

Les Soixante-Huitards: Sex, Drugs, and Lame Poster Art

by Theodore Dalrymple



“Choses vues en mai,” “Things Seen in May,” by Jean Helion, 1968-69 (alamy.com)

My wife began her medical studies in Paris in the year of *les événements*. She remembers them mainly as having been great fun, a kind of break from boring everyday routine and responsibility, in effect a long street party. Later she had to re-sit her first-year exams. It turned out that even the *soixante-huitards* didn't want to be treated in the future by doctors who had failed their exams.

What Professor Mahoney says in his [Liberty Forum essay](#) is right, as Raymond Aron was right before him. May 1968 in Paris was indeed a psychodrama, more a mass tantrum than a revolution. But what was the tantrum about? After all, even tantrums are usually about something. They may be unjustified, but they do not usually arise *ex nihilo*.

Before May 1968, France was not a land of Latin insouciance

and sexual freedom, but rather highly disciplined and blessed (or cursed, according to taste) with a strong conventional morality. Though my wife's parents were nonbelievers, she was sent to a convent school to be taught by nuns who wore the traditional habits that now, alas, have completely disappeared, and she had her First Communion. Parental authority and control were still unchallenged and the moral code enforced by social pressure.

More than one factor conspired to make it impossible for this situation to continue. The first was the economic transformation of France. In 1968, France was 23 years into the *trente glorieuses*, that is to say the 30 postwar years in which the French economy grew at a quite unprecedented pace, and which changed France forever into a consumer society. What is perhaps surprising is that this growth continued through the colonial disasters and political instability (including a narrowly averted civil war) of the postwar years.

But for the young, the possibility of indulgence in pleasure, including, of course, in sexual pleasure, was greater than ever before in France's history. The sexual frustration caused by the old morality no longer had the justification that early pregnancy was to be avoided at all cost and abstinence was the best way of securing this. With the advent of the oral contraceptive, you could now be as promiscuous as you liked at very little risk of unwanted pregnancy. Any attempt to maintain the old morality without a purely prudential argument to back it up was bound to fail. You wouldn't have had to be a Freudian to notice the strong sexual component in *les événements* and of the ideology behind them (if the scattered ideas expressed by the *soixante-huitards* deserve to be called an ideology).

Refusal to Discuss the Nation's Past

The historical circumstances in which May 1968 erupted were also rather special. The parental generation had lived through

the Nazi Occupation, the defeat in Vietnam, and the Algerian war (which at that time had still not officially been recognized as a war, although hundreds of thousands had died in it, and hundreds of thousands of young Frenchmen had been sent to fight in it). The society was pervaded by *non-dits*, those things which were not said and, for social reasons, could not be said. Internal peace depended on the maintenance of mutual silence.

Books such as *La Question* (1958) by Henri Alleg, which dealt with the use of torture in Algeria, were banned. No one spoke of the deportation of the Jews during the Occupation (or for that matter, of the thousands of Jews saved by courageous private action); of the *épuration* that followed the Occupation that many felt had been more a settling of old political or personal scores than a matter of justice; of the massacres in Madagascar and Algeria; of the shameful treatment of the Harkis, the Algerians who fought on the French side, who, once they reached safety in France, were put in camps; of the Algerians killed in Paris, the remains of whom were dumped into the Seine.

To grow up in a society in which the old lines of authority were supposed to hold as if everything could go along in the same old way, as if religious mores could continue without religious belief, and yet in which almost everyone had something to hide or did not wish to remember, and which had undergone multiple shocks and disasters, must have been odd for anyone not obliged to be preoccupied with the day-to-day flux of ordinary existence. For the more educated and well-to-do classes in France, that is to say. The successes of the *trente glorieuses* were not enough to paper over the cracks, or rather fissures, in French society.

L'imagination au pouvoir

Charles Dickens tells us that children are able to detect, and are highly sensitive to, the slightest injustice; adolescents,

who have yet to understand the complexities of life, sniff out inconsistency and uncertainty in their elders and with similar acuity. They have neither the knowledge nor the experience to put their own anxieties or frustrations into perspective. Thus the 1968 generation had little awareness of just how pampered, protected, and fortunate it was. A slogan of the "revolutionaries" was "All power to the imagination," though in retrospect, if there was one thing that they truly lacked, it was imagination. They lacked it in both temporal directions, past and future. They did not even understand that it was necessary to *imagine* the past, which was the only standard of comparison which could have given them a sense of proportion about their own frustrations (which I suspect, as I have indicated, were mainly sexual).

