

People without a land looking for land deprived of people.¹
Bruno Latour

Thankfully, the month of May has come to an end, and with it any illusion that May '68 could be reenacted in period costumes. French production studios are very clumsy when it comes to historical reconstructions, as the producers of TV series know very well. The settings are too perfect, the collars too starched, the voices too contemporary and the anachronisms so numerous that disbelief cannot be suspended for a moment. So, what might be true for the screen is even more so in politics, when people are looking for a replay of the wonderful times of May '68 while in the midst of the tragic situation today. Everything went wrong in this 2018 remake of May: the 'struggles' didn't 'converge' and there was no 'revolutionary spirit'.

What happened, between then and now, is that the meaning of revolution changed. What was driving students and workers fifty years ago, propelling them towards the future, also drives those who, around the world today, imagine they can return to an ethnically identified nation state. There is a revolutionary spirit, yes indeed, but it is conservative revolution on an unprecedented scale, without limits. The insolence of yesteryear is now on the extreme right!

To continue to celebrate 'the spirit of '68' with festivals and colloquia is to repeat the mistake made in the thirties of battling against a known enemy while there was another, much more serious, movement threatening to destroy everything.

One way of summarizing the situation today is to say that on the one hand there are people furious at being deprived of their land, and on the other a land sadly deprived of people.

Journalists and commentators talk of 'populism' in order to describe this mad scramble back to the protection of the Nation State. We see it happening in one election after another: in Italy, Germany, even in France, and most notably in Britain and the United States. The more a nation has profited from globalization, the more it breaks violently from it—England and America leading the rest of the world in this massive historical about-face. Of course, the word 'people' is in 'populism'. As much as it might come as a surprise to those who still want to celebrate the 'spirit of May', today's problem is one of coming to terms with these two toxic words, too often associated with reactionary thought: 'people' and 'land'.

Progressives accuse populists of wanting to go back to land conceived of as an identity that protects and comforts. Yet the great paradox is that the progressives have as little ground to walk on as the populists. There are all literally without earth. What's worse is that they are dimly aware of this, and that makes them even more irate.

Progressives know very well that the indefinite horizon of globalization will now come up against 'planetary limits', as we are happy to call them. So progress has nowhere to go to. As for the populists, how could they believe for a moment longer in the viability of these newly recreated Nation States, the tail-ends of

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long-gone ancient history: the British Empire? Padania? France in the fifties? ‘Great Again’ America? The Austro-Hungarian Empire?

Really? They know very well that these shelters against the storm will not guarantee survival.

Just like the progressives, the populists are all anxious about not finding a solid base for their projects. These are the people deprived of ground. Neither is able to come up with a political vision that is the slightest bit realistic. This is the reason the public sphere has become so crude, slipping into what has naively been called ‘post-truth’. Without a material world underfoot, how can any program be developed, and how can it be given a firm empirical base? People then turn to dreams; some for an ‘independent’ Italy, others for a France inhabited with ‘original’ citizens, others of colonies on Mars or of robots that would allow them to finally achieve posthuman status.

What is strange about the current political situation is that everyone is aware that the pervasive question is one of finding a ground to live with other migrants coming from all over. It is as if besides these peoples without land, there exists a land waiting for people that are able to inhabit it and look after it. It’s easy to understand populists are right to demand a protective base, but that they are wrong to look for it in national identity. And it’s easy to understand that progressives are right to want access to the whole wide world, but that they are wrong to confuse the world with the globe of globalization. It’s all happening as if a new wicked universality had replaced the former: humans migrating everywhere are impatiently stamping their feet as they wait for a livable ground.

There is a return to questions of land, terroir, territory, zones to be defended, peoples, and even quite material questions to do with food, transport, construction and energy. There is also research into different property laws, without forgetting the new struggles of ‘autochthonous’ peoples, or the extraordinary proliferation of books on the inventiveness of trees, plants, mushrooms, germs or wolves: all this diverse wave of interest is surely a sign of the embedding of the terrestrial, well and truly, in the common consciousness.

Yes, but the thing is, this terrestrial idea is not a representation shared by all. It is not a common ground where peoples can recognise themselves politically as such. It is not as attractive as the figure of the Nation State towards which those with their doubts about globalization are fleeing in despair. So we can now see that the issue is not to replay May ’68 as a bearer of ideals that are arguable, dated and ambiguous, but rather to deploy the same energy, fifty years later, in order to deflect the conservative revolution from the tragedy it is preparing for us.