

# THE WEAPON OF CRITICISM

New Books  
on the 1960s

*"Be Realistic,  
Demand the Impossible"*

By N. W.

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**Sixty-Eight: The Year of the Barricades**

By David Caute  
(Hamish Hamilton, London, 1988)

Available in North America, Australia and New Zealand through Penguin Books.

French edition: **1968 Dans le Monde**  
(Laffont, Paris, 1988)

**Wir Haben Sie So Geliebt Die Revolution**

By Dany Cohn-Bendit  
(Athenaum, Frankfurt, 1987)  
Spanish edition: **La Revolución y Nosotros que la Quisimos Tanto** (Anagrama, Barcelona, 1987).

French edition: **Nous l'Avons Tant Aimée, la Révolution**  
(Editions Bernard Barrault, Paris, 1986).

This book is based on the four-part television series called **Revolution Revisited in the UK**.

**Génération, 1. Les années de rêve.**

**Génération, 2. Les années de poudre**

By Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman  
(Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1987)

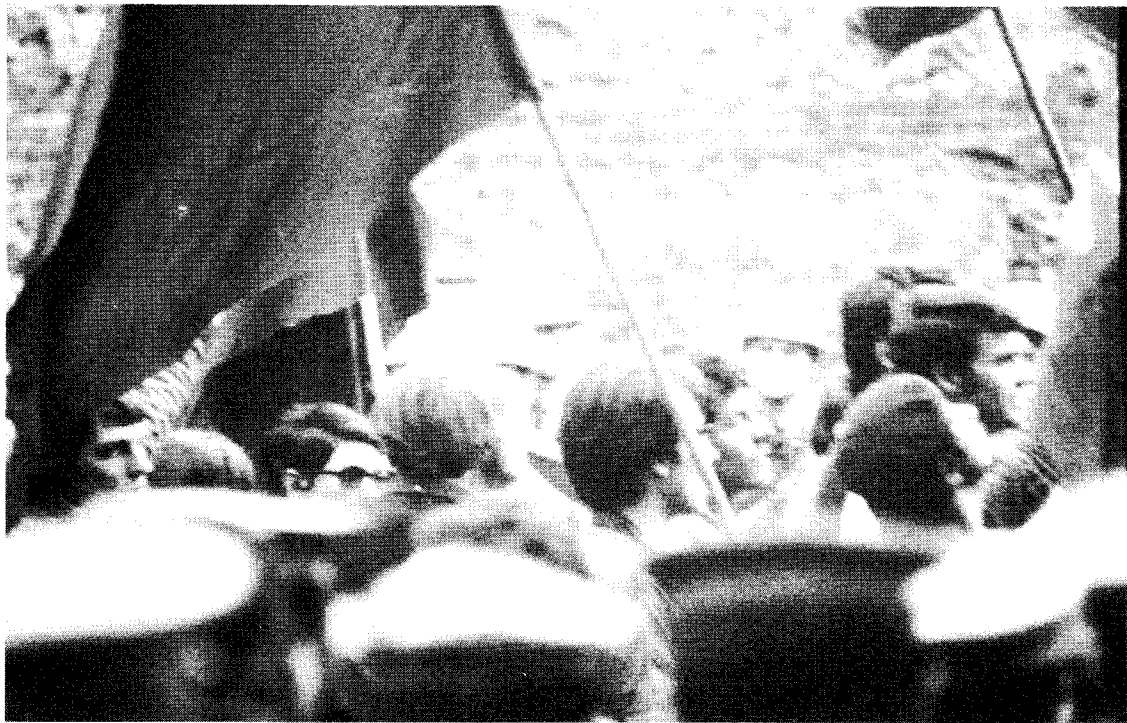
**Street Fighting Years**

By Tariq Ali  
(Collins, London, 1988)

**Red Flag/Black Flag**

By Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville  
(Ballantine Books, New York, 1968)

"Everybody" is talking about the 1960s lately, but it is hardly a question of universal nostalgia. That decade was not unanimously dearly beloved and those who come to commemorate it now assemble with opposing aims. Many of the mourners hated the deceased during his lifetime and have gathered with broad shovels to bury the 1960s as deeply as possible. They heap dirt upon the very idea that the world could or should be different than it is now. This heavy-handed revanchism needs refutation. More common are works by authors with 1960s credentials who seek the same ends in a more subtle and skillful manner, claiming to do excavation to reveal "the real Sixties." This needs some digging on our part as well. Then there are those who do come in praise of that period, but tend to look back on the richly diverse currents intertwined at that time through the eyes of "today" — from the point of view of the political stand current in most circles of today's Western intelligentsia — and neglect or slander the revolu-



Workers and students march in Milan, Italy, 1968.

tionary aspects amongst the complex convergence of contradictions that marked that decade. This needs some analysis.

In examining some recent books on this subject, our aim is not to undo that decade, as the bourgeoisie seeks to do, nor to somehow bring it back to life in what would inevitably be a reformist manner, as some suggest. The 1960s were not, for all their great achievements, marked by the full ripening of the objective and subjective conditions for revolution in imperialist countries, but they did see the rudiments of the elements that one day will bury the imperialist bourgeoisies there. We are partisans of the 1960s in that our aim is to carry the struggle through to the end. Looking at things from that point of view, this representative selection of books on the 1960s in the imperialist countries provides helpful and even essential material for coming to a deeper understanding of the questions involved; further, these different books complement each other in some useful ways.

### I Barricades in the Metropols

The British historian, novelist and journalist David Caute's *Sixty-eight* is by far the most ambitious book on the 1960s, as it claims to review the whole world during that dizzyingly event-filled year.

The book centres on 1968's

events in Britain, Czechoslovakia, France and the U.S., with chapters on Japan, Italy and West Germany as well, and some material on Belgium, Spain, Yugoslavia and Mexico. It opens, appropriately, with the January 1968 Tet offensive, the uprising that marked a turning point in the war against U.S. aggression in Vietnam and, as the author points out, "also unleashed the greatest wave of anti-American feeling around the world ever experienced." This is the author's political starting point as well: "The greatest evil of the age was the Vietnamese war." U.S. President Johnson, the U.S. "peace candidates" such as Robert Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern, all were determined to pursue this war, in various different ways, and all the major governments of Western Europe and Japan supported it overtly or covertly. This, for Caute, is what made it the year it was.

