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French anarchists and the continuing power of May 1968

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Contents

Prominent events	6
Personal accounts	8
Anarchist socio-political ethics	9
Lyrical accounts of liminal space	12
Political nature of May 68	13
Activist legacy	18
Alternative revolutionary models of May 68	20
Conclusion	28
References	31

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A survey of French anarchists in the mid-1990s suggested that substantial numbers rank the May Days of 1968 in France among the Paris Commune, Ukraine's Makhnovist revolution and the Spanish revolution of the mid-1930s as one of the key anarchist events in contemporary history (Pucciarelli 1999).¹ Its placement among these iconic anarchist revolutions, each of which added substantially to anarchist literature and theory, led me to examine a broad collection of books, articles and interviews by more than seventy French anarchists, providing memories, reflections and analyses concerning this latest insurrection. My selection omitted accounts from the first two post-68 decades to assure longer-range perspectives.

Rather than offering my own analysis of May 68, I intend to identify the principal specifically anarchist analytical themes and learnings from this deeply impacting experience. This seems especially appropriate given the quite anarchic context, dynamics and lived reality of May for millions of French people at the time.

By now, thousands of books and articles on May 68 are available. A large proportion of these consist of sensationalist and superficial journalism, collections of wall slogans, descriptions of specific local contexts, and anti-May 68 political polemics. The present piece provides long-neglected anarchist interpretations and conclusions and situates these among other serious efforts to understand May 68 and its legacy.

Several approaches or themes appear most commonly in these writings: narratives of prominent events in the immediate May-June upheaval, personal stories of involvement, reflections on the widespread experience of anarchist socio-political ethics, and lyrical accounts of the phenomenon of abruptly unbound consciousness itself. After considering each of these, I discuss French anarchists' views on May 68's legacy of deep political critique as well

¹ Generally, as in this article, the terms 'May Days' or 'May 68' refer to the whole May-June period.

as its actual impact on post-May social change. Finally, I show how several anarchist writers' alternative interpretations of the May 68 experience imply competing models for ongoing anarchist activity and revolution.

Prominent events

Most anarchist writings on May 68, certainly those in the decennial anniversary issues of French anarchist movement journals, include at least a brief overview of the rapidly developing explosion during the four weeks of May and the counteroffensive of threatened hierarchies until the end of June. In short, the usual account depicts the May-June insurgency as initially inspired and energised by a far left and significantly anarchist-composed 22 March Nanterre university student movement.² Its battles on campus and in Paris streets, beginning in May, led to major bloody confrontations by students, young workers and older adults with police in the Latin Quarter and occupation of the Sorbonne. Images and accounts of brutal police repression, especially during the famous 10 May 'Night of the Barricades', in turn shocked and angered large numbers across the country, provoking a protest procession of nearly a million in Paris as well as others elsewhere in France on 13 May. Shortly thereafter began a massive wave of prolonged campus revolts, strikes, workplace occupations and new horizontalist action committees throughout France, effectively shutting down much of the state and capitalist economy and opening a lived alternative social reality, with some 10 million (one-fifth of the population) on strike by the last week of May. The focus of daily life and consciousness drastically shifted for many from vertical to horizontal relations, extending now quite beyond the realm of students alone.

² The movement was named after a proclamation agreed upon at that 1968 date among 142 anarchist and far-left students (Mintz 2013). Its most thorough

Furth's assertion goes far in explaining the continuing power of May 68 for French anarchists.

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single so-called *grand soir*, much because of the multidimensional liberatory processes involved and the usual pattern where new regimes' efforts at consolidation and violent self-defence lead to new despotisms. The realities of limits in the French context in May-June 68 reinforced this doubt, despite the massive liberatory energies released. While probably most anarchists still hope for and foresee major ruptures again in the future, the specific explosive social ingredients would no doubt vary from those in 1968. In the meantime, French anarchists urge expanding anarchist social imagination and smaller-scale practice as widely as possible both for their own benefit in the present and to encourage any new context of rupture to become as open as possible to imagining and experimenting with larger-scale non-hierarchical society. When this happens, says French anarchist historian Ronald Creagh (2007), anarchists should simply 'step into the breaches'.

As demonstrated in May 68, whether a new rupture begins or not through anarchist initiatives, 'it is this dynamic of the revolutionary event,' says René Furth (2001), 'that sustains the confidence of anarchists'. Through liberating and combining intense energies, revolution opens 'breaches and paths that had seemed blocked'. To lack hope for revolution, he says,

would be to reduce [anarchism's] project and practice to a scattered ensemble of critical analyses, moral protests and piecemeal resistances. Imagining a future different from the 'natural' extension of the capitalist economy, and coherent actions in the different realms of social life, demand a perspective of radical rupture and transformation.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ 'C'est cette dynamique de l'événement révolutionnaire qui porte la confiance des anarchistes.' 'des brèches et des voies là où tout semblait bloqué'. 'y renoncer serait réduire son projet et sa pratique à un ensemble éparpillé d'analyses critiques, de protestations morales et de résistances parcellaires. L'imagination d'un autre futur que le déploiement "naturel" de l'économie capitaliste, et la cohérence des actions dans les différents champs de la vie sociale exigent la perspective d'une rupture et d'une transformation radicales.'

Aside from the initiative of 22 March movement anarchists, others in the tiny anarchist movement and its sympathisers throughout France³. Initially surprised by the sudden social explosion like everyone else, they enthusiastically joined and encouraged rapidly developing local anarchic liberating contexts of demonstrations, strikes, occupations and action committees as opportunities arose. By principle, without central leadership and believing in direct action initiatives, French anarchists of all ages needed no directives to actively integrate with others in the various sorts of insurrectionary 'propaganda by deed'. The proliferation of black (or black and red) flags in demonstrations and over factory and campus buildings in May 68 symbolised the deeply anarchic disposition of the uprising but by no means signified an overwhelming presence of anarchist movement militants.

