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Abstract

The May 1968 (Mai '68) social and cultural revolution in France generated a distinctive collection of posters produced by students associated with various Paris-based university community workshops known as Ateliers Populaire. These ephemeral items were in the form of graphically simple, primarily monotone, silkscreen posters. As an expression of the prevailing counterculture, they represented the important role of the fine arts in expressing to the wider public, and supporting, the concerns and desires of young people involved in the widespread protests which sought to curtail restriction of individual freedom of expression on university campuses, and support the actions of workers in their own struggle for improved conditions of employment.

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Michael Organ

Abstract: The May 1968 (Mai '68) social and cultural revolution in France generated a distinctive collection of posters produced by students associated with various Paris-based university community workshops known as Ateliers Populaire. These ephemeral items were in the form of graphically simple, primarily monotone, silkscreen posters. As an expression of the prevailing counterculture, they represented the important role of the fine arts in expressing to the wider public, and supporting, the concerns and desires of young people involved in the widespread protests which sought to curtail restriction of individual freedom of expression on university campuses, and support the actions of workers in their own struggle for improved conditions of employment.

Something's happening here...

A cultural revolution took place in France during 1968, reaching a crescendo in the month of May. University students, workers and members of the general public participated in a series of protests, demonstrations, occupations and strikes which took the country to the verge of a popular revolution and ultimately resulted in the near downfall of the government of the day (Drescher and McCreary 1968, Gretton 1969, Touraine 1971, Cookney 2018, Rubin 2018a). Encounters between protesters and police in Paris were especially violent. There were injuries on both sides, and hundreds of protesters were arrested (Seidman 2004). A unique and distinct

aspect of the popular uprising was the formation by Paris-based university art students of community poster and leaflet printing facilities known as Ateliers Populaire [Community Workshops / Printeries] (Rubin 2018b). These collectives were responsible for the production of a rich array of posters, produced in haste and cheaply for dispersal to the public and placement on billboards, hoardings, telegraph poles, the walls of factories and commercial buildings, and in shop windows. One commentator noted at the time that they were short-term works of revolutionary propaganda which revealed in their structure and form an urgent but temporary function (Berger 1968, 1969).



A student hurling rocks at the police in Paris during the May 1968 student uprising. The protests transformed France. Source: Gamma Keystone.

It is said that some 1 million such posters were printed in association with the events of May and June of 1968. Examples now reside in art gallery and museum collections around the world

such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, where they are highly valued due to their artistry, distinct graphic design elements, and role as historical artefacts of a significant episode in recent French history. The ephemeral nature of the posters has enhanced their rarity, as most were immediately, and freely, distributed for posting by students and workers. As such, few have survived the years since the events of May 1968. At the time of production, special effort was made to publically disperse the posters in the most efficient manner, rather than make them available to collectors, or offer them for sale. On principle, they were not sold as each poster represented more than a mere commodity to the student protestors and their associates. A network of students, unionists and community members was formed to stealthily go about the job - usually under cover of darkness - of bill posting about the city and wherever there were situations of dissent and industrial unrest, such as in the Renault and Citroen production plants outside of Paris. Thankfully, many of the artists involved held on to a few copies for their own collections. Some of those charged with posting also took samples, whilst others simply tore them off walls, keen to obtain mementos of the struggle. Many of the posters that survive therefore show evidence of contemporary use, with soiling, rips and tears, damage due to exposure to the elements, and the effects of aging as a result of the less than archival nature of the paper and inks used in their production. Even records of their posting are ephemeral. A relatively small collection of contemporary photographs exists of students producing posters, or posters in situ.



Posters, Boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris, May 1968.

The latter mostly comprises distant background shots of street corners or shadowy walls with peeling paint, upon which can be seen posters torn, pasted over or partially obliterated by casting shadows and passing traffic. To the authorities they were ugly pieces of graffiti; to the students, workers and community supporters they were vital elements of the call to action; to the general public they were a source of information regarding events then in play – information which was not usually available from mainstream media (Besancon 2018).

