

The Battle of the Streets: "C'est Pour Toi Que Tu Fais La Révolution"

DANIEL AND GABRIEL COHN-BENDIT

Danny the Red, to whom the mass media's way of understanding history gave an international reputation, was of course no more the maker or the "leader" of the March-June 1968 French uprising than Mark Rudd was the leader of the Columbia University rebellion of the same period. But like Rudd he seems to have deeply embodied and projected the spirit of that important moment. Vigorous, happy, impertinent—even his breathlessness seems precisely right.

The two passages below both come from Obsolete Communism; The Left-Wing Alternative, an analytic account of the March-June events co-authored by Daniel and his brother Gabriel Cohn-Bendit. The first comes early in the book; the last is the concluding chapter in its entirety.

THE BATTLE OF THE STREETS

PARIS HAD KNOWN many recent demonstrations at the Place de la Bastille and Place de la République—some for higher wages, others against American aggression in North Vietnam. The authorities knew the strategy of the traditional Left and felt confident that, if they could deal with militant workers, they would have little trouble with a lot of "mere children."

The police were in full control of the streets, and the political battles were being safely fought in the ministries and in parliamentary committees. Hence it seemed a very simple matter to send the forces of law and order into the Sorbonne, occupy all the faculties, and arrest four hundred students. Emerging from their libraries, from their lectures, or simply strolling back to college along the Latin Quarter, students suddenly

found themselves face to face with riot police (CRS) blocking the gates of the Sorbonne. Their reply was immediate, spontaneous, and quite unequivocal, and it was not even the students with the strongest political convictions who were the first to explode. Suddenly the walls were covered with such slogans as "Stop the repression," "CRS = SS," while the ranks of demonstrators swelled to unprecedented proportions. All hell broke loose when the first police vans left the Sorbonne filled with students being taken off for questioning.

"In the Latin Quarter at about 6:00 P.M., violent incidents occurred as students joined battle with police contingents." (*Le Monde*, May 5-6, 1968).

All night, special police squads poured into the district, every civilian was stopped, and anyone who even vaguely resembled a student was clubbed down mercilessly. More than one passerby who had nothing whatever to do with the demonstration spent an uncomfortable night in the police cells.

Hence the "riotous scenes" everyone talked about that night. What was so remarkable about the events of May 3 was the spontaneity of the resistance—a clear sign that our movement does not need leaders to direct it; that it can perfectly well express itself without the help of a "vanguard." It was this day that really mobilized student opinion; the first great ripple of a swelling tide. And not unexpectedly, the Communist students, bound to their party like Oedipus to his fate, did their utmost to stem that tide:

"Irresponsible leftists use the pretext of government inefficiency and student unrest in order to subvert the work of the faculties and to impede the mass of students from sitting for their examinations. These false revolutionaries behave, objectively, as allies of the Gaullist authorities and represent a policy that is objectionable to the majority of students, above all, to the sons and daughters of the working class." Clearly the Communists would do anything rather than try and understand the real issues.

I have said that the events of the day brought about an awakening of political awareness in many students. Take this eye-witness account published in the June issue of *L'Evènement*:

"Are you a member of the March 22 Movement?" they asked me.

I was still a little embarrassed, the speakers had talked of Marx and someone called Marcuse, of whom I had never even heard. The first time they mentioned that name I

asked them to spell it for me. I looked him up in Larousse, but I could not find him there.

I was told: "The Movement has proved its strength by boycotting the examinations." But to boycott partial examinations is something anyone can do—you can always sit them again. And in my case, I was quite happy to give mine a miss for personal reasons. And then one day, quite suddenly, I felt like jumping on to the platform and shouting: "I have been an imbecile, I always thought that personal revolt was the only way of telling the authorities to go and jump in the lake. But you have shown me that we can all stick together in Nanterre, that we need no longer be alone, and that no one has to wield the big stick to make us act in unison."

There were no membership cards, no followers, and no leaders. From then on everything went like greased lighting. Meetings, leaflets, and then we went out among the workers in Nanterre . . .

The unwelcome presence of the police on the campus gained the students the support of the University Teachers' Association (SNESUP), and also of four professors in Nanterre: Messrs. Lèfevre, Michaud, Touraine, and Ricoeur, who declared themselves willing to undertake the defense of those students who had been summoned to appear before the Disciplinary Committee in the Sorbonne on the following Monday. Their moral support took the press completely by surprise and did much to gain the students fresh sympathizers.

