

§ The Movements of the Sixties

AUTHOR'S NOTE "The Movements of the Sixties" is a fragment of a text on May '68 that will soon be published in its entirety in *Esprit*. The first part, not published here, discusses the question of the interpretation of the historical events in general, and then the interpretation of the virtual possibilities contained in the May '68 movement, as well as its international dimension and its historical roots. In the pages that follow, I criticize the interpretation of May '68 given by Gilles Lipovetsky in *L'Ere du vide: Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983) and by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut in *La Pensée 68: Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985; *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990]), who, while expressing a desire to uphold an "interpretative pluralism," highly privilege Lipovetsky's theses. Without this privileging, moreover, the connection they are trying to establish between the May movement and what they have, curiously, chosen to call "'68 thought" collapses. It goes without saying that the discussion of this part of the work of these three authors—who have all my esteem and sympathy—does not imply a rejection of what they otherwise contribute in these texts: the fine anthropological analyses of Lipovetsky or the vigorous critique conducted by Ferry and Renaut against the various sorts of imposture that have for so long dominated the French intellectual scene. It is all the more regrettable that Ferry and Renaut have added to an erroneous analysis of May '68 a completely fallacious connection between the events and an ideological constellation that is completely foreign to these events.¹

The "interpretation" of May '68 in terms of a preparation (or an acceleration) of contemporary "individualism" constitutes one of the most

extreme efforts I know—the good faith of the authors remaining unquestionable—to rewrite, despite all appearances to the contrary, a history through which most of us have lived, to distort the meaning of events that are still, if I may say so, almost “hot.” Everything that has introduced a tremendous renewal—the effects of which are often still present—in the life of contemporary societies, and in particular of French society, is, in their outlook, erased. Those weeks of fraternity and active solidarity, when one spoke to anybody and everybody in the street without fear of being taken for a fool, when every driver would stop to give people a lift—were they merely a form of hedonistic selfishness? “Talk to your neighbors,” a slogan written on the walls in May ’68, would have been slyly proposing the modern isolation of individuals in their private sphere. The sit-ins and teach-ins of all sorts, in which professors and students, schoolteachers and pupils, and doctors, nurses and hospital staff, workers, engineers, foremen, business and administrative staff spent whole days and nights discussing their work, their mutual relations, the possibility of transforming the organization and the aims of their firms—all this would have contained in embryo a vision of other people as “loony gadgets.” When in the packed Sorbonne lecture hall, “delegates” from the most incongruous and improbable occupational categories—from the retired to the handicapped—rose up and asked finally to be heard and understood by society, they no doubt did not know either what they were saying or what they were doing.

Within the May movement and through it took place a tremendous process of resocialization, even if it proved fleeting. People were not asking to feel each other’s warmth or smell each other’s bodies—nor simply “to be together.” They were animated by the same propensities: on the negative side, they vigorously rejected the empty futility and pompous stupidity that then characterized the Gaullist regime and today [1986] characterizes the regime of Mitterrand and Chirac; on the positive side, they wanted greater freedom for each and everyone. People were seeking truth, justice, freedom, community. They were unable to find the institutional forms that could incarnate these views in a lasting manner. And—something that is almost always forgotten—they were a minority in the country. This minority was able to predominate without terror or violence during several weeks, simply because the conservative majority was ashamed of itself and dared not appear in public. The May minority might, perhaps, have been able to become a majority if it had gone beyond proclamations and demonstrations. But that implied a different dynamic into which it was

clearly neither willing nor able to enter. If one wants to locate French “individualism” during May ’68, think then about what sealed the fate of the movement’s collapse after the Grenelle agreements were modified: the reprovisioning of the gas pumps. Order was finally reestablished when the average Frenchman was once again able to drive in *his* car, with *his* family to *his* favorite picnic spot or to *his* vacation home. That allowed him to vote at 60 percent for the government four weeks later.

