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Anarchism in the May Movement in France

JOHN VANE

ONE THING WHICH WAS NOTICED by every observer of what happened in France a year ago was the re-entry of anarchism on to the political stage. To take obvious symptoms, the black flag of anarchy was flown in the streets from the beginning of the movement, and among the thousands of graffiti which adorned the walls there were many with obvious anarchist meanings—some being well-known anarchist slogans, and a few being direct quotations from anarchist writers (especially Bakunin).

The most publicity for anarchism came from Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the main figure in the March 22 Movement at Nanterre, who never hesitated to call himself an anarchist—though, from the evidence of much of what he has actually said and written (especially in his book on leftism*), he seems really to be closer to libertarian Marxism or what used to be called "council communism", and he has occasionally shown definite authoritarian tendencies (as in refusing free speech to supporters of the Vietnam War, or in supporting Castro) which seem to put him at some distance from what most anarchists think of as anarchism. Nevertheless, his propaganda importance has been considerable, outside as well as inside France.

In a more general way, the importance of the anarchist contribution to the May movement—and therefore to political thought in general—has been emphasised in many books on it. In *Mai 1968: La Brèche*, one of the best early studies, the sociologist Edgar Morin noted that "it was a time of intellectual revival for anarchism, tinged with libertarian Marxism and situationism". In *Ce n'est qu'un début*, the best early collection of documents, an unnamed member of the March 22 Movement stated that the anarchist contribution was essential, though he was not himself an anarchist. In *Le Mouvement de Mai*, one of the best later studies, another sociologist Alain Touraine noted that "the union of the red flag and the black flag was the symbol of

*Reviewed in this issue.

the May movement". In *Journal de la Commune étudiante*, the best later collection of documents, Pierre Vidal-Naquet stated that "the appearance of the black flag on the first barricades in Paris, from May 6 onwards, and the arguments it started, were one of the great facts of the May movement"; and he continued: "There is no doubt that anarchist thought, which D. Cohn-Bendit himself followed, had a profound influence on a revolution which, as has been emphasised, recalled the themes of revolutionary syndicalism at the beginning of this century and, above all, that of workers' control. . . . In the same way, the federalist direction which the movement often took owes much to the tradition of Proudhon and Bakunin."

Similarly, in *The Beginning of the End*, the best English study so far, Tom Nairn noted "the resurrection of anarchist thought and feeling in May, the host of black flags which sprang up from nowhere alongside the red ones"; and he continued: "The anarchist 'groupuscules', feeble organisationally and small in numbers, were nevertheless far closer than the Marxist sects to the spirit of what was happening. . . . All the evidence of May suggests that without a powerful dose of anarchic sentiment and ideas, a revolution of this sort and in these conditions is very unlikely to get far." And the book ended with this remarkable sentence: "The anarchism of 1871 looked backwards to a precapitalist past, doomed to defeat; the anarchism of 1968 looks forward to the future society almost within our grasp, certain of success."

It is worth recording some of the hostile tributes to the anarchists from the sectarian left. It would be a pity to forget the Communist leader Georges Marchais writing in *L'Humanité* on May 3 about the "groupuscules" which had united in the March 22 Movement, "mostly made up of children of the upper middle-class and led by the German anarchist, Cohn-Bendit". Later Jacques Duclos took the opportunity to produce a book called *Anarchistes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*—subtitled "How leftism plays the game of reaction"—which is in fact largely a reprint of his old book *La Première Internationale* with a new opening section in which the veteran Communist leader complains that, "In listening to Cohn-Bendit, Sauvageot, Geismar, and others, one gets the clear impression that they are simply repeating what the Bakuninist anarchists were saying in different conditions a century ago".

The Trotskyist silence on the subject has been more deafening than anything they might have said could have been. (In the same way, the *Solidarity* movement in this country has in its excellent coverage of French events changed its habit of making ritual sneers at anarchists to saying nothing about them at all.) The Situationists, however, have made their usual ambiguous contribution. In a very interesting and well-informed book, *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations*, René Viénet attacks the anarchists—along with every single left-wing group other than the situationists themselves—but he does agree that Cohn-Bendit is "a genuine revolutionary, though no genius", and admits that, on the first night of the barricades (May 10), "the revolutionary elements of almost all left-wing groups were there—notably a large proportion of anarchists (some even belonging

to the Anarchist Federation), carrying the black flags which had begun to appear on the streets on May 6 and bitterly defending their stronghold"—which was, for the historical record, at the north-west corner of the battlefield in the Latin Quarter. (It is perhaps worth adding that one situationist exploit which the book does *not* mention was the invasion of the home of Jean Maitron, the historian of French anarchism, by a gang of situationists who smashed his typewriter and other personal possessions—as an act of what they called confrontation.)

Despite all this testimony, very little has been said about what anarchists actually did during the May movement, or about who they actually were. This suggests that the part played by anarchists *as anarchists* was small; their significant role was as active members of non-sectarian left-wing groups and activities—such as, and above all, the March 22 Movement at Nanterre. As Claude Lefort said of this in *Mai 1968: La Brèche*, "if it was able to give an impetus to the student movement and by its effort to provoke a general strike, it was because from its formation it had no leaders, no discipline, because it confronted the professionals of confrontation, and broke the rules of opposition. The breach which it opened in the university it opened at the same time in the petty bureaucracies which had made the labour movement and the revolutionary struggle their own property." This "entrust" role seems in fact to have been remarkably fruitful for the anarchist cause. A survey in *Anarchisme et Non-Violence* 15 (October 1968) quotes several accounts of anarchists who were able to make more anarchist propaganda in a few days than in many years, of anarchists who were strengthened in their anarchist convictions, and of non-anarchists who were pushed in an anarchist direction, during the crisis. (We can recall a similar experience in this country in the nuclear disarmament movement, especially in the Committee of 100.)

Similarly, there has been little attempt to analyse the reasons for or the effects of this anarchist activity. One was made by the French monthly *Magazine Littéraire* in a rather journalistic way. In May 1968 it published a feature on the world student movement which included an interview with Daniel Cohn-Bendit* in which he stressed his anarchism and the influence of his brother. In its next issue, which was delayed until July 1968, was a well-illustrated feature on anarchism which included all sorts of material. Apart from articles on various anarchists and aspects of the anarchist movement in the past, there were interviews with Gabriel Cohn-Bendit† and with several unnamed anarchist students, and an article in which Edgar Morin (again!) attempted to explain the sudden "resurrection and revival of anarchy among young intellectuals".

Morin's approach was over-confident—he carelessly called *Noir et Rouge* "*Rouge et Noir*", which suggests that he is more at home in French literature than in French anarchism—but one of his ideas is worth following up. He distinguished between the "old" anarchism,

*Translated in this issue.

†Translated in this issue.

traditionalist and strongly anti-Marxist, and a "new" or "revisionist" anarchism, free from tradition and closer to Marxism. This distinction should not be taken too far, and it should anyway be clarified. As an editorial put it in *Noir et Rouge* 41/42 (November 1968), "the real cleavage is not between 'Marxism' or what is described as such, and anarchism, but rather between the libertarian spirit and idea, and the Leninist, Bolshevik, bureaucratic conception of organisation"; and it continued: "We are not afraid—on the contrary—to say that we feel closer to 'Marxists' in the Council Communist movement of the past or to some comrades in ICO [*Informations-Correspondance Ouvrières*, a group and paper similar to *Solidarity* in this country] and many friends in the March 22 Movement than we do to official 'anarchists' who have a semi-Leninist conception of party organisation." Nevertheless, such a distinction certainly exists, and it is clear that it was the "new" anarchism in France—however it may be defined—which became the significant vanguard last year. (We may be glad that there is much less of this difficulty in Britain and that almost every kind of anarchist can take part in common actions, meetings, and publications; even so, we are familiar with the problem and with the necessity of solving it through action rather than theory.)

Morin's general comment is also interesting:

The young anarchists seem to me to have a considerable superiority: they are not prisoners of a dogmatic scholasticism, as is the case with many militants in the official Marxist, Trotskyist or Maoist parties. They are less captives to the limitations of rigid thought. When anarchists read Marcuse, they are not going to ask from the start whether what Marcuse writes is dangerous, whether he is going to deny the historic role of the proletariat, whether he lacks a proper conception of the spirit of the party, etc. They don't have this sort of obsessional search for defects, deficiencies, deviations. They are much more open. . . .

This is paralleled by the answer given by *Noir et Rouge* to the accusation that it is "Cohnbendist"—"we may be called 'Cohnbendist', for we are in favour of an anarchism which is open, prepared for dialogue. . . ." And the interviews with anarchist students in the same issue of the *Magazine Littéraire* reflect this attitude; one of them compared the quarrels between Marxist and anarchists to those between the various psychoanalytic schools, and—though it should be noted that the psychoanalysts haven't actually resorted to murder (whatever their unconscious wishes may be!)—there is clearly a general impatience with the sectarian wrangles which have paralysed the extreme left.

