May Made Me

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An Oral History of the 1968 Uprising in France

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PLUTO PRESS

First published 2018 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3698 5 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3694 7 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0192 0 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0215 6 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0214 9 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Printed in the United Kingdom

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: May '68 Revisited

On March 15, 1968, the journalist Pierre Viansson-Ponté published an article in *Le Monde*. Echoing the words of the nineteenth-century liberal Alphonse Lamartine, his article was headlined "Quand la France s'ennuie" (When France is bored). He entered into the heart of the matter immediately, saying that "what currently characterizes our public life is boredom." The French "don't participate in any way in the great convulsions shaking the world." The Vietnam War "moves them, but doesn't really touch them."

In a world of guerilla warfare in Latin America, mass murder in Indonesia, war and starvation in Biafra, the French view all this "as their business, not ours." Viansson-Ponté mocks French students who, while their fellows around the world demonstrate and fight, "are concerned with knowing if the girls of [the universities] in Nanterre and Antony can freely access boys' rooms." Young workers, for their part, "look for work and don't find it." Caring nothing for politicians, "television is there to divert their attention towards the real problems: [skier Jean-Claude] Killy's bank account, traffic jams, and horse race results."

Boredom is everywhere: even General de Gaulle is bored. Viansson-Ponté's final words were a warning: "A country can also perish from boredom."

Five days later, on March 20, an anti-Vietnam War demonstration turned violent at American Express near the Opéra and several students from Nanterre were arrested. On March 22, exactly a week after Viansson-Ponté's article, 142 students at Nanterre occupied the administrative tower in support of the arrested students. The March 22 Movement, its most famous face that of the German

Jew Daniel Cohn-Bendit, is born. Everything was now in place for the explosion that would occur on May 3 at the Sorbonne, setting off the May–June events. Two months, almost to the day, from the article's publication, France experienced its first general strike since the Popular Front of 1936, and the most massive popular movement in Western Europe in the twentieth century.

In retrospect, Viansson-Ponté's article seems foolish. But was it?

France was, indeed, in a state of political quiet. Still in the middle of the post-war *trente glorieuses*, the thirty glorious years of economic expansion, France was modernizing at a furious pace under the un-modern figure of de Gaulle. Though there had been strikes of varying degrees of importance in the previous couple of years, there was no sign of the kind of worker discontent that would lead anyone to predict what would occur in May and June. No one would have thought that student protests about dorm visitation rights would lead to an upsetting of French society. But it would be the students Viansson-Ponté mocked who would set it all off.

After the occupation of the recently opened University of Nanterre by the students who would become the first members of the March 22 Movement and the temporary closing down of classes there, on May 3 a gathering took place in the courtyard of the Sorbonne in support of the seven students who had been called before the disciplinary committee for their actions on March 20. The police were on the scene, and inexplicably, spontaneously, confrontations between students and police broke out. The May events had begun.

The authorities closed the Sorbonne after the police-student battles, and the following Monday, when the disciplinary hearings were scheduled to occur, demonstrations criss-crossed Paris. Word of the May 3 events had spread across France, and students all around the country began to follow Paris's example; demonstrations occurred daily. Early on, the leading voices of the Parisian students were Daniel Cohn-Bendit for the March 22 Movement, Alain Geismar for the Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieur (SNESUP, the union of professors),

and Jacques Sauvageot of the student union, the Union Nationale d'Etudiants de France (UNEF). If the Trotskyists of the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR) supported the movement from the start, indeed participated in Nanterre in the March 22 Movement, the Maoists of the Union de la Jeunesse Communiste Marxiste-Léniniste (UJCML), based at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure, stood aloof.

The working-class was beginning to join the fight, though on its own terms for the most part, firmly controlled by (and supporting the line of) the French Communist Party (PCF) and its union, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), both deeply suspicious of the students. If the students' demands were in a sense more poetic, for "all power to the imagination," for a change of the university, for a more open educational system, one that refused to serve capitalism and those in power, the workers more prosaically demanded a raise in wages, but also a less inhumane workplace. On May 10 a huge march in Paris ended in the Latin Quarter, and rather than disperse, barricades went up and street fights with the police and the Compagnies Républicaines de la Sécurité (CRS) occurred on what came to be known as the Night of the Barricades.

Over the intervening weekend all the major trade union federations called for a general strike beginning May 13, and huge demonstrations occurred on that date, while the following day workers began to occupy factories, the first occupation taking place at Sud-Aviation, outside Nantes.

