

**COMMUNITY AT  
LOOSE ENDS**

**Edited by the  
Miami Theory Collective**

**COMMUNITY**

# A l'insu (Unbeknownst)

*Jean-François Lyotard*

If we had time—but that's the whole point, *we don't have the time* (after a certain age, this is well known; whereas earlier, we believe we have time; to grow older is to learn that we will not have had the time; and Europe is old, face-liftings notwithstanding)—if we had time, we would seize the opportunity afforded by subjects like “The Politics of Forgetting” or “May '68: Twenty Years Later” to make a point by taking stock of where we are (*faire le point*). An illusory wish, and necessarily so. Points are marked out in space—in the middle of the ocean or in vast deserts—to which coordinate measurements are applied. But there are no points in time. We cannot even claim to be located in the immensity of time. Time discourages the attempt to “co-ordinate” and the hope of “locating ourselves.”

In wanting to “mark out our point” (*faire le point*) we are already going astray. We are already forgetting what time is. Or rather, through the subterfuge of the spatial metaphor, time allows itself to be forgotten. Physicists have understood this, but not the rest of us humans.

It would not be a point, but on the contrary a universal proposition that we could make, one affirmed from every possible point: namely, that all politics is a politics of forgetting, and that nonforgetting (which is not memory) eludes politics.

I am not speaking of something that we could attribute to politics itself, of an intention to make forgotten. Intention has nothing at all to do with it. It's rather a question of “short-term memory,” of that temporal disposition included in the rules governing a civil or citizenly community of whatever kind, and which re-

quires that something in it be forgotten. What we could say is that what is forgotten, of course, is that this community remains intractable (*intraitable*) to the treatment of political unity; or again, that this treatment has in appearance to be renewed “from time to time,” while in reality it has to be renewed all the time, perpetually. What cannot be treated, what is not manageable [*trailable*] once and for all, and what is forgotten by political treatment in its constitution of a “commonality” of humans by dint of their belonging to the same polis, is the very thing that is not shareable among them, what is not communicable or communal or common at all. Call it birth and/or death, or even singularity. On this, see Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Inoperative Community*.

Here, I do not wish to conjure up some kind of aggressiveness, death drive, or death struggle among humans that are whole, constituted, and organized into sects, parties, or movements. Nor even organized into individualities who rebel against any kind of association. It is the business of politics to make that sort of separation *its* business. Politics never ceases calling for union, for solidarity; and, in the least bad of cases, it turns the manner of being together into the object of an open-ended negotiation, the object of a better-distributed justice or of a consultation that remains to be pursued. This daily fare of politics is not an easy matter. It is the art of Machiavelli. And ever since the authority of partitioning and sharing (*partage*) was denied “real presence” after and by the execution of Louis XVI, we know that the so-called democratic debate not only bears upon possessions (economic, moral, intellectual) to be divided, upon rights to be affirmed and taken into account in deliberation and distribution, but that the debate also, inclusively, bears upon the authority that governs the debate and, sometimes, even upon the very principle of the debate, at the constitutional level.

That is what was exposed in its horror when old Europe suffered its “crisis” during the era of totalitarianisms. Aside from that horror, there remains the striking fact, noted by Hannah Arendt and Franz Neumann, that the totalitarian apparatus, constituted as a result of the elimination of debate and by the continuous elimination of debate from political life by means of terror, reproduces within itself, in the anatomy and physiology of its national body politic, the illness that it claims to cure. Disorder within, an internal proliferation of decision-making authorities, war among inner-circle cliques: all this betrays the recurrence of the shameful sickness within what passes for health and betrays the “presence” of the unmanageable (*intraitable*), at the very time that the latter is hidden away by the delirium and arrogance of a unitary, totalitarian politics.

Betraying the unmanageable, these factors manifest it anew while reversing its meaning, and indeed by the very fact of reversing its meaning. Shiny, jack-booted rigidity is like the obverse of a poorly circumscribed thing that “inhabits” society without even being felt. With the horror resulting from this sanitizing operation, the phantasm of oneness and totality is sustained by the belief that this

heterogeneous thing has, or is, a face (Medusa's face?), and that it would suffice to turn it around to get rid of it. And indeed, it is endowed with a face, with a name, a representation ("the jews," for example)<sup>1</sup> wherein is invested everything that is supposed to be contrary to the distinctness—and inauspicious for the health—of the social body. But precisely, the thing has no more of a reverse side than it has a right side, it has no place, not having taken place and being "present" only outside representation: in death, in birth, one's absolute and singular dependency, which prohibits any instantiated disposition of oneself from being unitary and total. I could just as well say "sexual difference," in the most radical sense of a heteronomy that does not belong to the space-time of representation. That is why it can hardly be felt in the "soul of the polis."

