THE UNFORGETTABLE YEAR 1968

From Prague to the paving-stone of Paris, from Nixon to the Tet offensive, 1968 was a memorable year. ALR looks back in words and photographs.

The Greening of Dany the Red

Daniel Cohn-Bendit was the doyen of the French far left in the 'May Events'. Now he's a 'realist' in the German Greens. David Caute asked him for his views on 1968 today.

We were more than self-confident. We thought we could do more than we could. We thought everything was possible. We had a utopian view of the world — self-government, workers' control — but all this was important to our ability to criticise society.

— Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

Dany Cohn-Bendit bounces into the imposing dining room of Frankfurt's Hessischer Hof Hotel with the urchin smile familiar to the generation of '68 and an uncomfortable dressing covering his nose. The black-coated waiters don't flinch: celebrity now surpasses respectability in the Zeitgeist.

Cohn-Bendit has been playing football, not rioting — though the city is riotous enough, with militarised ranks of uniformly masked ecologists firing standardised steel catapults at young policemen who, in turn, are capable of earnestly explaining their indignation by demonstration and televised interview.

Clearly, the political culture of Frankfurt has changed during the two decades since Karl Dietrich Wolff deployed his SDS guerrilla units against city, university and state — the decades of Rudi Dutschke's "long march through the institutions" of democratic capitalism. But the capitalist system has survived the challenge. Checking into the hotel — I wasn't paying — I was greeted by a bowl of free fruit in my room, an exorbitant mini-bar, and a range of miniature toiletries beckoning to be stolen. Klau' Mich — "Steal Me": that had been the title of the "Leftporn" book marketed in 1968 by Berlin's half-Yippie, half-situationist, always scandalous Kommune I, in an effort to raise legal fees for the many state trials its leading spirits flamboyantly enjoyed.

Cohn-Bendit was never a citizen of that Bohemia, but his active sympathy extended to any young radical engaged in confrontation with the state. Today his position is rather more discriminating. He's past 40.

Now he is an advocate of parliamentary democracy. Dany-the-Red has been greened. The Greens have tasted the bargaining power which proportional representation offers to small parties growing larger; after gaining 30 percent of Frankfurt's votes they
entered a short-lived coalition government in the local state Landtag of Hesse. They are now back on the streets, but the beguiling aroma of power lingers.

If Cohn-Bendit’s anarchist political philosophy has gone, his temperament retains its anarchic edge; like Norman Mailer he remains a high-profile publicist rather than a politician at ease with the machine. He is busy, in a hurry, constantly besieged for interviews and sometimes stubborn about fees — he taxes the rich and gives freely to the poor. Recently he completed a fourpart television documentary series of his own, *Revolution Revisited*, and an accompanying book whose somewhat sardonic title can be roughly translated, *The Revolution, We all Loved Her!*

Trailing by a camera crew, he made good contact with the ageing American Yippie Abbie Hoffman — still kindred spirits — and rather uncomfortable contact with the other Yippie media star of the ’60s, Jerry Rubin, now a spiritual engineer for Yuppie culture, separated from outright Reaganism only by a lingering sense of what is kosher. Jerry took Dany up to his New York penthouse, in between biogenic jogs, showed him rows of pill bottles, and talked about the urgent duty to make money. “But you used to burn money in the ’60s!” Cohn-Bendit protested. Rubin was not thrown: burning money was the cutting edge of human endeavour in the ’60s and making it has been the cutting edge ever since. It’s all in the head — somehow.

Cohn-Bendit, whose head retains the clarity of an inspired street orator (he talks at half-shout, megaphonic and compelling) was not convinced. Yet Dany himself is a convert, with his own historic reversal in the head: to be a Green today (he insists) is to place oneself at the same point of advanced political consciousness as Reds had in ’68. “We have all these movements, the ecological movement, the peace movement, the women’s movement — this is a sign that society is taking over its responsibilities”. His friend Joshka Fischer, another son of ’68 and until recently Hesse’s Green Minister of the Environment, agrees: “What we need is a new internationalism, an ecological and social internationalism, not in the old marxist or labour movement way…”

International solidarity was the first rule of the generation of ’68 and “Ho-Ho-Ho Chi Minh” their universal war cry, their verbal Tet Offensive. At SDS’s international Viet Nam Congress, held in West Berlin in February 1968, Rudi Dutschke, despite his loathing of stalinism, led the chanting, an inspirational figure for the young French radicals who would soon bring Gaullist France to the point of paralysis. Dutschke was shot, almost fatally, on 11 April 1968 — a week after the assassination of Martin Luther King — while riding his bicycle away from SDS headquarters in Berlin. The rioting that followed spread from Berlin to Bonn, Munich, London and Paris. The protest demonstrations in Paris brought the French ultra-left *groupuscules* their first real experience of unity: from Easter until the police invasion of the
Sorbonne on 3 May was only three weeks and those weeks belonged to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a founding member of the libertarian 22 March Movement at the Paris University campus of Nanterre.