On Saturday, May 4, the police swooped again, and on Sunday, May 5, an emergency court sent six student demonstrators to jail. Proclamations in the press and over the radio then made it known that the demonstrations in support of the condemned students which had been called for Monday at nine o'clock were officially banned.

"On Monday, Paris saw its most impressive and threatening demonstration for many years. Even during the Algerian war there has never been a movement of such breadth and above all of such staying power." (*Le Monde*, May 8, 1968).

"We cannot allow those who are openly opposed to the university to seize that institution. We cannot tolerate violence in the streets, for violence is no way of starting any kind of dialogue." (Charles de Gaulle, May 7, 1968).

Many people have asked themselves how it was possible that so vast a movement should have erupted from what was apparently so unimportant an event as the closure of a university and the intervention of the police in student affairs. It is therefore important to explain how a relatively small number of

students succeeded in broadening the struggle against police repression to such an extent that it culminated in the occupation of the universities and the total rejection of their function in capitalist society. Learning through action plays a basic part in the genesis and growth of all revolutionary movements. From analyzing what is closest at hand, we can come to understand society at large.

The complexity of modern life and the frustration it brings in its wake are such that we are forced most of the time to submerge our deepest aspirations. Students, who have to swallow humiliation every day, are particularly subject to these frustrations, and so react all the more violently once they are aroused. Lull them with sweet promises about the future and they may be prepared to put up with petty restrictions, false values, hypocritical doctrines, and the lot, but bring out the police against them and you will find that you have stirred up a hornet's nest. The students started demonstrating at 9:00 A.M. and by the time they dispersed fourteen hours later, a mere trickle had swelled into a torrent, and "barricades" had sprung up in the streets. The students' determination, and above all their willingness to take on the police, was truly astonishing. They asserted their right to enter their own university, and to run it themselves for the benefit of all. The almost continuous confrontation with the police merely hardened their determination not to go back on their first claims: the release of all the imprisoned demonstrators, withdrawal of the police, and reopening of the faculties. I must add in parentheses that during the "Long March" of May 7, and during the demonstrations at the university annex at the Halle aux Vins, the various factions of the Left tried desperately to insinuate their own marshals in the vain hope of taking control. There were some 35,000 demonstrators present in the Champs Elysées alone and—*mirabile dictu*—they managed without any leaders at all. Unfortunately, the bureaucratic officials of UNEF, that moribund Student Union, who had been frustrated in their earlier attempts to take over the Movement, now called in the help of the trade-union bureaucrats who, at the Halle aux Vins and in the demonstrations that followed, were able to divert the Movement away from its original aim: the recapture of the Sorbonne. I do not want to pass an opinion on the strategic and tactical possibilities of capturing the Sorbonne at this point, but merely to show that all hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations must necessarily pervert all activities in which they participate to their own ends. Thus Alain Geismar explained to

the General Assembly of the March 22 Movement on May 8, how trade-union officials had used every trick in the book to force the student movement to opt for a program that would divert the struggle into purely reformist channels. In this they were greatly helped by Communist students and lecturers, who played a particularly treacherous part on May 8 at the Place du Luxembourg, when they called upon the students to disperse. This might well have spelled the end of the Movement, long before it had a chance to express its real demands: the overthrow of repressive society. Luckily the revolutionary students were not taken in; they realized that they themselves had the power to beat repression, even in the face of Communist Party and other bureaucratic obstruction. Indeed, UNEF, by launching appeals to "reason" and issuing communiqués through the press, merely mobilized an ever larger number of demonstrators. And so when Roche announced he would reopen the Sorbonne under police protection, the students replied with an improvised "teach-out," assembled in their thousands, and completely stopped the traffic in the Boulevard St. Michel. This teach-out was the first attempt to turn the Latin Quarter into a "public forum." Those responsible for the dispersal of the students in the Place du Luxembourg during the previous night were severely taken to task and asked to explain their actions. Direct democracy was being put into effect—under the very noses of the police. All the political and strategic problems of the past few days were brought up for discussion and thrashed out, not least among them the role of the university of the future. As the students stood talking they were joined by scores of passers-by, among them Louis Aragon, that venerable bard and prophet of the Communist Party, the man who had sung paeans of praise to OGPU and Stalinism, and who had come to take his place among those who "remind me so movingly of my own youth." A group of students recognized him and greeted him with cries of "Long live OGPU! Long live Stalin, the father of all the people!"

