

very visible. Each citizen must learn that the street no longer belongs to him, but to power alone, which wishes to impose muteness, produce asphyxia.⁹⁷

97. Comité d'Action Etudiants-Ecrivains, "La rue," tract dated July 17, 1968. Rpt. with attribution to Maurice Blanchot, *Lignes* 33 (March 1998): 144.

2

FORMS AND PRACTICES

More than anything else, May '68 was in my view a vast aspiration toward equality.

—Daniel Lindenberg

THE CRITIQUE OF SPECIALIZATION

How much was the "seizure of power" by militants in 1968—the failure of which has constituted in retrospect what many still mean when they speak of the failure of May—a narrative or an agenda itself imposed primarily by the state? How much was the "taking of state power" and the set of problems related to such a goal the state's own centralizing fantasy, created mostly in the final week of May 1968 when de Gaulle, in his speech of May 30, evokes the threat of massive state violence and the intervention of the army to forestall what he calls an impending "communist dictatorship" in France? In the last few days of May, time accelerates markedly; the state decides to put an end to the *chienlit* (disorder)¹ and impose its own temporality. Do you want power? If thousands of you are in the streets then this must be the case. Fine, try to seize it from the army and its tanks. Given the extreme military proportions of de Gaulle's reaction, it bears recalling that the demonstrators in the streets were unarmed and that, as Sartre commented later, "A regime is not brought down by 100,000 unarmed students, no matter how courageous."²

1. "La réforme oui; la chienlit, non": one of the lone comments made by de Gaulle during May about the events transpiring in France. In the sixteenth century, the word *chienlit* referred to a carnival mask; literally, of course, "chier-en-lit" evokes the idea of fouling one's own nest. The *Larousse* dictionary lists the year 1968 as the first time the term was used to refer to a "disordered or chaotic situation." De Gaulle, however, was not the first to use the term in the context of '68; that honor, according to Keith Reader and Khursheed Wadja, goes to the neo-fascist weekly newspaper *Minute*, on May 2: "We will not abandon the street to the disorder [chienlit] of insurgents [enragés]." See their *The May 1968 Events in France: Reproductions and Interpretations* (London: St Martin's, 1993), 3.

2. Sartre, *Situations VIII*, 194.

Militant Pierre Goldman was among those who lamented the fact that the demonstrators in the streets were unarmed:

The student revolt began to grow. The movement that had erupted on the campuses was now joined by the determining presence of the workers. They began a general strike. I was excited but I cannot hide the fact that I sensed in that revolt obscene emanations. It seemed to me that the students spreading out onto the streets, in the Sorbonne, represented the unhealthy tide of an hysterical symptom. They were satisfying their desire for history using ludic and masturbatory forms. I was shocked that they were seizing speech and that they were happy with that. They were substituting speech for action. This seizure of power was an imaginary power. My opinion was that they gravely misunderstood the government's tactic and that that tactic was subtle and effective. They thought they were in insurrection, in violence, but it was paving stones they were throwing, not grenades.

. . . Nonetheless, I hoped that this collective, delirious onanism would lead to a revolutionary situation. The presence of the workers—their strike—was in effect of a different order. I knew some militants who were very involved in the conduct of the student combats. I went to see one of them, he belonged to the March 22 Movement, and I proposed an armed action to him. I told him that despite everything the situation remained peaceful and that it had to explode. . . . He looked at me like I was a madman, a mythomaniac. . . .

. . . De Gaulle left for Germany and came back. He spoke. What he said was simple. In his pitiless discourse he recalled that the forces he represented, force itself, was capable of wars and history. He sentenced his adversaries to impotence and dream. To castration. It was a challenge and no one took him up on it. Power chased away imagination. The festival was over.³

Despite his recognition of the “determining presence of the workers” and the fact that their strike was of a “different order” than the frenetic and, to his mind, delirious, activities of the students in the streets, Goldman narrows his perspective to focus on a confrontation between an all-powerful military state and powerless, masturbatory students adrift in a purely symbolic realm. His scenario is not so very different from that of someone at the very opposite end, from Goldman, of the political spectrum: Raymond Aron. (Whereas Goldman sought to provoke the movement to armed insurrection, Aron, a professed anti-Gaullist, marched nevertheless arm in arm with the Gaullist forces of order down the Champs Elysée