In view of all this, it is not surprising that what documentation there has been has tended to concentrate not so much on the specifically anarchist contributions to the May movement as on its more generally libertarian and syndicalist aspects. Good examples are collections of material such as those in *Ce n'est qu'un début* and *Journal de la*

Commune étudiante, pamphlets such as those in the *Cahiers de Mai* series or that produced by ICO (*La grève généralisée en France: mai-juin 68*), and articles such as those in *Noir et Rouge* 41/42. This tendency is a healthy one, though we should naturally like to know more about the details of anarchist activity.

In particular, it would be useful to know about the part played by anarchist militants in the workers' movement which nearly turned a revolt into a revolution. The direct action in the streets, the black flags and the glorious graffiti, were in the end overshadowed by the direct action in the factories, the occupations and the self-management. Has the anarcho-syndicalist tradition of the CGT survived from the beginning of the century, or has it been forgotten? One person who seems to have carried it on is Alexandre Hébert, the anarchist militant who is the Nantes representative of the Force Ouvrière (the non-communist left-wing trade union) and who was active in the first factory occupation—at the Sud-Aviation works at Bouguenais (on May 14)—and in the most successful example of popular control of a whole town—in Nantes during the last week of the movement's peak (May 24 to June 2). In *Le Printemps des Enragés*, the rather journalistic but very vivid book by Christian Charrière, a reporter on the left-wing daily *Combat*, the section on the workers' movement began with an interview with Hébert* in which he stressed his traditional anarchism; but it is impossible to say how typical he was, or whether the vigorous anarchist movement in Nantes had any significant influence on developments there.

What is clear is that the Nantes commune showed marked similarities to the ideas for revolutionary action which appeared in the writings of such anarchists as Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta between half a century and a century ago: the workers took over their places of work, a central strike committee ran the day-to-day administration of the town, the official local government system withered away, the transport workers set up a defence system controlling the entrances to the town, joint committees of workers, peasants, students and teachers organised the supply of food from the surrounding farms, and area committees of working-class women handled the final distribution of food; it was not so much a dictatorship of the proletariat as a seizure of power by the whole people, and only the expropriation of land and capital would have been necessary for the establishment of a truly revolutionary commune. (A fascinating interim account of what happened at Nantes was given in *Cahiers de Mai* 1 (June 1968).)

A considerable amount of libertarian documentation of the May movement has already appeared in this country. FREEDOM published some interesting articles in June and July 1968, and more material appeared in ANARCHY 89 in July 1968. Since then FREEDOM has published several interesting items, especially those translated by Bob Blakeman from the French anarchist press—above all, some extracts from *Noir et Rouge* 41/42 in January 1969. This issue of ANARCHY

*Translated in this issue.

adds some more material to this documentation: a review of the English translation of the book by Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, and translations of interviews with both brothers and with Alexandre Hébert. The large proportion of material concerning the Cohn-Bendits is the result not of any particular admiration for them or of any intention to reinforce the Cohn-Bendit myth, but of the fact that they have simply said and written so much and of the opinion that they have at the same time made a useful contribution to the discussion of the present situation of anarchism not just in France but elsewhere. If they represent a "new" anarchism, then Hébert presumably represents the "old" anarchism—but it is significant that they are both close friends of his! We are publishing this material as an anniversary tribute to the magnificent work done by our French comrades last year in making people take anarchism seriously again, and in the hope that it will make such work easier in this country.

Comrades!

Join the anarchists in their struggle for the abolition of the system of exploitation and of the apparatus of state coercion!

Don't put your rights into the hands of the politicians who lead all revolutions into the dead-end of parliamentary democracy! Reject the absurd pretensions of the Marxists who direct the libertarian aspirations of the masses into the concrete structures of the Bolshevik ghettos!

Don't obey any more directives from the reformist unions which are trying in vain to exploit for their own profit a great spontaneous liberation movement, at a time when CGT members on the order of the indescribable Séguy turned over to the police the student militants who came to talk to them on the night of May 24-25!

Join the anarchists! Long live the direct action of the workers and students! Long live libertarian socialism.

Sorbonne anarchist leaflet, May 1968

Comrades!

The French Anarchist Federation unites under the black flag of anarchy all the free and responsible men in the country. Madmen, nihilists, and extremists at any price, have nothing to do with the anarchists. On the contrary, free people should take account of the long and profitable trickery of the political parties and their trade unions, and join our ranks in order to bring about by direct action the victorious insurrection of liberty!

As in the Ukraine in 1917!

As in Spain in 1936!

Liberty or death!

Long live anarchy!

Sorbonne anarchist leaflet, May 1968

Lessons of the French Revolution

NICOLAS WALTER

Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit: OBSOLETE COMMUNISM: THE LEFT-WING ALTERNATIVE. Translated by Arnold Pomerans. (Andre Deutsch, 25s. Penguin Books, 5s.)

DANIEL COHN-BENDIT WAS UNKNOWN until a year ago, when he emerged as one of the most intelligent and courageous—and also attractive and entertaining—"megaphones" of the student rebellion in Paris which was the "detonator" of the "revolution" throughout France. The mass media quickly picked him up for the scapegoat treatment (cf. Ralph Schoenman and Tariq Ali in this country or Mario Savio and Rudi Dutschke abroad), but what interests us is not the cult of his personality but the fact that he turned out to be some kind of anarchist. For several months he was known mainly through what other people said about him and partly through a few interviews (some extracts from the latter were included in ANARCHY 89, and a particularly interesting one is included in this issue). Then in November last year came this book, which is now also available in paperback, and which tells us a lot more about his ideas. But before saying anything about them, there are some preliminaries to clear up.

First, the book is written by Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit—not by the well-known student leader alone, but in collaboration with his little-known elder brother who seems to be less of a speaker and agitator and more of a thinker and writer, and more of an anarchist as well (an interesting interview with him is also included in this issue). This has made the book more serious and ambitious but not necessarily better than it might otherwise have been; but it is impossible to distinguish between the authors, and from now on "Cohn-Bendit" means both brothers.

Second, the book's English title, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, is meaningless and misleading, and is in fact significantly different from that of the original French and German editions, *Leftism: A Cure for the Senile Disease of Communism*, which makes sense and is at the same time an obvious parody of the pamphlet Lenin wrote in 1920, *Leftism: The Infantile Disease of Communism* (this too was badly rendered in the English edition as *Left-Wing*

Communism: An Infantile Disorder). It seems a pity to spoil a good joke right at the start and at the same time to miss a fundamental point. The argument is about *leftism*, whether that of the Communist Workers Party in Germany, Pannekoek and Gorter in Holland, Bordiga in Italy, and William Gallacher and Sylvia Pankhurst in Britain in 1920, or that of the March 22 Movement in France in 1968, and about its relationship with official Communism, whether that of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern in 1920, or that of the French Communist Party and the CGT in 1968. The title of the book establishes a position opposed not just to Waldeck Rochet and Séguy and to Stalin and Brezhnev, but also to Lenin and Trotsky.

Cohn-Bendit is in fact trying to make an important distinction which tends to be forgotten in the sectarian quarrels of the left. "The history of leftism is, in fact, the history of all that is truly revolutionary in the working-class movement. Marx was to the left of Proudhon and Bakunin was to the left of Marx." Lenin was to the left of the Mensheviks and also of the Bolsheviks in 1917, and after 1917 the Workers' Opposition was to the left of Lenin inside the Party and the Ukrainian anarchists were to the left outside the Party. "This struggle between its left and right wings continues to divide the working-class movement to this day," he adds, quoting Trotsky: "As Lenin never tired of repeating, the masses are greatly to the left of the Party, just as the Party is to the left of its Central Committee." The distinction is finally applied to the French events. "Who is the authentic representative of the left today: the Fourth International, the Situationist International, or the Anarchist Federation? Leftism is everything that is new in revolutionary history, and is forever being challenged by the old."

Third, the book was commissioned, written and published in a great hurry to take advantage of Daniel Cohn-Bendit's sudden fame. As he puts it, "this book was written in five weeks and bears the marks of this scramble". From the safety of his commercial position, he has a lot of fun at the expense of his publishers and of the Cohn-Bendit myth in general:

Had I decided to write a book on the French political scene and on the chances of a revolutionary uprising only two or three months ago [i.e. before May 1968] no publisher would have taken the slightest notice of me. But such was the impact of the events of May and June and so wildly has the name of Cohn-Bendit been bandied about that, far from my having to go down on my knees to them, the publishers now come chasing after me, begging me to write about anything I choose, good or bad, exciting or dull; all they want is something they can sell—a revolutionary gadget with marketable qualities. . . . All self-respecting publishers are falling over themselves to cash in on the May events. In our commercial world, individual capitalists are perfectly willing to pave the way for their own destruction, to broadcast revolutionary ideas, provided only that these help to fill their pockets. So anxious are they, in fact, that they are prepared to pay for the privilege through the nose in the short run (offering me a vast sum of money before I have written a single line). They do not even seem to be bothered by the fact that their cash will be used for the next round of Molotov cocktails.

He then asks the obvious question and gives the obvious answer. "Why, then, did I decide to write this book? Who was I to refuse this golden opportunity of taking aim against our whole society, of saying what no one has been able to say for so long, of explaining the full importance of the French revolutionary movement, not only in the immediate past, but also in the future? For, as far as I am concerned, the revolution is not yet over." After all this, it is a pity that the book isn't in fact very good.