The Aragon episode, in itself banal and without political importance, nevertheless shows how politically aware the young demonstrators had become. They would have no truck with members of a party whose official organ, *L'Humanité*, had launched what could only be called a smear campaign against French youth. The revolutionary movement did not deny the importance, and even the necessity, of a dialogue with the rank and file of the Communist Party, but it did try to unmask the opportunist strategy and counterrevolutionary attitude of its

leaders, including Louis Aragon, the poet laureate of the personality cult. He could not make himself heard simply because those participating in the "teach-out" knew that he had nothing in common with them. His bold assertion that he was in the Party "precisely because he was on the side of youth" merely turned him into a laughing stock. By refusing to act honestly for once in his life, and to denounce the machinations of his Party, he threw away his chance to join the student movement, and incidentally saved his leaders a great deal of embarrassment.

Luckily the dialectic of events did not have to wait on an Aragon: we knew that the issue would be decided by the demonstrations called for next day and not by some Party demagogue or other. The people were clearly sympathetic, the National Assembly was divided, and we saw our chance to prove that the power of General de Gaulle would collapse like a house of cards if we went about it the right way. And here the police force itself came to our aid: by barring the route we had planned to take, they forced us into the Latin Quarter. Once there, we were determined not to disperse until all our demands had been met. And so we found ourselves drawn up in front of the CRS, facing their clubs—30,000 of us standing united and ready for action, but with no definite plan. No one seriously envisaged attacking the Sorbonne, no one wanted a massacre. All we knew was that we had to defend ourselves where we stood; we split up into small groups, so that the police services were unable to launch a single, directed attack. Every barricade became a center of action and of discussion, every group of demonstrators a squad acting on its own initiative. Barricades sprang up everywhere; no one felt the lack of a general in charge of over-all strategy; messengers kept everyone informed of what was happening on the other barricades and passed on collective decisions for discussion. In our new-found solidarity our spirits began to soar. For the first time in living memory, young workers, young students, apprentices, and high-school pupils were acting in unison. We could not guess what turn the events were going to take, but that did not bother us—all that mattered was that, at long last, we were all united in action. The Gaullist regime proved completely helpless in the face of this youthful demonstration of strength, and this was only a beginning! None of the lies that have been told since, nor yet the final sell-out by the CGT, can detract from this achievement. In a society which seeks to crush the individual, forcing him to swallow the same lies, a deep feeling of collective

strength had surged up and people refused to be browbeaten. We were no longer thousands of little atoms squashed together but a solid mass of determined individuals. We who had known the nagging ache of frustration were not afraid of physical hurt. This "rashness of youth" did not spring from despair, the cynicism of impotence, but, on the contrary, from the discovery of our collective strength. It was this feeling of strength and unity which reigned on the barricades. In such moments of collective enthusiasm, when everything seems possible, nothing could be more natural and simple than a warm relationship between all demonstrators and quite particularly between the boys and the girls. Everything was easy and uncomplicated. The barricades were no longer simply a means of self-defense, they became a symbol of individual liberty. This is why the night of May 10 can never be forgotten by those who were there. For bourgeois historians, the barricades will doubtless become symbols of senseless violence, but for the students themselves they represented a turning-point that should have its place among the great moments of history. The memory of the raids, the gas grenades, the wounds, and the injuries will surely remain, but we will also remember that night for the exemplary bravery of the "*communards*" or "*sans culottes*" of the rue Gay-Lussac, of young men and women who opened a new and cleaner page in the history of France.

C'EST POUR TOI QUE TU FAIS LA RÉVOLUTION

There is no such thing as an isolated revolutionary act. Acts that tend to transform society take place in association with others, and form part of a general movement that follows its own laws of growth. All revolutionary activity is collective, and hence involves a degree of organization. What we challenge is not the need for this but the need for a revolutionary leadership, the need for a party.