3. Goldman, *Souvenirs obscurs d'un juif polonais né en France*, 70–71.

on May 30).⁴ Like Goldman, Aron—famously—viewed '68 to be “the event that turned out to have been a non-event.”⁵ Nothing happened, in other words. In fact, Aron was the very first of May's commentators to pronounce May a non-event. Aron and Goldman offer renditions of the conclusion to the non-event that are strikingly similar. Goldman: “De Gaulle left for Germany. He spoke. . . . The festival was over.” Aron: “General de Gaulle spoke for three minutes. The whole affair was over and the atmosphere transformed.”⁶ In each of the accounts, de Gaulle returns to the source of his strength, the army, the threat of a military situation is evoked, and the students evaporate into the thin air of the imaginary.

It seems accurate to say now that the government's military threat was directed less at the students in the streets than it was at providing a context of crisis in which the various labor union organizations, primarily the CGT, could regain the power they needed to effectively corral or strong-arm workers into a swift acceptance of the rapidly negotiated settlement called the Grenelle Accords, after these had been refused by workers not only at Billancourt, but at Citroën, Sud-Aviation, Rhodiaceta, and elsewhere. This was the perspective adopted at the time by a group of writers and workers active in the movement: “De Gaulle is inciting violence. . . . we will not enter into the process. . . . the strike must continue.”⁷ A Renault worker concurs: “Chaos and revolution, he [de Gaulle] is the only one talking that way; we don't use those words.”⁸ And it was a perspective reiterated firmly by a worker, Anne-Marie Schwartch, when she insisted years later during a panel discussion in one of the early television commemorations of May that:

the problem at that moment was not one of making revolution, but rather that the CGT not sell out the strike. [Turning to Guy Hermier, a PCF deputy on the panel with her:] *You* went around from shop to shop in the factories, from factory to factory, telling us that the others had gone back to work, saying that it was all over. . . .⁹

4. Raymond Aron, *Mémoires: 50 ans de réflexion politique* (Paris: Julliard, 1983), 473.

5. Aron, *Elusive Revolution*, ix. Historian Pierre Nora is perhaps the most recent commentator to reiterate Aron's assessment that “nothing happened in '68” in the conclusion to his *Lieux de mémoire*: “[N]othing tangible or palpable occurred at all.” “The Era of Commemoration,” in *Realms of Memory*, vol. 3 (New York: Columbia, 1998), 611.

6. Aron, *Elusive Revolution*, 25.

7. Tract, Comité d'Action Ecrivains/Étudiants/Travailleurs, undated but after May 30.

8. Renault worker, cited in Gudie Lawaetz, *Mai 68*, film documentary, 1974.

9. “Mai: Connais Pas,” episode of TV show “Vendredi,” May 13, 1983, prod. André Campana, FR3.

Indeed, what is most striking about the terms negotiated between management and union leaders is the relative poverty of the gains for workers in relation to the amplitude of the movement. A higher percentage of French workers than ever before, across every sector and in every region of the country, had been on strike for the longest time in French history. And yet the immediate principal results of the Grenelle Accords, negotiated between May 25 and 27, were a small augmentation in the minimum salary and the extension of union rights in the factories.¹⁰

The threat to which the government was responding in May–June '68 was less the violent contestation of students aiming to “seize power” than the fact that a quite inconsistent student maelstrom had succeeded, thanks to the violent repression it had encountered at the hands of the police, in attaching its wagon of insurgency to a mass strike. What was at stake was not, immediately, the question of state power. The workers' strike, by erupting outside of the confines of the big French labor confederations and outside the desiderata of any of the various left parties, particularly the Communist Party, had come to threaten the very existence of those institutions and organizations. As one worker said, “It's we who went on strike, it's not up to anyone else to decide for us.”¹¹ When de Gaulle took his helicopter trip to the Black Forest to negotiate a new alliance against the communist menace with Massu and the army, that menace already no longer existed. A new, more corrosive communism had formed outside the structure of the party. The other—official communism—had already known for a long time the moment when to end a strike: the day before its victory. Focusing attention on the Latin Quarter, even after the mass strikes began on May 14, was the main element in the government's strategy to isolate the street violence and quarantine it away from the workers—enclosed, for the most part, in the occupied factories. The May 11 decision taken by Georges Pompidou, de Gaulle's prime minister, to reopen the Sorbonne to the students two days later, a decision widely criticized by his advisors at the time, by Aron soon afterward, and castigated by de Gaulle as collaborationist (“C'est du Pétain,” he told his

