

THE MEANING OF MAY 1968

BY GEORGE KATSIAFICAS

The men in power had their universities
The students took them.
The men in power had their factories
The workers took them.
The men in power had their radios
The journalists took them.
The men in power only have their power now
We shall take it.

—Poster, Beaux-Arts, May 1968

Even though the first seven lines of this poster were true, the grand finale failed to materialize. Of course, a one- or two-month long revolution is not possible. But revolution should not be viewed simply as a mechanistic problem of seizing state power or as some other technical transformation of the structures of society. Rather, revolution is a process through which large numbers of people qualitatively transform the values, norms, and institutions of society—not simply overthrowing the

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old rulers and replacing them, but creating new kinds of social realities and human beings.

A revolutionary situation is one which opens the possibilities for the transformation of the totality of social reality. A revolt, on the other hand, merely demonstrates discontent with the present state of affairs. When people revolt, they rise up against those perceived to cause a common problem, not to take control of their own destinies. A revolt culminates in the negation of the previous rulers, values, or institutions, but not in the affirmation of new modes of life. As Sartre says:

The revolutionary wants to change the world; he transcends it and moves toward the future, toward an order of values which he himself invents. The rebel is careful to preserve the abuses from which he suffers so that he can go on rebelling against them. . . . He does not want to destroy or transcend the existing order; he simply wants to rise against it.^{1*}

The May insurgents did not act with a model for a new society already developed. The spontaneous escalation of the student struggle necessitated the improvisation of strategy and tactics and brought new forms of social organization into existence. A vision for the future where nations, hierarchies of domination, boredom, toil, and human fragmentation no longer would exist came to light during May and June. A brief investigation of some of the aspects of this vision will be undertaken to demonstrate its qualitative difference from the France of 1968.

Patriotism and Internationalism

The vision which was fought for in May knew no national boundaries. "To hell with borders" expressed a popular feeling. Through leaflets and posters ("Frontiers = Repression") a systematic campaign against petty nationalism was conducted.

For a long time, French students have acted in solidarity with movements for national liberation. Immediately prior to May, in February, hundreds of activists from France went to an international conference in Berlin to help organize pan-

* Notes will be found at the end of the article.

European actions against United States involvement in Vietnam. Independence movements in underdeveloped countries were viewed as a means for indigenous control of economies and peoples long plundered by foreign powers. National liberation for oppressed nations was the other side of socialist internationalism in the industrialized countries.

Students from many parts of the world who were studying in France participated in the May events. As the student revolt intensified, foreign students' residence halls in Paris were occupied by their more radical members. Democratic reorganization of the residences and support of liberation movements at home and in France were called for. Of course there were exceptions, notably the Brazilians who closed their doors during May. A Tri-Continental Committee was established in Paris which proclaimed that "to contest capitalist structures within a national framework is also to contest the international relations set up by these structures."²

Bilingual posters urged such seemingly antagonistic groups as Arabs and Jews to "turn against your common enemy: imperialism and capitalism." One of the more significant episodes of May concerned a demonstration in support of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the German-born Jew who was not allowed back into France after he and the March 22 Movement helped spark the explosion. As the support demonstration unfolded, 50,000 people including a prominent contingent of Arabs chanted, "We are all German Jews."

Foreign workers in France, traditionally considered a threat to the jobs of French workers, were received as comrades during May. (Immigrants from nearby countries had to find work in French industry, even though they were rarely hired except for the worst jobs at the lowest pay. For the most part unable to speak French, these workers were often used by management to break strikes, or in periods of relative calm, to disrupt communication and organization among the workers at the point of production. Working at the grueling pace of an assembly line provided little time or space for discussion, especially if there was a Yugoslav on your left and a Portuguese on your right. Moreover, foreign workers in France generally lived in

company-owned houses where they were purposely assigned roommates who spoke a different language.)

The general strike temporarily ended these divisions. Bilingual worker-student action committees canvassed the housing projects where foreign workers lived, with much success. Not only was management unable to mobilize strike-breakers, but the vast majority of foreign workers joined the general strike.

