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France

The event itself and its effects... Looking back on May '68

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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In 2008, in an interview with Francis Sitel for the journal *Critique communiste* (No. 188) Daniel Bensaïd looked back over the strategic debates which took place in May 1968, and especially in its immediate aftermath, among the militants of what became in 1969 the Communist League [1]. Between enthusiasm for the rise of struggles and fear of being swept away by the ebb tide of the mobilizations, between predictions about the coming revolution and reformist dead ends, it was the question of organization, of the political party, that was posed at that time in new terms for a far left that was overwhelmingly composed of students. *Contretemps* [2]

Francis Sitel: To begin this interview I would like to return to the book that you wrote with Henri Weber at the time, *Mai 1968: une répétition générale* ("May 1968, a Dress Rehearsal") [3], a book that certainly shows its age but deserves to be read again on this fortieth anniversary...

Daniel Bensaïd: The book was written during the summer of 1968, without any retrospective analysis of the event. As I remember it - in terms of the content of the book, but it may be the way in which I have reconstructed it - the concern was to focus on the possibilities that had been opened up. This was in the manner of "what would have been possible if...": if we had another party, if we had another implantation in the workers' movement..., in other words by imagining a Communist Party that would not be the Communist Party, a CGT different from the CGT. [4]... So it was a form of pedagogy.

But at the same time, when you think about your own political project, you are more aware of the political reality. Two problems came up right away. First, an awareness of the limits of our organization - 90 per cent or more of the members were students. This was true of all the organizations with the exception of the PSU, including those that came from the crisis of the UEC, the Union of Communist Students.

Hence the imperative need to initiate a sociological transformation, and thus not to yield to the hopes of a rebound of the movement, of which there signs during the summer and autumn, but on the contrary to be sensitive to the effects of decomposition resulting from the ebbing of the movement as they appeared, and not to remain a prisoner of them. It was clear in the student movement: we needed to prepare the December 1968 Congress of the UNEF (the main French student union), an intermediate meeting took place in July in Grenoble. You could already feel the deleterious effects of frustration.

A battle against the current of the spontaneous wave had therefore to be fought. Hence the priority we gave to emphasizing the idea of the party. At the same time, within the PCI (section of the Fourth International), there existed the idea that such an event put new possibilities on the agenda. This was the double proposal, during the summer, of affiliation to the Fourth International, and therefore a fusion between the PCI [Parti Communiste Internationaliste, the French section of the Fourth International] and the JCR [Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire, originating in a split led by Trotskyists from the CP's Jeunesse Communiste], and a fusion with Lutte ouvrière. I was not a member of the PCI and I discovered these perspectives through discussions with Henri Weber and Charles Michaloux, but all this was in the background of the book and its central idea: "We need a revolutionary party."

For those who came from Trotskyism, the perspective was certainly that of a recomposition of the Trotskyist movement as a response to the space that had opened up. For me, this resonated with an obsessional form of Leninism: I wrote in great haste, during the same summer of 1968, my master's thesis on Lenin and the notion of revolutionary crisis. So I was living and breathing Lenin's writings, especially those of the young Lenin before 1905, about the beginnings of a party. These are the concerns that we find in the book.

The shock title of the book seems to me to have obscured the questions raised there. The analogy with 1905 leads us to retain only the imperative of the revolutionary party as a response to what "was missing" in May '68. However, the book is much richer in its thinking and goes far beyond this one dimension, addressing for example the questions of self-organization, dual power...

DB: It is possible that there is a problem of timing and that in my memory is telescoping distinct moments. In the summer of 1968, we were still in the event, and we were also marvelling at the possibilities that had been revealed. It was one thing to be expelled from or to leave - it was a bit of both - the CP, explaining that all the stories about the bourgeoisification of the working class had their limits; it was something else to find ourselves two years later faced with a general strike! This confirmation-revelation, in the wake of a battle against a bureaucratic apparatus, was an invitation to discover and make the most of the slightest experiences of self-organization - the Saclay soviets, the CSF in Brest, the action committees... - and even to overdo it. [5]