In addition to police repression, the forces of hierarchy began a counteroffensive by the last week of May, with de Gaulle securing needed army loyalty, leftist politicians and the regime gradually channelling the revolt toward the narrow electoral arena, and top-level trade union officials, foremost in the powerful Communist-led CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), agreeing defensively and opportunistically with the government to 'settle' the insurgency with an overall nationwide contract for mainly 'quantitative' gains. 'Because Gaullism and Stalinism rejected fundamental change in the world,' observed a writer for *Le Monde Libéraire*, 'they came to an agreement, with the Grenelle Accords, and threw a few crumbs to the people' (Raynaud, 1998).⁴ Despite continued

recent anarchist description and analysis is by Jean-Pierre Duteuil (1988).

³ According to Roland Biard (1976), the number of those officially in French anarchist movement organisations at the time was less than 1000, though the number of ex-member anarchist sympathisers was significantly greater (177–178).

⁴ 'parce que le gaullisme comme le stalinisme refusaient que le monde change de base, ils se mirent d'accord lors des accords de Grenelle et jetèrent quelques miettes au peuple'.

stubborn worker resistance, by the end of June the strike collapsed and French society resumed an outer appearance of restored ‘normality’.

Personal accounts

Individual accounts by then-anarchist militants and by those recruited to the movement because of the upheaval itself provide important insights into how and why grassroots individuals from every realm were attracted to participate, as well as the nature of their direct experience. While May 68 might seem to many in later generations as an abstract event of inexplicable explosive dynamics, these stories offer a credible and logical sequence of steps at the individual level, allowing readers more easily to identify with participants and to imagine themselves realistically in such a context. Of more recent such resources, especially valuable is an anthology, *Mai 68 par eux-mêmes: le mouvement de Floréal, An 176*, including accounts of some 38 individuals (roughly half are apparently anarchists), published by the Fédération Anarchiste in 1989.⁵ University and lycée students, professionals, peasants and workers from factories, shops and other settings are all represented, as are various regions throughout France. Other especially powerful and extensive individual accounts are by anarchist sociologist Claire Auzias (1988, 2006), a Lyon lycée youth at the time, and ‘Le Flutiste’ (2008), a former Sorbonne student who describes the May demonstrations, barricades and occupations in Paris as well as student action committee support of factory workers nearby.

⁵ The book’s subtitle borrows the date equivalent to May 68 from the French Revolution’s invented new calendar (later used also during the Paris Commune).

ativity and dignity and socially cooperative mutual accomplishment. While the manifestation of such desire seems conceded by many observers of the May 68 event itself, most regard this as an aberration, perhaps delightful but only a temporary psychic detour from the usual realities of daily existence.

Most writing on May 68 still regards it as an unrepeatable event, due at the time to a unique convergence of factors inside and outside of France and, in the long run, largely or entirely recuperated by the ‘realities’ and dynamics of advanced capitalism and liberal democracy. For a still-minority of writers interpreting May 68 generally, however, there is much more of notable significance and they, like the anarchists, dismiss the reductive and negative writings on the event and its aftermath by the New Philosophers of the late 70s, as well as those by Debray, Lipovetsky and others of similar interpretation. At the same time, their more recent detailed studies, for example those by Jacques Guigou and Jacques Wajnsztein (2008), Kristin Ross (2004), Boris Gobille (2008) and Julian Bourg (2007), essentially confirm the key interlocking anarchist positions (without acknowledging anarchist writings themselves). Specifically, they agree that May 68 was fundamentally against domination overall, that it was just as much political as cultural, that social and individual liberation were interdependent, and (excluding Bourg) that, because of the very depth of perception experienced at the time, it is impossible wholly to contain or repress its continuing afterlife as an anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical revolutionary vision. Though not addressing 1968 in a focused work on the subject, various writings and interviews to the present day by French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2008), Rancière and Revel (2008) and Faure (2013); Grelet, Lèbre, and Wahnich (2009); Carta (2014)) show him in accord with these essential anarchist positions as well.

In general, French anarchists, like most of their counterparts elsewhere, have for a long time rejected the possibility of a sudden all-inclusive and lasting social revolutionary transformation, a

Conclusion

May 68 demonstrated the potentials of a major rupture based more on ‘spontaneous’ initiative than on large-scale revolutionary organisation. Initially, the rapidity and breadth of insurrection led some, including de Gaulle, to believe in a secretly planned revolution. The reality was best described metaphorically as an earthquake or volcanic explosion following mounting longer-range social, cultural and political tensions and a series of initial catalytic opportunities seized by militant activists. Within this imagery, there were various seething explosive potentials forced to the surface by exemplary activism and imitation. As Edward Sarboni (2008) observed, ‘the revolt was born spontaneously from chain reactions’.⁴³ Even the single event of the ‘Night of the Barricades’ is described by ‘Le Flutiste’ (2008) as ‘the detonator’ for the massive nationwide upheaval to come.

While personal epiphanies, a new sense of grassroots community and radicalised consciousness were common to 60s upheavals elsewhere in the West, what distinguished May 68 in France was the apparent suddenness and ubiquity that profoundly shook much of French society within a very condensed period of time. It was this intense simultaneously shared experience of sudden multidimensional revelation and defiant transgressive social relations that suggested the imagery of revolution much more convincingly in France than did the series of smaller upheavals in lengthier time periods experienced elsewhere.

For anarchists, the massive explosion had special value in dramatically confirming and refreshing on a large scale their long-held assumption of inherent subjective revolutionary desire, a usually unconscious impulse to destroy those oppressive political, cultural, social and economic structures that blocked individual cre-

en appuyant sur un bouton que cela se produit.’ ‘Tu es toujours plus ou moins dans l’improvisation.’

⁴³ ‘La révolte naît spontanément de réactions en chaîne.’