In early June, the general assembly of worker-student action-committees (ACs) passed a resolution "For Abolition of the Status of Foreigner in France." Invoking the example of the Paris Commune, where a Hungarian was the minister of labor and a Polish worker the military chief, the resolution went on to call for an end to residence cards, work cards, and deportations:

These foreigners come under an oppressive special statute which subjects them to almost permanent special police checks and threats, which we, Frenchmen, avoid simply because of our nationality. This concept of "nationality" is profoundly reactionary. People work, are exploited, dream, and fight for their freedom in a specific geographic and social context; there they have every right.³

In contrast to the internationalism of the insurgents, the government sealed off its borders to the many young people from Germany and Italy who attempted to get to Paris. Deportations were used to rid France of foreign activists. In response, an Action Committee for the Abolition of Borders was formed in Paris and urged Europeans to spread the revolution throughout the continent.

Traditional French ethnocentrism was swept aside by unleashed imaginations during May. The Gaullist counteroffensive in June, of course, played heavily on the myth of foreigners who had caused the disruptions and riots. What may surprise some was the nationalism of the French Communist Party (PCF), an organization originally committed to proletarian internationalism. On June 10, Waldeck-Rochet, the Party's secretary-general, publicly said:

We Communists have always fought and shall continue to fight remorselessly the lack of national feeling that certain anar-

chist elements vaunt as a sign of their revolutionary ardor. We, for our part, are proud to have restored to the working class what Aragon so nobly called *the colors of France*.⁴

The nation-state as a rational form for social organization was questioned during May, but national sovereignty had already been undermined long before 1968 by the growth of capitalism. Modern multinational corporations, which today account for nearly one third of the world's production, are capitalist forms of global organization which transcend national boundaries. Is it so surprising that a socialist vision for the future includes a world without borders?

Authoritarianism and Self-Management

With the rise of large-scale modern industry and the fragmentation of production, managers of all varieties had become a necessary part of the productive apparatus. Are they really? The May events indicate not. Many factory occupations exposed management as a necessary part of a profit-oriented economy, but also as superfluous, if not destructive, members of a human-oriented system.

In the first days of the general strike, many managers found themselves prisoners in their offices at the mercy of the occupying workers. The first two factories to be taken over, Sud-Aviation in Nantes and Renault at Cléon, were the scenes of workers detaining managers. This caused an uproar in the government as well as in the largest trade-union in France, the PCF-dominated General Workers Confederation (CGT). Georges Séguy, secretary-general of the CGT, broadcast an appeal to the workers in Nantes to release the management team, and even sent a delegation by plane to intervene. Alarmed by the workers' drastic action, the CGT issued a public statement praising the "responsibility" of their membership and guaranteeing safety for management and the means of production.⁵

It should be noted that during the same period some managers expressed sympathy for the aims of the strikers, a few even contributing money to the movement. At Orly Airport, for example, the Air France staff donated 10,000 francs at the start of the strike, and the vast majority of management helped

the strike committee in negotiations and upkeep of the 90-odd planes grounded during the strike.

In general, however, workers' actions against management revealed a fundamental aspiration of the general strike: *auto-gestion*, or self-management. The main thrust of the vision of self-management was to abolish hierarchical authority, but this kind of authority was only one of many permeating France. As the scientific innovations in methods of production progressed, so did the need for experts with technical qualifications to develop and implement them. Knowledge became even more a means for power over others. The self-managed institutions of 1968 aimed to socialize such specialized knowledge.

Because participation in the general strike included large numbers of professionals, technicians, and off-line office and service personnel (hereafter referred to as "new workers"), the united working class was able to synthesize what had been a fragmented and partial view of production. Compartmentalization of knowledge and the concomitant need for privileged experts and managers were refuted not only in desire, but in many cases in reality.