Caute's chronology begins with a flashback to the escalation of the war and of the antiwar movement in the U.S. in 1965, the massive teach-ins against the war in May and the first big anti-war demonstrations of that fall, including the blockading of military trains in Oakland, California. Then he fast-forwards to the May 1967 Bertrand Russell International Tribunal in Stockholm where dozens of Europe's leading intellectuals and

prominent Americans condemned the U.S. for war crimes in Vietnam. (Although French President de Gaulle sought to avoid endorsing the U.S. invasion of a country where France had recently been defeated, he prohibited the holding of the Tribunal in France. The Labour government forbid the Tribunal in Britain.) In January 1968, student demonstrators in Tokyo attacked the visiting U.S. warship *Enterprise* and stormed into Japan's Foreign Ministry building. The same month saw the beginning of a movement by students and intellectuals in Poland for artistic freedom, leading to bloody street clashes and university strikes in the following months.

On March 1st, in Rome, a city controlled by the revisionist Italian Communist Party, police unleashed an attack of unparalleled viciousness on students gathered on the long, steep Spanish Steps ascending a hill in the centre of the capital for a march to demand university reform. Burning police vehicles paralysed the city as students fought their way through. Two weeks later, intense fighting once again threw the city into chaos as students who had seized Rome University after that battle of the Spanish Steps clashed with police blocking their way to the American Embassy. Over half a million students at 26 universities were on strike. The occupation of the university at Tren-

to was followed by the seizure at Turin, where student "Red Guards" who modeled themselves on the youth of the Chinese Cultural Revolution turned the school into a focal point of rebellion against established Italian society which reached down into the bowels of the enormous Fiat car works in that city and horizontally throughout the country.

A decisive point in the radicalisation of the student movement in West Germany had already occurred in June 1967, when a policeman shot a student dead in front of the Berlin opera house during a demonstration against the West German government's support for the visiting Shah of Iran. In April 1968, bullets also cut down and nearly killed Rudi Dutschke, a leader of the German Socialist Student League (SDS), who had played an important role in the chain of militant antiwar protests in the winter of 1967-68. In the wake of this shooting, students carrying red banners and portraits of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the murdered leaders of the German communist uprising of 1919, clashed with police as they assaulted West Berlin's City Hall and the fashionable Kurfurstendamm. Similar events shook a dozen other West German cities. In Frankfurt, students singing the Internationale drowned out Good Friday hymns in St. Peter's Church. Despite the relatively advanced radicalism of the student movement in West Germany, however, it was not able to break out of the confines of the university during this period.

These events helped fan fierce French demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. A mass raid on the American Express office in Paris by secondary (high) school and university students led to serious arrests. Students at the University of Paris' barren new suburban facility in Nanterre, already involved in skirmishes with authorities over the regimentation of campus life, seized the administration tower on March 22nd to demand the release of the arrested demonstrators. A leader of the revisionist French Communist Party (PCF) called in by the dean to calm the students was chased off

campus. As conflicts escalated, the administration shut the school down. Students who considered themselves Maoists smashed an attempt by a South Vietnamese government official to speak in Paris' Latin Quarter. On May 3rd, 500 activists met at the Sorbonne in the Latin Quarter to demand the re-opening of Nanterre.

Riot police surround the Sorbonne courtyard and herd the students into rows of police vans. As the first of the ponderous black vehicles departs, trying to make its way through the Place de la Sorbonne in front of the university, students who had gathered outside to see what was happening block its path. Fighting erupts. The riot police find themselves suddenly under attack and surrounded. They lash out wildly, beating youth and other passers-by in the university district without discrimination. Young hands wielding iron bars or whatever else they can get dig through the blood-stained broken glass and the asphalt to pry up the ancient square paving stones below. The whole Latin Quarter becomes a battleground on a scale unseen in recent European history.

On March 17th, London witnessed its biggest antiwar march so far: 25,000 people attempted to storm the American Embassy at Grosvenor Square. In the following months, news of the revolt in France and the upheaval following the Berlin shooting of Rudi Dutschke also found echo in Britain.

In the U.S. that April 5th, millions of Black people rose up against police and 75,000 National Guard troops in 110 American cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King. Flames filled the horizon behind the White House; the fighting was the most serious to rock any major imperialist power since the second world war. Also that same month, Black and white students seized New York's Columbia University and turned it into a centre of revolt in that city. Sorties went to and fro between the campus and the Black and Puerto Rican ghettos. The city's middle classes were split into two hostile camps between those who

supported the students and those who supported the police against them.

The week of May 6th-13th in France saw the seizure of all of France's universities and many secondary schools. Some young workers, especially amongst the lower sections of the second worst-paid working class in the European Common Market at that time (after Italy), had already launched a prophetic series of violent strikes in the preceding months. Now trains from Paris' drab outskirts brought in young workers, unemployed youth, young men recently demobilised from military service and trade school youth, as well as a great many students from the academic *lycées* who had been organised through the nationwide *Comités Vietnam de Base*. They all took part in the debates and fighting in the Latin Quarter alongside the more elite university students. Something else was new in French political life: young women were only slightly less numerous than young men amongst the fighters.

The night of May 10th students and youth build dozens and dozens of cobblestone ramparts to protect the Latin Quarter from police attack. At 2 a.m., a police barrage of tear gas projectiles and hand grenades begins to pour down on the fortifications. Millions of people are following the events on live broadcast radio. Though by morning the police finally dislodge the rebels, "the night of the barricades" has brought about the political isolation of the government. The country is seized by the sentiment that the regime has become intolerable. Students and their friends take over the Sorbonne and commence a permanent political meeting that is to draw participants from every class and corner of the country. What is said there is taken seriously in all quarters.