It is felt, in the sense that it is not heard or seen. It is not represented either by words or by "things" (images), as Freud used to say. Freud also designated its mode of "presence" by using the senseless expression: "unconscious affect." It has nothing to do with the imaginary nor, consequently—looking at the thing socially—with ideology. I leave to Nicole Loraux, whose theses I am approaching here, the question of whether it is permissible to envision the thing socially. In my opinion, there is no doubt about it, but I understand that historians resist the hypothesis that the polis has a soul, and that one must therefore disarm their defenses. No doubt there is *some soul* at stake in the polis, if by "soul" we mean the part of spirit that remains hostage to the thing, that remains susceptible to anguish, and defenseless. Historians, after all, are also trying to build a polis, and they strive, or lend themselves, to forgetting that affect.

What is essential to the unmanageable thing is that it absolutely must be gotten rid of. It can be approached only as the unbearable, the repulsive. Its way of attracting is to repulse. At least, that is what the mind recounts about it when it obeys the ancient call of the *logos* (the conceiving function) to corral, to determine, to expose and articulate everything—even the untimely thing—as an object. For, as far as the mind's clandestine passenger is concerned, we can and must suppose that it does not enter into the economic and dynamic game of attractions and repulsions, and that it is not waiting for us to concern ourselves with it or to "redeem" it by intelligence. It is what "occupies" the mind while disabling it. This occupation solicits a kind of paranoia. The "discontent of civilization," the sharp and vague feeling that the civilians are not civilized and that something is ill-disposed toward civility, all this easily engenders the suspicion that plots are being hatched. Also easily engendered are trials, the denunciation of scapegoats, the exclusion of the *xenos*, the accusations made against opposing parties, slander, eristics. And the revolutionary idea, too. *Polemos* is not the father of all things, he is the child of this relation of the mind to a thing that has no relation to the mind. And *polemos* too is a way for the mind to forget it, to forget the *coitus impossibilis* that engendered it and never stops engendering it.

If the thing is not manageable politically, it is because it is outside the chain. If we seek to link it onto the chain, which is the whole business of politics, it remains unlinked and only inspires yet more unleashing. Revolutions, all revolutions, are attempts to approach it, to make the community more faithful to what, unbeknownst to it, inhabits it; at the same time, revolutions attempt to regulate, to suppress, to efface the effects that the thing engenders. There is a fidelity and an infidelity in the fact of revolution. An attentiveness to what "is not working," a voice and an ear lent to a grave wrong done to the community, whatever that wrong may be called. Marx, for example, revealed its cause, or so he believed, in the exploitation of labor power, in the sacrifice of pure creative power that results from the capitalist organization of being together. I say "pure" creative power, because Marx endows it with an attribute that no mechanism of exchange possesses (be it chemical, physical, or human), namely, the property of expending or consuming *less* energy (less value) than it produces as it goes into action (into productive action, that is, as it goes to work). Thus, this power must be unleashed from the chains that bind it in the intrigue of the contract and on the stage of the market. It must be unbound from the *pseudon* (contract, work, average social time required) in which it is proffered, imagined, exposed, betrayed. Revolution, according to Marx, clearly means this fidelity to the non-enchained.

It seems to me that May '68 was marked by such a fidelity. From the outset, the unleashing expanded to culture. May '68 was faithful to the thing that would suffer from its being represented and directed toward the civil sector, the thing that would therefore be ill-treated, not only in the factory or the office, but also at school, and throughout the "cultural" institution (which became manifest at that time and which today we encounter everywhere, including here).<sup>2</sup> And, of course, this thing would also have been ill-treated in political life itself. In the streets of France, the thing was supposedly exposed live—at the cost, of course, of a thousand ideologies of the most contradictory kind. But this very incoherence in the representations can be chalked up to a kind of fidelity, which it served to guarantee. The question of political power was hardly asked, in the final analysis. When, in late May and June, it did get asked by the left, extreme or not, on the rostrum and at work, when the political parties began once again to bark up a storm, the thing fell silent, if indeed it had ever spoken, or even heaved a sigh. The effects of the unleashing persisted, but in the guise of traces. Like any memory, although sometimes in the very name of fidelity, the function of these traces was always to help forget the threat that everyone, whether in the movement or against it (always both at the same time, no doubt), had experienced. One strives to become a realist, an activist, either stupidly or intelligently. By "intelligently" I mean with the Machiavellian intelligence that is aware at least that politics cannot avoid betraying the thing. In any case, realism requires amnesia.

Thus it is that the success of revolutions is necessarily their failure, and that their infidelity is produced out of the very "exploit" or exploitation of their fi-

delity. On the political “score card” (at once disastrous and illuminating) that, unbeknownst to it, the century coming to an end is mentally tallying up, a question arises: are there other politics—other than revolutionary—that would make it possible not to be unfaithful to the thing that inhabits the polis unconsciously?

But how could such a goal be achieved by a politics, when politics is already devoted to the scene of representation from which the unrepresentable presumably must be eliminated, unless politics is to risk losing the polis? The very manner of speaking about forgetting here, I realize, makes no political sense. Only a sense of melancholy. While giving up on revolution, we still cannot finish mourning for this fidelity, even though, and above all because, we know it to be impossible. Politics will never be anything but the art of the possible.

