

The Beginning of an Era

Situationist International

1969

“You believe that these Germans will make a political revolution in *our* lifetime? My friend, that is just wishful thinking,” wrote Arnold Ruge to Marx in March 1844. Four years later that revolution had come. As an amusing example of a type of historical unconsciousness constantly produced by similar causes and always contradicted by similar results, Ruge’s unfortunate statement was quoted as an epigraph in *The Society of the Spectacle*, which appeared December 1967. Six months later came the occupations movement, the greatest revolutionary moment in France since the Paris Commune.

The largest general strike that ever stopped the economy of an advanced industrial country, and the first *wildcat general strike* in history; revolutionary occupations and the beginnings of direct democracy; the increasingly complete collapse of state power for nearly two weeks; the resounding verification of the revolutionary theory of our time and even here and there the first steps toward putting it into practice; the most important experience of the modern proletarian movement that is in the process of constituting itself in its *fully developed* form in all countries, and the example it must now go beyond — this is what the French May 1968 movement was essentially, and this in itself *already* constitutes its essential victory.

Later on we will examine this movement’s weaknesses and deficiencies, which were the natural consequences of the ignorance and improvisation and of the dead weight of the past that was still felt even where this movement best asserted itself; the consequences, above all, of the *separations* that all the joint forces for the preservation of the capitalist order narrowly succeeded in defending, with the bureaucratic political and labor-union machines exerting themselves to this end more intensely and effectively than the police at this life-or-death moment for the system. But let us first enumerate the evident characteristics at the *heart* of the occupations movement, where it was freest to translate its content into words and acts. There it proclaimed its goals *much more explicitly* than any other spontaneous revolutionary movement in history; and those goals were much more radical and up-to-date than were ever expressed in the programs of the revolutionary organizations of the past, even at their best moments.

The occupations movement was the sudden return of the proletariat as a historical class, a proletariat now *enlarged* to include a majority of the salaried employees of modern society and still tending toward the real abolition of classes and of wage labor. The movement was a rediscovery of collective and individual history, an awakening to the possibility of intervening in history, an awareness of participating in an irreversible event. (“Nothing will ever be the same again.”)

People looked back in amusement at the *strange* existence they had led a week before, at their outlived survival. It was a passion for bringing everything and everyone together that included a holistic critique of all alienations, of all ideologies and of the entire old organization of real life. In this process property was negated, everyone finding themselves at home everywhere. The *recognized desire* for genuine dialogue, completely free expression and real community found their terrain in the buildings transformed into open meeting places and in the common struggle. The telephones (which were among the few technical means still functioning) and the wandering of so many emissaries and travelers around Paris and throughout the entire country, between the occupied buildings, the factories and the assemblies, manifested this real practice of communication. The occupations movement was obviously a rejection of alienated labor; it was a festival, a game, a real presence of people and of time. And it was a rejection of all authority, all specialization, all hierarchical dispossession; a rejection of the state and thus of the parties and unions; and of sociologists and professors, of the health-care system and repressive morality. Everyone awakened by the lightning chain-reaction of the movement (one of the graffiti, perhaps the most beautiful, simply said: “*Quick*”) thoroughly despised their former conditions of existence and therefore those who had worked to keep them there, from the television stars to the urbanists. Many people’s Stalinist illusions, in various diluted forms from Castro to Sartre, were torn apart, as all the rival and interdependent lies of an era crumbled. International solidarity spontaneously reappeared: numerous foreign workers flung themselves into the struggle and many European revolutionaries rushed to France. The extensive participation of women in all aspects of struggle was an unmistakable sign of its revolutionary depth. There was a significant liberation of mores. The movement was also a critique, still partially illusory, of the commodity system (in its lame sociological disguise as “consumer society”). And it already contained a *rejection* of art that did not yet recognize the historical *negation* of art (a rejection expressed in the poor abstract slogan, “Power to the imagination,” which did not know how to put this power into practice, to reinvent everything; and which, lacking power, lacked imagination). Hatred of *coopters* was expressed everywhere, though it did not yet reach the theoretico-practical knowledge of how to get rid of them (the neoartists, political neoleaders and neospectators of the very movement that contradicted them). If the critique-in-acts of the spectacle of nonlife was not yet the revolutionary supersession of these coopters, this was because the “spontaneously councilist” tendency of the May uprising was ahead of almost all the concrete means (including theoretical and organizational consciousness) that will one day enable it to transform itself into a power by being the only power.

Let us spit in passing on the banalizing commentaries and false testimonies by sociologists, retired Marxists and all the doctrinaires of the old preserved ultraleftism or of the servile ultramodernism of spectacular society; no one who *experienced* this movement can deny that it contained everything we have said.

In March 1966, in *Internationale Situationniste* #10 (p.77), we wrote, “What might appear to be audacious speculation in several of our assertions, we advance with the assurance that the future will bring their overwhelming and undeniable historical confirmation.” It couldn’t have been put better.

Naturally we had prophesied nothing. We had simply pointed out what was *already present*: the material preconditions for a new society had long since been produced; the old class society had maintained itself *everywhere* by considerably modernizing its oppression, while developing an ever-increasing abundance of contradictions; the previously vanquished proletarian move-

ment was returning for a second, more conscious and more total assault. Many people, of course, were already aware of these facts, so clearly demonstrated both by history and by present reality, and some people even stated them; but they did so abstractly and thus in a vacuum, without any echo, without any possibility of intervention. The merit of the situationists was simply to have recognized and pointed out the new focuses of revolt in modern society (focuses which do not at all exclude the old ones, but on the contrary bring them back to light): urbanism, the spectacle, ideology, etc. Because this task was carried out radically, it was able to stir up, or at least considerably reinforce, certain practical acts of revolt. If our enterprise struck a certain chord it was because *uncompromising* criticism was scarcely to be found among the leftisms of the preceding period. If many people *put our words into action* it was because we expressed the negative that had been lived by us and by so many others before us. What awakened in the spring of 1968 was nothing other than what had been sleeping in the night of the “spectacular society,” whose spectacles presented nothing but an eternal positive façade. But we had “cohabited with the negative” in accordance with the program we formulated in 1962 (see *Internationale Situationniste* #7, p.10). We are not going into our “merits” in order to be applauded, but for the benefit of others who are going to act in similar ways.

Those who shut their eyes to this “critique within the mêlée” only saw an “immovable” force of modern domination which reflected their own renunciation. Their antiutopian “realism” was no more real than a police station or the Sorbonne were more real buildings before than after their transformation by arsonists or “Katangans.”¹ When the subterranean phantoms of total revolution rose and extended their force over the entire country, it was all the forces of the old world that appeared as ghostly illusions dissipated in the daylight. After thirty miserable years that in the history of revolutions amounted to no more than a month, came this month of May that recapitulated thirty years.

To transform our desires into reality is a precise task, precisely the contrary of the function of the intellectual prostitution that grafts its illusions of permanence onto any reality that happens to exist. Take Henri Lefebvre, for example, whom we already quoted in the preceding issue of this journal (October 1967) because in his book *Positions contre les technocrates* (Gonthier) he ventured a categorical conclusion whose scientific validity was revealed scarcely more than six months later: “The situationists ... do not propose a concrete utopia, but an abstract one. Do they really imagine that one fine day or one decisive evening people will look at each other and say, ‘Enough! We’re fed up with work and boredom! Let’s put an end to them!’ and that they will then proceed into the eternal Festival and the creation of situations? Although this happened once, at the dawn of 18 March 1871 [the Paris Commune], this combination of circumstances will not occur again.” A certain intellectual influence has been attributed to Lefebvre for certain of the SI’s radical theses that he surreptitiously copied (see in this issue the reproduction of our 1963 tract “Into the Trashcan of History”),² but he reserved the truth of that critique for the past, even though it

¹ “Katangans”: nickname given to mercenaries and other toughs who rallied to the May movement.

² In 1960 the SI initiated a boycott of anyone who collaborated with the journal *Arguments*, “in order to make an *example* of the most representative tendency of that conformist and pseudoleftist intelligentsia that has up till now laboriously organized a conspiracy of silence regarding us, and whose bankruptcy in all domains is beginning to be recognized by perceptive people” (*Internationale Situationniste* #5, p. 13). The SI noted various evidences of this bankruptcy and predicted the journal’s imminent demise from sheer incoherence and lack of ideas; which was precisely what happened in 1962. It so happened that the last issue of *Arguments* contained an article by Henri Lefebvre on the Paris Commune that was almost entirely plagiarized from the SI’s “Theses on the Commune.” The SI issued a tract, “Into the Trashcan of History,” calling attention to the contradiction that the lead article of a guest writer

was born out of the *present* more than out of his academic reflections on the past, and he warned against the illusion that any present struggle could ever again achieve those results. Don't jump to the conclusion that Lefebvre is the only former thinker the event has made a complete fool of: those who avoided committing themselves to such ludicrous declarations nevertheless had the same convictions. Overcome by their shock in May, all the *researchers of historical nothingness* have admitted that no one had in any way foreseen what occurred. We must acknowledge a sort of exception to this in the case of all the sects of "resurrected Bolsheviks," of whom it is fair to say that for the last thirty years they have not for one instant ceased heralding the imminence of the revolution of 1917. But they too were badly mistaken: this was not at all 1917 and they were not even exactly Lenin. As for the remains of the old non-Trotskyist ultraleft, they still needed at least a major economic crisis. They made any revolutionary moment contingent on its return, and saw nothing coming. Now that they have admitted that there was a revolutionary crisis in May they have to prove that some sort of *invisible* economic crisis was taking place in early 1968. As oblivious and complacent as always, they are earnestly working on this problem, producing diagrams of increases in prices and unemployment. For them an economic crisis is no longer that terribly conspicuous objective reality that was so extensively experienced and described up through 1929, but rather a sort of eucharistic presence that is one of the foundations of their religion.

Just as it would be necessary to reissue the entire collection of *Internationale Situationniste* journals in order to show how greatly all these people were mistaken *before* May, so it would require a thick volume to go through all the stupidities and partial admissions they have produced since then. We will limit ourselves to citing the picturesque journalist Frédéric Gaussen, who felt that he could reassure the readers of *Le Monde* on 9 December 1966 that the few situationist maniacs who perpetrated the Strasbourg scandal had "a messianic confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the masses and in their aptitude for freedom." Since then Gaussen's aptitude for freedom has not progressed one millimeter, but we find him in the same paper, 29 January 1969, panic-stricken at finding everywhere "the feeling that revolutionary aspirations are universal." "Highschoolers in Rome, college students in Berlin, 'enragés' in Madrid, 'Lenin's orphans' in Prague, radical dissidents in Belgrade, all are attacking the same world, the Old World." And Gaussen, using almost the same words as before, now attributes to all those revolutionary masses the same "quasi-mystical belief in the creative spontaneity of the masses."