Anarchist socio-political ethics

Anarchist writings on May 68 especially focus on the decompartmentalised and egalitarian social relations directly experienced—important prefigurations themselves of long-proclaimed social and political ethics envisaged for an anarchist society without domination. Of crucial importance as well, observes Jean-Pierre Duteuil (1998), ‘[w]ith the largest general strike ever in a so-called “advanced” industrial society, with the first “wildcat” general strike in history, May 68 is the return of the proletariat to the scene, too soon proclaimed earlier as disappeared or integrated’.⁶ Mutual aid among workers, students and peasants, respect for individuality and freely pursued passions, as well as joint decision-making through grassroots assemblies with a voice for all—these were anarchists’ traditional ideals promoted or spontaneously emerging to varying degrees and in various grassroots contexts, from campus amphitheatres to factory floors and hundreds of neighbourhood action committees. States the anthology preface,

[most participants] took from this intense period of mobilisation essentially a lived experience more than a political one. ... A different relation to the world, to others and to oneself. One got into the movement essentially because it was movement, that is, unexpected in that apathetic France, under the Gaullist lead weight. One was enchanted there because it was strong and it could do anything, one thought. And equally because it offered encounters with others; in the space of an instant it offered already a different world (Linhart, 1989, 4)⁷

⁶ ‘Avec la plus grande grève générale dans un pays industriel dit “avancé”, avec la première grève générale “sauvage” de l’Histoire, mai 68 est le retour sur la scène du prolétariat, un peu vite annoncé comme disparu ou intégré.’

⁷ ‘[la plupart d’entre eux] ait retiré de cette période intense de mobilisation une expérience essentiellement de l’ordre du vécu, plus que du politique. ... Un autre rapport au monde, aux autres et à soi-même. On se lance dans le mouvement, essentiellement parce qu’il est mouvement, c’est-à-dire l’inattendu dans cette France apathique, sous sa chape de plomb gaullienne. On s’y enchante parce

Says Claire Auzias (1988), in the campus amphitheatre, ‘we debated everything. Never a decision all alone. ... But especially, no one was bossing their neighbour in May. One had to become adult immediately, to know what one wanted, each, immediately, to decide, to defend it and to defend oneself’ (17). ‘We always had to watch out that the card-carrying leftists did not concoct a mean trick through an A.G. [*assemblée générale*] or a tract. They were very factional’ (17). ‘Everyone,’ she says, ‘spoke of [Wilhelm] Reich.’ His *The Function of Orgasm* ‘was sold out’ (19).⁸ Latent revolutionary desire, now exposed, revealed for Auzias and millions of others subversive social alternatives to domination and alienation.

Duteuil (2008a), a co-founder of the 22 March movement, emphasises how the rare simultaneous and deep crises of workforce, family, school system and cultural front all came together ‘so much and so well that every problem mixed and interpenetrated’. Thus, ‘every energy was liberated’ and everything spoken about and challenged (199).⁹ For this reason, he asserts that the critique of hierarchy was the single most important trait of May 68: ‘all forms of hierarchy: the refusal to be executors submitting to directors; the refusal of a pyramidal society, a model that penetrates the least recesses, from individual relations to work activities and leisure’ (11).¹⁰

qu’il est fort et qu’il peut tout, pense-t-on. Et également parce qu’il offre la rencontre avec d’autres, qu’il offre déjà l’espace d’un instant un monde différent.’

⁸ ‘On débattait tout. Jamais une décision tout seule. ... mais surtout, aucune prise en charge du voisin, en Mai. Il fallait devenir majeur tout de suite, savoir ce qu’on voulait, chacun, tout de suite, décider, le défendre et se défendre. ... Et les gauchistes en carte. Il fallait sans arrêt, veiller à ce qu’ils ne nous concoctent pas une entourloupe, au détours d’une A.G., d’un tract. Ils étaient très factieux.’ ‘Tout le monde parlait de Reich.’ ‘était épuisée.’

⁹ ‘Tant et si bien que tous les problèmes vont se mêler et s’interpénétrer. ... toutes les énergies se libèrent.’

¹⁰ ‘... toutes les formes de hiérarchie. Le refus d’être des exécutants soumis à des dirigeants ; le refus d’une société pyramidale dont le modèle pénètre ses moindres recoins, des rapports individuels aux activités professionnelles ou de loisir.’

movement translated in practice the desire for a non-bureaucratic form of social struggle and that, he says, is important. ‘People should take pleasure in struggles. ... For me, that’s a fundamental notion: to lead a strike, a struggle, should not be a load on one’s shoulders.’ Duteuil also stresses

the democratic need and desire. That idea recurs time and again in the 22 March movement. There is no leader, no central committee. Of course, there is power. There were obviously power relations ... But there was a will to flush them out, to not be content with them. This is fundamental for all movements.⁴¹

Though it is always claimed that central leadership is needed for movement efficiency, states Duteuil, this isn’t so.

Another originality of the 22 March movement, he says (Duteuil 2008b), concerns the place of internal critique. By itself, critique ‘remains a closed perspective and this is completely paralysing, abstract, scholarly, theoretical’. At the same time, it was equally dangerous to think that the absence of critique is paralysing. ‘What is important is to open things up so that people express themselves, so that something happens. It’s not magic, it’s not by pressing a button that something happens.’ Unanimity was not considered necessary. If a group wanted to take some action, they should do it, but then discuss it afterwards with full transparency. ‘You are always more or less improvising.’⁴²

elements with hierarchical ambitions (Duteuil, 2008a Duteuil, Jean-Pierre. 2008a. *Mai 68: un mouvement politique*. La Bussière: Éditions Acratie. , 207–208).

⁴¹ ‘C’est important que les gens prennent du plaisir dans les luttes. ... C’est une notion fondamentale pour moi, à savoir que mener une grève, une lutte, ce n’est pas un poids qu’on doit porter sur ses épaules.’ ‘la nécessité et le désir démocratique. Cela revient toujours dans le 22 mars. Il n’y a pas de chef, pas de comité central. Bien sûr qu’il y a du pouvoir. Il y a des rapports de pouvoir ... Mais il y a une volonté de les débusquer, de ne pas s’en contenter. C’est fondamental dans tous les mouvements.’

