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Book review

The spirit of those frenzied days

- Reviews section -

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A few years ago I was in an arts center in Southern Paris. While waiting for the play I had gone to see, I bought a volume of Siné's political cartoons from a second-hand bookstall. I asked the stall-holder, a man a little younger than myself, if he had taken part in 1968. He looked almost surprised as he replied: "I was at the Sorbonne. I was twenty. I'd have been an imbecile not to take part."

There must still be many thousands like him. May–June 1968 remains, to the best of my knowledge, the biggest general strike in human history, though ignorant commentators still refer to the events as "student riots." If socialists of my generation are asked how we know that the working class has the historical potential to overthrow capitalism, we may reply with a quote from Marx or a reference to 1917—but at the back of our minds there is always France 1968, when we saw that potential in flesh and blood in the occupied factories.

So we are greatly indebted to Haymarket Books for republishing Daniel Singer's *Prelude to Revolution*. Singer worked as a journalist for the *Economist*, and observed the 1968 events at first hand. His book was

first published in 1970, and so it contains research and reflection that were absent from commentaries written within weeks of the events. Yet it is still infused with the spirit of those frenzied days. Singer died in 2000, and Haymarket has decided to republish his book without any new introduction or additional notes. It stands as a historical document, recording the thoughts of an honest but highly partisan observer.

At the center of the book, chapter 3—"The Explosion"—gives a day-by-day, sometimes hour-by-hour, account of the unfolding of events. Singer writes in a remarkably vivid fashion, recreating just what it was like to be on the streets of Paris in those days:

Thump, thump . . . "Arise ye damned of the earth" . . . bang, bang . . . "De Gaulle murderer" . . . whamm, whamm . . . "C'est la lutte finale" . . . the noise was deafening, breathing difficult. A blinding cloud of gas and smoke rose above the first barricade, whose defenders wore handkerchiefs and had their faces covered with baking soda. A change of wind and the first wave of police was driven to retreat, suffocated by its own gas. . . . To help the besieged, buckets of water were poured from neighboring windows in the hope of clearing the atmosphere. This did not last because the police started throwing grenades into open windows.

He has a keen eye for concrete detail and anecdote. When student demonstrators, protesting racist attacks on the militant leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit, chanted in solidarity: "We are all German Jews," Singer notes that the famous West Indian poet Aimé Césaire, who was with the demonstrators, commented: "I am quite willing to shout it, only nobody will believe me."

But this narrative is set between chapters that attempt to analyse the roots of the events and to draw out their significance. There is a wealth of information here about France in the 1960s—the changing nature of French capitalism and hence of the working class, the achievements and limits of Charles de Gaulle in modernising French capitalism, the place of education, and especially of educational expansion, in French society. Singer examines the particular structure of French trade unionism—of the ten million strikers in 1968 fewer than three million were union members. And he is scathing in his account of the role of the Communist Party (PCF). As he points out, the PCF and the union it effectively controlled, the CGT, seemed to be positively encouraging passivity:

An allegedly revolutionary party that allows the initiative to flow from below inevitably runs the risk of being driven beyond its original intentions. The alternative, chosen by the CGT and the Communist party, was to run a general strike in a more military fashion, from above. Trusted trade unionists were picked for strike committees and tried to get their policy endorsed. Mobilization of the workers was limited to the necessary minimum, to the numbers needed for such indispensable duties as picketing. Workers were allowed to drift home, while those who stayed in the factory were encouraged to play games rather than to indulge in dangerous debates. At moments one began to wonder whether the sit-down strike was designed to prepare the workers for the offensive or to isolate them from the outside world with its leftist germs.

As Singer, with his intimate knowledge of French society and culture, shows, the precise way in which events developed in France can only be understood with reference to the particular features and traditions of French society. But this point is always balanced by the parallel assertion that these events were not uniquely or exceptionally French, but, making allowance for local specificities, they could happen anywhere. Thus he insists that

If anything crucial differentiates the immediate French prospects from those of, say, Germany or Britain, it is a subjective factor, the potentially more militant posture of its working class. And this is why France or Italy may be showing Europe the way.

Looking back from 2013, it is easy to feel that Singer was suffering from an excess of optimism when he claimed that it was possible that "Europe has re-entered the age of conflict and possibly the era of revolution." Yet we should not forget that Singer's predictions were in part borne out. The French May was followed by the Italian "hot autumn" of 1969, and then by the Portuguese revolution of 1974-75. In Spain the Franco regime was dismantled in 1976-77, and in Britain industrial action by miners overturned a Conservative government. The potential was there, and it should not be forgotten.

Indeed Singer's narrative reminds us powerfully just how serious our defeat was. Singer's enthusiasm for the rebels of 1968 was motivated by his deep distress at what he called "the growing sickness of our society":

Look at the men rushing away from their jobs as if they were leaving some place of perdition, at the huge traffic jams every weekend as the frustrated city-dwellers line up for their breath of fresh air, at the manual workers inventing manual hobbies so as to produce a whole object. Can one be genuinely surprised by the mounting and often wanton destruction, by the violent reaction of man to the wholesale commercialization of all human relations? Despite its relative material wealth, our society has proved incapable of solving the problems of man's relations with his neighbors, with his social and natural environment, with himself (p. 363).

The picture is all too familiar. Humanity rejected socialism and the first shoots of barbarism are beginning to grow.

The final sections of the book are devoted to the question of strategy. Singer notes the failures of the PCF, rotted by Stalinism and increasingly wedded to the institutions of the existing order; he notes too that the far left is disunited and fragmented. In particular, he points to the problem of spontaneity and organization. Discussing the action committees that grew up in the course of the events, he says, that "they had the difficult job of organizing spontaneity."