Cohn-Bendit explains what he thinks the book is and is not. It is not "an historical treatise, if only because the events are too recent for anyone to reconstruct them objectively"; nor is it "a simplified theoretical account of the events", because he is "unable to stand aside and take a detached view of the overall situation". It is "no more than an attempt to participate in a continuing scene, with all its remarkable spontaneity"; it is "but an echo of the great dialogue that was begun in the forum of the Latin Quarter. Both in form and content, it will try faithfully to reflect the mood of the movement." And, of course, it is "a propaganda pamphlet, one that, thanks to the help of my benevolent publishers, will reach a far wider audience than it could in any other form."

He adds some interesting comments:

I do not address myself to a 'reader' or to the 'public', but only to those who were with us, might have been with us, or may be with us in the future, and quite particularly to the workers and peasants from whom the Establishment tried to separate us so assiduously. I know that the only chance of resuming the struggle is to put an end to the division between intellectuals, workers and peasants. . . . I know that there are many other ways of ending our division. However, since I happen to be writing a book, I shall try to use this particular method.

He therefore proposes to avoid difficult language and talk directly to the people, but this is not in fact an easy book and is unlikely to appeal to people who aren't left-wing intellectuals, and it will annoy many of them.

Cohn-Bendit's main thesis is as follows. He agrees with many commentators—and particularly mentions the authors of *La Brèche*, Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, and Jean-Marc Coudray—that the revolution "saw a breach of modern capitalist society and also of the old authority of the left", but he insists that "it did far more than that: it represented a return to a revolutionary tradition these parties have betrayed". The movement was "no 'brilliant invention' of a group of 'naive prodigies' but the result of arduous research into revolutionary theory and practice". So, just as the Communists in attacking the leftists did not really betray their principles but simply followed their tradition, the leftists did not really start anything new but simply followed *their* tradition. Nor is he himself trying to say anything new: "I am not, and do not want to be, anything but a plagiarist when it comes to the preaching of revolutionary theory." He says he might just

have reprinted articles from French anarchist and libertarian socialist papers such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, *Internationale Situationniste*, *Information et Correspondance Ouvrière*, *Noir et Rouge*, and *Recherches Libertaires*—"but such an anthology would be of no interest to a publishing house that insists on a book signed by Cohn-Bendit", so readers should suppose that "'Cohn-Bendit' is simply the anonymous author of all these reviews"! (And he has some gentle fun at the expense of Lefort, who patronisingly praised him in *La Brèche*, by pointing out that he got many of his ideas from Lefort himself.)

So *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* is in fact a re-statement of leftism—of revolutionary libertarian and egalitarian socialism—divided into four parts: an account of the May revolution, an account of the official reaction, an account of the Communist reaction, and an account of the failure of the Russian Revolution. (He had intended to consider not just Russia after 1917 but also Russia in 1905 and Germany in 1918, Italy in 1920, Spain in 1936, Hungary in 1956, and modern Algeria and Yugoslavia. "In the event I have only had time to look at Russia. I have used this example to demonstrate the counter-revolutionary nature of the Bolshevik Party.")

* * *

The first part of the book begins with another parody, this time of the opening passage of the *Communist Manifesto*. "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of student revolt. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre," and so on. There follows a sketchy description of the student revolutionary movement throughout the world rather than just Europe, with special reference to the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in 1964-5, the situationist coup at Strasbourg in 1966, the demand for sexual freedom in many French universities in 1967, and the troubles at Nantes and Nanterre early in 1968, culminating in the formation of the March 22 Movement at Nanterre. (In the latter appears a very garbled version of the remarkable pamphlet produced by Daniel Cohn-Bendit and three colleagues in the middle of March 1968 called *Pourquoi des sociologues?*, of which a better translation appears in the Penguin book *Student Power*.)

This is disappointing as history but quite interesting as theory. Cohn-Bendit does not accept the current neo-Marxist thesis that students are in some obscure way a "class", but he does accept the corresponding thesis that the university is a microcosm of bourgeois society and exists to serve the class system. There is a contradiction between its two roles—economic role is to "churn out the trained personnel that is so essential to bureaucratic capitalism", while its theoretical role is "to be the supreme guardian of 'culture', human reason and disinterested research, of unalloyed truth and objectivity". Today "it is the economic rather than the theoretical role of the university which is predominant", and this makes the contradiction more obvious and more unbearable for the people involved. Hence the recent function of the left-wing

students in France as the backbone of the resistance to the Algerian war and of the 1968 revolution.

Cohn-Bendit explains why the student is able to fulfil this function, which is in fact traditional, without resorting to any nonsense about class, alienation, oppression, or the other current formulas of Marxist analysis. He "still preserves a considerable degree of personal freedom, if he chooses to exercise it. He does not have to earn his own living, his studies do not occupy all his time, and he has no foreman on his back. He rarely has a wife and children to feed. He can, if he so chooses, take extreme political positions without any personal danger; in general, he is not subjected to formal sanctions or even reprimands." One might add that he is young, energetic, clever, conceited, and so on, and then see that the student rebellion is a predictable rather than a surprising phenomenon.

The significant point, however, is that "when a minority of students takes conscious advantage of their freedom to attack the established order, they can become a catalyst activating a larger section of the student population". If this happens, "the struggle becomes transformed qualitatively", and if that happens, "the student movement has become revolutionary and not simply a university protest".

Cohn-Bendit then describes the May events. He naturally emphasises the part of the March 22 Movement, but unfortunately says little about what it was actually like. It is useful to know that "for the first time French students found a common platform and forgot their factional differences", but it would be more useful to know how this was done. He shows how important "provocation" was to clarify issues, expose reactions, and rouse support, but doesn't mention the Dutch Provos who did such good work on these lines in 1966, nor does he consider the problem that provocation—or "confrontation", to use the current vogue word—also raises false issues, creates dangerous reactions, and draws unreliable support.

This is again disappointing as history but interesting as theory. Paradoxically, the most stimulating passages are those where Cohn-Bendit is most sectarian. From the beginning of the struggle, "the various factions of the left tried desperately to insinuate their own marshals in the vague hope of taking control", but also from the beginning the demonstrators "managed without any leaders at all". He accuses the UNEF (the students union) of nearly destroying the movement in the first week of May by trying to divert it from the primary aim of retaking the Sorbonne. And he accuses not only the UNEF but also the PSU (left-wing socialist party) and various Trotskyist groups, including the JCR (the Revolutionary Communist Youth), of preventing the triumph of the movement on May 24—the day of De Gaulle's worst speech and the night of the worst fighting, when "everything was still possible"—by trying to prevent the enormous demonstration called by the March 22 Movement from taking the Ministries of Finance and Justice after burning the Bourse, and then by leading it back into the dead-end of the Latin Quarter. "Paris was in the hands of the demonstrators," he says, "the revolution had started in earnest."

But:

These 'revolutionaries' were quite incapable of grasping the potential of a movement that had left them far behind and was still gaining momentum. As for us, we failed to realise how easy it would have been to sweep all these nobodies away. We should never have allowed them to divert us, should have occupied the Ministries and public buildings, not to put in a new lot of 'revolutionary' bureaucrats but to smash the entire state apparatus, to show the people how well they could get on without it.

Cohn-Bendit believes that "if, on 25 May, Paris had woken to find the most important Ministries occupied, Gaullism would have caved in at once", that "similar actions would have taken place all over the country", and that "for the first time in history a revolution could have been made without recourse to arms". He is actually quite aware of the objections to this belief, but thinks that the main error was not to occupy the radio stations. He is naturally scornful of the Grenelle agreements between the government and the unions, which were made during the following weekend, and also of the Charléty mass meeting, which was held on May 27. The united front of the traditional left, displayed at the Charléty stadium, he calls "the old Bolshevism adorned with a liberal sash". For the true leftist, the true socialist, the revolution is made not by negotiations or by meetings, but by direct action. The direct action in the streets failed when it was not pushed as far as insurrection, but it was still the essence of the student movement, and it taught the most important lessons.

The crucial turning-point was on May 6, when the authorities shifted the battlefield from Nanterre in the suburbs to the Sorbonne in the Latin Quarter, and the street struggle brought its first lessons on the night of the barricades, May 10.

No one seriously envisaged attacking the Sorbonne, no one wanted a massacre. All we knew was that we had to defend ourselves where we stood, we split up into small groups, so that the police services were unable to launch a single, directed attack. Every barricade became a centre of action and of discussion, every group of demonstrators a squad acting on its own initiative. Barricades sprang up everywhere; no one felt the lack of a general in charge of overall strategy; messengers kept everyone informed of what was happening on the other barricades and passed on collective decisions for discussion. In our new-found solidarity our spirits began to soar. For the first time in living memory, young workers, young students, apprentices and high-school pupils were acting in unison. We could not guess what turn the events were going to take, but that did not bother us—all that mattered was that, at long last, we were all united in action. . . . In a society which seeks to crush the individual, forcing him to swallow the same lies, a deep feeling of collective strength had surged up and people refused to be browbeaten. We were no longer thousands of little atoms squashed together but a solid mass of determined individuals. We who had known the nagging ache of frustration were not afraid of physical hurt. This 'rashness of youth' did not spring from despair, the cynicism of impotence, but on the contrary from the discovery of our collective strength. It was this feeling of strength and unity which reigned on the barricades. In such moments of collective enthusiasm, when everything seems possible, nothing could be more natural and simple than a warm relationship between all demonstrators and quite particularly between the boys and the girls. Everything was easy and uncomplicated. The barricades were no longer simply a means of self-defence, they became a symbol of individual liberty. This is why the night of 10 May can never be forgotten by those who were 'there'.