Central to my thesis is an analysis of the bureaucratic phenomenon, which I have examined from various viewpoints. For example, I have looked at the French workers' unions and parties and shown that what is wrong with them is not so much their rigidity and treachery as the fact that they have become integrated into the over-all bureaucratic system of the capitalist state.

The emergence of bureaucratic tendencies on a world scale, the continuous concentration of capital, and the increasing in-

tervention of the State in economic and social matters, have produced a new managerial class whose fate is no longer bound up with that of the private ownership of the means of production.

It is in the light of this bureaucratization that the Bolshevik Party has been studied. Although its bureaucratic nature is not, of course, its only characteristic, it is true to say that Communists, and also Trotskyists, Maoists, and the rest, no less than the capitalist state, all look upon the proletariat as a mass that needs to be directed from above. As a result, democracy degenerates into the ratification at the bottom of decisions taken at the top, and the class struggle is forgotten while the leaders jockey for power within the political hierarchy.

The objections to Bolshevism are not so much moral as sociological; what we attack is not the evil conduct of some of its leaders but an organizational set-up that has become its own and only justification.

The most forceful champion of a revolutionary party was Lenin, who, in his *What Is To Be Done?*, argued that the proletariat is unable by itself to reach a "scientific" understanding of society, that it tends to adopt the prevailing, i.e., the bourgeois, ideology.

Hence it was the essential task of the party to rid the workers of this ideology by a process of political education which could only come to them *from without*. Moreover, Lenin tried to show that the party can only overcome the class enemy by turning itself into a professional revolutionary body in which everyone is allocated a fixed task. Certain of its infallibility, a party appoints itself the natural spokesman and sole defender of the interests of the working class, and as such wields power on their behalf—i.e., acts as a bureaucracy.

We take quite a different view: far from having to teach the masses, the revolutionary's job is to try to understand and express their common aspirations; far from being Lenin's "tribune of the people who uses every manifestation of tyranny and oppression . . . to explain his Socialist convictions and his Social Democratic demands," the real militant must encourage the workers to struggle on their own behalf, and show how their every struggle can be used to drive a wedge into capitalist society. If he does so, the militant acts as an agent of the people and no longer as their leader.

The setting up of a party inevitably reduces freedom of the people to freedom to agree with the party.

In other words, democracy is not suborned by bad leadership

but by the very existence of leadership. Democracy cannot even exist within the party, because the party itself is not a democratic organization, i.e., it is based upon authority and not on representation. Lenin realized full well that the party is an artificial creation, that it was imposed upon the working class "from without." Moral scruples have been swept aside: the party is "right" if it can impose its views upon the masses and wrong if it fails to do so. For Lenin, the whole matter ends there. In his *State and Revolution*, Lenin did not even raise the problem of the relationship between the people and the party. Revolutionary power was a matter of fact, based upon people who are prepared to fight for it; the paradox is that the party's program, endorsed by these people, was precisely: All power to the soviets! But whatever its program, in retrospect we can see that the party, because of its basic conception, is bound to bring in privilege and bureaucracy, and we must wash our hands of all organizations of this sort. To try and pretend that the Bolshevik Party is truly democratic is to deceive oneself, and this, at least, is an error that Lenin himself never committed.

What then is our conception of the role of the revolutionary? To begin with, we are convinced that the revolutionary cannot and must not be a leader. Revolutionaries are a militant minority drawn from various social strata, people who band together because they share an ideology, and who pledge themselves to struggle against oppression, to dispel the mystification of the ruling classes and the bureaucrats, to proclaim that the workers can only defend themselves and build a socialist society by taking their fate into their own hands, that political maturity comes only from revolutionary struggle and direct action.

By their action, militant minorities can do no more than support, encourage, and clarify the struggle. They must always guard against any tendency to become a pressure group outside the revolutionary movement of the masses. When they act, it must always be with the masses, and not as a faction.