In some factories, the workers continued production without the "help" of management. Gas and electricity workers, for example, insured regular supplies for the population as a whole. At the electricity plant in Cheviré, workers refused to readmit managers to the plant despite an offered increase in monthly wages averaging 150 francs. As one of the workers put it: "The managing staff has been away for two weeks, and everything is going fine. We can carry on production without them."⁸ At the Atomic Energy Center in Saclay, the Central Action Committee, the organ of dual power, organized production to such an extent that when gasoline was running low in the area, 30,000 liters were delivered with the compliments of the Finac strikers in Nanterre.

In Vitry at the Rhône-Poulenc factories, the workers established direct exchange with the nearby farmers and made contact with various chemical works in Western Europe, hoping to develop similar relationships.

These examples indicate a profound aspiration of French workers for control over their jobs and lives, not simply for

more things in exchange for obedience to superiors. The absence of specific demands for the first ten days of the workers' occupation at the Atlantic shipyards in St. Nazaire, even though under pressure from their union, is a spectacular demonstration of the workers' disdain for management, whether capitalist or "Communist." As the advances of capitalism in the days of Marx relegated the capitalist to an unnecessary component of the productive process, so it seems that monopoly capitalism has carried managers to the abyss of irrelevancy.

It is difficult to overestimate the anti-bureaucratic thrust of the May insurgents. The pomp of officials, Communist or not, was everywhere held up to public ridicule. Rules, an essential ingredient of rational-legal forms of authority, were flaunted according to the slogan: "It is forbidden to forbid." Economic and bureaucratic domination were simultaneously challenged: "Humankind will not be free until the last capitalist has been hanged by the entrails of the last bureaucrat."

In word and deed, May marked the merging of the social movement for economic liberation with a vast cultural revolt. Romanticism, looking to the non-fragmented life of the past, was combined with a modern awareness of the possibilities opened by space-age production. Science was not totally rejected, yet material progress was made secondary to human needs.

It was the fusion of cultural revolt with a vast social movement which gave the May events a *new* character within the long tradition of socialist insurrections. At one point, De Gaulle said that the situation was *insaisissable*, impossible to grasp or control. The universities and workplaces were not held by armed force but through the massive participation of their members. When the occupied buildings were retaken by the government, there was considerable bloodshed, but not of the scope of the aftermath of the Commune. In this sense, the fusion of the human forces of production and culture in May presented a new method and new goals for the transformation of capitalism. The imagination of May opened the possibilities for the construction of a qualitatively new future, one where not only the material needs but also the cultural needs of human beings will be of prime concern.

The concept of self-management did not originate in the workplaces during May, but in the universities. However, it quickly became a general aspiration of the May explosion, a spontaneously created form for revolutionary power. The Student Soviet at the Sorbonne developed a comprehensive plan for restructuring the goals and methods of the university system. The occupied Sorbonne was managed by a general assembly which had final decision-making power. Medical services, food, space allocations, and all the other functions within the liberated Sorbonne were taken care of by the occupiers.

In Nantes, food and gasoline distribution, traffic control, and other activities in the life of the city were conducted by a democratically elected Central Strike Committee. It seems that this committee even developed its own currency.⁷

The occupied high schools, universities, offices, and cities which succeeded in establishing direct control were the concrete realizations of a new vision for society which existed among nearly all sectors of the population of France. An eloquent articulation of this vision came on May 28 from a student-worker action committee:

Self-management as an economic and social system has as its goal fully to achieve free participation in production and consumption through individual and collective responsibility. This is therefore a system created above all for human beings, to serve them and not to oppress them.

Practically, for working-class comrades, self-management consists in having their factories . . . doing away with the hierarchies of salaries as well as the idea of employees and employers . . . setting up workers' councils elected by themselves to carry out the decisions of everyone together. These councils should be in close relationship with the councils of other companies on regional, national, and international levels. The members of these workers' councils are elected for a determinate period and tasks are to be rotated. We must in fact avoid the re-creation of a bureaucracy which would tend to set up a leadership and thus re-create a repressive power.