Nor is it possible purely and simply to ignore, as is fashionable nowadays, the “contents” of the movement, namely the *substance* of its demands and the *meaning* of its forms and modes of action. May’s “ideological” atmosphere—like, basically, that of the movements of the sixties in general—consisted of a blend of “traditional revolutionary” ideas and a critical questioning, or outstripping, certainly often disguised and confused, of the traditional forms and contents of the “socialist movement” and “workers’ movement.” This can be seen even in the confusion and the illusions of many participants. Even the worst mystifications that enjoyed currency before, during and, above all, after May were underpinned by the desire to see established, somewhere, some form of self-organized and spontaneous collective activity. Those who were “pro-Chinese” were not so because they hoped that China was achieving a Nazi or even a “Leninist” society; they were so because they dreamed that a real revolution was taking place there, that the masses were eliminating the bureaucracy, that the “experts” were being put in their places, and so on. The fact that this desire was able, in this case, to engender practically criminal illusions is *another* matter. But the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” was glorified *because* it would have allegedly meant a liberation of people’s activity and creativity—not because it favored the introduction of Taylorism and industrial techniques.

I have spoken elsewhere of the critique and rejection of the traditional organizational forms that characterized the movement;² in a complementary fashion, it would be necessary to understand the significance, in terms of *content*, of a *form* such as the sit-in or the open assembly. But above all, it would be necessary to stop throwing overboard, or loading as contraband cargo on the ship of individualism, the considerable changes in social reality (and its institution) introduced by the movements of the sixties and seventies, and *explicitly pursued* by them. Is it because society evolved the way it did that the freedom to use contraception or abortion has toppled from the level of autonomy of subjects to that of unprincipled hedonism?

The movements of the sixties, have they, then, nothing to do with changes in the relationships between parents and children or between the sexes—or should we see in these things, along with Régis Debray, the “victory of productivist reason,” of the “law of commodities,” and of “capitalist ideology”? Is the fact that American blacks were able to loosen a little the racial discrimination to which they had been subjected also without any interest from the point of view of individual and social autonomy? And why is the questioning of the traditional contents and forms of education and teaching (as in the case of the traditional teacher/pupil relationship), along with the somewhat minor effects that are still inscribed in reality, totally ignored? Have people then returned completely to the positions already stiltedly stated in 1964 by Althusser when faced with the first signs of student discontent: namely, that nobody can question the content of teaching (or its structure) because its task is to transmit scientific and objective knowledge? Has it been forgotten that before 1968, as far as the established powers and the “left-wing” organizations were concerned, the only educational problem worthy of discussion was that of student loans and scholarships?

Nothing is changed by the fact that today, thanks to the Restoration and to its instrument in educational matters, Mr. Jean-Pierre Chevènement, “pedagogy” is again spurned and that fundamental questions have been obliterated by those who have taken advantage of the reactions provoked by extravagant promises and by ridiculous and pernicious forms of extremism, here like everywhere else. I would really like to see someone question for a second, and with rational arguments, the right of students to ask, as soon as they are capable of doing so, the following question: Why and how is what you are teaching us interesting or important? I would really like to hear someone refute the idea that true education also consists of encouraging and enabling students to pose these sorts of questions and argue about them. And I would like to be shown that it was not the movements of the sixties, but the “Haby reform,” the “Chevènement reform,” or the future “Monory reform” that have brought these questions to the awareness of society.

It is strange to hear people label today “’68 thought”³ a set of authors who saw their fashionableness increase after the *failure* of May ’68 and of the other movements of the time and who did not play any role even in the vaguest sense of a “sociological” preparation of the movement, both because their ideas were totally unknown to the participants and because

these ideas were diametrically opposed to the participants' implicit and explicit aspirations. Were one to have passed around an anthology of the writings analyzed by Ferry and Renaut on the night that barricades were erected in the Latin Quarter, at best one would have provoked an irrepressible laughter, and at worst one would have led the participants and the movement to disband. The well-known writing on the Sorbonne walls, "*Althusser à rien*," needs no commentary.⁴ No one in his right mind who was familiar, in the sixties, with Lacan's writings and personality would have dreamed that he could ever have anything to do with a social and political movement. Foucault did not hide his reactionary positions until 1968, although he spoke less, it is true, of the way in which he had put them into practice during a students' strike in 1965 at Clermont-Ferrand. The effacement of the subject, the death of man, and the other asinine conceptions contained in what I have called the French Ideology⁵ had already been in circulation for some years. Their inescapable corollary, the death of politics, could be made explicit without much effort (and it was done by Foucault not long after May '68: since all politics is a strategy, it could only lead to the establishment of counterpowers, and *therefore* of powers); it is clearly incompatible with the very activities in which the participants in the movements of the sixties, including May '68, were engaged.

