

Socialism and Anti-Technocratic Struggle

in the French May Events of 1968: An Essay in Retrieval

I was interested to read Hervé Hamon's comments on the demonstration of May 24th. He remarks that the students revealed their lack of revolutionary commitment and the fictional nature of their struggle by returning to the Latin quarter after having marched through the right bank and set fire to the stock exchange. Now, it so happens that I was on that March. I do recall a momentary thrill at the idea of conquering a government ministry, but that heroic deed, not retreat, was the unreal fiction that tempted us. An insurrectional seizure of power was clearly impossible on that particular evening. In any case, most of us had a very different idea of revolution, based on the unfolding of mass movement throughout the country and the development of something called an active strike. I believe this strategy represented the mainstream of the radical wing of the movement. To explain it, I will base myself on contemporary leaflets. I've handed out some extracts from these leaflets to make it easier for you to follow the argument. I will conclude with some comments on the meaning of the politics invented during the May Events and its significance for us today.

The first text presents what I take to be one of the central themes of the Events as they were understood by a great many participants at the time. Of course it's difficult to generalize about a mass movement. It's easier is to know what the Maoist and Trotskyist sects wanted because they had a party line. What I am calling the mainstream of the movement did not have a line so much as an inclination to believe and act in a way reflected in the unfolding of the Events and the accompanying flurry of leaflets.

Understanding that widespread radical inclination requires an interpretation of the social background against which 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 harsh repression of the working class 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 countries like the United States but more shocking in the more 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. This first text offers a good example of the anti-technocratic discourse of the time.

"Let's categorically refuse the ideology of PROFIT AND 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 necessitythe stereotyped needs imposed separately on all, to make each worker labor in the name of the "natural laws" of the economy. . .

"WORKERS of every kind, don't let's 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."

This leaflet was very widely distributed early in May and became something of a manifesto of the movement. It criticizes the technocratic ideology on the basis of which France was being reconstructed as a streamlined modern society in the 1960s. The students were directly implicated in this process since they were in training to manage the new system. I realize that there was unemployment among graduates at this time and students were worried about their future. 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 the society in order to create a very different future. This was the theme of many student leaflets. Here are some 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 of execution, reflection and organization. We want to construct a classless society."

"The college and high school students, the young unemployed, the professors and the workers did not fight side by side on the barricades last Saturday to save a university in the exclusive service 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 the exploitation and repression of the workers."

These leaflets contain a critique both of scholarship cut off from social reality, and management, the two futures to which the students were destined. The students rejected both as complicit with a technocratic system of oppression which they wished to destroy. It's interesting that the destruction of that system is 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 implementation. The students called for the suppression of the division of mental and manual labor, a utopian goal with particular relevance to the condition of modern technocratic societies, both communist and capitalist.

These students 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 administrations 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 role. Here are a couple of texts that reflect this. The first was issued by the civil servants of the Ministry of Finance. I quote:

"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 the traditional structures of administration 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.'"

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

"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. An erroneous conception of the role of the Administration, together with the absence of consultation in the making and implementing of decisions, have as a consequence that, instead of being the driving force of Urban Affairs and Housing, we are the brakes that all concerned would like to see disappear."

Here one sees the self-critique that was developing in the administrative strata of French society in 1968. In this text the technocratic administrators themselves call on the government to radically restructure the administration and to change the policies that guide it.

These themes of middle-class rebellion met an answering call among 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 favor revoution in 1968, but it is also certain that a minority did support the students and entertained very radical goals. This, in the context of a militant general strike, defies cynical critique long after the fact.

The second-largest union federation, the 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 administrations as an occasion for ending technocratic administration and substituting self-management. Here's 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 in a still more intolerable way, 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."

What was meant by self-management? Were the students and their allies really conscious of what they were doing in putting forward this slogan? There is a whole tradition of paternalistic commentary on the May 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 Events wound down, the Revolutionary Action Committee of the Sorbonne published a brochure containing leaflets it had composed during the movement and commentaries on their use. These leaflets were distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies, some of them in the streets, and others among workers at the factories. They articulated a specific strategy, the strategy of the active strike leading to a revolution based on self managed worker controlled enterprises. This was the radical alternative that was put forward by those activists who were fully committed to restructuring French society.

I've given you here most of one of the major leaflets with a commentary by the authors. As you can see, they explain that they distributed 30,000 copies of this leaflet on May 28 as a basis for discussion among workers. It called on the workers to seize power on the workplace. The idea was to substitute self-management for the established strategy of the unions and Communist Party based on wage demands and electoral politics. 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 account or 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 I have translated for you begins by rejecting the option of a popular front government, that is to say, a government of Socialists and Communists substituting itself for the Gaullists. 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 occupation of the factories must now signify that you are capable of making them function without the bourgeois framework which exploited you....Assure production, distribution: the whole working class must show that a workers' power in possession of its means of production, can establish a real socialist economy....Practically, self-management consists in the worker comrades operating their factories by and for themselves and, consequently, the suppression of the hierarchy of salaries as well as the notions of wage earner and boss."

