

The May–June Events in France

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1. France: A Movement for Life

The Quality of Everyday Life

The 1968 May–June uprising was one of the most important events to occur in France since the Paris Commune of 1871. Not only did it shake the foundations of bourgeois society in France, it raised issues and posed solutions of unprecedented importance for modern industrial society. It deserves the closest study and the most thoroughgoing discussion by revolutionaries everywhere.

The May–June uprising occurred in an industrialized, consumption-oriented country—less developed than the United States, but essentially in the same economic category. The uprising exploded the myth that the wealth and resources of modern industrial society can be used to absorb all revolutionary opposition. The May–June events showed that contradictions and antagonisms in capitalism are not eliminated by stratification and advanced forms of industrialism, but changed in form and character.

The fact that the uprising took everyone by surprise, including the most sophisticated theoreticians in the Marxist, Situationist and anarchist movements, underscores the importance of the May–June events and raises the need to re-examine the sources of revolutionary unrest in modern society. The graffiti on the walls of Paris—“Power to the Imagination,” “It is forbidden to forbid,” “Life without dead times,” “Never work”—represent a more probing analysis of these sources than all the theoretical tomes inherited from the past. The uprising revealed that we are at the end of an old era and well into the beginning of a new one. The motive forces of revolution today, at least in the industrialized world, are not simply scarcity and material need, but also *the quality of everyday life, the demand for the liberation of experience, the attempt to gain control over one’s own destiny*. It matters little that the graffiti on the walls of Paris were initially scrawled by a small minority. From everything I have seen, it is clear that the graffiti (which now form the content of several books) have captured the imagination of many thousands in Paris. They have touched the revolutionary nerve of the city.

The Spontaneous Majority Movement

The revolt was a majority movement in the sense that it cut across nearly all the class lines in France. It involved not only students and workers, but technicians, engineers and clerical people in nearly every stratum of the state, industrial and commercial bureaucracy. It swept in professionals and laborers, intellectuals and football players, television broadcasters and subway workers. It even touched the gendarmerie of Paris, and almost certainly affected the great mass of conscript soldiers in the French army.

The revolt was initiated primarily by the young. It was begun by university students, then it was taken up by young industrial workers, unemployed youth, and the “leather jackets”—the so-called “delinquent youth” of the cities. Special emphasis must be given to high school students and adolescents, who often showed more courage and determination than the university students. But the revolt swept in older people as well—blue and white-collar workers, technicians and professionals. Although it was catalyzed by conscious revolutionaries, especially by anarchist affinity groups whose existence no one had even faintly supposed, the flow, the movement of the uprising was spontaneous. No one had “summoned it forth”; no one had “organized” it; no one succeeded in “controlling” it.

A festive atmosphere prevailed throughout most of the May–June days, an awakening of solidarity, of mutual aid, indeed of a selfhood and self-expression that had not been seen in Paris since the Commune. People literally discovered themselves and their fellow human beings anew or remade themselves. In many industrial towns, workers clogged the squares, hung out red flags, read avidly and discussed every leaflet that fell into their hands. A fever for life gripped millions, a reawakening of senses that people never thought they possessed, a joy and elation they never thought they could feel. Tongues were loosened, ears and eyes acquired a new acuity. There was singing with new, and often ribald, verses added to old tunes. Many factory floors were turned into dance floors. The sexual inhibitions that had frozen the lives of so many young people in France were shattered in a matter of days. This was not a solemn revolt, a *coup d'état* bureaucratically plotted and manipulated by a “vanguard” party; it was witty, satirical, inventive and creative—and therein lay its strength, its capacity for immense self-mobilization, its infectiousness.

Many people transcended the narrow limitations that had impeded their social vision. For thousands of students, the revolution destroyed the prissy, tight-assed sense of “studenthood”—that privileged, pompous state that is expressed in America by the “position paper” and by the stuffy sociologese of the “analytical” document. The individual workers who came to the action committees at Censier¹ ceased to be “workers” as such. They became revolutionaries. And it is precisely on the basis of this new identity that people whose lives had been spent in universities, factories and offices could meet freely, exchange experiences and engage in common actions without any self-consciousness about their social “origins” or “background.”