We don't want to dwell in triumph on the discomfiture of all our intellectual adversaries; not that this "triumph," which is in fact simply that of the modern revolutionary movement, is not quite significant, but because the subject is so monotonous and because the reappearance of history, the reappearance of direct class struggle recognizing *present-day* revolutionary goals, has pronounced such a clear verdict on the whole period that came to an end in May³ (previously

himself far above the general level of this journal — a journal pretending that the SI was of so little interest as to not be worth mentioning — was merely a watered-down version of a text three situationists had written in a few hours. This tract was reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* #12 in response to the numerous commentators who attributed to Lefebvre an important influence on the May 1968 movement due to "his" theses on the festive nature of the Commune, etc.

³ "Those who spoke of Marcuse as the 'theorist' of the movement didn't know what they were talking about. They didn't even understand Marcuse, much less the movement itself. Marcusean *ideology*, already ridiculous, was pasted onto the movement in the same way that Geismar, Sauvageot and Cohn-Bendit were 'designated' to represent it. But even these latter admitted that they knew nothing about Marcuse. If the May revolutionary crisis demonstrated anything, it was in fact precisely the opposite of Marcuse's theses: it showed that the proletariat has *not* been inte-

it was the subversion of the existing society that seemed unlikely; now it is its continuation). Instead of going over what is already verified, it is henceforth more important to pose the new problems; to *criticize the May movement* and embark on the practice of the new era.

In all other countries the recent and up to now confused quest for a radical critique of modern capitalism (private or bureaucratic) had not yet broken out of the narrow base it had in the student milieu. In complete contrast, whatever the government, the newspapers and the ideologists of modernist sociology pretend to believe, *the May movement was not a student movement*. It was a revolutionary proletarian movement rising again after half a century of suppression and generally *deprived* of everything. Its unfortunate paradox was that it was able to concretely express itself and take shape only on the very unfavorable *terrain* of a student revolt: the streets held by the rioters around the Latin Quarter and the mostly university buildings occupied in the same area. Instead of dwelling on the laughable historical parody of Leninist or Maoist-Stalinist students disguising themselves as proletarians or vanguard leaders of the proletariat, it must be realized that it was, on the contrary, the most advanced segment of the workers, unorganized and separated by all the forms of repression, that found themselves *disguised as students* in the reassuring imagery of the unions and the spectacular news. The May movement was not some political theory looking for workers to carry it out; it was the acting proletariat seeking its theoretical consciousness.

The *sabotage* of the university by a few groups of young and notoriously *antistudent* revolutionaries at Nantes and Nanterre (we are referring here to the “Enragés” and not, of course, to the majority of the “March 22nd Movement” who later imitated their actions) presented the *opportunity* to develop forms of direct struggle that dissatisfied workers, mainly young ones, had already initiated in the early months of 1968 (at Caen and Redon, for example). But this circumstance was in no way fundamental and could do the movement no harm. What was both significant and unfortunate was the fact that the unions were eventually able to control the *wildcat strike* that had been launched against their will and despite all their maneuvers. They accepted the strike they had been unable to prevent, which is the usual tactic of a union faced with a wildcat, although this time they had to accept one on a national scale. And by accepting this “unofficial” general strike they remained accepted by it. They kept control over the factory gates, simultaneously *isolating* the vast majority of the workers from the *real movement* and each plant from all the others. Thus the most unitary action and the most *radical* critique-in-action ever seen was at the same time a sum of isolations and a pageant of banal, officially approved demands. Just as the unions had to let the general strike spread *little by little*, winding up in virtual unanimity, so they strove to liquidate the strike little by little, using the terrorism of falsification and their monopoly of communication to coerce the workers in each separate enterprise to accept the crumbs they had *collectively rejected* on May 27. The revolutionary strike was thus reduced to a *cold war* between the union bureaucracies and the workers. The unions *acknowledged* the strike on the condition that the workers tacitly acknowledged, by their practical passivity, *that it would lead nowhere*. The unions did not “miss an opportunity” to act revolutionarily, because there is nothing revolutionary about any of them, from the Stalinists to the bourgeoisified reformists. And if they did not even act to bring about *substantial reforms*, this was because the situation

grated and that it is the main revolutionary force in modern society. Pessimists and sociologists will have to redo their calculations, as will the spokespeople of underdevelopment, Black Power and Dutschkeism.” (René Viénet, *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations*, pp.153–154.)

was too dangerously revolutionary to play around with, even to try to exploit it to their own advantage. They very clearly wanted it to be brought to a stop immediately, at any cost. In this exceptional moment the Stalinists — admirably imitated in this hypocrisy by the semileftist sociologists (cf. Coudray in *La Brèche*, Éditions du Seuil, 1968) — though usually of such a contrary opinion, suddenly feigned an extraordinary respect for the competence of the workers, for their wise “decision,” presented with the most fantastic cynicism as having been clearly debated, voted in full knowledge of the facts and absolutely unequivocal: for once the workers supposedly knew what they wanted because “they did not want a revolution”! But all the obstacles and muzzles and lies that the panic-stricken bureaucrats resorted to in the face of this supposed *unwillingness* of the workers constitutes the best proof of their real will, unarmed but dangerous. It is only by forgetting the historical totality of the movement of modern society that one can blather on in this circular positivism, which thinks it sees a rationality everywhere in the existing order because it raises its “science” to the point of successively considering that order from the side of the demand and the side of the response. Thus the same Coudray [pseudonym of Cornelius Castoriadis] notes, “If you have these unions, a raise of 5% is the most you can get, and if 5% is what you want, these unions suffice.” Leaving aside the question of their intentions in relation to their real life and their interests, what all these gentlemen lack at the very least is dialectics.

The workers, who as always and everywhere naturally had quite enough good reasons for being dissatisfied, started the wildcat strike because they sensed the *revolutionary situation* created by the new forms of sabotage in the universities and the government’s successive mistakes in reacting to them. They were obviously as indifferent as we were to the forms and reforms of the university system; but certainly not to the critique of the culture, environment and everyday life produced by advanced capitalism, a critique that spread so quickly upon the first rip in that university veil.

By launching the wildcat strike the workers *gave the lie to the liars* who spoke in their name. In most of the factories they proved incapable of really speaking on their own behalf and of *saying what they wanted*. But in order to say what they want it is first necessary for the workers to create, through their own autonomous action, the concrete conditions that enable them to speak and act, conditions that now exist *nowhere*. The absence, almost everywhere, of such dialogue and of such linking up, as well as the lack of theoretical knowledge of the autonomous goals of proletarian class struggle (these two factors being able to develop only together), prevented the workers from *expropriating the expropriators of their real life*. Thus the advanced nucleus of workers, around which the next revolutionary proletarian organization will take shape, came to the Latin Quarter as a *poor relative* of a “student reformism” that was itself a largely artificial product of pseudoinformation or of the illusionism of the little leftist sects. This advanced nucleus included young blue-collar workers; white-collar workers from the occupied offices; delinquents and unemployed; rebellious highschoolers, who were often those working-class youth that modern capitalism recruits for the cut-rate education designed to prepare them for a role in developed industry (“Stalinists, your children are with us!” was one of the slogans); “lost intellectuals”; and “Katangans.”

The fact that a significant fraction of French students took part in the movement, particularly in Paris, is obvious; but this cannot be considered as constituting the essence of the movement, or even as one of its main aspects. Out of 150,000 Parisian students at most 10–20 thousand were present during the least difficult times of the demonstrations, and only a few thousand during the violent street confrontations. The sole moment of the crisis involving students alone

— admittedly one of the decisive moments for its extension — was the spontaneous uprising of the Latin Quarter on May 3 following the arrest of the leftist leaders in the Sorbonne. On the day after the occupation of the Sorbonne nearly half the participants in its general assemblies, at a time when those assemblies had clearly taken on an insurrectional role, were still students worried about the conditions for their exams and hoping for some university reform in their favor. Probably a slight majority of the student participants recognized that the question of power was posed, but they usually did so as naïve constituents of the little leftist parties, as spectators of old Leninist schemas or even of the Oriental exoticism of Maoist Stalinism. The base of these little leftist groups was indeed almost exclusively confined to the student milieu; and the *poverty* that was sustained there was clearly evident in virtually all the leaflets issuing from that milieu (the vacuity of all the Kravetztes, the stupidity of all the Péninouses). The best statements by the workers who came to the Sorbonne during the initial days were often stupidly received with a pedantic and condescending attitude by these students who fantasized themselves as experts in revolution, although they were ready to salivate and applaud at the stimulus of the clumsiest manipulator proclaiming some stupidity while invoking “the working class.” Nevertheless, the very fact that these groups manage to recruit a certain number of students is one more symptom of the discontent in present-day society: these little groups are the theatrical expression of a real yet vague revolt that is bargain-shopping for answers. Finally, the fact that a small fraction of students really supported all the radical demands of May is another indication of the depth of the movement; and remains to their credit.

Although several thousand students, as individuals, were able through their experience of 1968 to break more or less completely with the position assigned to them in the society, the mass of students were not transformed by it. This was not in virtue of the pseudo-Marxist platitude that considers the student’s social *background* (bourgeois or petty-bourgeois in the great majority of cases) as the determining factor, but rather because of his social destiny: the student’s *becoming* is the truth of his being. He is mass-produced and conditioned for an upper, middle or lower position in the organization of modern industrial production. Moreover, the student is being dishonest when he pretends to be scandalized at “discovering” this reason for his education, which has always been proclaimed openly. It is evident that the economic uncertainties of his optimum employment, and especially the dubious desirability of the “privileges” present society can offer him, have played a role in his bewilderment and revolt. But it is precisely because of this that the student is such a perfect customer, eagerly seeking his quality brand in the ideology of one or another of the little bureaucratic groups. The student who dreams of himself as a Bolshevik or a swaggering Stalinist (i.e. a Maoist) is playing both sides: Simply as a result of his studies he reckons on obtaining some modest position managing some small sector of the society as a cadre of capitalism, should a change in power never arrive to fulfill his wishes. And in case his dream of such a power change were to become a reality, he sees himself in an even more glorious managerial role and a higher rank as a “scientifically” warranted political cadre. These groups’ dreams of domination are often clumsily revealed in the contempt their fanatics have the nerve to express toward certain aspects of workers’ demands, which they often term “mere bread-and-butter issues.” In this impotence that would be better advised to keep silent one can already glimpse the disdain with which these leftists would like to be able to respond to any future discontent among the same workers if these self-appointed specialists in the general interests of the proletariat ever managed to get their little hands on state power and police (as in Kronstadt, as in Beijing). But leaving aside the perspective of these germ-carriers of ruling bureaucracies, nothing seri-

ous can be recognized in the sociologico-journalistic contrasts between rebellious students, who are supposedly rejecting “consumer society,” and the workers, who are supposedly still eager to participate in it. The consumption in question is only a consumption of commodities. It is a hierarchical consumption and it is increasing for everyone, but in a way that becomes increasingly hierarchical. The modern commodity’s decline and falsification of use-value is experienced by everyone, though to differing degrees. Everyone experiences this consumption of both spectacular *and* real commodities within a fundamental poverty, “because this poverty is not itself beyond privation; it is only enriched privation” (*The Society of the Spectacle*). Like everyone else, the workers spend their lives passively consuming the spectacle and all the lies of ideologies and commodities. But they have fewer illusions than anyone about the concrete conditions imposed on them, about the price they have to pay, every moment of their lives, for the *production* of all that.

