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France in 1968: Myths, realities and unanswered questions

John Mullen

It seemed, in France, in this year of 2018, that everyone was talking about 1968. A huge number of broadcasts, publications and commemorative events were being produced. The conservative magazine *L'Express* headlined “1968-2018: How Everything Changed”. The National Archives and the National Library in Paris both held exhibitions on the theme, the latter on 1968 radical posters. Communist Party branches and different far-left organizations organized meetings or day schools on “May 68: What lessons for today?”



1 Conservative magazine *L'Express*

What's so special about France in 1968?

Why was this fiftieth anniversary such a talking point that it seemed far more visible in public debate than the centenary of the First World War? Certainly, the events were sufficiently out of the ordinary as to challenge our conceptions of normal political life. There were barricades on the streets of Paris, pitched battles between police and young people with hundreds injured on each side,

and tanks prepared on the outskirts of the city, in case the government should feel they were necessary. It saw a flowering of creativity and imagination of what another society could be like: the emblematic slogans “It is forbidden to forbid” “Under the paving stones you will find the beach” (referring to the experience felt as liberating of throwing the stones at the police) or “Be realistic, demand the impossible!” covered the streets, along with slogans referring to the lives of factory workers, such as “Down with the hellish speed-up!”.

1968 saw at least nine million workers on strike for several weeks, often occupying their factories, offices, and schools. It was, at the time, the biggest general strike in history, and it counted four times as many strikers as the historic general strike of 1936 in France, long hailed as a major turning point in its gaining of the right to paid holidays.



2 The main French mainstream history magazine

Other stunning events accompanied the upheaval. President Charles de Gaulle actually disappeared for a day, fleeing to Germany, without even telling the Prime Minister where he was going! Meanwhile, radical left groups who were used to organizing meetings in cafés and bars could organize one in a football stadium! Finally, among factors which cry out for explanation, is the fact that General de Gaulle’s conservative party won a clear victory in the general elections at the end of June 1968.

What kind of society produced such an explosion?

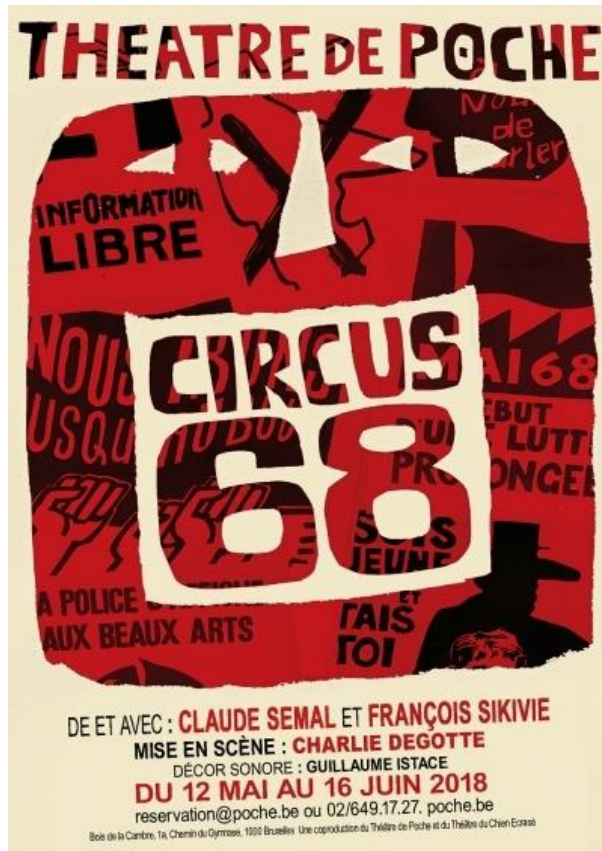
To understand the explosion, we need to go back to the end of the Second World War, a war which had divided France terribly, as a Nazi occupation with a French collaborationist government held power. In 1945, many French towns were wrecked by bombing and people were hungry. A massive work of reconstruction had to be carried out. This reconstruction can in many ways be seen as a success. The following twenty or thirty years are known as years of prosperity. The word may be rather strong, but ordinary people's lives got much better. Even poor children wore shoes. Ordinary working people could afford to see a doctor when they were ill – the newly established *Sécurité Sociale* made sure of that. People could have healthier housing, washing machines, record players and televisions.

