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France

# "We are the heirs of May 68"

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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**This chapter from the book *Mai Si! Rebelles et repentis* by Daniel Bensaïd and Alain Krivine [1] was first published in English in *International Marxist Review* Volume 3 number 2, Autumn 1988. That version unfortunately was published in an uncorrected form. This has been corrected by the original translator.**

The media refer to "the May 68 events" as they once did to the "Algerian events". An evasive plural: they want to be objective and avoid venturing beyond the surface of random facts. What made May (and June, strictly speaking) "an event" anyway? The student explosion? The barricades of the Rue Gay-Lussac in Paris? De Gaulle's flight to Baden-Baden? The firing of the Paris Stock Exchange? The Grenelle Accords between employers and workers? The June elections? All of them together of course. But what unites all these events, giving May 68 a different importance from the spectacular demonstrations of Japanese students, the massacre of Mexican students in Tlateloco, or the workers' struggles of the Italian "hot autumn"? What, in a word, makes the "May events" so special that they are still worth arguing about 20 years later? More fundamentally: what in the jumble of history can be allowed to have the dignity of a historic event? August Blanqui, the great 19th century revolutionary, would have replied: the great partings of the ways, the eruption of the possible into the routine of the real.

Twenty years (a flash on the scale of history) have not sufficed to clarify all the ups and downs and real dimensions of the upsurge. Symbols still drown out the politics; minor episodes still overshadow what was essential. Meaning is lost in a plethora of subjective accounts. Disparate memories obscure historic significance. Was this also the case twenty years after the 1830 and 1848 revolutions, after the Paris Commune of 1871, after the Dreyfus Affair or the Popular Front? Or have particular social layers and the media blown up their own role? By profession or vocation, the figures of 68, from the principals to the spear-carriers, have become their own chroniclers, their own stage directors. And so we have this orgy of self-portraits and premature autobiographies, reflecting and repeating each other ad infinitum, with all the attention and self-indulgent satisfaction of a generation more often spoilt than lost.

## A lost generation

The sixty-eighters are now in their depressed forties. Most of them no longer consider history and its issues with passion. They have become, prematurely, historians. They profit, prosper, mull over their memories and strut about. But they are no longer waiting for anything, they are drying up, their tongues cleaving to their palates. They are surrounded by the stench of tombs and mummies.

Biologically, we have more or less the same age. But in politics time is not the mechanical, homogeneous and empty time of a calendar. We have the age of our convictions and passions, our fights and expectations.

Why should we accept this complicity, this chance coincidence that defines a particular age bracket? It is a long time since we felt something in common with the converted, the penitents, the turncoats of all types, with Serge July, Roland Castro, Alan Geismar, Henri Weber

Refusing the term "generation" with its ideological promiscuities and sticky complicity, Guy Hocquenghem writes: "I don't like the idea of belonging to this coagulated bloc of disappointments and old-boy networks which only congeals at the moment of the great betrayal of maturity. A generation only takes shape when it retreats into its shell like a snail, or into its cell like penitent." [2]

There is nothing to add to this remark. Except that certain trajectories are particularly nauseous or disappointing. Some are bourgeois by birth and tradition. The others, the bourgeois by choice and cooption, by mimicry and worldliness, the "mixed, bastard, half-cultivated spirits who share the qualities and faults of the bourgeois classes," [3] are often worse. They need even more self-justification and absolution. The conservative ideologues are recruited among them.

What makes May 68 really important, a real event, are not the barricades around the Sorbonne or the Odeon. Nor is it the microcosm of the Parisian intelligentsia, returning to their salons from the street. The difference between the May movement and other protest movements lies in the conjunction between the student movement and the workers' movement, in the most general strike of our history. This massive, major fact is simply erased in the miserable portraits painted by those who put out fires and colour the brightest images with the dullness of their ideas.

One ends up wondering whether 1968 actually took place. After all, the fashion is now to play down the French revolution, to make it into a non-event for its bicentenary. [4] So why deprive oneself of the opportunity to make 1968 into a students' rag, a cultural happening or a video clip of the glories of modernity?

During the student struggles of December 1986, Socialist Party steering committee member, Isabelle Thomas, twenty-five, came up with a media catchword: "68 is out of date". We answer, no, 68 is not a cult piece. We are not nostalgic veterans for the simple reason that the fight is not behind us, any more than our loves. We still love the revolution... [5]

What is out of date, without ever having been in, is to be a social-democrat at age twenty. What is dreary is to be twenty and have never known another passion, another ambition, another perspective than the reformism without reforms of Jospin, the "three Rs" republic of Chevenment, the mathematical lyricism of Rocard, the slimy neutrality of Fabius. [6] Dreary, lukewarm and moderate, like those who have never revolted, not even at twenty.

The premature veterans of 1968 share a common feature with the preventively disenchanting of 1986: the boredom of daily life, of career plans without surprises and the studied senatorial slowness of a president who had made a political art of "letting time take its time". They should all recite in chorus what the French writer Charles Péguy wrote barely a year before 1914: "We are growing old on the plain of this immense plateau. For over forty years, no war, no civil war, no riot even, no revolution, no coup d'etat. No relief. Hardly a swelling, barely the slightest fold, which we, to fill the void, tried to turn into a mountain. But we knew very well that it was no mountain." [7]

Far be it from us to make 1968 into a mountain. The forty years since we were born have been something of a plain. In France at least, there was little room for epics and heroism. Nevertheless, we have had two wars. True, they were colonial ones and could easily be forgotten and censored because most casualties (a million deaths in the second?) were on the other side... We had a coup d'etat in 1958, but in the prosaic dimensions of the Fourth Republic which had nothing Roman about it... And we had 68... Not a mountain certainly. In any case, not the mountain we hoped for or dreamt of. But more than the "slight fold" that all the "ex" remember (ex-rebels, ex-Maoists, ex-Trotskyists, ex-revolutionaries, ex-lefties), now they have wised up and settled down.