At least a thousand people join the few dozen students who had seized the Fine Arts School and turned it into a poster factory. Working in teams of 200, and submitting each design to the Sorbonne General Assembly, during the six-week occupation they were able to put out 350 different posters in print

runs of tens of thousands. The imagination, impatience and forcefulness with which they mocked authority incited astonishment and delight below and grim horror above.

The PCF stepped forward to seize the mantle of "the party of order" from the hands of the encircled ruling Gaullist party. From the beginning the revisionists had denounced the Nanterre and Sorbonne students as "provocateurs." The right blamed everything on the "Jew red" Nanterre student leader Dany Cohn-Bendit; PCF leader Georges Marchais echoed this by painting the devil behind all the disorder as the "German anarchist Cohn-Bendit." The PCF was to support the government in banning Cohn-Bendit from France. But the PCF also had its own interests and methods.

In an attempt to both put itself at the head of the rising tide and calm the waters, the PCF called a 24-hour general strike May 13th. In fact, strikes were to paralyse the country for over a month, with about 10 million going out. This situation was extremely complicated. Some factories closed because the PCF union leadership wanted to keep "the ultra-leftist plague," as they called it, away from "their" workers and retain the initiative. For instance, the powerful revisionist leadership of the CGT union at the Billancourt Renault car factory near Paris thought that seizing the plant and chaining its doors tight was a fine way to keep out student radicals. Nevertheless, some young workers climbed out onto the roofs to fraternise with the students. In other factories radical influences predominated amongst the strikers.

Such was the power of this upswell that tumultuous mass meetings were called by people in almost every conceivable walk of life. A mania for organisation swept the people. Housing estate (project) housewives, office employees and highly paid professionals, astronomers and museum curators, hospital staff members and people in the most varied workplaces and neighborhoods set up "action committees" to organise the practical needs of the struggle as well as the

details of daily life, since official authority seemed paralysed. By the end of May, 450 such committees had sprung up in Paris alone in loose coordination with the Sorbonne General Assembly. Film directors staged a revolt and took over the Cannes Film Festival, from where their action committee issued a revolutionary manifesto. Other action committees sprouted in France's every nook and cranny. French Prime Minister Pompidou, his voice weary and heavy with pessimism, warned against impending civil war. Historians would later call this the first day of France's "dangerous week."

Two days later, on May 25th, the government, employers' federation and unions met to negotiate a country-wide pact patterned on the 1936 accords that had helped contain the turbulent proletarian unrest of that time. Now they agreed to raise the minimum wage (the prevailing wage for many workers) by over a third at one blow, to hike other wages 10% overall and to cut the workweek from 48 hours to 40. (As Lenin once pointed out, in times of crisis economic reforms are the easiest for the bourgeoisie to grant.) Yet when the PCF took these agreements to the plant it considered its stronghold, Billancourt Renault, they were rejected. Even stronger rebuffs came from other combative factories where pro-Mao students had "gone to the workers" during the previous months. Carrying portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao, students marched from the Latin Quarter to Billancourt with the banner, "the hands of the workers will take from the fragile hands of the students the banner of revolt against the regime."

But the strike movement could not in and of itself issue a real challenge to the whole bourgeois state, despite the depth of the political crisis in which the government was caught. On May 27th, the same day these proposed accords were announced, an enormous rally at the Charléty sports stadium — street demonstrations had been banned — brought together some student and union leaders and forces from the Socialists to pro-

pose "a political solution" to the crisis: Pierre Mendes France, the "man of the left" who had led France in the beginning of its war against Algeria, clamoured to be made head of a "provisional government" pending elections. "Today," a Socialist trade union leader proclaimed, "revolution is possible." Actually, what they proposed was a change of regime *without* a revolution in the same kind of manoeuvre the parliamentary left had once denounced as a "putsch" when de Gaulle used it to become president in 1958.

May 29th, President de Gaulle, his wife and aides climb into three helicopters and vanish. The only words reporters can get from him are directed at his wife: "Hurry up, Madame, I beg you." Panic brings the country's propertied classes to the edge of madness; on the streets the mood is the greatest jubilation imaginable. In fact, de Gaulle's helicopter took him to a secret meeting in Baden-Baden, West Germany, with the commanders of the French Army. Plans were made to bring 20,000 troops from France's army stationed in West Germany to deal with Paris. The military men who had once opposed de Gaulle's end to the war in Algeria were to be pardoned, including the general who had almost been successful in having the president shot.

The next day de Gaulle issued the country's propertied classes an ultimatum: close ranks around him or else. If he were toppled, the pro-Soviet PCF would end up in power. This argument was accepted even by the Socialists, who had managed to co-opt a section of the student movement and others under the guise of supporting the revolt. The Socialists feared that under the conditions of the time any government formed by the opposition was liable to be dominated by the PCF. The PCF, too, pulled back; this kind of revolt against Gaullism was neither liable to bring them the shared place in the ruling alliance they sought, nor was it in the interests of the Soviet Union and its allies. De Gaulle's men are said to have appealed to the PCF leadership to stand with them to protect France against the Socialists who

would subordinate French foreign policy to U.S. interests. Thus all the reactionary parties, right and "left," agreed: it was de Gaulle or disaster.

In response to the president's call, the swank Champs Elysées swarmed with hundreds of thousands of well-dressed men and women thronging to support their government, their fatherland and their God. Maids were obliged to march with their masters. But there were people of the lower classes as well. The "party of fear," as the press called them, could organise too: the Gaullist Committees for the Defense of the Republic were at least as serious about preparing for civil war as the rebels that threatened them.

The temporary confluence of the Socialists, the PCF and its unions and student radicals collapsed. By mid-June, the police were once again to have the Sorbonne to themselves. But at the Flins Renault plant, 50 kilometres from Paris, where revolutionary students had worked and established links during the preceding winter, 1500 students slipped through police blockades to join several thousand workers fighting to drive out the riot police who had seized their factory. The fighting lasted several days in the woods in the surrounding countryside. A 17-year-old Maoist student was drowned by riot police. Once again, the student quarter in Paris exploded into flames. In the following days, two more workers were killed fighting riot police at the Peugeot plant at Sochaux. Battles raged at the Cleon gearbox plant and at a non-union Citroen plant where over a third of the workers were immigrants living in company barracks.

