

THE FOURTH WORLD, PART I WHAT HAPPENED IN PARIS

Paris, July 14, 1968

The annual parade is over, rather thinly covered on television because the journalists of the O.R.T.F. have not yet returned to work. Their strike, the last remnant of the May revolution, ended a few days ago without the assurances of freedom in reporting for which they had held out.¹ After the final performance of a run of Beckett's *Endgame* at a Montmartre theater last night the principal actor held a collection box for the journalists. The sensation of an ending has been strong in Paris in the last weeks; as the police have occupied the few remaining buildings still held by students (or, in the language of the right, as the students have evacuated them) and the cleaning men with their *grattoirs* have taken down all the posters, only a few slogans in spray paint here and there, and some asphalt patches in the street around the Sorbonne where the *pavés* were torn up and used for ammunition, give outward evidence of anything's having happened at all.² For the crowd on the Champs Élysées this morning it was all finished; France was back to normal, and there as usual taking the salute was De Gaulle.

"De Gaulle — mon Dieu, faites qu'il crève!" (De Gaulle — oh God, make him drop dead!) This agonized appeal could be seen scrawled up at the Odéon, and it must have reflected the feelings of many participants in the demonstrations. For to the youth of France De Gaulle is what Johnson is (or was) to the youth of America, the infuriating symbol of a materialistic and chauvinistic society with enormous power but without a soul, a society so closed upon itself that only violence can hope to make any significant change in it. The remarkable thing about the May revolution is that it did in fact come within a hair's breadth of overthrowing the society. After De Gaulle's massive victory at the polls this is hard to remember, but it is by no means the most bizarre of the truths about this extraordinary episode. Two others, equally implausible on their face but equally borne out by the evidence, are that the whole thing was an indirect product of the war in Vietnam, and that France was saved for democracy at the very brink of collapse by the Communist Party. The conjunction of these last two points has a kind of sickening irony in the light of America's postwar foreign policy, but their lesson is too obvious for me to have to drive it home here.

Having come so close to success, however, the revolutionary movement may have spoiled its chances of pulling off anything similar again for a long time. In a way its hand was forced; the student activists, who did not expect at this stage to have much impact outside the university, had intended to wait until the fall for their big manifestation. That events would grow to such proportions in May was unforeseen: so was the general strike. Some left-wing theorists, encouraged by the magnitude of the disturbance, are now developing a new theory of revolution for advanced industrial societies, societies in which classical revolutionary theory concluded that success was impossible (whence the preference of the Communists in France for parliamentary action). According to the new theory, the initiative will be taken by students, the one group not successfully integrated into the mechanism of society and not yet having a collective stake in it; their lead will be followed by the workers in a general strike; then, however, instead of sitting stubbornly in the factories, the workers will start the processes of production and distribution up again under the direction of their own revolutionary committees, with which the public will be forced to deal for the necessities of life; meanwhile the old government can do what it likes: it will eventually be seen to be a nonfunctioning appendage (the real business being conducted directly between the workers and the people) and will die a natural death.

This theory is beautiful but absurd. It would not have been absurd if it had been

formulated a few months ago, for the position of the Communists was then not as clear as it is now. If in May the Communist Party and the unions had called for a real take-over of the factories and for their operation as revolutionary enterprises, instead of behaving like respectable democratic organizations, it is hard to guess what would have happened. Probably the Army would eventually have broken the movement, but that would have amounted to civil war. Now however it is evident that the Fifth Republic has undergone a kind of catharsis in its body politic, and another general strike in the near future, or even a successful large-scale manifestation, seems out of the question. There was an outbreak last night near the Bastille but it was quickly crushed: the maintenance of public order is now at the top of De Gaulle's agenda, and there is plenty of evidence that it will be maintained if necessary by brutal repression and at the expense of justice. As to the Communist Party, it can hardly be thought of as a revolutionary agency any more, having been offered a revolution and publicly declined the offer. M. Waldeck-Rochet, its secretary-general, said a few days ago that the most pressing danger to the party came from "leftists."³ And there is no other united organization capable even of thinking in such terms. There is a lot of ideological spirit but very little political strength.

The trouble with the May revolution was that it was swallowed whole by bourgeois democracy, just as Marcuse had feared.⁴ What prevents the continuing alliance of the students and workers is that the students have already enjoyed and seen through the benefits of bourgeois society while the workers are still struggling for those benefits; the students are ready to destroy what the workers still dream of attaining. "The students did not go to the barricades for a few more lecture-rooms, and I think we are safe in saying that the young workers who joined in did not do so for a seven percent raise," said Alain Geismar of *S.N.E.Sup.* (*Syndicat national de l'enseignement supérieur*, the university teachers' union) at a rally on May 27.⁵ But it is easy for the privileged to overrate the idealism of the underprivileged: the workers got their raise and went back to work.

