

---

## The May 1968 Archives: A Presentation of the Anti-Technocratic Struggle in May 1968

ANDREW FEENBERG

---

The beginning of the May '68 events coincided with a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference on Marx. This conference brought together Marx scholars from all over the world to Paris, where they could witness the first stirrings of a revolution while debating the continuing validity of Marx's work. I recall meeting one of these scholars, a prominent Italian Marxist, in the courtyard of the Sorbonne. He recognized me from my association with Herbert Marcuse, who was also at the UNESCO conference. I expected him to be enthusiastic in his support for the extraordinary movement unfolding around us, but on the contrary, he ridiculed the students. Their movement, he said, was a carnival, not a real revolution.

How many serious-minded people of both the left and the right have echoed these sentiments until they have taken on the air of common sense! The May '68 events, we are supposed to believe, were not real, were a mere pantomime. And worse yet, *La pensée '68* is blamed for much that is wrong with France today.

I consider such views of the May '68 events profoundly wrong. What they ignore is the political content of the movement. This was not just a vastly overblown student prank. I believe the mainstream of the movement had a political conception, one that was perhaps not realistic in terms of power politics, but significant for establishing the horizon of progressive politics since

the 1960s. I will present this argument by discussing leaflets from the May Events Archive at Simon Fraser University.<sup>1</sup> I will conclude by reflecting on the meaning of the politics invented during the May '68 events and its significance for us today.

Before proceeding it is necessary to make the criteria of my archival choices explicit. Participants interpreted the May '68 events very differently. Leninist organizations, derisively called *groupuscules*, sometimes suggested that the students were revolutionary leaders of a classic proletarian revolution. But although nearly 10 million workers joined the movement in a general strike, a Bolshevik style take-over seemed implausible to most of those one talked to in the streets. The idea that a vanguard could give tactical leadership presupposed a very different dynamic than the one actually in place in May and June of 1968. The spirit of the movement was better expressed by groups that can be loosely described as anarchist, such as the 22nd March Movement and the Situationists. But these groups had no real grip on the political process, particularly since they were unknown to the workers.

Of course my view of the events was limited by the nature of my involvement. I participated in the student movement daily in Paris from early May to the end of June. I was present at many demonstrations, including demonstrations of solidarity with striking workers. I sang the *Internationale* with the workers of Renault-Billancourt, not that I can be sure they knew why we had come to visit them at their occupied factory. Not only is my viewpoint biased by this mode of participation in the movement, but my limited access to speeches and documents which influence my interpretation has certainly reinforced that bias.

No doubt it is difficult to generalize about a mass movement. It is easier to know what the Maoist and Trotskyist sects wanted because they each had a party line. I identify what I call the mainstream of the movement not with a line so much as with the most widespread interpretation

of the actual unfolding of the events evident in the accompanying flurry of leaflets and student publications. I concede that it is also difficult to know to what extent workers shared this interpretation, but a surprising number showed up at the Sorbonne and in the Latin Quarter to protest side by side with the students.

Reading the leaflets and ephemeral newspapers of the time and recalling conversations with participants has convinced me that the movement was not a classical struggle for power. Instead, it was a protest against the emerging advanced capitalist society in its repressive French version. The protest took the form of a revolutionary movement, a familiar form in the French context, and it could have led to a seizure of power for that reason. But the political strategy was not essential. The movement was primarily about something else. It demanded a more meaningful and fulfilling way of life than an American-style consumer society, and a more democratic and participatory practice of administration than French elites were willing to concede. Most of the ideologically sophisticated participants would have said that they sought a self-managing socialist alternative. Although not everyone would have agreed, this was certainly a commonplace view not confined to a small sect.