The significant graphic qualities of the Mai '68 French revolutionary posters are the result of both a crude simplicity in their production and powerful messaging through simple design elements. The latter was in large part the result of the appraisal system set up by the student

and community artists and their colleagues who, collectively, were responsible for decisions as to what would be printed. Designs were submitted for approval, and if voted for, there was a communal effort to see them through the production process. Also, it was generally agreed that the designers would remain anonymous - a decision made by many such poster collectives, both contemporary and in years to come, including the Poster Workshop, London, 1968-71, Earthworks Poster Collective, University of Sydney, 1972-79, and Redback Graphix, Wollongong, 1979-1994 (Cullen and Donaldson 1981, Lord 2018, Zagala 2008). The anonymity of the poster also protected the artist from prosecution for illegal posting, copyright infringement or defamation. For students of graphic design and poster history, the Mai '68 movement posters have a readily identifiable style (Kukelberg and Vermés 2011). Text was hand drawn and images were, on the surface, simple and almost child-like, with cartoonish silhouettes depicting massed figures or individuals, raised fists and structures such as factories. Text was prominent. There was usually no ambiguity, no obvious attempts at individual, artistic expression, though the outcomes were very much that, whilst remaining in most instances anonymous. Many of the poster designs display great artistic imagination, with or without associated text, and often in tune with collective style. Art-political organisations such as the Situationists International were influential in the events of May 1968, enabling the involvement of artists and graphic designers in core protest activities (Gough 1996, Dark Star 2008, Pinder 2008).



Jacques Carelman, *SS* [poster], Atelier Populaire, Paris, 18 May 1968. Silkscreen print in dark blue ink on paper.

The message was the goal, with immediate impact imperative. As such, the posters were usually successful due to their often-confrontational nature and the support structure put in place to ensure their timely posting in Paris and other centres of unrest. For example, the most famous and iconic image of the time is of a Paris policeman with helmet, goggles, truncheon raised and wielding a shield bearing the NAZI letters 'SS' as though roughly, and recently, painted thereon. The image portrayed the harsh reality of the violent treatment handed out by

the authorities on behalf of the government of the day - a treatment that the protesters and student artists were experiencing first hand in the form of battering by truncheons, tear gas, water cannon, intimidation and incarceration. Such a poster would have brought to mind the NAZI occupation of Paris during World War II, something which undoubtedly struck a raw nerve with those who survived the ordeal and the divisions created in French society at the time.

Most of the posters were printed on cheap, rough, white or cream paper - often thin newsprint - utilising the silkscreen process. Stone lithography was quickly abandoned by the students as it was deemed too complex and unable to produce the quantities needed due to the limitations of the available workshop facilities. Most of the posters were of a single colour, predominantly black, though revolutionary red was also popular. On occasion dark blue, green, brown or purple inks were used, either singularly or in combination with one other. Multi-coloured prints were rare. The subjects of the posters were socially and politically topical, such as cuts to university funding, industrial relations reform, promotion of political ideologies, freedom of speech, especially for the young, police brutality, and societal inequality.