Those who most blindly exaggerated the height of the mountains are very often those who now play down the fold to the point of making it disappear. [8] The future will tell us more about the relative importance of our hill. The significance of such events is never definitely fixed in history. The present is always recalling the past, to re-examine it, redefine its scope, to throw into obscurity what had been in the limelight and retrieve what had escaped our notice, to recast the winners and losers of yesterday. The hill of 1968 is still an algebraic point, a work in progress. It will be, to a large extent, what we make of it today, tomorrow and the day after.

In the meantime, let us get back to politics because the twentieth anniversary celebration, not surprisingly, has become a phenomenal attempt to depoliticize the events in grandiloquent discourses on modernity and the spirit of the time. Let us see who profits from this.

## Under the paving stones, the strike

Before getting into the rigours of figures, we should recall the spirit of the general strike, its liberating effect, its transfigurations and metamorphoses. A general strike is quite different from a sum of local strikes or from a national day of action prolonged for a month. Suddenly the iron ring of exploitation, the subservience to the clocking-in machine, is broken. The idols of everyday life are smashed: commodity fetishism, money fetishism, state fetishism. Relations between people rise above the relations between things that had dominated them. There is no need to look further for the source of the rediscovery of words, communication and sociability, experienced in marvel and enchantment. The night of 10 May in the rue Gay-Lussac has often been described: people watched their cars burn without much emotion, some even handing over their car keys to help things along. Smokers accepted with equanimity being deprived of tobacco, and car maniacs did without petrol. We have heard of neurotics being suddenly restored and calmed.

We touched all that, felt it from day to day, the festive spirit that Raymond Aron decried as carnival. But why not? Right on carnival! Anyway, what is carnival, in a society caught up in the infernal spiral and fancy dress ball of commodity exchange?

We were not the best placed to get drunk on those heady perfumes. We were not born in 1968. We were active long before: against the war in Algeria, the war in Vietnam, against Gaullism and university reforms. As young communists, enthused by an upheaval that went beyond our most optimistic forecasts, we perceived its limits in a confused fashion.

Our concern was to have some impact, within the limits of our modest forces, on the course of events, to bring forward from hour to hour proposals on what to do. We did not have a moment's respite. Between two public meetings or two demonstrations, we tried, inadequately, to take our distance, to think, to see beyond the next day. We wrote our daily leaflets on the corner of a table. We had less time than others for the pleasures of sight-seeing and wandering through the streets of May 68 as if in a great and extraordinary spectacle.

In 1965 we were expelled from the Communist Party precisely because we wanted to remain communists and not Stalinists, because we wanted to be revolutionaries and not dull reformists. Today we sometimes meet former comrades reconverted to the realism of cohabitation. We feel their perplexed or vaguely condescending regard "What, still active? Still revolutionaries? You still believe in it...?".

There are some serious questions that call for soul-searching and an honest answer. We are not seeking to avoid them in this book, but we should at least refresh the memory of these enquirers as to the state of things on the threshold of 1968. In the France of 1965, of the "thirty glorious years" of the post-war boom, the France of decolonization and almost full employment, it was no less preposterous than today to declare oneself a revolutionary. Then too, the common sense that makes good pupils and good civil servants, good fathers and husbands, was in the other camp: the camp of Gaullist technocrats, social-democratic notables and the Communist Party's "advanced democrats". In their down-to-earth reasoning, we were then, and always will be, irresponsible. In 1967, revolution was a question for history classes, reading about Lenin, the Russian revolution, the Popular Front, the Liberation. To demonstrate the continuing relevance of social revolution in developed capitalist countries we referred to the Belgian strikes of 1960-61, to the French miners' strike of 1963. Our arguments made little headway against the prevailing

current of theories on neo capitalism, the consumer society, the bourgeoisification of the working class and the settling of class conflicts by negotiation.

No comrades, it is not life that has changed, it is you. How can you forget all that today? May 68 seems to provoke an optical illusion. The hurried commentators confuse before and after. After May, revolutionary speeches were in fashion. A simple study of the press would demonstrate this. But, before May, we were regarded as visionary cranks.

There is nothing more wrong than counterposing the politicization of the May 68 generation to the supposed depoliticization of 1980s youth. Young people in general are infinitely more active today than in the early 1960s. Look beyond France's border to Europe as a whole, look at all the mobilizations by young people against war, against missiles, against Nato, against racism, against university reforms (in France, the Spanish state, in Italy, in Austria...): you can only recognise that they are far larger than the mobilizations against the atom bomb, against university reform or even against the Vietnam War, which only brought out a few thousand people between 1964 and 1967. Yet, for a few weeks, we found ourselves engaged in an extraordinary experiment. Our actual practice went far beyond our theories, reality overrode fiction and overtook our most audacious hopes. We had argued so hard against the evidence of working-class passivity, given so much to analysing the great historical movements and refuting the dull findings of sociologists, that we were hardly surprised by this confirmation. In summary: the general strike came more quickly and more strongly than we ever imagined. But it flowed from the innermost logic of capitalism.

A few figures now, since ours is the age of numbers rather than words, when figures are given instead of programmes and opinions, when only what is quantifiable is considered practical. First, how many strikers? We have retained the beautifully round and memorable figure of 10 million. To be reliable, statistics need stability and bureaucratic routine. In turbulent periods they lose their grip. The National Institute of Statistics (INSEE) figures suggest the number of strikers in May and June 1968 stood at 7 million. Gerard Adam's, in *Revue française de sciences politiques*, at 6 million. Alain Delale and Gilles Ragache incline for a total above 8 million. Rolande Trespé and the CGT talk of 9 million.