Even so, in France in 1968, there were still five million people below the poverty line. Unemployment was low compared to today's figures, but there were almost half a million without a job. And work in the new factories which were springing up everywhere – car factories, steel mills, chemical and plastics factories - was hard and highly repetitive. On average, ordinary people worked 46 or 48 hours a week. More and more women went out to work, which allowed them more control over their lives, but also exposed them to long working hours, and to pay which was lower than that of men. Although housing was improving, there were still vast slums (and indeed the University of Nanterre, where the 1968 movement began, was very close to some of the biggest slums in the country).

On the international scene, France was under the shadow of the Algerian war (1954 to 1962). Almost a million died, mostly Algerians, before Algerian independence was finally won. In 1961 and 1962, demonstrations in Paris against the war had been attacked by the police, and dozens of demonstrators killed.

The post-war years also saw the rise of a new student layer which was to be key to the 1968 explosion. The new factories, new motorways and new towns needed engineers, lawyers, accountants, architects and doctors. The new industries: cars, plastics, nylon, pharmaceuticals, household appliances, organized in large factories, need workers but they also need engineers, researchers, managers. New universities were thrown up to provide these. By 1968 12% of young people went onto Higher Education. Although the number of students was almost four times less than today, (there are two and a half million students in France today, there were only 700 000 in 1968) it was incommensurably higher than it had ever been before. Their lives were different

from those of their parents, and in the international context that we shall see in a moment, their desire to revolt went further than anyone thought it would.



3 A 2018 theatre production in Paris

Finally, although in 1944 the fascist dictatorship had been replaced with a democracy, there were many aspects of the regime set up in 1958 under president de Gaulle which caused discontent. And De Gaulle was fragile: his political parties had won only a narrow victory at the elections in 1967. De Gaulle's regime was rigid and authoritarian. The radio and television were a state monopoly: every night the contents of the television news bulletin were first checked by the Minister of Information. Indeed, for most of May and June 1968 people did not get their information from French television but from the independent private radio stations outside France: Radio Europe and Radio Luxemburg. The rise of transistor radios to replace the huge valve-based radios meant that the radio was everywhere in 1968.

A world in crisis

Internationally, there was a tidal wave of dissent. The terrible American war in Vietnam continued to rage, but in 1968 the situation appeared to be changing. With a new military campaign, the Tet offensive, the North Vietnamese put the US army in tremendous difficulty, penetrating right into the US compound in Saigon. For the first time, it seemed possible to millions that America might

lose. That the greatest superpower the world had ever known might be defeated by a poor peasant people: it felt that anything was possible now. In March 1968 in Poland in Eastern Europe, mass strikes had opposed the government and demonstrators chanted “Down with the Red bourgeoisie!”. And in April 1968, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, riots broke out in all big US cities in protest. The Black Panther party, which had been founded in 1966 on a program of welfare activity and armed self-defence against the police, was gaining in popularity. Meanwhile, in April 1968, there had been huge demonstrations in Berlin after a radical student leader had been shot and severely injured by an anti-Communist right winger.



4 A Communist party meeting in 2018: What lessons from 1968?

It is this atmosphere of international revolt which would give left-wing students the confidence to fight back against the police in May, build barricades in the Latin quarter of Paris, and spark off a historic crisis.

The events¹

A rapid summary of the events is necessary. In late March, a group of around a hundred students occupied administrative buildings at Nanterre University near Paris in protest at sanctions imposed on anti-Vietnam War activists. Daniel Cohn-Bendit was the best known leader. A week later all classes were suspended in the University. When, on 3rd May, the Dean of Nanterre closed

down the campus, students headed to Sorbonne University in the centre of Paris to meet with left organisations. The Dean of the Sorbonne gave permission to police to evacuate the premises and students fought back in the Latin Quarter, which surrounds the university. More than 100 people were injured that day, 20 of them seriously. Hundreds more were arrested and the Sorbonne was closed.