10. Daniel Cohn-Bendit was correct in assessing “the grand maneuvers of Grenelle” to be “the biggest theft [escroquerie] of the century. All the powers come together to save their own power. . . . Pompidou saving the P.C. and the C.G.T., Seguy upholding the powers that be before he drowns.” Daniel and Gabriel Cohn Bendit, *Le gauchisme—remède à la maladie sénile du communisme* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1968), 142. Workers gained far less from Grenelle than they had in 1936 when the Matignon Accords brought an end to the unprecedented strikes that followed the victory of the Popular Front. For a detailed analysis of the terms of the Grenelle Accords, see Cornelius Castoriadis, aka Jean-Marc Coudray, *Mai 1968: La brèche: Premières réflexions sur les événements* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), 122.

11. Citroën worker, cited in *CA 13: Comité d'action du 13ème*, film documentary, Collectif Arc, June 1968.

closest advisors),¹² was in this light perfectly consistent with the overall aim Pompidou would sum up in a single sentence: “I wanted to treat the problem of the youth separately.”¹³ After students had been dissociated from strikers each group would settle back into the confines of their “sociological” identity, and both would lose: the strike would be contained as a purely salary—bread and butter—issue; the student demands would be rechanneled and redefined as “education” issues. And “violence” as a quality would come to pertain only to students and not to the peaceful, law-abiding workers. “Before May 13, it was above all about making sure, by circumscribing their struggle, that the students not enter the Latin Quarter. After that date it was above all about doing everything possible to prevent them from leaving.”¹⁴

Given the government's strategy of separation and containment, the most effective political forms and actions the movement could develop were those that attempted what has variously been called the “dialogue,” “meeting,” “relay,” “alliance,” “solidarity,” or even “alloy” (*alliage*)—the term is Jacques Baynac's—between workers and students. Consider two examples of the *prevention* of such a “meeting,” one that transpired on the streets, the other in the factories.

On May 24, a crowd of some 100,000 demonstrators attempted to march from the Gare de Lyon to the Bastille; one participant, Pierre Peuchmaurd, writes: “Everyone is there. All of us. The CGT too, but without banners, directors or delegates. The *true* CGT, and several federations of the CFDT and the FO. Fifty percent workers at least. . . . We were circulating and exchanging tracts. A very beautiful tract from the March 22 movement, addressed to the workers who were everywhere that day, ‘Your struggle is ours,’—undoubtedly one of the best attempts to define why we were all there.”¹⁵ Peuchmaurd mentions another slogan of the day: “No success is definitive in a capitalist regime.” But one tract, signed jointly by all of the various Comités d'Action, best captures the tone of that day's demonstration:

No to parliamentary solutions where de Gaulle leaves and management stays.

12. See Aron, *Mémoires*, 475–78; de Gaulle, cited in the television documentary, “La dernière année du Général,” an episode of the series “Les brulures de l'histoire” (prod. Patrick Barberis, 1995) that discusses at some length Pompidou's strategy of dissociating the demands of striking workers from those of the students.

13. Georges Pompidou, *Pour rétablir une vérité* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), 185.

14. “Le mouvement de Mai: De l'étranglement à la repression,” *Analyses et documents*, no. 156 (June 27, 1968): 5.

15. Pierre Peuchmaurd, *Plus vivants que jamais* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1968), 115–16.

No to negotiations at the top that only prolong a moribund capitalism.

No more referendums. Enough of the circus.

Don't let anyone speak in our place.

