

Psychic Liberation & the Almost Revolution

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If you mention France, May 1968 today, you're probably met with a shrug or a blank look. It's easy to dismiss the ten million workers and students who went on general strike and the virtual shutdown of the French state as an historic blip. Another failed revolution.

But for the people who took part in those events, much more was going on—something besides a political uprising. Possibility bloomed. First hand accounts speak of a wave of mental liberation and spontaneous joy, with a sense that the old order of business had become obsolete overnight. How did reality shift so quickly into this new, liberated mood?

Then how, just as swiftly, at the end of May, did French President Charles de Gaulle cast a spell, shifting almost everything back to what had been like lights going on in a movie theater, its dazed participants rising from their seats to lumber home?

Basic recipe for May 1968: mix generally well-off students in a barracks-like suburban campus disgruntled with their education. Add general political dissent over the war in Vietnam and US globalization. Combine enraged students (enrages) with French workers, with their history of class struggle, who want higher wages and a better standard of living—and voila, an electrified revolutionary situation. In 1968, the students supplied the wit, the charm, and perhaps most importantly, the imagination. The workers supplied the “manpower,” which the state interpreted as the real threat. This fusion of joyful whimsy and the specter of a workers' uprising is what brought the revolution to the ordinary person.

The question is: how does one maintain whimsy, wonder, and imagination, without being simply naive—and while getting things done on the physical plane? We have the 1968 model of fusing people with both imaginative and practical qualities in a sometimes-precarious partnership. We also have the model of the temporary autonomous zone, where people enter imagination-time for a night or a festival, and hopefully the energy of liberation carries through to ordinary states of consciousness often enough to keep us inspired.

These ordinary states of consciousness (the work-grocery-store-highway-madness states of consciousness) are not devoid of imagination, however. We still have imagination, but it's used against us. This is the world of myth, which plays an enormous role in human psychology, and what the authorities prey upon to manipulate our fears and desires.

In 1968, revolt was fed by myth, but Authority used myth as well to right the tottering state. On one side of the confrontation, you had heroic, beautiful, young students; on the other, cops in riot-helmets, looking like evil bug-aliens. The Paris street fighting was done with clubs and cobblestones, with barricades made of cars. In a sense, it was play-fighting, for a tank could have easily taken out any one of the makeshift fortifications. But the barricades were a symbol; they played to the mythos of the struggle, as they had in the revolutionary uprisings of 19th century France from 1848 to the Paris Commune.

Things were going well for the charismatic rebels until Charles de Gaulle broke in with a myth of his own—he switched the plot for the public, so to speak. When de Gaulle made a speech on May 24, 1968 asking the French people for their support, he seemed like a defeated old man. Five days later, de Gaulle disappeared. Dramatic tension was

at a height. Then, he swept back into the country with an amazing speech. Declaring that he had a “mandate from the people,” he threatened to “use other methods than immediate national elections,” and invoked the menace of the Red Peril.

Within minutes, this speech shattered the revolutionary reality that had been developing. And, when the story changed, May-as-it-had-been began to disappear. The liberation and joy gave way to a tired mess, as Paris was faced with cleaning up after the party. Move along, there’s nothing to see. That’s the attitude; that’s the disappearance of May; nobody died, and since we measure things in death tolls, nothing happened.

When people do remember May, it’s for the brilliant graffiti and posters of revolutionary slogans, artifacts of the spirit of May, but they often forget that for several days a modern industrial state was brought to its knees. May is viewed today, when viewed at all, rather like the 1960s in general—a romantic, youthful fling, a necessary growing-up. But there was something real and authentic there, because an entire country was shut down and people in all sectors of society began to question the old assumptions and actually, if only for a while, live differently than they had. Reality actually did shift, and shifted back; events were, psychologically reorganized. The storyline was revised, and the first version slowly vanished.

Like de Gaulle’s May 30th speech, the current US government constantly tries to pull off reality-switches. They tried this by claiming there is a new, post 9/11 world, as if Reality was suddenly Different Overnight. They came up with the laughable Axis of Evil story, a creation so blatant that it is now a joke on late night television, and most sinister, they play on apocalyptic Christian myths as well as that of the pioneer single-handedly “taming the West,” rugged individuals pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, Johnny-get-your-gun, and the rest of the rot.

However, this is only playing to one slice of the American mythical heritage. We’ve overlooked a lot of American myths we can use to our advantage that tells a story different from the official one. We need to appeal to that mythic archetype of the fiery abolitionist orator, the wild-haired suffragette, the Wobbly organizer riding the rails to the next strike, the union sit-in strikers, the civil rights marchers, and the anti-war, gay, and feminist militants of the 1960s.

We can encourage a reality-shift, a switching-of-myths, if we work it right. Like the enrages of May ’68, we can demonstrate that politics and life should be merry, as well as free and fair and peaceful. All of this leads back to imagination. It falls upon all of us to engage our imaginations—both for imagining new possibilities, and for creating new (or reworking old) myths for us to be written into.

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