

TESTIMONY OF A LEFT-WING LIBERAL IN MAY 68 AT NANTERRE IN FRANCE

French Politics and Society, Vol 16, Number 3, Summer 1998, Center for European Studies at Harvard University, Cambridge MA, pp. 57-64

For the former Maoist French philosopher Alain Badiou, demonstrating to end the Algerian war was the prelude of May 68 (Cahiers du Cinéma, special issue 68, May 1998); for others it was demonstrating against the American presence in Vietnam. In my own experience, Vatican II, a period of key reform of the Catholic Church, played the most important role in sparking my participation in May 68. After having spent seven years at a posh Jesuit school in the XVIth arrondissement in Paris and one year at the University of Nanterre in 1964-65, I entered the seminary of Issy Les Moulineaux, in the suburbs of Paris. There I studied philosophy and biblical analysis, which have helped me considerably in comparative anthropology.

a. The hidden revolution of Catholics in favor of Vatican II

When I started the seminary, in 1965, our daily life was completely governed according to a monastic model. We got up at 6 a.m. and lights went out at 9 or 10 p.m. The day was punctuated by laudes and morning mass, angelus at noon, and compline in the evening, all in Latin. Every hour a bell announced a new activity. Meals were eaten in silence with one student reading the life of the day's saint. We left the seminary only on Thursdays for charity work and on Sundays after mass. This all seemed very normal to me.

Two years later, following many meetings and much questioning connected to the Vatican II reform movement, which was based on social, working-class philosophy, most of the rules were thrown out of the window. We were allowed out when we wanted, and mass and prayers were delivered in French. Thanks to this period, I had my first experience of challenging the established social order and participating in a process of profound change, and I discovered my skill in contesting rules that are not socially justified. I was in favor of the Church's involvement in the world and opposed to a mystical religion mainly focused on God.

On my own, I would never have started such a movement. And yet, this movement — neither calculated nor explicit for me at the outset — corresponded to an unformulated desire for liberation from the traditional social and family model and from the quasi-military paternal authority that was associated with them in France.

b. November 1967: The first strike at Nanterre University or learning about collective action

After receiving a diploma in Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy at the Catholic University in Paris — which laid the groundwork for my neo-realist vision of sociology — I registered for a DEUG, a two-year diploma, in sociology at Nanterre in October 1967. Touraine, Crozier, Bouricaut, Lefevre, Baudrillard, Lourau, Steudler, Tripier, Raymond, Manuel Castells — a political refugee whom I heard by chance as guest speaker at the Congress of the American Association of Anthropology in Atlanta many years later in 1995 — and Cardoso, the current President of Brazil, were teaching there. My interest in intellectual diversity came from Alain Touraine, who became my Ph.D. director between 1971 and 1975 and shaped the importance I have attached to a strong pluralism in university learning and publishing. Afterwards, as head of

the department of social sciences at L'Harmattan publishing house, over the 20 years between 1975 and 1995, I published many "Crozerian" researchers, as well as Marxists, "Boudonians," and "Bourdieuists."

In November 1967, several strikes started in Paris, at Nanterre University, but also at the Sorbonne and the School of Sciences in Paris. "The reasons for this agitation are diverse," wrote the journalist Frédéric Gaussen. It appears that it began as a spontaneous movement and that it was born from the concern of a number of students over the application of the University reform. Students met together in small groups of training workshops and elected delegates who were to discuss with professors the equivalence of diplomas between the old and new learning systems. The delegates were not all heads of National Union of French Students (UNEF), and the strike committee that was formed for this occasion underlined the fact that it was composed of "union and non-union students." The initiative of the movement was taken by sociology students who, under the influence of several assistant professors, investigated the material and pedagogical conditions of learning and the implications of the reform." (Le Monde, November 23, 1967)

I participated in the strike as one of the five non-union members of the ten-member strike committee; Yves Stourdzé, who died a few years ago, and Philippe Meyer, a well-known, brilliant intellectual and journalist, were members. While a delegation of students went to present our claims to Dean Grapin and to the extraordinary assembly of professors, I participated in organizing and supervising the 1,000 to 2,000 students who awaited the results. The students all sat quietly in the lobby of Building B, which was the symbol of university power. While we were waiting, Barbet, mayor of Nanterre and Communist representative, came to "affirm the solidarity of the Communist representatives in the National Assembly with the students on strike." He stressed the inadequacy of the budget of the Ministry of Education, which explained the difficulties that students encountered at Nanterre University.

