After '68: the Left and Twenty-first Century Political Projects

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In broad terms '1968' still stands as a signifier of social and political radicalism. Workers' mass action and students' protests signal an age of powerful labour and politicised youth; the impassioned commitments of 'engaged intellectual' and citizen alike show a synergy between the life of the mind and activism; fierce philosophical debates illustrate the vitality of ideas; and the expansive critical vision and hope reaching throughout the social reveal an unrestrained radical imagination. In short, the very tumultuousness of the period expresses a political urgency and commitment seemingly profoundly distanced from contemporary apathy. But as with all representations, these sets of associations are as fictional as they are factual and the tendency to inflate and romanticise the meaning of '1968' is as obvious as its undoubted significance.

Nonetheless, even beyond its disputed symbolic status as a moment of exemplary radicalism, '1968' is often - even if only implicitly - taken as marking an intellectual-political watershed. Dominique Lecourt, for example, argues that the French 'master thinkers'and political culture of the 1960s have been replaced by a pedestrian intellectual 'mediocracy' that is media-driven and acquiescent to a neo-liberal agenda, resulting in prosaic social analysis and abdication of politics.[1] This is broadly mirrored within wider Euro-American perspectives on the activist-intellectual vocation: arguably academics have retreated into the university as an insular domain, which is disengaged from practical social and political involvement;[2] and the work of intellectuals has moved from the legislative sphere towards a more abstracted interpretive function.[3] And although vital expressions of popular radicalism can be found within various forms such as anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist movements and protests, they are often seen as confined to mounting a reactive rearguard action against the hegemonic neo-liberal agenda. Perhaps most importantly, the contention that the utopian spirit able to imagine a progressive alternative beyond present constraints has been all but extinguished suggests that we are consigned to a sterile futurity of limited possibility.[4]

The conditions of our present 'historical bloc' as a moment of extreme difficulty for progressive politics seemingly confirm the validity of such despondency. From one side the consolidation of the New Right and its neo-Conservative progeny has pushed re-distributive social agendas onto the defensive. And from another side, the 'sacralization of difference'[5]

1. Dominique Lecourt, *The Mediocracy: French Philosophy Since 1968*, Gregory Elliott (trans), London, Verso, 2001.

2. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, New York, Basic Books, 1987.

3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Intellectuals*, Cambridge, Polity, 1987.

4. Russell Jacoby, *Future Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.

5. Pierre-Andre Taguieff, *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and Its Doubles*, Hassan Melehy (trans), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. 2001.

has served to reify, inflate, and isolate a series of identity-based claims to recognition that has appeared to erode much of the collective ethos central to forging and maintaining broad political coalitions. As such 'the market' qua 'the social' and 'identity' qua 'the individual' or 'group' would seem to confirm a liberal-democratic 'end of history'. A pressing question for the dissident, the uneasy, and the unconvinced alike is: 'What forms of politics are possible in times like these?' Swift reflection on this question is not particularly reassuring however. Many of the radical and oppositional political projects of recent and present times can be readily classified as based in proscriptions - *anti*-capitalist, *anti*-racist, *anti*-sexist, *anti*-homophobic and so on. This begs a crucial question of the possibilities of positive political prescription. As Paul Gilroy asks of anti-racism, how does the elusive question of what we are positively committed to 'connect with the necessary moment of negativity that defines our political hopes?'[6] Perhaps more importantly, we may also ask what happens when we become mired in the 'necessary moment of negativity' to the extent that it becomes a political habitus in and of itself instead of a transitory stage en route to imagining, articulating, and pursuing political hopes? We may instead wonder 'What forms of politics *might* be possible in times like these?'

6. Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Culture and the Allure of Race*, London, Allen Lane/ The Penguin Press, 2000, p53

With this predicament in mind, we take the fortieth anniversary of '1968' as offering an important opportunity, not to look back but, instead, to look forward and in particular to explore the issue of left political possibility. Our main concerns are twofold: first, we wish to re/consider the possibilities and futurity of building a progressive politics as a 'positive project'. What it is that we might imagine, build, and organise around, in principle and in practice, as *positive projects*? Our second concern is with what Gilroy terms 'the necessary moment of negativity'. Instead of acting dialectically - the negation of social ills as partially informing a positive commitment to universal social welfare provision, for example - 'our' negativity may have become necessary less as a contrasting form and more as a productive force in itself. For this reason, it is necessary to ask a straightforward question: Are we mired within the mode of critique? Have the difficulties of our political moment immobilised us to the extent that exercising our critical resources towards the negative - what is deemed undesirable, impossible, impractical, and so on - is preferable to positively daring to imagine and make that which we believe to be desirable and possible?

