

Will it Happen Again? Boredom, Anxiety and the Peak of Human Evolution

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Abstract: The question I try to ask myself is the following: may a global insurrection happen again? What is the background of the global explosion that happened in 1968?

My answer is that 68 is the culmination of a long period of increasing expectations and desire on the backstage of boredom. And now we live in a situation that is marked by anxiety, the contrary of boredom. Where can we find the energy for a process of subjectivation, when attention is permanently mobilised by neuro-stimulation proceeding from the Info-machine?

Keywords: neuro-stimulation, boredom, desire, cognitive labor, general intellect, anxiety, panic

1. Boredom

Boredom is the background of the explosion that changed the world in the years 68.

Boredom is a multi-faceted sentiment, based on the disproportion between undefined desire and real existence. This sentiment is ubiquitous in the cultural experiments of the postwar decades: its symptoms range from Sartre nausea to Antonioni psychological desert of incommunicability, to the Moravia cynical absentmindedness.

After the distressing years of war, after the tragedy and the protracted condition of fear, a wave of boredom (sweet boredom, sad boredom, anguishing sometimes and sometimes pleasurable) weaselled its way in the post-war mind.

This is not of course an attempt of explanation of the cultural earthquake whose temporal epicentre is in the year '68. Just a possible approach to the psycho-cultural environment that prepared the kids to gather in the streets and do something never happened before.

Boredom is the painful (but not so painful) contrast between the intensity of desire and the scarcity of nervous stimulation coming from the surrounding world. Boredom happened to be the prevailing psychological condition of pre-adolescents in the past: unfulfilled arising sexual desire, lonely pleasure, lingering and imagining.

Having been born just after the end of the world war, we had the opportunity of accessing the public school, of buying paperbacks, those non expensive books that gave us the inspiration of being travellers, intellectuals, fighters explorers and pirates. We had the chance of going to the movie theatres just when Hollywood was projecting all over the feeling of being citizens of the world.

But our parents protected us from the dangers they had just experienced in the years of war. They wanted us to be safe, and we learned to despise safety, and security was for us one of the ugliest words of the vocabulary.

Travelling was expensive, before discovering that it is possible to travel for free just avoiding to pay for the ticket, and avoiding to respect the law. So we did not travel much, in the '60s, before discovering hitchhiking, and the possibility of taking a train and not paying the ticket. The intensity of our imagination did not match with the slow rhythm of family life, inspired by the smiling reassuring advertising of the '50s. And conformism was part of the boredom: dressing, and hairstyle, and daily life we wanted to change in order to escape the order of normalcy.

The gap between our imagination and our expectations nurtured those long summer days of delicious agonising boredom, when we fantasised about travelling exotic places and about fighting against the wrongdoings of the imperialist world.

Adventurism is an expression that in the history of Communism has been employed against those extreme-left activists who dared to do things that could imperil the common cause: a double edged definition, that many young extremists like me embraced with a certain degree of irony: we wanted to live those adventures that seemed unattainable in the boring welfare society of our pre-adolescent years.

Then something happened, and the bubble of boredom burst.

2. Information and consciousness

My political expectations have been forged by the persuasion that progress is the general trend of human history. This was the prevailing vision of the future. Fascism and war had been a dark digression, a parenthetical outburst of backwardness and reactionary violence, in our perception. In my perception at least, as my father, who had fought as a partisan against the Nazis in the mountains of Central Italy, told me thousand times in my childhood: you are lucky, as you will never again experience fascism and war. Progress was the common ground of expectation for the communists like my father and for the democrats who were ruling country where I have been growing up. This assumption was wrong, as we know nowadays in the new Century, as Evolution has taken the shape of Regression.

Progress means, first and foremost, that the new generation will live better than their parents, and the per capita available resources are destined to increase, and that the modern criteria of justice are destined to be better implemented from one generation to the next. From this point of view, it's easy to acknowledge that progress is over: for the first time in modern history the new generation is destined to receive less than the previous, at least in the industrialised world. And on a global scale the quality of life is worsening for the wide majority of the human kind, including those who have been lured by the promise of consumption, and now are facing the harshness of hyper-exploitation, environmental pollution and massive mental breakdown.