Afterwards the extraordinary assembly of professors declared itself in favor of "the consolidation or the creation of liaison organizations between students and teachers inside each department," as reported by the journalist Claude Gambiez (Figaro, November 22, 1967).

The starting point of the action was "corporatist." There were no political goals as in the beginning of many other social movements. Grouped together were students campaigning for mixed dormitories on the campus, where I was living in October 1967, political militants incensed over Vietnam, Cuba, or Palestine, and also more "innocent" students like me, many of whom were middle-class Catholic students. Some of the latter, however, were well trained in contesting the Catholic Church and in leading groups because of their experience in Catholic youth groups such as the Boy Scouts or in parish organizations.

I learned how to talk with journalists; write releases; debate with all manner of politicians — Communists, Trotskyists, Socialists, Maoists (pro-Chinese students); conduct meetings; speak on the radio, write motions; talk at the right moment in collective bargaining or a general assembly; negotiate alliances with other groups; and analyze the political situation in order to choose the right moment to act. These were actually common lessons one learns when participating in a social movement, but they provoked deep transformations in my way of

dealing with human relations and considering the efficiency of acting in society. Since then, I have realized that relationships between individuals at work or at home must be the least hierarchical possible, with inherent conflicts and direct negotiation, and with a realistic appraisal of the room for maneuvering within any given situation.

A second, unexpected effect was learning not to give too much credence to explanations based on secret forces. At the time, theories explaining the problems of French society by plots organized by Chinese or Russian Communists were very frequent. For example, I have found in my personal archives of May 68 a pamphlet from 1968 signed "Renovation of a Christian Order" and titled "What is the source of the gangrene?" It exposed the methods of the Chinese Communist Party, written by "department number 106 in a secret order of February 12, 1957, according to the 'FIDES' information bureau of the Holy See, part of the Congregation 'De Propaganda Fide.' Comrades must infiltrate Catholic schools... They must join students, adapt themselves to their feelings, learn about community activities, observe them, and **methodically infiltrate all sectors of Catholic Church activity** [in bold in the text]."

I learned from my experience then that the success of a social movement need not be explained by underground, manipulative actions, even though some minorities may be plotting and trying to manipulate the situation. Afterwards, in 1976 in Brazzaville in the Congo, as head of Snes Sup, a left-wing university union, I had to organize a one-day peaceful occupation of the French Embassy. Before the beginning of action, it was very difficult to know whether the French university teachers would support it, and I learned just how little so-called "agitators" can actually manipulate people who are under the constraints of being expelled from their position. At the same time, my anthropological work on "witchcraft" in Africa, between 1975 and 1979, helped me to understand that we mustn't think that because people are suffering and being exploited, there is a relation between intention on the part of conspirators and outcome. Intention is not causality. Not only do I mistrust explanations based on conspiracies, but I also am wary of over-interpretations, comprehensive approaches, and explanations focused on representations and values that don't take into account the constraints of the situation. These realizations have inoculated me against power-conspiracy theories as well as against spontaneous-action theories and have gradually led me to a structural approach of contingency: an event is the product of a structure — "the course of things" as expressed by Chinese thought — without necessarily being the direct result.

c. May 68: learning to regulate conflict

May 68 took place in this context. I remember it as both a great event and a series of difficult moments. It was not the May of barricades or paving stones of official history. It was a more modest, "reformist" May, which, between January and June 68, was made up of discussions on the reform of the University with the members of the Catholic community of Nanterre; of sit-ins in March 68 on the lawn of Nanterre, led with efficiency and humor by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, an undergraduate Sociology student; and of meetings in University committees about changing the University's commitment and opening it to the professional and occupational world. My involvement in all these activities was based on reformist and realistic goals. I felt attacked as much by "gauchistes," radical leftists, as by the conservative right-wing. I was not

alone in searching for solutions that follow the stream of the social movement without falling into the "messianism" of a brighter future that would not come true. As we said at the time, the issue was not the "great evening" of Marxist Revolution but the next morning, that is to say, the moment when realism and daily constraints got the upper hand.