Let us take a broad span of 6 to 9 million. [\[9\]](#) This is enough for some comparisons and conclusions. The general estimate for 1936 (the time of the Popular Front) is 3 million strikers; for the high point of the struggle in 1947, 2.5 million; for the public workers strike in the hot summer of 1953, 850,000. May 68 therefore broke all records. For the first time in a developed capitalist country, the absolute majority of the wage earning population, and without doubt the immense majority of the working class (15 million at the time), was on strike. This fact is confirmed by studies of working days "lost" through strikes. Here all the statistical records are pulverized. Ministry of Labour estimates for all 1968 record 150 million strike days! Compare this with 2 million in 1969, 4.3 million in 1971, and one million for 1985 in France; with 37 million in Italy the record-breaking year of 1969 and 14 million in Britain in 1974, when the miners' strike brought down Edward Heath's Conservative government.

Next, how long did it last? The paroxysm of the strike was concentrated in the week of 22 to 30 May (the day of De Gaulle's speech rejecting any idea of resignation and dissolution of the National Assembly). More than 4 million strikers held out for 3 weeks, more than 2 million for a month. Ten days after De Gaulle's speech there were still more strikers than at the highest points of the Popular Front.

Finally, who were the strikers? We remember most readily the novel aspects of the strike: white-collar workers occupying their offices, footballers their headquarters, actors their theatres. As in 1936, the extension of the wage-earning population was reflected in the contours of the strike. At the time, we were struck by the entry into the struggle of new sectors like the saleswomen of big department stores. This time, the rebellion ran through all the institutions, the press, the radio and television, the legal system. The strike, in a sense national, reflected a society where, for the first time, more than 80% of the population were wage earners.

But a closer look shows that the backbone of the strike was still in the traditional bastions of the industrial proletariat, in engineering, chemicals, transport. While experiences like the Nuclear Research Centre at Saclay were spectacular, it was engineering which sparked off the movement at Sud-Aviation-Bouguenais on 14 May, then at Renault-Cléon and the Bordeaux shipyards the next day, and at Berliet, Saviem-Blainville, SNECMA at Gennevilliers, Renault-Billancourt on the 16 or 17... After the Grenelle Accords it was again engineering that remained in struggle until the end, with clashes at Renault-Flins and Peugeot-Sochaux. Renault-Billancourt only went back on 17 June, Citroen the 24 and Usinor-Dunkerque the 25 June.

Overall, the movement varied depending on the size of the plants: those of more than 1000 workers lost five times more production than those of less than 10. The mass of young workers under 25 had their first experience of struggle, as did women whose entry into the labour market was accelerating. Semi-skilled workers were often at the forefront of the action. Overall it was not the "new proletariat of the service sector" or high technology sectors who were the initiators of the movement, but the concentrations of the industrial proletariat. This was the hard core.

It was incontestably the biggest strike in the history of the workers' movement. To claim today that such a tidal wave could be foreseen would be ridiculous. Let us simply say that some were more surprised than others. That certain political positions made it easier than others to "hear the grass grow" outside the sanctuary of parliament or the bureaucrats' head quarters; and that in spring 1968 we were not getting bored alongside M. Viansson-Ponté. [10]

Ever since De Gaulle had had to go to a second round in the presidential elections of 1965 his authority was no longer untouchable. His parliamentary majority had scraped through in the legislative elections of 1967, thanks to electoral fraud in the overseas *départements*. This weakening of the regime offered a favourable context for the upturn in struggles already perceptible in 1967. There was growing social unrest. Wages, frozen in the stabilization plan of 1963, were lagging behind. There was a widening gap in wage scales. The top layers were enjoying twice as much of the "fruits of growth". The span of wages, one of the broadest in Europe, made it possible for some to earn 100 times more than others. The average workweek had increased from 1950 to 1962, reaching 46 hours and more than 52 hours in certain sectors. The "infernal rhythms" were more than just Maoist rhetoric.

On 10 January 1966 the first confederal agreement between the CFDT and the CGT was signed. The 17 May that year was one of the strongest days of action for a long time. Masses of students and school students joined the contingents of workers. The idea propagated by small revolutionary organizations of a convergence between the youth and the workers movement was already beginning to make itself felt. In the workplace ballots of 1966 the workers' unions won results that have never been equalled: 77.9% in all categories taken together and 83.8% among the workers. (...)

Expelled from the Communist Party barely two years beforehand, we were lying in wait for these signs. We searched for them in the dense mass of daily news. At the time our "forces" were no more than 300 members, the overwhelming majority of them students. We were fewer than the Maoists who were carried along on the wave of the Cultural Revolution; and we had fewer workers than the other organizations identifying with Trotskyism. [11] But you have just to leaf through the meagre collection of *Avant-Garde Jeunesse*, our little newspaper of the time, more episodic than monthly, to see how the elements took shape: the Gaullist decrees on social security, the student movement, the support for strikes make up a single picture... Although the general strike went further than all hopes it was not, for us, the clap of thunder in a clear sky that took the government and the headquarters of the left parties by surprise.

We knew what relationship of forces meant, what class struggle meant, and the role of the working class in it. The barricades on 10 May were to a large extent the work of a spontaneous, contagious, communicative inspiration which suddenly made the paving stones spring from the ground, created human chains which transported them, built elaborate ramparts worthy of a baroque palace, brought down trees, and took the form of a protective encirclement,

without any previous plan, from Rue Gay-Lussac to Rue Mouffetard, and from Rue Soufflot to Avenue Claude Bernard. [12] We deliberately participated in this inspiration. The Maoists draped themselves in their theoretical dignity to denounce this "petty bourgeois gardening" (sic) and returned to their cosy nest in the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the Rue d'Elm. [13] The members of the Communist Party shouted about provocation before going home on the metro. The "Lambertists" visited the barricade-builders to denounce an "adventure" that could lead to a massacre, faced with a strong state that was (according to their theses at the time) on the road to fascization. [14]

Given the results, one can smile at this reticence. However, formal orthodoxy was on the side of our contradictors. How could one imagine that the student movement alone, without the direct cooperation of the working class, without the unity of the trade unions, could enter into a test of strength with the regime! On the other extreme, the spontaneists saw in the episode the revenge of improvisation and outpouring of life against all theory, against all political thought.