The revolt had created the beginnings of its own classless, nonhierarchical society. Its primary task was to extend this qualitatively new realm to the country at large—to every corner of French society. Its hope lay in the extension of self-management in all its forms—the general assemblies and their administrative forms, the action committees, the factory strike committees—to all areas of the economy, indeed to all areas of life itself. The most advanced consciousness of this task seems to have appeared not so much among the workers in the more traditional industries, where the Communist-controlled CGT exercises great power, as among those in newer, more technically advanced industries, such as electronics. (Let me emphasize that this is a tentative conclusion, drawn from a number of scattered but impressive episodes that were related to me by young militants in the student-worker action committees.)

Authority and Hierarchy

Of paramount importance is the light that the May–June revolt cast on the problem of authority and hierarchy. In this respect it challenged not only the conscious processes of individuals, but also their most important unconscious, socially conditioned habits. (It does not have to be argued at any great length that the habits of authority and hierarchy are instilled in the individual at the very outset of life in the family milieu of infancy, in childhood education” at home and in school, in the organization of work, “leisure” and everyday life. This shaping of the character structure of the individual by what seem like “archetypal” norms of obedience and command constitutes the very essence of what we call the “socialization” of the young.)

The mystique of bureaucratic “organization,” of imposed, formalized hierarchies and structures, pervades the most radical movements in nonrevolutionary periods. The remarkable susceptibil-

¹ The new building of the Sorbonne Faculty of Letters.

ity of the left to authoritarian and hierarchical impulses reveals the deep roots of the radical movement in the very society it professedly seeks to overthrow. In this respect, nearly every revolutionary organization is a potential source of counterrevolution. Only if the revolutionary organization is so “structured” that its forms reflect the direct, decentralized forms of freedom initiated by the revolution, only if the revolutionary organization fosters in the revolutionist the lifestyles and personalities of freedom, can this potential for counterrevolution be diminished. Only then is it possible for the revolutionary movement to dissolve into the revolution, to disappear into its new, directly democratic social forms like surgical thread into a healing wound.

The act of revolution rips apart all the tendons that hold authority and hierarchy together in the established order. The direct entry of the people into the social arena is the very *essence* of revolution. Revolution is the most advanced form of direct action. By the same token, direct action in “normal” times is the indispensable preparation for revolutionary action. In both cases, there is a substitution of social action from below for political action within the established, hierarchical framework. In both cases, there are molecular changes of “masses,” classes and social strata into revolutionary individuals. This condition must become, permanent if the revolution is to be successful if it is not to be transformed into a counterrevolution masked by revolutionary ideology. Every formula, every organization, every “tried-and-tested” program, must give way to the demands of the revolution. There is no theory, program or party that has greater significance than the revolution itself.

Among the most serious obstacles to the May–June uprising were not only de Gaulle and the police, but also the hardened organizations of the left—the Communist Party that suffocated initiative in many factories and the Leninist and Trotskyist groups that created such a bad odor in the general assembly of the Sorbonne. I speak here not of the many individuals who romantically identified themselves with Che, Mao, Lenin or Trotsky (often with all four at once), but of those who surrendered their entire identity, initiative and volition to tightly disciplined, hierarchical organizations. However well-intentioned these people may have been, it became their task to “discipline” the revolt, more precisely, to de-revolutionize it by imbuing it with the habits of obedience and authority that their organizations have assimilated from the established order. These habits, fostered by participation in highly structured organizations modeled, in fact, on the very society the “revolutionaries” profess to oppose—led to parliamentary maneuvering, secret caucusing, and attempts to “control” the revolutionary forms of freedom created by the revolution. They produced in the Sorbonne assembly a poisonous vapor of manipulation. Many students to whom I spoke were absolutely convinced that these groups were prepared to destroy the Sorbonne assembly if they could not “control” it. The groups were concerned not with the vitality of the revolutionary forms but with the growth of their own organizations. Having created authentic forms of freedom in which everyone could freely express his viewpoint, the assembly would have been perfectly justified to have banned all bureaucratically organized groups from its midst.