To begin this imaginative process, the papers in this issue map the contemporary intellectual resources and challenges for thinking contemporary left political projects 'After 68'. This 'figuration' - to use Braidotti's term - differs from Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping of postmodern culture in that it does not emphasise the problem of the orientation of critical thought in the spatial and political confusion of postmodernity.[7] Rather, it explores the formation of contemporary critical thought itself. What are the key theoretical and political possibilities and problems of our contemporary political moment for the left? How might

7. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London, Verso, 1992.

we move from critique to more emancipatory projects?

The papers in this special issue insist upon and also reveal the importance of intellectual work for our political formations. Thinking with the political and theoretical engagements of 1968, these papers work through key conceptual and political knots within contemporary political formations of the left. These knots are both problems and resources for our intellectual work of thinking emancipatory politics now, some forty years after '68. The papers in this special issue analyse these problems and possibilities that confront contemporary emancipatory politics through a series of key thematics including: negativity and positivity; possibility and creativity; and normativity and ethics. We map these key thematics as constituent elements of the contemporary formation of positive left projects.

NEGATIVITY AND POSITIVITY

Pure positivity is a tough, if not unachievable, aim. Whether explicitly or implicitly, positive claims contain a non-positive referent: alongside advocating freedom and independence for positive purposes including individual and collective development, the women's movement and national liberation struggles, for example, also sought the amelioration of oppression and injustice. As this is both inescapable and necessary, it confirms that negativity is tightly linked to positivity - the pressing question is whether negativity, thus conceived within a 'bad' society, can transcend its immanent context and assume a progressive positivity that amounts to anything other than sentimentality.[8]

The short answer to that question, for this special issue, has to be 'Yes' - the longer answer, of course, needs to think through carefully the deviations Adorno spies around us. Such a response is necessary partially because, in an unrealised state, negativity becomes something else altogether, something far more enervating than dissatisfaction or dissent. The failure of negation to achieve its objectives, in our case the elimination of social inequity, has a debilitating impact; contemporary forms of political negativism become reducible to 'resistance' per se without any discernible positive referent.[9] Negativity thus becomes a teleological fraud, redundant in its abject failure to realise its transformative promise. For the left, perhaps more so after 1968 than ever, the failure - or at least the story of the failure - of negativity as a political force to actualise its radical potential has become an important narrative.

In the first paper in this issue, 'The Politics of Radical Immanence: May 1968 as an Event', Rosi Braidotti reclaims a radical positive project against this narrative of failure. Braidotti traces 'May '68' as a 'philosophical location' and imaginary object, and argues that the 'enduring event' of May '68 is its radical politics of the subject. She shows how this enduring event in thinking provides philosophical material for our current intellectual

8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton (trans), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.

9. Timothy Bewes and Jeremy Gilbert, 'Introduction: Politics after defeat' in Bewes and Gilbert (eds) *Cultural Capitalism: Politics after New Labour*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2000, p2.

work of imagining other ways to be persons and to live collectively. The generation of 1968, Braidotti contends, placed subjectivity at the centre of politics, and provided a radically new way to think about *being*. Using the feminist and anti-racist movements as examples, she shows how this production of new forms of political action and sociality continues to be a powerful and as yet unfinished emancipatory project for today.