A red-haired rouquin, CohnBendit had been prominent in several escapades at Nanterre, including a protest occupation of the entrance hall of the segregated women’s dormitory. In January 1968 the Gaullist Minister of Youth, Francois Missoffe, arrived to open a new swimming pool. Cohn-Bendit broke through the protective cordon of dignitaries and inquired why the Minister’s massive manual on French youth made no mention of sexual problems. Missoffe replied that a dip in the new swimming pool was the best remedy; Cohn-Bendit

To be a Green today, insists Cohn-Bendit, is to be at the same point of advanced political consciousness as the Reds in ’68

likened this doctrine to that of the Hitler Youth, the Minister walked away, and a zealous official instigated proceedings to deport the 22-year-old student who, though born in France of German-Jewish refugee parents, had chosen German nationality mainly to avoid French military service.

The swimming pool incident reinforced Cohn-Bendit’s reputation. As one Nanterre wall slogan put it, “tout le monde est Cohn-Bendit”. Despite friction about the cult of Dany’s personality, which grew within the action committees and surfaced after he crossed the French frontier in defiance of a banning order and cheekily held a press conference in the Sorbonne, the ancien combattants still speak of him warmly. Jean-Marcel Bougereau was international secretary of the French National Union of Students in 1968:

He had a gift for speaking to the mass of students in a direct, provocative but comprehensible language, very important; he was spontaneous, natural, not sectarian, he was happy, he was laughing, he could crystallise a movement, not like the boring radical... He was not raising different issues, he was raising the same issues differently...

Less enthusiastic, yet grudgingly respectful about the tribune of the baby-boom generation (the French use the English expression), is Monsieur Pierre Grappin, whose increasingly unhappy duty was to administer the Nanterre campus throughout that riotous spring. A former Resistance hero known for his progressive views and liberal policies, Dean Grappin was unable to cope with this conflict of generations instigated by intellectual hooligans who distributed leaflets describing him as an “SS Fascist”:

They had among them real provocateurs... I was angry — a deep disillusion... I was very upset to see young girls who had been very co-operative two weeks later sending me to the revolutionary tribunal. It really made me very sad... Their methods, apparently democratic, were deeply undemocratic... Cohn-Bendit? A very popular man for meetings. Much better than the others. He was a real demagogue — real — with a talent for people.

Compelled (as he believed) to close the campus in March, in April and again on 2 May, Grappin brought disciplinary charges against eight Nanterre students (Cohn-Bendit among them), precipitating a protest meeting in the Sorbonne, a panic call to the police, and the violation of a tradition of sanctuary seven centuries old when the police entered the main courtyard and arrested 300 militants (including, of course, Cohn-Bendit). About this, Dean Grappin has no regret: “I had a lot of people calling my home to raise my pity for these poor guys. At worst they risked six months’ suspension”.

The majority of the faculty at Nanterre were behind the Dean, but an exception was Cohn-Bendit’s sociology professor, Alain Touraine. Their mutual respect developed into friendship; Touraine was one of four Nanterre professors who rallied to the defence of the eight inculpes. Yet

Touraine’s sociology course had come under attack from CohnBendit and a small group of students who announced that they would not be examined in a subject imported from America and designed to reinforce capitalist-technocratic values. Cohn-Bendit explains: “The students wanted to know: why are we learning this? To do what? What sort of manager will I be in ten years’ time?”

In his book Le Mouvement de Mai, Touraine observed that CohnBendit constantly clashed with the “Masons” of the sectarian groupuscules (trotskyists, communists,
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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>May 30</td>
<td>10 million French workers on strike: occupation of factories across France</td>
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<td>May 24</td>
<td>President De Gaulle calls French elections.</td>
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<td>June 6</td>
<td>Robert Kennedy assassinated.</td>
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<td>Late June</td>
<td>Dubcek publishes “2,000 words”, interpreted by Soviets as “counter-revolution”.</td>
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<td>June 23</td>
<td>French elections: big victory for the Right.</td>
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<td>Aug 3</td>
<td>Warsaw Pact powers sign “friendship statement”.</td>
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<td>Aug 20/21</td>
<td>600,000 Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops invade Czechoslovakia. Dubcek and senior ministers arrested.</td>
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<td>Oct 27</td>
<td>100,000 march in London against Viet Nam War.</td>
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<td>Nov 5</td>
<td>Richard Nixon elected US President.</td>
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maoists), ridiculing their fixed slogans and catchphrases, their conformist attitude towards the university itself. Cohn-Bendit confirms the point:

With marxism you have to change all the structures to change life. We discovered and felt that the revolutionary process is a summary of changes in daily life. This was new. It was interesting for other students. We didn't propose a change in the next life, after you die for the revolution ... We wanted to be in charge of our lives. That's still the main issue today.