Old woes like nationalism, religious fanaticism and racism that in

my youth were considered buried forever are resurfacing and taking the upper hand almost everywhere. Happiness seems almost an impossible goal for the precarious generation, and sexual joy is largely replaced by compulsive digital stimulation.

The reversal of expectations can be dated more or less around the end of the '70s, when the two defining processes of the post-modern transition (neoliberal privatisation of everything and networked virtualisation of social life) were put in motion simultaneously and inter-dependently.

Therefore I assert that 1968 is the peak of human evolution: the moment in which technological innovation and social consciousness reached their high point in convergence. Since then the technical potency has steadily expanded, technology has grown more and more pervasive, while social consciousness has been relatively receding. As a result technique has been enhancing its grip over social life, while society has been losing control over technology, and therefore has grown less and less able to govern itself.

In the conjuncture that we name '68 social consciousness was expected to preside over technological change and to direct it to the common good, but the contrary happened. When a new technological horizon appeared, following the diffusion of electronics and computing, the Leftist parties and the unions regarded the technological change as a danger, rather than as an opportunity to master and to submit to the social interest. As a consequence the liberation from labor was labelled unemployment, and the Left engaged in countering the unstoppable technical transformation.

The relation between information and consciousness is here the focus of my reflection. So I have to clarify the meaning of these concepts in this context: I define information as knowledge objectified in signs and conveyed by media, and I define consciousness as the subjective elaboration and the singularisation of the contents of knowledge.

After the years '68, and particularly in the wake of the digital acceleration of the info-sphere, simultaneous to the Neoliberal turn, the sphere of objectified knowledge has enormously expanded, while available time for conscious elaboration has inversely shrunk.

This double dynamics has provoked a reshaping of social consciousness: the relative reduction of available time has resulted in a systemic downsizing of the individual conscious assimilation of information and the singularisation of knowledge. The rhythm of technological innovation has intensified while social awareness has symmetrically decreased.

While Artificial intelligence is expanding in the technical sphere, human ignorance has relatively increased, and demented behaviour

is spreading all over, as is exposed by the massive support to racism, nationalism, and religious fanaticism. I use the expression dementia in a literal sense: separation of the automated brain from the living body, and resulting dementia of the brainless social body.

3. Emergence of the general intellect on the scene of history

Sixty-Eight marks the moment when the general intellect enters the scene of the world, and marks the beginning of a long lasting process, that is still underway: the formation of the networked the general intellect.

Hans-Jurgen Krahl, a thinker and an activist of the German movement in '68, in his text "*Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarischem Klassenbewusstsein*", (published in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf*, 1971 Verlag Neue Kritik) argued that a new composition of labor is emerging, thanks to the insertion of science and technology in the cycle of production, and to the emerging consciousness of the techno-scientific intelligence, intended as a social force.

Actually the decade that prepares the explosion of '68 marks the highpoint in history of mass education: the universal access to the public system of education is an effect of the progressive struggles of the workers movement, and creates a new condition in human history.

The faculty of critical thought, which has been exclusive privilege of a part of the bourgeoisie in the past centuries turns into a common good of the majority of society. Simultaneously in those years the evolution of technology prepares the conditions for the formation of the general intellect, that Marx conceptualised in the *Grundrisse*: the concept of network as structure for the simultaneous connection of distant brains, takes shape in the wake of the movement. The different streams of alternative culture that come to the surface with the student revolt in the second part of the '60s, have different approaches, but converge in the appreciation of something that we may define with Marx "general intellect": the Californian psychedelic wave and the holistic approach to the Global Mind, the German legacy of the Critical Theory, the Italian Neo-Marxist approach of *Potere operaio*, in different ways signal the consciousness of an emerging technical and anthropological entity, that is reshaping the very ground of social imagination.

Those who conceived the network, as a technical and cultural compound come from the generation that went through the brainstorm of '68.

In the *Grundrisse*, particularly in the well known *Fragment on machines*, Marx asserts that machines, as a product of knowledge, are reducing the time of necessary labour up to the point of making possible the emancipation of society from the slavery of salaried labour.