We must show that worker-management in business is the power to do better for everybody what the capitalists were scandalously doing for a few.⁸

As a universal aspiration of the May explosion, self-management affected not only the occupied institutions, but also, as mentioned, the unions which controlled large parts of the work-

ing class. Many of the younger workers struggled against the CGT from within, and others left that structure entirely. In the Wonder Batteries factory at Saint-Ouen, the workers elected their own strike committee and refused to let CGT officials inside the occupied plant. (The vast majority of the takeovers, however, were controlled by the CGT, which went no further than encouraging occupations, but not dual power.)

In contrast to the ultra-centralization and authoritarianism of France, self-management provided a realistic alternative based on autonomy and direct participation. In contrast to the passivity of the consumer society, self-management demanded active involvement. In contrast to the compartmentalization of knowledge, self-management required collectivity and pooling of individual skills. In short, self-management implied a social reality qualitatively different from that of monopoly capitalism.

Some Implications of May

Proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts . . . until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!

Here is the rose, here dance!

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Between the direct participation of self-management and a new international reality freed from the fetters of borders lay the power of the French state. The inability of the May insurgents to come to terms with national political power has come to be defined as their major shortcoming—the primary explanation for the collapse of the impetus to establish a new society and the quick return to the inertia of the old.

Whether or not the French state could have been overthrown in the heat of the explosion will never be known. That there was no organized force which could have led such an undertaking is also debatable. In the aftermath of 1968 every-

one became a general capable of offering strategic and tactical alternatives which could have led to revolution (or, as some insisted, to disaster).

Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that the May movement did not culminate in a seizure of power. The disorganization of the left could have produced a monstrosity weighing heavily on future revolutionary movements, once again disillusioning people about the possibilities of socialism.

But such considerations ignore an important legacy of 1968: the *possibility* of revolution in an industrialized country. In the five decades since the demise of the Second International, the prospect of socialism did not realistically appear until the May explosion. If May succeeded in nothing else, it was not a total loss.

Yet there have been other concrete results. On April 27, 1969, the French electorate by over a million votes said *non* for the first time in a Gaullist referendum, sending the General into permanent retirement. His power and prestige were shattered in May, making it only a question of time before he would fall. Moreover, in the ten years which have passed since 1968, a host of reforms have been inaugurated in France which streamline authority structures and give a semblance of participation to students and workers.

The thrust of most of these reforms has been to provide temporary relief to an incurable patient. Increased government planning of the job market and university curricula has helped reduce the number of college graduates without jobs. University problems are now considered by councils which include students. The entire university system has been reorganized into a "co-governing" one with a more multi-disciplinary focus for each school.

But while the system's rhetoric may include student power, the reality of a student power transcending the borders of the university remains a dream. Student power of the contemporary kind is little more than an attempt to legitimize the administration. Writing in the aftermath of the 1970 student strike in the United States, a sociologist here said:

Only a vigorous leadership at top levels, operating in contact

and conjunction with students and faculty, can generate a university opinion out of the flux of diverse views. Student power is a necessary but not sufficient part of that process. Committees can legitimate actions; they can seldom persuade or convert.⁹

Co-management and other reforms institutionalized in the last decade have served the authority of the top. Archaic structures inherited from the days of Napoleon are being altered according to the modern needs of monopoly capitalism, not revolutionized to meet human needs. Such modernization does not call into question the fundamental assumption of the present system—the organization of production and consumption for private profit—but merely attempts to make the system more efficient. These reforms hope to keep protests scattered and ineffective while devising technical solutions for social problems.

Modernization in France has hidden behind the progressive rhetoric of its time, much as the ascendant bourgeoisie temporarily adopted the slogan *liberté, égalité, fraternité* in the aftermath of the struggles of 1848. Accordingly, self-management has been made into co-management, a profitable venture where more initiative from the workers may replace some of the supervisors, thereby lowering the company payroll and helping to reduce the “alienation” of the workers. While co-management may help bring the “little people” closer to the decision-making centers, it does not aim, nor will it serve, to abolish the hierarchy of domination.