But Cohn-Bendit knows perfectly well that the student movement, for all its importance, was not as important as the workers' movement which followed that weekend. A general strike spread spontaneously, and, "just as the strike itself came about spontaneously, without specific grievances, in the wake of the student revolt, so, now, new forms of organisation of society were being discussed everywhere". And here, of course, came the real importance of the French revolution last year. "Perhaps the most concrete expression of this new sense of purpose was the occupation of the Sud-Aviation works in Nantes. The workers, by 'imitating the students', were rediscovering a form of action that they had for too long discarded." The direct action in the streets was followed by direct action in the factories, and "recourse to direct action changed the whole tenor of the struggle". The idea of self-management, "autogestion", overflowed from the university into industry. Student power, a marginal idea, became workers' power, a revolutionary idea. And "this idea arose quite spontaneously, not by command, or under the aegis of the so-called vanguard of the proletariat, but simply as a *natural response to a concrete situation*".

The militant students naturally realised the significance of what was happening, and when their own movement began to crumble at the end of May they did what they could to help the militant workers, especially those in occupation of isolated factories. Cohn-Bendit describes how student groups reinforced pickets, transported supplies, communicated news; the climax came at the terrible battles at the Renault works in Flins on June 7 and 10 (when a Maoist student was killed) and at the Peugeot works at Sochaux on June 11 (when two workers were killed).

The students also did what they could to help the equally spontaneous establishment of Action Committees—the embryonic soviets which sprang up all over the place, but especially in Paris—and once more Cohn-Bendit emphasises the libertarian, non-sectarian features of the movement, this time in sarcastic terms:

Thousands of people discussed democracy, the class struggle, the next action, and all this without having learned to recite the magic spells put out by the Central Committee of the Communist Party; without even knowing that there are five different wings to the Fourth International, or whether the PCMLF or the UJC(ML) support Mao Tse Tung. They refused to admit that they were as nothing without the brilliant leadership of that great revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat which would one day seize the reins on their behalf, much as it had already seized the reins in the 'Workers' Fatherland'. Nor did they appreciate that every splinter group expresses at the top what the gagged proletariat thinks at the bottom. . . . If lack of political understanding means the rejection of bureaucracies big (e.g. the Communists and the Social Democrats) and small (e.g. the Trotskyist splinter groups) and the denial that the workers must be led by a revolutionary élite; if lack of political interest means being bored with platform rhetoric, with theories that have no practical application, with resolutions, petitions, marches, congresses and annual dinners; . . . if lack of political interest means all this, then indeed most young workers and working intellectuals have become eminently unpolitical.

He points out that the Action Committees had no officials, no constitution, and he describes in some detail those of the thirteenth and eighteenth arrondissements in the south-east and north of Paris. There is a particularly interesting political programme adopted by the former on May 25, which is given in full; it stands quite clearly in the tradition not only of the Russian soviets of 1917 and 1905, but also of the Paris Communes of 1871 and 1793 (and it is not out of place to mention the federalist ideas of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin, though Cohn-Bendit doesn't do so). Again, however, one would like to know more of what actually happened in the Action Committees, how they were formed, how they worked, and what they did.

Cohn-Bendit devotes a section of the first part of the book to the workers' own methods of struggle. He points out that "it was the young workers, most of whom were not members of the trade unions, who proved the most militant and tenacious". He is of course full of praise for the great strike wave, and naturally emphasises the significant fact that in it "the workers simply turned down their thumbs not only on the contestants but also on the game itself". At the same time he emphasises the other side. "Unfortunately most of them failed to take that final and decisive step beyond bourgeois legality: the actual running of the factories by and for themselves." He does add that "in several cases strikers did, in fact, start running the factories on their own account", and he rightly comments that "in their action can be seen the essence, the highest achievement, of the movement". And it was not just a matter of self-management at work, for in some places "the strikers organised their own food supplies with the help of students, small farmers, and lorry drivers". This was only a single step—the final step of expropriation—away from the true social revolution.

It would be valuable to know more about these examples of ultimate direct action, but instead Cohn-Bendit examines four cases of places where initial revolutionary demands were taken over by the trade union bureaucracy and inevitably diluted and in the end dissolved into nothing. "The lesson is clear: once the workers stop fighting their own battles, they have lost the war." And yet Cohn-Bendit remains optimistic:

Many militants have come to ask themselves how they can teach the workers that their only hope lies in revolution. Now, this merely reintroduces the old concept of the vanguard of the proletariat, and so threatens to create a new division within society. The workers need no teachers; they will learn the correct tactics from the class struggle. And the class struggle is not an abstract conflict of ideas, it is people fighting in the street. Direct control can only be gained through the struggle itself. Any form of class struggle, over wages, hours, holidays, retirement, if it is pushed through to the end, will lead to a general strike, which in turn introduces a host of new organisational and social problems. For instance, there cannot be a total stoppage of hospitals, transport, provisions, etc., and the responsibility for organising these falls on the strikers. The longer the strike continues, the greater the number of factories that have to be got going again. Finally the strikers will find themselves running the entire country. This gradual restoration of the economy is not without its dangers, for a new managerial class may emerge to take over the factories if the workers are not constantly on their guard. They must ensure that they retain control over their

delegated authorities at all times. Every function of social life—planning, liaison and co-ordination—must be taken up by the producers themselves, as and when the need arises.

Nevertheless, he realises that things aren't quite as easy as that. As he admits, "all this is doubtless a far cry from the general strike of May and June which, though it gave spontaneous expression to popular disgust at the present system and showed the workers their real power on a scale unprecedented in recent French history, failed precisely because the workers themselves failed to take the next logical step: to run the economy by themselves as free and equal partners". In fact, the workers lagged behind the students, and the essential task is clearly to do something about such a pattern. Cohn-Bendit believes that "the revolutionary students can play a very important part in changing this picture. Having been trained as future managers, they are in a position to make their knowledge available to all." And that is, for him, the future link between the two sections of the revolutionary movement.

This is certainly the best part of the book—being most original, and also based partly on the Cohn-Bendits' own experience. But in avoiding the cult of personality, both brothers have failed to provide what could have been a much more interesting and valuable account of the May movement. We would have liked to know a lot more of what it was like to take a leading part in what happened in Paris and St. Nazaire last year. As it is, we aren't even told that Daniel Cohn-Bendit was away from France for a crucial week, from May 20 to May 28, and is now in exile from his native land. The Communists, the Trotskyists, and the situationists have published their versions of the 1968 "events"; any future libertarian version will have to use this book, but this book is not itself a satisfactory libertarian version.

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The second part of the book adds little to the first. Cohn-Bendit, after all, knows much less about the authorities than he does about the rebels. He sets out to describe "the strategy of the state, or rather its non-strategy, against the revolutionary student movement", but the description lacks any inside knowledge of what the people at the top were trying to do or thought they were doing. The most valuable things in this part are in fact those which relate to the revolutionary rather than the counter-revolutionary movement. Thus: "When the authorities claimed that at the core of the student demonstrations was a small number of militants, they were right in a way, but did not realise that this minority could only make itself felt because it expressed the feelings, and had the support, of the mass of the students."

He rightly insists on the political nature of the state—on its repressive function even in the most stable society, whether this is a class function (as Marxists say) or simply a function of any system of authority (as anarchists say). He also rightly insists on the political nature of the university and therefore on the place of politics in the university; but—like the revolutionary students in Britain—he does not

consider the problem whether militants have the right to force their views on other students and in fact become yet another authoritarian element in an authoritarian structure: student power indeed!

There are some interesting passages about the police who played such an important part in escalating the initial rebellion into an insurrection. The police were notoriously hostile to the students, but not so clearly hostile to the workers, especially when the strike movement covered the whole country, and it seems that on May 14 (the day of the first factory occupation) the police were not content with protesting against public ridicule and “were about to call a strike”; it would be valuable to have more concrete evidence about this. Then there is the remarkable outburst the police union made to the authorities on May 22, hoping that “they will not try to use the police systematically to oppose the workers’ demands for better conditions, lest the police find the performance of certain of their duties in conflict with their conscience”; if only the police had begun to crack, and the government had been forced to rely on the army which is largely made up of conscripts—then a repetition of what happened in Petrograd in February 1917 might have been possible.

Even without this happening, Cohn-Bendit states that the government was helpless in the face of the general strike and was able to rely only on the moderate trade union leaders. “The unholy alliance of Grenelle represents the most treacherous piece of politics of this century. All the bureaucrats, Right, Left and Centre, sank their differences to save their own power.” He adds that the rejection of the Grenelle agreements by the strikers created a vacuum of power during the last week of May. “For a short time, the State had virtually ‘withered away’. A vast new network was being built to exchange information . . . and goods. The new system had sprung up by the side, and independent, of the old.” Here of course is the movement towards an alternative administrative system, of the kind which developed in Russia, Germany and Italy after the First World War, in Spain in 1936, in Hungary in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968—a movement which is an essential preliminary to a social revolution.