Over the following days the fighting between young people and police intensified, with many young workers, joining the students, as recent research in police archives has confirmed. On the 6th May, six hundred young people and 345 police were injured. Four hundred twenty-two people were arrested and the protest movement began to spread to other parts of France. Although there were many seriously injured among the demonstrators, the police were being careful not to repeat the situation of six years earlier when nine demonstrators, members of the CGT trade union, had been shot dead by police.

On the 10th May, known as “the night of the barricades”, the riot police launched an assault during the night. Three hundred and sixty-seven people were seriously injured, including 251 police and 102 demonstrators. Four hundred and sixty-eight people were arrested, 60 cars were burned. Informed by radio stations based abroad, and distrusting the pro-Gaullist press, the general public was siding increasingly, day after day, with the students.

Three days afterwards, the major trade unions and left-wing parties call a 24-hour general strike in support of the students. One-day general strikes, symbolic and quickly forgotten, were not unusual in the France of the time, but this one would be different. An estimated 800,000 people - teachers, union members and many political activists - flocked onto the streets of Paris, shouting slogans calling for De Gaulle to resign. In big cities across France there were similar demonstrations: Nantes, Lyon, Clermont Ferrand, Marseille, Grenoble. Prime Minister Georges Pompidou sought to calm the situation by announcing that arrested students would be dealt with very quickly by the courts, and by re-opening the Sorbonne University. Students immediately took possession of the Sorbonne and proclaim its permanent occupation. Debates and meetings were held around the clock.

Most commentators imagined that everything would be back to normal the following day. But the strike continued, and spread, and, beginning in a huge factory in Nantes, workers began to occupy their workplaces.

This combativity had not come from nowhere. For example, the previous January there had been strikes in Caen in Normandy, with links being made between factory struggles and the struggles of small farmers and of students. But this was going to be on a mass scale. Every day a new factory was occupied. On the 16th it was the turn of the enormous Renault factory just

outside Paris at Billancourt, with 60 000 workers. Each group of workers had their own demands, but they were similar. In the Paris metro workers demanded a working week reduced to forty hours, and for two consecutive days off a week. In many workplaces, strikers kidnapped the bosses and kept them locked in their offices (even though the leadership of the CGT was opposed to this tactic). Trade union leaders were overtaken by the movement. The leader of the biggest union confederation, the CGT, declared that an unlimited general strike was not necessary, but he was not listened to.



5 1968 poster: "Down with the hellish speed-up"

All that week General de Gaulle, unable to conceive of the depth of the revolt, was out of the country on an official visit to Romania. Insurgent France became unrecognizable. Students occupied the Odéon theatre, a cultural symbol of the bourgeoisie. Others invaded luxury food shops in Paris and distributed the products to poor people. The strike spread from the private sector to the public sector. By the 22nd, more than nine million people were striking. Factories were occupied and echoed with partying and with debates. In some regions, the workers controlled the regional government. In at least one place in the North the head of police had to ask permission from the trade union alliance to buy petrol for its vehicles.

With the excuse that he was of German nationality, Daniel Cohn-Bendit was refused re-entry to France after a speaking tour of Germany. Demonstrations in Paris took to chanting "We are all German Jews" in solidarity. The authorities spent an enormous effort, mobilizing scores of officers, to stop Cohn- Bendit

getting back into France, and hundreds of other activists who did not have French nationality were expelled from the country, in an attitude which it is difficult not to describe as paranoid. Unable to understand where the movement came from, sections of the establishment were convinced there was some communist conspiracy going on, controlled from abroad, do doubt from China. Recent research has shown how far this paranoia could go. The secret service set up an investigation of the General Manager of the huge publicly owned car manufacturer, Renault, suspecting he was a clandestine communist operative!

On the 24th May, in a television broadcast, a gaunt-looking de Gaulle tried to win back public acceptance, by proposing a referendum. The speech had little impact (his own prime minister was not convinced) and protesters continued calling for his resignation. Fighting in the Latin Quarter led to 456 injured and 795 arrests. Combats also broke out in Strasbourg, Bordeaux, Nantes and Lyon.

The following day, emergency negotiations were set up between trade union federations, the government and the employers' organizations. No representatives of students were invited. Two days later, the results were announced: an increase in the minimum wage by a third, increases in all other wages across France of almost ten per cent, along with the establishment of a statutory right to a union branch in every company, even when management was hostile to the idea. The right for employers to hire younger workers at below the minimum wage was abolished.

