists, leftists, artists, intellectuals and some members of the working class of the French society against the norms and values of the modern consumer society and political bureaucracies of the Western and Eastern blocs. They explored new political, social and cultural horizons that were expressed by the three central and critical ideas of anti-totalitarianism, anti-bureaucratism and anti-patriarchy.

It is true that some of the key leading figures of May '68, like Bernard Kouchner, one of the founding fathers of Medecins Sans Frontieres, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit ended up as a minister and a European parliamentarian. It is also correct to say that some leftist revolutionaries like Bernard Henri Levy and Andre Glucksmann became the leading figures of the new philosophy school named as Les Nouveaux Philosophes and with other intellectual personalities like Alain Finkielkraut, Pascal Bruckner and Luc Ferry, returned to the French republican values.

However, the moment '68 transformed the political visions of several generations of men and women, who evolved toward an irreversible consciousness of becoming critical and argumentative citizens.

First published: 7 May 2018, 18:11 IST

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