But this was encouraged by one of the good dimensions of the Trotskyist heritage, the one represented by Ernest Mandel, even before the publication of his anthology on self-management and workers' control... In the UEC (Union of Communist Students), we had been educated with the Notebooks of the Centre for Socialist Studies, which in particular reflected debates within the Italian trade union left with Bruno Trentin, and also contributions by Gorz, Mandel, Naville and Serge Mallet on the theory of "anticapitalist structural reforms", in our eyes a pseudonym for transitional demands... [6]

So one of our first heterodox readings in the UEC in Toulouse was Gorz's book on *Néocapitalisme et Stratégie ouvrière* ("Neocapitalism and Working-class Strategy"). In a semi-conscious way, this transitional theme came from these debates, and it is against this background that the general strike burst forth, with its exciting experiences.

Subsequently, the feeling of having to define ourselves, against the current, undoubtedly crushed this problematic of the articulation, in this diversified movement, between different levels of consciousness, and different rhythms of mobilization. That was probably more in the year 1969. In the student movement, it was expressed our pamphlet entitled *La deuxième soufflé* ("The Second Wind"), that was violently polemical towards the Maoist currents: we were then "at war" to define ourselves and to last the course, with the excesses and the over-enthusiasm that may result ... The founding congress of the League was dominated by this hardening attitude: the idea of the priority struggle against spontaneity, the obsession not to be swept away by the ebb tide. Hence a polemic, at a distance, with the legacy of the group Socialisme ou barbarie. [7] In 1968 we were therefore more in a transitional culture than a year later. There was then a leftist shift and the exacerbation of polemics. When the decline of the movement was confirmed the internal debate was marked by excesses on all sides.

All this was further reinforced by short-term predictions: even though the formula did not come until two or three years later, the idea was emerging, supported in particular by Mandel, of a "European revolutionary crisis in five years". This did not appear so delusional in view of the "creeping May" in Italy, the crisis of the Franco dictatorship, the strikes in Britain. It gave an immediate relevance to the idea of "dress rehearsal", which we had made the title of the book on 1968. Moreover we were not the only ones, all the currents were obsessed by the desire to define themselves: when you think that you are going towards a real revolutionary crisis, you have to forge, as quickly as possible, the sharpest possible instrument. And the Revolution, if not God, would recognize its own...

With regard to this project of fusion with LO, how was it articulated with the proposal put forward by LO in the wake of May '68 of a "party of the movement"?

DB: This fusion project took into account the common Trotskyist heritage and a certain complementarity between the two organizations: LO with its small working-class base and its organizational culture, the League with its student experience and its capacity to react to events. For LO, how did this fit in with the "Party of the May movement"

proposal, with the idea of a common paper, even including the PSU? No doubt following the idea according to which LO and the League could constitute the Trotskyist pole of this party, and that LO would obviously be the determining workers' component. It nevertheless remains that it was a rather daring response to the new situation.

Though the CP was strongly challenged in its claim to be the revolutionary party, we can note that it concentrated the bulk of its attacks against its adversaries less on this revolutionary quality than on its reality of being "the party of the working class" faced with various small bourgeois variants. Finally LO chose to take up the challenge on this terrain...

DB: LO was indeed more sensitive to this dimension. For them, the guarantee of the party's identity was sociological, in a way the mirror image of the CP, an approach that situated the competition on the terrain of the working-class authenticity of the two parties. Our approach was more ideological.

To which we must add the theoretical and practical importance of the international dimension, which went beyond the question of the Fourth International. We saw ourselves as a component of the international communist movement. The theme that had been preoccupying us since 1967, and which can *a posteriori* appear as an illusion, was that of the "third international component", with Cuba and Vietnam, illustrated by the initiatives of OLAS (Latin American Solidarity Organization) and present as such in *Granma*, the Cuban Communist Party newspaper, which published vitriolic articles against bureaucracy and in solidarity with Vietnam...