Jeremy Gilbert also takes issue with the notion of 1968 as signalling the defeat of the left in his contribution to this issue. In his paper, 'After '68: Narratives of the New Capitalism', Gilbert argues that the promotion of various putatively progressive interests such as individual freedoms and social liberalism within '1968' cannot simply be dismissed as the germination of the 'new spirit of capitalism'.[10] Instead, Gilbert argues for the radical significance of '1968' as combining novel and incisive 'social' and 'artistic' modes of critique which cannot be completely dismissed as liberal individualism. Reversing the narrative of 1968 as defeat, Gilbert then asks whether post-Fordism and the concomitant social and political shifts might be more accurately understood as a *defensive reaction* to the progressive forces marshalled under the aegis of '1968'. This reformulation has a series of important implications for a positive politics: firstly, it foregrounds the real - although incomplete - gains made in anti-racist, feminist, and social democratic politics since the 1970s which illuminates affirmative political possibility and achievement. And secondly, this reassessment of '1968' leads Gilbert towards Guattari's appraisal of May '68 as representing a micropolitics of desire where the simultaneous expression of individual interests and eruption of sectional mobilizations forges a web of hitherto unmade connections that coalesce into mass political activity. Therefore, even if only retrospectively, 1968 can offer a narrative of the elusive transition from socially atomised and politically inert individuals to tangible, if fleeting, examples of collective emancipatory activity.

10. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Gregory Elliott (trans), London, Verso, 2005.

Nevertheless, attempts to identify the definitive positivity and negativity within a political project can be inconclusive. In itself, positivity is little more than a strategic resource, mobilised towards particular ends through specific rhetorical moves and discursive regimes. Within the politics of reproduction, for example, 'anti-abortion' or 'pro-life' standpoints can be seen as two sides of this same coin - albeit with different emphases on negation and affirmation within specific contexts. At the literal level, this means that while an 'anti' platform might be regarded as the basis of a politics of negation, the 'pro' predicate can be taken to signal a 'positive' project. 'Pro-life', therefore, like certain other 'pro' movements - nationalist, consumer and so on - are presented by their adherents as 'positive' projects that seek to 'affirm' particular entities and values such as the human embryo and the 'sanctity' of human life.

Not all positions asserted under the aegis of positivity are part of a progressive left project; and the extreme relativism incurred by such a

formalist acceptance of positivity is easily avoided. The positive project we seek to develop, therefore, is characterised by an open commitment to progressive and emancipatory politics. Certain 'positive' arguments, such as those articulated under the 'pro-life' rubrics, can be understood essentially as reactionary proscriptions of women's lives; this rhetorical use of the affirmative mode is a disingenuous attempt to hide a repressive imperative. Such positions, therefore, are unable to lay valid claim to positivity under the emancipatory left criteria we have in mind.

Alongside reactionary forms of 'positivity' lies the possibility of progressive negativity; negation that moves beyond the mode of critique to instantiate progressive, emancipatory possibility. Fran Tonkiss engages this theme in her contribution to this issue, 'New Manifestations: Paris, Seattle and After', which shows that negativity can also form an important part of a positive politics. Tonkiss focuses upon two emblematic moments of political mobilisation, Paris 1968 and Seattle 1999, to examine the 'global' context and engagements of these political projects. She demonstrates how the transnational and international scales of political struggle of 1968 re-emerge in the anti-globalisation movement, but as what is often commonly characterised as a negative political project of the critique of global capital. She suggests, however, that the diverse sites and local and global scales of these struggles generate a *productive* movement between 'negative and positive valences of politics', which contains within itself commitments to positive projects that imagine a different and better world. Tonkiss makes the important argument that 'negation' can be 'a flag of convenience', such as the case of 'anti-globalisation'. This strategic use of the 'anti' permits the making of positive claims and connects these particular demands to historical and global political networks. In this way, 'the "negative" politics of critique comes out of more basic commitments to social justice and to human security'. Tonkiss reminds us that refusal as a form of political action can also lead to a form of creative politics.

A positive project has to contend with the rapacious dynamic of global capitalism and its widespread enervating effects. A major justification for undertaking a positive project, therefore, is the very urgency, political and otherwise, of addressing this situation and the iniquitous conditions that it (re)produces. But while this project is in some senses tied to contemporary circumstances, it can also be situated genealogically. Amidst the all-encompassing social reach of capitalism the very possibility of imagining an alternative is itself, broadly speaking, *utopian* in the sense that utopian projects represent the attempt 'to imagine the outlines of a better world beyond capitalism, in a context where we are repeatedly told that there is no alternative'.