Although it is often said now that the student and worker movements were entirely different and at cross purposes, I do not believe this was so. Workers, students and a large section of the middle strata had a common demand for dignity and respect which showed up in the political rhetoric of their movements. The workers' protest was strongly coloured by a sense of frustration and outrage. Economic demands were deemed insufficient by themselves because low wages were experienced as part of a pattern of disrespect, not just as material deprivation. Subsequent sociological research confirms this. The very steep hierarchies in French bureaucracies were also an object of protest even by those privileged to hold good positions. This

affected the students who were sensitive not only to the injustice done to the working class but also to their own problematic future. One law student in suit and tie I met on the barricades told me: “This is my last chance to avoid becoming a bureaucrat.”

Finally, I find it absurd to claim that the May '68 events were merely an explosion of narcissism for which *la pauvre France* is paying to this day. The claim that the movement was really about sexual license may be due to a confusion of the aftermath with the actual events. Defeated revolutions kill hope and give rise to individualistic solutions to social problems. Before attributing libertinage to the May '68 events it would be a good idea to reread the first chapter of de Musset's *La confession d'un enfant du siècle*. He describes the post-Napoleonic youth very much as post-'68 youth have been described by reactionary commentators in recent years. All this is not to deny that a lot of sexual activity accompanied the protests. But since when has this been an issue in France?

It is still puzzling that such a violent reaction could make sense to large numbers of usually peaceful individuals. The surface causes are of course known, such things as the development of mass higher education and the harsh repression of labor under de Gaulle, but what common condition made it possible for the movement to spread from one group to another until it embraced the entire country? I believe that the key element was the emergence of a new kind of technocratic administration, perhaps less developed than in the United States but more shocking in the traditional and ideologically polarized French political landscape. The struggle against technocracy provided a unifying theme, what Laclau and Mouffe call an “articulation” of diverse struggles.<sup>2</sup>

Let me turn now to some texts which illustrate this theme. The first text offers a good example of the anti-technocratic discourse of the time:

Let's categorically refuse the ideology of PROFIT, of PROGRESS or other pseudo-forces of the same type. *Progress will be what we want it to be.* Let's refuse the trap of luxury and necessity—the stereotyped needs imposed separately on all, to make each worker labour in the name of the 'natural laws' of the economy ...

WORKERS of every kind, let's not be duped. Do not confuse the TECHNICAL division of labor and the HIERARCHY of authority and power. The first is necessary, the second is superfluous and should be replaced by an equal exchange of our work and services within a liberated society.<sup>3</sup>

This leaflet was very widely distributed early in May and became something of a manifesto of the movement. It explicitly criticized the technocratic ideology of modernization that was so influential in France in the 1960s. The students were directly implicated in this process since they were training to manage the new system. But for the moment they suffered a repression similar to what workers suffered. The parallel was interpreted as a basis for unity by the students. Many of the early leaflets reflected this sudden discovery of solidarity. Here is one such example: "Your struggle and ours are convergent. It is necessary to destroy everything that isolates us from each other (habits, the newspapers, etc.). It is necessary to bring the firms together with the occupied colleges."<sup>4</sup>

It is true that there was unemployment among graduates at this time. This was certainly a cause for anxiety, but that anxiety did not express itself merely in aggressive careerism as it does today. On the contrary, it shaped an intention to radically transform society in order to create a very different future. This was the theme of many student leaflets. Here are two such examples:

We refuse to be scholars cut off from social reality. We refuse to be used for the profit of the ruling class. We want to suppress the separation between the work of conception and reflection and organization. We want to build a classless society...<sup>5</sup>

The university and high school students, the unemployed youth, professors and workers have not struggled side by side on the barricades last Friday to save a university in the exclusive service of the interests of the bourgeoisie: This is a whole generation of future executives who refuse to be the planners of the needs of the bourgeoisie and the agents of exploitation and repression of the workers.<sup>6</sup>

These leaflets contain a critique of both management and scholarship, the two futures to which studies lead. The students rejected both as complicit with the technocratic system of oppression they hoped to destroy. The reasons for their rage are expressed here not simply in terms of the classic Marxist problem of exploitation but also in terms of a much more sophisticated critique of the separation of conception and execution. The students called for the suppression of the division of mental and manual labour, a utopian goal with particular relevance to the condition of modern technocratic societies, both communist and capitalist.