For some time, the March 22 Movement was remarkable only for its radical political line, for its methods of attack—often spontaneous—and for its nonbureaucratic structure. Its objectives and the role it could play became clear only during the events of May and June, when it attracted the support of the working class. These militant students whose dynamic theories emerged from their practice, were imitated by others, who developed new forms of action appropriate to their own situation. The result was a mass movement unencumbered by

the usual chains of command. By challenging the repressive nature of their own institution—the university—the revolutionary students forced the State to show its hand, and the brutality with which it did so caused a general revulsion and led to the occupation of the factories and the general strike. The mass intervention of the working class was the greatest achievement of our struggle; it was the first step on the path to a better society, a path that, alas, was not followed to the end. The militant minorities failed to get the masses to follow their example: to take collective charge of the running of society. We do not believe for a single moment that the workers are incapable of taking the next logical step beyond occupying the factories—which is to run them on their own. We are sure that they can do what we ourselves have done in the universities. The militant minorities must continue to wage their revolutionary struggle, to show the workers what their trade unions try to make them forget: their own gigantic strength. The distribution of petrol by the workers in the refineries and the local strike committees shows clearly what the working class is capable of doing once it puts its mind to it.

During the recent struggle, many student militants became hero-worshippers of the working class, forgetting that every group has its own part to play in defending its own interests, and that, during a period of total confrontation, these interests converge.

The student movement must follow its own road—only thus can it contribute to the growth of militant minorities in the factories and workshops. We do not pretend that we can be leaders in the struggle, but it is a fact that small revolutionary groups can, at the right time and place, rupture the system decisively and irreversibly.

During May and June, 1968, the emergence of a vast chain of workers' committees and subcommittees by-passed the calcified structure of the trade unions, and tried to call together all workers in a struggle that was their own and not that of the various trade-union bureaucracies. It was because of this that the struggle was carried to a higher stage. It is absurd and romantic to speak of revolution with a capital R and to think of it as resulting from a single, decisive action. The revolutionary process grows and is strengthened daily not only in revolt against the boredom of a system that prevents people from seeing the "beach under the paving stones" but also in our determination to make the beach open to all.

If a revolutionary movement is to succeed, no form of organization whatever must be allowed to dam its spontaneous flow. It must evolve its own forms and structures.

In May and June, many groups with these ideas came into being; here is a pamphlet put out by the ICO, not as a platform or program for action, but as a basis for discussion by the workers:

The aim of this group is to unite those workers who have lost confidence in the traditional labor organizations—parties and trade unions.

Our own experiences have shown us that modern trade unions contribute towards stabilizing and preserving the exploitative system.

They serve as regulators of the labor market, they use the workers' struggle for political ends, they are the handmaidens of the ruling class in the modern state.

It is up to the workers to defend their own interests and to struggle for their own emancipation.

Workers, we must try to understand what is being done to us all, and denounce the trade unions with their spurious claims that they alone can help us to help ourselves.

In the class struggle we intervene as workers together, and not on the basis of our job, which can only split our ranks. We are in favor of setting up committees in which the greatest number of workers can play an active part. We defend every nonsectarian and nonsectional claim of the working class, every claim that is in the declared interest of all. We support everything that widens the struggle and we oppose everything that tends to weaken it. We are in favor of international contacts, so that we may also get in touch with workers in other parts of the world and discuss our common problems with them.

We have been led to question all exploitative societies, all organizations, and such general problems as state capitalism, bureaucratic management, the abolition of the state, and of wage-slavery, war, racism, socialism, etc. Each of us is entitled to present his own point of view and remains entirely free to act in whatever way he thinks best in his own factory. We believe in spontaneous resistance to all forms of domination, not in representation through the trade unions and political parties.

The workers' movement forms a part of the class struggle because it promotes practical confrontations between workers and exploiters. It is for the workers alone to say how, why, and where we are all to struggle. We cannot in any way fight for them; they alone can do the job. All we can do is give them information, and learn from them in return. We can contribute to discussions, so as to clarify our common experience, and we can also help to make their problems and struggle known to others.

We believe that our struggles are milestones on the road to a society that will be run by the workers themselves. (*Information et Correspondance Ouvrières*).