As the strikes and occupations spread, so did the student-originated movement, as the Odéon theater was occupied. General Assemblies occurred in universities and high schools everywhere, and the Cannes film festival was shut down. Dany Cohn-Bendit, who was not a French citizen, was expelled from France for saying that "the tricolor flag is made to be ripped and turned into a red flag," though he famously was able to sneak back into the country, his red hair dyed black.

On May 24 the CGT called for demonstrations throughout France, and the date would also be perhaps the most violent one of the events, as the Stock Exchange in Paris was set on fire (though

the participant accounts below vary as to the gravity of the event), while in Lyon a policeman died during the demonstration that night (see the account of Jacques Wajnsztejn, leader of the March 22 Movement in Lyon for a full account of those events).

This would perhaps be the high-water mark of the events, though it didn't seem so at the time. The following day, negotiations between the workers and the bosses and government began that would result in the Grenelle Accords of May 27, after which the workers returned to work within the following two weeks. The accords, which granted wage increases, union recognition, and a rise in the minimum wage, would be rejected in some larger enterprises. Communist functionaries like CGT head Georges Séguy were booed over them, but the accords were finally accepted and the return to work would begin on a large scale on June 5.

Until then, though, the demonstrations and occupations continued, and the first signs of a political recuperation by the left-wing parties also appeared, with a major rally at Charléty Stadium, called by, among others, the independent left-Socialists of the Parti Socialiste Unifié (PSU) and former Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France. At the same time, the pro-government forces, which had been silenced for the first few weeks, also shook themselves from their torpor, and on May 30 in Paris and May 31 in the provinces, massive pro-de Gaulle demonstrations occurred and de Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly.

This, as most of those interviewed below admit, signaled the beginning of the end. Strikes continued, as well as violent confrontations, as students went to factories still occupied to give their support, leading on June 10 to the death of the student Gilles Tautin outside the Renault factory in Flins.

The demonstrations petered out, and after all the workers had returned to their factories, legislative elections were held on June 30, with the right tightening its grip on power, obtaining over 43 percent of the vote. Revolution in the streets had failed to overturn bourgeois power (but was it a revolution?). The electoral road, as most of the far left had predicted, had solidified the right's position.

It was time for the left to reflect on what had occurred, to define the possibilities for the future, to continue to organize and act. One of the great slogans chanted everywhere had been "*Ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat*" (It's only a beginning, continue the fight)! In order to continue the fight, the lessons from May had to be drawn.

Five decades later, we continue to question May, to try to learn from it.

* * *

In May 2018 we will be fifty years from the events of May '68 in France, as far from May as May was from the trenches of World War I. May '68 seemed to portend the beginning of a revolutionary period in Europe, but it didn't. Even so, in France and in so much of the world, it remains a marker, a moment when it was forbidden to forbid, when it seemed the imagination was about to seize power.

Even as a 16-year-old living in the deepest depths of Brooklyn, I was one of those profoundly influenced by the events in Paris. The images on TV of the results of the Night of the Barricades, May 10, 1968, were, along with the war in Vietnam, a catalyst for a life of political activism.

Reading the interviews that follow, the accounts by Isabelle Saint-Saëns and Prisca Bachelet of the occupation of Nanterre on March 22, 1968, which set off all that was to follow, of peoples' activities throughout the period, the excitement and hopes of those weeks in May and June fifty years ago are still fresh. Life was different during the events, and not just because of barricades and battles with the police. The barriers between people fell. As Alain Krivine, the leader of the Trotskyist JCR told me: "I saw people talking to each other on the street, people you would pass every day and never say hello and then everyone was talking to everyone. On the metro too everyone talked. It was fantastic. You never drove alone, you picked people up and took them, it was

absurd to be alone. People became unrecognizable. I never saw it before and never saw it again."

Suzanne Borde, who would live on a commune and eventually become a nuclear physicist, told me of how she was a girl in pleated skirts before the events, but as soon as the events kicked off she went home and made herself a miniskirt, around the hem of which she wrote in magic maker: "The problem is not with the length of my skirt, but with your gaze." People discovered the thrill of speaking in public and inspiring others to action, of sharing ideas on the streets with total strangers.

It seemed that life would never be the same, and for the people I interviewed it never was. People literally discovered their voices. Myriam Chédotal, a high school student in Saint-Nazaire at the time, told me of how she went around to the classes in her high school as events began to encourage the students to go out on strike. And as she did so, "My life shifted. I realized I had a gift for speaking, for finding the right words. It was that day I gained confidence in myself. It was brilliant."

Social movements grew out of May: feminism, prisoners' rights, gay rights … Everyone I interviewed admitted they might have come about anyway; all insisted that given the sclerotic nature of French society it would have taken much longer to happen without May.