These texts might still be considered marginal to the extent that students themselves are marginal. However, the anti-technocratic impulse of the movement spread to the technocracy itself. There were strikes throughout the government ministries and even among business executives in many companies. The goals of the strikes were often articulated in terms that reflected the students' critique of their own future social roles. Here are a couple of texts that reflect this. The first was issued by the civil servants of the Ministry of Finance.

While the students rose in all the universities of France and ten million strikers united against the iniquities of the economic system, the prodigious popular movement of May '68 touched the civil servants of the principal ministries, where traditional administrative structures have been profoundly shaken.

The personnel assembly of the central administration of economy and finances, meeting the 21st of May, decided *to continue the strike*. At the Ministry of Finances, as in the majority of associated services and at the National Institute of Statistics, the civil servants stopped work and occupied their offices.

May 21, a demonstration in the rue de Rivoli drew 500 civil servants from Finances demanding an administration in the service of the people and a 'radical change of economic and social policy.'<sup>7</sup>

The second text comes from a leaflet distributed by the strikers at the Ministry of Equipment.

The authors write:

As civil servants in the service of the community, we have become, paradoxically, and for many of us against our will, the symbol of red tape. As a result of an erroneous conception of the role of the Administration and the lack of consultation in decision-

making and implementation, instead of being the driving force of Urban Affairs and Housing, we are the brakes that everyone would like to see disappear.<sup>8</sup>

These are examples of the self-critique that developed in the administrative strata of French society in 1968. In these texts the technocrats themselves call on the government to radically restructure the administration and to change the policies that guide it.

These themes of middle-class rebellion were echoed by some workers, a social stratum far less privileged and far more dangerous to the system. It was their participation in the movement that made it a serious challenge to the government. It may well be true that a majority of workers did not favour revolution in 1968, but it is also certain that a large minority did support the students and entertained very radical goals. This fact, in the context of a militant general strike, defies cynical critique after the fact.

The second-largest union federation, the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), was especially responsive to the student movement. This union primarily represented technicians and skilled workers. It was more open to new and radical ideas than the Communist-led union which represented the majority of unionized unskilled workers. With the CFDT, we have a large, official union federation calling on the working class to seize the breakdown in the universities and government departments as an occasion for ending top-down control and substituting self-management. Here is a passage from a leaflet the CFDT distributed to workers early in the development of the strikes:

The intolerable constraints and structures against which the students rose exist similarly, and still more intolerably, in the factories, construction sites, and offices ...

The government yielded to the students. To freedom in the university must correspond freedom in the factories. Democratic structures based on self-management must be substituted for industrial and administrative monarchy.

The Moment Has Come To Act.<sup>9</sup>

What was meant by self-management? Were the students and their allies really conscious of the meaning of this slogan? There is a whole tradition of paternalistic commentary on the May '68 events that denies the movement self-awareness, but I think the students and workers of the time knew as much as we do now about the meaning of self-management; they do not deserve our condescension. There is plenty of evidence for this in the leaflets.

As the May '68 events wound down, the Revolutionary Action Committee of the Sorbonne published a brochure containing leaflets it had composed in the course of the movement accompanied by commentaries on their use. These leaflets were distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies, some of them in the streets, and others at factories. They articulated a specific strategy, the strategy of the active strike leading to a revolution based on self-managed worker-controlled firms. This was the radical alternative that was put forward by those activists who were fully committed to restructuring French society.

I will consider here one of their major leaflets. In their commentary the authors explain that they distributed 30,000 copies of this leaflet in factories on May 28 as a basis for discussion amongst workers. The leaflet called on the workers to seize power in the workplace. The idea was to substitute the demand for self-management for the wage demands of the unions and Communist Party. That this was feasible and not simply a fantasy is shown by the fact that workers had in fact already seized hundreds of factories and locked out management, in some cases continuing to operate the machines on their own as a public service. The number of factories occupied was so large and the situation so explosive that the government was hesitant to use force to throw the workers out. They saw the occupations as a political problem, which it was. The workers too appreciated the political significance of their own action and in some cases

made no wage demands at all but simply hung a red flag on the factory gate in expectation of the revolution.