Touraine believed at the time, and still believes that the rebels were employing an antiquated language — the myth of revolution — to express genuinely modern concerns and demands. Touraine’s recent summation, “Mai 1968 entre les souvenirs et l'Histoire” is echoed by Cohn-Bendit himself:

We were prisoners of mythology. Revolutionary theory was moribund but we didn't know it. That realisation took time. What we gained from May was the historical experience of collective action which is the basis of the social imagination. The “individualism” of May was healthy, rooted in the group. Today we live off nostalgia for that spirit of conviviality and generosity.

The non-sectarian 22 March Movement offered an existentialist kind of politics — to think is to act, here and now — and it should not astonish us that at the height of the may insurrection it was Cohn-Bendit whom Jean-Paul Sartre chose — without bogus humility — to interview:
Your movement is interesting because it puts imagination in power. You have been able to create something which astonishes, something which jolts, something which repudiates all that has made our society what it is today. This is what I'd call the extension of one's potential. Don’t give it up.

What followed May '68 for Cohn-Bendit was not terrorism on the Baader-Meinhoff model, but a renewed long march to the factories. As Joshka Fischer recalls, the colonisation of certain targeted enterprises (like the Opel works near Frankfurt) didn’t work out: “We had a full defeat. There was no chance. We were thinking in categories and concepts of yesterday not of tomorrow”. In short, the great working class, the hope of Marx, Engels, Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, remained stubbornly loyal to social democracy and the German economic miracle.

The working class has now faded from the horizon of the _anciens combattants_ of 1968. Alain Krivine, the leading figure in the trotskyst Jeunesse Communiste Revolutionnaire, is one of the few who have not “sold out”. Alain Geismar, the young general secretary of the SNESup, the university teachers’ union, who called his members out on strike in solidarity with the students, has also given up on the working class—even though he went through a maoist phase after 1968 and suffered imprisonment.

One day the working class will open the cupboard, take the flag and liberate humanity. A lot of people were thinking that in the ‘50s and ‘60s... You had to be with the working class or you were nothing. I think this has changed.

Geismar, who had quickly adopted the libertarian ideal of _autogestion_ or self-management in ‘68, and who disparaged Mitterrand, Mendes-France and the parliamentary Left, nevertheless worked in a technical advisory capacity for the Socialist government of 1981-86—under President Mitterrand. Cohn-Bendit even repudiates the antiparliamentary rhetoric of 1968, his disparagement of Mendes-France as “the leftwing de Gaulle”.

This was an error. We said election is bullshit. We should have had another attitude. If a new left government had been elected after a general strike, if the movement had proposed an election, they could have had a chance to win it.

Joshka Fischer, who now describes progress in terms of electioneering, power sharing and patronage, admits that the involvement of the broad masses in controlling their own destiny—the central proposition of the New Left in the ‘60s—has not been solved:

I think the dream of a political system ruled by the undogs, ruled by the oppressed, it will be a dream... If you try to throw out or maybe kill the middle class then you will kill democracy, then you produce a new ruling class.

In essence, the Greens have painted the great revisionist tradition, which extends back to Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, in a new colour. It is the freewheeling demonstrational culture of the Greens which is the heir to 1968, the “modern” element. But Cohn-Bendit insists on a broader heritage:

For me politics is the fight for more autonomy and decision-making in the hands of society. On this I remain at the same point as in ’68. But today we have to work within the state, parliament—this is a big change.

I think people decide in certain circumstances they want to have a big influence on certain issues—ecology, nuclear power. At another time they want to delegate a policy to a government. And this is what we didn’t see. We thought people will always want to decide everything—this is not true.

Alain Touraine argues that 20 years later a history of France could be written showing how all curves changed direction in ‘68—justice, medicine, economics, politics, the women’s movement, the arrival of ethnic minorities in politics, the first strikes of immigrant workers, the politicisation of private life. True enough. These were real gains, yet also consolation prizes for that remarkable generation of agitators and _revelateurs_ whose clarity of vision, however “utopian” or romantic, however misguided about Ho or Mao, remains the most precious “moment” in our defeated lives. Talking to Dany, one feels both the power of the moment and the power of the defeat.


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