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May 1968

1968 – It was just the beginning

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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Although the fiftieth anniversary of May 1968 provides the opportunity for new celebrations, new tributes and testimonies, for extensions of previous historiographical research, few writings take seriously the political questions raised by this event. However, ten years after the beautiful month of May, in 1978, the event was still live, and even though social setbacks were being announced and the crisis was beginning to install itself, it was still politics and not history that people were discussing with regard to May 1968. Hence the interest in plunging back into the debates of that time, with this article by Daniel Bensaïd, published in 1978 in a review of the Revolutionary Communist League, *Les Cahiers de la taupe* (No. 23, dated May-June 1978).[*Contretemps*]

"Nobody knows for sure who these leaders are, where they are going to come from, what they mean historically – and perhaps it would be asking too much to expect them to know themselves. But they cannot help but exist already: in the present turmoil, in the face of the unprecedented seriousness of this crisis that is social, as well as religious and economic it would be a mistake to conceive of them as products of a system that we are thoroughly acquainted with. There is no doubt that they are coming from some horizon that is a matter of conjecture: still they will have had to make their own several closely related programmes for making demands which parties up to now have wanted to have nothing to do with – or we will soon fall back into barbarism. Not only must the exploitation of man by man cease, but also the exploitation of man by the so-called "God", of absurd and exasperating memory. The problem of the relations between men and women must be gone over from top to bottom, with no trace of hypocrisy and in such a manner as to brook no delay. Man must pass bag and baggage to the side of man. No more weaknesses, no more childish behaviour, no more ideas of indignity, no more torpor, no more lounging about, no more putting flowers on the tombs, no more civics lessons between two gym classes, no more tolerance, no more snakes-in-the-grass!"

"Look at the street, it is rather curious, rather equivocal, quite well-guarded and yet it will be yours and it is beautiful."

André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 1953

Against all those who doubted about socialism and despaired of the working class, May 1968 was first of all the confirmation of the actuality and the possibility of the revolution in the developed capitalist countries, the reaffirmation of the leading role of the working class.

Indeed, for nearly twenty years the long economic expansion of the post-war period had nourished all the ideological expressions of class collaboration. Fashionable sociologists promised unlimited growth, eternal prosperity, and the reconciliation of social classes in the equitable sharing of well-being. No question then of zero growth, no ecological concerns, no crisis of civilization. The reformist leaders of the workers' movement echoed that the working class no longer had only its chains to lose, and that social progress would pursue its merry way, from advanced democracy to a renewed democracy, from presidential elections to legislative elections: Marx was for the museum of antiquities!

The most massive general strike in history: disproportion between its strength and its results

For superficial observers, fascinated by parliamentary routine, the student barricades and the general strike had the

effect of a bolt of lightning in a clear blue sky. Just a few weeks before the explosion, Pierre Vianson-Ponté published an article on the front page of *Le Monde* entitled "France is bored". More attentive to the "feverish symptoms" coming from the depths of society, parties and government should have perceived those molecular transformations which, after the strikes of Saint-Nazaire and Rhodia, suddenly led the workers to violent confrontation with the police forces; they would have understood that something was changing in the minds of the students, yesterday fearful of the batons, who suddenly grabbed hold of the Mobile Guards' rifles and began to make the walls of their universities speak...

This profound divorce between the immobility of political life and the sudden social ferment was fraught with consequences.

It explains on the one hand the surprise and the confusion of the ministries and the state apparatus. But it also illuminates the disproportion, at first sight shocking, between the scale of the movement (the most massive general strike in history), and the meagreness of the results: an extension of trade union rights, higher wages, and the gradual return to the 40-hour week for the 1980s... Proportionately, the Grenelle agreements of 1968 are much leaner than those of Matignon in 1936. [1]

The disproportion only expresses the tragic gap between the power and the militancy of the movement, on the one hand, and the low level of consciousness and political experience on the other. The strike was neither directed nor centralized by the trade union leaderships, which retained control over it in order better to fragment it and wear it out. With few exceptions, there was not the ferment of grassroots activists who had bathed in great struggles: since the Liberation, apart from the strikes of 1953 in the Civil Service and the miners' strike in 1963, there was more resignation than struggles, more defeats than victories, resulting in strong discontinuity between generations of militants.

Amazed and surprised by their numbers and the discovery of their strength, the 1968 strikers were unable to use them. Of course, we must name those who were most responsible for the failure, because a strike of 10 million workers for three weeks that resulted in Grenelle's mess of pottage, and the re-election in June of the most reactionary Assembly since the war, was a failure.