It was extraordinary that such concessions should be made. Yet many strikers were dissatisfied with the proposals. This was partly because, in the atmosphere of workers' power, expectations were extremely high, but also, the agreement said nothing on payment for strike days, almost nothing on the length of the working week or the speed of work in the factories, and nothing on the social security cutbacks, which were going through at that time and had made people very angry.

The trade union leaders, professional negotiators all, were delighted with the result, but the strikes would continue for weeks: indeed, in the days after the negotiations there were more strikers than previously. As the conflict continued, in many workplaces it was possible to make bigger gains than the national "minimum" protocol, and even sometimes to oblige the employer to pay wages for the strike days. The negotiations won nothing specifically for the students.

By this time, some sections of the elite were genuinely panicking. Jacques Chirac, who would become president of France in the nineties, went to the negotiations secretly armed with a revolver "just in case".

In the Charlety sports stadium in Paris, the radical Left held a mass meeting: 50 000 people were present, chanting, in response to the Grenelle plan “This is only a beginning. The struggle must continue” (“*Ce n’est qu’un début: continuons le combat!*”).ⁱⁱ One political leader who had resigned from the Communist party in protest at their lack of revolutionary spirit declares “A revolution is possible, now!” The same day, Daniel Cohn-Bendit returned secretly to France.



6 Far-left paper from 1968

The 29th May brought a stunning development. General De Gaulle suddenly disappeared, without even informing his prime minister. He took a large amount of luggage, his wife, his family and the family jewels and fled to a French military base in Germany. His son-in-law had tried to dissuade him (“You cannot do that. You have an army which is ready to follow you”). De Gaulle then prepared a letter confiding the presidency to his prime minister (a letter he will finally not use). His staff contacted the French ambassador in Germany to see if it might be possible for him to simply stay in Germany. But the military general at the base, Massu, persuaded him that it was his duty to go back to France and face the situation. The following day he returned to Paris.

De Gaulle considered military action, a coup d’état, among other options. His Prime Minister, however, Georges Pompidou, was convinced that this would be an extremely dangerous idea, and that the bourgeois order could be re-

established using parliamentary means. De Gaulle was still keen on organizing a plebiscite, but Pompidou threatened to resign unless it was agreed that a general election, rather than a referendum, be held.

At four thirty that afternoon, De Gaulle made a radio broadcast (it has been suggested he did not look well enough to be shown on television). He refused to resign, but dissolved the National Assembly (parliament) and called for new legislative elections. That evening, hundreds of thousands of De Gaulle's supporters marched in Paris. The demonstration had been prepared over several days, and was accompanied by others the same day and the following day in support of De Gaulle in a series of cities around France. "Committees for the Defence of the Republic" were organized to oppose the strikes and support De Gaulle; some of these were ready to follow paramilitary options.

At this crucial point, the Communist party leadership agreed that legislative elections were the best way forward, and from then on, they would pull out all the stops to close down the strike movement. As June went on, the majority of public and private-sector workers returned to work, though there was much resistance. On the 6th June there were still two million men and women on strike. In clashes with the police at occupied factories, two people were killed.



7 *Factory meeting 1968*

Having regained the initiative, the government decreed on the 12th June that eleven left wing groups were banned and must dissolve. One of the leaders, Alain Krivine, was imprisoned for six months. No government action was taken against far-right groups.

On the 23rd and the 30th June the first and second round of general elections were held. Only those over 21 years of age had the right to vote. In the first-round, right-wing parties obtained ten and a half million votes, and left-wing parties just over nine million (4 million registered voters stayed at home). Some

MPs were elected straight off in the first round, while in most towns a second-round run-off was necessary. In the second round, Right wing parties obtained 7.2 million votes, and the Left got 6.1 million.