It remains to the lasting credit of the March 22nd Movement that it merged into the revolutionary assemblies and virtually disappeared as an organization, except in name. In its own assemblies, March 22nd arrived at all its decisions by the “sense of the assembly,” and it permitted all tendencies within its midst to freely test their views in practice. Such tolerance did not impair its “effectiveness”; this anarchic movement, by the common agreement of nearly all observers, did more to catalyze the revolt than any other student group. What distinguishes March 22nd and

groups such as the anarchists and Situationists from all others is that they worked not for the “seizure of power” but for its dissolution.

The Dialectic of Modern Revolution

The French events of May and June reveal, vividly and dramatically, the remarkable dialectic of revolution. The everyday misery of a society is highlighted by the possibilities for the realization of desire and freedom. The greater these possibilities, the more intolerable the everyday misery. For this reason, it matters little that French society has become more affluent in recent years than at any time in its history. Affluence in its highly distorted bourgeois form merely indicates that the material conditions for freedom have developed, that the technical possibilities for a new, liberated life are overripe.

It is plain, now, that these possibilities have haunted French society for a long time, even if unperceived by most people. The insensate consumption of goods graphs, in its own warped way, the tension between the shabby reality of French society and the liberatory possibilities of a revolution today, just as a sedating diet and extravagant obesity reveal the tension in an individual. A time is finally reached when the diet of goods becomes tasteless, when the social obesity becomes intolerable. The breaking point is unpredictable. In the case of France, it was the barricades of May 10, a day which shook the conscience of the entire country and posed a question to the workers: “If the students, ‘those children of the bourgeoisie’, can do it, why can’t we?” It is clear that a molecular process was going on in France, completely invisible to the most conscious revolutionaries, a process that the barricades precipitated into revolutionary action. After May 10, the tension between the mediocrity of everyday life and the possibilities of a liberatory society exploded into the most massive general strike in history.

The scope of the strike shows that nearly all strata of French society were profoundly disaffected and that the revolution was anchored not in a particular class but in everyone who felt dispossessed, denied, and cheated of life. The revolutionary thrust came from a stratum which, more than any other, should have “accommodated” itself to the existing order—the young. It was the young who had been nourished on the pap of Gaullist “civilization,” who had not experienced the contrasts between the relatively attractive features of the prewar civilization and the shabbiness of the new one. But the pap didn’t work. Its power to co-opt and absorb, in fact, is weaker than was suspected by most critics of French society. The pap-fed society could not withstand the drive for life, particularly in the young.

No less important; the lives of young people in France, as in America, had never been burdened by the Depression years and the quest for material security that shaped the lives of their elders. The prevailing reality of French life was taken by the young people for what it is—shabby, ugly, egotistical, hypocritical and spiritually annihilating. This single fact—the revolt of the young is the most damning evidence of the system’s inability to prevail on its own terms.

The tremendous internal decay of Gaullist society, a decay long ante dating the revolt itself, took forms that do not fit into any of the traditional, economically oriented formulas of “revolution.” Much had been written about “consumerism” in French society to the effect that it was a polluting form of social stabilization. The fact that objects, *commodities*, were replacing the traditional subjective loyalties fostered by the church, the school, the mass media and the family, should have been seen as evidence of greater social decomposition than was suspected. The fact that traditional class consciousness was declining in the working class should have been evidence

that conditions were maturing for a majority *social* revolution, not a minority *class* revolution. The fact that “lumpen” values in dress, music, art and lifestyle were spreading among French youth should have been evidence that the potential for “disorder” and direct action was ripening behind the facade of conventional political protest.