But instead of revolution there was reaction. “What made it all possible was, we cannot stress it enough, that the organisations of the Left were unwilling for the masses to take power. . . . Their role begins *where the struggle for workers’ autonomy stops*—behind closed doors.” Cohn-Bendit believes the strikers and students could easily have destroyed this reaction; in St. Nazaire, where they insisted on calling a demonstration, they overwhelmed the bourgeois in the streets by 150,000 to 400, and this could have been done throughout the country. Instead the left let itself be manoeuvred into fighting on the battlefield of an election which amounted to just another Gaullist referendum: “A lesson to be remembered—if the bourgeoisie is allowed to choose the arena, it will always cut the workers down to size.” (And vice versa, one might add.)

The analysis of Gaullism which follows recalls the facile Communist analyses of Fascism thirty years ago. It is all very well in a left-wing

paper, but it doesn’t stand up to exposure in a full-length book, and it would have been better omitted.

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The third part of the book is probably more valuable to French than to British readers, and more interesting to Marxists than to anarchists. The Communist Party is not and never has been a mass movement in this country, and it hasn’t even attempted to threaten the political (let alone the social) system for thirty years or more; things are different in France, where the Communist Party is still the largest organisation on the left and also controls the largest trade union organisation. In the same way, it is hardly news for us to be told that the Communists are authoritarian, counter-revolutionary and dishonest—too many of our comrades have suffered at their hands during the last half-century to leave us with any illusions about them.

Cohn-Bendit thinks that if the French workers realised “the true nature and role of the French Communist Party and of the CGT which it controls, they would break with it almost to a man, and this would be entirely to the good if only it led to the emergence of a truly revolutionary movement. As it is, the break which started many long years ago has been passive and predominantly negative in its results—the workers have voted with their feet” (another neat parody of Lenin). He claims that “the May crisis did a great deal to change this picture”, and adds that “if this book contributes to this process it will not have been written in vain”. All this seems highly dubious to me, but it is still clearly worth documenting the part played by the Communists in the French “events”.

The main thesis is of course that this part is nothing new, and that in particular the Communists behaved in the same way in 1936. But first Cohn-Bendit examines three examples of Communist behaviour in the May movement—Georges Marchais’s article in *Humanité* on May 3, Georges Séguy’s reports to the CGT National Executive on June 14 and 15, and Waldeck Rochet’s television speech on June 21. Marchais’s article is the famous one attacking the March 22 Movement—“led by the German anarchist Cohn-Bendit”—and it shows the second-in-command of the Party using Lenin’s traditional arguments against the leftists in the most abusive way. Séguy’s reports follow the usual Communist line against militant strikes, and Cohn-Bendit has no difficulty in exposing the lies all along this line. In the same way, Waldeck Rochet’s speech follows the usual Communist line in electoral campaigns, and again Cohn-Bendit has no difficulty in pulling it to pieces. The nicest parts of his analysis are the quotation from Lenin supporting revolutionary students, and the quotations from the early writings of Louis Aragon attacking patriotism, parliament and reformism. But most of it is only for connoisseurs of the kind of thing *Solidarity* specialises in.

This is even more true of a chapter on “the nature of the Communist bureaucracy”, which analyses the record of the French

Communists not only in 1968 but in the previous strike movements of 1953, 1947, and 1936. The moral, which we knew all along, is that the Communist bureaucracy, far from being the main threat to the Gaullist bureaucracy, is in fact its main support.

* * *

The fourth part of the book is valuable only to readers who have illusions about the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution, such as those who accept the case against the orthodox Communists but still follow a Leninist, Trotskyist or Maoist line on the need for a revolutionary party to act as the vanguard of the working class and to take over the state as the climax of a proletarian revolution. There is nothing new for anarchists, though it is of course gratifying to see Marxists beginning to understand that the Russian Revolution was not betrayed after October 1917 but was destroyed in October 1917 by the Bolshevik coup d'état itself.

Cohn-Bendit begins by analysing "the role of the Bolshevik Party during the Russian Revolution". As he says, he relies heavily on Yvon Bourdet's study of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* (published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and included in Bourdet's book, *Communisme et Marxisme*, published in 1963) and on the notes to the *Solidarity* edition of Alexandra Kollontai's pamphlet *The Workers' Opposition* (published in 1961). The main theme is paralleled by that of Volin's book *La Révolution inconnue* (partly translated into English in two volumes, *Nineteen-Seventeen* and *The Unknown Revolution, 1954-1955*), and it may be called a libertarian Marxist attack on the Bolsheviks for not leading but obstructing and finally destroying the revolutionary movement of the Russian working class.

Here Cohn-Bendit comes nearest to open anarchism. Instead of sneers at anarchists, which were normal in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* until it ceased publication in 1965 and in *Solidarity* until its leaders at last discarded their Marxist sectarianism during the last year, there are

The urge to destroy is a creative urge.
 The liberty of others extends mind to infinity.
 If God existed he would have to be abolished.
 Socialism without liberty is a barracks.
 Anarchy is order.
 Down with the state!
 Neither God nor master!
 It is forbidden to forbid.
 It is bad to submit to ruler. It is worse to choose them.
 Do not change your masters. Become your own masters.
 To vote is to abdicate.
 Long live Bonnot!
 Bonnot and Clyde!

from the walls of Paris

useful references to Maksimov and Volin and a good though brief account of the Makhno movement. Then there are descriptions of the campaigns of the Left Communists and the Workers' Opposition from 1918 to 1921, and the attack rightly culminates with an account of the Kronstadt rising (referring both to Volin's book and to the *Solidarity* edition of Ida Mett's *The Kronstadt Commune*, published in 1967).

This is all good polemical stuff for people who are either indoctrinated to believe that the Bolshevik Revolution was a "good thing" or else ignorant about the whole episode, but it is rather unsatisfying. It is perhaps a pity that Cohn-Bendit didn't have time to include all the other revolutionary episodes he originally intended to consider, but that would have made the book enormous. Anyway, the Russian Revolution is the most important of all and, as he says, unconsciously quoting Kropotkin, "it is highly important not only because it shows how a revolution was made but also what a revolution should not be".

* * *

A conclusion sums up the book's message. Cohn-Bendit agrees that a revolution needs organisation, but he denies that it needs a party. Here he accepts the theory of bureaucratisation, according to which the traditional working-class organisations are prevented from being revolutionary by the development within them of bureaucracy. This seems to me to be nonsense, as do all the other reasons for the failure of the Russian Revolution in particular and of the revolutionary movement in general which are given by Trotskyists and ex-Trotskyists. On the idea of the bureaucracy as a new ruling class, Hilferding surely saw through this fallacy when he said in 1940: "The bureaucracy is not an independent bearer of power. . . . It is only an instrument in the hands of the real rulers. . . . It receives but does not give orders. . . . It is not the bureaucracy that rules, but he who gives orders to the bureaucracy." What the Bolshevik Revolution established was a *party* dictatorship, and this is what would be established by the revolutionary party which Trotskyists want, if it succeeded. Bureaucracy is a sociological rather than a political problem.

The real enemy, as anarchists have always said, is the principle of authority, especially when expressed by a system of government (and that includes authority in the hands of anarchists and a government with anarchist members!). Cohn-Bendit is wrong to say that revolutionaries only express what the people want, and Lenin was right to say that revolutionaries must lead the people; but Lenin was wrong to say that revolutionaries must also rule the people, and Cohn-Bendit is right to say that revolutionaries must only help the people. It seems absurd for Daniel Cohn-Bendit, of all people, to deny the importance of leaders, whether the individuals who become "megaphones" of a group, or the groups which become "detonators" of a movement. We need leaders—but they should be followed only as long as they lead in the right direction; what we don't need is official managers, bosses, governors,

rulers. It is essential to distinguish between leadership and authority, just as we have learnt to distinguish between organisation and government. Some sort of bureaucracy is inevitable in any group which is too large to meet in a room; the point is whether power comes from above or below.

Like many people who move from Marxism towards anarchism, Cohn-Bendit seems to have kept several Marxist dogmas (about the class structure which inevitably leads to the class struggle which inevitably leads to revolution) and at the same time to have turned anarchist ideas into further dogmas (about liberty which excludes all leadership and equality which excludes all administration). As a result the book is ultimately disappointing, however interesting it is to read. It is neither an authoritative first-hand account of the May movement, nor a thorough libertarian analysis of what happened in France last year. It ends as a mess, which is a great pity, because it will have a wide circulation and could have been important and influential.