For all these reasons the students considered as a social stratum — a stratum itself also in crisis — were in May 1968 nothing but the *rear guard* of the whole movement.

The deficiency of almost all the students who expressed revolutionary intentions was, considering all their free time which they *could have* devoted to elucidating the problems of revolution, certainly deplorable, but quite secondary. The deficiency of the vast majority of workers, constantly leashed and gagged, was in contrast quite excusable, but decisive. The situationists’ description and analysis of the *main stages* of the crisis have been set forth in René Viénet’s book *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement* (Gallimard, 1968). We will merely summarize here the main points related in that book, which was written in Brussels during the last three weeks of July on the basis of then-existing documentation, but of which, it seems to us, no conclusion needs to be modified.

From January to March the Enragés group of Nanterre (whose tactics were later taken up in April by the March 22nd Movement) successfully carried out the sabotage of classes and university departments. The Paris University Council’s bungling and too-belated repression, together with two successive shutdowns of Nanterre College, led to the spontaneous student riot in the Latin Quarter on May 3. The university was paralyzed by both the police and the strike. There was fighting in the streets throughout the following week. Young workers joined in, the Stalinists discredited themselves each day by incredible slanders, the leaders of SNESup [National Union of University Employees] and the little leftist groups revealed their lack of imagination and rigor, and the government responded successively and always at the wrong moment with force and inept concessions. On the night of May 10 the uprising that took over the neighborhood around Rue Gay-Lussac, set up sixty barricades, and held it for more than eight hours aroused the entire country and forced the government into a major capitulation: it withdrew the police forces from the Latin Quarter and reopened the Sorbonne that it could no longer keep running. From May 13–17 the movement irresistibly advanced to the point of becoming a general revolutionary crisis, with the 16th probably being the crucial day, the day the factories began to declare themselves for a wildcat strike. The single-day general strike decreed for the 13th by the big bureaucratic organizations, with the aim of bringing the movement to a rapid end and if possible turning it to their own advantage, was in fact only a beginning: the workers and students of Nantes attacked the prefecture and those who occupied the Sorbonne opened it up to the workers. The Sorbonne immediately became a “*club populaire*” that made the language and demands of the clubs of 1848 seem timid by comparison. On the 14th the workers of Sud-Aviation at Nantes occupied their factory and locked up their managers. Their example was followed by two or

three enterprises on the 15th and by several more after the 16th, the day the rank and file imposed the Renault strike at Billancourt. Virtually all the enterprises in the country were soon to follow;⁴ and virtually all institutions, ideas and habits were to be contested in the succeeding days. The government and the Stalinists made feverish efforts to bring the crisis to a halt by breaking up its main power: they came to an agreement on wage concessions that they hoped would be sufficient to lead to an immediate return to work. On the 27th the rank and file everywhere rejected these “Grenelle Accords.” The regime, which a month of Stalinist devotion had not been able to save, saw itself on the brink of destruction. On the 29th the Stalinists themselves had to recognize the likelihood of the collapse of the de Gaulle regime and reluctantly prepared, along with the rest of the left, to inherit its dangerous legacy: a social revolution that would have to be disarmed or crushed. If, in the face of the panic of the bourgeoisie and the wearing thin of the Stalinist braking force, de Gaulle had stepped down, the new regime would only have been a weakened but *officialized* version of the preceding *de facto* alliance: the Stalinists would have defended a Mendès-Waldeck [i.e. Socialist-Communist coalition] government, for example, with bourgeois militias, party activists and fragments of the army. They would have tried to play the role not of Kerensky, but rather that of Noske.⁵ De Gaulle, however, being more steadfast than the staff of his administration, relieved the Stalinists by announcing on the 30th that he would strive to maintain himself in power by any means necessary; that is to say, by calling out the army and initiating a civil war in order to hold or reconquer Paris. “The Stalinists, delighted, were very careful not to call for a continuation of the strike until the fall of the regime. They immediately rallied around de Gaulle’s proposal of new elections, regardless of what it might cost them. In such conditions, the immediate alternative was either the autonomous self-affirmation of the proletariat or the complete defeat of the movement; councilist revolution or the Grenelle Accords. The revolutionary movement could not settle with the PCF [French Communist Party] without first having got rid of de Gaulle. The form of workers’ power that could have developed in a post-Gaullist phase of the crisis, finding itself blocked both by the old reaffirmed state and by the PCF, no longer had any chance to hold back its onrushing defeat.” (Viénet, *op. cit.*) The movement began to ebb, although the workers for one or more weeks stubbornly persisted in the strike that all their unions urged them to stop. Of course the bourgeoisie had not disappeared in France; it had merely been dumbstruck with terror. On May 30 it reemerged, along with the conformist petty bourgeoisie, to demonstrate its support for the state. But this state, already so well defended by the bureaucratic left, could not be brought down against its will as long as the workers had not eliminated the power base of those bureaucrats by imposing the form of their own autonomous power. The workers left the state this freedom and naturally had to suffer the consequences. The majority of them had not recognized the total significance of their own movement; and nobody else could do so in their place.

If, in a single large factory, between May 16 and May 30, a general assembly had constituted itself as a *council* holding all powers of decision and execution, expelling the bureaucrats, organizing its self-defense and calling on the strikers of all the enterprises to link up with it, this qualitative step could have immediately brought the movement to the *ultimate showdown*, to the final struggle whose general outlines have all been historically traced by this movement. A

⁴ By May 20 six million workers were on strike; within a few days the number had risen to ten or eleven million.

⁵ *Alexander Kerensky*: head of Russian provisional government between the February 1917 revolution and the Bolsheviks’ October 1917 coup. Evoked here as representative of devious counterrevolutionary maneuvering, as contrasted with Gustav Noske, the German socialist leader responsible for crushing the Spartakist insurrection in 1919.

very large number of enterprises would have followed the course thus discovered. This factory could immediately have taken the place of the dubious and in every sense eccentric Sorbonne of the first days and have become the real center of the occupations movement: genuine *delegates* from the numerous councils that already virtually existed in some of the occupied buildings, and from all the councils that could have imposed themselves in all the branches of industry, would have rallied around this base. Such an assembly could then have proclaimed the expropriation of all capital, *including state capital*; announced that all the country's means of production were henceforth the collective property of the proletariat organized in direct democracy; and appealed directly (by finally seizing some of the telecommunications facilities, for example) to the workers of the entire world to support this revolution. Some people will say that such a hypothesis is utopian. We answer: It is precisely because the occupations movement was objectively at several moments *only an hour away* from such a result that it spread such terror, visible to everyone at the time in the impotence of the state and the panic of the so-called Communist Party, and since then in the conspiracy of silence concerning its gravity. This silence has been so total that millions of witnesses, taken in once again by the "social organization of appearances" which presents this period to them as a short-lived madness of youth (perhaps even merely of student youth), must ask themselves if a society is not itself mad if it could *allow* such a stupefying aberration to occur.

In such an eventuality, civil war would naturally have been inevitable. If armed confrontation had no longer hinged on what the government feared or pretended to fear concerning the supposed evil designs of the "Communist" Party, but had actually faced the consolidation of a direct, industrially based proletarian power (we are, of course, referring here to a total autonomous power, not to some "workers' power" limited to some sort of pseudocontrol of the production of their own alienation), then armed counterrevolution would certainly have been launched immediately. But it would not have been certain of winning. Some of the troops would obviously have mutinied; the workers would have figured out how to get weapons, and they certainly would not have built any more barricades — a good form of *political* expression at the beginning of the movement, but obviously ridiculous *strategically*. (And those like Malraux who claimed afterwards that tanks could have taken Rue Gay-Lussac much more quickly than the state troopers did are certainly right on that point; but could they have afforded the *political* expense of such a victory? In any case, the state held its forces back and did not risk it; and it certainly didn't swallow this humiliation out of humanitarianism.) Foreign intervention would have inevitably followed, whatever some ideologues may think (it is possible to have read Hegel and Clausewitz and still be nothing more than a Glucksmann), probably beginning with NATO forces, but with the direct or indirect support of the Warsaw Pact. But then everything would once again have hinged on the European proletariat: double or nothing.

Since the defeat of the occupations movement, both those who participated in it and those who had to endure it have often asked the question: "Was it a revolution?" The general use in the press and in daily conversation of the cowardly neutral phrase, "the May events," is nothing but a way of evading answering or even posing this question. Such a question must be placed in its true historical light. In this context the journalists' and governments' superficial references to the "success" or "failure" of a revolution mean nothing for the simple reason that since the bourgeois revolutions *no revolution has yet succeeded*: not one has abolished classes. Proletarian revolution has so far not been victorious anywhere, but the practical process through which its project manifests itself has already created at least ten revolutionary moments of historic importance that can appropriately be termed revolutions. In none of these moments was the

total content of proletarian revolution fully developed; but in each case there was a fundamental interruption of the ruling socioeconomic order and the appearance of new forms and conceptions of real life: variegated phenomena that can be understood and evaluated only in their overall significance, including their potential future significance. Of all the partial criteria for judging whether a period of disruption of state power deserves the name of revolution or not, the worst is certainly that which considers whether the political regime in power fell or survived. This criterion, much invoked after May by the Gaullist thinkers, is the same one that enables the daily news to term as a revolution the latest Third World military coup. But the revolution of 1905 did not bring down the Czarist regime, it only obtained a few temporary concessions from it. The Spanish revolution of 1936 did not formally suppress the existing political power: it arose, in fact, out of a proletarian uprising initiated in order to defend that Republic against Franco. And the Hungarian revolution of 1956 did not abolish Nagy's liberal-bureaucratic government. Among other regrettable limitations, the Hungarian movement had many aspects of a national uprising against foreign domination; and this national-resistance aspect also played a certain, though less important, role in the origin of the Paris Commune. The Commune supplanted Thiers's power only within the limits of Paris. And the St. Petersburg Soviet of 1905 never even took control of the capital. All the crises cited here as examples, though deficient in their practical achievements and even in their perspectives, nevertheless produced enough radical innovations and put their societies severely enough in check to be legitimately termed revolutions.