The leaflet began by rejecting the option of a popular front government, that is to say, a government of Socialists and Communists substituting itself for de Gaulle. A popular front or a union settlement would leave the basic structure of society unchanged. The only effective way of altering the system, the leaflet argued, would be to prove that socialism was possible in practice starting out in each individual factory. I quote:

Comrades, the factory occupations should now signify that you are capable of making them function without the bourgeois structures which exploited you ... Ensure production, distribution so that the whole of the working class demonstrates that a workers' power owning its own means of production can create a real socialist economy ... Practically speaking self-management consists in the worker comrades operating their factories BY and FOR Themselves, and consequently the elimination of the hierarchy of salaries as well as the notions of wage earner and boss.<sup>10</sup>

The leaflet goes on to explain that production should be started up again and coordinated regionally, nationally and even internationally. To prevent bureaucratization, the councils should be elected and their officers rotated. The authors of the leaflet were quite clear that they did not want French socialism to resemble Russian communism. They conclude: "Show that workers' management in the firms is the power to do better for everyone what the capitalists did scandalously for the few."<sup>11</sup>

Obviously this strategy did not take hold, but that does not mean that it was without influence. On the contrary, for ten years, from 1968 to 1978, self-management was the central theme of all left political discourse in France. The Socialist Party in particular co-opted that theme and promised to promote self-management once in power. Although at first it bitterly resisted, even the Communist Party eventually used the idea of self-management to win votes. Of course these parties were not serious advocates of council communism, but they created an

ambiguity around their position in order to benefit from the popularity of the notion of democratizing industrialism. I think it would be a mistake to see these ideas as falling stillborn on hostile soil. Their failure was not due to public indifference but to more complex causes rooted in the history of the French left after 1968.

I want to conclude very briefly by reflecting on the significance of these ideas today. If we see the events as a failed Leninist coup or an outburst of juvenile narcissism they would appear to be a complete failure. It does not look much more interesting as a final replay of the old Marxist schema of proletarian revolution, the language of which was borrowed by nearly everyone in the movement. But I believe there was something else going on under the surface of the Marxist clichés that is still relevant today. This is the anti-technocratic critique I have highlighted here.

In saying this I do not want to claim that the May '68 events held the solution to the problem of technocracy in its hands. It is of course still quite uncertain that the attack on technocracy from above in the student movement and the administrations could have been successfully coordinated with the attack on capitalism from below in the radical wing of the workers' movement. The idea of self-management put forward in 1968 remains abstract and speculative. But precisely because the events were unsuccessful, we do not need to know if they could have solved this thorny problem. What we do know is that the May '68 events launched a whole new approach to politics in France that lives to this day. This approach is anti-technocratic and refuses the alibi of progress for every new means of concentrating power in a few hands. The echoes of this new approach in other advanced countries have had a permanent impact on our understanding of the political. The spread of a rebellious spirit from familiar issues such as racial

and gender discrimination to technology has borne fruit in the many social movements around technical issues in such different domains as medicine, computerization and the environment.

Here are some examples. AIDS patients challenged the medical establishment to extend opportunities to participate in experiments, and to modify experimental designs to better conform to patients' needs. The struggles resulted in significant reforms. The Internet has been largely shaped by users and hackers; still today popular resistance to business strategies plays an important role in decisions about its future. The environmental movement is without doubt the most powerful of these new movements and has had a tremendous impact on production and public attitudes. These unprecedented struggles and innovations testify to a growing will on the part of the citizens of advanced societies to control their own technical destiny.

I think Sartre had the deepest insight into the May '68 events when he described them, in speeches and in articles, as enlarging "the field of the possible" (Sartre 62-63). The events lifted the barriers to imaginatively approaching the many technical and administrative obstacles to democratic participation in advanced societies. Self-management as a regulative ideal, if not a political goal, lives on in the radical politics that has continued with ups and downs since 1968.