⁴² ‘reste en champs clos et c’est complètement paralysant, abstrait, universitaire, théorique’. ‘C’est en favorisant, en ouvrant des brèches pour que les gens s’expriment, pour qu’il se passe quelque chose. Ce n’est pas magique, ce n’est pas

Apart from such questions, May 68 produced a distinctive model of anarchist revolution, different from that implied by Joyeux and Fontenis. It involved a quite modest scale of initial organising, reliance on relatively spontaneous initiatives by non-hierarchical, loosely networked, revolutionary affinity groups, and initiation and prolongation of a general strike. Essential as well were efforts to develop and maximise egalitarian self-management of units in every social realm, with linkages and coordination through voluntary mutual aid. From this perspective, capturing the reins of state is not a goal both because, except in conditions of extreme crisis and breakdown, government power is too overwhelming for successful direct confrontation and because gaining centralised political control would contradict the fundamental commitment to egalitarian self-management. In effect, a prolonged situation of liberatory revolutionary process and tenuous dual power is implied.

For Duteuil (2008a), the explosion of May 68 was set off by 'the lucky meeting of growing struggles and clumsy errors by the regime. Errors induced in part, it must be said, by the intuitions of those who happily maintained the cycle of provocation-repression.' The May-June context allowed the smaller activist numbers of earlier years to share their 'experiences and desires'³⁹ with far greater numbers. He argues (2008b) that the 22 March movement was a unique organisational template, constantly encouraging new tactical initiatives and continuous open discussion without an imposing leadership, thus setting an important influential example, adopted by others in campus and workplace occupations and on the streets, that later became expected by participants in the new autonomous movements of the '70s.⁴⁰ The 22 March

³⁹ 'la rencontre fortuite entre cette remontée des luttes et les erreurs grossières du pouvoir. Erreurs induites en partie, il faut le dire, par les intuitions de celles et ceux qui maniaient le cycle provocation-répression avec assez de bonheur.' 'expériences et désirs'.

⁴⁰ Consistent with this model as well was the 22 March movement's decision to dissolve itself after June to prevent co-optation by certain newcomer leftist

In workplaces, as Pierre Sommermeyer (2008) describes, there seemed in May a logical progression emanating from the worker base, easily understood and followed in various degrees throughout France, from spontaneous strike to occupation to sequestration of owners or managers in their offices and finally to at least consideration of worker self-management. 'Respect for hierarchy was no longer accepted. ... [Bosses were] faced not with armed violence but a determination that produced its own legitimacy bit by bit according to its needs.'¹¹ Many examples of such initiatives and new interpersonal relations of mutual respect and dialogue in numerous factories and shops are described and extolled in anarchist movement journals and the *Fédération Anarchiste's* anthology.

Beyond the dramatic, though mainly only symbolic, creation and stubborn defence of dozens of street barricades in Paris and elsewhere, anarchists cite a number of especially exemplary examples of defiant horizontalist practice. One of the most striking examples was in Nantes, the largest city in northwestern France, where workers, students, peasants and others followed the occupation of the large Sud-Aviation factory with further demonstrations leading to a temporary takeover of the prefecture by a strike committee and arrangements with local peasants to supply the city with food. (There, as elsewhere, local anarchists were among the most active.) According to Duteuil (2008a), most militants had no illusion that the overall insurrection would topple the government. But efforts were made, temporarily at least, to gain and maintain maximum freedom of neighbourhoods, campuses and workplaces from top-down interference. However, anarchist Gildas (2008) writes that 'battles with the police were not just for amusement. That would

¹¹ 'Le respect de la hiérarchie n'est plus de mise. ... On n'est pas là face à une violence armée mais face à une détermination qui produit sa propre légitimité au fur et à mesure de ses besoins.'

deny the determination of some demonstrators to overthrow the bourgeois state.’¹²¹³

Lyrical accounts of liminal space

Beyond describing *de facto* anarchist practice, various French anarchists offer almost poetic descriptions of the emotional and psychological euphoria experienced in the temporary absence of hierarchical authority—with atomised isolation replaced by egalitarian conviviality, partly in shared combat but especially for most in the general contexts of occupied campuses, streets and factories. A new society seemed possible and, for a while, passionately experienced, easily identifiable as ‘anarchist’ in the broadest sense. In this ‘month of madness’, recalls Benoist Rey,

[there were] so many meetings, so many demonstrations, so many encounters, so many words, so much racing through the streets, so many retreats from police charges, so many confrontations! I have only the memory of a permanent state of grace, physically as well as mentally, a lightness of being, a deep and wild joy. ... A truly non-constrained regime. ... Old quarrels were forgotten, we were all brothers. (Rey, Benoist. 2006. *Les Trous de mémoire*. Paris: Les Éditions Libertaires. , 111).¹⁴

In the words of Auzias (1988), ‘I was We, amidst the “thousands of isolated small groups” who joyously treated themselves to a slice

¹² ‘[Les étudiants aux cheveux longs] se seraient affrontés aux CRS comme pour s’amuser ! On nie ainsi la détermination des manifestants à renverser l’État bourgeois.’

¹³ Violent confrontations with police occurred throughout France at various times and places during May and June.

¹⁴ ‘un mois de folie. ... Tant de réunions, tant de manifs, tant de rencontres, tant de paroles, tant de courses dans les rues, tant de replis sous les charges policières, tant d’affrontements ! J’ai seulement le souvenir d’un état de grâce permanent, aussi physique que mental, une légèreté de l’être, une joie profonde et sauvage. ... Un vrai régime sans contrainte. ... on oublie des vieilles querelles, on est tous frères.’

form of hierarchy and dominance, equally challenged the potential liberating role of a more structured anarchist revolutionary organisation as envisaged by Fontenis.

Though marginalised as an issue by Fontenis, one must ask how possible it would be to integrate or accommodate those hostile or at least passive toward the insurrection even if establishing a new government was not a goal. Anarchist writers most typically blame the CGT’s negotiation of the Grenelle Accords for much of the failure of May 68 to prolong itself. The agreement and CGT manipulations to pressure its acceptance by resisting workers effectively removed by far the greatest social potential for maintaining and expanding the revolt. But along with this, writers for the *Alternative Libertaire* journal (Tristan, Renaud, and Davrange 2008 Tristan, Renaud, and Guillaume Davranche. 2008. “Dossier 68: 1968, révolution manquée?” *Alternative Libertaire*, no. 173.) criticise the lack of revolutionary thinking among most, especially older, workers, thus facilitating the CGT position.