It will be said that we are examining only the "manifest contents" of the movement and that, thanks to the good old cunning of Reason, nothing prevented the May '68 participants from being acted upon by ideas radically different from those they professed and openly tried to put into practice. This would be pushing paradox rather far, because one would have to admit, then, that the true unconscious motivation that drove the May participants to act [*faire*] was the idea that nothing can be done [*faire*] and nothing must be done. But the real question lies elsewhere. Everybody knows—and it is astonishing that the authors of *La Pensée 68* hardly take it into account—that the first announcements of the various deaths (of the subject, man, meaning or signification, history, etc.) had been sent out long before May '68 by the representatives of a pseudoscientific ideology, structuralism: in chronological order, by Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Barthes, and Althusser. And long before May '68 structuralism had been questioned, notably by the author of the present article, both as to its content as such and as to its political implications.⁶

Those who lived through those times can testify that being a militant at

the beginning of the sixties in contact with certain student and university circles in Paris entailed taking a stand against structuralism in general and Althusser in particular. Althusser, as I have already stated, did not wait long to go on the counterattack and declare as early as 1964 that educational programs and structures were in their essence exempt from the “class struggle”; that is to say, exempt from the political question. The other authors of the “French Ideology” very explicitly (like Foucault) or implicitly situated themselves within the “territory” of structuralism. They had all said what they had to say (if, indeed, they ever did have anything to say . . .) before May ’68, and with enough “success” (within the Paris intelligentsia and in publishing terms) for their ideas to have had time to exert an “influence” on the actors in the movement. But no sign of such an influence can be found. It suffices to look, for instance, at the introduction to the book by Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Le Gauchisme*, at the *Journal de la Commune étudiante* by Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Alain Schnapp, or at the various collections of wall inscriptions (for example, Julian Besançon, *Les Murs ont la parole*).⁷ Not the slightest trace of the “ideas” of those ideologues will be found there, except for the rare instances in which they are ridiculed or denounced. What constantly appears is criticism of the established order, the famous appeals to the imagination (one wonders how that could relate to Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, or even Lacan!) and obviously the celebration of freedom and of “jouissance,” but above all of socialism and of a new social order.

It could not have been otherwise. Lacan, for example spoke of the “dès-êtré” (“unbeing”) of the subject both before and after ’68. Both before and after, nobody could have imagined (save for a few bold academics in the American Middle West) either that he was revolutionary or that he was individualistic. He was clearly, strictly, and openly Lacanary and Lacanistic. His central thesis had always been that the schize (the splitting) of the subject amounted to structural alienation and was therefore insurmountable. The central question of all political activity, which was present during May ’68, is the question of the institution. This is something carefully occulted by Lacanism thanks to the smoky mystifications of the “Law” and the “symbolic,” emitted precisely to prevent all possible distinction between a “de facto validity” and a “de jure validity,” thus cutting short the questioning that must precede all political action. In this respect, it is easy to see that the other authors discussed by Ferry and Renaut are essentially indebted to Lacan and that they all share with him the same sly

and vulgar skirting of the elementary question: What, then, is the status of *your* discourse?