The government ordered all the organisations associated with the rebellion dissolved and moved to arrest their leaders. The PCF, the Socialists and others prepared to fight their battle in parliament. A new stage had been reached in the confluence of workers and students, and two roads were clearly posed.

These events sent the world spinning even faster in the following months. The Soviet Union moved to quench disorder in its part of Europe. In August, Soviet tanks began

pouring across an air bridge into Czechoslovakia. The Czech party leadership had advocated a certain nationalism and other reforms, but it feared disorder worse than the invaders. It advised non-resistance.

A week later, the cracks in U.S. society widened abruptly in the wake of wave upon wave of violent police attacks on demonstrations against the Vietnam war at the Democratic Party's Chicago Convention. In turn, the fact that a section of the U.S. ruling class was coming to see the need to end the war had an impact on the development of the antiwar movement and divergences within it, as two roads posed themselves in the U.S., too, though not exactly in the same manner as in France. On the one hand there was a powerful attraction exerted by the Democratic Party candidates who promised to put an end to the war — as in France, the idea arose that elections held out the promise of quick victory for the goals of the mass movement. On the other, consciously revolutionary contingents were taking shape amongst the Black and other oppressed nationalities and in a student movement very influenced by this development, in the context of a general discrediting of existing American society.

The Black Panther Party (BPP) had erupted onto the national political scene in 1967 when shotgun-toting young Blacks uniformed in black leather coats and berets marched into the California state legislature to protest legal moves to further disarm the masses. The Panthers gathered increasing influence amongst Black proletarians and others more widely in the San Francisco Bay Area and in nearly every American city with a Black population. In September 1968, Panther leader Huey Newton was sentenced to prison and the police shot up the BPP headquarters in the first of what was to be a long and deadly series of police assaults aimed at exterminating the Panthers. A violent and prolonged conflict beginning in November 1968 with a strike at San Francisco State College pit Black and other minority students and white radicals, many of them influenced by the Panthers, against a

school administration acting under the orders of California Governor Reagan and the government. Each side was able to rally considerable political strength amongst different sections of the population in the San Francisco Bay Area and around the country.

The October 1968 London demonstration against the war, far more massive than the previous March, also saw an increasing political polarisation. An intense debate boiled up in the London School of Economics and other occupied universities and more broadly about whether or not to attack the American Embassy this time. Although Wilson's Labour government had firmly supported the U.S. in Vietnam, the left wing of the Labour Party was able to dictate terms of the march in return for its support. A minority contingent went ahead and ferociously assaulted the American Embassy.

In West Germany, too, the student movement faced similar debates amidst tear gas and water cannons. Italy was shut down by events bearing some similarity to May-June in France, though on a smaller scale. In July 1968 Japanese students had seized 54 universities after the crash of a U.S. Air Force plane into Kyusho University. The tenor of the times was such that students armed with staves and helmets fought to prevent the wreckage from being cleared, because they wanted it to remain as a sign of the struggle against U.S. bases. By November, the Faculty Senate at Tokyo University voted to resign collectively to support student demands.

This brief summary is meant to give something of an idea of what makes the *Caute* book fun to read and of the year itself (although this recapitulation also uses some material from all the books cited in this review). It also should give something of an idea of the limits of *Caute's* approach. This is not really a book about 1968 in the whole world, though it is hard to imagine how it could have been kept to 400 pages or any manageable size if it had been. In fact it focuses on the student movement in the U.S. and Western Europe.

This would be a good thing to do, if one were to do so openly and to infuse such a specific focus with an understanding of the world's wider events that were shaping the development of the events that Caute is considering, but this is not the case. It is justifiable for Caute not to centre his narrative on the third world and other international factors. But it is not justifiable to dismiss them. Though Caute gives importance to the 1968 Tet offensive, he does not draw the vital conclusion that the events of that year in the imperialist countries would have been far different if it had not been for the vast revolt of the masses of the oppressed nations of the world against imperialism and the military defeat that the head of Western imperialism was facing. Furthermore, what if the USSR had not restored capitalism and become imperialist? What if Mao had not launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in order to save socialism in China and support the world revolution?

At the same time, Caute does not examine the underlying contradictions and trends within the imperialist countries themselves that, in this overall world context, gave all the talk about revolution there a material basis. Further, he treats these events as though contradictions in all the Western bloc imperialist countries were the same (except for fascist Spain), and so fails to provide an explanation for the important differences between the processes in different countries. These factors sap some of the life out of his account. The reader is swamped with one image after another of tens of thousands of students charging police lines, until after a while it all tends to blur together from Tokyo to Turin. (The material on Japan, West Germany and Italy is especially unsatisfying.) In real life, the events of 1968 were sharp, varied and particular.

Another problem that stems from the arbitrary uniformity Caute imposes on these historic events has to do with differences in time and tempo as well as other national particularities. In other words, 1968 was overall a rather key year, but it was not, as Caute says, a prelude

to universal ebb. Spain and Portugal were to undergo their "1960s" in the mid-1970s; the seventies in Italy, also, were years of floodtide, especially through the first half of the decade. 1968 in Britain was more middle class than elsewhere, but the following decade saw the lower classes issue violent challenges to the order. Even in countries like the U.S. where there is good reason to use 1968 as a point of reference, Caute's identification of 1968 as the high point and the rest as a quick descent into insignificance stems mainly from the author's own view that the more radical things became, the less worthy they are of his consideration.

Thus the development of organisations influenced by or attempting to take up Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought is beyond Caute's limits, not only for chronological reasons (since in many countries this was more a post-1968 phenomenon) but basically for political ones (since prominent forces in France and Italy, Black Panthers in the U.S and others already were invoking this ideology during the period Caute covers). For all his cant about "Red Fascism" consisting of seeking "to smash all thought other than Mao's," Caute himself does not hesitate to consider his way of thinking as the only one that can be considered thought.