The affair is more practical. On the night of 10 May, the elements that came into play were the wearing-out of the regime, the democratic legitimacy of the student movement in public opinion and the receptivity of the working class, itself in full radicalization. These were the broad lines of a relationship of forces that could not be reduced to the height of the barricades, the number of students mobilized, the aggressive attitude of the police force.

We did not hold a council to deliberate on this. When events force the pace there is no longer time to weigh up leisurely the pros and cons. It is a time for rapid decisions. Only previous knowledge of the situation makes them possible. At the beginning of 1968, we understood the broad outlines of the situation better than the big organizations. This would be secondary if it did not raise an important question. We cannot avoid asking ourselves if, with more experience, more maturity, a better social implantation, we would not have made the wrong choice, like our Maoist comrades or those of the Communist Party, and left the scene, calling for a return the following day, after having in due form contacted the leaderships of the unions and left parties...! It is so true that the whole development of a political force engenders its organizational conservatism and ideological sluggishness. On the other hand, how can we forget that the experience of 1968, symbolized by these barricades, nourished an infantile "ultra-leftist" of direct action? It is so true that the truly fertile recognition of the "strategic moment", the initiative which turns the course of events, germinates in ground patiently worked by analysis. Against the double pitfall of paralysing routine and irresponsible improvisation, there is no absolute guarantee. In return, an active collective (call it an organization) sharing the same education, familiarized with the same perception of the situation, brought together by a common vision of events and tasks, has a better chance of knowing how to respond to the sharp accelerations of history without disintegrating. (...)

Most of us being products of the Communist Party, we were too conscious of the realities of the workers' movement to have any illusions about our own marginality. A solid implantation, a network of seasoned and influential militants in the workplaces, solid trade-union posts would have been necessary in order to effectively raise the question of a unifying and democratic centralization of the strike. We could make the proposal. But, by ourselves, we did not have the forces to make it happen in practice. On the other hand, the action committees made it possible to immediately broaden the audience for revolutionary ideas through practical initiatives that invited repetition. In a situation like that of 1968, history changes its rhythm. We have often repeated, that days like that are worth years of ordinary experience, and minutes are worth hours. This acceleration cannot however work miracles. The relationship of forces changes quickly.

But still, a bit of yeast is needed in the dough. A revolutionary vanguard existed in the form of the student movement. It played a decisive role in the conduct of the movement, in its initiatives, its democracy until 13 May. From that point the stakes in the game changed. The Maoists, demanding on their banners that the "workers take back the torch from the fragile hands of the students", said it in their own fashion. We have never had any taste for these populist formulas, which smell of undigested religion and falsely humble bigotry. We knew from experience the strength of the CGT, of the CP that had been our party. We knew the faults and the qualities of their members. We did not discover

the proletariat with the marvelling curiosity of the lecture theatres, where it was enough to say "I'm a worker" to unleash thunderous applause. Later on, it never entered our heads to claim, as the Maoists did, that "the CGT is hugging the walls at Renault". We did know however that it was a first round. Time would be needed to change the deep-down reality of the workers' movement.

Twenty years later, the railway workers' strike of winter 1986 gave an idea of the distance travelled. This time there was a new workers' vanguard, not at the gates but in the heart of the workplaces. We see it in most significant struggles of the last few months: among teachers, at Thomson, at the EGT, or in the post office. The railway workers' coordination expressed a far more developed level of consciousness and of mistrust than that of 1968. However, it did not go as far as demanding leadership of the struggle and direct control of the negotiations. It behaved rather as a unitive and democratic body, controlling the conduct of the union representatives. It was thus a first hint of dual power in the conduct of the struggle. To arrive at the point where such instruments would enjoy more legitimacy and authority than the union bodies, there would have to be still newer experiences and accelerations.

All this was germinating in 1968. But we are still far from getting there. The literature about May sometimes bolsters a confusion between the real content of the general strike and the phenomena which were in gestation but only flourished a few years later. The appearance of a powerful women's movement has often been one of the surest indices of the maturation of a revolutionary situation. This was the case in February 1917 in Russia, in February 1936 in Catalonia. Women were massively present in 1968, in the strikes and in the demonstrations. This was the first expression of their increased presence in the universities as well as in production. However, we find few traces of explicitly feminist demands, whether in the list of demands or in the feverish debates in the occupied faculties. Surprisingly, although all sorts of structures emerged, an autonomous women's movement did not emerge immediately. Its appearance was a delayed effect, in 1970-71. This says a lot about the real scope and contradictions of the May radicalization. Despite the flights of anti-hierarchic and anti-authoritarian rhetoric, the most fundamental expression of our societies, which encompasses the inequalities between the sexes in the framework of exploitation, was not directly or massively challenged.

In the same way, although there was a challenge to the function of all "Euros" or almost all "Euros" institutions (education, health service, communications, sports, even the legal system) in reproducing social relations, the central institutions of the repressive apparatus seemed to remain essentially sheltered from the storm. We were to learn after the event, through the testimonies of Gerard Monatte and Bernard Delepace particularly, that this was not without some crises and splits as far as the police force was concerned. [\[15\]](#)

But the army, although more than half national service conscripts, was hardly touched. We have often insisted on the appeal published by the soldiers of the 15th Regiment of Mechanized Infantry at Mutzig (...) "Long live solidarity between workers, soldiers, students and school students! Long live workers' democracy! Long live joy, love and creative work! 22 May 1968". This initiative is so frequently cited because it was exceptional and perhaps unique. In this regiment there was one solitary member of the JCR. This was enough to relight the embers of a long-lost tradition. (...)

