

France '68: A Society Explodes

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

a review of

Worker-Student Action Committees: France '68, R. Gregoire & F. Perlman, Black & Red, PO Box 02374, Detroit MI 48202, 1969 (reprinted 1991). Available from B & R or FE Books, \$3 plus postage.

This is a pamphlet written almost a generation ago when revolution not only seemed possible, but imminent. The enthusiasm generated from the authors' direct participation in the 1968 events almost leaps from the pages as they pen lively critiques of the successes and failures of the movement which almost toppled French society.

Gregoire and Perlman state at the outset that this pamphlet's purpose is not to "enlighten future generations," but to allow those at the moment it was being written, to "move further in the realization of the revolutionary project." Time, though, has its own way of altering intentions and so, as it turns out, this text has renewed relevance when this generation considers what constitutes authentic revolution and what are its impediments.

Living as we do in an age when the idea of revolution has seemingly been closed off by numerous triumphs of the empire, it is hard to conceive of a recent era marked by a movement which, in the space of a few weeks, altered daily life to the extent where all the assumptions of the economy and its culture were challenged to their core.

In May 1968, 800,000 people marched through Paris in support of the revolt, and a general strike was called throughout the country. A week later, French society and its economy were paralyzed. Even more astounding perhaps, daily life was altered to a degree which would have been unrecognizable only a few days before.

France '68 was a moment in which traditional society, including old forms of resistance to it, were thrown aside and new ones prevailed consistent with the spirit expressed in the Situationist slogan, "Humanity will be free only when the last priest is hung by the guts of the last bureaucrat." This harsh sentiment emanated less from a blood-thirsty urge than from a drive to generalize a revolution which had set into motion an ethos of desire rather than duty. As a reflection of this, new ways were created in which people made decisions about their lives.

Those decision-making forms comprise the title of this essay—student-worker action committees. Modeled on traditional workers councils, they replaced the elite, hierarchical command form which administers daily life in capitalist society. At council meetings, everyone participates, representation is abolished, and all decisions are made directly by those present.

Worker-student committees were established for "every major enterprise, district, region," according to the authors and they took part in one at Censier University in Paris. They report, much to the horror of the leftists, the committees had no "programs, lines or strategies. Their aim is to communicate to workers what has taken place at Censier. Self-led and self-organized, they do not go out...to 'organize the workers.'" To do so, the authors continue, "would merely reintroduce the type of dependence, the type of relation between leaders and led, the type of hierarchic structure, which they'd only just started struggling to destroy."

The only sections of the pamphlet which don't ring well today, 22 years after they were written, are those which advocate worker self-management of industry. As revolt swept France in 1968, numerous factories responded by challenging the command structure of work and Communist Party domination of the unions, so it is no surprise that the authors supported councils similar to the ones they were involved in to administer work in a new manner.

However, after Fredy examined the roots of civilization and the industrial growth economy for the next decade and a half, particularly in his last books, one can speculate he would have opposed a self-managed automobile plant or airplane factory for its production, not its lack of democracy in decision making.

Still, a factory in revolt today would probably bring no less excitement than it did in 1968 France. Decisions about dismantling the technological/industrial megamachine would undoubtedly come once the coercion of industrial society has been eliminated.

This pamphlet is more than just a political essay. It is also a chronicle of involvement when daily life suddenly unraveled and nothing seemed impossible. One story Fredy relates gives a strong sense of how the rules were being broken everywhere. Fredy agrees to assist a Communist Party bureaucrat by addressing guest Yugoslav workers in Serbian to tell them not to strike, but instead he exhorts them to revolution and is greeted by cheers.

Fredy arrived in Paris fortuitously in May 1968 after finishing a teaching position in Italy. He immediately was swept into the events of the uprising and participated in the type of actions he had been pondering intellectually for the previous five years. Although he expresses an admiration for the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions in the book, much in the manner of his mentor, C. Wright Mills, there is no ambivalence in his condemnation of the varied leninist sects who were (unsuccessfully) attempting to impose their vanguard strategies on a movement which had no use for such practices.

The newly reprinted edition maintains the original typewritten text, and the graphics from the period. This serves to preserve visually the sense of urgency under which the essays were written upon Fredy and Roger's arrival in Kalamazoo, Mich. when their hopes were high that similar events would soon convulse the U.S. They realized that while the forces of revolution were preparing for new assaults on the bastions of power, the rulers world-wide had learned great lessons from the events of Paris. Fredy and Roger insisted that rebels must learn lessons as well.

Those lessons, it seems to me, are no less relevant today. In a period when the visions of leftist reformers go no further than to beg the state for survival or see their concept of revolution realized with the ascent of their party to power, this pamphlet is more valuable than ever for its capacity to articulate what is necessary for authentic transformation.

The authors express it as when people "suddenly cease to be unconscious objects shaped by...social forces" and "become conscious, active subjects who begin to shape their own social activity." Concretely, in France '68, this meant confronting the activities which define capitalist society—wage work, the commodification of life, consumption, representation, and the institutions which mystify those relationships. Without a fundamental challenge to what constitutes the core of capital's reign, they realized, revolutionaries are doomed to replay the failures of those whose appetite for only half a revolution brought about a modernization or extension of the society they sought to overturn.

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