A popular conjugation of May indicated a high degree of consciousness about co-management and cooptation:

je participe	(I participate)
tu participes	(you participate)
il participe	(she, he, it . . .)
nous participons	(we . . .)
vous participez	(you . . .)
ils profitent	(they profit)

The internationalism of May also has a use for those who wish to streamline the present system. A top manager of IBM, Jacques Maisonrouge, some of whose children participated in the May events, was heard to mimic them when he said: “Down with borders.” After all, the multinational corporations are bodies whose wealth and influence transcend any particular

country. The global corporation, so he says, increasingly views the world as "one economic unit" and leads to "a need to plan, organize, and manage on a global scale."¹⁰

But the global vision of the multinational corporations is the internationalism of profit-making and domination, not of an anti-authoritarian socialism. Here, as elsewhere, the modernization thesis rests on two assumptions. First, that what is needed is new people with better ideas running the same kind of society. It fails to conceive of a new type of system, one in which people themselves would govern their lives and institutions. Second, modernists conceive of social problems as technical ones which can be solved through more science and technology. The need for *change* in the human structures of society is neglected. This neglect causes science and technology, originally great forces for the liberation of human beings from material scarcity, to turn into their opposite. Under the modern capitalist system, science and technology increasingly become means for domination, not liberation.

The human aspirations and social forces which converged in the May explosion have not been totally dissolved in the reformist solution. The contradiction between the constantly growing forces of production and their organization for profit grows more pregnant. Modernization, in contrast to socialization, leaves the possibilities for new levels of human life ensnared in an increasingly fragmented social reality. The vision of a self-managed international order remains frustrated.

Whether these frustrations will explode in yet another French-type upheaval remains to be seen. In any case, socialist revolution in France (and elsewhere), practically inconceivable in the decades before 1968, is back on the historical agenda.

Electoral strategies for socialism are gathering momentum in France today. But the chance that the left may one day capture the French state through elections should not excite contemporary enthusiasts of the May insurgents. The PCF's negative response to the self-management and internationalism of 1968 offers more than a clue to the program the Party might implement if in power.

Furthermore, there is a prior question which pre-empts hopes for socialism through the ballot box. Since the Commune

of 1871, revolutionary socialists have recognized the necessity of smashing the bourgeois state, the impossibility of simply taking hold of that apparatus in its inherited form. Can a qualitatively new society be built as long as the centralized authoritarian state still exists?

In organizing for a "legitimate" role in the present government, the PCF is required to conform to the existing structures. As the editors of MONTHLY REVIEW said in analyzing the role of the PCF during the May events:

No mass party which is organized to work within the framework of bourgeois institutions can also be revolutionary. If it accepts these institutions and adapts itself to them—even if it thinks it is doing so only provisionally and temporarily—it is bound to acquire vested interests in the existing social order which would not merely be jeopardized but actually wiped out by a genuine revolution.¹¹

In contrast to the centralization of power in the state, the weakening of local and institutional authority, the reduction of the individual to a position of unprecedented passivity—all of which accompany the domination of monopoly capitalism—socialism in the industrialized countries presupposes the destruction of the centralized hierarchical state by an activated population. Such destruction is required of those who would construct a qualitatively new society, a socialism which would have little in common with bureaucratic European "socialisms" of today.

Nevertheless, a victory of the left in national elections could open new possibilities. The right wing in France, abetted by the multinational corporations, might stage a *coup d'état*, blocking further attempts to reach socialism through the ballot box and necessitating a clandestine struggle, as in Chile. In all probability, the PCF would still dominate the left, but the necessities of the clandestine struggle might help transform the goal of the PCF from social democracy to socialism.

On the other hand, a left victory might be tolerated as a means—perhaps the least costly politically—to modernize the archaic social relations of France while preserving their capitalistic core. Such a possibility might come to be; and we might witness a popular uprising like that of 1968 directed against a Communist government instead of De Gaulle.