This problem of imagining another future becomes particularly sharp in the context of a perceived crisis in the creative possibilities of democracy. This problem can be seen in Colin Crouch's formulation of the atrophy of citizenship and rights within contemporary western democracies:

> Democracy needs both of these [positive and negative] approaches to citizenship, but at the present time the negative is receiving considerably more emphasis. This is worrying, because it is obviously positive citizenship that represents democracy's creative energies.[11]

11. Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity, 2004, pp13-14

For Crouch, this state of affairs has clear and important implications; it has created a culture of complaint and blame that encourages passivity and aggression and dominates the perception and practice of citizenship and citizen's rights. Crouch sees this in the articulation of popular disquiet on an individualistic basis while broader issues with a profound collective impact are received apathetically, discouraging the collective imagining of other worlds.

Thus, a dialogue with utopian genealogies and futures is not only contextually necessary but also deeply productive for the positive projects outlined here. Among the key questions that emerge out of the utopian tradition and important for the positive project are the following. Is our desired vision for future society best conceived of as concretely realisable situation or a dynamic process? Does, or must, envisioning the future as a finite state act as a prelude to establishing the totalitarian possibility such a vision entails? Or, on the other hand, is advocating the re-imagining of the social as a ceaseless process simply the gestation of an evasive and unfulfilling politics? However, this formulation of a dichotomous negativity forecloses the terms of a positive project, as the weight of the present negates any possible alternative future as Jacoby suggests above.[12] Instead the utopian project might be more fruitfully considered as a form of *representation* of the future that, as a dialectical negation of the dystopic present, constitutes a leap that also disrupts the present itself.[13] It is such a utopian leap, encompassing the entirety of the social, represented here in specific form through the various practico-theoretical spheres raised within this project - feminist, Marxist/post-marxist, humanist/anti-humanist, cosmopolitan, social and political movements, and global political economy - that a positive politics must begin to address.

12. See Jacoby, *Future Imperfect*, op. cit.

13. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2005.

Ruth Levitas' contribution to this issue, 'Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible' offers an important reflection upon this 'utopian leap'. Levitas explores different modes of utopian thinking from '68 onwards. She offers an important analysis of utopian possibility as a mode of politics, which insists upon the necessity of hope and creativity in contrast to the defeatist reformism of the post-68 era. This strategy contests the mode of critique that insists that we think our progressive projects in terms of impossibility rather than imagining the creative possibilities of ethical living. For this reason, Levitas makes the useful suggestion that we undertake both 'serious' and 'playful' utopianism. Using the example of the current ecological crisis, these modes of utopianism represent democratic practices of alternative social relations as well as emotional connections with ethical living. These utopian modes also constitute an important pedagogical resource for

building ongoing and meaningful commitments to human flourishing.

As 'a particularly obdurate prisoner, subjected to ceaseless interrogation, yet still refusing to give away its secret',[14] 1968 figures as a crucial part of the pre-history of the contemporary conjuncture and the possibilities - restricted and otherwise - for progressive politics therein. In her acute study, Kristin Ross[15] carefully points out the profound implications of post-68 narratives that chronicle a non-event or counter-revolutionary conformism cloaked in gestural radicalism. Furthermore, Ross notes that by disingenuously explaining the contemporary omnipotence of capital as the 'inevitable outcome' of 1968, such accounts dissemble the collective imagination seeking an alternative society *and* actively encourage a resigned radical capitulation, confirming the self-fulfilling prophecy of '68 as an indisputable and irredeemable failure.

This issue of the historical memory of '1968' and its resonances - what Ross terms its 'afterlives' - is the focus of Alberto Toscano's review essay in this issue. In his contribution, 'Beginnings and Ends', Toscano reviews recent assessments of '1968' - Ross included - as attempts to connect an understanding of its character as an 'event' to a/its legacy. Toscano points out how the indefinable, ephemeral quality of 1968 is received as both a source of inspiration and frustration; for some, such as François Cusset,[16] it signals a singular and unorthodox event that is irreducible to prosaic categorization and pragmatic ends, while, for others, such as Gilles Lipovetsky,[17] it is an apolitical, self-indulgent pageant. Amidst claim and counter-claim, Toscano demonstrates that the struggles over '1968' exceed such a narrow concern and serve as a means to stage enduring and ongoing problematics. These dilemmas, as recounted by Toscano, include the limits of disciplinarity, experience contra explanation, periodising social and economic change, and cultural politics and political economy as modes of struggle. Ultimately, Toscano reminds us of the enormity of the challenge facing a creative positive left project, not least conjuring the vision to deal with dispassionate history and affective existence as well as the divergent demands of necessity and contingency.