May as it was lived, May '68 during May '68, the "great lyrical community," as Jean-Michel Rabaté describes it below, was an irreplaceable, extraordinary event, one we are unlikely to see again in the West. But beyond that there is another side to any recounting of May that must be confronted, and that is its failure to overturn the state and establish a new and different order. To make a revolution. To change class relations. This is far less cheery a subject, and yet it became clear from my conversations that it, too, has haunted the minds of those who took part. Almost all found positive results flowing from the events, in their bringing about greater openness, greater individual freedom, in their smashing of the Gaullist myth and the complacency of the *trente glorieuses*, the three decades of prosperity that followed World War II.

The first question May raises, indeed the central one, is whether revolution in the West is possible. But even before addressing that larger question, there is the question of how to name the period. Was May '68 a revolution? If we were to say that a revolution is an uprising that results in the overturning of the power structure and a change in the ownership of the means of production, then May obviously wasn't one, not only because it failed to accomplish either of these things, but because there is no indication that the seizure of power was ever even seriously considered. In fact, it was in many ways scrupulously avoided. And further, when the period drew to a close the Gaullist state was more firmly entrenched than it was at the beginning, sweeping the elections in late June with a greater majority than it had held before. And as for a change in ownership of the means of production, those who could have posed that question—the workers—never considered asking it. Quantitative demands were the order of the day for the workers, while the students wanted to completely change society.

Also standing in the way of calling it a revolution is the lack of intentionality: when the events began it was a call for the liberation of students arrested for their involvement in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration at an American Express office on March 20, 1968. On May 3, 1968, when students gathered at the Sorbonne to support those students who would pass before the disciplinary council the following Monday, they spontaneously exploded against the police. It grew and grew from that, but though many I spoke to admitted that they thought revolution would be the end result at some point during those six weeks, it was not a stated goal.

But if the fact that it didn't succeed in changing power disqualifies May from being defined as a revolution, then no mass activity that fails to change society to its foundations can be called one.

What then is the proper word for an event which sees virtually every factory in France on strike and occupied; schools shut down and occupied and end-of-year exams cancelled; daily demonstrations all over the country; barricades set up in the hearts of cities; the police and the forces of order confronted violently; unions

taking over the distribution of food and gas; people organizing in their neighborhoods and schools; and strangers engaging each other in conversation, breaking the barriers that had formerly stood between them, all while the authorities are helpless to put a stop to it? "Events," which is the word most often used, seems to be a pale reflection of what was occurring.

Is avoiding the word "revolution," which is what the veterans of the event do today, simply another way of conjuring away the fact that it ended so poorly? Was May a revolution that failed, or was it really something else entirely, something sui generis?

Several people I interviewed described May as their 1905, the preparation for 1917 (a 1917, it must be pointed out, that never occurred). Indeed, Henri Weber and Daniel Bensaïd, then leaders of the JCR, wrote a book titled *Mai 68: Une Répétiton générale* (A Dress Rehearsal) positing precisely the notion that May was the precursor of the *grand soir*: the violent, rapid, and total overturning of the old order. This was the opinion as well of several of the people I interviewed:[1] they were active in May as a way of pushing things as far as the circumstances allowed, and—in the case of the most Bolshevik among them—in the hope that a united revolutionary working-class party taking in all tendencies would be a result.

Viewing May as 1905 has a serious flaw. In 1905 the Russians thought they were living 1917, i.e., they were engaged in a fight that was not the preparation for something greater that would occur later: they intended to seize power in that moment. In fact, the Soviets, the organs of dual power, date from that revolution (and it is worthy of note that despite its failure the events are called precisely that: The Revolution of 1905). The hope of the revolutionaries of the day was that this would be the end of Tsarism, and Trotsky wrote unambiguously at the time, "The Revolution has come."[2] In the heat of the struggle they had no thought of laying

1 See interviews with Prisca Bachelet and José and Hélène Chatorussat below.

2 Leon Trotsky, "The Events in Petersburg." www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/ourrevo/ch03.htm.

the groundwork for a second attempt. They intended to win in 1905. That there were second and third chapters was the result of the revolutionaries' defeat in 1905 and later of an event no one would base their strategy on: a world war.

And if many of my interviewees said they didn't think this was the *grand soir*, many admitted that *at the time* they did, so the notion of a dress rehearsal has no validity: no one takes to the streets and confronts the CRS having in mind a hypothetical victory in some indefinite future.