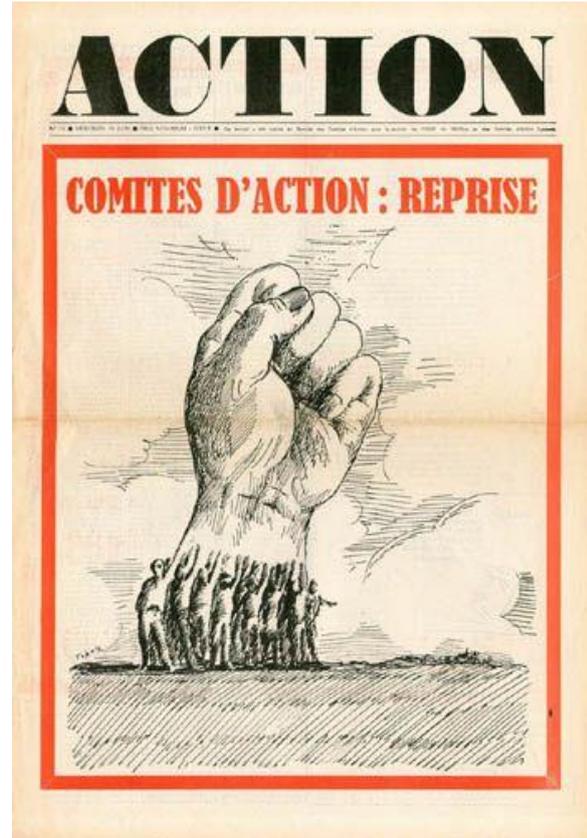
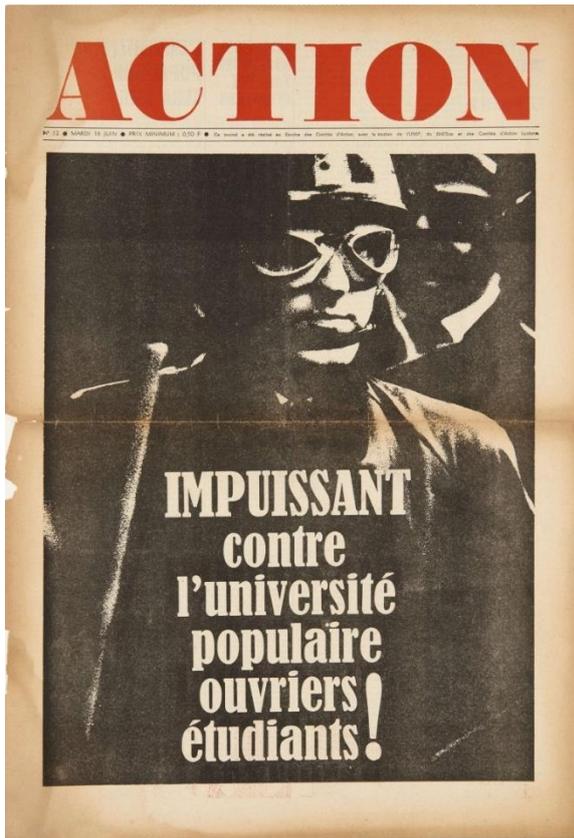
Cause and effect

The Mai '68 revolution largely comprised French youth, alongside workers, rebelling against the tired, worn out war hero President Charles de Gaulle and the conservative government under Prime Minister Georges Pompidou. The latter's immediate reaction to the protests was the use of extreme, often brutal measures to limit freedom of speech, halt the protests and constrain the conditions of workers. The student protest came at the same time as a general

industrial disquiet throughout the nation. In addition, conscription of French youth was a sore point, as it was in America and Australia in support of the Vietnam war.

The widespread civil unrest began in Paris early in May, though there had been disturbances on university campuses from November 1967, most especially at Nanterre following on the restrictive reforms introduced that year by the Minister of Education, Christian Fouchet (Crouzet 1969). These resulted in student strikes and, in January 1968, the use of police at the Nanterre University, Paris. Violent police encounters with striking workers also took place in January. A sit-in by students at Nanterre on 22 March was so violently dealt with that it gave rise to protests in support at the Sorbonne in Paris, and a general escalation in student opposition throughout France (Berger 1968). The May 1968 uprising lasted some seven weeks and took the form of public protest, strikes, and the occupation of universities and factories (Dulaney 2018). As a result, on 30 May 500,000 workers rallied in Paris in support of change. All of this was met with violent confrontation between the students, workers and the police, and the rise of pro-government, right wing activist groups. Following a speech by President de Gaulle announcing elections on 23 June, a counter rally in support of the government was also held. In combination with the students and workers it is said that up to 800,000 people took to the streets that day. Gaullist support ultimately put paid to the idea of a general populist revolution.

For those protesting and seeking political and social change, spreading the word called for the publication of declarations, manifestos, press items, newsletters, magazines, posters, leaflets and pamphlets (Action 1968, Caricatures&caricature 2015). All of this activity was initially strongly opposed by the government and police, though it ultimately resulted in the granting of concessions by President Charles de Gaulle and an accord with the unions (Astarian 2013).