As for judging revolutions by the amount of bloodshed they lead to, this romantic vision is not even worth discussing. Some incontestable revolutions have involved very little bloodshed — including even the Paris Commune, which was to end in a massacre — while on the other hand numerous civil confrontations have caused thousands of deaths without in any way being revolutions. It is generally not revolutions that are bloody, but the reaction's subsequent repression of them. The question of the number of deaths during the May movement has given rise to a polemic that the temporarily reassured defenders of order keep coming back to. The official version is that there were only five deaths, all of them instant, including one policeman. Those who claim this are the first to admit that this was an unexpectedly low number. Adding considerably to its improbability is the fact that it has never been admitted that any of the very numerous seriously wounded people could have died in the following days: this extraordinary good luck was certainly not due to rapid medical assistance, particularly on the night of the Gay-Lussac uprising. But if an easy coverup in underestimating the number of deaths was very useful *at the time* for a government up against the wall, it remained useful *afterwards* for different reasons.

But on the whole, the retrospective proofs of the revolutionariness of the occupations movement are as striking as those that its very *existence* threw in the face of the world at the time: The proof that it had established its own new legitimacy is that the regime reestablished in June has never, in its striving to restore internal state security, dared to prosecute those responsible for overtly illegal actions, those who had partially divested it of its authority and even of its buildings. But the clearest proof, for those who know the history of our century, is still this: everything that the Stalinists did ceaselessly and at every stage in order to oppose the movement confirms the presence of revolution.

While the Stalinists, as always, represented antiworker bureaucracy in its purest form, the little leftist bureaucratic embryos were straddling the fence. They all openly catered to the major bureaucratic organizations, as much out of calculation as out of ideology (except for the March 22nd Movement, which limited itself to catering to the manipulators who had infiltrated its own ranks:

JCR [a Trotskyist group], Maoists, etc.). Locked in their delusory “left-right” schemas, they could envisage nothing more than “pushing to the left” both a spontaneous movement that was much more extremist than they were and bureaucratic apparatuses that could not possibly make any concessions to leftism in such an obviously revolutionary situation. Pseudostrategical illusions flourished: Some leftists believed that the occupation of one or another ministry on the night of May 24 would have ensured the victory of the movement (but other leftists maneuvered to prevent such an “excess,” which did not enter into their own blueprint for victory). Others, prior to their later, more modest dream of maintaining a cleaned up and “responsible” administration of the university buildings in order to hold a “Summer University,” believed that those buildings would become bases for urban guerrilla warfare. (All of them, however, were surrendered after the end of the workers’ strike without being defended; and even the Sorbonne at the very time when it was the momentary center of an expanding movement could, on the crucial night of May 16 when all the doors were open and there were hardly any people there, have been retaken in less than an hour by a riot-police raid.) Not wanting to see that the movement had already gone beyond a mere political change in the state, or in what terms the real stakes were posed (a total, *coherent* awakening of consciousness in the enterprises), the little leftist groups worked against that perspective by disseminating moth-eaten illusions and by everywhere presenting bad examples of the bureaucratic conduct that all the revolutionary workers were rejecting in disgust; and finally, by the most pathetic parodying of all the forms of past revolutions, from parliamentarism to Zapata-style guerrilla war, without their poor dramatics having the slightest relation to reality. Fervent admirers of the errors of a vanished revolutionary past, the backward ideologists of the little leftist parties were naturally very ill-prepared to understand a *modern* movement. The March 22nd Movement, an eclectic aggregate of these old ideologies spiced up a few fragments of modern incoherence, combined almost all the ideological defects of the past with the defects of a naïve confusionism. Coopters were installed in the leadership of the very people who expressed their fear of “cooption,” which was for them a vague and almost mystical peril since they lacked the slightest knowledge of elementary truths about either cooption or organization, or about the difference between a mandated delegate and an uncontrollable “spokesman” — a spokesman [Daniel Cohn-Bendit] who was their *de facto* leader, since the main prestige and influence of the March 22nd Movement stemmed from its communication with reporters. Its laughable celebrities came before the spotlights to announce to the press that they were taking care not to become celebrities.⁶

⁶ “The March 22nd Movement was from the beginning an eclectic conglomeration of radicals who joined it as (supposedly) independent individuals. They all agreed on the fact that it was impossible for them to agree on any theoretical point, and counted on ‘collective action’ to overcome this deficiency. There was nevertheless a consensus on two subjects, one a ridiculous banality, the other a new requirement. The banality was anti-imperialist ‘struggle,’ the heritage of the contemplative period of the little leftist groups that was about to end (Nanterre University, that suburban Vietnam, resolutely supporting the just struggle of insurgent Bolivia, etc.). The novelty was direct democracy within the organization. This was only very partially realized in the March 22nd Movement because of the participants’ divided allegiance — the discreetly unmentioned or ignored fact that the majority of its members were simultaneously members of other groups... The sociologists’ and journalists’ trumpeting of the ‘originality’ of the March 22nd Movement masked the fact that its leftist amalgam, while new in France, was a direct copy of the American SDS, itself equally eclectic and democratic and frequently infiltrated by various old leftist sects.” (Viénet, pp. 37–39.)

“Cohn-Bendit himself belonged to the independent semitheoretical anarchist group that publishes the journal *Noir et Rouge*. As much from this fact as because of his personal qualities, he found himself in the most radical tendency of the March 22nd Movement, more truly revolutionary than the rest of the group whose spokesman he was to become and which he therefore had to tolerate. (In a number of interviews he has increased his concessions to

The “Action Committees,” which were spontaneously formed just about everywhere, were on the ambiguous borderline between direct democracy and infiltrated and coopted confusionism.⁷ This contradiction created internal divisions in almost all of them. But there was an even clearer division between the two main types of organization that went by the same label. On one hand, there were committees formed on a *local* basis (neighborhood or enterprise ACs, occupation committees of certain buildings that had fallen into the hands of the revolutionary movement) or that were set up in order to carry out some specialized task whose practical necessity was obvious, notably the internationalist extension of the movement (Italian AC, North African AC, etc.). On the other hand, there was a proliferation of *professional* committees: attempts to revive the old trade-unionism, but usually for the benefit of semiprivileged sectors and thus with a clearly corporatist character; these committees served as tribunes for specialists who wanted to join the movement while maintaining their separate specialized positions, or even to derive some favorable publicity from it (“Congress of Cinema Workers,” Writers Union, English Institute AC, etc.). The methods of these two types of AC were even more clearly opposed than their goals. In the former, decisions were executory and prefigured the revolutionary power of the councils; in the latter, they were abstract wishes and parodied the pressure groups of state power.

The occupied buildings, when they were not under the authority of “loyal labor-union managers” and insofar as they did not remain isolated as exclusive pseudofeudal possessions of their usual university users, constituted one of the strongest points of the movement (for example, the Sorbonne during the first few days, the buildings opened up to the workers and young slum-dwellers by the “students” of Nantes, the INSA taken over by the revolutionary workers of Lyon, and the Institut Pédagogique National). The very logic of these occupations could have led to the best developments. It should be noted, moreover, how a movement that remained paradoxically timid at the prospect of *requisitioning commodities* did not have the slightest misgivings about having already appropriated a part of the state’s fixed capital.

If this example was ultimately prevented from spreading to the factories, it should also be said that the style created by many of these occupations left much to be desired. Almost everywhere the persistence of old routines hindered people from seeing the full scope of the situation and the means it offered for the action in progress. For example, *Informations, Correspondance Ouvrières* #77 (January 1969) objects to Viénet’s book — which mentioned their presence at Censier — by declaring that the workers who had been with ICO for a long time “did not ‘set up quarters’ at the Sorbonne or at Censier or anywhere else; all were engaged in the strike at their own workplaces” and “in the assemblies and in the streets.” “They never considered maintaining any sort of ‘permanent center’ in the university buildings, much less constituting themselves as a ‘workers

Maoism, as for example in the May 1968 issue of *Le Magazine Littéraire*: ‘Maoism? I don’t really know all that much about it! I’ve read some things in Mao that are very true. His thesis of relying on the peasantry has always been an anarchist thesis.’) Insufficiently intelligent, informed confusedly and at second hand regarding present-day theoretical problems, skillful enough to entertain a student audience, frank enough to stand out from the arena of leftist political maneuvers yet flexible enough to come to terms with its leaders, Cohn-Bendit was an honest revolutionary, but no genius. He knew much less than he should have, and did not make the best use of what he did know. Moreover, because he uncritically accepted the role of a star, exhibiting himself for the mob of reporters from the spectacular media, his statements, which always combined a certain lucidity with a certain foolishness, were inevitably twisted in the latter direction by the deformation inherent in that kind of communication.” (Viénet, pp. 38–39.)

⁷ Roger Grégoire and Fredy Perlman’s booklet *Worker-Student Action Committees: France May ’68* (Black and Red, 1969) gives a good account of some of these committees, while at the same time exemplifying some of their confusions (e.g. praise of the March 22nd Movement).

coordinating committee' or a 'council,' even if it were for 'maintaining the occupations' ” (ICO considering this latter as tantamount to “participating in parallel organizations that would end up substituting themselves for the worker”). Further on, *ICO* adds that their group nevertheless held “two meetings a week” there because “rooms were freely available at the university departments, particularly at Censier, which was calmer.” Thus the scruples of the ICO workers (whom we are willing to assume to be quite capable as long as they modestly limit themselves to striking at their own workplaces or in the nearby streets) led them to see in one of the most original aspects of the crisis nothing more than the possibility of switching from their usual café hangout by borrowing free rooms in a quiet university department. With the same complacency they also admit that a number of their comrades “soon stopped coming to ICO meetings because they did not find any response there to their desire to ‘do something’.” Thus, for these workers, “doing something” has automatically become a shameful inclination to substitute oneself for “the worker” — for a sort of pure, being-in-himself worker who, by definition, would exist only in his own factory, where for example the Stalinists would force him to keep silent, and where ICO would have to wait for all the workers to purely liberate themselves *on the spot* (otherwise wouldn't they risk substituting themselves for this still mute real worker?). Such an ideological acceptance of dispersion defies the essential need whose vital urgency was felt by so many workers in May: the need for coordination and communication of struggles and ideas, starting from bases of free encounter outside their union-policed factories. But the ICO participants have never, in fact, either before or since May, consistently followed out the implications of their metaphysical reasoning. Through their mimeographed publication a few dozen workers resign themselves to “substituting” their analyses for those that might spontaneously be made by the several hundred other workers who read it without having participated in writing it. Their issue #78 in February informs us that “in one year the circulation of *ICO* has risen from 600 to 1000 copies.” But the Council for Maintaining the Occupations [CMDO], for example, which seems to shock the virtue of ICO by the mere fact that it occupied the Institut Pédagogique National, was able (to say nothing of its other activities or publications at the time) to get 100,000 copies of various of its texts printed for free, through an immediate agreement reached with the strikers of the IPN press at Montrouge. The vast majority of these texts were distributed to other striking workers; and so far no one has tried to show that the content of these texts could in the slightest way threaten to substitute itself for the decisions of any worker. And the strikers' participation in the link-ups established by the CMDO in and outside Paris never contradicted their presence at their own workplaces (nor, to be sure, in the streets). Moreover, the striking typesetters who were members of the CMDO much preferred working elsewhere where there were machines available rather than remaining passive in “their” usual workplaces.