For revolutionary socialists to hope for a repetition of the May events, however, would be a grave mistake. That such an upheaval may develop is realistic, given the existence of the same social contradictions today as before 1968; but in the absence of organizations prepared to make the most of it, a new explosion would be unable to translate popular aspirations into reality. History might repeat itself, but as Marx used to say, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

The elements of the May movement which at first glance appeared as its strengths are also its weaknesses. Spontaneity, a refusal to accept any form of hierarchy or leadership, and initiative solely from the base cannot be permanently maintained in a new social formation except within a framework of political power. The centralized organization of monopoly capital necessitates the organization of the seeds of the new society—the revolutionary party—prior to the destruction of capitalism.

The May insurrection developed outside the traditional parties on the left for good reasons. The bureaucratization of the PCF, understood long before May by many, made that organization incapable of comprehending the totalized impulse for liberation which emerged in May. The inability of the May insurgents to advance the political crisis (except to the extent that the cultural revolt and social movement precipitated it) had its corollary in a rebellion against the PCF. There was no transcendence of obsolete organizations, no development of a political form for the creation of socialism. What Lenin once said in another context could be said about May, that “anarchism was often a sort of punishment for the opportunist sins of the working class movement. The two monstrosities were mutually complementary.”¹²

In the aftermath of 1968, many of the insurgents like André Gorz have come to envision the construction of a new kind of party. Besides destroying the traditional state, such a revolutionary party would need to be capable of fusing the partial concerns of the subjects of social transformation—the students, factory workers, new workers, the ecology and women’s liberation movements—into a totalized vision of the future.

reassert itself in the generation of specialized self-interest issues and concerns.

Analyzed in isolation, each sector of the May movement was incapable of conceptualizing and implementing a new society. The student movement was able to detonate a larger social explosion. Despite the modern-day subservience of academia to the "real world," the limits of the student movement are marked by the confines of its environment. Students embody a particular expression of the general contradiction between capitalist relations of production and the productive forces. In 1968 only their momentary integration into a larger movement, i.e., the abolition of a purely student movement, allowed the student revolt to trigger such a vast upheaval.

By themselves, the new workers tend toward the modernization solution. Educated as much as executives, they tend to look for a better way to do this, a less painful way to implement that. The immense birth pains involved in creating a new society make it easier for the new workers to adopt technical solutions to human problems. Generally speaking, the new workers are relatively better paid than other sections of the working class.

This relative privilege cut the other way in May though, as the new workers, more often than others, stressed qualitative demands and were relatively unconcerned with pay raises. In the climate of the explosion, the majority of these new workers allied themselves with the students and factory workers. Together they constituted a united force which, if it could have been maintained, might have served as a basis to abolish different categories of existence while establishing a new mode of life.

The student revolt would not have become much more than the now usual springtime festivities had it not been for the general strike. In the rejection of the Grenelle agreements* and

* In an attempt to buy off the striking workers, Pompidou organized a weekend of negotiations (May 25-27) with all major trade unions at the Rue de Grenelle in Paris. The proposed settlement called for an increase in the minimum wage of 35 percent (in agriculture 56 percent and for some a 72 percent raise), a shorter work week, lower age of retirement,

the examples of dual power created during the strike, French factory workers momentarily demonstrated aspirations to transform the entire society. By themselves, however, the factory workers neither initiated nor successfully concluded the general strike. It was only after two weeks of the student revolt and the fighting in Paris that the working class acted. What the students had proposed—a new social formation—the workers were in a social position to implement. Unfortunately, when all was said and done, the working class by itself proved incapable of carrying through its historic task.

Neither the absence of a revolutionary party nor the reformism of the PCF totally accounts for the limitations of the May movement. The questions must be asked: Why did the workers ultimately remain obedient to their unions and return to work? Why did the students obey the commands of CGT officials to leave the factories, as on May 16 when over a thousand students marched from the Sorbonne to the huge Renault plant at Boulogne-Billancourt? The next day an even larger march was not admitted inside the factory by CGT officials. Even when some chemical workers went to the Sorbonne and invited students to their factory occupation, few went and many opposed the idea, using the “revolutionary” argument that “we would be substituting ourselves for the workers.”

more old people's and family allowances, and more union rights. To top it off, the strikers were to be paid half their normal wage for the days of occupation. When Georges Séguy and Benoît Frachon (CGT president) drove directly from the concluded negotiations to the huge Renault plant at Boulogne-Billancourt, their speeches were met with boos and catcalls from the 25,000 assembled workers. Shop stewards from around the country telephoned and telegraphed CGT headquarters turning down the agreements.

