

WHEN **POETRY** RULED THE STREETS

The French May Events of 1968

Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman

with a foreword by Douglas Kellner



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GRAFFITI FROM THE WALLS OF PARIS: 1968

It is forbidden to forbid. Freedom begins by forbidding something: interference with the freedom of others.

Run comrade, the old world is behind you.

The Revolution must take place in men before occurring in things.

The walls have ears. Your ears have walls.

The act institutes the consciousness.

To desire reality is good! To realize one's desires is better.

The thought of tomorrow's enjoyment will never console me for today's boredom.

A single nonrevolutionary weekend is infinitely bloodier than a month of permanent revolution.

Beneath the cobblestones is the beach.

We are all German Jews.

Be salted, not sugared.

I am in the service of no one, the people will serve themselves.

The barricade blocks the street but opens the way.

Art is dead, liberate our daily life.

Life is elsewhere.

The restraints imposed on pleasure excite the pleasure of living without restraints.

The more I make love, the more I want to make the Revolution, the more I make the Revolution, the more I want to make love.

All power to the imagination!

Poetry is in the street.

UNE JEUNESSE QUE L'AVENIR
inquiète TROP SOUVENT.



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Frontispiece: Students in front of the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt in the south of Paris in 1968. Andrew Feenberg is visible in the background on the right reading a leaflet.

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FOREWORD

May 1968 in France: Dynamics and Consequences

In the historical memory of the Left, the Events of May 1968 in France have attained mythic proportion. The student uprising, workers' strikes, and factory occupations that erupted during a brief but explosive period in 1968 instilled fear in the hearts of ruling powers everywhere. They inspired those in revolt everywhere with the faith that social upheaval is possible and that spontaneous insurgency can overcome the force of circumstances. For an all-too-brief moment, imagination seized power, the impossible was demanded, and poetry and spontaneity ruled the streets.

Of course, the revolutionary energies of the May Events were soon exhausted, order was restored, and since then the significance of May 1968 has been passionately debated. Did the uprising reveal the exhaustion and bankruptcy of the existing political system and parties, or the immaturity and undisciplined anarchy of the forces in revolt? Did the Events indicate the possibility of fundamental change, or prove that the established system can absorb all forms of opposition and contestation? Did May 1968 signal the autonomy of cultural and social revolution, or demonstrate once again that the old economic and political forces still control the system and can resist all change?

By now, a small library of books and articles have addressed the May Events and offered a myriad of conflicting interpretations. After a series of activities in 1998 commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of May 1968 and as a new millennium dawns, the Events themselves are buried in the historical archives, shrouded in dim remembrance, and mystified by clichéd media images and discourses. It is thus extremely

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useful to have access for the first time in English to many key original documents accompanied by a lucid and engaging record of the Events. Feenberg and Freedman have assembled a valuable collection of primary documents that provide a feeling for the immediacy and passion of the May Events, that disclose the explosion of radical thought it elicited, and that provide important evidence of the discourse and action of resistance in an advanced capitalist society. The documents reveal the self-understanding of the actual participants in the Events and allow them to speak directly to us, across the ages to a different historical conjuncture.

As participants and firsthand observers of the Events, Feenberg and Freedman provide a lively account that allows today's readers to grasp the chronology and significance of the explosion in France and experience the excitement and drama of what now appears as one of the most surprising and powerful contestations of the established political and economic system in the second half of the twentieth century. Their narrative is engaging and spirited, capturing the novelty and intensity of the Events, their complexity and contradictions, and the genuine excitement of what now appears as the last major revolutionary uprising in the Western world.

Feenberg and Freedman also provide lucid interpretive perspectives to make sense of the Events of May 1968, and challenge the current and coming generations of students and workers to renew radical contestation in the struggle for social transformation. Their assembled documents and analyses suggest to us today that resistance and action is feasible, that students and intellectuals can be harbingers of social transformation and agents of effective action, and that an oppressive system can be challenged and changed.

Feenberg and Freedman present the May Events in the first instance as a revolt against a technocratic system and as evidence that contestation and alternatives to this system are viable. Their documents and analyses show that middle-class students, intellectuals, and artists can organize themselves to transform their immediate places of work and everyday life and can unite with workers to militate for fundamental social transformation.

May 1968 demonstrates as well that spontaneous action can erupt quickly and surprisingly, that it can provide alternatives to standard politics, and that a new politics is practical and necessary. The initial inability of established Left political parties and unions to support the students and workers suggests the irrelevancy of politics as usual and the need to go outside of ordinary political channels and institutions to

spark significant contestation and change. The Events also suggest the primacy of social and cultural revolution, of the need to change individuals, social relations, and culture as a prelude to political and systemic transformation. The total nature of the rebellion reflects the totalizing domination of the system that must itself be transformed if significant change is to take place.

Of course, the dispersion of revolutionary energy and aspirations, and the defeat of the more militant demands and forces, suggests as well that spontaneity is not enough, that passion and good ideas alone will not bring about change, and that the forms and organization of radical social change must be discovered. Feenberg and Freedman show that the radical student and worker cadres indeed put forward the concept of an alternative democratic organization of society and everyday life: self-management and the tradition of the workers' councils. Yet while autonomous, local organizing and struggle were defining features of the initial phase of the insurrection, and while demands for self-management and participation united students and workers in opposition, self-sustaining political organizations were never realized. Indeed, although the disparate groups came together in a General Strike that paralyzed French society and created conditions for genuinely revolutionary transformation, de Gaulle outmaneuvered the opposition and doomed it to defeat.