14. Keith Reader, 'Three Post-1968 Itineraries: Régis Debray, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Marin Karmitz', *South Central Review*, 16, 4-17, 1 (Winter 1999-Spring 2000): 90.

15. Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p20.

16. François Cusset, *Contre-discours de mai. Ce qu'embaumers et fossoyeurs de 68 ne disent pas à ses heritiers*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2008.

17. Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ere du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989.

NORMATIVITY AND ETHICS

There is more than a hint of the normative in the endeavour to frame a positive politics. In the positivistic mode, it is necessary to assert - or posit - certain facts and principles that can be adequately evidenced and supported. Therefore, naturalised explanations for social stratification and inequality such as the congenital as well as environmental inadequacies - physical, physiological and psychic, behavioural, moral and intellectual -understood to proscribe the opportunities and life chances of particular social groups can be falsified through evidence and argument. However, remaining within the Popperian schema, what would a positive project verify or conjecture? Put differently, what, precisely, would a positive

project seek to affirm?

To clarify what we mean or intend by 'positive' in order to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable political projects that claim a positive basis, two questions are crucial: What is the descriptive and analytical basis of positivity? And what independent principles validate and justify acceptable claims to positivity? In other words, how can we account for the positive project and why should such explanations be accepted? This special issue takes the subject and the social as our point of departure. And as such we are concerned with the quality and conditions of existence: How are persons living? What are the forms and possibilities for intersubjective relationships? What are the social structures and networks within which those lives and relationships exist? And finally, and most importantly, how just are these arrangements?

In relation to these questions, various commentators across the arts, humanities and human and social sciences have sought to recover/uncover humanist grounds for political commonalty and cultural exchange.[18] Lorenzo Simpson's article in this issue, 'Humanism and Cosmopolitanism After '68', intervenes directly in these debates and provides an ethical framework for progressive political possibilities as well as the normative foundations of a positive politics. Simpson develops a critical conception of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'humanism' that insists upon the development of the necessary conditions that make meaningful understanding and dialogue possible. He argues that such a situated cosmopolitanism requires normative judgement in order to recognise social and cultural difference without reifying it and rendering understanding and dialogue impossible.

For a positive project, understanding the quality and conditions of social existence is methodological and also evaluative; it invites judgment on the basis of whether they correspond to desirable or undesirable standards. Again, without theological doctrine, moral absolutes or any other epiphenomena to fall back on, we are led towards a notion of that which we determine to be good that is not pre-determined through deference to convention or deity. Instead it is emergent through our own practico-theoretical determinations and activity. Using the 'pro-life' perspective as an example, to speak of the *sanctity* of human life as the basis for a putatively 'positive' project is to call upon the inviolate moral truths set out within religious scripture: religiosity is, therefore, *the* foundation of politics. As an incontestable metaphysical truth, buttressed by absolute moral authority, the sanctified ideal of human life is impervious to external critique or practical considerations. Against this attempt at circumventing dialogue, Simpson's situated cosmopolitanism advocates calling moral standpoints to account instead of accepting their 'positivity' at face value. Claims to positivity are tasked with establishing their 'non-invidious' character in ethical terms outside of its own narrow frame of reference that consider and justify its broader implications - with this in mind it is worth noting that

18. See, for example, Lorenzo C. Simpson, *The Unfinished Project: Toward a Postmetaphysical Humanism*, New York, Routledge, 2001; Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, Carol Cosman (trans), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002; Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2003; Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.

the sanctification of life within 'pro-life' discourses related to reproduction or, for example, euthanasia, is generally applied to a spiritual ideal of life either *in utero* or after death instead of the materiality of lived existence.