It is therefore in the universities rather than in the country at large that further developments are to be looked for (not that a too repressive régime might not blow up in an even more spectacular way later on, only the government would have to be quite remarkably stupid for this to happen). How the *rentrée* in October will be managed is hard to visualize at this point.⁶ Something has to give somewhere eventually, the French university system being about a half-century behind in its attitudes and resources, and the chaos this year is unbelievable—courses unfinished, examinations postponed, candidates for advanced degrees refusing to take them, and so on. In fact while the tension generated among the students by the war in Vietnam was the immediate cause of the trouble, the ground of general student and faculty discontent had been prepared long before. But what happened in May was out of all proportion to that discontent; it was the by now classic combination of administrative insensitivity and police brutality that provided the needed catalyst.

About the disturbances themselves I shall say very little, since after the first outbreak the story is reasonably well known, but it may be worth stating again how things began and how events led up to this beginning. On May 3 M. Roche, the Rector of the Sorbonne, looked out of his window and saw that the courtyard was full of students. Alarmed by this unusual circumstance, he called the police. The Prefect of Police, M. Grimaud, thought this an unwise move, and refused to answer the call without written confirmation from the Minister of Education, which however was promptly furnished. Although there had been a good deal of recent unrest in the French universities (some of it inspired by Columbia) the students at the Sorbonne had, up to that point, been rather passive, in spite of a good deal of prodding from their

more activist colleagues elsewhere to get into the swing of things — protest, occupy a building, do *something*. But the Rector's call for the police broke an immemorial tradition of the immunity of the university from local interference; it was an offense beyond forgiveness. "*Les flics à la Sorbonne, les deux mots ça a vraiment tout fait bouger*"⁷ (the cops at the Sorbonne, those two words really started everything off).

The meeting in the courtyard had been somewhat out of the ordinary for the Sorbonne, since it was partially organized by the *enragés*, members of the Movement of March 22 who had come into town from Nanterre, a university in the suburbs whose Dean, M. Grappin, had (also with the help of the police) closed the campus the previous day. Both Roche and Grappin had had genuine worries about what might happen at their respective institutions. The movement of March 22, whose sole unifying principle was support of the Vietnamese people against American imperialist aggression (although the meeting on March 22 at which it was formed dealt with more general ideological concerns and university reform as well),⁸ had been sitting-in in various buildings at Nanterre off and on for about a month, and the right-wing student organization FNEF (*Fédération nationale des étudiants de France*, to be distinguished from the left-wing student union, UNEF) had threatened to break them up with violent action. At the Sorbonne the fascist action group Occident had made similar threats, and on May 2 had in fact set fire to the offices of a local union of students. One of the reasons why so many students were gathered on May 3 was that a new attack was expected.

When the police were called at Nanterre the reaction was less violent than at the Sorbonne simply because Nanterre had less in the way of tradition to be violated — it is indeed a fairly new university, and since it has already won a reputation for radicalism and unrest (the film "*La Chinoise*" was shot there and is about one of the Maoist *groupuscules* of which so much was heard during the revolution) disturbances of all sorts were less surprising. It was consequently in the streets of the Latin Quarter that the real confrontation unfolded, and this fact in itself gave a double rhetorical boost to the movement. The Nanterre students had been *enragés* on ideological grounds; there were comparatively few of them, but the police action enraged thousands of less politically conscious students who found themselves shut out of their own buildings. Other students and the general public (at first strongly on the side of the students but gradually becoming less and less sympathetic as the violence continued) were aroused by the incredible viciousness of the police and the government security forces (the *Compagnies républicaines de sécurité* which inspired the slogan "CRS=SS!", shouted and scrawled all over Paris). Stories of strangers, women with children, old people bludgeoned and arrested whether they had anything to do with the manifestations or not, together with photographic evidence, circulated in large quantities.⁹ And once started the violence had to work itself out, through the now familiar sequence of the barricades, the strikes, the *chientlit*, the elections.