This enlargement of the field of the possible has had philosophical as well as political consequences. Since positivistic and technocratic ideologies limited the social imaginary, an attack on these limits appeared as an attack on a certain conception of rationality which, for the first time, became a political issue. The critique of the notion of neutral, universal, and asocial reason developing among isolated intellectuals such as Marcuse and Foucault was thereby promoted suddenly and to the surprise of the critics themselves into a politics under the banner of which mass demonstrations were organized. Modifying the old anarchist slogan, "Ni dieu ni maître"—"Neither God nor master"—a student turned it into a critique of technocracy and wrote

on the wall of the Sorbonne, “Ni dieu ni mètre”—“Neither God nor the meter stick.”<sup>12</sup> The May ’68 events created the social conditions for the so-called postmodern period in which rationality has become an object of general critique.

To conclude, let me put this point another way. We are familiar today with two main kinds of politics in our society. They are: an instrumental politics which aims at power, laws, and institutions, and an identity politics through which individuals attempt to redefine their social roles and their place in society. I would argue that the May ’68 events represent a third kind of politics which I call a civilizational politics, a politics of civilizational identity. The questions of this politics are: what kind of people are we, what can we expect as a basic minimum level of justice and equality in our affairs? The May ’68 events replied that we cannot go on as before. It is not a question of generosity or personal self-sacrifice but concerns a larger sense of who and what we are. From that standpoint we must acknowledge the mediocrity of consumer society and the injustices at its basis. Ideologies that stand in the way, even if they be identified with rationality itself, must be overthrown. Recall the first leaflet from which I quoted the following passage: “Progress will be what we want it to be.” That I think is the main message of the May events and it is not exhausted. I hope that someday it will be picked up again and the utopian vision of May ’68 made real.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: The following text, adapted from a talk given at the École normale supérieure de Lyon, presents the May Events Archive created by the author at the library of Simon Fraser University (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/projects/mai68/>). The archive contains scans of hundreds of May '68 items organised according to five categories: booklets, leaflets, magazines, newspapers, and translations. Various booklets offer a cross-section of reflections on the May '68 events from many perspectives. Several items attempt to explain the unprecedented involvement of the employed middle strata in the May '68 events, notably researchers, government bureaucrats, film makers, and architects. Others represent attempts by student and worker activists to present the idea of self-managing socialism which inspired much of the movement. *Les Cahiers de Mai* reports on struggles by the students themselves and offers direct testimony on movement activities. The reports on the union takeover of the town of Nantes are particularly interesting. This was the highpoint of the movement, its closest approximation to the goal of self-management. Other items in this section give insight into the reaction of the unions, the Communist Party, and various political sects. The leaflets track the unfolding of the movement. Most are by the various student organizations directly involved in the May '68 events. *Action* was the principal student newspaper published during the May '68 events. Other movement publications represented in the archive, such as the Maoist newspapers *La Cause du Peuple* and *Servir le Peuple*, were far less influential. *L'Enragé*, named after a radical faction in the French Revolution of 1789, contains cartoons that spoofed and ridiculed the government and its supporters. The archive also contains translations of a number of the texts.

<sup>2</sup> This formulation of the problem comes from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

<sup>3</sup> Almost all of the quoted passages included in this text are translations from scans available at the Mai 68 Archive, see endnote 1. In the notes I will provide the original French that has been translated in the text.

“Refusons catégoriquement l'idéologie du rendement [,] du progrès ou des pseudo-forces du même nom. Le progrès sera ce que nous voudrions qu'il soit. Refusons l'engrenage du luxe et du 'nécessaire'—stéréotypés—et imposés tous deux séparément pour être bien sûr qu'aucun travailleur ne se rendra compte qu'il se fait travailleur lui-même—le out au nom des lois naturelles de l'économie.” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=1053>, pp.11-12)

“TRAVAILLEURS de toutes natures, ne nous laissons pas duper. Ne conformons pas la division technique du travail et la division hiérarchisée des autorités et des pouvoirs. La première est nécessaire, la seconde est superflue et doit être remplacée par un échange égalitaire de nos forces de travail et nos services au sein d'une société libérée” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=1053> p.13).