May '68 had a double, apparently contradictory, one could almost say paradoxical, effect on this microcosm. On the one hand, "structuralism" melted away; no one dared invoke its name any longer and the most adept, like Foucault, claimed they no longer were and/or had never been a part of it. On the other hand, those same authors (and their various acolytes, subclan chiefs, and so on) were rapidly propelled to a qualitatively different level of "success" and notoriety. To fix the ideas, as is said symbolically and in mathematics, if 30,000 copies of Lacan's *Ecrits* were sold before '68, 300,000 would be sold thereafter. That was certainly due to the adeptness at media and mercantile manipulation of the said personalities or of their impresarios as well as to the strong demand on the national and export wholesale market in the commerce of ideas. But it is also fundamentally due to the *failure* of May '68—and therein lies the colossal blunder of Ferry and Renault. What the ideologues supply after the fact is a legitimation of the limits (of the ultimate limitations; in the last analysis, of the historic weaknesses) of the May movement: You did not try to seize power and you were right, you did not even try to establish a counterpower and you were right once again, because to say counterpower is to say power, and so on. At the same time, what the ideologues furnish us with is a retrospective legitimation of withdrawal, renunciation, noncommitment, or of a punctilious and measured commitment: in any case, we are told that history, the subject, autonomy are only Western myths.

Moreover, this legitimation will rapidly be relayed in the song of the new philosophers, beginning in the mid-1970s: politics aims at the whole, it is therefore totalitarian, and so on (and these lyrics also explain to us its success). Before falling back on "vacation homes" and private life, and *in order* to do exactly that, people needed a minimum of ideological justification (not everybody, alas, enjoys the same freedom from yesterday's words and actions as some other people do). That is what the ideologues continued to supply in slightly modified wrappings. It is astonishing that Ferry and Renault have not seen the perfect harmony between the ideology of the death of the subject, man, truth, politics, etc., and the state of mind, the humor, the mood, the *Stimmung* that followed the *failure* (and what is more, the *bizarre* failure) of May and the *disintegration* of the movement. There were, certainly, among the people mobilized in May, a number of participants who continued to be militants among the Trotskyists, the

Maoists, and so on. They never amounted to more than a few thousand altogether, and their numbers rapidly declined after 1972. For the rest, for the tens or hundreds of thousands who participated in May–June 1968 but who no longer believed in a real movement, who wanted to find a justification or a legitimation both for the failure of the movement and for their own incipient privatization while also retaining some sort of a “radical sensibility”—for all these people, the nihilism of the ideologues, who had at the same time managed to jump on the bandwagon of a vague sort of “subversion,” was admirably convenient. Ferry’s and Renaut’s misinterpretation is total. “Sixty-eight thought” is anti-’68 thought, the type of thinking that has built its mass success on the ruins of the ’68 movement and as a function of its failure. The ideologues discussed by Ferry and Renaut are ideologues of man’s impotence before his own creations; and it is a feeling of impotence, discouragement, tiredness that they have come to legitimate, after May ’68.

As for the ideological filiations of the May ’68 movement, insofar as it is possible and of interest to provide “concrete” origins, they have been retraced in detail by Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Alain Schnapp in the already cited *Journal de la Commune étudiante*, and suitably summarized by Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit when they write in *Le Gauchisme* that their book could have been replaced “by an anthology of texts published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, *L’Internationale Situationniste*, *Informations et Correspondance Ouvrières*, *Noir et Rouge*, *Recherches Libertaires* and, to a lesser degree, in Trotskyist journals.”⁸



May ’68 and the other movements of the sixties have shown the persistence and the power of the aim of autonomy, expressed both in the rejection of the bureaucratic-capitalist world and in the new ideas and practices invented or propagated by those movements. But they have also testified to this dimension of *failure* that has so far been indissolubly linked, at least in appearance, with modern political movements: the immense difficulty involved in prolonging in a positive direction the critique of the existing order of things, the impossibility of assuming the aim of autonomy, as simultaneously individual and social autonomy, through the instauration of a collective form of self-government (whence, after the collapse of the movement, the multifarious and multifariously ridiculous driftings toward the Maoist and Trotskyist micro-bureaucracies, toward

“Mao-spontex” liquefaction, or toward pseudo-“subversive” ideological nihilism).

