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Summer in France

I Love Paris When it Falls

Murray Bookchin

July 1968

The barricades have been cleared away and the paving stones replaced in their traditional arc like design along the streets. Revolutionary posters still remain on the walls, but they are tattering rapidly and many are nearly covered up by the drab election appeals of the Communist Party and the Gaullists. If you wander around looking for radicals who you befriended before the May events, many of them have disappeared. In most cases they're hiding, not in prison. Carried along the grand boulevards by the latest flood of summer tourists, you begin to wonder if reaction hasn't triumphed completely over the spirit of revolution—that is, until you meet your first French university students.

After talking for hours to over a dozen of them during my first few days in Paris, there is one thing that can be said with certainty: they mean to try it again. There is no evidence of despair or malaise; to the contrary, one phrase comes from every student's lips: "Wait till the next time..." "Next time" usually means October, when the universities and high-schools open again.

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Rat Subterranean News

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As if to underscore these predictions, street fights have been breaking out since the eve of Bastille Day along the Boulevard St. Michel, at the Place de Bastille, and along the Boulevard St. Germain. On the night of July 13, the air at the foot of Saint Michel was acrid with tear gas and the helmeted CRS, the “riot” police, were roaming the boulevard in packed formations, arresting people up to three A.M. On the same night at the Place de la Bastille, the crowds, mainly young unemployed workers, carried red flags and were subjected to gas and clubbings. The red flags had nothing to do with the Communists, who were conducting their own Bastille Day demonstration on the Isle de St. Louis bureaucratically oblivious to the clashes on their flanks.

On the next night, crabs again appeared near Odeon, along St. Germain, and the clashes were renewed. They burned a tricolor, clapping their hands to calypso beat that means “Ce/n’est/qu’un debut/continuons/le combat!” (“It is only the beginning. Let us continue the fight!”) Again tear gas, clubbings, skirmishes through the streets, arrests. The elan, the enthusiasm, the courage and festiveness of these crowds is absolutely infectious. You now know with certainty that the Gaullists have won a sham victory at the polls. The electoral success of the regime is as a feeble thing compared with this revolutionary ardor.

Looking at France from America, it is difficult to sense the scope and intensity of the May movement. Whatever may have been the original grievances that brought the students into the streets, these have long since been transcended by goals of an extremely revolutionary character. These goals represent a decisive departure from the demands raised by the “classical” revolutionaries of history. The revolutions of the past centered around “bread”—around scarcity, survival, and need. The student uprising takes its point of departure from an era of potential abundance. Its appeals cry for freedom, life, desire. The

walls of Paris, scrawled in black and red paint, proclaim intoxicating slogans like:

“Imagination to power”

“Life without dead times”

“Culture is the inversion of life”

“Society is a carnivorous flower”

“No more work”

“Creativity, spontaneity, life”

Inside the Sorbonne itself, a slogan sweeps around the curve a large classical alcove at the foot of the stairway to the main auditorium. “I take my desires for reality, for I believe in the reality of my desires.” Slogans of this kind are so numerous that they make up the contents of several recently published books. In fact books on May, photograph and poster collections, compendia of manifestoes and documents, an excellent biweekly, titled *Cahiers de Mai*, which is ferreting out the details of the student-worker movement throughout France, new periodicals like *L'Enragé* and the fiery, more authentic *L'Action*, are heaped on bookstalls and kiosks. The *Magazine Littéraire*, the equivalent of the *Saturday Review* in America, has discovered the anarchists and the cover of its latest issue proclaims “Les anarchistes—d’ou viennent? Qui sont? Que veulent?”

A fever of reading has gripped the city. Everyone is buying this material—part of it obvious exploitation by the publishing industry, but much of it surprisingly good and informative. Marcuse’s works, virtually unknown to most French students up to the May events have been touted by the bourgeois press as the primary intellectual “influence” in the revolt. So now there’s a sudden run on French translations of his books.

The point of course, is that the May events have turned from an effect into a cause. Not only are they events in their own right, but they have increased the social metabolism of the

entire country, adding a greater momentum to the crisis. Far from closing that remarkable phase in the revolutionary development of France, they have opened a new epoch of hope, passion and self-discovery. Millions of people in France have been stirred into a new sense of their power over the social system, and for an incalculable number this revolutionary awakening has converged into a resolution to take up the conflict on an even more advanced level.

The government knows this and has tried to obstruct the dissemination of news about the revolt. The press has not been tampered with, but motion pictures of the events are under a de facto ban. The police are looking for the cinematic footage of the events taken by radical cameramen, and this material, if found, will surely be confiscated. Public showings are forbidden.

The government has also outlawed the March 22 Movement (the most militant and authentic of the student groups to emerge from the May events), a number of anarchist groups, the Trotskyist JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth), the Maoists, and curiously enough, the FER (Federation of Revolutionary Students), another Trotskyist group that is now thoroughly detested because of its bureaucratic manipulative methods and its efforts to divert the students from barricade-fighting into orderly demonstrations.

Since the May events, however, the repression has not been harsh. There were severe beatings during the earlier street fighting on the barricades and in the jails. Press reports of police brutality, amply reported in almost all the newspapers, greatly embarrassed the regime and a certain amount of restraint is now evident. Police work has centered mainly around finding out who the “new” radicals are, and investigating the “new” movements that contributed to the uprising. Having suddenly discovered a threat to its very existence, the state is raking over the entire student body, gathering information on its “leaders,” on “trouble makers”

and on the “enragés.” Apparently, these are the people the police plan to “pick up” if or when “next time” comes around.

The futility of this investigation is obvious: “they,” the “leaders,” are everywhere. In the event of another uprising the police would have to pick up most of the eight million young people in France who range between the ages of 16 and 21—and not only the students who initiated the uprising, but also the young workers who spearheaded the general strike and the seizure of the factories. It would have to change the very basis of French society, indeed, dissolve the state apparatus itself. For what these young people want now can no longer be satisfied by a car, a little box in the suburbs, or a secure career in a bureaucratic, manipulated society. What they want, in Stephen Spender’s words, is a revolution that is equated “with spontaneity, participation, communication, love youth.” The newly forged relations between students and young workers “dramatize a struggle not between proletarian and capitalist interests so much as between forces of life and the dead oppressive weight of the bourgeoisie. They are against the consumer society, paternalism, bureaucracy, impersonal party programs and static party hierarchies. Revolution must not become ossified. It is la revolution permanente.”

It is this revolution permanente—conceived not as a sectarian formula but as a totality, as revolution invading and changing every aspect and corner of life—that is now percolating through France. The youth of France are demanding not the “seizure of power” but its dissolution: they are demanding not the conquest of “history,” but the right of each individual to control all the conditions of his everyday life.