<sup>4</sup> “Votre lutte et notre lutte sont convergentes. Il faut détruire tout ce qui isole les uns des autres (l'habitude, les journaux, etc.). Il faut faire la jonction entre les entreprises et les facultés occupées” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=247>).

<sup>5</sup> “Nous refusons d’être des érudits coupés de la réalité sociale. Nous refusons d’être utilisés au profit de la classe dirigeante. Nous voulons supprimer la séparation entre travail d’exécution et travail de réflexion et d’organisation. Nous voulons construire une société sans classes...” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=247>).

<sup>6</sup> “Les étudiants, les lycéens, les jeunes chômeurs, les professeurs et les travailleurs n’ont pas lutté au coude à coude derrière les barricades vendredi dernier pour sauver une université au service des seuls intérêt de la bourgeoisie: c’est une génération entière de futures cadres qui se refusent à être les planificateurs des besoins de la bourgeoisie et les agents de l’exploitation et de la répression des travailleurs” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=184>).

<sup>7</sup> “En mêmes temps que les étudiants soulevés dans toutes les universités de France et les dix millions de gréviste unis contre l’iniquité du régime économique, le prodigieux mouvement populaire de mai 68 a touché les fonctionnaires des principaux ministères où les structures traditionnelles de l’administration sont profondément ébranlées.

L’assemblée des personnels de l’administration centrale de l’économie et des finances réunis le 21 mai a décidé la Grève continue. Au ministère des Finances comme dans la plupart des services annexes et à l’Institut national de statistique, les fonctionnaires ont arrêté le travail et occupé les locaux.

Le 21 mai une manifestation réunissait rue de Rivoli 500 fonctionnaires des finances réclamant une administration au service du peuple et un ‘changement radical de politique économique et sociale’” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=224>).

<sup>8</sup> “Fonctionnaires au service de la collectivité, nous sommes devenus paradoxalement et pour beaucoup à notre corps défendant, le symbole de la paperasserie. Une conception erronée du rôle de l’Administration jointe à l’absence de concertation dans l’élaboration de décisions et dans leur mise en œuvre font qu’au lieu d’être l’élément moteur de l’Urbanisme, de l’Équipement et du Logement nous en sommes les freins que tous les usagers voudraient voir sauter” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=958> p.13, top of p. 14).

<sup>9</sup> “Les contraintes et les structures insupportables contre lesquelles les étudiants se sont élevés existent pareillement, et de façon encore plus intolérable, dans les usines, les chantiers, les bureaux ...

Le gouvernement a cédé aux étudiants. À la liberté dans les universités doit correspondre la liberté dans les entreprises. À la monarchie industrielle et administrative, il faut substituer des structures démocratiques à base d’autogestion.

Le Moment d’Agir est Venu” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=212>).

<sup>10</sup> “Camarades, l’occupation des usines doit maintenant signifier que vous êtes capables de les faire fonctionner sans l’encadrement bourgeois qui vous exploitait ... Assurez la production, la distribution, pour que l’ensemble de la classe ouvrière démontre qu’un pouvoir ouvrier propriétaire de ses moyens de production peut instituer une réelle économie socialiste ... Pratiquement l’autogestion consiste pour les camarades ouvriers à faire fonctionner leurs usines

PAR et POUR EUX et par conséquent à supprimer la hiérarchie des salariées ainsi que les notions de salariat et de patronat” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=1042> pp. 47-48).

<sup>11</sup> “Démonstrons que la gestion ouvrière dans les entreprises, c’est le pouvoir de faire mieux pour tous ce que les capitalistes faisaient scandaleusement pour quelques-uns” (<http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/cgi-bin/Mai68?Display=1042> p. 48).

<sup>12</sup> The play on words works in French because “maître” and “mètre” have the same pronunciation.

### Works Cited

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London and New York: Verso, 1985.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Itinerary of a Thought.” *New Left Review*, no. 58 (1969): 43-66.