In the years '68 actually, the alliance between students and industrial workers could be intended as something more than an ideological or moral solidarity. In fact, students were the bearers of the force of knowledge, while workers were expressing a widespread refusal of salaried exploitation. The political alliance between them implied the prospect of an organised process of reduction of labor time. In Italy the slogan "lavorare tutti lavorare meno"

"Everybody at work so everybody can work less" was the culmination of those years of social mobilisation.

But this alliance did not last for long, because the political leadership of the workers movement (the communist parties and the Unions) proved unable to transform technology into an opportunity. On the contrary, they saw technology as danger, and they engaged into the losing strategy of defending jobs.

The emerging movement of the University proved unable to transform the prevailing culture of the Left, and the legacy of Soviet Communism strangled the novelty that students were bringing about, swallowing the emergent social rebellion into the rigid symmetry of the Cold War.

4. Anxiety

In the years '68 everybody was expecting a long lasting process of social emancipation from misery and exploitation. This persuasion was totally wrong, as we know fifty years after. Exploitation and misery have not decreased, they have transformed and expanded in many ways.

Today the prevailing expectations are very different, almost opposed: massive depression, expanding inequality, precariousness and war.

Why? What has broken the expectations of fifty years ago, what has provoked this sort of reversal of imagination?

Financial capitalism has paralysed the ability to act together, and the collapse of social solidarity has paved the way for a dynamics that is quite similar to the dynamics that led to Fascism in the past Century. Fascism is back, mixed with the unrelenting aggressiveness of global economic competition, that in several cases results in open war.

The only possibility to overcome the devastating effects of financial capitalism and to dispel the sense of impotence that overshadows social life in the new Century would be a worldwide movement like was '68, because only a movement might unleash the intellectual energy that is needed for the reactivation of the autonomous social mind.

Only a massive and long lasting mobilisation might dispel the fog depression. So the question: is a new '68 possible? Although I don't forget the Keynes assertion that the inevitable generally does not come into being because generally the unpredictable prevails,

I must admit that - as far as I can understand and I can foresee - a social movement up to the situation is out of the imaginable possibilities.

Why so? I could reply this question about the impossibility of a movement in many different ways: I could refer to the effect of precarisation in the sphere of labor that has made so difficult social solidarity, I could refer to the feeling of impotence of people facing the mathematical inexorability of financial capitalism. In my vision, however, the main reason of the present de-solidarisation is based in the relation among conscious bodies. The digitalisation of communication has resulted in the paradoxical effect of expanding communication in condition of increasing isolation.

The sphere of affection is disturbed because of a fundamental uncoupling of language and the body. In human history, language has always been based on the bodily relation among sentient and conscious beings. The access to symbolic has always been granted by the bodily relation with the mother. The voice (as Agamben suggests in language and death) is the point of conjunction of meaning with the flesh, therefore it is the point of singularisation of meaning.

The relation between the signifier (words, images) and the signified (meaning) is not based on any isomorphic link. The only foundation of our trust in the meaning of signs is the bodily relation with the voice of the mother.

I'm not talking here of the biological mother, I 'm not even talking of a female person. It may be an uncle, or a friend or a father, but it has to be human, and singular, and physical. The voice is the certifier of the relation between words and things: the body is the ground of signification.

Loveless is the title of a movie by Zvyagintsev. The first I saw is *Leviathan*: two movies describing the iced desert of the contemporary post-modern soul. *Loveless* is about the disappearance of the future. The future is Aljosa, the 8 years old child who disappears at the beginning of the movie. He disappears (dies? is killed? flies faraway? we don't know) because Genia, the mother of the child is unable to feel love for the unwanted son. She is unable to feel affection because of the surrounding sadness, competition and loneliness.

The kid disappears, and the mother is desperately looking for him, and not finding him.

All along the movie connection is permanently haunting and capturing attention: people watching all the time the small screen of their smart phones in the train and in the street and in the bedroom, perpetually driven by the engulfing flows of neuro-stimulation.

Boredom has been erased, and angst has replaced it in such a way that we cannot desire adventure anymore, because the simulated adventure has saturated our attention and our imagination.

Coda

I don't intend to measure the distance from '68 in political terms, because I think that the transformation that happened after the end of those years can only be appreciated from the point of view of anthropological evolution and of cognitive mutation. A process of evolutionary regression is underway. I wonder if the human mind can consciously and intentionally (politically, I mean) deal with the evolution of the human mind itself.

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