By a remarkable twist of dialectic irony, a process of “debourgeoisification” was going on precisely when France had attained unprecedented heights of material affluence. Whatever may have been the personal popularity of de Gaulle, a process of deinstitutionalization was going on precisely when state capitalism seemed more entrenched in the social structure than at any time in the recent past. The tension between drab reality and the liberatory possibilities was increasing precisely when French society seemed more quiescent than at any time since the 1920s. A process of alienation was going on precisely when it seemed that the verities of bourgeois society were more secure than at any time in the history of the republic.

The point is that the issues that make for social unrest had changed qualitatively. The problems of survival, scarcity and renunciation had changed into those of life, abundance and desire. The “French dream,” like the “American dream” was eroding and becoming demystified. Bourgeois society had given all it could give on the only terms it was capable of “giving” anything—a plethora of shabby material goods acquired by meaningless, deadening work. Experience itself (not “vanguard parties” and “tried-and-tested programs”) became the mobilizing agent and source of creativity for the May–June uprising. And this is as it should be. Not only is it natural that an uprising *breaks out spontaneously*—a feature of all the great revolutions in history—but it is also natural that it *unfolds* spontaneously. This hardly means that revolutionary groups stand mute before the events. If they have ideas and suggestions, it is their responsibility to present them. But to use the social forms created by the revolution for manipulatory purposes, to operate secretly behind the back of the revolution, to distrust it and try to replace it by the “glorious party,” is wantonly criminal and unforgivable. Either the revolution eventually absorbs *all* political organisms, or the political organisms become ends in themselves—the inevitable sources of bureaucracy, hierarchy and human enslavement.

To diminish the spontaneity of a revolution, to break the continuum between *self*-mobilization and *self*-emancipation, to remove the *self* from the process in order to mediate it with political organizations and institutions borrowed from the past, is to vitiate the revolution’s liberatory goals. If the revolution does not start from below, if it does not enlarge the “base” of society until it becomes the society itself, then it is a mere *coup d’état*. If it does not produce a society in which each individual controls his daily life, instead of daily life controlling each individual, then it is a counterrevolution. Social liberation can only occur if it is simultaneously self-liberation—if the mass” movement is a self-activity that involves the highest degree of individuation and self-awakening.

In the molecular movement below that prepares the condition for revolution, in the self-mobilization that carries the revolution forward, in the joyous atmosphere that consolidates the revolution—in *all* of these successive steps, we have a *continuum* of individuation, a process in which power is dissolved, an expansion of personal experience and freedom almost aesthetically congruent with the possibilities of our time. To see this process and articulate it, to catalyze the process and pose the next practical tasks, to deal unequivocally with the ideological movements that seek to “control” the revolutionary process—these, as the French events have shown, are the primary responsibilities of the revolutionary today.

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2. Excerpts from a Letter

The Making of a Revolution:

What Happened...

What Could Have Happened...

You ask how the May–June revolt could have developed into a successful social revolution.² I shall try to give you my own views as clearly as possible. My answer applies not only to France, but to any industrialized country in the world. For what happened in France could be regarded as a model of social revolution in any advanced bourgeois country today. It astonishes me that there is so little discussion about France in the United States. The May–June events are the first really clear illustration of how a revolution can unfold in an industrially developed country in the present historical period, and they should be studied with the greatest care.

The general strike, let me point out, occurred not only because of the wage grievances that were piling up in France, but also—and mainly, in my opinion—because the people were fed up. Intuitively, unconsciously, and often quite consciously, the strikers were disgusted with the whole system, and they showed it in countless ways. A cartoon published in France after the May–June events shows a CGT official addressing the strikers: “What do you want?” he shouts. “Better pay? Shorter hours? Longer vacations?” Each time this Stalinist hack asks one of these questions, the strikers respond with silence. Finally, the CGT official cries out in anger; “Tell me, damn it! I am your representative!” And the strikers answer with a huge cry. “We want the revolution!”

To a very large extent, this response is accurate. The cartoon expressed a sentiment which was still very diffuse, of course, but was nevertheless quite real. That is why the cartoon was so popular in France when it came out. It expressed what many workers (especially young workers) felt in a vague way—and perhaps not so vaguely.