Michel Crozier expressed this tension in an open letter to French students in May 1968: "You rose up against the absurd, the nonsense, and the caricature of ourselves and of our scientific and intellectual tradition that has been made by generations of pedantic university professors, narrow-minded bureaucrats, and authoritarian revolutionaries... It is not a matter of being totally delirious even if you have succeeded in communicating your delirium to all of France... There is within your movement the temptation to set up a closed community, an ideal, autonomous, self-sufficient group, enclosed within a legal constitution. If you give in to it, you will wind up reproducing the traditional pattern of society that you wanted to leave behind." (Mimeographed tract, Club Jean Moulin, 1968, May 24) He was asking us to do the impossible, but I agreed with his realism. To paraphrase one of the most well known slogans of May 68, "Be realistic, ask for the impossible." I also observed his physical courage at Nanterre University when he came to participate in a meeting about examination conditions in June 68. With Touraine, he took a stand against radical students, unlike other professors such as Lefevre, Baudrillard, or Bouricaud, who disappeared from Nanterre.

Outside of work meetings and of AG (General Assembly), my most vivid souvenir is the 100,000-student demonstration of the evening of May 13, following the working-class demonstration of one million French who took to the streets. I learned how to run in a demonstration in the Chinese style, shouting "hop, hop, hop" to keep the crowd in order. Cohn-Bendit led the demonstration by acting out the slogans as we advanced to the Sorbonne, in the heart of the Latin Quarter, and by demanding "news of the missing" — students that had been taken by the police — as we took up the demands. There was another slogan that has had a great impact on my life, and of which I am still proud as a Frenchman: "We all are German Jews." France has been the site of the mixture and integration of many ethnic groups for more than 20 centuries, opposed to purity and apartheid. Little by little, I have understood that speeches about purity — but also on the respect of others — might hide stigmatizing practices and lead towards ghettoization.

The demonstration ended quietly. The police (CRS) were not far away. Today I know that the police force is necessary to protect the law of the State, but it took me a long time to accept such a conclusion.

At the time, I was caught within a tension between a protest against social order, authority, rules, non-participation, and capitalism and a will to be efficient, to improve reality, and to be on the side of institutions. I was not against consumer society, for I thought it was a left-wing bourgeois position. I had the feeling that the left-wing radicals were "protesting against what they called the 'false values' of consumer society and claiming that the working class was deceived, but in the name of what kind of values if not Catholic values... They were defending an ideology... which in fact deceived the working class." (Personal notes, December 1968) In what name should one claim that consumption is a false value, unless it is the name of the

Catholic ideal of poverty and the refusal of money? My deep feeling is that attacking the consumer society in 1968 was not fair. It was a way of depriving the working class of consumer goods that the bourgeoisie and its children, the radical and revolutionary students, already possessed. There was an elitist side to their position that I could not abide. I also discovered during that period the deep link between the values of Marxism of the Latin countries of Southern Europe and those of the Catholic Church, both of which both mistrusted man's exploitation of man by money. They contrast with those of Protestantism and social democracy Northern Europe, which do not oppose earning money but insist on its redistribution.

I am also against left-wing radicals who, from my point of view, "use neo-fascist methods: humiliating professors in sociology and in the humanities, in the bureaucracy and in their departments; pressuring and threatening students at the university or at the dormitory; demanding for themselves freedom of expression which, once obtained, they refused for those who didn't think like them..." (Personal notes, May 68)

I discovered class struggle through Marxism, power relationships, and concepts of interest thanks to Michel Crozier. My whole right-thinking world had to be rebuilt on a new base. May 68 for me is not the memory of a great "fusional" happening, but rather a moment of discovery of concrete conflicts and struggles, and also of the fact that others could be dangerous. It was time to become adult.

d. The Edgar Faure law and the creation of MARC 200 at Nanterre: learning political realism

The last term of 1968, Edgar Faure, De Gaulle's new Minister of Education, prepared his new university law. Using as a basic network the left-wing students of the Catholic community of Nanterre, some friends and I launched MARC 200, Movement of Critical Action and Research, which required 200 student candidates in all departments. It was a half-political and half-union association. We met in December 1968 and launched MARC 200 on January 6, 1969, with a three-page manifesto, which was the result of a compromise among several tendencies: social Catholics, SFIO students (the former Socialist party), PSU students (a splinter group of SFIO), some liberals, etc.