It must also be added that the British edition makes the mess worse, not only because of its title, but because the translation is rather mechanical, many obscure points are not explained for English readers, many quotations are not referred to their sources (and it is not clear when some of them begin and end), and there are several little slips (names, dates and titles wrong—as when Vaneigem is called “Vaneighem” and his 1967 book is dated “1947”, and *The Workers' Opposition* is called “*The Roots of the Worker's Opposition*”—pamphlets called leaflets, new editions of old translations called new translations, and so on). It would have been better to spend more time writing and translating and producing the book at the expense of a short delay in publication and a small cut in royalties, fees and profits. The best libertarian contribution to the literature of the May movement in English is still Tom Nairn's half of the Panther Book, *The Beginning of the End*.

ANARCHIST

(from **FOUR SKETCHES FOR HERBERT READ**)

When you died I was in France.
 Supposing you were sad,
 Listen. I saw the students
 Tread the streets in dance.
 Their heels struck fire.
 Their hands uprooted pavements.
 Their mouths sang the chant
 Of a poet's final hour:
Imagination seizes power.

STEPHEN SPENDER

(Published in *The Listener*, December 19, 1968)

Three interviews

1: Gabriel Cohn-Bendit

Until the May Days, it was thought that in France there were still only some old anarchists continuing the cult of Ravachol, of Kropotkin, and of the Bonnot Gang. Now it is suddenly realised that people can be nineteen years old and anarchists. How do you explain this?

It often happens that anarchism is passed from father to son. This isn't what happened with me, but it did happen with some of my comrades. The Spanish War gave rise to a whole generation of anarchists. The children of those militants are now young people who were brought up in this environment, in this tradition, and with these ideas. Those who are not in this category come to anarchism through a more modern ideological evolution. First they are Marxists, and they join the Communist Party. There they get their first revolutionary education. They read Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin—and Mao Tse-tung not so long ago—and they begin to study the history of the Russian Revolution. It is through this path that they break with Stalinism. They discover that things aren't as simple as the party manuals try to make out. They aren't happy with the summary condemnation of Trotsky, and they want to go further into the matter. They begin to read Trotsky's work, and from there they begin a criticism of Stalinism. In my own case, for example, I and some other people analysed Soviet society according to Marxist methods. You then realise that Soviet society is a class society, that its machinery of production has not resolved any of the problems raised by socialism. From there you put the revolutionary attitude of the French Communist Party on trial, and try to find the reasons why it has been betrayed by the party leadership. After this criticism of Stalin, you go still further. You go back to Lenin and Trotsky, to Marx as well, and realise that if socialism could degenerate in the Soviet Union it is because the authoritarian principle was accepted by the theoreticians of socialism.

That doesn't explain how you can be an anarchist today.

The question I would ask is how one cannot be an anarchist, above all today. Everything which has just happened, this movement which has convulsed France and which is said to be about to overflow into other countries, is a confirmation of all the main themes of anarchism:

1. **The spontaneity of the masses.** You have to be blind not to see it. During the May Days, anyone could take a red or a black flag on to the Boulevard Saint-Michel and be followed by dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of young people.

2. **The role of minorities.** This was exemplified in the movement. It is not a question—as in the Jacobin or Leninist tradition—of a minority organised as an army and designed to take power. To this tradition is opposed that of anarchism—a minority which causes an incident and leaves the masses with the job of extending it. It is a question not of imposing its authority on society but of giving society the opportunity of moving forward.

3. **The unlimited general strike.** For decades we have been told that this was utopian, and suddenly, despite the trade union leadership, it became a reality. *Against* the trade unions.

4. **Self-management.** Today everyone is talking about it as a normal thing. Here again they used to say it was utopian.

5. **Elections.** It has been proved that they are simply a method of maintaining order.

In a democracy there must surely be elections. Representatives must surely be chosen to take national decisions.

That isn't so. No one can speak in the name of anyone else, except to give immediate expression to a decision which was taken together. For representation to be real, it must be limited to a single decision and be immediately revocable. I don't see why, even in a socialist system, a Strasbourg grocer or a Gers peasant should take a decision about a change in the organisation of the Saint-Nazaire shipyards. It is for the people who work in the shipyards to say what they want and how they propose to live.

But even so there must be coordination on a national scale.

Of course. Each unit of production can choose a council, from which it is possible to draw assemblies of towns, of regions, and of countries, but these representatives must operate under the permanent control of their base. It is the represented who must take decisions, and if the representative doesn't agree he is replaced.

What books and writers have you got these ideas from?

At first I hadn't read much anarchist literature, but I defended these ideas and people called me an anarchist. Then I accepted this description and began to read the theorists. You naturally begin by reading *The Unknown Revolution* by Voline. A little Bakunin, a little Kropotkin. It is difficult to get hold of their works today. There are some collections of anarchist texts which have been published recently—such as that of Daniel Guérin, *Ni dieu ni maître* [reviewed in ANARCHY 94]. You find out, for example, that some texts of Bakunin throw much light on our understanding of the Russian Revolution; much more than those of Marx. But in the end, the ideas you pick up from this or that writer are not much use. We really get our education from the experience of others and from what we experience ourselves.

Do you explicitly relate yourself to Marxism?

This, oddly enough, depends on the age of anarchist. The old generation of anarchists condemns all the ideologies of Communism together. They mix them all up. For them, Marx is to be rejected as much as Stalin. Just as, for Marxists, anarchists are all petit-bourgeois, so, for the old anarchists, Marxists are all Stalinists. The young

anarchists, however, accept the Marxist criticism of production. But they still reject a lot of Marx. To begin with, we reject the role which is given to the state during the transitory period between capitalism and socialism, because it is through this theoretical justification that you came to Stalinism. We also leave on one side everything that seems obviously false in Marxism, such as the analysis of cyclic economic crises. The events we have just lived through prove this: a revolutionary situation doesn't necessarily derive from economic imbalance. Anyway capitalism has found ways to deal with these crises which threaten it. For my part, I also deny the role which Marxism gives to the working class as the only revolutionary class. When the mass of workers is reduced to 15 per cent of the active population, it is difficult to see what it can do on its own.

Anarchist tradition is also anti-religious. Do young anarchists keep up this opposition to religion?

Anarchist tradition is not only anti-religious, it is also anti-militarist. For the old anarchist, the real struggle against capitalism begins with the destruction of religion. But in the end they take this to absurd extremes. As for us, we try to see things more clearly. It is obvious that the domination of the bourgeoisie is expressed as much by force as by ideology, and that it will use every weapon including religion as an instrument of domination. It is not the temporal power of the church which is dangerous, but the spiritual power of all churches, whether they are Christian or technocratic. The bourgeoisie inculcates ideas into young people, into society, and then does what it wants. It is more effective to convince people that it is wrong to resist their rulers than it is to use the police to defend rulers.

Another traditional characteristic of anarchists is that they follow their ideas even in present society. Are the young as rigid as their elders?

It is true that the anarchist minority sees itself as a model of future society. The anarchists don't accept compromises at a personal level. The individualists, for example, refuse to form groups. For them, you must change individuals first—but to tell the truth all this is rather out of date. I am married, I have children, I live like a bourgeois, and this isn't very much in accordance with the sexual and social ideas of anarchism. But sometimes we really do live as if we were in the society we want. Thus, for example, in the March 22 Movement, all cars and bicycles which the members possess are held in common whenever it is necessary, and everyone uses them when they need to.

Is this the anarchist society?

The main task of the anarchist criticism is to put power on trial. Primarily the power of a minority over the majority, but also the power of the majority over a minority. Its other task is to challenge the hierarchy—the power of the boss, the teacher, the parents.

You challenge the role of the leader in history?

It is not leaders who make history; they are leaders because they express at a particular moment what the group wants—or else they dominate. It is the truth of the moment which creates the leader of the

moment. Thus for ten years I have expressed the same ideas as my brother. All that was needed was the conjunction of favourable circumstances, and he was able to express what the group wanted.

You deny the role of the individual?

No, but I give it to many individuals. The bourgeois are prepared to accept leaders because it reassures them. We think that people should be trusted and that they can decide their own fate.

But surely history proves you wrong. All ages up to now have witnessed the progressive strengthening of the state. If we were to move towards anarchism, it would be evolution in reverse.

Anarchism has never said that the state would not become strong. It has said that we should struggle against this phenomenon. After all, no one in a developed society can really control the state apparatus. They try, but they don't succeed. You have to confine people in a more and more oppressive rationality to make them accept power, but the resistance to this power still becomes more and more serious, and in the end participation is needed by the state itself. We don't put on trial the coordination of the various activities of society. This coordination is necessary, but the centralisation of power is unacceptable. Coordination leads to information, centralisation leads to domination. For a long time people have not claimed their freedom. But today they are beginning to do so. Things are being decided without them, and they don't understand it. They want to understand.

Do you think that we shall live to see an anarchist society?

I don't know anything about whether we shall live to see it. If I can't, it's a pity but that's just too bad. It won't change anything I believe. I shall spend my life in confrontation and struggle. I don't even know whether a free society will ever be established. It is possible that it will never be created, but I do know that it is possible to create it. Neither the nonsense which is talked about human nature by those for whom people must always be told what to do, nor the supposed technical difficulties, need stand in its way. Before the May Days we were thought of as crazy, but now the whole country has begun talking almost like us.

Including General de Gaulle?

You don't have to participate in everything with anyone.

But are there any historical precedents you can refer to?

There is the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution at the beginning, Ukrainian anarchism, Spain in 1936.