Action [newspaper], Paris, 1968-9. *Action* was a countercultural / resistance newspaper first published at the beginning of May 1968. It called for a general strike and permanent insurrection, and relayed the demands of the National Union of Students of France and the Committees of High School Student Action.

The mainstream media was heavily censored at the time by government and conservative forces who, in many instances, controlled them through business connections. Support for the government was also significant, with the country split down the middle and the older generation seemingly trapped in a post-World War II and contemporary Cold War paranoia mindset, fearful of losing the comforts and freedoms which they were increasingly experiencing as the Sixties unfolded. Not having known the difficulties of the Depression and war years, but angry at the threat of nuclear apocalypse or death on a foreign battlefield in a senseless war, the students and young people, including many artists, were keen to extend their

own freedoms, whilst the working class was also looking for a greater share in the country's prosperity. Memory of France's less than glorious colonial involvement in Algeria and Vietnam was also brought into the spotlight with the escalation of the American war in Vietnam, and atrocities such as Me-Lai massacre of 16 March 1968.

The events of May 1968 resulted in significant social and cultural changes, rather than a political revolution echoing the extreme events of the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 and removal of the aristocracy with the assistance of the guillotine. Like the countercultural revolution taking place in Western nations during the second half of the 1960s and flowing into the following decade, this was a time of great change and a shrugging off of the conservatism and paranoia of the Cold War era by youth. In addition, the wider community sought peace and prosperity, rather than war and inequity. For this reason, the general French population was happy, by the end of June, to get back to work and support the few concessions granted by government and the employers. The Left was left dissatisfied, especially by the fact that the revolution which had promised so much had, in fact, stalled and appeared to deliver so little. The police brutality remained, as did conscription for the young. Dissident groups and organisations were banned in the months following the demonstrations, and Prime Minister Pompidou was eventually elected president, replacing the aged Charles de Gaulle.

Revolutionary Art

The artists who produced and printed posters were mainly university students associated with the Atelier Populaire (Popular Workshop) at the School of Fine Arts [L'Etoile des Beaux Arts], Paris-Sorbonne University. Members of the public, including high school students, were also

involved. Unionists played an important role in identifying issues and themes that could form the basis for a poster that would resonate with their membership (Cookney 2018).



Dans l'Atelier Populaire en 1968 [In the Popular Workshop during 1968]. Photographs:

Philippe Vermés. Collection: Ecole Nationale des Beaux-arts de Paris.

Unity and solidarity were common rallying calls, with silhouettes of groups of workers and students, raised fists and factory outlines featuring in the posters, alongside caricatures of politicians of the day and the distinctly helmeted police.

The activity in Paris during May quickly spread beyond the borders of France, influencing, and being influenced by, similar student and worker protest movements around the world. Nearby, there were student demonstrations in Germany, Poland, Italy and Spain. The United States was already a hive of such activity during 1968, spurred on by the war in Vietnam, the murder of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and the widespread use of drugs such as LSD which often focused on an individual quest for utopian peace and love. The so-called Summer of Love of the previous year had, unfortunately, turned into a dark winter of discontent during 1968, followed by both the glorious and inglorious musical festivities at Woodstock and Altamont during 1969, and the Kent State University shootings of May 1970 wherein 4 students were killed by members of the Ohio National Guard. One policeman and a student died as a result of the French protests, whilst many more were injured.

Industrial unrest in the United Kingdom, and its close proximity to France, resulted in the setting up of the Poster Workshop in London around June of 1968, with its mostly young artists and countercultural revolutionaries producing posters in a style similar to their French counterparts. For example, in its June 1968 issue the leading London-based countercultural magazine *OZ*, edited by Richard Neville, reported on the events of the previous month in France, reproducing one of the most notable of all posters - the May 17 image by Jacques Carelman of the truncheon and shield bearing Parisian policeman. This was further enhanced by the *OZ* graphic designers with silhouettes of the police in action, superimposed upon the

poster. The combination of images, colour and graffiti-like text reflected the chaos and brutality of the government and police response to the demonstrations.