Caute's views are most sharply revealed in his juxtaposition of events in the East and West blocs. What he sees as the "responsible" movements of the East bloc, where students sought above all, he says, to enjoy a liberal university with a worthy library, are thrown into contrast with the wild behaviour of students in the West who seemed to consider the university at best a good place to protest. Apparently without the slightest fear of appearing ridiculous, he informs the reader that Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and China's Red Guards cannot be considered a real part of 1968 because they were "instruments of the state," whereas he devotes praise and several chapters to Czech head of state Dubcek and those around him, including several dozen generals, who were ignominiously pushed aside by the

Russians. Thus the liberal Caute who opposes the dictatorship of the proletariat in China does not hesitate to defend the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, as long as it is linked to the imperialism he favours.

We don't really come to understand much about the East bloc in this account, although Caute was there at the time. It seems to be taken up mainly as a foil. As for what happened in the West bloc imperialist countries, his understanding seems to be this: there was the war in Vietnam, "a blunder and a crime," which was bad; and there was justifiable protest against it. There were unjust fetters on students and intellectuals and anachronistic repression in social mores, and that too had to be opposed. Insofar as things were restricted to these targets, and insofar as the forms of struggle were not too violent and did not take a turn unacceptable to the present mood of people like Caute, he is generous with his descriptions. What he hates most of all is the radicalisation and the polarisation within that upsurge between those who were persuaded that the war in Vietnam and other evils were "blunders" that could be corrected in a society they found basically to their liking, and others who found their society intolerable and came to see these evils as part of an unreformable imperialist system that needed overthrowing.

For Caute, it was this growing radicalisation that killed the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly, he says (apparently referring to the U.S.), because Black militants, feminists and other *unreasonable* people were breaking up the "unity" that had prevailed: "This fracture in the bonding vision of the sixties proved fatal." Reading between the lines one can also see that he is greatly influenced by the turn against street demonstrations taken by some bourgeois circles who for various reasons had supported some of them.

Caute seems to feel that social movements that had started for good reasons suddenly lost their brakes around 1968 and went careening off; it is as if the intelligentsia in the imperialist countries

suddenly and inexplicably went mad. Why were renowned professors drawn to students who sought to burn down the archives? How could the wife of a respected orchestral conductor invite fellow rich people to a fund-raising party for Black radicals who quoted Mao and carried guns? At the same time that he describes what he obviously conceives of as horrifying and almost incomprehensible excesses, Caute gives very little importance to the subjective factor, to the ideas and political lines that animated the movements he describes. The overall result of all this is that the times and their protagonists seem far more strange and removed from today's reality than they should. The underlying reason why he does not care to consider their thinking worthy of examination is that he disagrees with it whilst seeking to preserve the illusion that he himself has no ideology.

His approach leads him to rely almost exclusively on secondary sources, on establishment journalists and analysts of the time, especially in regard to countries other than Britain (which gets more attention than necessary). Those who were young then — and far more importantly, those who were representative of the various trends at work — are not given much chance to speak.

For instance, Black people are treated as threatening or amusing; the revolt of the oppressed nationalities in the U.S. and other imperialist countries is never taken seriously. Caute never really examines the Black Panther Party in the U.S. An examination of a revolutionary organisation with a significant base amongst Black proletarians would undermine his assertion that the upsurge of the 1960s in the imperialist countries remained isolated from the workers. When he does mention the Panthers, it is only to quote the notorious white dandy Tom Wolfe telling us that they do not have much influence in the ghetto. To give another shameful example, Caute also blithely dismisses the women's liberation movement: it gets tossed aside at the end of a chapter billed, in order of importance, "Films, Sex

and Women's Liberation." A reader dependent on this book alone for knowledge would never guess that there is anything wrong in the dominant relations between men and women or what a powerful role the rebellion against women's oppression played in the general revolt against unjust social relations. Caute acts as though the really important demand was for more of the same kind of sexual relations that already characterise bourgeois society, which amounts to the same kind of tawdry titillation that most of the snickering bourgeois establishment exhibited in the face of the seriousness of the youth of that time.

Because of Caute's stand and that of the sources he chooses to depend on, his book presents a view of 1968 as seen through the eyes of people who were both vaguely sympathetic to that upsurge and vaguely threatened by it. Although they didn't exactly stand with "the Man" (authority), still they were ideologically "over 30." (Thirty was sometimes jokingly referred to in the 1960s as the dividing line age between youth and "the man," though more than a few elderly men and women stood firm for revolution whilst some younger types were just waiting to "get off the bus" of that upsurge at the first stop.) Caute's general amazement at the "weirdness" of the times brings to mind a character from a 1968 Bob Dylan song, also a magazine reporter: "Something is happening here and you don't know what it is, do you, Mr Jones?"

The irony is that such people played an important role in the 1960s in the imperialist countries. Not that their views were really much more radical than now. But in the context of those times, when the upheaval of the world's exploited and oppressed, within the imperialist countries as well as the countries they fattened on, threw the idea of revolution on the agenda — to various degrees, and with varying degrees of understanding, in different countries — such people often failed to give the ruling classes the unconditional support they so desperately needed, or even sided with the wretched of the earth.

Otherwise, the question of seizing revolutionary political power in the imperialist countries could not have even been posed.

To Caute, looking back with mixed nostalgia and loathing, and neglecting the factors that made even university professors go a little wild at times during those years, it was the spiraling interplay of unreasoned repression and unreasonable radicalism and the capitulation of well-meaning intellectuals to the latter in the face of the former that brought about today's "triumph of the profit motive and the idolisation of market forces in the era of Reagan and Thatcher." In other words, extremism bred extremism; the tragedy was that the centre did not hold. The 1960s movements, by fighting against the liberal-social democratic-Labourite forces, are responsible for the triumph of the open right of today.