Despite immense numbers actively involved in May 68 in various sectors, larger numbers were not involved, merely observing with varying degrees of shock, irritation or anger the disruption of their lives. Symbolically, their reticence or opposition was dramatically mobilised by conservatives in the massive Paris march of over 600,000 on the Champs-Élysées at the end of May. With this demonstration of the French ‘silent majority’ and assurance of military support, de Gaulle was ready to use more forceful methods, if needed, to suppress the revolt. Behind the French state and its military strength, of course, were the potential forces of international capitalist state allies threatened by the revolutionary model and no doubt ready to intervene if needed. As well, the government and the political class (including Communist and Socialist leaders) in the short run successfully channelled much of the public’s political attention into the confined realm of electoral competition, with de Gaulle’s party gaining a new majority in the National Assembly.

groups, in the case of Fontenis) while the latter also thought that the government could and should have been dethroned through decisive action. What the latter process would involve is not specified in his rather brief remarks. While urban barricades and numerous confrontations with police throughout the country led a few anarchists even to fantasise rural guerrilla maquis for armed resistance in the isolated Limousin mountains of central France (Malouvier 2008 Malouvier, Guy. 2008. “Interview in “Dossier 68: Rolf Dupuy et Guy Malouvier: ‘chacun de ces mots comptait: organisation; révolution; anarchiste.’” *Alternative Libertaire*, no. 173.), there was little potential or desire shown for that form of revolt and the likely bloodshed involved, in the name of a quite vague and disputed future ‘revolutionary regime’. Pierre Sommermeyer (2008) indeed argues that a ‘political victory would have brought to power’ the various Maoist and Trotskyist Marxist–Leninist avant-garde parties who believed in state power and ‘this we fortunately escaped’.³⁷

Yet the emphasis on more centrally structured revolutionary organisations has been sharply and continuously contested among French anarchists for generations.³⁸ Most recently, for example, the tendency toward hierarchical bureaucracy and accumulation of power in present French anarchist organisations was strongly criticised by theorist Daniel Colson (2008) in the same issue of *Réfractations* that focused on May 68. As well, within the movement, even in more recent years, consistent reports of sexism, itself another

³⁷ ‘une victoire politique aurait amené au pouvoir’, ‘on l’a échappé belle’.

³⁸ While both Joyeux and Fontenis emphasised adequate movement organisation instead of spontaneity, the former’s loose confederal preference contrasted sharply with the latter’s more disciplined, centralist approach, an organisational dispute that itself led to a formal split in the Fédération Anarchiste in the early 50s and was prominent in the pre-war period as well. See Biard (1976 Biard, Roland. 1976. *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste, 1945–1975*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.), Berry (2009 Berry, David. 2009. *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917 to 1945*. Oakland: AK Press.) and Mintz (2013 Mintz, Frank. 2013. *Histoire de la mouvance anarchiste, 1789–2012*. Paris: Éditions Noir et Rouge.).

of history’ (8). Like everyone else, she says, the lycée movement combined elements from situationism and anarchism, and more from the 22 March movement, to create the festival: ‘That festival that came to us from the French Revolution, and known by all revolutionary explosions, that was for us the sole truth’ (16). ‘We laughed all the time’, she says (17). For the lycée students, what was unique was ‘their ability to reason beyond boundaries. There were no boundaries. ... It was the end of traditional political systems, it was the end of the 19th century’ (16). As political territories decomposed, ‘everyone lost their bearings’ (20). We all had to surf on the crest of revolution, she claims, the left groups had no tools for that. ‘But nothing could hold. It was a flood and all points of reference gave way. We loved anarchism because one could play. ... We devoured its verses on the wall’ (15–16). May was a communal present without limits, ... ‘the universal immediate’ (20). ‘Imagination was a common property’ (25).¹⁵

Political nature of May 68

Anarchist writers are especially concerned that the depth and breadth of May 68’s insurrectionary challenge be recognised and understood. Their own and others’ continuing struggle with political adversaries on this issue demonstrates that May 68 remains an important revolutionary signifier—its ripple effects of contested interpretation are still very much alive, whatever the subsequent

¹⁵ ‘En Mai, je était Nous. Les “milliers de groupuscules isolés” qui s’offraient joyeusement une tranche d’histoire.’ ‘Cette fête qui nous venait de la Révolution Française, que toutes les explosions révolutionnaires connurent ; qui était pour nous, l’unique vérité.’ ‘On riait tout le temps.’ ‘la capacité à raisonner sans frontière. ... il n’y avait aucune frontière. ... c’était la fin des schémas traditionnels de la politique. ... [c]’est la fin du XIXème siècle’. ‘tout le monde y perdit ses repères’. ‘Mais rien n’a tenu. C’était une marée et tous les repères craquaient. Nous aimions l’anarchisme parce qu’on pouvait jouer. ... Nous dévorions ses vers sur les murs.’ ‘l’immédiat universel’. ‘l’imagination était un bien commun’.

changes in contexts and forms of struggle. The French readership of anarchist accounts is of course dwarfed by those exposed to written and media coverage from other perspectives—some hostile and some apparently sympathetic to at least certain aspects of May 68. But anarchists, claim militant writers, have remained the most constant long-range adversaries against the dominant historical narratives, insisting that May 68 continues to be a relevant source of political inspiration for deep transformative social change.