I remember being shocked by the comparisons that were frequently being made between Charles de Gaulle and Adolf Hitler. There was a famous image of de Gaulle removing his mask (the face of de Gaulle) and revealing what was really behind it, namely Hitler. Like all human beings, no doubt, de Gaulle was flawed, but this seemed to me more like a gaseous eructation from the stomach than a manifestation of anything that could be called thought. The comparison displayed no imaginative grasp of the horrors of Nazism, and no desire to know anything of them, either—knowing, that is, in the sense of an imaginative grasp, which is surely necessary for there to be any true historical knowledge. Only someone with no real interest in the world, who was entirely egotistical, could have made such comparison so lightly, in the belief that he really meant it.

The same goes for their rhetorical espousal of Mao Zedong and Che Guevara as tutelary spirits. The *soixante-huitards* didn't have the faintest interest in what these men were actually like or what they had wrought. They were, to adapt Mao slightly, mythical beings onto whom the most beautiful characters could be projected, and never mind if they were

sadistic executioners responsible, in the former's case, for the deaths of millions. What are a few million dead Chinese to set against the so-called ideals of the Left Bank?

The claimed equivalence of the CRS (*les Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*) with Hitler's SS could only have pained the many Frenchmen who knew of the activities of the SS first-hand, but such a thought was beyond the imagination of those who urged "All power to the imagination." These moral equivalencies were essentially trivial and frivolous, at most self-pitying. Yet what cause had these people, these spoilt and even gilded youth, for self-pity?

Trauma-Envy

I suspect that, in a way, they envied their elders the very fact that they had lived through so much of world-historical importance. They themselves were condemned (as they saw it) to live an existence in which a university exam counted as a large event. They faced the prospect of an easy life of assured prosperity, without any transcendent purpose beyond personal enjoyment of material good fortune. The romanticism of youth finds this insufficient and even repellent. Pascal might have said that a lot of the trouble in 1968 arose from youth's inability quietly to accept its own good fortune.

The Parisian students were playing at revolution as children play at soldiers. I do not think they for a minute believed that they would be mowed down by troops as crowds in real revolutions tend to be: Mummy and Daddy were far too socially prominent for that to happen. They were being very, very naughty rather than revolutionary. It was obvious from the way they dressed and from their gestures that they were thinking how they would appear on television or in news photographs to the grown-ups.

This is not to say that the events, frivolous as in essence they were, had no real or abiding effects on the evolution of

French society and perhaps on Western society as a whole. I think they served to fix in the popular mind the romantic notion that adolescence is the high point of any human existence, a time of idealism rather than (more accurately) of egotism, which perhaps accounts for the seeming refusal of ever more people to relinquish the musical and sartorial tastes they formed in their youth. The area of France in which I live part of the year is full of geriatric *soixante-huitards*, recapturing their personal apogee of having manned the toy barricades, or at least of pretending they had. (One of the more tangible consequences of May 1968, was the asphaltting over of the cobblestones of Paris, so that they could never again be ripped up and thrown at the police.)

An Exhibition of Mediocrity

Earlier this month, I went to the [exhibition](#) at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts* in Paris of the posters manufactured during the May days and a few years afterwards. For me, at any rate, who am quite without emotional attachment to that time, it was a depressing experience. There were three reasons for this.

First was the extremely low intellectual level of the sloganeering. I have already mentioned the disgraceful false equivalences made between de Gaulle and the CRS, on the one hand, and Hitler and the SS on the other. The other slogans were positively pitiful. Expressed mainly in the purest *langue de bois*, they left nothing for Leonid Brezhnev's speechwriters to envy, such as "To work now is to work with a pistol in the back," or "Everyone united against Gaullist provocation."

The second reason was the militant conformism of the students in revolt, as revealed by the video footage shown at the exhibition. There is no one as conformist and shallow as a student in revolt.

Finally, the feeble graphic abilities of the art students of

the time. This was a bit of a surprise, but it would be obvious to any viewer within seconds of entering the exhibition. It suggests, at least to me, that the undermining of culture had begun well before May 1968, and was not caused by it.

Professor Mahoney's characterization of *les événements* is in essence is correct.

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