If the purists of worker inaction certainly missed opportunities to speak up and make up for all the times they have been forced into a silence which has become a sort of proud habit among them, the presence of a mass of neobolshevik manipulators was much more harmful. But the worst thing was still the extreme *lack of homogeneity* of the assembly, which in the first days of the Sorbonne occupation found itself, without having either wished it or understood it clearly, in the position of an exemplary center of a movement that was drawing in the factories. This lack of social homogeneity stemmed first of all from the overwhelming preponderance of students, in spite of the good intentions of many of them, a preponderance which was made even worse by the large number of visitors with merely touristic motivations. This was the objective base that made possible the most gross maneuvers on the part of bureaucrats like Péninou and Krivine.

The ambiguity of the participants added to the essential ambiguity of the acts of an improvised assembly which by force of circumstances had come to *represent* (in all senses of the word, including the worst) the councilist perspective for the entire country. This assembly made decisions both for the Sorbonne (and even there in a poor and mystified manner: it never even succeeded in mastering its own functioning) and for the whole society in crisis: it wanted and proclaimed, in clumsy but sincere terms, unity with the workers and the negation of the old world. While pointing out its faults, let us not forget how much it was *listened to*. The same issue #77 of *ICO* reproaches the situationists for having sought in that assembly an exemplary act that would “enter into legend” and for having set up some heroes “on the podium of history.” We don’t believe we have ever built up anybody as a star on a historical tribune, but we also think that the superior irony affected by these lofty workerists falls flat: it *was* a historic tribune.

With the defeat of the revolution, the sociotechnical mechanisms of false consciousness were naturally reestablished, virtually intact: when the spectacle clashes with its pure negation, no reformism can succeed in winning an increase, not even of 7%, in the spectacle’s concessions to reality. To demonstrate this to even the most casual observer it would suffice to examine the some 300 books on May that have appeared in France alone in the year following the occupations movement. It is not the number of books in itself that merits being scoffed at or blamed, as certain people obsessed with the perils of cooption have felt obliged to declare (people who, moreover, have little to worry about on that score since they generally haven’t come up with anything the coopters would be interested in). This huge quantity reflects the fact that the historic importance of the movement has been deeply sensed, in spite of all the incomprehension and interested denials. What is deplorable is the fact that out of three hundred books there are scarcely a dozen that are worth reading: a few accounts or analyses that don’t follow laughable ideologies, and a few collections of unfalsified documents. The misinformation and falsification prevalent everywhere are particularly evident in almost all the accounts of the situationists’ activities. Leaving aside those books that limit themselves to remaining silent on this question, or to a few absurd accusations, we can distinguish three main styles of falsification. The first pattern consists in limiting the SI’s activity to Strasbourg, eighteen months before, as a remote initial triggering of a crisis from which it would later seem to have disappeared (this is also the position of the Cohn-Bendits’ book, which even manages not to say a word about the existence of the Nanterre “Enragés” group). The second pattern, presenting a positive lie and no longer merely a lie by omission, asserts, in spite of all indications to the contrary, that the situationists accepted some sort of contact with the March 22nd Movement; and many even go so far as to claim that we were an integral part of it. The third pattern presents us as an autonomous group of irresponsible maniacs springing up by surprise, perhaps even armed, at the Sorbonne and elsewhere in order to stir up disorder and shout extravagant demands.

It is difficult, however, to deny a certain continuity in the situationists’ action from 1967–1968. This very continuity, in fact, seems to have been felt as an annoyance by those who through their quantity of ostentatious interviews or recruitments strove to be recognized as leaders of the movement, a role the SI has always rejected for itself: their stupid ambition leads some of these people to hide certain facts that they are a bit more aware of than are others. Situationist theory had a significant role in the origins of the generalized critique that gave rise to the first incidents of the May crisis and that developed along with that crisis. This was not only due to our intervention against the University of Strasbourg. Two or three thousand copies each of Vaneigem’s and Debord’s books [*The Revolution of Everyday Life* and *The Society of the Specta-*

cle], for example, had already been circulated in the months preceding May, particularly in Paris, and an unusually high proportion of them had been read by revolutionary workers (according to certain indications it also appears that these two books were *the most frequently stolen* from bookstores in 1968, at least relative to their circulation). By way of the Enragés group, the SI can flatter itself with not having been without importance in the very origin of the Nanterre agitation, which was to have such far-reaching effects. Finally, we don't think we remained too far behind the great spontaneous movement of the masses that dominated the country in May 1968, both in what we did at the Sorbonne and in the various forms of action later carried out by the Council for Maintaining the Occupations. In addition to the SI itself and to a good number of individuals who acknowledged its theses and acted accordingly, many others defended situationist perspectives, whether unconsciously or as a result of direct influence, because those perspectives were to a large extent objectively implied by the present era of revolutionary crisis. Those who doubt this need only *read the walls* (those without this direct experience can refer to the collection of photographs published by Walter Lewino, *L'imagination au pouvoir*, Losfeld, 1968).

It can thus be said that the systematic minimization of the SI is merely a detail corresponding to the current (and, from the dominant viewpoint, natural) minimization of the whole occupations movement. But the sort of jealousy felt by certain leftists, which strongly contributes to this minimization, is completely off base. Even the most "extreme-left" of the little groups have no grounds for setting themselves up as rivals to the SI, because the SI is not a group of their type, competing on their terrain of militantism or claiming like they do to be leading the revolutionary movement in the name of the "correct" interpretation of one or another petrified truth derived from Marxism or anarchism. To see the question in this way is to forget that, in contrast to these abstract repetitions in which old conclusions that happen still to be valid in class struggles are inextricably mixed in with a mass of conflicting errors and frauds, the SI had above all brought a *new spirit* into the theoretical debates about society, culture and life. This spirit was assuredly revolutionary. It entered to a certain extent into a relation with the real revolutionary movement that was recommencing. And it was precisely to the extent that this movement also had a new character that it turned out to *resemble* the SI and partially appropriated its theses; and not at all by way of the traditional political process of recruiting members or followers. The largely new character of this practical movement is easily discernable in this very *influence* the SI exerted, an influence completely divorced from any directing role. All the leftist tendencies — including the March 22nd Movement, which included in its hodgepodge Leninism, Chinese Stalinism, anarchism and even a dash of misunderstood "situationism" — relied very explicitly on a long history of past struggles, examples and doctrines that had been published and discussed a hundred times. It is true that these struggles and publications had been smothered by Stalinist reaction and neglected by bourgeois intellectuals. But they were nevertheless incomparably more accessible than the SI's new positions, which had never had any means to make themselves known except our own recent publications and activities. If the SI's few known documents found such an audience it was obviously because a part of the advanced practical critique recognized itself in this language. We thus now find ourselves in a rather good position to say what May was essentially, even in its latent aspects; to make conscious the unconscious tendencies of the occupations movement. Others lyingly say that there was nothing to understand in this absurd outbreak; or describe, through the filter of their ideology, only a few older and less important aspects of the movement as if that was all there was to it; or simply draw from it new topics for their academic "studies" and consequenceless "conferences" and "debates." They have the support

of major newspapers and influential connections, of sociology and mass-market circulation. We don't have any of that and we draw our right to speak only from ourselves. Yet what they say about May will inevitably fade in indifference and be forgotten; and what we say about it will remain, and will ultimately be believed and taken up again.

The influence of situationist theory can be read not only on the walls, but in the diversely exemplary actions of the revolutionaries of Nantes and the Enragés of Nanterre. In the press at the beginning of 1968 one can see the indignation that was aroused by the new forms of action initiated or systematized by the Enragés, those "campus hooligans" who one day decided that "everything disputable must be disputed" and ended up shaking up the whole university.

In fact, those who at that time met and formed the Enragés group had no preconceived idea of agitation. The only reason they had signed up as "students" was in order to get *grants*. It simply happened that broken-down streets and slums were less odious to them than concrete buildings, thickheaded self-satisfied students and smooth-tongued modernist professors. In the former terrain they saw some vestiges of humanity, whereas they found only poverty, boredom and lies in the cultural soup where Lefebvre and his honesty, Touraine and his end of class struggle, Bourricaud and his strongarms and Lourau and his future were all splashing about in unison. Furthermore, they were familiar with the situationist theses and they knew that these thinkers of the university ghetto also were aware of them and used them to modernize their ideologies. They decided to let everyone know about this, and set about unmasking the lies, with the expectation of finding other playgrounds later on: they reckoned that once the liars and the students were routed and the university was destroyed, chance would weave them other encounters on another scale and that then "fortune and misfortune would take their shape."

Their avowed pasts (predominantly anarchist, but also surrealist and in one case Trotskyist) immediately worried those they first confronted: the old leftist sects, CLER Trotskyists, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and other anarchist students, all wrangling over the lack of future of the UNEF [national student union] and the function of psychologists. By making numerous exclusions without useless leniency they guarded against the success they rapidly encountered among a couple dozen *students*, as well as warding off various stupid would-be followers seeking a situationism without situationists in which they could express all their obsessions and miseries. As a result, the group which sometimes had as many as fifteen members more often consisted of a mere half-dozen agitators. Which turned out to be enough.

If the methods used by the Enragés — particularly the sabotage of lectures — are commonplace today in both universities and high schools, at the time they profoundly scandalized the leftists as well as the good students; the former sometimes even organized squads to protect the professors from the hails of insults and rotten oranges. The spread of the use of deserved insults and of graffiti, the call for a total boycott of exams, the distribution of leaflets on university premises, and finally the simple daily scandal of their existence drew upon the Enragés the first attempt at repression: Riesel and Bigorgne were summoned before the dean on January 25; Cheval was expelled from the campus at the beginning of February; Bigorgne was expelled from the university grounds later that same month and then banned from all French universities for five years at the beginning of April. Meanwhile the leftist groups began a more narrowly political agitation.