Anarchists denounce the line of most mainstream politicians, media and authors for continuing to portray and marginalise the meaning of May 68 as merely an irresponsible period of adolescent countercultural indulgence and psychodrama that, according to some, left an ultra-permissive legacy of asocial egoistical cultural and political attitudes and behaviour that continues to the present. More recently, just as other politicians of left and right before him, in an April 2007 presidential campaign speech, Nicolas Sarkozy called for finally liquidating the influence of May 68 because of its idea ‘that everything was relative, that there was thus no longer any difference between ... true and false, between beautiful and ugly ... [and] that the student was equal to the teacher ..., that the victim counted less than the delinquent ...’ (as quoted in Duteuil 2008a, 17).¹⁶

The real reason for such attacks, argue *Alternative Libertaire* writers, is that ‘May 68 represents too important a challenge to relations of domination, to the forms of authority that the present-day right wishes to restore. Because it can’t be recuperated ..., the event must be emptied of its subversive content and fought’ (Bruno and Renaud 2008).¹⁷ Another anarchist echoes this point: ‘I always ask myself why this hatred toward 68; it is precisely because they

¹⁶ ‘l’idée que tout se valait, qu’il n’y avait donc désormais aucune différence entre ... le vrai et le faux, entre le beau et le laid. ... que l’élève valait le maître ... que la victime comptait moins que le délinquant’.

¹⁷ ‘Mai 68 représente une trop importante remise en cause des rapports de domination, des formes d’autorité qui sont celles que veut restaurer la droite

could have been encircled, their movements made impossible, the military units consisting of conscripts unusable.’ But setbacks in Paris in late May demonstrated to him that revolutionaries lacked an overall strategy. ‘Without thought, without direction, despite speeches and illusions, with entire sectors of the country perfectly calm even in the dense urban populations, the defeat of the revolutionaries was evident’ (168).³⁵ Says Fontenis, it truly was a missed rare revolutionary opportunity. The lack of revolutionary will and organisation was the key.

The fact that a great part of the population remains uncertain or is hostile is never a lasting barrier. It’s always given as an excuse for not moving forward. Every revolution has known these sorts of problems and a revolution cannot be calculated arithmetically: it is audacity and contagion that mobilises everyone who’s waiting or that at least gains their consent. (168)

Despite the fear of all politicians, including those of the left for revolution, ‘it is the absence of a real reflective and organised avant-garde’, as well as the still powerful Communist Party, that, ‘in the last analysis, caused the halt and then the retreat, and finally the political defeat’ (168).³⁶

Both Joyeux and Fontenis thus stressed the need for serious revolutionary organisation (including collaboration with far-left

³⁵ ‘les faits eux-mêmes étaient révolutionnaires, dans la rue et dans les usines. ... Tout était bloqué, les forces de répression dispersées ou démoralisées, pouvant être facilement encerclées, leurs déplacements rendus impossibles, les troupes du contingent inemployables.’ ‘Pas de pensée, pas de direction, des discours, des illusions, des secteurs entiers du pays parfaitement calmes même dans les grosses concentrations urbaines : la défaite des révolutionnaires était évidente.’

³⁶ ‘Le fait qu’une grande partie de la population reste dans l’expectative ou soit hostile n’est jamais un empêchement durable. C’est toujours un prétexte donné pour ne pas avancer. Toutes les révolutions ont connu ce genre de problèmes et une révolution ne se calcule par arithmétiquement : c’est l’audace et la contagion qui mobilisent tout un peuple en attente ou qui au moins obtiennent son consentement.’ ‘C’est l’absence d’une réelle avant-garde réfléchie et organisée ... qui, en dernière analyse, fut cause de l’arrêt, puis du recul, enfin de la défaite politique’.

the emphasis on spontaneity instead of organised class struggle, and the failure of commitment to more seriously challenge, if not to successfully overthrow, the dominant social structures.

Joyeux (1988) praised the young insurrectionists of May 68 for ‘the most beautiful gift’ of hope that they ‘gave to the youth of tomorrow’ through revealing ‘the permanent presence of humanitarian and libertarian thought in the hearts of men’ (283).³¹ But at the same time, in his memoir two decades after 1968, he denounced the new young self-defined anarchists at that time for their deviations of hippie individualist spontaneism and attraction to Marxist theory, both seen as simply further dimensions of transitional adolescent revolt for middle-class youth soon to be seeking the career world of their class (248, 264–266). The ‘deep thinkers’ of the Nanterre group, he said, were under the spell of situationism and rejected his own Fédération Anarchiste as ‘old farts’ (267).³² By seeking to revolt by new values, students ‘gave great joy to the bourgeoisie by rejecting class relations, which are eternal truths’ (278).³³ However, after all the more dramatic moments of May, there was ‘finally that lassitude of every movement that seems to turn in circles without knowing which way to break out’ (275).³⁴ In actuality, he said, the historical context was not revolutionary since that could only happen with the evolution of capitalism to a final crisis (283).

By contrast, Georges Fontenis (2008) hoped for actual revolution down to the last week of July. ‘The facts themselves were revolutionary, in the street and in the factories. ... Everything was blocked, the forces of repression dispersed and demoralised easily

³¹ ‘le plus beau cadeau ... a fait à la jeunesse de demain’. ‘la permanence de la pensée humanitaire et libertaire dans le cœur des hommes’.

³² ‘les esprits profonds’, ‘vieux cons’.

³³ ‘ont contribué, à la grande joie des bourgeois, à écarter les rapports de classes qui sont des vérités éternelles’.

³⁴ ‘enfin cette lassitude de tout mouvement qui a l’impression de tourner en rond sans trop savoir sur quoi déboucher’.

understood that it was a subversive moment, one of the rare moments when people made use of their critical minds’ (“Un dessin” 1989 “Un dessin hors de commun.” 1989. In *Mai 68 par eux-mêmes*, 169–172. Paris: Éditions du Monde Libertaire. , 170).¹⁸

A 2008 editorial in *Infos et Analyses Libertaires* argued, ‘May 68 [was] the greatest general strike in French history surpassing by far that of 1936. ... Profoundly egalitarian and anti-authoritarian, the “May movement” was thus a real threat for all the privileged.’ Furthermore, contrary to the vaguely defined ‘greater individual freedom’ touted by French elites as the society’s supposed response to May 68, freedom, in May 68, was the idea of ending all alienation whether from the boss, the politician or consumer objects whose accumulation is taught by the system as the sole purpose of living. What was then at stake was to free ourselves from a shitty life that capitalism imposes on us where we are supposed to accept working to enrich someone else and to consume for the same reason. (“Édito” 2008)¹⁹

The statement here implicitly targets as well those ‘leftist’ writers such as Régis Debray and Gilles Lipovetsky who blamed 68ers for the subsequent narcissistic and atomised consumerism fuelling the post-68 rapid surge of capitalism that made future social transformation inconceivable.

actuelle. Puisqu’il ne peut pas être récupéré ... l’événement doit donc être vidé de sa substance subversive, et combattu’.