This brings us to the Guevarist reference, which played an important role in our break with the culture of the CP: in the face of the official Communists, holders of the title without deserving it, a sort of parvenu of the Russian Revolution, it implied the will to affirm the necessity of proof: Che's formula - "the duty of a revolutionary is to make the revolution" - was the maxim of this. This idea was that of a whole young European generation. This discourse was common to activists like Rudi Dutschke, Tariq Ali... [\[8\]](#)

In the debates on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of 1968, we see how much these oppositions were decisive: on the side of the militants of the CP, we still see today the absence of a real critical element concerning the fundamental choices then defended by their party, and sometimes just a pure and simple falsification of history by the leaders of that time.

Does not the accusation of treason addressed to the CP, even if it is justified, risk leading to a reductive vision of what its real role was? It operated on the basis of a coherent orientation, articulating the refusal to play on the dynamics of mobilization, which it denounced as leading to civil war, and on the need for this great fighting movement to obtain gains, while waiting for the necessary unity of the left as a political solution?

DB: It was indeed a rational and coherent orientation, which is why it was effective. Even though, moreover, 1968 marked the beginning of its decline, the CP then recruited, on this line, militants who came to it, not by revolutionary conviction, but on the basis of an orientation in keeping with a reformist line within the institutions as they were, consistent with the coherence between a trade-union front putting forward reasonable demands and a patient electoral front. Hence the weakness of the fractures within it and a very slow-moving crisis. On the other hand, unlike in 1936 and 1945, it did not capture the bulk of the active forces, which were partly dispersed, on the trade-union level and politically, in the different currents of the new radical left.

It should be added that this strategy was congruent with the Welfare State, otherwise it could not have worked. Because there was indeed a dimension of "catching up" at work in May '68. We were right to proclaim that, in relation to such a strong movement, what was won was not what could have been won, neither at Grenelle [the name given

to the negotiations between the trade-unions and the government on 25-26 May 1968] nor after. But that does not mean that what was won was nothing. Today, the right wants to take back everything; that is a confirmation that the gains were not so negligible.

When the problem of a governmental alternative was posed, around the end of May, with Charléty and the demonstration of the CGT, what were for us the debates on these questions? [9]

DB: We must first of all remember, without cultivating self-deprecation, the problematic character of "us": a tiny group of students. Did we meet to "debate"? Not really! I remember a state of great agitation. With Guy Hocquenghem, I was responsible for producing the daily bulletin *Aujourd'hui*, where we put more or less what was going through our heads, day by day. [10]

There were some discussions. I think we took good measure of the crisis, with the blocking of the Grenelle agreements and the departure of De Gaulle. We were aware that it was important, that something was being played out in those few decisive hours. On the other hand, like those demonstrators who marched indifferently past the National Assembly, there was little interest in Mitterrand's statements, which were a kind of background noise. As a recent debate with [leaders of 68] Jacques Sauvageot and Abraham Béhar showed, the PSU was much more involved, it had people in leading positions and influence within the UNEF, it had influence in the CFTD (Confédération française démocratique du travail, the social democratic trade union) and in Snés-Sup (the university teachers' union)... Without having the keys to the situation, its decisions had some impact. Our position, by force of circumstances (our small size and our marginality) was more propagandist.

Without creating a myth, we can assume that the PCI probably discussed these issues more, when it put forward the perspective of a left government based on the trade unions. We can note that Georges Séguy in his recent statements evokes this same possibility. [11] It was a pedagogical formula that took into account the various parameters of the situation: the government proposed by Mitterrand was not an adequate response to the situation, and a government responsible to soviets that did not exist did not have any reality... The real leadership of the strike was in the hands of the unions. So there was a certain logic to the formula, but little credibility.

As regards the JCR, using our instinct, we improvised a good response, which was to go to both initiatives, the Charléty meeting on 27 May and the CGT demonstration on the 29th. In the course of this demonstration we tried to get people to take up the slogan "Popular Government, yes, Mitterrand-Mendes, no!" This pedagogy in the negative, in short, developing mistrust in relation to the attempt to channel the movement in a parliamentary direction, obviously met with an echo in the CGT demonstration. But all this was done in a totally improvised way, and amounted to a political exercise.