And yet people and social life were changed. I studied in France in 1971–1972 and almost all the young people I met told me with excitement of their participation in May 1968, swore that they would never conform or be “integrated” into the system, that the Events had changed their lives in significant ways. May 1968 was thus in retrospect a key event of the cultural revolution that was the 1960s, that most dramatically expressed the desire to break with established patterns of thought and behavior. May 1968 was an opening; it was a harbinger of a possible change that appeared to be in motion on a world-historical scale.

To properly understand the immediate force and lasting significance of the Events of May 1968 it should be stressed that the insurrection in France was part of what looked like a worldwide revolutionary movement, with branches in Latin America, China and Indochina, Japan, and Mexico. The May Events seemed to confirm that the system was under significant attack. The forces of contestation appeared to be gaining ascendancy on a world scale and would soon rupture the continuum of domination.

These hopes were dashed and a contradictory legacy of May 1968

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emerged instead. As the assembled documents attest, for participants in the May Events, communist parties and the model of Soviet Marxism were shown to be completely bankrupt, part and parcel of the existing system of domination, and incapable of promoting genuine social and political revolution. It was necessary to cut revolutionary hopes free of those discredited experiments in the East. But for some, that break combined with the reinstallation of the Gaullist order in France and defeat of the revolutionary forces disclosed the bankruptcy of politics itself, suggesting that opposition and alternatives could only come from the margins of society, that only sustained micropolitics was viable.

Thus, in place of the revolutionary rupture in the historical continuum that 1968 had tried to produce, nascent postmodern theory in France postulated an epochal coupure, a break with modern politics and modernity, accompanied by models of new postmodern theory and politics. Hence, the postmodern turn in France in the 1970s is intimately connected to the experiences of May 1968. The passionate intensity and spirit of critique in many versions of French postmodern theory is a continuation of the spirit of 1968, while the world-weary nihilism of Baudrillard and some of his followers can be related to the defeat and dispiriting aftermath of the Events of May.

Indeed, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Virilio, Derrida, Castoriadis, Foucault, Deleuze, Guatarri, and other French theorists associated with postmodern theory were all participants in May 1968. They shared its revolutionary elan and radical aspirations, and they attempted to develop new modes of radical thought that carried on in a different historical conjuncture the radicalism of the 1960s. But whereas theorists like Herbert Marcuse and Henri Lefebvre found confirmation of their brand of utopian Marxism in the explosions of May, these postmodern theorists saw the need to break with all past forms of thought and politics and to create new ones.

For us today, May 1968 continues to raise fundamental problems. The documents, analysis, and interpretation set out in this book suggest the following challenges for contemporary advanced societies:

- Can a highly organized technological society offer fulfilling work to its members, or must they be reduced to cogs in the machine?
- Can bureaucracies and the workplace be reshaped to allow more freedom, initiative, participation, and non-alienating activity, or are we condemned to bureaucratic and technocratic domination?

- Can the citizens of contemporary societies recover the energy and initiative necessary for a democratic public life, or have they been permanently stifled by mindless work and entertainment?
- Does technological progress condemn us to live and work under the control of technocratic experts and smart machines, or can we find more democratic ways to deploy our technologies and organize our society?

These questions were posed with passionate intensity by the French students and workers, and the documents in this book challenge us also to consider how we want to work and live. Will we submit forever to alienating bureaucracies and workplace routines, or can we restructure the workplace and our social institutions? Will we allow ourselves to be governed by political elites and institutions that are unresponsive to people's needs and aspirations, or can we create a political system that is more participatory and democratic? Are we content to be passive consumers of culture and media spectacles, or can we create our own culture and make our own history?

For a brief moment, the spirit of 1968 appeared to promise fundamental change in France and other places throughout the world. To counter historical forgetting, to keep memory and hope alive let us now rethink and relive these experiences, find connections with our contemporary situation, and strive to create our own alternative modes of thought and action. Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman are to be thanked for their work in assembling documents that allow us to gain access to an exciting historical occurrence. Now it is up to us and the coming generations to draw the appropriate conclusions.

—Douglas Kellner

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PREFACE

Nineteen sixty-eight was the climactic year of New Left protest all over the Western world, and especially in France where in May of that year ten million workers transformed a student protest into a revolutionary movement by joining it in the streets. In the short space of a month France was overthrown and restored, but not without suffering a shock that resounds to this day. Like many an unsuccessful revolution before it, the May Events triumphed in the political culture of the society that defeated it in the streets. Although the Events occurred in France, they reveal many of the underlying causes of student protest throughout the advanced capitalist world, including the United States.

The May Events lay at the intersection of three histories: not only did the New Left of the sixties peak in France in 1968, but France gave the first signal of the political instability that overtook much of Southern Europe in the seventies. In 1968 no one imagined that the Events would lead to an electoral movement such as Eurocommunism. Then the talk was all of the “senility” and “sclerosis” of the official opposition parties. In fact, the May Events overthrew not the Gaullist state, but the narrow ideological horizons of the Old Left it challenged in challenging capitalism in new ways. The Events transformed the popular image of socialism in France, contributing to the collapse of moribund Stalinist and social democratic traditions, and prepared Mitterand’s eventual victory as the first “socialist” president of the Fifth Republic.

However, that victory failed to yield radical social change. The Socialist and Communist parties had flirted with the energies and ideas circulating in the extraparlimentary Left since 1968, but in the end abandoned their flirtation for a banal program of nationalizations followed by a hasty retreat into fiscal and political conservatism. Thus what remained of the influence of the Events was once again an extra-