¹⁸ ‘Je me demande toujours pourquoi cette haine vis-à-vis de 68 ; c’est justement parce qu’ils ont compris que c’était un moment subversif, un des rares moments où les gens faisaient fonctionner leur esprit critique.’

¹⁹ ‘Mai 68 est la plus grande grève générale de l’histoire de France dépassant de loin celle de 1936. ... Foncièrement égalitariste et foncièrement autoritaire à la fois, le “mouvement de mai” fut donc une réelle menace pour tous les privilégié-e-s.’ ‘La liberté, en mai 68, c’était l’idée d’en finir avec toute aliénation que ce soit celle du patron, du politicien, ou des objets de consommation dont l’accumulation est la seule raison de vivre que le système veut nous inculquer. Il s’agissait alors de se libérer d’une vie de merde, celle que nous impose le capitalisme, où nous sommes justes bons à travailler pour en enrichir un autre et consommer pour en enrichir un autre encore.’

Though disdainful of nostalgically commemorating 1968 as another historical ‘spectacle’, most anarchist writers assert the need to keep alive the memory of the true anarchist political and cultural nature of the insurrection in order to influence newer generations with a dramatically liberatory reality or inspiring myth. Duteuil (2008b) indeed suggests that though the children of the May 68 generation may have been ‘fed up with the stories of their parents’,²⁰

Specifically, anarchists focus on the fact that May 68 was a *political* as well as a *cultural* insurrection and had massive participation from *all* ages, not just youths, and *throughout the country*, not just in Paris. To prove their claims, they identify the overall pre-May atmosphere of growing militancy among students and activists on various political issues as well as direct actions and wildcat strikes by workers and peasants alike. They emphasise also the qualitative nature of grievances of each major participating insurrectionary social group as well as the broader state of alienation and powerlessness affecting millions of French people at the grassroots.

Beginning, they say, with the closing years of the Algerian war, and the revulsion felt by many in France towards the massive repression and torture in that desperate last-ditch colonial effort, the 60s involved a worldwide atmosphere of growing radical insurgence. The defiantly anti-imperialist Cuban regime; the Vietnamese liberation war; black urban insurrections in the US; continuing challenges to the Franco regime in Spain; campus confrontations, occupations and radical student movements in Italy, the US and Germany,²¹ and expanding militant activism against state repression everywhere in the West provoked growing radicalised attention and support among increasing numbers within France.

Moreover, students were increasingly alienated by curricular and pedagogical rigidity, school bureaucracies and a future of un-

²⁰ ‘avoir plein le cul de ce que racontaient leur parents’.

²¹ The several months before May 68 included the dramatic Tet offensive of

lutionary moments that punctuate the history of capitalism’.^{29,30} The Hungarian revolution lasted only 18 days and the Paris Commune only 2 months and 10 days. Whatever their label, however, anarchists view those massive insurrections against political and economic oppression, as well as their defiant and creative egalitarian self-organisations of alternative society, as crucial moments, however temporary, in human liberation. They all demonstrated that non-hierarchical society is possible and more fulfilling than class stratification, capitalist exploitation and state domination. It is in this more limited sense that May 68 could be regarded as a revolution—though neither as a radical replacement of the government nor as a longer-range achievement of anarchist society. As a temporary anarchic revolution, it deeply subverted the very concept of hierarchical authority in every realm and began to create a horizontalist society, a revolutionary process that continued, though less dramatically, in movements of the 70s.

In broad terms, essentially two competing models of militancy and revolution are at play in anarchist discussions of May 68. Despite differences from one historical context to another, these alternative views reflect similar debates in the French movement going back to its nineteenth-century origins.

The first implied model emerges in post-May critiques by influential long-time French anarchist rivals from the 1950s, Maurice Joyeux and Georges Fontenis. Despite significant differences between them—especially on how to structure the anarchist movement, the danger or not of using aspects of Marxist theory to strengthen anarchist analysis and the potential or not of left statist allies to encourage non-hierarchical society, both of them praised the fact that anarchism once again returned to public consciousness. However, both also decried the lack of sufficient organisation,

²⁹ ‘des réalisations inachevées, ... moments révolutionnaires qui ponctuent l’histoire du développement capitaliste’.

³⁰ The Hungarian revolution lasted only 18 days and the Paris Commune only 2 months and 10 days.

Veteran anarchist Georges Fontenis (2008) states that May 68 ‘was an upheaval in thought and in direct human relations that remains still today. ... Submission was deeply vanquished, at the core of beings, despite appearances provoked by the return or even reinforcement, within twenty years, of hierarchies and bureaucracies.’²⁸ A further repercussion, anarchists claimed, was that a new generation of young people exposed to and becoming active in movements of the 70s themselves became major sources of energy, militant skills and vision for new active arenas of strikes and social struggle into the mid-80s and 90s. It was these concrete forms of continued activism on many fronts that also bolstered anarchist arguments that May 68 had a major *long-range* and *political* impact on French society, not in the cultural realm alone.

Important as well, say anarchist writers, was that 1968 finally led to the sharp decline of the once powerful French Communist Party. Its stranglehold on revolutionary potential was fully exposed by its denunciations of street confrontations, its attempts to control the general strike and its promotion of the Grenelle Accords. Nevertheless, the eventual ascendance of Socialist Mitterrand to the French presidency in 1981, in turn, lured many away from grassroots activism to expect progressive reforms instead from the state.