An illustration: on the night of the Stock Exchange fire, Henri Weber, Alain Krivine and myself met at midnight at Alain's house. Henri said that we must stop giving in to activism, so that we could think about what to propose the next day. Alain, hearing on the radio that the demonstration was continuing and that the Stock Exchange was burning, decided that we had to go, which Henri refused to do. I was the youngest, I wanted to act, and I thought we would always have time to think. I followed Alain in a walkabout until dawn amidst the smoking remains of derisory barricades. And we ended up getting picked up in an unmarked van, by cops or intelligence services, at the corner of boulevard Raspail!

There was no pause, it was a permanent whirlwind, and we had none of what was necessary: the ink, the roneos, the petrol came to us thanks to the Belgian comrades... We really had to understand that the essential stakes no longer depended on us, and that our responsibility was to say sensible things in a situation over which we no longer had any control. We devoted the bulk of our energy to daily political education at the Sorbonne, with an important echo: the big amphitheatre was full every day! Intuitively we understood that the important thing was to explain what were the

limits of the situation, instead of accompanying the forward rush towards a dead end, or sharing the responsibilities of the big organizations, otherwise we would have been carried away by the ebb tide, as most groups were.

When we read the documents of the PCI from that time, especially those of Pierre Frank [12], we are struck by the gap between a somewhat exalted vision - it is the socialist revolution in progress that is evoked! - and precise tactical proposals, including in terms of government slogans.

DB: Extrapolation towards what was possible combined with awareness of the real balance of power! A mixture of propagandist exaggeration, optimism of the will, and realism: for a revolutionary organization this double register is inevitable. To which must be added the parameters specific to Pierre Frank, who was both a carrier of the classic Trotskyist culture and an admirer of Blanqui. Especially since, after such a long time spent crossing the desert, there was every reason to be enthusiastic about such events. [13]

It must be remembered that this classical Trotskyist culture was not widely known: Trotsky's writings in French were rare, and they were probably more read after May '68 than before. The political memory, that of the Popular Front and of this whole period, was based on a few elders (Daniel Guérin, Danos and Gibelin on the Popular Front), some of whom, more sensitive to the transitional logic than Pierre was, were scattered throughout the country, in the PSU, among the Pabloites, in the network of Socialism or Barbarism, etc. [14] The thread of continuity was tenuous, weakened by the various splits.

For us, the transmission was done more through Ernest Mandel. But around the First Congress of the League, we became wary of the transitional dimension, including in relation to Mandel. We feared, at least some of us, that, as the movement ebbed away and with the deterioration of the relationship of forces, transitional demands would open the way to a flatly reformist co-management rather than to workers' control.

The recent online publication of the old article on Lenin and Rosa published in *Partisans* in January 1969 and co-signed with Sami Naïr [15], right in the middle of the congress of the League, led me to accompany it with an introduction, in order to reposition it in the context and to indicate that it was a leftist text. [16]

It was marked by the influence of Poulantzas: faced with the state apparatus, the only serious opposition is the party. This logic, pushed to the extreme, could lead to vanguardism, including military. It was at that time a question of a theoretical hardening, which resulted in a reticence towards Mandel's schemas on the different levels of consciousness and the demands that were supposed to correspond to them. These evolutions are obviously to be considered in their context. Many formulations refer to the polemics of the time, and a certain voluntarism of survival in the 1970s: the split of *Révolution* was marked by a certain brutality on both sides, and by vigorous debate. [17]

Membership of the Fourth International was not initially obvious to me, but I was convinced by the idea that we had to give ourselves a history, an identity, to anchor ourselves... From this point of view, Sami Naïr showed himself to be more convincing than the militants of the FI, who were hardly proselytes! The logic was simple. Capital is global. It must be opposed by an internationalism that is not only theoretical but practical. There is a Fourth International which is modest, small, which has the flaws of its small size. But it had nothing to be ashamed of. In joining it, we were going to give it a more youthful look.

Instinctively, what guided us, it seems to me, was the idea that we had to hold on. Looking at what we were from the point of view of our social composition, the challenge was not small, and the result improbable. But we are still here.

This fear of a possible dispersion of the organization was very taken very seriously?