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 about not wanting socialism in France to resemble the Russian model. They conclude, "DEMONSTRATE THAT WORKERS' MANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY IS THE POWER TO DO BETTER FOR EVERYONE WHAT THE CAPITALISTS DID SCANDALOUSLY FOR A FEW."

Obviously the strategy did not take hold but that isn't to say that it was without influence. On the contrary, for ten years, from 1968 to in 1978, the theme of self-management was central to all left political discourse in France. The Socialist Party in particular coopted that theme and promised to promote self-management once in power. Although at first it bitterly resisted, even the Communist Party eventually tried to buy into the idea of self-management for its electoral appeal. 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. So I think it would be a mistake to see these ideas as falling barren 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 May Events as an outburst of juvenile narcissism or in terms of the Leninist problematic of seizing state power it will of course look like a complete failure. It does not look much more interesting as a final replay of the old Marxist schema of proletarian revolution. But I believe there is something else going on under the surface of the Marxist language that is still relevant today. This is the anti-technocratic critique I have highlighted in these remarks. In saying this I do not want to claim that the May 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. To that extent that 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 there was a solution to this thorny problem. What we do know is that the Events launched a whole new approach to politics that lives to this day and that has born fruit in the many social movements around technical issues in such different domains as medicine, the environment, and computerization. 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 Events when he described them as "enlarging the field of the possible." What the May events did was to lift the barriers to imaginatively approaching advanced societies and the many technical and administrative obstacles to democratic participation they set up. Self-management as a regulative ideal, if not a political goal, lives on in the technical politics that has become commonplace 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. The social conditions were thereby created for the so-called "postmodern" period in which rationality has become an object of general critique.

Let me put the point another way in conclusion. 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 the identity politics through which individuals attempt to redefine their social roles and their place in society. I would argue that the May Events represents a third kind of politics which I'll call a civilizational politics, a politics of civilizational self definition. The question of this politics is, What kind of people are we, what can we expect as a basic minimum level of justice and equality in our affairs? The May Events replied that we cannot go on as before. Not out of generosity or personal self sacrifice but out of a larger sense of who and what we are, we need to 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.

Appendix

Commentary on We Are Continuing the Struggle (May 28, 30,000 copies)

This text was written by the Revolutionary Action Committee of the Sorbonne at a time when the need was felt for an intermediate type of leaflet, between the fighting leaflet, which no longer sufficed, and the pamphlet, which nobody read. The strike was generalized then and the problem of political power was posed.

It was distributed essentially in the factories. The tactic was as follows. We began by interesting the workers in the problem of self-management and mass political power with:

Workers-Students or The Struggle Continues.

It was then that we distributed some We Are Continuing the Struggle, in sufficiently small numbers to create groups. In each group a worker comrade played the role of discussion leader. Politics ceased to be a disgusting thing, a pile of corrupt and careerist politicians and became everyones right to play a role in social life. In each group the workers ceased thinking of the stopped machines as something which was going to start up again after trivial and temporary wage increases. The machine was seen in terms of the possibility of using it to force the capitalists to the walls of their final bastion by operating it by and for the worker.

This was truly a fascinating experience and in some small and middle factories experiments in self-management were tried for several weeks.

This was already quite good and will make it possible in the next spontaneous strikes to reach this stage much more quickly and to force the C.G.T. to run once more in the race to catch up with the rank and file.

But there will come a day when it will no longer be able to catch up...

WE ARE CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE

The movement cannot endorse an operation of the "popular front" type or a transitional government. The material concessions that we could obtain would in no way modify the scandalous character of the present society. Besides, they would be quickly absorbed by a rise in the cost of living organized by management.

This is why the ultimate weapon of the workers struggling for revolution is DIRECT MANAGEMENT of their means of coordination and production.

Another step must be taken!!!

Comrades, the occupation of the factories must now signify that you are capable of making them function without the bourgeois framework which exploited you. It is necessary now to permit the revolutionary movement to live, to develop itself, to organize production under your control. You thereby deprive capitalism of its instruments of oppression. Assure production, distribution: the whole working class must show that a workers' power in possession of its means of production, can establish a real socialist economy.

The goal of SELF-MANAGEMENT AS AN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SYSTEM is to fully realize free participation in production and consumption through individual and collective responsibility. It is thus a system created above all for man, to serve him and not to oppress him.

Practically, self-management consists in the worker comrades operating their factories by and for themselves and, consequently, the suppression of the hierarchy of salaries as well as the notions of wage earner and boss. It is up to them to constitute the workers' councils, which they elect to carry out the decisions of the whole.

These councils must be in close relation with the councils of other enterprises on the regional, national and international plane.

The members of these workers' councils are elected at a specified time and their tasks are rotated. It is necessary in practice to avoid recreating a bureaucracy which would tend to set up a leadership and an oppressive power.

DEMONSTRATE THAT WORKERS' MANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY IS THE POWER TO DO BETTER FOR EVERYONE WHAT THE CAPITALISTS DID SCANDALOUSLY FOR A FEW

("Worker-Student Action Committee")