Alternative revolutionary models of May 68

Duteuil (2008a) suggests that to ask whether May 68 was a revolution made no sense, because no previous revolutions, including the Paris Commune, 1905 and 1917 in Russia, 1936 in Spain and 1956 in Hungary, had led to the abolition of classes, the state and hierarchies. They were all ‘unfulfilled achievements, ... revo-

²⁸ ‘c’est le bouleversement des pensées et des rapports humains directs qui restent aujourd’hui encore. ... La soumission a été vaincue en profondeur, au fond des êtres, en dépit des apparences qui provoquent le retour ou même le renforcement, en vingt ans, des hiérarchies et des bureaucraties.’

creative, conformist jobs, while young people, generally, felt increasingly constrained by traditional family expectations of filial obedience and ‘responsible’ adult paths, confined gender roles and sexual conservatism, and the authoritarian and bureaucratic nature of institutions and workplaces overall. Auzias (1988) argues that lycée students were only beginning to explore and articulate the boundaries of their social existence. They had not passed through political organisations and did not relate to typical leftist language. Only with their emotional rage at police repression did their anti-authoritarianism find translation; then, for many, not simply in demands for lycée reforms and less parental restraint, but in a vast landscape of new liberatory experience as they joined older students in campus occupations and street demonstrations.

Freer lifestyle choices were increasingly appealing, vocalised and pursued, and many became aware of alternative countercultural paths explored in the US, the Netherlands and elsewhere. Likewise, in the months before May 68, French media publicised surprisingly lengthy and dynamic wildcat strikes and factory occupations by young French workers in several locations concerned with more than quantitative issues—a message attracting great attention and interest among workers with similar issues elsewhere. Meanwhile, peasants were hit by decreasing prices and markets for their goods and intense pressure was felt by small plot owners to trade subsistence farming for the status of mere labourers in larger capitalist farm enterprises or to migrate to cities for jobs. Thus, many engaged in militant street demonstrations and direct action in rural France in the months even preceding prominent wildcat factory strikes.

While none of these seemingly unrelated pre-May factors on the surface seemed to have obvious insurrectional potentials, they all

the Vietnamese in January and February, widespread urban upheavals throughout the US after Martin Luther King’s April assassination, and violent reactions one week later in Germany to the attempted assassination of radical student leader Rudi Dutschke.

eventually contributed complementary energies and increasingly flammable elements to the May explosion. 'For the dominant ideology,' says Duteuil (2008a), 'politics is the state, the government; ... the rest is cultural'.²² It fails to acknowledge the deep egalitarian political critique of all authority that was at play when crises and revolt in all realms mutually interrelated.

Activist legacy

In the immediate aftermath of the powerful June counteroffensive, many who intensely experienced and hoped to maintain the new alternative social reality were understandably depressed and disoriented. For political scientist Jean-Pierre Bernard (2000), 'The melancholy of lost hope in May expressed itself as early as June, and it persisted, punctuated by depressions and suicides.'²³ Auzias states (1988), 'In June I knew that we had lost May. That it would never come back. It was finished. For one's whole life' (19).²⁴ After May, she says, psychological suffering became individualised again. Lycée students, without pre-May structures of their own to retreat to like university students or older adults, were left to wander in the undefined post-May landscape, trying to create a new sense of community. 'Life had an urgency in itself. We needed time and we devoured time that much more greedily as it became more and more apparent that we had lost May irrevocably. Nomadism [became] the admired choice.' For the same reason, they chose 'sexual revolution before gender politics' (Auzias 1988).²⁵ as well as drugs and a hippie lifestyle (Auzias 2006).

²² 'pour l'idéologie dominante, le politique c'est l'État, le gouvernement ; ... le reste, c'est le culturel.'

²³ 'La mélancolie de l'espérance déçue en mai s'exprime dès juin, et elle dure, rythmée par les dépressions, les suicides.'

²⁴ 'Nous le savions ... que nous avons perdu Mai. Que ça ne reviendrait plus jamais. C'était fini. Que c'était pour la vie. Nous le savions, en juin.'

²⁵ 'La Vie était une urgence en soi. Nous avons besoin de temps et nous

Nevertheless, having experienced a revolutionary process and alternative social reality in personal, campus, workplace, neighbourhood and other realms at personal and broader levels, French society was deeply and positively affected for the long run. According to anarchist singer and songwriter Léo Ferré (1989), 'May 68 was an opened door, rather partly opened, a door that one had to push forward to permit liberation on lots of levels.'²⁶

Because new egalitarian forms and values were experienced in May, arbitrary and authoritarian 'legitimised' norms of pre-May society so starkly demystified, and the potentials and joys of defiant militant action so clearly demonstrated, the subsequent decade saw new anti-authoritarian autonomous movements developed throughout the social arena by activist veterans of 68. Typically, they were quite radical at the base, including anarchist agendas, such as expressed in Françoise d'Eaubonne's ecofeminist classic, *Écologie/féminisme: révolution ou mutation?* (1978). As Duteuil (2008a) asserts, consistent with the vision and experience of May 68, all forms of domination everywhere needed to disappear. Thus, '[e]cology, women's struggles, homosexualities, anti-militarism, regionalism, the critique of repressive institutions (school, prison, hospitals—not only psychiatric), the handicapped, and so forth, would benefit from the breach opened by the general strike'.²⁷ This included enduring enthusiasm for workers' self-management, a prominent theme in May 68 that was significantly recharged with the well-publicised LIP watch factory occupation in 1973.

avons dévoré le temps d'autant plus goulûment qu'il fut de plus en plus patent que nous perdions irrévocablement Mai. Le nomadisme fut cette volonté sublime. ... révolution sexuelle avant la politique des genres'

²⁶ 'Mai 68, ça a été une porte ouverte, entrouverte plutôt, une porte qu'il faudrait pousser en avant qui a permis la libération sur des tas de plans.'

²⁷ 'L'écologie, la lutte des femmes, les homosexualités, l'antimilitarisme, le régionalisme, la critique des institutions répressives (école, prison, hôpital pas seulement psychiatrique), les handicapés, et j'en passe, vont s'engouffrer dans la brèche ouverte par la grève générale.'