Agit OZ - Riots in Paris, *OZ* magazine, London, June 1968. Page layout based on an original poster and contemporary news photographs.

The French posters varied markedly from the mostly photolithographic music, personality and event posters coming out of centres such as San Francisco and London at the time (1966-70) in association with organisations such as the Fillmore and Avalon ballrooms in the US, and the Big O and Osiris commercial poster operations in the UK (Grunberg 2005, Artcurial 2018). These posters were multi-coloured, often psychedelic, collage-based, and veering away from specific political engagement, though the countercultural revolution was innately and broadly political, though not party based. They were also offered for sale in Head shops or through underground magazines, unlike those from the Atelier Populaire which rejected

commodification. A good example of the posters produced during the May '68 uprising, though not necessarily typical, is *Les Beaux-Arts sont fermés / mais l'Art Révolutionnaire est né* [*The fine arts are dead / but Revolutionary Art is born*]. It is roughly 12 x 24 inches (30 x 60 cm) in size, of portrait format, and printed in black or red ink on paper or card of a pale cream colour. An original copy is reproduced below, with missing ink on some letters, ink stains at the top, and a torn corner. All of this is evidence of the less-than-ideal printing conditions and subsequent use.



Anonymous, *Les Beaux-Arts sont fermés / mais l'Art Révolutionnaire est né* [*The fine arts are dead / but Revolutionary Art is born*], silkscreen print, 30 x 63 cm, Atelier Populaire, Paris,

May 1968.

The issue this poster addresses is the importance of art and the threat to fine arts courses by closures at the Sorbonne and other universities, just as similar posters addressed the threat to worker livelihoods through factory closures and unemployment. As a result, revolutionary art is identified as evolving, and being used, to fight the cuts on both fronts (Berger 1969).

The origin of the *Les Beaux-Arts sont fermés / mais l'Art Révolutionnaire est né* poster is not clear. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London ascribes the Atelier Populaire as its creator, though it is not cited amongst those works listed in the comprehensive catalogue by Kukelberg and Vermés published in 2011. One copy printed in red bears the stamp of the Lycée Louis Le Grand, a prestigious Jesuit secondary school located in Paris.

Many posters from the Atelier Populaire possess a stamp or other marking indicating such an origin, though a large number were not so marked, due in part to the hastiness of their production at a time of much social and political turmoil. It is possible that the Lycée Louis Le Grand stamp merely indicates that the poster came from the school's collection, rather than actually being printed there. Nevertheless, high school students were involved in the May '68 protests and some poster production. The silkscreen method was used as it was able to produce posters quickly and on a variety of papers. Unfortunately, in their haste, the application of paint by amateur printers was often shoddy. Nevertheless, hundreds of different posters and leaflets were printed, and a wide variety of graphic forms were utilised. In many copies, the rushed printing has resulted in some sections showing only a light application of ink, or none at all. This is the case with the copy abovementioned. The poster design is in some ways unique among the May '68 collection in that it presents an art historical perspective. It depicts Marianne, a bare-breasted, female allegorical figure from the time of the French Revolution, representing the concept of liberty. She was made famous in the 1830 painting by Delacroix

titled *Liberty Leading the People*. In the 1968 poster Marianne / Liberty wields a palette knife and carries an artist's palette and brushes, whilst in 1830 she bears a rebel flag and a gun as she leads a motley crew of male revolutionary fighters. In the American State of Liberty, Marianne is transformed into a fully clothed man.



Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty leading the People*, oil on canvas, 1830. Collection: Louvre, Paris.

The events of May 1968 have subsequently generated numerous books, articles, academic courses and conferences, and audio-visual items such as documentaries, with the posters featuring.