The student barricades of May 10 precipitated the general strike, the largest general strike in history. The workers (mainly the young workers) said to themselves, “if the students can do it, so can we.” And out of the Sud-Aviation plant in Nantes, a city with the strongest anarcho-syndicalist tendencies in France, came the general strike. The strike swept into Paris and brought out almost everybody, not only industrial workers. Insurance employees went out, as well as postal workers, department store clerks, professionals, teachers, scientific researchers. Yes, even the football players took over the building of their professional association and put out a banner that proclaimed, “Football belongs to the people!” It was not only a workers’ strike; it was a *people’s* strike that cut across almost all class lines. You must understand this, for it is a very important fact about the possibilities of our time. At Nantes, peasants brought their tractors into the city to help the movement and longshoremen emptied the holds of the ships to feed the strikers. The most advanced demands, I should emphasize, were raised in the *newer* industries—for example, in the electronics plants. In one such plant, a firm composed largely of highly skilled technicians, the employees declared publicly, “We have everything we want. We won large wage increases and longer vacations in negotiations we conducted last month [April]. We are now

² This is an excerpt from a letter written shortly after the May–June events.

striking for only one demand: workers' control of industry—and not only in our plant, but for all the plants in France.”

What an astonishing development! And this demand was precisely the key to the whole situation. The workers had occupied the plants. The economy was in their hands. Whether this sweeping movement would become a complete social revolution depended upon one thing—would the workers not only occupy the plants, but *work* them? This was the barrier that had to be surmounted. Had the workers begun to work the plants under workers' management, the revolt would have advanced into a full-scale social revolution.

Let us now try to imagine what would have happened if the workers had actually surmounted this barrier. Each plant would elect its own factory committee from among its own workers to *administer* the plant. (Here the workers could have counted on a great deal of cooperation from the technical staff, most of whom would have gone over to the revolution.) I emphasize “administer” because policy would be made by the workers in the plant, by an assembly of the workers on the factory floor. The factory committee would merely execute and coordinate these policies. Here you have true revolutionary democracy, and in the arena of production, where the means of life are made.

Let us go further (and what I shall describe was absolutely possible). The factory committees of all the local plants could now link together to form an area administrative council, whose function would be to deal with whatever supply problems exist. Each member of this council would be rigorously controlled by the workers in the plant from which he or she came and would be fully accountable to the factory assembly. The tasks of the council, I must emphasize, would be entirely administrative; many of its technical functions could be taken over by computers, and membership on the council would be rotated as often as possible.

Together with these industrial forms of organization, there would also be neighborhood organizations—assemblies corresponding to the French revolutionary sections of 1793, as well as action committees to perform the administrative tasks of the neighborhood assemblies. They too would form an administrative council, which would work with the factory committee council, the two meeting together periodically to deal with common problems. One of the most important functions of the neighborhood assemblies—the new “sections”—would be to recycle employment from nonproductive areas of the economy (sales, insurance, advertising, “government,” and other socially useless areas) into productive areas. The goal here would be to shorten the work week as rapidly as possible. In this way, everyone would benefit almost immediately from the new arrangement of society—both the industrial worker and, say, the ex-salesman whom the worker trains in the factory. All would get the means of life for a fraction of the time they devote to work under bourgeois conditions. The revolution would thus undercut the position of many counterrevolutionary elements who, from time immemorial, have argued that the old conditions of life were better than the new.