DB: Yes! It seems to me that we can say soberly that the entryism of the 1950s, which is not especially my favourite thing, could represent, despite everything, a principle of reality, even though it had as a counterpart a discontinuity on the levels of organization and leadership. Without this familiarity with the workers' movement from the inside, without this knowledge of its reality and history, an evaporation of this student group could have occurred. To see ourselves as a component of the workers' movement, to internalize the idea that we were a dissident component of the communist movement as much as a Trotskyist organization; that created a link with the workers' movement. A principle of reality that imposed certain limits, the decisive nature of which we can measure when we observe certain Maoist delusions and the choices they led to.

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[1] Ligue Communiste, later French section of the Fourth International

[2] The interview was republished by *Contretemps* 7 April 2018 "[L'événement et la durée... Retour sur Mai 68](#)". The translation and footnotes are by *International Viewpoint*.

[3] Daniel Bensaïd, Henri Weber, Mai 1968: une répétition générale, Cahiers libres 133, Editions François Maspéro, Paris, October 1968. A leader of the JCR in 1968, Henri Weber later became a Socialist Party senator.

[4] The CGT is the Confédération générale du travail, a trade union confederation. It was a member of the WFTU and was led by the the French Communist Party, with which it still strongly identified in 1968. It has since left the WFTU and taken its distance from the CP.

[5] The reference is to experiences of self-organisation through workplace committees in the Centre of Nuclear Studies and Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) at Saclay in the Paris region, at a factory in Brest (Brittany) and other local action committees.

[6] Bruno Trentin was an Italian Communist and trade-unionist. André Gorz was born in Austria but naturalized French after having become stateless during the Second World War. He wrote extensively on questions concerning wage labour. Serge Mallet, sociologist, was a member of the CP and then of the PSU. Pierre Naville was successively a surrealist, CP member, Trotskyist and then member of the PSU, professionally he was a labour sociologist. Ernest Mandel was one the central leaders of the post-war Fourth International as well as an internationally renowned economist.

[7] Socialisme ou barbarie originated in a split from the PCI after the Second World War. It defended the definition of the USSR and all Soviet bloc societies as state capitalist. Its conceptions evolved, provoking more splits. Its best-known leader, Cornelius Castoriadis, announced its dissolution in 1967.

[8] Rudi Dutschke, originally from East Germany, was a leader of the West German radical student movement SDS. He survived an assassination attempt in 1968 but died of its after effects in 1979. Tariq Ali had come from Pakistan to study in Britain in 1965. After his time as president of the Oxford Union he became a leading figure in the anti-war movement, and during the 1960s and 70s of the British section of the Fourth International.

[9] Thirty-five thousand people attended a mass meeting called by the UNEF and leaders of the non-communist left the PSU, and some trade-unions, the FEN, the CFDT and FO, in Charléty stadium on 27 May.

[10] Guy Hocquenghem subsequently became a leader of the radical gay rights movement in France.

[11] Georges Séguy was General Secretary of the CGT 1967-1982. He died in 2016.

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[12] Cf. "Mai 1968, première phase de la révolution socialiste française", special issue of *Quatrième Internationale*, July 1968. Available on ESSF [here](#).

[13] "Crossing the desert" is a term used to describe the difficult period for the tiny Trotskyist movement in the post-war years where its members in countries under CP domination were persecuted and elsewhere they were overshadowed by the CPs still enjoying the prestige of the Resistance in Europe, Soviet resistance to Hitler or anti-colonial resistance in parts of the third world.

[14] Daniel Guérin was a libertarian communist and gay rights activist. Jacques Danos and Marcel Gibelin, activists on the left wing of the Socialist Party during the period, wrote an account of the popular Front *Juin 36* ("June 36").

[15] Daniel Bensaïd and Sami (Alain) Naïr, "[Sur la question d'organisation: Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg](#)", republished from *Partisans* No. 45, December 1968-January 1969, with an Introduction by Daniel Bensaïd.

[16] Sami Naïr subsequently became a political philosophy professor and a mainstream politician within the "Chevenementist" wing of the Socialist party, working on questions of migration.

[17] Révolution was a group formed in 1971 after splitting from the Communist League. Many of its members subsequently rejoined.