Which add up only to defeats.

That is true. What is needed is a conjunction of events which has not appeared so far. Until circumstances made the execution of Louis XVI possible, the republic might have seemed impossible. Circumstances have not favoured the attempts which have been made. But it is also feasible that libertarian socialism is the most difficult form of freedom to win.

Translated by N.W. from *Magazine Littéraire* 18 (May 1968).

2: Daniel Cohn-Bendit

It is said that you are or were an anarchist?

I still am an anarchist. I was much influenced by my brother, who went through all the groups of the extreme left after being expelled from the Communist Party. But it was above all through a negative reaction—rejecting all the sects of the extreme left and their dogmatism—that I first arrived at the anarchist position which enabled me to define my attitude precisely by relating it to the Bolshevik Marxist-Leninists along the lines of “council socialism”.

Your parents left Germany at the time of Nazism. You don't have French nationality?

I have German nationality. But I don't give a damn about nationality.

From what moment do you date the birth of your political consciousness?

One thing affected me a lot. I was thirteen, and it was 1958. There were five or six hundred thousand people in the streets after May 13 [the right-wing putsch in Algeria], and even so the Gaullists came to power. And I couldn't understand.

What did the Algerian war mean to you as a child, which is what you still were?

The birth of my political consciousness took place in a continuous process—the Algerian war, the things I read which made me conscious of political and social problems.

You talk of the things you read. What is surprising in you, and in so many for whom you are the spokesman, the leader—

Let's say the megaphone—

What is surprising is the political confusion of the mass of the student movement. There are Maoists, various Trotskyist groups, you who are an anarchist. Which leaders do you recognise? What attitude do you take to the revolutionary theoreticians? Such as Marx?

I am, if you like, a Marxist in the way Bakunin was. Bakunin translated Marx, and for him Marx had not so much developed a new theory as formulated the possibilities of a revolutionary criticism of society on the basis of theories about bourgeois culture. Bakunin has had more influence on me. But above all I think I made up my own mind on the basis of the Russian Revolution, of the situation in the workers' commune in Kronstadt, where there were anarchists struggling against the heavy hand of the Bolsheviks on the soviets. In consequence I am very anti-Leninist, I am against the organisational method of democratic centralism and for organisational federalism—for federated autonomous groups which act together but still preserve their autonomy.

Is this position the same as that of your comrades?

In the March 22 Movement there are also Marxist-Leninists, and Trotskyists who are themselves very Leninist; but they make up only part of the movement.

What seems clear is that with all of you there is a radical confrontation which applies to capitalist societies as well as the "socialist" society of the East.

True. There are three permanent themes—the struggles against state repression, against authoritarianism, and against hierarchy. In view of the fact that these three phenomena may be found in both East and West, my opposition to the organisation forms of the societies in both East and West is total.

So your confrontation is direct as much against Western capitalist civilisation as against Soviet society?

For me, Soviet society is a form of government which has the characteristics of a class society: in my eyes the bureaucracy represents a class, so I am opposed to Soviet society just as I am opposed to capitalist society in France. However, I do not live in the USSR, I live here. So I carry on the fight here against the French bourgeoisie.

You are anti-Leninist. But there are also Trotsky, Mao, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara.

At the time of the repression of the Kronstadt commune, on Trotsky's orders, I am anti-Trotskyist. But when Trotsky makes himself the spokesman of the opposition to Stalin, I more or less follow his denunciation of the Russian bureaucracy. For me, however, it doesn't go far enough. For Trotsky, the Russian state is a degenerated workers' state; whereas for me, the bureaucracy represents a class. So it isn't a workers' state at all! My criticism of Soviet society is entirely Marxist—after analysing the relationships of production and distribution in the USSR, you can see that these are not the relationships of socialist production: the Russian working class has no power to make decisions in production and distribution. For this reason the Soviet state for me is still a class state.

Then we come to Maoism.

Maoism—I'm not very sure what it is! I've read some bits and pieces in Mao which are very true. His thesis of relying on the peasantry has always been an anarchist thesis. Here there is no problem—even during the Russian Revolution. But now they have made Mao into a myth. And I am not interested in talking about the myth of Mao, the "little red book", the defence of Stalin, etc. The "Marxist-Leninists" do that. That's their business. But for me it completely misses the point.

What do you think of Stalin?

You mean, what do I think of the CP? Stalin is Stalinism; it is really an absolute form of repression, a bureaucratic society which fights every form of working-class and even revolutionary confrontation.

Is your rebellion against civilisation?

I am not against civilisation. That is meaningless. I am against the nature of our society and against its forms of expression. And our civilisation is nothing but the form of expression of the nature of the

system we live in.

What are your aims?

As follows. Through action, the problem of moving from theory to practice and from practice to theory is raised more clearly. When we carried out very precise struggles—against sexual repression, for the freedom of political expression, for bringing politics into the student world—we came up against total repression, right down to the present explosion. Starting from this, we must now develop a new strategy of politics so as to be able to go on raising political problems; and when we raise these political problems, precise aims will emerge for us, in the universities and in the educational system generally, and outside in our contact with the working class.

Since the student world is mainly of bourgeois origin, one wonders whether this is a revolution of children who are playing at being leftists.

What seems important to me now is to introduce politics into the student world, which is happening—and into the world of apprentices and unemployed young people who aren't even apprentices—to make possible the development of action involving radical confrontation with society, based precisely on the objective situation of our society, which is unable (for good reason!) to find any place for its youth. Why? Because today our society, knowing what we know (about profits, etc.), cannot make commercial use of its youth. That is all.

Your attack is directed particularly against the teachers, who were the first to denounce the university structure.

We don't challenge the teachers as such. We challenge their place in the university, as a cog in the machine. And it is as this that we are opposed to them. There are attacks against some teachers, even against the courses of some teachers, against the political attitudes of some teachers. This seems quite normal to me.

You consider the university system as the objective accomplice of the bourgeoisie. And this is why you put it on trial. But isn't it therefore a matter of challenging western civilisation?

If you like—but I would rather use another word. It is in the name of civilisation that the Occident Movement [a Fascist group] wants to change everything. It is in the name of civilisation that De Gaulle acts; it is in the name of civilisation that Mitterand acts; it is in the name of civilisation that the Communist Party acts.

But they are defending it. You are attacking it.

I could reply that I am attacking precisely in the name of the scientific knowledge we have and don't make use of! For me, our society doesn't make use of its scientific and technical methods for the liberation of man.

What does the word socialism mean to you?

What do I think of what is called socialism? I am fighting to make socialism a reality. In my eyes that is the only way to live.

You take some elements of your definition of socialism from Trotsky, from Mao?

From Mao, in fact. For example, Mao breaks with strict Leninism

when he relies on something outside the working class—the peasantry. Village communes are for us a form of organisation which is quite desirable.

There is often talk about the influence on your movement of the American philosopher Marcuse.

There has often been talk about the influence of Marcuse on the SDS [the Socialist German Student League]. And we are in contact with the SDS. But there aren't ten people in the movement who have read Marcuse, except perhaps *Eros and Civilisation*. In his criticism of capitalist society and his rejection of so-called "socialist" society, Marcuse is on the same lines as us. Especially because of three theses. He shows that it is the nature of society itself that is repressive, and it isn't a matter of external forms of repression like the police. He shows that man is one-dimensional, that is, our society makes man in its own image. Thirdly, he shows that criticism and destruction are a beginning of construction, and when you criticise something radically you are being constructive.

Your criticism has been directed against several intellectuals and teachers. Yet those who first prepared the way for you are people like Sartre, Camus (at one time at least), Merleau-Ponty [another existentialist philosopher]. Are these people part of the bourgeois world for you?

Let's take the example of Camus; he started the paper *Combat* with the subtitle "From Resistance to the Revolution". Look what *Combat* has become today! It exists for you to say that Camus has influenced some young people. But today the problems that he raised—such as the absurdity of the world—it isn't in such terms that the majority of students who are active think of them; Camus is still a source, we read him, but he doesn't have the same significance now. Neither does Sartre, for that matter. Nor does anyone else.

You are strongly in favour of Vietnam, and so is Sartre—

But everyone can be in favour of Vietnam! . . . All right, look, Sartre is in favour of Vietnam, that's great. But this doesn't mean that he still has the same influence on students. Sartre belongs to the postwar period. We are at another stage. The point is that young people today did not live through the postwar period, nor did the working class for that matter.

Still, on the literary side it seems that the surrealist challenge of the 1920s interests the Nanterre students a lot.

The student movement is not a revolution but a rebellion. We agree—with surrealism, and especially with Dada, because Dada was more radical, and it does influence a section of the movement. But personally I am very much a "politico".

Among the anarchists, which are those who have influenced you most?

