

## The New French Revolution, May 1968

by

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*In Paris last May, the student rebels were, at bottom, demanding "the personal in place of the impersonal, the human instead of the inhuman, the spontaneous in lieu of regimentation."*<sup>1</sup>

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*Rebellion is one of the essential dimensions of man.*—Albert Camus

IT was a surprising, not to say humbling, experience for a specialist in French history like myself to be overtaken in Paris last spring by the May Revolution. Like other social scientists, I did not foresee the upheaval which saw thousands of students in revolt, ten million workers on strike, and de Gaulle's government tottering on the brink of collapse. We were aware of stresses and strains beneath the apparent stability of France, but we did not anticipate such an earthquake. Evidently the social sciences are not yet predictive. However, far be it from the historian to argue that an analysis based on hindsight does not have its uses.

The revolt was not the result of outside influences, although the insurgents were acutely conscious of student revolts in other countries. 'Rome . . . Berlin . . . Madrid . . . Warsaw . . . Paris', declared an inscription scrawled on the wall of the library at the Ecole des Sciences Politiques. French students were made aware of revolts elsewhere by both personal contacts and press reports. But even if they were encouraged by examples elsewhere, this does not explain why they rebelled when they did or on the scale they did. An external influence requires an explanation more than it provides one.

The student uprising was also not the product of real economic hardship or social misery. The students may not have had adequate housing or proper academic facilities, but they were scarcely driven to rebellion by privation. The students mostly come from bourgeois families. They are a privileged group headed for privileged positions in society. However, revolt by such a group should not surprise us. Revolutions have often been precipitated by the haves rather than the have-nots. One need only mention the landed gentry who fought the crown in seventeenth-century England, the well-to-do merchants and farmers who rebelled against Britain in the thirteen colonies, or the nobles and bourgeois who led the way in the French Revolution in 1789.

Nor was the student uprising in France the work of radical groups consciously planning the revolution. Such groups certainly did exist — Trotskyites, Maoists, Castroites, anarchists, and other bands of extremists. Some of the *groupuscules* were well-prepared for violent insurrection. The Fédération des Etudiants Révolutionnaires, for example, had a club house where members received instruction on how to turn a crowd into an enraged mob, how to situate oneself on the upper storeys of buildings so as to hurl missiles effectively, how to provoke and combat the police, and how to make Molotov cocktails. They also had two gyms where they practised karate regularly. These groups helped to spark the revolt, at times they steered it to some extent, and in the end they helped to prolong it, but they did not cause it, nor did they ever dominate it. What then *did* cause the revolt?

The revolt began when the Rector called the police into the Sorbonne. His ill-considered move seemed to symbolize the backwardness and reactionary nature of the university which combines Jesuit teaching methods of the seventeenth century with bureaucratic rigidities inherited from Napoleon. Long-felt grievances were denounced with a new passion: overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities — for example Sorbonne library can cope with only ten per cent of the students —, traditional lack of contact with professors, a vicious examination system which eliminates twenty per cent each year, rigid compartmentalization of disciplines, prohibition on political activity

within the university, and inflexible control over administration by the Ministry of Education. Students united to destroy this archaic university structure.

At the same time excessive police action dramatized the deficiencies of the Gaullist government which had increasingly lost contact with the real needs of the country. Students have never had much respect for de Gaulle in any case. They have never cared much for his efforts to restore French grandeur. Most of them are too young to remember personally the hard times which he helped the nation to overcome in the past — the wartime occupation when he led the Free French, the difficult postwar years when he contributed to reconstruction of the country, or even the evils of the long Algerian war from which he finally extricated France. Most of the students were just entering their teens when de Gaulle returned to power back in 1958. To them he seems the personification of the generation gap — or several such gaps. Now police repression in their own backyard brought home to the students the authoritarian and reactionary nature of the regime.