In this state of affairs, recourse to human rights brings slight consolation. Human rights define only the limits that public power ought not to cross. They can do no more than to prohibit public power from unleashing the polis, in the way that all legal entities are limited. Human rights must be respected like a clear memory and a clear-sightedness, the memory of itself that the republic must conserve if it does not wish to fall into ruin. Human rights, then, are defensive. They are defense mechanisms against the nonlinked, and as a citizen, one has the duty to interiorize them and to put them to work in public situations, to direct them to all others, oneself included. As such, human rights are one of the ways to forget: to forget that, in every mind and in the ensemble of minds that is the republican community, there is something which has no rights that need to be affirmed, but which, beyond the just and the unjust, exceeds the mind of each and all. In the republican principle, man and his autonomy come to scramble, under the guise of laws and rights, the traces of an immemorial dependency.

“Resistance” can be used in two senses. Rights resist the thing, and the thing resists rights. Clear memory resists the immemorial that threatens it, derails it, wears it down like the clouds of matter that can slow the course of photons approaching from far away. It is in this way that our present relation to the idea of Enlightenment is altered by the thickness of a night. Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. And you can’t escape this aporia by adding memory to the list of human rights. If one had to situate the respect due the thing in the doctrine of justice, one would be obliged to count it among the duties rather than among the rights. It is the debt, par excellence. But, yet again, the thing does not belong to a doctrine, it expects and requires nothing from the mind, it exceeds all prescription—even all permission—of an institutional nature. If, unbeknownst to it, the mind is indebted to the thing, it is not because the thing has been contractually instituted as the mind’s creditor following a request for a loan. The mind will have been dispossessed “before” being able to certify or to act as a subject. It is consigned to the unending effort to repossess itself over and against the thing, which means, to

forget it. This thing will turn out always to have been the mind's childhood, this enigma that the mind existed "before" existing.

The events of May '68—once shorn of its hodgepodge of intentions, wills, strategies, and conciliatory illusions—took on their luster, an intelligible luster, really, from what they revealed of childhood. I do not mean that the movement was motivated and carried along by a collective infantile regression, nor even that the majority of those swept up in it obviously were young people. I mean that May '68 clearly showed a scrupulous fidelity to a state of dependency more immanent to the mind than its state of mind. This state of dependency was, I repeat, an unbearable one, and we were protesting against it without being able to name the "cause," the thing, *la cosa* (indeed unnamable). But at the same time, it was an admirable state that we insisted deserved homage, as if we could in that way get the civil community (the adult community) to recognize that, despite its ideals of autonomy and progress (or because of them), such a community could not avoid leaving a residue beyond its control, to which the community itself remained hostage, unbeknownst to it.

The return to order that all the political parties prescribed in different styles but with a single voice, from the extreme left to the right, was quite simply an urgent request to forget this thing—childhood. The Marxisms, from the more radical Workers' Council movement to the less radical Maoism, had their part, a decisive part, in occulting what was being revealed—or rather what was showing itself. Each in its own way rendered the thing manageable once again by inscribing it within the register of political perspectives, including that of "splinter-group activism," the supreme nonsense, or countersense, with regard to the thing.

In the West at least, in the West of politics and metaphysics, any revelation is for the mind the event, perhaps, of a greater proximity to the forgotten-unforgettable thing, which leaves it disabled. The event of 1968—"les événements," as we have since called it in France—is remarkable for the anguish it taps. In the mind, childhood is not happiness and innocence, but the state of dependency. Childhood itself seeks to rid itself of that state and to become "grown-up." It does not give evidence of its irresponsibility as a self-flattery, but as a complaint. May '68 sighed the lament of an incurable suffering, the suffering of not having been born free. This lament returned in an immense echo. Like a tragic chorus, adults lamented the lament of child heroes.

And yet, May '68 was not a tragedy; there was no *dénouement*, no crime, and if blood was spilled it was not the doing of the enraged children. They were not fulfilling a destiny inflicted on them by an oracle requiring their life's passion. Its representation as tragedy itself seemed, no less than politics, still *too* unfaithful to the thing. May '68 was not a revolution, because its actors were just young enough or old enough, just aware enough of the status of the polis, to know in-

stinctively that today politics can in no way be tragedy. They knew that tragical-political terror is only an effect, and that horror (its true name) *repeats* the immemorial terror in which the mind has been dispossessed. They did everything they possibly could to avoid this repetition. They did not want, in their acts, to repeat the terror, born of the thing, but to invoke it through their gesture, as poets.

Since it was not revolutionary, the movement of May '68 was not destined to fall into unfaithfulness. Once the "demonstration" had shown that all politics is a politics of forgetting, it remained such as it was in our minds, serious and inconsistent, even as our minds forgot it. "Les événements" became *unheimlich*, both strange and familiar, like the thing to which they had given witness. Their innumerable "effects" (school, sex, woman, family, work, etc.) came to be inscribed not as effects of '68, but rather as new initiatives in ordinary political and civil life. The West went back to its work of managing the unmanageable (*traitement de l'intraitable*).

Translated by James Creech and  
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### Notes

1. See my *Heidegger and "the jews,"* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 3, for an explanation of my use of quotation marks and lower case for "the jews."

2. By "here," Lyotard refers specifically to the colloquium at which this paper was read and generally to the "cultural institution" manifested by the contemporary scholarly conference.—Ed.