If one single member of the JCR was capable of an initiative which remained an example, we can ask ourselves what the hundreds of young communist conscripts did to ward off the frightful putschist plots that were so lavishly denounced by their party. It remains the case that the relative serenity of the army is another index of the limits of 1968. Should we conclude that it was simply a great cultural *fÃ¢te* and that the political crisis was simply a result of the doubts and moods of the General?

## Power vacuum and poker games

Each aspect of reality is reflected in others and vice-versa. Thus the relative weaknesses of the general strike are found again in the contradictory forms of the crisis of the regime. Power vacuum or not? We are still discussing this. (...)

The regime was not vacant, deserted, ready to be picked like ripe fruit. It was however temporarily incoherent and paralysed. This was shown in the week from 24 May, the day when the firing of the Bourse answered De Gaulle's speech announcing a referendum, to the 30 May when he announced the dissolution of the Assembly. During that week, the president, who had deliberately staked his resignation on an increasingly uncertain outcome of the referendum, was in suspense. Different biographies give enough elements for us to consider the mysterious trip to Baden-Baden on 29 May as a staging post on the road to exile, complete with family and luggage. It would seem that even the "calm and courageous" Pompidou, whose legendary sang-froid is based on these episodes, had also ordered preparations "in case...". This version, backed up by many testimonies, is politically and psychologically possible. It was General Massu who convinced De Gaulle and put him on the aeroplane home. (...)

A revolutionary situation demands at least two players. On one side the regime, so superbly confident until yesterday, suddenly reveals its deep cracks. But, on the other, a strike movement, however powerful it is, is not by itself a candidate for power. The ruling class understood perfectly that the last thing the opposition wanted was to arrive in government on the rising wave of a general strike. The trade-union leaderships, those of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, were doing their best to avoid it.

The week of 24 to 30 May was decisive. (...) The big demonstrations (13, 24, 28, 29, 30 May) are a characteristic of 1968. Unlike June 1936, when the workforce remained confined in the factories, here the dynamic of occupations was limited to pressure for economic demands, while political protests were expressed in marches of millions. However, the link between the two was obscured, as if there were two parallel battles being fought.

The last days of May were the days of political crisis. In rejecting the first compromise at Grenelle, the strikers expressed their feeling of strength. Not only did this make it possible for them to count on more substantial social gains, but it enabled them to demand a political guarantee for these gains through a change in the regime. The left parties, who had almost reached a parliamentary majority in 1967, were not prepared for this possibility. They did not want it. For the Communist Party it was the great period of the broad anti-monopoly alliance and of advanced democracy. All the plans were made for the presidential elections of 1972. These absolutely could not be upset. (...)

We were a small organization of a few hundred members whose average age was barely that of the legal age of majority at the time: 21 years old. It is unnecessary to spell out that, running madly from mass meetings to demonstrations, we hardly took time to meditate on the government question. In the universities, in the strike, in the streets, within the modest reach of our forces, we were on our own ground. The solution to the governmental problem was at another level, on which we hardly had a grip. We felt this, and this feeling probably fed the disgust of many of the May activists towards anything that seemed like politicians' institutional, professional politics. The libertarian tone of the movement also expressed this powerlessness, this dispossession.

Participating in the big COT demonstration of 29 May, we nevertheless made an effort to give an answer to the question of the day. Mitterrand had proposed a provisional government "without excluding and without dosing". [\[16\]](#) The Communist Party and the CGT replied with a slogan for a "people's government" that was as abstract as it was enigmatic, in order to give a reply and win some time. We launched a vigorous "People's government, yes! Mitterrand, Mendès France, no!" which was often taken up by the demonstrators. This formula played on a certain ambiguity. It counterposed a people's government, which the most combative sectors could interpret as a product of the strike and its bodies, to a government of political personalities. Without openly rejecting a coalition government of left parties, it took as its target personalities without clear links with the workers' movement and likely to use their organizational independence for class-collaborationist deals. The difficulty of the hour was in the strict parallelism

between the social movement and the political game.

The real questions were not posed: a provisional government, so be it. But to do what, committed to what, responsible to whom? Responsible to some non-existent strike committee, to the action committees, to the soviets to come? Responsible to the unions? This idea emerged in certain discussions. It was rejected by the trade unionists in the name of the independence of the unions, and by the militant activists, who were rather unenthusiastic at the idea of a government of the reformist leaderships, responsible to the union bureaucrats. The formula of "people's government", despite its deliberate vagueness, had the advantage of indicating a government of the left parties without going into more precise considerations.

A few years later, it could have taken the form of a government of the two major parties, Socialist and Communist. But in 1968, the old SF10 (French organization of the Second International) had not recovered from its compromises of the Algerian war period and the arrival of Gaullism. It was still weakened by a social movement escaping from its usual channels. This marginalization was to be confirmed a year later, at the presidential elections in 1969 with the 5% received by the Gaston Defferre/Pierre Mendès France "ticket". Mitterrand, a refugee from radicalism, did not belong to a workers' party, while Mendès, a bourgeois politician par excellence, was member of a small party, the PSU, which identified completely with the May movement.

On the occasion of the student demonstrations in front of the National Assembly in December 1986, the anti-parliamentarism of May 68 was sometimes compared with the democratic respect for the institutions twenty years later. The May demonstrators, rather than turning towards the Assembly to make demands on its members, to ask them to account for themselves, as did the students in 1986, often passed by without a glance for the Palais Bourbon [meeting place of the National Assembly]. It was an empty shell, a rump parliament, suffocated by the executive.

There was another reason. The extra-parliamentarism of the period had a double cutting edge. It expressed a deep distrust for the fixed and blocked mechanisms for delegating power. It also expressed the hiatus between the social strength of movements and their lack of a political expression, their strong feeling of powerlessness on the directly political plain.