First, the facts Caute himself marshals against the American Democrats, British Labourites, European revisionists and continental social democrats militate against this conclusion. Second, open reaction is no more the only card in the hands of the bourgeoisies today than it was in the 1960s. Consider the case of France, which in contradiction to Caute's "backlash" theory is now under a Socialist president; its current Prime Minister led the Charléty rally at which the Socialists proclaimed "the revolution" in May 1968. Still there is nothing less reactionary about France than Britain or America and it might even be accurate to say that in the wake of 1968 the de Gaulle government instituted more reforms than the Socialists when they came in 13 years later.

The often bare face of reaction in the 1980s cannot be blamed on the 1960s. The point is that although the imperialist ruling classes never stopped feeding on human flesh, during the 1960s they were politically and ideologically on the defensive in many countries. There was the wide-spread feeling that policies of the governments, life in these societies and often imperialism itself was not tolerable and did not have to be tolerated, that the world should and could be turned upside

down. To different degrees in different places, not only the Reagans and Thatchers but also their rivals within the system were also exposed, and the system itself was brought under attack. Today the imperialists in every country are furiously firing their political artillery to wipe out the traces the exposures and experiences of that period left amongst the masses, whilst also building up openly reactionary political currents amongst strata who were often made to shut up in the 1960s. The same trends are operating in all the imperialist countries, though in different forms.

It cannot be concluded that this period and the political crises of the regimes did not last because the 1960s radicals went "too far."

As the spiraling upsurge in the imperialist countries began to run into serious obstacles, middle forces in society who had been drawn into protests against some specific and immediate outrages were not able to go over to a vision radical enough to seek the total transformation of imperialist society, and amongst more radical forces there was a tendency to tailor their work to suit these vacillating allies. If there is a single fault that should be found with the radicals of the 1960s in these countries, it was that too often their understanding and goals were not radical enough. They were not clear enough on the strategy and means for revolution; they did not thoroughly enough grasp the nature of their societies or correctly analyse who could be relied upon for revolution, who were allies and who could at best be won to friendly neutrality. Rather, many radicals tended themselves to see the masses of people in these societies as homogeneous, just as Caute does. *They did not go far enough.*

The charges those like Caute lay against the 1960s can only be substantiated if it is shown that the course the most radical forces of that decade embarked upon was fundamentally wrong because their basic premise of the possibility of ever making revolutionary change was unfounded. The argument goes like this: there was no revolution, therefore revolution was impossible, therefore working within the

system, as hopeless as that may seem even according to the facts Caute supplies, is still the best that can be hoped for.

## II France Towards Civil War?

Hamon and Rotman, despite their backgrounds in radical journalism, share Caute's basic premise. The stated theme of their two-volume *Génération* is that what the far left of the 1960s in France mistook for a revolutionary situation was really a *mutation* in France society, a rapid forced march towards its modernisation and a change of management between two very different generations.

For the most part, their two-volume history written in a semi-novelistic style is organised around the collective biography of students from Paris' most elite schools who were to form the leadership core of the Proletarian Left (Gauche Prolétarienne — GP) and the Trotskyite Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR), perhaps the two best known organisations to come out of France's 1968. (The Communist Party Marxist-Leninist of France [PCMLF], which like the GP considered itself Maoist, and other such groups which arose in the 1970s, are excluded in this account.) Most of the specific figures chosen to represent this "political generation" on whom the authors focus have either become the new management, fully co-opted into the upper reaches of French society today (like the newspaper publisher Serge July, who is one of the main characters in this work as well as playing a starring role in Cohn-Bendit's book), or were broken or died. (Such as Pierre Goldman, who, according to the authors, seems to have shared many of July's more radical views during the 1960s and early seventies, but who was mysteriously gunned down in the streets of Paris before his ambiguities could be resolved. Goldman's 1979 funeral, attended by former comrades who only a few years later were to begin entering government ministries, forms the book's prologue.)

One cannot disassociate the book's methodological shortcomings from the authors' views. To say

that this work is self-serving would be an understatement. It is an apologia for a large section of those who have currently established offices in the corridors of power. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is a part of the current government's authorised biography. Still the book is broad, varied and detailed enough to allow the reader to come to understand a number of points. Whilst its principal characters are chosen according to the authors' own political preconceptions, in contrast to the Caute book one of Hamon and Rotman's chief merits is that they detail some of the thoughts, attitudes and political lines in play during that period, if only to allow their chosen protagonists to repent. For this reason, unlike Caute's old men's account of the sixties, in the Hamon-Rotman book one gets a real whiff of those "years of dreams and gunpowder."

(These differences between the two books can also be understood, in a very limited way, as having to do with differences between what happened in Caute's Britain, and France, where there was revolutionary upheaval on a far greater scale. Here it is worth recommending the now out-of-print book *Red Flag/Black Flag*, a short and very readable account of France's May 1968. Written by two young correspondents for a British magazine while barricade embers still smoldered, it is a good example of what some people in Caute's profession thought in those days, since it warmly supports what it calls "the revolution" without abandoning the class prejudices for which Caute insists on being a spokesman.)

The first volume of Hamon and Rotman's account opens with a long train ride carrying a delegation of very young *lycée* members of the PCF's youth organisation to a Moscow Youth festival to be presided over by Khrushchev. At that time the PCF cast its shadow over an enormous part of French society; it was taken for granted that any worker, student or intellectual who was serious and not reactionary would follow it. Yet there was nothing revolutionary about it and there had not been for a long time.



This fact was to become all the more stark during France's vicious war against Algeria, which the PCF at first supported and never thoroughly opposed. The youth in Hamon-Rotman's account carried out clandestine work in support of the Algerian liberation movement; the PCF employed the dual tactics of forbidding and sabotaging such work while also seeking to prevent them from rupturing with the party. The PCF's Union of Communist Youth (UJC) undergoes a crisis. Some members leave to take up Trotskyism, which enables them to become a sort of disloyal opposition to the PCF. Under the influence of the Cultural Revolution in China, the UJC(ML) is formed in 1967, and students seeking to "serve the people" begin to organise secondary-school committees against the war in Vietnam and get hired in factories. There is the explosion of May 1968: small groups of revolutionaries unexpectedly find themselves at the head of a mass revolt they had hardly dreamt of and which initially the UJC(ML) had opposed because of the fear that the student movement would swamp the workers. When this sort of economism was swept aside by the development of events during the spring and summer of 1968, the UJC(ML) fell apart, to be supplanted in the fall of that year by the Proletarian Left.