The resulting parliament was overwhelmingly Gaullist in character – 354 Gaullist MPs as opposed to 243 in the outgoing parliament - for two main reasons. Although most people at the time started work at 16, the right to vote was reserved for over 21s, whereas many of the most enthusiastic strikers and protestors were younger people. Secondly, the division of the left-wing vote between the Socialist federation and the Communist Party led to right-wing MPs being elected in many towns with minority support. In addition, turnout among panicked conservatives was very high, whereas some sections of left-wing opinion favoured a boycott of the election.

De Gaulle appointed a new Prime Minister and the immediate crisis was over. In the aftermath, students were able to win concessions: in November 1968, a new law was passed making the universities more democratic, setting up governing bodies where staff and student representatives had considerable influence. Some of these gains have survived up to today, and French universities are still incomparably more democratic than those in the UK, for example.

De Gaulle was much damaged politically: the following April, he insisted on a referendum on constitutional reform, committing himself to resigning if he lost, which he did (by 53.2% to 46.8).



8 *Student demonstrators 1968*

Questions

A number of questions are still being explored concerning the 1968 explosion.

Why are people – of all political stripes - still so interested fifty years later? This is partly because there is an element of mystery. This was the biggest general strike in world history at this time, and it appeared to be difficult to explain. It is also a source of huge disagreement. Those of who believe radical anticapitalist change is possible look to 1968 as an example of mass revolt which could have gone further. Supporters of capitalism, on the other hand, are keen to explain why they think that 1968 did not represent the possibility of another world. The Right has used different tactics to do this. Ten years ago, conservative French presidential candidate Nicholas Sarkozy declared that, in order to rebuild morality and French values, the immoral inheritance of 1968 had to be destroyed. Present French president Emmanuel Macron prefers to think that 1968 was at the origins of the radical individualism which he preaches: at one point he was even tempted by the organization of an official government commemoration of the 68 events.

Why did De Gaulle panic? Heads of state with a long experience in politics do not usually show panic, either because they find the self-control necessary or because they have surrounded themselves with trusted advisers who stabilize them (although the new US president is extending the range of emotional expression one can expect from a head of state). The elite has learned lessons since 1968. Governments are less naive; certainly one cannot imagine national leaders leaving the country on official visits abroad during insurgent movements of this type, as both De Gaulle and Pompidou did in 1968. And today's police are more sophisticated in weaponry and tactics.



9 *A pro-Gaullist poster from 1968*

Why was there not a civil war? A civil war could have broken out. The older political leaders had often been through the Resistance and so understood military operations. Occasional state representatives were tempted with military action. At one point the Prefect of Nantes, faced with a demonstration which had occupied his office and burned his car, telephoned the interior ministry in Paris to ask permission to shoot at the demonstration with live bullets. The permission was refused. In the end, Pompidou, the prime minister, understood that the division of the Left would allow elections to close off the crisis, in the absence of a true revolutionary strategy on the part of the movement.

The legacy

Of course, the vast majority of local strike leaders went back to doing what they were doing before, and used the Grenelle changes to build trade union resistance in the workplaces. Health and safety, unsocial hours and other important questions made significant progress thanks to the trade unionists of the 1970s.

Among the best-known leaders of the time, several have died, a few have become famous for defending a very different conception of politics, like Daniel Cohn Bendit who is now a supporter of the right-wing French president, Emmanuel Macron. And a few have continued in the tradition of revolutionary opposition, like Alain Krivine, who is still active in the New Anticapitalist Party.

Across the world, a number of protest movements were inspired by the events of 1968. The women's movement in France rose shortly afterwards, led by activists who had been involved in 1968. In 1969 across Italy, there were huge strikes and occupations of factories. In Northern Ireland, in 1969 a radical movement to defend Catholics from anti-Catholic racism rose up. In 1974 the dictatorship in Portugal was overthrown by a revolutionary movement; in Britain from 1970 to 1974 a huge wave of strikes destabilized the government. The 1968 events in France helped build an atmosphere of confidence and resistance.

Fifty years later in France, mass strikes are not uncommon, and this year saw radical tactics in a number of universities. Occupied faculties were addressed by striking railway workers, students organized successful boycotts of exams in some towns. Another 1968 is of course possible.

ⁱ Online archive footage can be found here. Although the commentary is dubious, the archive images are striking. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjgSSSZuVbk>

ⁱⁱ Archive footage available online here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsKo_e259KY