With derisory forces we could not, past a certain limit, do more than note the problems, explain them, give general answers in our editorials. But nevertheless, for a short period of time, the question of government was sharply posed. A really implanted revolutionary party would have had in its hand the elements of an answer: develop the democratic centralization of the general strike in order to watch over a possible provisional government, whatever it was; participate in such a government on the basis of a clear platform and precise commitments, or give it critical and conditional support without participating, depending on the case. A real revolutionary party would have acted in this way. (...)

## Everything is possible?

"Everything is possible"; the words of Marcel Pivert in 1936 were on all lips in the last days of May, between the mass meeting at Charléty stadium (the day the Grenelle Accords were rejected by the base) and De Gaulle's speech on his return from Baden-Baden. The judgements vary on the scope not the fact. The political crisis of 1968 is indisputable, even if different interests agree in trying to play it down. Did it take on the proportions of a real revolutionary crisis? That is another question. Francois Mitterrand makes a definite reply, "I still deny that in May the situation was revolutionary." [\[17\]](#)

How can a revolutionary situation be defined? The question is not one of exact measures. There is a constant risk of applying a static, photographic judgement to an evolving situation. In a celebrated text, Lenin enumerated the three characteristic criteria in his eyes: when those at the top can no longer govern as before; when those at the bottom can no longer stand it; when those in the middle incline towards those at the bottom. Trotsky added the existence of a subjective factor (of a revolutionary force capable of cutting through the crisis) and insists on the reciprocity of different factors. [18] Never having thought that workers' spontaneity could, in a few weeks, overcome the too obvious deficiencies in the subjective factor (no significant revolutionary party, no serious implantation of vanguard militants in the workplaces), we have always been reticent to describe the situation as revolutionary. The terminological subtleties are not very important today. We talk more easily of a pre revolutionary situation to indicate an unresolved difficulty. This has brought us terrible accusations of insipidity and moderation from other currents. Some talk of an "objectively revolutionary situation". And subjectively? It's a curious logic that puts the subject on one side and the object on another. If the objective situation is so clearly revolutionary, how can it be explained that the "subjective factor" does not emerge from it profoundly modified? That May 68 did not lead, if not to a victorious revolution, at least to the birth of a mass revolutionary party? Asked about the limits of their growth, the same revolutionary organizations, ourselves included, while talking of the "failure to recruit" attributable to their own mistakes, do not hesitate to invoke certain limits to the "objective situation". Deathly dialectic!

The worm is in the bud. A critical situation can be characterized by a series of elements, in the manner of Lenin, without one being able to divide the whole into separate pieces. Thus, "the subjective factor" was lacking in 1968, but not in the sense of piece missing which would fit in among the others of the jigsaw. Its absence affected the whole: the forms of the political crisis at the summit, the forms of mobilization at the base, the trajectory of the intermediate layers. In addition, it should be clearly stated exactly what is the missing piece.

We answered at the time: a revolutionary party is lacking. This was strikingly true. It was however only a half-answer because it isolates one factor from other considerations. Thus it implies the conclusion that it would be enough to as quickly as possible find an alternative piece to fill the whole. This is the very basis, explicitly or implicitly, of the frantic voluntarism and leftism of post-68. Mad activism and exemplary action were supposed to overcome as soon as possible the lack of a revolutionary party worthy of the name. The weakness of the organized revolutionary forces at the beginning of the movement could be attributed to the misdeeds of Stalinism and of social-democracy. But, unless one falls into frenzied idealism, it also expresses, although in a deformed fashion, a more general state of the working class, of its combative tendencies, of its natural vanguard in the workplaces and the unions. The political vanguard of the working class supposes a fertile soil which is made by the daily struggles, the accumulated experiences.

In 1968, the contradictions between the dynamic of the struggle, its potentiality, and the policy of the reformist leaderships, of the Communist Party or the SF10, are clearly perceptible. They feed from the frictions, the rebellions, the ruptures. But these phenomena remain marginal. There are in history examples of big reformist betrayals, which generally terminate in violent shake-ups. The most spectacular case is that of the great German social-democracy during and after the first World War. There was no comparable effect in 1968, at least not in the heat of the moment. The small revolutionary organizations recruited their first worker militants. But, for one hand which stretched out, they were how many closed, mistrustful or openly hostile reactions. Unlike what happened one year later in Italy, worker-student dialogue remained exceptional. The fact that there were few elected strike committees and that the traditional parties, or at least the CP, won more new members than they lost to the left, indicates that, despite the fact that they suffocated what was possible, they were in line with the state of mind of broad layers. The strikers in their mass wanted to settle a social problem, shake the yoke of an authoritarian regime. From there to revolution there was still a long way to go. (...)

When we talk of May 68 as a "dress rehearsal" we think not of a model, but rather as a try-out of history which moves forward by trial and error, an accumulation of experiences, successes and mistakes. [19] We wanted to mark the time it would take, escape from the instantaneous, the immediate, the childishness of "everything at once". The analogy was of course misleading, like every analogy of that sort: 1905-1917, twelve years, perhaps more, perhaps less ...

Nevertheless, 1968 was not for us the culmination, but the first crucial episode in a prolonged battle. Time and many other tests would be necessary to bring together and steel the necessary forces. We were convinced of this. Those who became communists during the Algerian war or at the beginning of the 1960s had made a considered choice. It was not a final outcome. (...)