But as the demonstrators neared their goal, they were met with a wall of CRS riot police who blocked them from the Bastille and steered them back to their own barricades in the Latin Quarter, barricades that from that point on could now clearly be seen to have been tolerated, tacitly, by the forces of order as the only viable or apt "expression" of the students' movement. "At the Bastille, it's over. A deployment of police to make you dizzy. . . . A victory on the terrain until the retreat (*repli*) back to the Latin Quarter." Later, Peuchmaurd criticizes the students' willful self-enclosure within the imagery of the Latin ghetto, speaking of the demonstrators' "political errors: especially that of returning to the Latin Quarter, all of us regrouping there like assholes, like moths. We should have split up into small groups, saturated the city. . . . The other error was not to free ourselves in time from the myth of the barricade."¹⁶ Sequestration of the demonstrators within the Latin Quarter ghetto as a deliberately chosen tactic by the government is clearly visible from this point on through the last large demonstrations of June 10 and 11.¹⁷

The second example concerns the practice of "factory occupation" by striking workers, a practice that had been invented in 1936 and not used again by workers movements until just before 1968. Occupation was generally viewed as a mark of the strength and the seriousness of the strike, since it meant a clear departure from tired, artificial forms like meetings and petitions, or the partial "symbolic" strikes that bore the trappings of the trade-union movement and no longer mobilized workers. "Occupying the factories means something other than parading in the streets in order to obtain—or often not to obtain—professional or salary demands: it means the will to be master of one's own workplace."¹⁸ Was the model of occupation adopted by the two factories that unleashed the strike, Sud-Aviation and Renault-Cléon, patterned on the students' occupation of the Sorbonne, as many *gauchistes* have since maintained? Or did it derive from the workers' own tradition, going back to the historical model of the 1930s or to the more recent 1966 and 1967 strikes at Rhodiacta, Caen, and elsewhere? Most likely, the decision to occupy was taken less as an imitation

16. *Ibid.*, 120–21.

17. See "Le mouvement de Mai: De l'étranglement à la repression," *Analyses et documents* 156 (June 27, 1968).

18. Anonymous pamphlet, dated April 25, 1968.

of students' tactics than in response to the perceived vacillation, the weakness, even defection, of the government. But in either case, occupation—in which the director is either sequestered or expelled or at times allowed to stay within the occupied factory—involves the assumption of services like security, food, and the organization of leisure by workers, and thus a clear reversal of the director's authority. "Occupation is a consolidation of the strike such that the factory doesn't function. It's a way of protecting the strike."¹⁹ Advocates of occupation see it less about taking charge of the factory as a center of production, than about taking charge of a non-neutral space in which the opposing class is constituted as an adversary: taking possession of the logical categories that govern institutions and not the institutions themselves. Occupation is in this sense akin to the student barricade: the dominant class is never as present as it is at the moment of occupation; the enemy is never clearer than when seen across a barricade. Occupation, like the barricade, *reveals* class conflict, the relation to the adversary. According to the case made for occupation, the appropriation of the space of the dominant power would ideally be accompanied by an expansion of the workers' movement outside of the limits of that space.

But was it? Perhaps the streets were a better mixing place, a more conducive place for the expansion of the workers' movement than were the occupied factories. Because of the way that May '68 has been consistently represented, it is easy to forget the extent to which the streets, from early May on, were *already* mixed. As the street battles progressed, students were joined by more and more young workers, stifled by the protocol of the unions, and by unemployed workers—a group whose role and sheer number has been consistently downplayed, both at the time of the insurrection and even more in subsequent representations. Evelyne Sullerot points out the way in which workers' presence on the streets was erased by the vocabulary used by the mainstream media during May as they reported the events:

One cannot leave unmentioned the crystallization of a vocabulary that was to play a part in the orchestration of an overwhelming fear and in the isolation of the students. The word "barricade," for example, was employed to designate a little heap of a few packing cases and various other refuse. "Students" was a convenient term, which was justified during the first days of May. Later, there was cautious use of "non-students," a discreet way of avoiding the use of "workers." The "non-students" were always left in some mysterious shadow land, where they

19. Worker cited in Daniel Vidal, "Les conditions du politique dans le mouvement ouvrier en mai-juin 1968," in *Grèves revendicatrices ou grèves politiques?* ed. Pierre duBois (Paris: Anthropos, 1971), 514.

were joined by the underworld (*pègres*) and the thugs (*katangais*) as the occasion arose. Even on those occasions in which authentic students were an active but not the majority element in the mass of demonstrators, the radio continued to say, "The students have taken refuge here," "The students retaliated. . . ." etc.²⁰