I said earlier that there was now very little trace of all this, but that observation overlooked one extremely important, impressive and disturbing phenomenon. The Paris bookstores were literally full of books about the revolution little more than a month after it started. One example of the more trivial kind of publication to have emerged is a collection of graffiti, *Les Murs ont la parole*¹⁰ (idiomatically "the walls have the floor," *la parole* — the word — being what passes from speaker to speaker in French debates) which was reported in *Le Monde* the other day to have run to 65,000 copies in three weeks. It is true that a kind of mania for writing and sticking things on walls broke out among the demonstrators everywhere, partly in imitation of the Chinese cultural revolutionaries, but more perhaps as a bottled-up reaction against the injunction "*Défense d'afficher — loi de 29 juillet 1881*" which has been part of the

Parisian superego as long as anyone can remember. But although there were brilliant, witty, moving and above all serious slogans everywhere, most of them simply didn't deserve preservation. It seems, however, that everything that could be conceivably used as an excuse for publication has been used: citations, photographs, posters, reportage, commentary — there must already be twenty-five titles and new ones appear almost daily, printed, sewn, bound, with glossy covers, selling at 6 francs, 10 francs, 18 francs, 28 francs, a fantastic feat of production for the printers and a veritable bonanza for the publishers. What is disturbing about all this is that it is just another symptom of Marcuse's one-dimensional society, part of the process of digesting and neutralizing one of the only serious attempts to make a fundamental change in the order of things that has come along in fifty years. An indignant tract was briefly in circulation against the commercial exploitation of the revolution, and its indignation was fully justified.

The contrast between a single tract and the flood of paper which is coming off the presses may be all too accurate a symbol of the May revolution in the face of the sheer weight of Western industrial-bourgeois habits. Whatever university reforms may be won — and there will be some — the vision of a purified society which quite genuinely animated some of the leaders of the movement will certainly not be realized. That of course is the fate of all revolutions, even the successful ones, especially in their later phases, which explains why Russia is completely *passé* but China and Cuba still command enthusiasm. But in this case it seemed, for a while at least, that the vision was not merely Utopian, that it had a chance of coming into being, that indeed it had come into being for a week or two. The conviction that there must be something better than the values and social organization of the prosperous middle classes is gaining ground among students all over the world, and in Paris the revolutionaries thought they had a taste of it. It is difficult to convey the tone of conviction, commitment, discipline and hope that pervaded the atmosphere in the new Faculty of Medicine, one of the only faculties still liberated when I arrived at the end of June (although by then most of the hope had evaporated). In many places it was hard no doubt to keep faith in these things, -what with Katangese rebels, teeny-boppers and other dubious types attracted by the prospect of promiscuity or a good fight, but in the Faculty of Medicine at least, until the last few days when the students thrown out of the Censier center took refuge there, affairs were conducted with great responsibility and seriousness. (The police found no vandalism at all after a period of six weeks.) Students and faculty, working together, drew up a white paper on the reform of medical education which, as they put it, accomplished more in those six weeks than the administration had been able to accomplish in ten years.¹¹ Everywhere there was a sense of participation, of community, of a kind of collective movement and purpose in refreshing contrast to the authoritarian and hierarchical system of influence and personal prestige which has characterized higher education in France.

The revolution turned up one personality, it is true, in *Dany le Rouge* (Danny the Red), a German sociology student from Nanterre named Daniel Cohn-Bendit who was the leader of the original *enragés*. But as Cohn-Bendit himself took pains to point out in a number of press conferences, personalities were unimportant, indeed to take any notice of them would have been to fall into the well-known ideological heresy. In Germany after it was all over he said, without regret, "Six months ago nobody had heard of Cohn-Bendit, six months from now everybody will have forgotten him." Viewed from a democracy whose electoral processes are almost entirely built on the cult of personality (which makes it well-nigh impossible to take a genuinely historical view of anything at all) this may just seem like personal modesty — in itself, be it noted, a personal virtue, and one which the cult of personality knows well how to exploit. But it can also be seen as reflecting a genuine and fundamental conviction that what happened in Paris

was *history*, transcending any of the participants in it. In virtue of that fact (not because of the violence or the barricades) it qualified as revolutionary for those involved. And the failure — as the participants see it, the betrayal — of the revolution may indicate that Western democracy has succeeded, at least for the time being, in bringing history to a standstill. It is not an encouraging thought.

1 Most of them were subsequently fired.

2 During the summer all the streets in the Latin Quarter were asphalted, and the iron grills around the bottoms of the trees — also handy weapons — were all removed.

3 *Le Monde*, July 11, 1968.

4 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1964.

5 Alain Ayache, ed., *Les Citations de la révolution de mai*, Paris, Pauvert 1968, p. 81.

6 In fact, under the leadership of the new Minister of Education, M. Edgar Faure, the French government has in three months radically overhauled the entire system of University administration.

7 Emile Copferman, ed., *Mouvement du 22 mars: ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat*, Paris, Maspero, 1968, p. 23.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

9 See especially *Le Livre noir des journées de mai*, Paris, Seuil, 1968, and Philippe Labro, ed., *Les Barricades de mai*, Paris, Solar, 1968.

10 Julien Besançon, ed., "*Les Murs ont la parole*," *journal mural mai 1968*. Paris, Tchou, 1968.

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