But the students were not just protesting the archaic university system and an authoritarian regime. The inscriptions on the walls in early May were extremely revealing. The majority were not narrowly political or aimed at immediate grievances. They condemned a whole way of life variously described as the bourgeois or consumer society.<sup>3</sup> But it seems to me that these terms obscure the real nature of the student revolt. The denunciation of the consumer society creates the false impression that they are opposed to the quality of goods which this society produces whereas their real objection is to the *system* by which these goods are produced and sold. And the emphasis on the bourgeois nature of this society hides the fact that many of the features of this system exist in modern communist states as well. These features are characteristics of the bureaucratic industrial state. They exist on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The modern state is creating at its very base a contradiction which is most keenly felt by young people. The communist state informs young people that they are important and that the system works on their behalf. The so-called capitalist state, especially through advertis-

ing, teaches young people to think that they are important, that they make vital choices, that they rule. It tells them that they decide what fashions will prevail, which records will become hits, which movies will enjoy the longest runs. A dream world is created in which youth dominates. But many young people are aware that this is an illusion, that in fact they are manipulated or conditioned in making their choices. And they are aware that in the real world, in the university or the factory, that far from ruling, they are subordinated to a bureaucratic, hierarchical, authoritarian system.

Alienation of young people in the modern industrial state is aggravated by another contradictory development. On the one hand young people are maturing physically and mentally at an earlier age than hitherto. It is an established fact that the age of puberty has been declining steadily in all the industrialized countries. Meanwhile modern communications make youth sophisticated and aware at a precocious age. On the other hand the necessities of modern education and professional training increasingly delay the entry of young people into active life. The most sensitive and intelligent youths thus find themselves subjected to a prolonged tutelage. The antiquated university system has made French students especially resentful of this protracted subordination.

In addition modern society has turned out irreverent young people unimpressed by traditional beliefs. They have in many cases been raised by parents who are unsure of their own values and have not communicated them effectively to their offspring. Modern literature and modern art have further engendered a sense of the relativity and tentativeness of social values. In France the schools have added to this by cultivating a critical Cartesian spirit even if they have not given it free rein. Yet the skeptical product of these experiences is still confronted with authoritarian superiors in everyday life. In the medical schools the French student confronts a sclerotic mandarin, in the arts faculties he meets professors who pontificate in *cours magistraux*, in politics he comes upon parties which cling to old dogmas, and in government he finds the greatest of all paternal authorities, de Gaulle himself.

The determination of many students to decide for themselves was forcefully stated on May 4 by Cohn-Bendit, the twenty-three-year-old sociology student at Nanterre: "We no longer want to wait for hand-outs, for gifts: for the right to entertain girls in our residences, or the right to have a room. Now you must reckon with us. We do not want someone to impose a destiny on us, we want to choose it. Even if you promised us paradise we would turn it down. Because we want to capture it." That put the spirit of the student revolt in a nutshell.

Despite their lack of reverence, the modern student would like to believe in some cause which would provide him with the satisfactions and excitement of commitment. "You had the good luck to have two world wars", one French student told me. The May revolution gave the students a cause to fight for. They could mime the great revolutionary struggles of the past — seizing the Sorbonne as though it were the Bastille, erecting barricades in the fashion of 1848, talking of establishing a revolutionary commune and singing the *Internationale*. At the same time they could play the roles of some of their contemporary heroes: they could pretend to be the Castros of the boulevard St. Michel, the Guevaras of the rue Guy-Lussac, the guerrilla fighters of the Latin Quarter. And this play-acting was all the more exciting because they knew that through the mass media all France and all the world was watching.

The student commune of early May would not, however, have almost paralyzed France had it not inspired a general strike and occupation of factories. French workers had much to complain about. Following a year of relative economic stagnation, about half a million workers were unemployed. Apart from those workers who earned only the guaranteed minimum wage, about three million workers earned no more than 600 francs per month, that is about 120 dollars. The average worker toiled 46 hours per week, longer than in most industrial countries. These long hours were aggravated by speeding-up of the production line and poor working conditions. And French workers had recently been deprived of some social security benefits by the Gaullist government.

Other reasons for discontent lay deeper, especially for many of the

younger workers. Modern industrial development has increasingly dehumanized the productive process by fragmenting it. Admittedly automation has to some extent recomposed the process of integrating all the fragmentary stages so that theoretically the worker can once again get some overall view of his work. But automation has done this at the cost of distancing the worker from the process so that even the skilled technicians watch over production rather than direct it. Workers thus feel that they not only do not control the product of their work, they do not control the work itself. These factors are not new, but they have become more acute in France as the economy has become more modernized — or ‘Americanized’ as many Frenchmen would say.