The political and trade union leaderships of the workers' movement were responsible for it, for the betrayal of Grenelle as well as for the electoral treason. But the problem we must ask ourselves goes further than that: why did such an open and shameful betrayal provoke so few ruptures and so few examples of going beyond the union apparatus in the working class itself? Why, although the following year in Italy Fiat workers opened their doors to students, why were dialogues impossible under the walls of Renault or Citroën?

It was the combined result, it must be repeated, of closer control by the apparatus but also of the low level of consciousness in this immense force that was suddenly revealed to itself.

A great force without a democratic framework

Think about it. Ten million strikers, three weeks of struggle... And yet elected delegates and strike committees responsible to the workers' assembly remained the exception. The advanced examples of self-organization were so exceptional that they are still remembered: the democratic organization of the strike in Saclay, the taking over of supply and transport by the unions in Nantes. Practically no restarting of production in the service of the struggle: people did talk about it happening at the CSF in Brest, but the information was never really confirmed. In the

barracks, we know of only one leaflet, also exemplary: that of the soldiers of the RIMCA of Mutzig who solidarized with the strikers. Finally, while the specific participation of women has been a characteristic feature of all great popular revolutions (1789, 1848, 1871, 1917...), the rise of feminism appeared as a delayed effect of 1968, without us being able to cite any autonomous initiatives of women in May and June 1968.

Channelled by its leaderships to the negotiating table (the CGT and the CFDT were content to take note of the general strike, without ever declaring it!), the general strike floated in a permanent ambiguity, halfway between a political strike and a strike over demands, without clearly defining either a political objective or a platform of demands on which to focus and centralize until victory.

On 13 May the one-day general strike was organized by the trade union confederations in solidarity with the students. The spontaneously dominant slogan, "Ten years is enough!" expressed the desire to end the Gaullist regime and traced the path of a political strike. But the reformist leaderships did not want to hear of a political strike leading to the dissolution of the Assembly and the formation of a government of the workers' parties. This way forward being blocked by their own leaderships, the workers, frustrated, turned back, from the outbreak of the strike at Sud-Aviation Bouguenais on 17 May to their own demands: after the general strike called by the leaderships, there was the one unleashed by the rank and file. But in most workplaces, people were waiting for the regime to fall like a ripe fruit, without clearly defining it as an objective, and it was left to the union leaderships to manage the list of demands. From then on, these strikes without precise motives and without self-organization became easy to manipulate for the leaderships. Look today at the images that were filmed at the time: the mass meeting of workers at Renault-Billancourt after the speech by De Gaulle on 30 May, look at those faces closed and sceptical, bitter but powerless, already defeated without knowing how to fight.

The political way forward confiscated by parliamentary manoeuvres

However, yes, with the debacle in the ministries and de Gaulle taking a break in Baden-Baden, the question of power was objectively posed. But it was not posed in practice.

To offer an alternative solution if necessary, Mitterrand put forward the idea, for the first time since 1947, of a Mendès-France government with the participation of Communist ministers. But he intended that this government should be "without proportionality", in other words, he claimed full powers with regard to its composition, in order to give all the necessary guarantees to the bourgeoisie, while the PCF would receive the usual task of organizing a disciplined return to work.

"I thought," says Mitterrand cynically in his memoirs, "that the presence of Communists would reassure more than it would worry. This statement seems today foolhardy. But I knew that neither their role nor their number in the government team were any reason to frighten reasonable people who at that moment saw in the CGT and Séguin the last ramparts of a public order that Gaullism was proving to be powerless to protect, in the face of the blows of the amateurs of revolution."

Faithful to their vocation, the reformist leaders therefore proposed a government of class collaboration and public safety, even though the discussions ran into trouble over the names.

On 29 May, the PCF and the CGT demonstrated without the CFDT or UNEF to cries of "Popular Government!". Present in the demonstration, we raised the cry: "Popular government yes! Mitterrand, Mendès-France, no!" The next day, the workers' leaderships agreed... to bow down uncomplainingly to de Gaulle's diktat, reassured to find an

negotiating partner using the language of the established regime: they could then leave the workers to swallow the Grenelle agreements, and leave aside their laborious negotiations on a government.

The virtual non-existence of a process of self-organization encompassing reformist party activists, on the one hand, and the strictly parliamentary manoeuvres of these parties, on the other, had profound and unforeseen consequences: the lasting difficulty for a number of militants of May 1968, to think through the concrete articulation between the social mobilization and the definition of a political way forward in the form of the unity of the workers' parties. It also resulted in a deep economic distortion of the majority of far-left organizations, which were content to differentiate themselves from the reformists on the terrain of the escalation of demands and imagined the revolutionary process on the model of an outflanking of the reformist apparatuses by a "new May 1968 carried through to the end".