But this failure has been with us since the beginning of modern times. It is represented by officers who finally brought to its senses the army of Roundheads and by Cromwell who became Lord-Protector. It is found in the New England that fell short of, rather than going beyond, the line laid down by Jefferson (Tocqueville’s America is a society at the same time idealized and bygone). It is in the France that pulled back when confronted by the task of continuing the immense work initiated between 1789 and 1792—whence the open field left to the Jacobins, then to the Terror. It is in the Russia of 1917, where the Bolsheviks seized power in the population’s absence and established the first totalitarian power in modern times.

This failure, need we recall, very rarely is total. In most cases, these movements result in the formal instituting of certain rights, freedoms, guarantees under which we still live. In other cases, nothing is formally instituted, but deep traces are left in the mental outlook and actual life of societies; such was undoubtedly the case with the 1871 Paris Commune; such is certainly the case, as I stated earlier, with the movements of the sixties.

The situation is clearly linked to the antinomic character of the modern political imagination. This imagination is, on the one hand, under the sway of the aim of autonomy and its successive extensions into the various fields in which the social sphere is instituted; on the other hand, it seldom, and only for a brief time, manages to disengage itself from the representation of politics—and of the institution—as an exclusive domain [*fief*] of the State and from the representation of this State (which itself continues to incarnate, even in the most modern societies, the figure of a power based on divine right) as belonging only to itself. The result has been that, in modernity, politics as collective activity (and not as a specialized profession) has been able to be present so far only as spasm and paroxysm, a bout of fever, enthusiasm and rage, a reaction to the excesses of a Power that in other respects is still both inimical and inevitable, enemy and fatality; it has, in short, been able to be present only as “Revolution.”

One can find within oneself the mischief to show that the “meaning” of May ’68 has in the end been a growth in sales of pornographic video-cassettes. It might be less amusing, but more fruitful, to see in May ’68 and in the movements of the sixties the enormous promises latent in contem-

porary society and the immense difficulty modern humanity experiences in trying to get away from all this idiocy, politicize itself, and decide that taking care of its (collective) business could become its normal and regular condition.

The dissolution of the movements of the sixties has heralded the beginning of the new regressive stage in the political life of Western societies, a stage that we have been witnessing since the early 1970s. This regression goes hand in hand with (and is almost synonymous with) a new round of bureaucratization/privatization/mediatization, and at the same time, to express it in a more traditional language, with a massive return of authoritarian political tendencies in the liberal-oligarchic regime. People have the right to think that these phenomena are temporary or permanent, that they express a particular moment in the evolution of modern society or that they are the conjunctural expression of insurmountable features of human society. What is not permissible is to forget that, thanks to and by means of the type of collective mobilizations represented by the movements of the sixties, Western history is what it is and Western societies find sedimented within themselves the institutions and characteristics that, somehow or other, make them viable and may one day serve as the starting point and the springboard for something else.

Here is the only important division. There are those, like myself, who consider that the margins of freedom contained in the contemporary regime are but the sedimented by-products of movements of this type that have been going on for centuries; that, without these movements, the regime not only would never have produced these freedoms but would have, each time, unrelentingly whittled them down (as is happening now); that, finally, humanity can certainly do better. And there are those who think—they seldom dare say it, except “on the Right,” but their arguments and their reasoning boil down to the same thing—that we live in the finally found form of a free and just political society (some reforms, of course, remain to be accomplished). The discussion cannot but stop here, and everybody can make their choices or confirm ones they have already made.

And yet, even if it were admitted that we are living at the end of a period of historical inebriation begun for the second time some eight centuries ago in the first free burgher towns of Western Europe, at the end of a dream of freedom and self-government, of truth and responsibility—even if it were admitted that today we are finally in a position to see, in all sobriety, the finally found form of political society, the definitive truth of

the human condition in the guise of Pasqua and Fabius, Hernu and Léotard, *Playboy* and video-clips, pop-philosophy and “postmodern” hotchpotches—even if such were the case, it would be incongruous to see in all that the “meaning” of 1776 and 1789, of 1871, of 1917, and of May ’68. For, even in this nightmarish hypothesis, the “meaning” would lie in the attempt to bring into being other possibilities for human existence.