The uprising which these conditions produced had novel features which make it difficult to fit into our traditional categories, especially Marxist ones. It was to a large extent a revolution of youth, creating internal divisions within both the bourgeois and the working class. And for many of the youthful rebels the basic aim was not the supposedly traditional one of replacing one class with another in order to redistribute power and property. The aim was rather to restore individual responsibility, to decide for oneself, to reject ready-made judgments, even those handed down by revolutionary tradition. But this new-style twentieth-century revolution lacked certain features which are still essential if the existing order is to be overthrown.

For one thing the revolutionary leaders lacked an effective organizational base. One does not gain power by occupying university buildings, state theatres, and art schools. One must seize the real centres of power or create substitute ones. The opponents of the crown in seventeenth-century England controlled parliament, the American colonists had the continental Congress linked to local institutions, the French revolutionaries turned the Estates General into a Constituent Assembly, and in Russia in 1917 the socialists had a network of workers’ councils or soviets which served as a springboard to power. In France in May the action committees and striking unions were never organized into a formidable revolutionary organization. When in late May and early June some ultras attempted to organize a network of *Comités d’Action Populaire*, recruited from students, workers and peasants and

aiming at violent seizure of power, they managed to create about 450 branches, but the effort came too late and failed to get the support of all the insurgents. Cohn-Bendit and his March 22 Movement and various university groups held aloof.

The general strike is a lethal weapon in a complex industrial society, but for the very reason that it is so devastating, and disrupts everyday existence so profoundly, it risks a violent reaction. The workers did show some restraint. Lack of electricity can paralyse a modern community almost instantly, but the electrical workers never pulled the switch for long periods, and never at mealtime — after all this was France. But lack of public transportation, postal services, garbage collection, banking facilities, and above all gasoline soon provoked exasperation among large sections of the population, including the wives of striking workers.

Even to begin with the mood of many segments of French society was not revolutionary. Back in 1789 every social group staged a revolt against the existing order — first the nobles, then the bourgeoisie, then the lower classes in the cities, and finally the peasants in the countryside. But this past spring the bourgeoisie was not in a revolutionary mood. Nor were the peasants, although some were unhappy over low prices for their produce. And the majority of workers were not really anxious to overthrow the system. Older workers who remember the depression, the hardships of the occupation, and the difficult post-war years, appreciate some of the benefits of the so-called consumer society. They do not so much want to destroy it as to get a bigger share of its bounties. Revolution would disrupt the system for the sake of uncertain gains.

The Communist Party was evidently convinced that genuine revolution was impossible. In any case it hesitated to risk the image of itself as a respectable opposition party eligible to take power through orderly processes. Besides, there has been no love lost between the Party and student radicals, who consider it stale and out-of-date, while it considers them infantile adventurists. In the past Trotskyite and Maoist students trying to convert young workers have repeatedly been thrown out of factories and union meetings by old-line Communists.

Consequently in May the C.G.T., the Communist-dominated trade union, preferred to concentrate on economic gains rather than political goals. And when at the moment the government seemed to be disintegrating late in May the Communist party did demand a 'popular democracy' it was a half-hearted gesture devoid of revolutionary zeal. When de Gaulle called for elections, the Party quickly accepted with an almost audible sigh of relief. It was happy to escape from the unknown. It could return to the old familiar electoral game.

Finally no modern revolution has succeeded without the neutrality or support of the armed forces of the country. Now there are segments of the French army which have no love for de Gaulle — they remember too well his manoeuvre in Algeria — but there is no doubt whatsoever that the army as a whole is opposed to a leftist takeover of power. In fact when the government appeared to be toppling, right-wing officers opened negotiations with right-wing factions in preparation for a possible *coup* to prevent leftists from moving into a power vacuum. They began to organize civic militia groups ready to receive arms at the right moment. One of de Gaulle's main reasons for going to Baden was to prevent such a move by reassuring his generals that no such vacuum would occur. In any case he won their support. Following his May 30 speech reaffirming his will to rule, tanks and troops ostentatiously encircled Paris.