The old apes of the intellectual reservation, lost in the muddled presentation of their "thought," only belatedly started to get worried. But they were soon forced to drop their masks and make fools of themselves, as when Edgar Morin, green with spite amidst the hooting of students, screamed, "The other day you consigned me to the trashcan of history ..." (Interruption: "How

did you get back out?”) “I prefer to be on the side of the trashcans rather than on the side of those who handle them, and in any case I prefer to be on the side of the trashcans rather than on the side of the crematories!” Or Alain Touraine, foaming at the mouth and howling: “I’ve had enough of these anarchists and more than enough of these situationists! Right now I am in command here, and if one day you are, I will go somewhere else where people know what it means to work!” A year later these profound perceptions were further developed in articles by Raymond Aron and René Étiemble protesting the impossibility of working under the rising tide of leftist totalitarianism and red fascism. From January 26 to March 22 violent class disruptions were almost constant. The Enragés participated in this continuous agitation while working on several projects that proved abortive, including the publication of a pamphlet projected for the beginning of May and the invasion and looting of the administration building with the aid of some revolutionaries from Nantes at the beginning of March. But even before having seen that much, Dean Grappin, speaking at a press conference on March 20, denounced “a group of irresponsible students who for several months have been disrupting classes and examinations and practicing guerrilla methods in the University... These students are not connected with any known political organization. They constitute an explosive element in a very sensitive milieu.” As for the pamphlet, the Enragés’ printer did not progress as fast as the revolution. After the crisis they had to abandon the idea of publishing this text, which would have seemed intended to demonstrate retrospectively their prophetic accuracy.

All this explains the interest the Enragés took in the evening of March 22, however dubious they already were about the other protesters. While Cohn-Bendit, already a star in the Nanterre skies, was debating with the less decided, ten Enragés took the initiative of occupying the Faculty Council room, where they were only joined 22 minutes later by the future “March 22nd Movement.” Viénet’s book describes how and why they withdrew from this farce.⁸ In addition, they saw that the police were not coming and that with such people they could not carry out the only objective they had planned for the night: the complete destruction of the exam files. In the early hours of the 23rd they decided to exclude five of their number who had refused to leave the room out of fear that they would be “cutting themselves off from the masses” of students!

It is certainly piquant to find that the origin of the May movement involved a settling of accounts with the two-faced thinkers of the old *Arguments* gang. But in attacking this ugly cohort of state-appointed subversive thinkers, the Enragés were doing more than settling an old quarrel: they already spoke as an *occupations movement* struggling for everyone’s real occupation of all the sectors of a social life governed by lies. And by writing “Take your desires for reality” on the concrete walls, they were already destroying the cooptive ideology of the “Power to the imagination” slogan that was pretentiously launched by the March 22nd Movement. They had desires, while the latter had no imagination.

The Enragés scarcely returned to Nanterre in April. The vague fancies of direct democracy ostentatiously proclaimed by the March 22nd Movement obviously could not be realized in such bad company, and they refused in advance the small place that would readily have been granted them as extremist entertainers to the left of the laughable “Culture and Creativity Commission.” On the other hand, the taking up of some of their agitational techniques by the Nanterre students,

⁸ “In the name of the Enragés, René Riesel immediately demanded the expulsion of two observers from the administration and of the several Stalinists who were present. An anarchist spokesman and regular collaborator of Cohn-Bendit asserted, ‘The Stalinists who are here this evening are no longer Stalinists.’ The Enragés immediately left the meeting in protest against this cowardly illusion.” (Viénet, p. 34.)

even if within a confused “anti-imperialism” perspective, meant that the debate was beginning to be placed on the terrain the Enragés had wanted to establish. This was also demonstrated by the Parisian students’ May 3 attack on the police in response to the university administration’s latest blunder. The Enragés’ violent warning leaflet, *Gut Rage*, distributed on May 6 chimed so perfectly with the real movement that the only people it outraged were the Leninists it denounced; in two days of street fighting the rioters had discovered its relevance. The Enragés’ autonomous activity culminated as consistently as it had begun. They were treated as *situationists* even before entering the SI, since the leftist coopters picked up on some of their ideas while imagining that they could conceal the existence of their source through lavish performances in front of the reporters whom the Enragés had naturally rebuffed. The very term “Enragés,” by which Riesel had given an unforgettable touch to the occupations movement, was later for a while given a spectacular “Cohn-Bendist” meaning.

The rapid succession of street struggles in the first ten days of May had immediately brought together the members of the SI, the Enragés and a few other comrades. Their accord was formalized on May 14, the day after the occupation of the Sorbonne, when they federated as an “Enragés-SI Committee” which began that very day to publish texts thus signed. In the following days we carried out a more widespread autonomous expression of situationist theses within the movement. But this was not in order to lay down particular principles in accordance with which we would have claimed to shape or guide the real movement: in saying what we thought we also said *who* we were, while so many others were disguising themselves in order to explain that it was necessary to follow the correct line of their central committee. That evening the Sorbonne general assembly, which was effectively open to the workers, undertook to organize its own power, and René Riesel, who had expressed the most radical positions on the organization of the Sorbonne itself as well as on the total extension of the struggle that had begun, was elected to the first Occupation Committee. On the 15th the situationists in Paris addressed a circular to persons elsewhere in France and in other countries: *To the members of the SI and to the comrades who have declared themselves in agreement with our theses*. This text briefly analyzed the process that was going on and its possible developments, in order of decreasing probability: exhaustion of the movement if it remained limited “to the students before the antibureaucratic agitation has extended more deeply into the worker milieu”; repression; or finally, “social revolution?” It also contained an account of our activity up till then and called for immediate action to “publicize, support and extend the agitation.” We proposed as immediate themes in France: “the occupation of the factories” (we had just learned of the Sud-Aviation occupation that had taken place the night before); “the formation of workers councils; the definitive shutdown of the universities; and the complete critique of all forms of alienation.” It should be noted that this was the first time since the SI was formed that we ever asked anyone, however close they were to our positions, to do anything. All the more reason why our circular did not remain without response, particularly in the cities where the May movement was asserting itself most strongly. On the evening of the 16th the SI issued a second circular recounting the developments of the day and anticipating “a major confrontation.” The general strike interrupted this series, which was taken up in another form after May 20 by the emissaries that the CMDO sent throughout France and to various other countries.

Viénet’s book describes in detail how the majority of the members of the Sorbonne Occupation Committee, which was reelected *en bloc* by the general assembly on the evening of the 15th, soon after slunk away, yielding to the maneuvers and attempts at intimidation of an informal

bureaucracy (UNEF, MAU, JCR, etc.) that was striving to underhandedly recapture the Sorbonne. The Enragés and situationists thus found themselves with the responsibility for the Occupation Committee on May 16–17. When the general assembly of the 17th ended up neither approving the acts by which this Committee had carried out its mandate nor even disapproving them (the manipulators having prevented any vote in the assembly), we announced our departure from the played-out Sorbonne. Those who had grouped themselves around this Occupation Committee departed with us, and formed the core of the Council for Maintaining the Occupations. It is worth pointing out that the second Occupation Committee, elected after our departure, maintained its glorious bureaucratic existence without any turnover until the return of the police in June. *Never again was there any question of the assembly daily electing revocable delegates.* This Committee of professionals soon even went so far as to suppress the general assemblies altogether, which from their point of view were only a cause of trouble and a waste of time. In contrast, the situationists can sum up their action in the Sorbonne with the single formula: “All power to the general assembly.” It is thus amusing to hear people now talking about the situationists’ having “taken power” in the Sorbonne, when the reality of this “power” was to constantly insist on direct democracy there and everywhere, to constantly denounce the coopters and bureaucrats, and to demand that the general assembly fulfill its responsibilities by *making its own decisions and by seeing that they were carried out.*

By its consistent attitude our Occupation Committee had aroused the general indignation of the leftist manipulators and bureaucrats. If we had defended the principles and methods of direct democracy in the Sorbonne, we nevertheless had no illusions as to the social composition and general level of consciousness of that assembly. We were quite aware of the paradox of delegates being more resolute in their desire for direct democracy than were their mandators, and we saw that it couldn’t last. But we were more than anything striving to put the not inconsiderable means with which the possession of the Sorbonne provided us at the service of the wildcat strike that had just started. Thus the Occupation Committee issued a brief communiqué at 3:00 p.m. on the 16th calling for “the immediate occupation of all the factories in France and the formation of workers councils.” All the other reproaches against us were almost nothing in comparison to the scandal provoked everywhere — except among the “rank-and-file” occupiers — by this “reckless” commitment of the Sorbonne. Yet at that very moment two or three factories were already occupied, some of the NMPP truckdrivers were trying to block the distribution of newspapers and (as we were to learn two hours later) several Renault shops were successfully beginning to stop work. In the name of what, we wonder, could unauthorized individuals claim the right to manage the Sorbonne if they did not support the workers’ right to seize all the property in the country? It seems to us that the Sorbonne, by declaring itself for such occupations, was making its last response that still remained at the level of the movement that the factories were fortunately to carry on, that is to say, at the level of the response the factories themselves had made to the first limited struggles in the Latin Quarter. This appeal certainly did not run counter to the intentions of the majority of people who were at the Sorbonne and who did so much to spread it. Moreover, as the factory occupations spread, even the leftist bureaucrats changed their minds and expressed their support of a *fait accompli* on which they had not dared to take a stand the day before, though they continued to vehemently oppose the idea of councils. The occupations movement did not really need the approval of the Sorbonne in order to spread to other factories. But beyond the fact that at that moment every hour counted in linking up all the factories with the action initiated by a few of them, while the unions were stalling everywhere in order to pre-

vent a general work stoppage; and beyond the fact that we knew that such an appeal, coming from the Sorbonne Occupation Committee, would immediately be widely disseminated, even by radio — beyond all this, it seemed to us above all important to show the *maximum* toward which the struggle that was beginning should aim right away. But the factories did not go so far as to form councils, and the strikers who began to come to the Sorbonne certainly did not discover any exemplary model there.

It seems likely that this appeal contributed here and there to opening up perspectives of radical struggle. In any case, it certainly figured among the events of that day that awakened the greatest fears. At 7:00 in the evening the Prime Minister issued an official statement declaring that “in view of the various attempts announced or initiated by extremist groups to provoke a generalized agitation,” the government would do everything possible to maintain “public peace” and republican order, “since university reform is turning into a mere pretext for plunging the country into disorder.” At the same time, 10,000 state trooper reservists were called up. “University reform” was indeed merely a pretext, even for the government, which masked its retreat in the face of the Latin Quarter riot behind this suddenly discovered respectable necessity.