But that leads to a further question, one that is essential: if you have a situation such as that in France in May–June '68 and power is not taken, and it is denied the name "revolution," what would or could a revolutionary situation look like? An entire country on strike, normal life brought to a halt, hundreds of thousands of people marching daily throughout the Hexagon … It was a situation totally unlike that of the Paris Commune (in *many* ways), where it was Paris against the rest of France, for in May all of France was a field of struggle. If power was not shaken and taken, what possibility is there for this to ever occur? No Western country has had a situation remotely like May, except perhaps Portugal in 1974, though that was significantly different due to the involvement of the armed forces in overthrowing the government and advancing working-class power (and even so the revolution failed to overthrow capitalism). There could be no more propitious circumstances for the overthrow of capital, yet it didn't occur. That being the case, can it ever occur? Is the revolutionary project dead?

Many of my interviewees spoke of the lack of interest in attacking the seats of power as if it was an irrelevancy. Alain Krivine, his role already established, spoke to me of how there were only three guards in front of the parliament building, yet it never occurred to anyone to steer the march into it and seize it, even for symbolic reasons. As I was told by one of its organizers, Jean-Jacques Lebel, the Stock Exchange, as the obvious stand-in for capitalism, was attacked and set on fire on May 24 as a symbolic gesture. Prefectures were attacked in a couple of cities, yet the main seat of power never was.

Some of the explanation for this can be marked down to the spirit of the March 22 Movement, founded at the University of Nanterre and led by the anarchists Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Jean-Pierre Duteuil.[3] All of their actions during the six weeks of struggle would be aimed at disorganizing centralized power and relocating it to the base. "Self-organization" was their goal, as I was told, with committees in universities, in high schools, in neighborhoods; committees uniting workers and students, intellectuals and workers: their new society would be from the bottom up, so a seizing of power as represented by its buildings with the new authority emanating from a single locus would have been anathema to them. Cohn-Bendit wrote that had Paris awakened on May 25, the day after the attack on the Stock Exchange, "with several ministries occupied, Gaullism would have immediately collapsed." But he was clear that the seizing of buildings would not have aimed at occupying them as the holders of power, but rather it would have "provoke[d] the awareness in the entire population of the fact that the state apparatus was no longer anything, that it had no power, and that henceforth everything was to be reconstructed on new bases."[4] This explains the anarchists' inaction in this regard, but what of the rest of the left?

The role of the PCF in the failure to pose the question of power is key. The PCF looked askance at the movement from the start, and if the strikes that started about a week into the events were inspired in part by the students (one interviewee told me that for the workers the thought was "if the students can do it, why can't we?"), the fact remains that the PCF and its allied union, the CGT, did all they could to put a brake on the movement, to ensure that the utopian demands of the students didn't penetrate to the working-class.

3 Jean-Pierre Duteuil (1944–) was an anarchist student in sociology at Nanterre and, along with Cohn-Bendit, participated in the founding of the March 22 Movement.

4 Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Le Gauchisme, remède à la maladie sénile du communisme.* Seuil, Paris, 1968, p. 75.

Some of those who were students in '68, like Eliane Paul-Di Vicenzo of Nantes, spoke of warm receptions from workers when they went to the factories to meet with them, to distribute flyers. But far more spoke of being ignored by the workers, some placing the blame on the CGT, others on the simple observation that the workers were just not interested.

The workers I interviewed, in Paris and the provinces, presented a uniform picture, and it was of a working-class that was anything but militant. All of them said that their first act upon declaring a strike was to sweep the floors and clean their machines and tools, so they wouldn't be looked on as destructive, so they'd be seen as "responsible," as "serious." This attitude set the tone for the rest of the strike.

For the workers, it was not the qualitative demands of the students that mattered, but their own quantitative, bread-and-butter issues. I spoke to workers from factories in several cities, all of whom occupied their workplaces, none of whom said they had any interest in the students. In fact, Guy Texier, a CGT leader at the naval shipyards in Saint-Nazaire, a hotbed of working-class activity, spoke with pride of kicking in the ass those students who came to speak to the workers. They did so, he said to me, "On principle, and also because the work of union militants is complicated, it's not something where you come and everything is immediately decided. There are discussions … We built and then the others came and instead of attacking the bosses they attacked the union."

The *ouvriérisme*—the workerism—so strong on the French left led the students to think the workers were the motor of any revolution, which left the vehicle immobile because the engine was dead. (An alternative way of looking at things is that the students, whose demands and actions were infinitely more radical than anything the workers did—who aspired at the very least to fundamentally changing their corner of the world, i.e., the high schools and universities of France—were Marxist in words, Marcusean in deeds. They spoke and wrote ad nauseam of the need for worker-student unity, for the workers to lead the way to