What was true on the streets of Paris was true elsewhere—in fact more so. In Nantes, Rennes, and throughout the provinces, crowds of students, workers, and frequently farmers occupied the streets for a longer period than in Paris.²¹ From May 6 on, young workers and unemployed joined students in Clermont-Ferrand and in Grenoble; in the May 7 demonstration in Toulouse it was impossible to distinguish student from "non-student" or worker on the streets.²² Once the mass strikes began, however, how much did "factory occupation," a practice that effectively enclosed many workers in the factories and kept them off the streets, serve the interests of union leaders in controlling and limiting a strike that had already "generalized" without CGT sanction? Not only did occupation anchor workers back in their proper, habitual place, preventing contacts with students, more importantly it broke interfactory communication and much of the informal kinds of information transmission that had ensued during the large street demonstrations between workers of different sectors, and even different regions.²³ With workers still safely in the workplace—even if nonfunctioning—occupation may have lessened any extension via coordination between different factories; it may have blocked communication at variance with the union leadership's representation of the strike. "For the government, as to a certain extent for the workers' unions, it's better that the strikers be in the factories than in the streets."²⁴ And it's better that the students were in the Latin Quarter—even if the universi-

20. Evelyne Sullerot, "Transistors and Barricades," in Labro, *This Is Only a Beginning*, 196–97. "Katangais" referred to a particularly tough group of street-fighters, rebels to any discipline or organization, some of whom claimed to have fought as mercenaries in Katanga.

21. Thus this assessment from the prefect of the Loire-Atlantique region: "The Parisian situation was less serious and less significant than that of the Loire-Atlantique." Cited in 1968: *Exploration du Mai français*, vol. 1, *Terrains*, ed. René Mouriaux et al. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), 255. See also Danielle Tartowsky, "Les manifestations de mai-juin 68 en province," in the same volume, 143–62.

22. Hempel, *Mai 68 et la question de la révolution*, 51.

23. "The occupied factories must be opened to all worker and student comrades to establish contact so that we can decide together what we want." Tract, Comité d'Action Travailleurs-Étudiants, undated but after May 15, 1968.

24. Pamphlet, "Le syndicalisme à l'épreuve," cited in Hempel, *Mai 68*, 62. The principal reason for the isolation of workers in the factories, was "a deliberate will, on the part of union leadership, to break off liaisons." "Contribuer à la liaison travailleurs-étudiants," *Cahiers de Mai*, no. 3 (Sept. 1, 1968): 3.

ties and lycées weren't operating—than on the Right Bank. When workers remained cloistered in their factories, union bosses could more easily decide in the workers' place, "sector by sector," through controlling the monopoly of information. Something like this interpretation can be gleaned from the remarks of worker Anne-Marie Schwartch cited earlier; it is also dramatically validated by one of the rare documents of "worker May" that we have: the short documentary film *La reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*. In that brief footage, a woman worker cries out against the decision to return to work, shouting that the vote to end the strike and resume work has been tampered with. Around her, three labor management representatives—*gros bras*—try to "handle" her: "But no." "We'll negotiate all that later on." As she continues to refuse their version of "the end of the strike," the three men grow increasingly impatient, and increasingly physical in their attempts to pressure the woman back into the factory: "It's a *victory*, don't you understand!"²⁵

Pierre Goldman's and Raymond Aron's narrative of May as a failed "seizure of power revolves around two diametrically opposed choices. These poles—de Gaulle or the students? revolution or psychodrama? revolution or hysteria? event or non-event? revolution or festival? ludic or serious? words or actions? seizing speech or seizing power? imaginary or real?—have largely set the terms of much of the discussion about '68, in the form of analyses or "judgments" of the event itself as well as in the turns taken by theoretical discourse in the 1970s. The thematics of "power," both in its centralized form and in its more microlevel locations and vicissitudes, would dominate a certain Foucauldianism, for example, and would receive full media-sponsored diffusion during the mid-1970s in the diatribes of the New Philosophers. And a media fascination with the question of "armed violence" would dominate the European 1970s in the focus on spectacular actions by Italian and German groups, the Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof faction, both of which derived from '68 movements.