The PCF was afraid of spontaneity, of anything that might challenge its bureaucratic grip on the movement. Singer, on the contrary, is excited by spontaneity, welcomes the magnificent display of human creativity that was revealed in the course of the May events. But at the same time he recognizes that spontaneity alone cannot resolve the situation, that without an organization to represent the working class and to take its actions forward, the whole effort will be dispersed and wasted. Singer has no simple solution, no formula that will guarantee success, but his thoughts on

strategy are perceptive and contain much that may be of relevance even today.

Singer's book, then, is a historical document of great value, and will amply repay a careful reading. However, it also has a number of limitations and leaves some crucial questions open. To point this out is simply to show respect to a serious socialist thinker. To serve as the basis for discussion and to help others make their way towards answers he had not himself found is the best service he can render us.

Firstly, Singer is not very well informed about the organizations of the far left. He tends to take a rather eclectic approach towards them, not giving much importance to the points of difference between them. Yet if an alternative to the PCF were to emerge, it would have had to develop from the "grouplets" of the far left—there was nowhere else for it to come from.

Singer notes only "two groups of Trotskyist inspiration." He seems to have been unaware of the existence of Voix ouvrière (Workers' Voice), although it was one of the groups banned by the government in June 1968. This is doubtless because it kept clear of the student milieu, concentrating on workplace organization. Yet in the decades after 1968 its successor, Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Fight), had perhaps the highest profile of any far Left group as a result of the presidential election campaigns of its candidate Arlette Laguiller.

Secondly, Singer's account is focussed almost exclusively on events in Paris. Yet some of the most significant events took place in the provinces. The first factory occupation, which set the whole process in motion, was at Sud-Aviation in Nantes. (It is a symptom of the distorted way in which the events are remembered that anyone with a nodding acquaintance with the events has heard of student leader Cohn-Bendit, but scarcely anyone knows the name of Yvon Rocton, who helped to initiate the Sud-Aviation occupation.) And it was in Nantes that many of the most interesting developments in terms of the exercise of workers' power over the whole area took place.

Thirdly, Singer has only a few cursory remarks to make about the role of immigrant workers in the strike. Perhaps the best way to complement his omissions is by a reading of Daniel Gordon's recent book *Immigrants and Intellectuals* (Merlin Press, 2012).

And fourthly, there is a similar neglect of women. Singer's index moves directly from Wolinsky to Wordsworth, showing an admirable cultural breadth but a seeming ignorance of half the human race. It is a measure of just how much things have changed in the last forty years that Singer was able to get away with an image of the working class as apparently entirely male. The individual worker is repeatedly referred to as the "workman."

But the most serious question posed by the book is why the enormous hope born in May, which so inspired Singer, did not come to fruition. For Singer the symbol of the desire of France's rulers to bury 1968 and all it stood for is the asphalt, which in the summer of 1968 was laid over the cobblestones of the Latin Quarter to ensure that never again would they be torn up to build barricades. (I remember sitting in a café in July 1968 with one of the editors of *ISR*, watching the steamrollers at work. Those of us who have survived as Marxists for the last forty-five years have derived much inspiration from the students and workers of France in 1968.)

How did they get away with it? The inability to answer this question is the fatal flaw in this book; Singer, along with almost all the 1968 generation, failed to foresee and grasp the tremendous power of reformism. In his narrative of May–June 1968 Singer makes some passing references to the toings-and-froings of François Mitterrand, but there is nothing to suggest what Mitterrand was about to achieve. Singer is scathing in his accounts of how social-democratic parties in power have failed to implement socialist policies in even the most minimal form. But he failed to predict that social democracy, stripped of all socialist content and increasingly detached from its working-class base, would be able to preserve the system it had once aimed to overthrow.

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Mitterrand rebuilt the Socialist Party and turned it into an election-winner. Many of the militants of 1968 were dragged along on his coattails. By making an electoral agreement with the PCF, he was able to turn what had been the mass party of the French working-class into a subsidiary, declining force (though the PCF did play a significant role in the very impressive presidential election campaign by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in 2012).

In his preface Singer notes, on the basis of the events of May-June:

Yet even when exercising restraint, French Communists showed their power, while their potential social-democratic allies revealed their weakness. The idea of bringing the Communists into the government as junior partners was thus killed by social realities, and it is difficult to see how it can be revived.

In fact it was successfully revived by Mitterrand at the beginning of his fourteen years in office in 1981. For twenty years the PCF had pursued the goal of reviving the Popular Front of 1936 in the form of an electoral alliance with the Socialist Party. But their entry into Mitterrand's rapidly rightward-moving government was the turning point that marked the start of their long decline.

In the absence of any organized force on the far left capable of taking the 1968 movement forward, reformism filled the gap, and the election of Mitterrand meant the final defeat of the ideas of 1968. There were similar defeats elsewhere in Europe, and we have been paying the price ever since.

But historical memory is of enormous importance. The students and workers of 1968 were inspired by memories of the Paris Commune, of 1917, and of the factory occupations of 1936. Future revolts whose form we cannot predict will likewise look for inspiration in the events of 1968, and Singer's book will play its part in preserving that inspiration.

Singer's political heroine was Rosa Luxemburg, and it is worth recalling the words of Luxemburg that he asked to be quoted with the announcement of his death:

Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow, the revolution will raise its head again, proclaiming to your horror amidst a blaze of trumpets, "I was, I am, I always shall be."

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