The salvos of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966 had had enormous impact on people in revolt everywhere. But there was a particularity to the way it became a dividing line in France between the "Marxist-Leninist" PCF — a major pillar of the system — and those opposed to the existing order. This, however, did not mean that all those who called themselves Maoists grasped or even accepted Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought. After May 1968, the whole range of the most radical forces opposed to the regime came to be called Maoists, or even more generically, "les maos," by friend and foe alike. This common term encompassed very different political tendencies, even including people who called themselves "anarchist Maoists" as

well as more serious trends.

For Hamon and Rotman, in looking back, what was good about "les maos" was that they discredited the PCF and thus cleared the way for today's Socialist Party to come to office unencumbered by the necessity for any alliance with the pro-Soviet party. (Before 1968 the pro-Soviet party's domination of the reformist political terrain dwarfed the splintered fractions of today's ruling Socialists.) What was bad about "les maos," according to Hamon and Rotman, was almost everything they did before the final collapse of almost all the forces borne out of 1968 at the time of Socialist President Mitterrand's election in 1981. Obviously, this question of good and bad can only be settled by class criteria. But the authors have put their fingers on some truth in insisting upon the heterogeneity of much of what passed for Maoism in France during this period. This is well expressed by a cynical joke. In Italy, the revisionist PCI had explicitly announced its departure from Leninism and distanced itself from the USSR before the Sixties storms broke. The French party, though equally revisionist, had adopted a more pro-Soviet and pseudo-Leninist hard edge, whilst still taking credit for the 20 years of labour peace that had prevailed in France until 1968. A French "pro-Italian" PCF dissident in this book remarks to a fellow whose admiration for Mao coexists with the rather different political thinking of the Cuban revolution, "We're all Maoists because we all oppose the Soviet Union." As one reads on, especially in the second volume (dealing with the period from autumn 1968 through the mid-70s), the reader is increasingly aware of opposite currents vying for the Maoist label and vastly different class standpoints converging in opposition to the PCF.

(Again, Serge July is a good example, since he emerged from within the "Italian" current in the PCF in the mid-60s, took some of these ideas with him into the Proletarian Left he helped found and lead, and continues to express them in his daily newspaper *Liberation* which has become a pillar of the "hip"

faction of the French establishment and the present government.)

"This is only the beginning," proclaimed one of that year's popular slogans. But the beginning of what? The "revolt against the regime" was fraught with ambiguity. There were different class interests involved. In this account, the reader gets a glimpse of how this operated even within the still mainly student organisations that grew to be enormous in the wake of May 1968. There was conflict between some political veterans whose entry into the movement was preceded by the acquisition of the prerequisites for bourgeois success, on the one hand, and on the other many secondary school students who came from a much more mixed and often dispossessed class background, who had not had the same revisionist political training, and whose involvement in the revolutionary movement meant jumping off the educational steps that might lead up from the shop floor. But everything cannot be reduced to the class origins and positions of the leaders of this movement.

Hamon and Rotman are indignant at the accusation that their protagonists were simply rich kids having their fling before taking their appointed places in the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Their indignation has a correct side to it, even if this does turn out to be the trajectory followed by many of the particular individuals the authors chose to focus on. After all, it was the PCF who used the fact that the students were headquartered in the most elite schools to argue that the May revolt should be considered an anti-worker provocation. The ideas put forward by these young intellectuals were taken up by millions, including proletarians, and they must be seriously examined.

There are some especially vivid sections describing the attempts by student radicals to "go to the workers," and different sections of workers themselves who sought to join up with revolutionary students. One gets a sense of some of the complexity of the situation amongst different strata of those the revolutionaries tended to lump together as "the workers." The portrait is iron-

ic: on the one hand, young workers, often in desperate economic conditions and in factories that had sprung up in formerly rural areas, factories where the PCF's CGT union or any other of the unions were weak, sometimes fighting their way through police lines to link up with students in a way more likely to lead to arrest than to a pay raise, and on the other, students whose revolutionary impulses were usually mixed with the idea that a revolutionary movement should centre on better wages and working conditions for the wage slaves. "We Will Have Our 70 Centimes," screams the front page of an early issue of the *Cause du Peuple* (later to become the organ of the GP). This slogan concerning an insignificant wage increase is illustrated by a photo of a proletarian about to tear a riot cop apart — at a time when some sections of workers themselves had rejected the idea that they could be bought for many times that amount.

One idea, prevalent amongst many of the people Hamon and Rotman focus on, was that as long as the unionised workers were in some way or another under PCF leadership, the PCF could forbid proletarian revolution and the only way to overcome this situation was by years of proving to be better trade unionists than the revisionists. For the UJC(ML), the slogan and proposed immediate task was to "build a class struggle CGT."

When events themselves outstripped this line, another which came to the fore in the GP was that "civil war" should be prepared for by fusing violent confrontations with the day-to-day struggle of the most "marginal" workers, especially immigrants, young unskilled workers and women, and secondary school students, until such time as these "detonators" would explode and the majority of the French people would spontaneously rise up in armed revolt and seize power.

Some initial class analysis of the workers themselves was done, contrasting the interests and mood of the skilled workers, salaried workers and foremen whom the CGT tended to consider most important, and the unskilled labourers and

production line workers, and the concept of a "real proletariat" was raised, but this glimmering was overshadowed by the idea that not only the whole of the workers but even 90% of the people could and had to be won to the revolutionary banner before there could be any revolution. Their approach had more in common with a classless populism — in some ways, with the French reformist parties, minus their insistence on elections — than the Leninist understanding that "imperialism inevitably leads to a 'shift in class relations,' to a split in the working class between the oppressed and exploited proletariat and an upper section of the workers benefiting from and in league with the imperialist bourgeoisie," to quote the 1984 *Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement*. They talked about civil war, but at the same time failed to see the possibilities for successful proletarian revolution in the elements that were already in view of a real civil war, between two camps of the people.