The Council for Maintaining the Occupations, which at first occupied the IPN on Rue d’Ulm, did its best during the remainder of the crisis, to which, from the moment the strike became general and came to a defensive standstill, none of the then-existing organized revolutionary groups any longer had the means to make a notable contribution. Bringing together the situationists, the Enragés and some thirty to sixty other councilist revolutionaries (of whom less than a tenth could be considered students), the CMDO established a large number of linkups both within and outside France, making a special effort, toward the end of the movement, to communicate its significance to revolutionaries of other countries, who could not fail to be inspired by it. It published a number of posters and texts — around 200,000 copies of each in some cases — of which the most important were “Report on the Occupation of the Sorbonne” (May 19), “For the Power of the Workers Councils” (May 22) and “Address to All Workers” (May 30). The CMDO, which had been neither directed nor organized by anyone for the future, “decided to dissolve itself on June 15... The CMDO had not sought to obtain anything *for itself*, not even any sort of recruitment in view of a continued existence. Its participants did not separate their personal goals from the general goals of the movement. They were independent individuals who had grouped together for a struggle on determined bases at a specific moment; and who again became independent after its dissolution.” (Viénet, *op. cit.*) The Council for Maintaining the Occupations had been “a bond, not a power.”

Some people have reproached us, during May and since then, for having criticized everybody and for thus having presented the situationists’ activity as the only acceptable one. This is not true. We approved the mass movement in all its depth and the remarkable initiatives of tens of thousands of individuals. We approved of the conduct of several revolutionary groups that we knew of in Nantes and Lyon, as well as the acts of all those who were in contact with the CMDO. The documents quoted in Viénet’s book clearly demonstrate that we also *partially* approved of a number of statements issued by some of the Action Committees.⁹ It is certain that many groups

⁹ Besides numerous SI, Enragé and CMDO texts, Viénet’s book reproduces a critique of the health-care system by the National Center of Young Doctors, a critique of advertising by a group of ad designers, a manifesto against the commercial manipulation of soccer by the Soccer Players Action Committee, and leaflets by a Yugoslavian woman, by the North African Action Committee, by the strike committee of a large department store, by airlines workers, by postal workers, and by several revolutionary groups.

or committees that were unknown to us during the crisis would have had our approval if we had been aware of them — and it is even more obvious that in being unaware of them we could in no way have criticized them. On the other hand, in regard to the little leftist parties or the March 22nd Movement, or people like Barjonet or Lapassade, it would indeed be surprising if anyone expected some polite approbation from us, considering our previous positions and the activity of these people during May.

Neither have we claimed that certain forms of action that characterized the occupations movement — with the possible exception of the use of critical comic strips — had a directly situationist origin. On the contrary, we see the origin of all these forms in “wildcat” *workers’ struggles*; and for several years our journals have pointed them out as they developed and clearly specified where they came from. Workers were the first to attack a newspaper building to protest against the falsification of news concerning them (Liège, 1961); to burn cars (Merlebach, 1962); to begin writing on the walls the formulas of the new revolution (“Here freedom ends,” on a wall of the Rhodiaceta factory, 1967). On the other hand, we can point out, as a clear prelude to the Enragés’ activity at Nanterre, the fact that on 26 October 1966 in Strasbourg a university professor was for the first time attacked and driven from his podium: that was the fate to which the situationists subjected the cybernetician Abraham Moles at his inaugural lecture.

All the texts issued by the situationists during the occupations movement show that we never spread any illusions as to the chances for a complete success of the movement. We knew that this objectively possible and necessary revolutionary movement had begun from a subjectively very low level: spontaneous and fragmented, unaware of its own past and of its overall goals, it was reemerging after a half century of repression and in the face of its still firmly entrenched bureaucratic and bourgeois vanquishers. A lasting revolutionary victory was in our eyes only a very slim possibility between May 17 and May 30. But the moment this chance existed, we showed it to be the *maximum* that had come to be at stake as soon as the crisis reached a certain point, and as something certainly worth risking. From our point of view the movement was already a historic victory, regardless of where it might go from there, and we thought that *even half* of what had already happened would already have been a very significant result.

Nobody can deny that the SI, in contrast in this regard, too, to all the leftist groups, refused to make any propaganda for itself. The CMDO did not raise any “situationist banner” and none of our texts of the period mentioned the SI except in the one instance when we responded to the impudent invitation for a common front issued by Barjonet the day after the Charléty meeting. And amid all the brand-name initials of groups pretending to a leadership role, not a single inscription mentioning the SI was to be found on the walls of Paris, even though our partisans were undoubtedly the best and most prolific writers of graffiti.

It seems to us — and we present this conclusion first of all for the comrades of other countries that will experience crises of this nature — that these examples show what can be done in the first stage of reappearance of the revolutionary proletarian movement by a few basically coherent individuals. In May there were only ten or twelve situationists and Enragés in Paris and none in the rest of France. But the fortunate conjunction of spontaneous revolutionary improvisation with a sort of aura of sympathy that existed around the SI made possible the coordination of a rather widespread action, not only in Paris but in several large cities, as if there had been a preexisting nationwide organization. Even more far-reaching than this spontaneous organization, a sort of vague, mysterious situationist menace was felt and denounced in many places; those who embodied this menace were some hundreds or even thousands of individuals whom the bureaucrats

and moderates called situationists or, more often, referred to by the popular abbreviation that appeared during this period, *situs*. We consider it an honor that this term “situ,” which seems to have originated as a pejorative term among certain student milieus in the provinces, served not only to designate the most extremist participants in the occupations movement, but also tended to evoke an image of vandals, thieves or hoodlums.

We do not think we avoided making mistakes. It is again for the benefit of comrades who may later find themselves in similar situations that we will enumerate them here.

On Rue Gay-Lussac, where we came together in small spontaneously assembled groups, each of these groups met several dozen acquaintances or people who merely knew us by sight and came to talk with us. Then everyone, in the wonderful disorder found in that “liberated neighborhood,” split up toward one or another “front line” or battle preparation long before the inevitable police attack. As a result, not only did all those people remain more or less isolated, but even our own groups were unable to keep in contact with each other most of the time. It was a serious mistake on our part not to have immediately asked everyone to remain grouped together. In less than an hour a group acting in this way would have inevitably snowballed and gathered together everyone we knew among the barricade fighters — among whom each of us ran into more friends than one chance to meet in Paris in a whole year. In this way we could have formed a band of two or three hundred people who knew each other and acted together, which was precisely what was most lacking in that dispersed fight. Of course, the vastly unequal forces (there were more than three times as many police surrounding the area as rioters, to say nothing of their superior arms) would have doomed this struggle to defeat in any case. But such a group would have made possible a certain freedom of maneuver, either by counterattacking at some spot or by extending the barricades to the east of Rue Mouffetard (an area rather poorly controlled by the police until very late) in order to open a path of retreat for all those who were caught in the dragnet (several hundred escaped only by chance, thanks to the precarious refuge of the École Normale Supérieure).

In and with the Sorbonne Occupation Committee we did virtually everything we could have done, considering the conditions and hurriedness of the moment. We cannot be reproached for not having done more to alter the architecture of that dismal edifice, which we didn’t even have the time to scout out. It is true that a chapel remained there (closed), but our posters — and also Riesel in his statement in the general assembly on May 14 — had appealed to the occupiers to destroy it as soon as possible. As for “Radio Sorbonne,” it had no transmitter so we cannot be blamed for not having used it. It goes without saying that we neither considered nor prepared for setting the building on fire on May 17, as was rumored at that time following some obscure slanders on the part of certain leftist groups: the date alone suffices to show how ill-advised such a project would have been. Neither did we spread ourselves thin in routine details, however useful we may recognize them to have been. It is thus a pure fantasy when Jean Maitron states, “The Sorbonne restaurant and cooking ... remained under the control of the ‘situationists’ until June. There were very few students among them, but many unemployed youth.” (*La Sorbonne par elle-même*, Éditions Ouvrières, 1968, p. 114.) We must, however, reproach ourselves for this error: from May 16, 5:00 p.m. on, the comrades in charge of sending the leaflets and declarations of the Occupation Committee to be printed replaced the signature “Sorbonne Occupation Committee” with “Occupation Committee of the People’s Free Sorbonne University” and no one thought anything about it. This was certainly a lapse of some importance because in our eyes the Sorbonne was of interest only as *a building seized by the revolutionary movement*, and this signature gave

the impression that we acknowledged it as still having some legitimacy as a *university* (albeit a “people’s free” one) — something we despise in any case and which was all the more unfortunate to seem to accept at such a time. A less important slip was made on May 17 when a leaflet composed by rank-and-file workers who had come from the Renault factory was circulated with the “Occupation Committee” signature. The Occupation Committee was quite right to provide these workers with means of expression without any censorship, but it should have been specified that this text was written by them and merely *printed* by the Occupation Committee; all the more so as these workers, while calling for a continuation of the “marches on Renault,” still accepted the unions’ phony argument according to which the factory gates should be kept closed so that the police could not derive from their being open a pretext or advantage for an attack.

The CMDO forgot to add to each of its publications the note “Printed by striking workers,” which certainly would have been exemplary and in perfect accord with the theories those publications expressed, and which would have been an excellent reply to the usual union printshop label. A more serious error: while an excellent use was made of telephones, we completely overlooked the possibility of using the *teletype machines*, which would have enabled us to get in touch with a number of occupied buildings and factories in France and to transmit information throughout Europe. In particular, we neglected the network of astronomical observatories, which was accessible to us at least by way of the occupied Meudon Observatory.

But everything considered, we do not see how the SI’s activities during the May movement merit any significant blame.

Let us now list the main *results* of the occupations movement so far. In France this movement was defeated, but in no way *crushed*. This is probably its most notable point and the one that presents the greatest practical interest. Probably never before has such a severe social crisis ended without a repression crippling the revolutionary current for a substantial period — a seemingly inevitable price that previously had to be paid for each moment of radical historical experience. Although of course numerous foreigners were administratively expelled from the country and several hundred rioters were convicted in the following months for various “common law” misdemeanors, there was no political repression properly speaking. (Although more than a third of the members of the CMDO had been arrested during the various confrontations, none of them were caught in this later roundup, their retreat at the end of June having been very successfully carried out.)¹⁰ All the political leaders who were not able to escape arrest at the end of the crisis were set free after a few weeks and not one of them was ever brought to trial. The government was forced to accept this new retreat merely to obtain a semblance of a calm reopening of the universities and a *semblance* of exams in fall 1968; this important concession was obtained as early as August by the mere pressure of the Medical Students Action Committee.

The depth of the revolutionary crisis has seriously thrown off balance “what was frontally attacked ... the *well-functioning* capitalist economy” (Viénet), not so much, of course, because of the wage increases, which the economy can easily bear, nor even because of the total paralysis of production for several weeks, but primarily because the French bourgeoisie *has lost confidence in the stability of the country*. This — in conjunction with other aspects of the present international monetary crisis — led to the massive exodus of capital and the crisis of the franc as early as November 1968 (the French reserves of foreign currency dropped from 30 billion francs in May

¹⁰ The Enragés, situationists and other CMDO members who were most directly implicated in the revolt escaped to Belgium for a few weeks until the momentary repression blew over.