In sum, a positive politics has to grasp the nettle of the euphemistic proliferation of 'culture' and 'faith' taken as explanans of the individual and social. This is compounded by the increasingly elaborate discourses of cultural incommensurability, unreflexive assertions of intrinsic based modes of being, and particularistic hierarchies of suffering that these formulations lend themselves to. In response, a positive approach is charged with desisting from reifying particular categories and inflating ethnic/cultural/religious incidents as epiphenomena while remaining aware of and responsive to the practical manifestations of prejudice, exploitation and oppression. As Simpson argues, a situated cosmopolitanism offers a vital resource to navigate a path between the polarities of particularism and universalism as well as dissolve the supposedly insoluble divide between parochialism and deracination; it enables a social subject capable of non-invidious self- and other-recognition as well as dialogic possibilities for edifying cultural exchanges and progressive, affirmative collective political projects.

BECOMING POSITIVE

The contributors to this issue speak to the unresolved relationship between the subject, sociality, and political possibility in the post-68 context. This fractious situation is compounded by the 'death' of two hitherto central categories and concepts - the 'human' and 'class' - that is often located within prevailing narratives of the aftermath of '1968'. In this vein, 'anti-humanism' is often taken to represent the intellectual hallmark of '1968', immortalised within Althusser's devastating critique of the implausible empirical essence lying at the core of '*the* human'.[19] Consequently, numerous genealogies of the historical work within the human sciences have sought to expose the artifice of the human as a conscious, knowing subject. A significant and large poststructuralist, feminist, psychoanalytical and postcolonial literature have replaced the Cartesian human with the contingent processes of identification that produce complex subjectivities and perspectives, simultaneously located within multiple fields.[20]

The '1968' era bridge between the death of the 'human' and the demise of class begins to emerge within Fanon's earlier critique of Sartre's 'man'.[21] While undermining the 'human' as a universal entity, Fanon also addresses Sartre's ethnocentric failure to recognise the psychic and material specificity of racialized ontology and suffering. This move, consolidated within the inspirational *The Wretched of the Earth* that informed Third World liberationist movements and metropolitan anti-racist struggles alike, arguably undermined proletarian solidarity still further. As subsequent legend would have it, the Marxism/post-marxism schism alluded to in

19. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Ben Brewster (trans), London, Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1969.

20. Examples include Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990 and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.

21. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann (trans), New York, Grove Press, 1967.

both Braidotti and Gilbert's contributions has opened up in part due to a deep contestation of the formation of the subject and its relation to the social. Amongst other objectives, paradigmatic positions characterised as post-marxist sought to bring hitherto marginal and subaltern groups into radical political representation: *Le droit à la différence* (the right to difference) slogan central to sexual, feminist and multicultural politics is regarded as a direct outcome of '68.[22] This geographical diffusion of radical sites and subjects enabled new forms of anti-racist politics and autonomous struggles as well as a politics of representation both cognizant of and sympathetic to ethno-national and religious specificity. Of course this shift was not greeted with universal approval on the left. For some the emergence of postcolonial and subaltern subjects as social agents instigated the demise of meaningful left struggle and proletarian unity; a worthy politics of material practicality and its erstwhile representative figure was replaced with the ostensibly apolitical distractions of the symbolic and representational realms pandering to reified and vacuous racial and ethnic recognition.[23]

22. Reader, 'Three Post-1968 Itineraries', op. cit., p90.

23. See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 1995.

So, where to from here? Taken together, the death of the human and demise of class has significant implications for a positive politics oriented towards collective, progressive and emancipatory ends: Are limited micropolitical projects in the Foucauldian sense, or discrete sectional, interest-based struggles the apogee of radical possibility? Or, put differently, what kinds of large-scale radical politics are possible without collective categories to mobilise around? The contributors to this special issue offer a meaningful intervention within recent debates on the political meaning and futurity of the social subject. In the midst of a series of profound challenges such as the neo-liberal hegemony and crisis of left politics, the resurgence of fundamentalist monotheistic doctrines and concomitant dogmas of faith, and the fetishisation of particularistic 'identity' promoting reactionary narcissism, solipsism, and parochialism, the contributors to this issue offer critical resources capable of building a normative ethics for empathetic and communicative sociality compatible with a progressive, emancipatory positive politics.