"We are offered a certain vision of participation which we condemn, but why do we participate in elections? Because every step, no matter how small, must be used, with its contradictions indicated, in order to help create the society we demand; because refusing to participate in elections would not be understood by public opinion (cf. Mao Zedong: "In every work for the masses we have to take their needs as the starting point and not to start from our desires, as laudable they may be"); because this would be a pretext for conservatives to take antidemocratic measures."

We had our watchwords: "For a permanent and critical education - For cooperative self-management - For interdisciplinarity critical of the role of culture, critical of the power structure included in the proposed law." These watchwords were strongly influenced by the ideas of the book by Bourdieu and Passeron Les héritiers (The Heirs), published in 1967.

On Tuesday 28 1969, the Figaro published a small article entitled "MARC 200 Nanterre: what would be the outcome of the failure of the law?" along with this excerpt from our press release. "We refuse to be locked into the alternative of participation in this law or systematic obstruction in setting up of any structures... We are against destructive movements that provoke repression while maintaining disorder. Through elections, we can take advantage of certain liberal sections of the law." This realistic position was difficult to maintain, particularly in the Department of Sociology of Nanterre. For me it made no sense asking to participate in the decision-making processes within the University, as we had done since November 1967, and, once we had the opportunity to do so, refusing to take part. That taught me something very important concerning human behavior: it is not necessarily because people ask for something that that is what they really want. More often, they wish for something else more vague, less clear, but most often they do not wish to take action. The cost is too high if the balance of power is not in favor of those who do not have enough assets in the social game.

In the middle of the electoral struggle, RTL Radio unexpectedly managed to convene a round table including all the student factions of Nanterre University, from left-wing to right-wing: UNEF, UEC, MARC 200, MEN, CA, REP, CLERU. The broadcast was difficult to organize, because one tendency would threaten not to attend if another did. Finally, "although there was at no time any dialogue among irreconcilable elements," wrote a newspaper, "the fact that such a debate happened allows us to think that something has changed in the political manners of the humanities departments of Nanterre University."

At the same time, an election committee was organized by the Rector of Paris Jean Roche and convoked by Jean Beaujeu. Along with ten other students, I participated in the name of Marc 200 in this committee, which was chaired by René Rémond and which included professors such as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. It was probably during this period that I learned the most difficult collective negotiation tricks. I learned how to bargain political alliances with UNEF, a student union close to the Communist party, how to compromise on a voting system, and how to deal with tiring meetings, where we had to stay late into the night in order to prevent a minority from enacting something in its favor.

On March 2, 1969, *Le Monde* announced the left-wing students unions won nearly half of the elected representatives. Twenty-nine of 100 student-elected members were from UNEF Renouveau, led by the Communist students, and 19 from MARC 200. It was a great victory for a movement that was only two months old and that stood up to the Communist party and the traditional right wing. It was also a valuable lesson of strategy. Winning in a short time is possible if the action involved is part of a long-term plan and if it is based on a strong social network.

A few months later, I went into politics. I took part in a meeting with Jean-Pierre Worms to prepare launching of the new Socialist Party chaired by Alain Savary. I joined the party in 1969 in the local section of Creteil, a CERES tendency led by the Portelli brothers. I stayed in the Socialist Party until 1982. I left the Catholic Church without crisis at the end the 70s and am now an agnostic.

The Relevance of May 68

Today, May 68 seems to me both close and far. Most of "the ideas of May 68" have become commonplace. Thus, I think May 68 is a key period in understanding the baby boomer generation born between 1945 and 1955, which is in charge of most political, economical or cultural activities in France. At the same time, nothing has been solved, because the solutions of one generation are not necessarily adapted to the problems of the younger or older generations. Nothing must be taken for granted; everything could be in the balance again. Like Sisyphus pushing his stone, we have to continue pushing ours without end. This is not a pessimistic view, but a will to refuse a totalitarian political and religious vision of life. The meaning of life is not given; we have to create it collectively. That is the most important thing I was taught by May 68 and by my Catholic past.

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