From the views expressed by this and other groups, we can get some idea of the form that the Movement of the future must take. Every small action committee, no less than every mass movement which seeks to improve the lives of all men, must resolve:

(1) to respect and guarantee the plurality and diversity of political currents within the revolutionary mainstream. It must accordingly grant minority groups the right of independent action—only if the plurality of ideas is allowed to *express itself in social practice* does this idea have any real meaning;

(2) to ensure that all delegates are accountable to, and subject to immediate recall by, those who have elected them, and to oppose the introduction of specialists and specialization at every step by widening the skill and knowledge of all;

(3) to ensure a continuous exchange of ideas, and to oppose any control of information and knowledge;

(4) to struggle against the formation of any kind of hierarchy;

(5) to abolish all artificial distinctions within labor, in particular between manual and intellectual work, and discrimination on grounds of sex;

(6) to ensure that all factories and businesses are run by those who work in them;

(7) to rid ourselves, in practice, of the Judeo-Christian ethic, with its call for renunciation and sacrifice. There is only one reason for being a revolutionary—because it is the best way to live.

Reaction, which is bound to become more and more violent as the revolutionary movement increases its impact on society, forces us to look to our defenses. But our main task is to keep on challenging the traditional bureaucratic structures both in the government and also in the working-class movements.

How can anyone represent anyone else? All we can do is to involve them. We can try and get a few movements going, inject politics into all the structures of society, into the Youth Clubs, Youth Hostels, the YMCA, and the Saturday night dance, get out on to the streets, out on to all the streets of all the towns. To bring real politics into everyday life is to get rid of the politicians. We must pass from a critique of the university to the anti-university, open to all. Our challenge of the collec-

tive control of knowledge by the bourgeoisie must be radical and intransigent.

The multiplication of nuclei of confrontation decentralizes political life and neutralizes the repressive influence of the radio, television, and party politics. Every time we beat back intimidation on the spot, we are striking a blow for freedom. To break out from isolation, we must carry the struggle to every market place and not create Messianic organizations to do the job for us. We reject the policy committee and the editorial board.

In the vent, the students were defeated in their own struggle. The weakness of our movement is shown by the fact that we were unable to hold on to a single faculty—the recapture of the factories by the CRS (with the help of the CGT) might well have been halted by the working class, had there been a determined defense of a single “red base.” But this is mere speculation. What is certain is that the Movement must look carefully at its actions in May and June and draw the correct lessons for the future. The type of organization we must build can neither be a vanguard nor a rearguard, but must be right in the thick of the fight. What we need is not organization with a capital O, but a host of insurrectional cells, be they ideological groups, study groups—we can even use street gangs.

Effective revolutionary action does not spring from “individual” or “external” needs—it can only occur when the two coincide so that the distinction itself breaks down. Every group must find its own form, take its own action, and speak its own language. When all have learned to express themselves, in harmony with the rest, we shall have a free society.

Reader, you have come to the end of this book, a book that wants to say only one thing: between us we can change this rotten society. Now, put on your coat and make for the nearest cinema. Look at their deadly love-making on the screen. Isn't it better in real life? Make up your mind to learn to love. Then, during the interval, when the first adverts come on, pick up your tomatoes, or if you prefer, your eggs, and chuck them. Then get out into the street, and peel off all the latest government proclamations until underneath you discover the message of the days of May and June.

Stay awhile in the street. Look at the passers-by and say to yourself: the last word has not yet been said. Then act. Act with others, not for them. Make the revolution here and now. It is your own.

The Appeal from the Sorbonne

THE OPEN ASSEMBLY OF JUNE 13–14, 1968

The Appeal is not really marred by the few flagrant inconsistencies that appear in it (e.g., Thesis 10 holds that the revolution “will not be made.” Thesis 11, equally self-assured, holds that “we must make the revolution.” Radicals have faltered before in that space between fate and will). In its abrupt formulations, it evokes the gathering mood of combative anticipation and at the same time draws up a nearly definitive agenda for the forthcoming trial of Western identity; for it is clear that a form of civilization is henceforth in suspense about its survival and its right to survive, and that its survival somehow depends upon its ability to do away with itself.

THESIS 1

THERE ARE NO student problems. The “student” is a limited notion. We are privileged persons because we alone have the time, the material, and physical chance to understand our state and the state of our society. Let us abolish this privilege and act so that everyone may become privileged.

Students, we must not let ourselves be taken in again.

Students, we must be conscious of what we all did in confusion and haste in the streets.

Students, we must be clear and not accept being bought back, assimilated, or understood in our small problems as privileged persons.

Student, we are adults, we are workers, we are the responsible. Let us take the time to understand what we want and to show it clearly.