1968 to 18 billion one year later). After the *delayed* devaluation of 8 August 1969 *Le Monde* began to notice that “May 1968 ‘killed’ the franc as well as the General.”

The “Gaullist” regime was nothing but a trivial detail in this general calling into question of modern capitalism. Nevertheless, de Gaulle’s power also received a mortal blow in May. We have previously shown how it was objectively easy for de Gaulle to reestablish himself in June, since the real struggle had already been lost elsewhere. But in spite of his reinstatement, de Gaulle, as the leader of the state that had *survived* the occupations movement, was unable to wipe out the blemish of having been the leader of the state that had been *subjected* to the scandal of such a movement’s existence. De Gaulle, who in his personal style only served as a cover for anything that might occur — specifically, for the normal modernization of capitalist society — had claimed to reign by prestige. In May his prestige was subjected to a definitive humiliation that was subjectively felt by him as well as objectively expressed by the ruling class and the voters who always support that class. The French bourgeoisie is now searching for a more rational form of political power, one that is less capricious and dreamy and that will be more intelligent in defending it from the new threats whose emergence so dumbfounded it. De Gaulle wanted to wipe out the persistent nightmare, “the last phantoms of May,” by winning on 27 April 1969 the referendum announced on 24 May 1968 but canceled that very night by a riot. He sensed that his tottering “stable power” had not recovered its equilibrium and he imprudently insisted on being quickly reassured by a factitious rite of reaffirmation of his cause. The demonstrators’ slogans on 13 May 1968 [e.g. “Ten years is enough”] turned out to be right: de Gaulle’s reign did not endure to its eleventh anniversary; not, of course, due to the bureaucratic or pseudoreformist opposition, but because after the Gay-Lussac uprising everyone realized that Rue Gay-Lussac opened on to all the factories of France.

A generalized disorder, calling in question the very foundations of all institutions, has taken hold of most of the university departments and especially the high schools. If the state, limiting itself to the most vital sectors, succeeded in largely reestablishing the functioning of the scientific disciplines and the elite professional schools, elsewhere the 1968–1969 academic year has been a complete loss and diplomas have been devalued, though they are still far from being despised by the mass of students. Such a situation is in the long run incompatible with the normal functioning of an advanced industrial country, triggering a fall into underdevelopment by creating a qualitative bottleneck in secondary education. Even if the extremist current has in reality only retained a narrow base in the student milieu, this seems to be enough to maintain a process of continual deterioration: the occupation and sacking of the rectorate of the Sorbonne at the end of January, and a number of serious incidents since then, have shown that merely maintaining some sort of pseudoeducation constitutes a subject of considerable concern for the forces of order.

In the factories, where the workers have learned how to carry out wildcat strikes and where there is an implantation of radical groups more or less consciously opposed to the unions, the sporadic agitation has, despite the efforts of the bureaucrats, led to numerous partial strikes that easily paralyze the increasingly concentrated enterprises in which the different operations become increasingly interdependent. These tremors do not allow anyone to forget that the ground under the enterprises is still shaky, and that in May the *modern* forms of exploitation revealed both their interrelatedness and their new fragility.

With the deterioration of the old orthodox Stalinism (discernable even in the losses of the CGT in recent union elections), it is now the turn of the little leftist parties to lose their credibility through bungling maneuvers: almost all of them would have liked to *mechanically* recommence

the May process in order to repeat their errors there. They easily infiltrated what remained of the Action Committees, which soon faded away. The little leftist parties are themselves splitting into numerous hostile tendencies, each one holding firm to some stupidity that prides itself on excluding all the stupidities of its rivals. The radical elements have become more numerous since May, but are still scattered — particularly in the factories. Because they have not yet proved capable of organizing a genuinely autonomous practice, the coherence they have to acquire is still distorted and obscured by old illusions, or verbosity, or sometimes even by an unhealthy unilateral “pro-situationist” admiration. Their only path, which is obviously going to be long and difficult, has nevertheless been mapped out: the formation of *councilist* organizations of revolutionary workers, federating with each other on the sole basis of total democracy and total critique. Their first theoretical task will be to combat and refute in practice the last form of ideology the old world will set against them: *councilist ideology*. At the end of the crisis the Toulouse-based *Révolution Internationale* group expressed a preliminary crude form of this ideology, quite simply proposing (we don’t know, moreover, to whom) that workers councils should be *elected above* the general assemblies, whose only task would thus be to ratify the acts of this wise revolutionary neoleadership. This Lenino-Yugoslavian monstrosity, since adopted by Lambert’s “Trotskyist Organization,” is almost as bizarre nowadays as the Gaullists’ use of the phrase “direct democracy” when they were infatuated with referendary “dialogue.” The next revolution will recognize as councils only sovereign rank-and-file general assemblies, in the enterprises and the neighborhoods, whose delegates are answerable to those assemblies alone and always subject to recall by them. A councilist organization will never defend any other goal: it must translate into acts a dialectic that supersedes the rigid, one-sided extremes of spontaneism, on one hand, and of openly or covertly bureaucratized organization on the other. It must be an organization advancing *revolutionarily* toward the revolution of the councils; an organization that neither disperses at the first moment of declared struggle nor institutionalizes itself.

This perspective is not limited to France, it is international. The total significance of the occupations movement must be understood everywhere. Already in 1968 its example touched off, or pushed to higher levels, severe disorders throughout Europe and in America and Japan. The most remarkable immediate consequences of May were the bloody revolt of the Mexican students, which was able to be crushed due to its relative isolation, and the Yugoslavian students’ movement against the bureaucracy and for proletarian self-management, which partially drew in the workers and put Tito’s regime in great danger. What finally came to the rescue of the latter, more than the concessions proclaimed by the ruling class, was the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia, which allowed the Yugoslavian regime to rally the country around itself by brandishing the menace of an invasion by a foreign bureaucracy. The hand of the new International is beginning to be denounced by the police of several countries, who believe they have discovered the directives of French revolutionaries in Mexico during summer 1968 and in the anti-Russian demonstration in Prague on 28 March 1969. The Franco government explicitly justified its recourse to martial law at the beginning of this year by stating that the university agitation in Spain risked developing into a general crisis of the French type. England has been experiencing wildcat strikes for a long time, and one of the main goals of the Labour government is obviously to succeed in prohibiting them; but it was unquestionably this first experience of a general wildcat strike that led Wilson to strive with such urgency and determination to obtain repressive legislation against this type of strike this year. This careerist didn’t hesitate to risk his career, and even the very unity of the Labour party-union bureaucracy, on the “Barbara Castle project,”

for if the unions are the direct enemies of wildcat strikes, they are nevertheless afraid of losing all importance by losing all control over the workers once the right to intervene against the real forms of class struggle is left solely to the state, without having to pass through their own mediation. On May 1 the antiunion strike of 100,000 dockers, printers and metal workers against the threat of this law was the first political strike in England since 1926: it is most fitting that this form of struggle has reappeared against a Labour government.

Wilson had to lose face by giving up his dearest project and handing back to the union police the task of repressing the 95% of work stoppages in England now caused by wildcat strikes. According to *Le Monde* (30 August 1969), however, the recent victory of the eight-week wildcat strike of the Port Talbot blast furnace workers “has proved that the TUC leadership is incapable of fulfilling this role.”

It is easy to recognize throughout the world the new tone with which a radical critique is pronouncing its declaration of war on the old society – from the graffiti on the walls of England and Italy to the extremist Mexican group *Caos*, which during the summer of 1968 called for the sabotage of the Olympics and of “the society of spectacular consumption”; from the acts and publications of the *Acratas* in Madrid to the shout of a Wall Street demonstration (AFP, April 12), “Stop the Show,” in that American society whose “decline and fall” we already pointed out in 1965 and whose very officials now admit that it is “a sick society.”

In Italy the SI was able to make a certain contribution to the revolutionary current as early as the end of 1967, when the occupation of the University of Turin served as the starting point for a vast movement; both by way of the publication of some basic texts (badly translated by publishers Feltrinelli and De Donato, but nevertheless rapidly sold out) and by way of the radical action of a few individuals (although the present Italian section of the SI was formally constituted only in January 1969). The slow evolution of the Italian crisis over the last twenty-two months – which has thus become known as “the creeping May” – first got bogged down in 1968 in the forming of a “Student Movement” that was much more backward even than in France, as well as being isolated – virtually the sole exemplary exception being the joint occupation of the city hall of Orgosolo, Sardinia, by students, shepherds and workers. The workers’ struggles also began slowly, but grew more serious in 1969 in spite of the efforts of the Stalinist party and the unions, who worked to fragment the threat by allowing one-day national strikes by category or one-day general strikes by province. At the beginning of April the Battipaglia insurrection, followed by the prison revolts in Turin, Milan and Genoa, pushed the crisis to a higher level and reduced even more the bureaucrats’ margin of maneuver. In Battipaglia the workers kept control of the town for twenty-four hours after the police opened fire, seizing arms, laying siege to the police holed up in their barracks and demanding their surrender, and blocking roads and trains. Even after the massive reinforcements of state troopers had regained control of the town and communications routes, an embryo of a council still existed in Battipaglia, claiming to replace the town government and expressing the inhabitants’ direct power over their own affairs. If the demonstrations in support of Battipaglia throughout Italy were regimented by the bureaucrats and remained Platonic, the revolutionary elements of Milan at least succeeded in violently attacking the bureaucrats and the police and ravaging the downtown area of the city. On this occasion the Italian situationists took up the French methods in the most appropriate manner.

In the following months the “wildcat” movements at Fiat and among the workers of the North have demonstrated, more clearly than has the complete collapse of the government, how close

Italy is to a *modern* revolutionary crisis. The turn taken in August by the wildcat strikes at Pirelli in Milan and Fiat in Turin point to the imminence of a total confrontation.

The reader will easily understand the main reason we have dealt here both with the general significance of the new revolutionary movements and with their relation with the theses of the SI. Until recently, even those who readily recognized an interest in some points of our theory regretted that we ourselves made the whole truth of that theory contingent upon the return of social revolution, which they considered an incredible “hypothesis.” Conversely, various activists with no real contact with reality, but taking pride in their eternal allergy to any relevant theory, posed the stupid question: “What is the SI’s practical activity?” Lacking the slightest comprehension of the dialectical process through which the real movement “meets its own unknown theory,” they all wanted to disregard what they believed to be an *unarmed critique*. Now this critique is arming itself. The “sunburst that in a flash reveals the features of the new world”¹¹ was seen in France in that month of May, with the intermingled red and black flags of workers’ democracy. The followup will appear everywhere. If we have to a certain extent marked the return of this movement with our name, it is not in order to hold on to any of it or to derive any authority from it. From now on we are sure of a satisfactory consummation of our activities: the SI will be superseded.

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¹¹ The quotation is from the Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

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