What is essential here is not the fine detail of this structure, which could be worked out in practice, but the dissolution of power into the assemblies, both factory and neighborhood. In the past, very little attention has been given to the role and importance of unmediated relations and popular assemblies. So strongly was the notion of “representation” fixed in the thinking of revolutionary groups and the people that the assemblies, where they existed, arose almost accidentally. Apart from the Greek ecclesia, they emerged, in most cases, not as a result of conscious design, but rather of fortuitous circumstances. Ordinarily, the various councils and committees in earlier revolutions were given enormous powers in formulating policy; the demarcation be-

tween administrative work and policy decisions was murky at best, or simply nonexistent. As a result, the committees and councils became social agencies exercising enormous political powers *over* society; they became a nascent state apparatus that rapidly acquired control over society as a whole. This can now be avoided, partly by making all committees and councils *directly* answerable to assemblies, partly by using the new technology to shorten the work week radically, thereby freeing the whole people for active participation in the management of society.

At first the various committees, councils and assemblies would use the existing mechanism of supply and distribution to meet the material needs of society. Steel would come to Paris the way it always has: by means of the same ordering methods and the same railways and trucks, probably operated by the same engineers and truck drivers. The postal, cable and telephone networks that were used before the revolution to request materials would be used again after the revolution. Finally, finished goods would be distributed by the same warehouses and retail outlets except that the cash registers would be removed. The principal functions of the new factory committee councils and neighborhood councils would be to deal with any bottlenecks and obstructive practices that might emerge and to propose changes that would lead to a more rational use of existing resources.

Capitalism has already established the physical mechanism of circulation—of distribution and transportation that is needed to maintain society without any state apparatus. This physical mechanism of circulation can be vastly improved upon, to be sure, but it would still be as workable the day after the revolution as it was the day before the revolution. It needs no police, jails, armies or courts to maintain it. The state is superimposed on this technical system of distribution and actually serves to distort it by maintaining an artificial system of scarcity. (This, today, is the real meaning of the “sanctity of property.”)

I must emphasize again that since we are concerned with human needs, not with profit, a vast number of people who are needed to operate the profit system could be freed from their idiotic work. So could many people who are occupied with working for the state. These people could join their brothers and sisters in productive jobs, thus drastically shortening everyone’s work week. In this new system, the producers and the community could jointly manage the economy from below, coordinating their administrative operations through factory committees, councils of factory committee representatives, and neighborhood action committees—all directly accountable to the plant and neighborhood assemblies, all recallable for their actions. At this point, society takes direct control of its affairs. The state, its bureaucracy, its armies, police, judges and jails, can disappear.

You may object that the old system of production and distribution is still centralized structurally and based on a national division of labor. Agreed; you are perfectly correct. But does its *control* have to be centralized? As long as policy is made from below and everyone who executes that policy is controlled locally, administration is socially decentralized although the means of production are structurally fairly centralized as yet. A computer used to coordinate the operations of a vast plant, for example, is an instrument for structural centralization. However, if the people who program and operate the computer are completely answerable to the workers in the plant, their operations are socially decentralized.

To pass from a narrow analogy to the broader problems of administration, let us suppose that a board of highly qualified technicians is established to propose changes in the steel industry. This board, we may suppose, advances proposals to rationalize the industry by closing some plants and expanding the operations of others in different parts of the country. Is this a “centralized”

body or not? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, only in the sense that the board is dealing with problems that concern the country as a whole; no, because it can make no decisions that *must* be executed for the country as a whole. The board's plan must be examined by all the workers in the plants that are to be closed down, and those whose operations are to be expanded. The plan itself may be accepted, modified, or simply rejected. The board has no power to enforce "decisions"; it merely offers recommendations. Additionally, its personnel are controlled by the plant in which they work and the locality in which they live.

Similar boards, I may add, could be established to plan the physical decentralization of the society—boards composed of ecologists as well as technologists. They could develop plans for entirely new patterns of land use in different areas of the country. Like the technicians who are dealing with the existing steel industry, they would have no decision-making powers. The adoption, modification or rejection of their plans would rest entirely with the communities involved.