This was to fail to draw all the consequences of the other great lesson of May: the absence of a revolutionary party.

The absence of a revolutionary party: combativity, consciousness, organization

We said that if there had been a revolutionary party in May 1968, everything would have been possible. But the existence of such a party is not a supplementary element, which just comes to be added on to others in a revolutionary crisis. Its presence or absence conditions the possibilities for those who can no longer govern as before and the responses of those who no longer want to be governed as before. So the absence of a revolutionary party is not a mere lack. It determines the whole process: the dough does not rise. Every factory, every establishment, every neighbourhood lacks the handful of recognized militants who, in a moment of intense receptivity of the masses, are able to suggest and propose: the relaunching of production and transport in the service of the strike; the election of revocable delegates and their centralization at the level of the locality, the region, the industry. What is missing is the presence of militants capable of convincing a union branch, a local or regional union federation, so that perspectives become the subject of a mass debate within the organized workers' movement. Such a revolutionary organization did not exist in 1968. This resulted not only in the immediate limits of the movement, but also in the slowness of assimilating and meditating on its lessons.

"It's only a beginning, let's keep fighting!" This slogan, before going around the world, arose spontaneously from the demonstration of 13 May 1968. It's only a beginning... Yes, but we did not know then to what extent. The first to take up the slogan thought that it was the beginning of an immediate revolution which, marked by its date, would join in history its glorious sisters of 1789, 1848, 1871... They were mistaken about what was at stake and about the rhythms: it was only a beginning, but the beginning of a period of prolonged struggle and profound reorganization of political and social forces. In this sense, we are still in May 1968.

We also spoke, by a distant analogy with 1905 in Russia, of a "dress rehearsal". A dress rehearsal, perhaps, because the general strike foreshadowed the possibilities of a mass uprising of the working class and its ability to try and take power.

But unlike May 1968, the revolution of 1905 in Russia had bequeathed to the proletariat the experience of the soviets, that is to say, organs of direct democracy through which the exploited build their own power against the bureaucratic machine of the bourgeois state. May 1968 did not even see the emergence, unlike in Portugal during the summer of 1975, of embryos of such organs. This allows us to understand the power of the grip of the reformist apparatuses, their ability to digest this general strike, and the persistent weight of electoral perspectives crystallized for five years around the Common Programme and the Union of the Left. The clarity and brutality of the crisis in May

1968 masked the necessary in-depth work by which the workers' movement must rebuild and recompose itself to embody a real revolutionary alternative to the bourgeoisie: it is not entirely by chance that its memory has nourished, even marginally, a resurgence of the old anarchist conception of the general strike that is prepared and decreed, in certain trade-union sectors ("What if we stop everything...") or more simply in the cinematic myth of "Year 01".

Today, it is becoming possible to measure the road we have travelled. In the definition of trade-union demands (across-the-board increases, sliding scale, right to work), in the demands with regard to security, in the forms of struggle (decision-making assemblies, strike committees in certain cases, restarting of production). We must add the gains that are represented by the struggles of immigrants, the autonomous women's movement, the tradition of soldiers' committees, the regionalist demands that imply a first natural framework of centralization of struggles. We must take into consideration the debates that are taking place in the unions, the ideas that are germinating and that will inevitably resurface at the moment of the test of practice.

Whatever happens, in the future the gap between consciousness and combativeness will not be the same as in 1968.

However, the relationships of forces within the workers' movement seem to evolve with infinite slowness. The reformist apparatuses have been built on years and years of relative social peace and assiduous collaboration with the bourgeoisie. To loosen their grip will require powerful shocks. It took no less than five years of a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation (from 1918 to 1923) and a serious economic crisis for the German social democratic bureaucracy to lose control of the working class.

Because there was a huge retard in consciousness and combativeness, the effect of May 1968 in the working class could only be felt after a certain passage of time. But above all, May 1968 remained an experience that was truncated: ten years later, the electoral betrayal of March 1978 has completed it.

We are entering a new phase where the recomposition of the revolutionary party can take a qualitative step forward.

May 1978

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[1] The Matignon Agreements in 1936 were won by the general strike under the Popular Front. They accorded: the legal right to strike, the removal of all obstacles to union organization (including the right to have representatives, elected by secret ballot, and protected from pressures by the employers), a blanket 7-12 percent wage increase for all workers. Laws were introduced at the same time to grant paid vacations (two weeks - for the first time in France), 40-hour work week paid 48, collective bargaining.