I have always defined myself as an anarchist by negation, by opposition to the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary tradition. The anarchists, if you like, have influenced me more by some of their works than by their theories. For example, Voline's book on the Russian Revolu-

tion, Makhno's book on the Ukraine, the German descriptions of 1917, etc. And in fact some thinkers, like Pelloutier, the founder of the CGT [the General Confederation of Labour, formed by revolutionary syndicalists in 1895—Fernand Pelloutier actually had little to do with it and devoted himself to the parallel Federation of *Bourses du Travail*, of which he was general secretary from 1894 until his death in 1901]. But I'm not going to mention a single anarchist thinker; I don't give a damn about theoreticians. There are no Anarchists: there are only people who behave as anarchists. There must be a theory which leads on to particular activity. But one doesn't think along with thinkers of two thousand years ago. In practice one relies on Marx and Bakunin, on Marcuse today, or Kolakowski [the dissident Polish Marxist]. It is a fundamental error in studying the French student movement to search for some thinker who inspires our activity.

Even so, aren't there any thinkers whose theories inspire your movement?

No, there isn't any one thinker, or several. Every thinker counts for us. I could name Aristotle for you. Why not? Certainly—and when opposing education, you may be referred to Rousseau, who said it all! There—Rousseau is a thinker who influences us.

But doesn't the thought of Guevara play a very important part at Nanterre?

There again, what can one say about Che? He fought, he was in South America. There's nothing to say. I may be more or less in agreement with what goes on in Cuba. But that isn't what is important. What is interesting is this: how can Cuba be practically isolated today between the USSR and the Americans? That is what interests me. It is also possible to talk about decisions of Fidel, of Che, etc., at particular times, but this amounts to pub talk. If you make a scientific analysis of the situation, you must first explain why Cuba is isolated, why Vietnam is equally isolated, in the context of the double opposition of China-USA and China-USSR, etc. These are the facts. Why is the workers' movement in Europe unable to break American imperialism and let the Vietnamese fight their own battles? These are the basic problems to consider.

From Madrid to Berlin, from Warsaw to Rome, from Paris to London, all the students have questioned the socio-economic and cultural systems of their countries. What relations do you have with the other European movements? And what similarities are there between you and them?

There are very important relations between the movements in Germany and France, struggling against the bourgeois and capitalist state. We have demonstrated our solidarity with the SDS because their struggle really overlaps with ours. And they have also demonstrated their solidarity with us. Briefly, we are in close contact with them, and for us in this struggle we must have an internationalism which no Communist Party of any kind has really achieved. And for us the struggle—not just of students, but of other people too—must be on a European scale. In Warsaw, where there is an obvious revival of

Stalinism, there is the same problem.

And in Prague?

In Prague there is liberalisation because the Czechoslovak economy was quite dead. So the liberalisation is taking place because there is a rebirth of the "capitalist" base. It isn't quite a bourgeois liberalisation, but the Church is reviving, etc. That is not what is interesting. But in the student world, as well as among the Czech workers, a confrontation is developing on the left of the regime which wants precisely the establishment of workers' councils. That is what is important.

It is sometimes said that the working class doesn't feel involved in your activity, especially in Paris. Why?

That is the wrong question. Just because the students come out into the streets, the workers aren't all going to shout, "Hurrah, they are right to fight!" We are all in a situation of crisis embittered by capitalism. So we don't need to meet each other. The workers will come out into the streets themselves, just as they have wild-cat strikes in England. The problem is this. It isn't the short-term one that *L'Humanité* [the Communist daily paper] doesn't say, "We support the leftists." The problem will be raised if the workers come up against an objective situation which makes them move as well; and then there will be a meeting between us, as in Italy, when the Italian students picketed during the Fiat strike. Then the workers knew which side the students were on.

If we take the example of the student movement in Madrid, we see that the difference—and the risks—are much more serious than with you—

But no one says that it is the same everywhere! I have never pretended that in Paris we live in a post-Stalinist or Fascist period. So it is not the same as in Warsaw or Madrid. But the fact is that all the students are rebelling against a repressive form of the state. Whatever Fascism may be in Spain, in view of Franco's tradition, that is obvious.

Do you think you will succeed in constructing a revolutionary theory adapted to the present age?

Our Nanterre bulletin, which came out two weeks ago [on April 22, 1968], shows very well the existence of a gap between theory and practice. We have developed methods of action, but we have not put forward a theoretical elaboration. This is necessary in the present situation of the extreme left-wing movement in France. But it is obvious that if things go on as they are, the Nanterre movement will collapse. It will possibly recover in other places with other people. That doesn't matter. It will simply prove that we are incapable of developing this theory; and there's no need to get upset about it. But we are trying to develop an effective theory.

At the beginning of this interview you mentioned the example of Kronstadt. That wasn't much of a success! Aren't you afraid of suffering a defeat—though a less bloody one?

The Kronstadt commune was crushed by the Red Army! Our movement will also be crushed; we aren't afraid of that. It will begin

again in another place—in another way. It would mean that we made mistakes. But this can be found out only in action, in real practice.

Translated by N.W. from *Magazine Littéraire* 19 (July 1968).

3: Alexandre Hebert

THE BASIS OF MY IDEOLOGY IS ANARCHY. I realised this when I first met members of parliament and local officials. I must say they gave me a superiority complex. The social hierarchy certainly has no basis in reality! So I have always been an anarchist. I first came into contact with anarchist circles in 1936, when I was fifteen. My father told me: "I know your character. If you go into the Young Communists, you will get yourself expelled." My father—he was a peasant who had gone on to the railways in 1920—had left the Communist Party when it began to organise cells, and he joined the SFIO [Socialist Party]. So I began in the Young Socialists. My father was against the anarchists. He told me: "You wanted to join the Communist Party, now you are joining the Young Socialists, and you are becoming an anarchist. But where will you end up?" I said: "We'll see in thirty years." And today I'm still an anarchist.

At that time, when I was fifteen, we had at home an iron stove with corners which had to be cleaned with emery cloth. Then one day my mother bought an enamelled stove. It was such an important event that I can still remember the Piedselle make and the purple colour. Then we got a horrible dining room, with a cupboard which had a mirror in the middle. At that time my father had a bicycle. And I had a motorcycle. And now I have a car. So today we have to have sociologists in *L'Express* or the *Nouvel Observateur* to explain how the working class is becoming bourgeois. We all began to become bourgeois when men came out of the caves.

My grandfather was a peasant, a serf. He went on foot in his wooden *sabots*, and the floor in his house was beaten earth. My father and mother wore shoes, and they could read and write. That was the beginning of our becoming bourgeois, and we didn't stop there. When you can manufacture cars by mass production, I don't see why in the name of any morality people should go on foot in *sabots* just because they are workers!

So I was then and I am now a bourgeois anarchist. This hasn't ever got in the way of my feelings or my ideas. Even in Germany, where I was an STO [forced labourer] for thirteen months. I was working in a factory in Munich, and nearly organised a strike. We were only a hair's-breadth from success. I managed to install strike pickets in the factory. Luckily the boss was anti-Nazi, as I found out after-

wards. Anyway, I had followed the anarchist doctrine: be yourself in all circumstances.

When I came back to France, I didn't take part in the Resistance. I didn't see any point in getting myself flattened between the nationalist Gaullists and the Stalinists. I don't like Stalinists. They are just cops. I am totally opposed to them. I struggle against them. But even so they are part of the family. That is why I joined the CGT [the Communist-dominated trade union organisation] after the Liberation. It was unthinkable for me to join the CFTC [the Catholic trade union organisation].

I came to Nantes in 1946. I was a railway worker. And in 1947 I became the local representative of the FO [Force Ouvrière—the anti-Communist faction which left the CGT in 1947]. I'm still in the FO and still an anarchist. My children are following in my footsteps, though I haven't made them do so. François, my eldest son, is twenty-one. He works for the post office at Rouen. Well, he's moving towards our anarcho-syndicalist ideas! He reads *Monde Libertaire*. Françoise, my daughter, who is twenty-two, is a teacher and a reformist. She is active in the teachers' union. I wouldn't say she was a do-gooder, but there is something of that in her. She's pretty conformist. If she'd had a lover when she was young, I wouldn't have been upset. I would just have said, "Watch out for kids," and that's all. My younger son, who is eighteen, will soon leave home. He's like me. He has a restless nature, as I did at his age. He took part in the Action Committee at his *lycée*, where he's in the top form. There's only one worry I have about him—that he shouldn't betray his class. That's the important thing, and it isn't a matter of what you believe. You can be a fine revolutionary at twenty, and be integrated into society at forty. In fact that's the only thing I want for my children—that they don't become either bourgeois or bureaucrats!

I can't stand bureaucrats. When the majority of the revolutionaries chose the Communist Party, I always believed it was necessary to work with the genuine working class, within its natural tradition. What I want is a federalist society, without any central power. I am for communes and soviets, and against bureaucracy. I reckon it will be necessary to rethink all human relationships on a basis which has nothing to do with authority. I dream of a workers' democracy—the opposite of bourgeois democracy like De Gaulle's. All citizens are equal? So what—workers aren't citizens! The workers don't really exist. They only begin to exist when they are organised. Democracy is the recognition of the right of workers to organise themselves in unions, groups, factions, tendencies, and of all of them to express themselves. The Stalinists are against this right. They are against any tendency which isn't theirs. We are for workers' organisation, not for just one workers' organisation.

Translated by N.W. from *Le Printemps des Enragés*, by Christian Charrière (Paris: Fayard, 1968), pp. 192-194.

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about
anarchism

*A New
Introduction*