My feelings about this abortive revolution are mixed. Although their demands for university reform were fairly specific — student parity on governing bodies, a student veto on all policy decisions, autonomy for each university, abolition of rigid compartmentalization, new methods of examination, and the right to engage in political activities within the university — their plans for changing society at large were never clearly articulated. "We say only that we want a system which will put an end to the exploitation of workers", declared Sauvageot, Vice-President of the Union Nationale des Etudiants de France. "As for the future society, it will construct itself." In their reaction against too much system the rebels rejected well-defined goals. But surely it would be reckless to demolish the existing structure without some architectural plans for its reconstruction. And the student heroes —



Trotsky, Mao, Castro, Guevara, and the like — may serve as striking negative symbols, but even from a leftist viewpoint not one of them stands for any workable plan for renovating a complex industrial state.

One is revulsed too by the totalitarian tendencies among some of the extremists. Like so many modern revolutionaries from the Jacobins onward, the ultras tend to mix libertarian ideals with latently totalitarian methods. They are inclined to throw out liberal parliamentary procedures as part of the discredited bourgeois system. Instead they demand direct democracy which by my own observations often resembled sectional assemblies of the sans-culottes of Paris during the Terror — opposition was shouted down, moderates were denounced as counterrevolutionaries, and votes were taken by acclamation. And they dismissed national elections as irrelevant. “Piss in the ballot-boxes” was their slogan.

Moreover one is alarmed by the taste for violence among many of the insurgents. It seems to satisfy a deep craving for excitement. Admittedly the students used violence within limits — they did not attempt to molest rectors or deans, they did not try to string up factory owners, and they used paving stones and Molotov cocktails rather than firearms. But many of them obviously enjoyed violence. On several occasions I watched young girls taunting the police on the barricades, passing missiles to their boyfriends, or running messages for the combatants. They were exhilarated, pupils dilated and faces flushed, elated by a thrill verging on a sexual experience. “Violence is the orgasm of youth”, a Frenchman remarked.

One is repelled too by the arrogance of many of these student rebels. In the early nineteenth century Metternich complained that presumption was the chief revolutionary vice — the boldness to reject established truths, to question tried traditions, to decide everything with one's own intellect. Metternich thought that such effrontery was a vice characteristic of middle-class liberals, but he would have found it fully developed in some of today's youth. “Neither master nor God, I am God”, some student scrawled on one of the walls at Censier, the annex to the Sorbonne. Presumption can go no further.

Despite these features the May revolution was basically a welcome

phenomenon. Many of us have been concerned with the capacity of the modern industrial state, coupled with the mass media, to create a dull conformist society. Now we find youth in rebellion against this very menace. At bottom the student rebels were demanding the personal in place of the impersonal, the human instead of the inhuman, the spontaneous in lieu of regimentation. "Ici on spontane", declared one of the *graffiti* on the walls at Censier — and in our society spontaneity is surely something badly needed.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Dunning Trust Lecture, Queen's University, October 2, 1968.
- <sup>2</sup> Suddenly in May and early June the walls of Paris, recently scrubbed as part of the Gaullist programme to restore French grandeur, were covered with inscriptions and slogans. These graffiti reveal the spirit of the uprising, the groping for a new ideology. Here are a few samples: *Les barricades ferment la rue mais ouvrent la voie.* (Censier); *Violez votre Alma Mater.* (Sorbonne); *Vive la démocratie directe.* (Sorbonne); *Les Gaullists ont-ils un chromosome de trop?* (Nouvelle Faculté de Médecine); *La volonté générale contre la volonté du général.* (Affice); *Soyez réalistes . . . demandez l'impossible* (Odéon); *L'insolence est une nouvelle arme révolutionnaire.* (Faculté de Médecine); *Professeurs, vous êtes aussi vieux que votre culture.* (Nanterre); *La société est une fleur carnivore.* (Sorbonne); *Il fait du rouge pour sortir du noir.* (Censier); *Je n'aime pas le travail, j'aime l'amour et la révolution* (Nanterre).