## We didn't choose the wrong story

In this book we wanted to give an account of a political trajectory, a path we travelled. We did not intend to tell the story of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, and still less of ourselves. An autobiography is already a tombstone, a form of seal put on the past. This past is not a dead letter. It is still active in the present. It will come back again in the future. We are sometimes asked about our situation as a minority. Why this continuing marginalization? Isn't it proof of a defeat? We do not make a virtue out of necessity. It would be wrong to consider extreme dissidence as a second nature, to wall oneself up in critical conscience, to oppose, to testify, losing the ambition to win. There is a real danger. If it is the case that existence determines consciousness, such a long existence as a minority cannot be without effect. To rediscover the majority vocation to which we aspire, we will pass through crises and transformations. However, a lot of false meanings attach themselves to the idea of majority that is too quickly identified in these days with election results and opinion polls. Truth is not for plebiscites. Justice is not decided in the Top 50. Gallup polls do not say who is right. In the tribunals of public opinion, Socrates would be condemned again, Jesus crucified, Galileo and Copernicus failed. None of them made a hit first time around. The Catholic Church canonized Joan of Arc five centuries after having burnt her at the stake, which is not compensation but a second posthumous execution. And Moses will never reach the Promised Land not, it is said, because his life was too short, but because it was a human life.

These illustrious antecedents should invite a little more circumspection before accepting the "general opinion" propagated by the media. We have never felt ourselves to be isolated from the big social movements. We have always felt ourselves as fish in water within them: from the general strike of 1968 to that of the railway workers, taking the big youth struggles in 1973 or 1986. Before the winter of 1986, it was said that the far left was on the road to oblivion. As soon as something starts moving, wherever it is, the comrades re-emerge, better rooted, more experienced. Well dug, old moles!

In a country with a long parliamentary tradition, a social force can only fully express itself if it also wins an electoral credibility. We are conscious of this. In this matter there is a question of thresholds. Once one has accepted representation in institutions, the famous argument of the "useful vote" turns up. It requires a strong conviction to vote for a candidate that has no chance of being elected. With the Italian or even Portuguese proportional system, we would have had significant representation at the beginning of the 1970s in the municipal, regional and even parliamentary elections. The vote of 5 or 10% for the revolutionary coalition in the municipal elections of 1977 is enough evidence for this statement. We would then have had a different training. We would have been confronted with other problems, other alliances. The legislators, whether of right or left, kept well away from risking any such misadventure: the "proportional system" with a bar at 5% (to be represented) still exercises strong pressure for the useful vote. The system eliminates minorities who are then condemned to either achieving a shock breakthrough or remaining in the vicious circle of marginality. This problem remains entire.

In practice, the real question goes much further than this electoral arithmetic. After 1968, a number of revolutionary organizations blossomed in Europe, with the most varied references, cultures and orientations. They all oscillated more or less in the same range and levelled out at a few thousand members. The political lines, the initiatives taken at the right moment, the organizational choices had their importance. We undoubtedly, through our inexperience and our mistakes, wasted precious forces.

We could today be a few hundred or a few thousand more. When one measures what can be done and undertaken by seasoned activists, their weight in the recomposition taking place would not be a small thing. It would even be enormous.

But we could not have been five or ten times bigger. If that had been possible, one group, one current at least, would have achieved it. The general dynamic of the class struggle, the state of the working class, the legitimacy of the institutions, the authority of the traditional parties, even after 1968, fixed an approximate limit for us. We could have got nearer to it. We could not, in the given situation, have crossed it. During these years of transition, we have accumulated strength and experiences, brought to life and enriched a political culture that draws its source from the left opposition to Stalinism. We do not in the least have the impression of a useless sacrifice.

A minority organization can only give a partial account of complex social processes, which concern the lives of millions of men and women. It would be a severe case of megalomania or absolute idealism that believed it had the answer to everything. We have thrown out markers which make it possible to position ourselves. Our roots have enabled us to deal with new situations, to correct ourselves, when others, born in an instant, have burnt up like straw fires. We have traced our path, as directly as possible. We have never put to one side equal rights for immigrants. We have never, in the name of "reasons of state", accepted the French nuclear strike force. We have never diplomatically toned down our support for the peoples of Kanaky or the Antilles. We have never held back a mobilization so as not to embarrass the "comrade ministers". We have tried, from the beginning, to learn from the women's movement. We have never ceased to raise in practice, within the limit of our possibilities, the need to make internationalism a living thing, and to build a revolutionary international.

We have remained communists, outside the Communist Party, despite exclusion, despite ostracism. We have shown in the long term that this was possible and disproved those judges who, in expelling us, destined us for the cesspit of the dustbin of history. With others, but thanks to this continuity, we hope to work for the renaissance of a revolutionary force. Among our comrades of yesterday, certain lacked patience. They could not stand to be for the first time rather against the stream. It is the fate of a generation for whom it seemed that everything should smile from the beginning, with spotlights and media glory as a bonus.

To act to change society is a choice, a reasoned conviction, not a sacrifice or a vocation. It is a way of acting humanly in an inhuman world, in order to change it. Some comrades are discouraged, tired, worn out. They have thrown in the sponge. Despairing of a real change, they have chosen to continue to fight in a different way, for change that seems to them possible. Belonging to a militant collective, which is essential in our eyes, is not an absolute frontier between the chosen and the "renegades". We also have our "dissociated" and our "penitents". If the hour calls, we will find ourselves with them again. We have barely taken leave of each other.

But what does shock us is cynicism: the cynicism of those who put out the light on leaving, thanking us for "having enjoyed the party". Being politically active is not always a trial. Rare pleasure and satisfaction are to be found. Revolutionary commitment is, however, not an amusement but a necessity. To pretend the contrary is to show contempt for all those men and women who are active, not as a cultural pastime, but to set their dignity against exploitation and daily humiliation. It is also to forget that we belong to an international movement. There we share responsibility for the much more painful experiences of our Latin American and our Asian comrades, or those from Eastern Europe.