But I've already traveled too much into the "future." Let us return to the May–June events of 1968. What of de Gaulle, the generals, the army, the police? Here we come to another crucial problem that faced the May June revolt. Had the armament workers not merely occupied the arms factories but worked them to arm the revolutionary people, had the railroad workers transported these arms to the revolutionary people in the cities, towns and villages, had the action committees organized armed militias—then the situation in France would have changed drastically. An armed people, organized into militias by its own action committees (and there are plenty of reservists among the young people to train them), would have confronted the state. Most of the militants I spoke to do not believe that the bulk of the army, composed overwhelmingly of conscripts, would have fired on the people. If the people were armed, every street could have been turned into a bastion and every factory into a fortress. Whether de Gaulle's most reliable troops would have marched upon them in these circumstances is very questionable. Alas, the situation was never brought to that point—the point that every revolution has to risk.

Let me emphasize again that all I have sketched out for you was perfectly possible. I write here of a reality that started the French revolution aries in the face. All that was necessary was for the workers to work the factories and turn their strike committees into factory committees. This decisive step was not taken; hence the people were not armed and the bourgeois system of property relations was not shattered. The Stalinists shrewdly deflected the revolutionary movement into political lines by calling for a Communist-Socialist coalition cabinet. Thus the struggle was channeled into an election campaign on strictly bourgeois grounds. For these reasons and others, the revolt receded and in so doing produced a "backlash" from the mass of people who were watching and waiting. These people might have been won to the revolution had it succeeded. They seemed to be standing by and saying; "Let's see what you can do." Once the revolt failed, however, they voted for de Gaulle. De Gaulle at least had reality; the revolution, on the other hand, had been vaporized by failure.

How did the Maoists and Trotskyists, the "vanguard" Bolshevik parties and groupuscules, behave? The Maoists opposed every demand for workers' control. (Some of them, after the revolt receded, began to revise their views and are now called "anarcho-Maoists"!) Chairman Mao had opined that workers' control is anarcho-syndicalism—hence a "petty bourgeois deviation." The job of the workers, cried the Maoists, was to "seize state power." Thus, in the name of "Bolshevik realism," the only basis for a social revolution—the occupation of the factories—was subordinated to abstract political slogans that had no reality in the living situation. Let me give you an example: marching to the Billancourt plant of Renault, the Maoists carried a big banner which read

“Vive the CGT!”—this at a time when the most revolutionary workers were carrying on a bitter struggle with the CGT and were trying to shed the bureaucratic apparatus with which the labor federation had saddled the workers. What the Maoists were saying was “put us in control of the CGT.” But who the hell wanted *them*?

The Trotskyists? Which ones—the FER? The JCR? The other two or three splits? The FER played an overtly *counterrevolutionary* role at almost every decisive point, condemning all the street actions that led to the general strike as “adventuristic.” The students had their hands full with them in the street-fighting before the Sorbonne, where they tried to get the students to go home, and in the barricade fighting on the night of May 10, when they denounced the students as “romantics.” Instead of joining the students, they held a “mass meeting at the Mutualité. All of this did not prevent the FER from politicking like mad in the corridors and assembly meetings of the Sorbonne-after the students had succeeded. As to the JCR, more often than not they dragged their feet and created a great deal of confusion in the Sorbonne assembly with their politicking. Toward the end of the May–June events, they held back the movement and accommodated themselves to the non-Stalinist electoral left.

What was “missing” in the May–June events? Certainly not “vanguard” Bolshevik parties. The revolt was afflicted with these parties like lice. What was needed in France was an awareness among the workers that the factories had to be *worked*, not merely occupied or struck. Or to put it differently, what the revolt lacked was a movement that could develop this *consciousness* in the workers. Such a movement would have had to be anarchic, similar either to the March 22nd Movement or the action committees that took over Censier and tried to help the workers, not dominate them. Had these movements developed before the revolt, or had the revolt lasted long enough for them to develop an impressive propaganda and action force, events might have taken a different turn. Anyway, the Communists combined with de Gaulle to deflect the revolt and finally destroy it.

In my opinion, these are the real lessons of the May–June events. In reading what I have written, it becomes very clear why Marxist-Leninists in America devote little discussion to the May–June events in France: the events, even the memory of them, challenge all their tenets, programs, and strategies.

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