Students and workers

Another 1968 poster in this study is very different from *Les Beaux-Arts sont fermés*. It varies in format (landscape), size (bigger), colour (red), content (industrial focus) and condition (damaged). It is titled *Mardi Matin - Aux Portes Des Usines Front Uni Population Travailleurs*

[*Tuesday Morning at the Factory Gates - United Front - Population, Workers*] and promotes a meeting to be held for workers and those in the community supporting them.



Anonymous, *Mardi Matin - Aux Portes Des Usines Front Uni Population Travailleurs*

[*Tuesday Morning at the Factory Gates - United Front - Population, Workers*], silkscreen print, 72 x 84 cm, Ateliers Populaire, Paris, printed for an event held on Tuesday 28 May

1968.

Whilst the *Les Beaux-Arts sont fermés / mais l'Art Révolutionnaire est né* poster posits a link between the fine arts and the French social revolution and protests of May 1968, the majority of posters produced by the Atelier Populaire during that period focussed on support for student and worker rights and conditions, alongside opposition to the then current political leadership and cuts to university courses.

Various statements and manifesto, printed both during the May '68 events and later, refer to support for these issues by the student artists, and especially support of workers, whether they be local (i.e., French) or immigrant. One such poster is *Mardi Matin - Aux Portes Des Usines Front Uni Population Travailleurs*, issued to promote a rally held on the morning of Tuesday, 28 May 1968, at various factory gates throughout France. It was likely produced, at the latest, on the weekend of 25 - 26 May. This would provide enough time for distribution to workers for posting around said factories and dispersal amongst the wider community. As the factory gate rallies were intended for both workers and the general population, it was important that this event received as much promotion as possible. It also came at a significant point in the unrest. By 28 May the situation in France was dire: there was effectively no government and the Socialist Francois Mitterand - opposed by Conservatives and supported by Communists - had nominated himself as the head of an interim government. In addition, the town of Nantes was governed by strike committees; General de Gaulle was about to head off to Germany for talks with the head of the French military; and the Minister of Education had resigned, with no resolution of the student demands (Kukelberg and Vermés 2011).

On Sunday 26 May the Grenelle Agreements had been drafted between unions, employee federations and the government. The following day they were put to members and widely rejected as too weak and a sell-out by union leadership. Therefore, there was a perceived need

for public and worker factory gate meetings on the Tuesday to discuss the outcomes and the way forward. *Mardi Matin* was produced at the high point of the unrest, as both Leftist and Conservative forces maximised their support base. Following the meetings of the 28th, the following day large meetings were held by the unions, culminating in the huge rallies on the 30th by both sides. Buckling under the pressure, the government announcement of elections in June put an end to the general disquiet. However, over the following weeks demonstrations and confrontations between workers, students, supporters of de Gaulle and the police continued. These lasted through to Bastille Day (14 July) and beyond.

The events of the May 1968 demonstrations continue to be discussed and analysed, politically, socially and culturally (Harvey 1978, Duchon 1986, Ross 2002, Woods 2018). Likewise, the posters reverberate to the present day, with a plethora of YouTube videos on the topic presenting analyses and commentaries pertaining to the broader social and political unrest. Many of the striking images highlight the fact of a contemporary relevance regarding issues such as the improvement of workers' rights and conditions, support for public education, freedom of speech, especially within the higher education environment, and disenchantment with government, on both the individual and wider party level. In a distinctly French manner, the student and worker posters formed an integral part, and significant record, of the events of Mai '68, combining pragmatism with a community-based artistry.

The Mai '68 posters provide a graphic reminder of the power of the poster, both in informing and promoting. Students, workers and the wider community were notified of activities and events during 1968, where, in many instances, the government-backed media failed in this regard. Their simple graphic intensity of many of these ephemeral items also clearly propagated the causes at hand, facing workers and students. For example, sympathy towards the action of

the police in supposedly protecting property could be turned through a poster which presented the view from the perspective of student and worker protesters, who therein encountered brutal repression. For these reasons, and others, the posters and related material of the Mai '68 movement, alongside the psychedelic art of the late Sixties, mark a significant phase in the international development of the graphic arts as a means of expression for the younger generation and in line with the countercultural revolution then taking place in the West.

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