But the real question, I believe, lies elsewhere, outside the parameters of revolution, failed or not. Why did something happen rather than nothing? And what was the nature of the event that occurred? The attention given to the problematics of power has effaced another set of problems at issue in May, and 1960s culture more generally, which we might begin to group under the heading of a no less political question—the question of equality. I mean equality not in any objective sense of status, income, function, or the supposedly "equal" dynamics of contracts or reforms, nor as

25. Jacques Willemont and Pierre Bonneau, *La reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*, June 1968.

an explicit demand or a program, but rather as something that emerges in the course of the struggle and is verified subjectively, declared and experienced in the here and now as what is, and not what should be. Such an experience lies to the side of "seizing state power;" outside of that story. The narrative of a desired or failed seizure of power, in other words, is a narrative determined by the logic of the state, the story the state tells to itself. For the state, people in the streets are people always already failing to seize state power. In 1968, "seizing state power" was not only part of the state's narrative, it expressed the state's informing desire to complete itself—that is, to totally assimilate the everyday to its own necessities. Limiting May '68 to that story, to the desire or the failure to seize centralized power, has circumscribed the very definition of "the political," crushing or effacing in the process a political dimension to the events that may in fact have constituted the true threat to the forces of order, the reason for their panic. That dimension lay in a subjectivation enabled by the synchronizing of two very different temporalities: the world of the worker and the world of the student. It lay in the central idea of May '68: the union of intellectual contestation with workers' struggle. It lay in the verification of equality not as any objective of action, but as something that is part and parcel of action, something that emerges in the struggle and is lived and declared as such. In the course of the struggle, practices were developed that demonstrated such a synchronization, that acted to constitute a common—though far from consensual—space and time. And those practices verified the immediate irrelevance of the division of labor—what for Durkheim was nothing more and nothing less than that which holds a society together and guarantees the continuity of its reproduction. As such, these practices form as direct an intervention into the logic and workings of capital as any seizure of the state—perhaps more so.

The opposition (revolution or festival, seizing power or seizing speech) that has dominated discussions of May is a false one. As Bernard Lacroix has commented, just because it took many people a certain amount of time to understand that May did not announce a coming "revolution," this does not then lead to the conclusion that it inaugurated its opposite, a "return to individualism."²⁶ It is wrong to conclude, in other words, that because the movement failed to seize state power it was either radically indifferent to the question of power or the prototype of a 1980s form of consumer consciousness. A focus on centralized state power was not absent from May; in her discussion of May '68 in Italy, Luisa Passerini describes revolutionary aspirations close to those of the French:

26. See Bernard Lacroix, "A contre-courant: Le parti pris du réalisme," *Pouvoirs* 39 (1986): 117–27.

We realized that, notwithstanding its fascination, the idea of a seizure of power like the assault on the Winter Palace was archaic, and we couldn't say what form the transfer of power to the oppressed classes would take. But certainly a hard shove would be required, it couldn't be a painless transition.²⁷

But more central to the movement's aspirations than any such "hard shove" was its realization of forms of direct democracy and collective self-organization. In these forms and practices lie the beginning, in and of itself, of a different social organization, of a universalizable objective of the kind usually ascribed to revolutionary undertakings or at least to their beginnings.

The distinction I am making can perhaps be illustrated by comparing a Leninist tendency to one deriving from the theories of Rosa Luxemburg. Both tendencies share, as did all the radical groups in '68, an anticapitalist goal. But a Leninist party is in essence a radical intelligentsia that says we have the right to rule. Their goal of "seizing power" is as much determined by that objective as it is by the adversary it confronts: the bourgeois state. In the hope of conquering that adversary, the party borrows the adversary's own arms and methods; in a kind of underanalyzed fascination, it imitates the enemy's organization down to the last detail. And it becomes its faithful replica, particularly in the hierarchical relation between militants and the working masses, reproducing the social division that is the very foundation of the existence of the state. But a dominant aspect of May—closer to Luxemburg than to Lenin—focused instead on that social division, on avoiding the hierarchy inherent in Leninism, and as such produced organizations that were an effect of the struggle:

The rigid mechanical-bureaucratic conception cannot conceive of the struggle save as the product of organization at a certain stage of its strength. On the contrary, the living, dialectical explanation makes the organization emerge as a product of the struggle.²⁸

From Luxemburg's perspective, the destruction of the capitalist regime and its replacement with socialism must be conducted from below, *à la base*, beginning with the situation at hand. The movement must continually adapt itself to the political exigencies of the situation, developing practices in contradiction to the bourgeois state and, by so doing, creating

27. Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 111.

28. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions*, trans. Patrick Lavin (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1971), 64.

the embryo of the new society to which it aspires as it goes. An anonymous tract dated June 1, entitled "We continue the combat," expresses this clearly:

The absence today of a leader at the head of our movement corresponds to its very nature. It is not a question of knowing who will be at the head of everyone, but rather how everyone will form one head. More precisely, it is not a question of some political or trade-union organization pre-existing the formation of the movement appropriating the movement.

The unity of the movement should not and cannot derive from the premature presence of a celebrity at its head but from the unity of the aspirations of workers, farmers and students.²⁹

Nowhere was what I am calling this "Luxemburgian" or situational tendency more apparent than in the workings of the most significant form invented in May, the *comités d'action*. Small groups of perhaps ten or fifteen people, most of whom had belonged to no pre-formed political group, began to organize—by profession in some cases, by neighborhood or factory in others—after the general strike began in mid-May, largely with the goal of providing material aid to the strikers and producing agitprop to extend the strike. By May 31, over 460 such committees existed in the Paris region alone; "action committees" had appeared in the high schools (CALs) as early as February. In addition to their commitment to power to the workers, these groups shared a hostility to recognizing Pompidou as a viable political interlocutor, a reluctance to being themselves "recuperated" into traditional, mainstream political organizations, and, above all, a definition of their struggle as one of anticapitalism: "Coordination in *comités d'action* implanted in the factories, the neighborhoods, in high schools and university campuses, of union and non-union militants engaged in the same combat: an anticapitalist combat."³⁰ Some of the neighborhood committees, like that of the Marais, continued to exist for years following May.

When you think that we kept an "Action Committee" alive for four years, with at least thirty people present at the weekly meeting, without a secretary, without an office, without regular obligatory dues, without a reliable meeting place—only the meeting day was set! In that we had a prodigious libertarian experience.³¹

29. Anonymous tract, "Nous continuons le combat," dated June 1, 1968.

30. Undated tract, "Projet de plate-forme politique des comités d'action."

31. Denise, cited in Daum, *Des révolutionnaires dans un village parisien*, 149.

In part, the "action committees" had emerged as an answer to the question of how best to retain the unorganized, the "mass" unaffiliated who had come out onto the streets for the fighting and the demonstrations. How could these people be catalyzed, organized? The answer, obviously, could not resemble the heavy bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state or party; rather, it must take the form of a supple kind of organization, with no defined a priori platform, and its workings have to transcend the distinction between leadership and mass activity. The *comités d'action* tried and succeeded in bringing into being in factories and neighborhoods other forms of organizations than those that functioned by adherence and election:

Our functioning was very different from that of the traditional parties or the "groupuscules" that some of us had known. We had no imposed ideology, something that permitted people, whoever they were, to participate in its elaboration—people who weren't used to speaking up, people who had no former political experience, no political culture. Those who were more politicized had the opportunity of confronting their analyses with the point of view of others . . . the C.A. brought together people of different ages and different social milieux.³²

In the words of the Students-Writers Action Committee:

We push our refusal to the point of refusing to be assimilated into the political groups that claim to refuse what we refuse. We refuse the refusal programmed by institutions of the opposition. We refuse that our refusal, tied up and packaged, bear a trademark.³³

Or, in the succinct words of one tract, "The fundamental goal of the *comités d'action* is to define a common political line from the bottom up (*à partir de la base*)."³⁴

The history of the "action committees" and the way in which their workings seemed to respond to what one tract called "the fundamental democratic need of the masses"³⁵ don't correspond to official political history or to the narrative of state power, whether seized or not. Nor do the

32. *Ibid.*, 145.

33. Comité d'Action Etudiants-Ecrivains, later attributed to Marguerite Duras, "20 May 1968: Description of the Birth of Students-Writers Action Committee," in *Green Eyes*, trans. Carol Barco (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 55.