The cynicism of those, sometimes the same ones, who, taking their distance, regret "the time they wasted". Was their time so precious? What could they have done better? Had a few more good dinners, frequented a few more antechambers, a few more worldly amusements? If, rather belatedly, they clamber up a few more steps on the ladder of what is called success, do they have the presumption to think they owe it only to their individual effort, these men of iron who have become men of straw? They are what this "wasted time" made them. It is this wasted time that they

are selling and profiting from, just as much as their servile intelligence.

In his lovely account of the 1960s, Tariq Ali gives an account of his meeting with the great poet Erich Fried, exiled to Britain since the entry of Nazi troops into his native Austria.<sup>15</sup> [20] At 67, after three operations for cancer, this poet of dialectics, heir to Brecht and Heine, marvels at the inconsistency of the 1968 generation, particularly in France, "How can they give up so quickly?" Why have these heretics been so easily converted? One would think their heresy was never anything but snobbery. (...)

We have had the good luck to bump into or meet magnificent heretics and rebels of several generations and different continents, and to learn from them as best we could. It seems nevertheless easier to live as a dissident today than in the 1930s. Another era, another material. The ancients were steeled by misfortune. The moderns have often not resisted the sweet seduction of notoriety. Nobody chooses their epoch. One can only be sad that those who claimed so strongly the right to speak have been so easily content with the right to chatter; that they did not resist the first change in public opinion. Gone with the wind of change.

To keep on course in the enormous junk heap of this end of the century two things are needed. First of all, a collective practice: this is the principle of reality which makes it possible to think, to change, without being carried away like a dead dog on the current of changing fashions. And then to retain, as the Red Guard said, a "theory" which makes it possible to learn from practice, rather than disintegrating in an incoherent crumble of experiences and moments.

Is Marxism in crisis? In relation to which golden age? The great era of the Stalinist gospel? The great academic recognition of university Marxism in the 1960s? In a certain fashion it has always been in crisis since its first crisis at the end of the last century. There are today more Marxist studies and research in all domains than at these periods. They are less spectacular. They are dispersed. But they are digging their tunnels. They contribute to the continual redefinition of theory, to the extension of Marxism to unexplored fields, to mix with previously ignored cultural experiences.

Should we resign ourselves to the world as it is? Deck it, for want of anything better, with virtues it does not have? Console ourselves with the idea that the revolution will be like a great love in books of Marguerite Duras, necessary but impossible? Rather than fitting the desirable into the supposed limits of the possible, we want to act so that the necessary becomes in fact the possible. Twenty years ago there were many of us who chanted "Continue the struggle!" We have kept our word. And what if it is still only the beginning?

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[1] Published by La Breèche-PEC, Montreuil 1988, This text was included in extenso in 1968. *Fins et suites* by the same authors 2008 Editions Lignes, Paris. For further reflections by Bensaÿ d on the same topic see *An Impatient Life: A Memoir*, Verso London 2013. Available from the [IIRE](#).

[2] Guy Hocquenghem, *Lettre ouvert a ceux qui sont passes de col Mao au Rotary*, Albin Michel, 1986.

[3] J. Michelet, *Le Peuple*, Champs Flammarion, Paris 1974.

[4] F. Furet, *Penser la revolution*, collection Folio 1985 et *Marx et La Revolution française*, Flammarion, 1986.

[5] Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who has become a radical reformist, said his good-byes in due form: *Nous l'avons tant aimée, la révolution...* (We loved it so much, the revolution...) Barrault Éditions, 1986.

## "We are the heirs of May 68"

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[6] Lionel Jospin was national secretary of the Socialist Party until 1988. Jean-Pierre Chevènement was briefly minister of education. Michael Rocard was appointed prime minister by François Mitterrand after his victory in the 1988 presidential elections. Laurent Fabius was prime minister from 1984 to 1986. Trans. note.

[7] Charles Péguy, *Clio*, Gallimard 1917.

[8] André Glucksman is a notable example of this with *Stratégie et Révolution en France*, Bougeois, 1968.

[9] For the study of strikes we have particularly used: Main Delare et Gilles Ragache, *La France de 1968*, éditions Seuil; the issue of *le Peuple*, 1 June 1978, given over to the CGT's seminar on 1968, and above all the excellent article by Jacques Kergoat in the special issue of *Critique Communiste* on the tenth anniversary (1978).

[10] In February 1968, P. Viansson-Pont published in *Le Monde* an article whose title became famous: "La France s'ennuie" (France is bored).

[11] Voix Ouvrière, an organization dissolved in June 1968, was at the origin of the current today represented by Lutte Ouvrière. The Organization Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), led by Pierre Lambert, was at the origin of the present Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI). This should not be confused with the PCI of 1968, led by Pierre Frank, with which the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (ICR) had privileged relations. The Ligue Communiste came out of the fusion of the PCI and JCR.

[12] The streets around the Sorbonne university in the Latin Quarter of Paris. Trans. note.

[13] Prestigious teacher-training establishment where the well-known Marxist intellectual Louis Althusser was a professor. Trans. note.

[14] See footnote on political organizations.

[15] These two, successively heads of the autonomous Federation of Police Trade Unions, have each published valuable contributions on this subject.

[16] Without excluding meant that for the first time since 1947 the Communists would enter the government. Without dosing meant that the head of the provisional government would have complete freedom of decision.

[17] François Mitterrand *Ma part de vérité*, Livre de poche, 1972.

[18] The notion of the revolutionary situation is dealt with by Lenin in *The Failure of the Second International* in particular, and by Trotsky in *The History of the Russian Revolution*.

[19] Daniel Bensaïd and Henri Weber *Mai 68, une répétition générale*, Maspero, October 1968.

[20] Tariq Ali, a revolutionary Marxist of Pakistani origin, former leader of the British section of the Fourth International. He is no longer a member but has denied none of his convictions. Member of the editorial committee of *New Left Review*, he has just published *Street Fighting Years, An autobiography of the Sixties*, Collins, London 1987.