In essence, then, this special issue is concerned with engaging the difficulty of moving from negation to an affirmative position. And in doing so the issue contributes to the existing conversations that assume the challenge and struggle of thinking the progressive positive - for example the 'Left Futures' debate staged by *Soundings*.[24] Nevertheless, there is a different point of emphasis here: many discussions of the future for left politics and its reinvigoration seek to enumerate core substantive categories and critical issues - drawing the route map so to speak. In practice, this amounts to moving between 'reclaiming' modes of political analysis and organisation that have become marginalised such as class and advocating 'new' points of emphasis such as urgent ecological concerns.[25] We are primarily concerned here with the complimentary issue of epistemological and ethical framing that might be characterised as the political methodology of left futures.

24. See for example *Soundings*, 35 (March 2007).

25. See for example 'A new politics of class: Interview with Jon Cruddas MP', *Soundings*, 38 (2008): 141-155 and Patrick Curry, 'Green ethics and the democratic left', *Soundings*, 35 (2007): 66-75.

Therefore, this issue seeks to open up discussion on *how* to (re)formulate substantive categories and critical issues alongside arguments detailing the practical conditions that explain *why* such moves are necessary.

Of course, committing to such a positive undertaking is not easy. Consider for a moment how much critical energy is expended on 'correcting' the analyses and prescriptions of like minds; energy that might be redirected more profitably. In each of their contributions to this issue, Rosi Braidotti, Ruth Levitas, Fran Tonkiss and Alberto Toscano explicitly discuss the '68 exhortation, 'Be realistic, demand the impossible', a political call to imagine and create the just conditions of individual and collective social existence and relations. In practice, however, whether in word or deed, demanding the impossible amounts to sticking one's head above the parapet and risking the disdain and disapprobation of political friends and foes alike. On one hand, this may be indicative of the crisis of engaged intellectualism from within the academic marketplace where the ideal of solidarity can be compromised by competitive status games. On the other hand, this might be a manifestation of negotiations between what Erik Olin Wright identifies as the imaginative enterprise of 'envisioning real utopias' and the pragmatic concern with real-world practicalities.[26] Nevertheless, explanations aside, this issue invokes an ethics of generosity that might enable a more productive and collegial - not to say comradely - response.

26. Erik Olin Wright, Guidelines for envisioning real utopias', *Soundings*, 36 (2007), 26-39.

Expressing this concern is neither an attempt to evade difficult questions nor suppress important differences. Rather, it offers an opportunity to think about moving beyond the activity of critique and the defensiveness it engenders in order to open up a dialogic space. As Audre Lorde put it with such great acuity, differences are not solely points of conflict but, if approached more openly, may provide opportunities for enhanced understanding that neither conflate difference with discord, nor confuse interest with identity.[27] This is all the more important given the travails of our present conjuncture including the increasing gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' across the North and South, escalating ecological crises and unsustainable over-consumption, the conflagration of genocide and ethnic tensions, racism and xenophobic hostility, and the unfolding 'global war on terror'.

27. Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Freedom, CA., The Crossing Press, 1984, pp110-113.

Arguably, part of the difficulty of imagining and committing to 'positive projects' is the passive voice of pre-empting and forestalling the inevitable disapprobation from opponents and 'like minds' together that it encourages. To say this is neither to promote an idealised version of consensus nor diminish dissent and debate; the tyrannical aspects of each of these are not difficult to imagine. In speaking of a positive project we have in mind something that is to be made then re-made. Its key ideas and principles are to be justified and argued for instead of taken as self-evident; the arduous work of winning support as a means to building concerted political commitment must be embraced; and, while

necessary, a commitment to progressive self-reflexivity and auto-critique ought to remain mindful of the traps of nihilistic introspection and fatal vacillation. We have in mind a positive project for a politics that is to be fought for and disagreed over, where the negativity expressed in debate is not crystallised around undermining or enervating purposes but is oriented towards affirmative ends. This special issue, therefore, is designed to open conversation, to feed into existing cognate debates, and to generate more maps and connections. We hope that 'After '68' will stimulate imaginative and creative responses for twenty-first-century progressive, emancipatory political projects.