At this point, revolution seemed to be the order of the day. De Gaulle left Paris and, according to his own admission, was tempted to resign. There was a power vacuum in France on Monday, May 29. For over six hours, no one knew where to find the president. In retrospect, we all know that the general used his mysterious trip to Baden-Baden, Germany, for plotting his comeback, in close consultation with top French army generals (among others). The release a few weeks later of General Raoul Salan, former head of the paramilitary right-wing OAS, whose actions included an attempted assassination of De Gaulle in 1961, prompted many to wonder not whether some deal was made, but what else was agreed upon.

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Some of the answers to these questions can be found in the social conditions of modern capitalism, a system which has consolidated its hold over half the earth while fragmenting people's needs, desires, and relationships to the whole. As Marcuse said:

In the domain of corporate capitalism, the two historical factors of transformation, the subjective and objective, do not coincide: they are prevalent in different and even antagonistic groups. The objective factor, i.e., the human base of the process of production which reproduces the established society, exists in the industrial working class, the human source and reservoir of exploitation; the subjective factor, i.e., the political consciousness, exists among the non-conformist young intelligentsia. . . . The two historical factors do coincide in large areas of the Third World. . . .¹³

During May, it was the momentary merging-in-action of the subjective and objective forces of transformation which brought France to the edge of revolution. The June containment necessitated their separation.

But even from the start, the PCF and CGT militantly struggled to isolate the student revolt, calling the students the "children of the big bourgeoisie" in the party's paper, describing their leaders as agents of Gaullism, and keeping the students out of the occupied factories. The student revolt challenged the influence which the PCF and CGT held over the French proletariat, a legacy from the trade-union struggles of the past. Feeling its power threatened, the CGT did its utmost to split the students from the workers. In early May, one of its statements said: "Some petty bourgeois with feverish brains slander the workers' movement and pretend to teach the workers a lesson. The working class rejects these stupidities; it has come of age a long time ago; it needs no tutelage."¹⁴

"Workerism" was common during May, accepting as it did a fundamental social category of capitalism. To have overcome it, a vision for a new society transcending the fragmented realities of modern monopoly capitalism would have been needed. In such a society, property would be socialized, and the vast majority, not simply a fraction of the population, would view the modern productive forces as their responsibility.

Such a vision could only have been practically conceptualized in the heat of May given the prior existence both of human

beings who had taken on the responsibility of changing themselves—their needs, aspirations, and ideas—and of a revolutionary mass party which refused to define itself simply in terms of the social divisions brought into existence by capitalism.

The May events came by surprise. Perhaps the privilege of historical hindsight allows mistakes to be made transparent, but it is the future which the legacy of May should serve. It is difficult to assess for the long run the taste of freedom that May was. People will not simply forget the explosion, nor will the social contradictions that were then manifested disappear of their own accord. Mistakes made and victories won through the courage of those who rose up are a guide for the future. In shoving aside a social order and a conditioning aimed to pacify them, the people of France reaffirmed the dignity of human beings, a legacy which they and people all over the world will carry into the next great battles for liberation.

NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (New Directions, 1967), pp. 51-52.
2. Alain Schnapp and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The French Student Uprising* (Beacon Press, 1971), p. 438.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 439.
4. Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 166.
5. Andrée Hoyles, "General Strike: France 1968" (Trade Union Register, 1969), p. 29. (Reprinted by STO, Box 8493, Chicago, Ill. 60680).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
7. Ernest Mandel, "Lessons of May" (*New Left Review*, #52), pp. 9-32.
8. Schnapp and Vidal-Naquet, *op. cit.*, p. 427.
9. Joseph R. Gusfield, "Student Protest and University Response" (*The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May, 1971), p. 37.
10. Richard Barnet and Ronald Müller, *Global Reach* (Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 18.
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