34. Bulletin de Liaison Inter-Comités d'Action (B.L.I.C.A.), July 22, 1968.

35. Tract dated May 15, signed "La coordination de la région parisienne," cited in Schnapp and Vidal-Naquet, *Journal de la commune étudiant*, 475.

official commemorations of May have much to say about their history, about the dominant role played by women, for example, in their day-to-day workings.³⁶ But their existence is the best illustration of what Luxemburg called a "living dialectical evolution." By evoking Luxemburg, I do not want to suggest an explicit or conscious influence of her ideas, or anyone else's for that matter, on the behavior of May militants. I find it impossible to evaluate the role played by radical ideas or revolutionary theories transmitted from the exterior on the eruption and evolution of the insurrection. To do so, I would have to believe that consciousness precedes action or that a movement is born from a model, a blueprint, an idea, or a set of ideas, and not from a struggle—which I don't. The relation between ideas and modes of political action is always a conjunctural or situational one. Nevertheless, for the tendency I am describing, "Luxemburgian" seems to me more accurate than a range of shorthand terms—"anti-authoritarian" or "anarchist," for example—frequently used in writings about May, whose connotations veer toward a kind of chaotic individualism. In a mass movement, what matters is the concrete form that the real movement takes and the meaning individuals attribute to their actions. And what is most striking about revisiting, particularly from the vantage point of today, the actual documents of May—the films and documents that show the activities of the action committees in the high schools, to take one example—is the high degree of organization and coordination that prevailed. Within a mass movement new practices and new horizons cannot be separated. New practices like the "action committees" invented after May 13 and lived at the level of new social relations could only develop because the direction of the movement had become enlarged and modified. And the figuration of new horizons could only be accomplished because new political practices were being invented.

Thus came the return throughout the culture of May to what we could call a thematics of equality: overcoming the separation between manual and intellectual work, refusing professional or cultural qualification as a justification for social hierarchies and systems of political representation, refusing all delegation, undermining specialization—in short, the violent

36. The two best sources for the neighborhood *comités d'action* both show the equal role played by women. The documentary by the Collectif Arc, *CA 13: Comité d'Action du 13ème* (June 1968), focuses on one of the most successful of the committees, and its involvement supporting the strikers at the Citroën factory in the 13th *arrondissement*. Nicolas Daum's *Révolutionnaires dans un village parisien* contains interviews conducted twenty years later with members of the CA of the 3rd and 4th *arrondissements*, one of the most long-lasting of the committees. See also "Journal d'un comité d'action de quartier," in *Cahiers de Mai*, no. 3 (Aug.–Sept. 1968): 13–16.

disruption of assigned roles, places, or functions. By starting with a refusal of the roles or places predetermined by the social system, the May movement veered throughout its existence toward a critique of the social division of labor. Aron, to his credit, recognized the political violence contained in such contestation when he wrote: "Social organization will decompose on the day when individuals refuse to accept the solidity and division of labor, and refuse to submit to the order imposed by all on all."³⁷

There is evidence that a kind of "after-the-fact" Leninism emerged in some militants as part of the disappointments and bitterness associated with the end of May. To look back at a moment after it has passed—a moment when ministers, the prime minister, and the president of the republic had all vacillated and lost consistency, when the government had become a shadow and had all but evaporated into smoke or dust like the witch in the *Wizard of Oz*—is to raise the question in all its poignancy of a missed opportunity, despite the fact that the notion of "seizing state power" was for the most part not central to the workings of May. Writing ten years later, a Maoist militant offers the best description of the complex set of ambivalent emotions associated with the end of May and the defeat of the left in the June elections called by de Gaulle, an electoral defeat that mattered less at the time than the fact that the elections had taken place at all:

Then there was June. The right pulled itself together, the left had nothing to propose in the way of an ideology—even a reformist one. . . . I came out of it all with one idea: never do that again, never take power from the ground up [*à la base*], never seize speech without seizing power. I was overcome with a certain bitterness and resentment against the fragility of everything we had done. The question of seizing Power (with a capital "P"), political power—I felt it all the more strongly in that we had the impression of already having it in the streets, of doing what we liked.

The end of that experience was very painful. It's for that reason that all those discourses that tend toward taking partial powers, that propose ideas of molecular revolutions, leave me extremely skeptical. I profoundly loved May '68 for its antiauthoritarian aspect, but I had the profound feeling in June that grass-roots power [*à la base*] is not enough. I am pretty representative of a generation that has constantly oscillated between the two poles.³⁸

37. Aron, *Elusive Revolution*, 35.

38. Alain, cited in Giorgini, *Que sont mes amis devenus?* 88–89.