Here the regime was in crisis, the middle classes were sharply divided for and against it, and a section of proletarians with nothing to lose was stirring intensely. Why was there no real insurrectionary attempt, an attempt at a second Paris Commune? The degree to which the objective situation was fully ripe is a question that deserves very serious study; at any rate, it is clear that the revolutionary forces themselves were very weak, especially at the moment when the regime was most in crisis, and that this in turn was a factor (though not necessarily the key factor) in holding back the ripening of conditions towards a revolutionary situation. But the main aspect of this weakness was not the numerical smallness of the revolutionary forces, or even their organisational preparations, although the weaknesses in these terms were considerable. Primarily it had to do with the political and ideological lines that guided them.

These were not errors that could be easily corrected, given the basic problems in the stand, viewpoint and method espoused by the GP and others. Hamon and Rotman

give some revealing anecdotes in this regard, and quote extensively from the book *Toward Civil War* which served as the GP's manifesto. This book upholds Mao and the Cultural Revolution, which was (and continues to be) a touchstone question dividing Marxism from revisionism, but at the same time it tends to see the question of supporting armed struggle as the basic dividing line, which leads it to mix up the opposite political and ideological (and military) lines of Mao and Che Guevara and neglect the crucial question of the *goals* of the revolution. This is where the GP's conception got most fuzzy at best.

In defining those goals, Mao is opportunistically portrayed as opposed to Stalin, rather than determined to go even further than Stalin in the all-around transformation of society under the dictatorship of the proletariat. In fact the whole concept of the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was central in the Cultural Revolution the GP upheld and equally central to revolution in France, is reduced to the common revolt against "authority" in both countries. What is most missing is exactly what was to be proletarian about the revolution in France — what goals differentiated proletarian politics from the reformist politics of the Socialists (or pro-Soviet revisionists) whose call for "revolution" envisioned the strengthening of French imperialism.

This was combined with equally eclectic notions about revolutionary strategy. *Towards Civil War* proclaims that "the revolution" will come in 1970 or 1971. Our intention here is not to mock their impatience, for it was far better than the stand of the Trotskyites, for instance, who after May concluded that since the regime had resolved its immediate crisis nothing should be allowed to interfere with building an electoral following. It was also better than that of the anarchists, who lost their bearings completely when the storm centre shifted away from the universities and often ended up tailing the Socialists and other reformist union leaders who tried to channel people into the institutionalisation of vari-

ous forms of factory and university councils and away from the question of overthrowing the government. (Today the ex-anarchist Cohn-Bendit expresses regret for not having supported the Socialists' Charléty rally.) But what was the GP's plan to overthrow the government?

They conceived of civil war as the result of a spontaneous process whose development their actions would spur on, not as an armed insurrection organised by the vanguard party based on proletarians with nothing to lose. Their idea of what was to be done did not centre on the political and organisational preparation of the conditions for organising such an insurrection. What was called for was to conduct "the daily anticapitalist struggle" (strikes, occupations of workplaces, apartment building takeovers, etc.) in an "offensive rather than defensive manner," as though such struggles could ever do more than play a role in *preparing* a real, military offensive to overthrow the government. Instead they proclaimed "the revolutionary mass movement is the people's army" and "the place where the masses seize politics and make history" — glossing over the difficult but basic question of how to go over from the mass political and economic struggles to something qualitatively different, the organisation of a revolutionary *army* and the seizure of state power which would allow the masses to make history in whole new way. Even at the beginning the GP denigrated the need for a Leninist vanguard party, which is the only way that such a revolution could be organised, and these views would come increasingly to the fore.

The March 4 1972 funeral of Pierre Overney showed just how far the revolutionary movement had surged forward in the less than four years since "the night of the barricades" in the Latin Quarter and how great the advantages for revolution still were. The government had banned the GP and its *Cause du Peuple*. The elderly Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, two of Europe's most prominent intellectuals, had stepped forward to sell the illegal newspaper in the

streets and in front of factories. As Hamon and Rotman recount, the GP's initial troops, drawn from secondary school and university students in revolt against the established order, now drifted from factory to factory, making propaganda, stirring trouble, getting fired and then hired somewhere else.

Here and there, these efforts took hold: unskilled workers, usually young and often Arabs or other immigrants, were forming an increasingly significant part of the organisation's membership. Enormous numbers of Arab workers were being flown in from their homelands to work in France's factories. Their receptiveness to revolution came not only from their French experience, but also that of liberation movements and revolutionary wars, including the Algerian liberation war against France as well as the Palestinian upsurge going on at that particular moment. Pierre Overney, son of an agricultural worker, was probably typical of the French proletarians who were being drawn to the Maoists. He had been 19 and working at Renault in 1969 when he joined the GP. He became a professional revolutionary quickly.

Three GP members fired by the Billancourt Renault factory — a former student at one of France's top schools, an Arab and a Portuguese — were on hunger strike to demand their rehiring. Overney and other GP activists, armed with metal bars and red flags, were giving out leaflets in front of the factory when a guard shot him dead. The PCF-led CGT, realising very well that it was their leadership over the plant that was at stake, reacted to this murder by calling for the Maoists to be arrested.

Two hundred thousand people take part in the funeral march through the proletarian neighborhoods of eastern Paris towards Père Lachaise cemetery, where many thousands more await them. From above nothing can be seen in the streets but red banners, red streamers, red flowers. The CGT organised workers *not* to attend, and indeed, there was good reason to fear marching. Still there are small

contingents of CGT members and members of the Socialist-led CFDT, alongside a far larger mass of labourers who simply carry red banners. Here and there, amidst these ranks drawn from the bottom of society, emerge well-known faces of philosophers and movie stars. They join in chanting, "We will avenge Pierre Overney" and sing the *Internationale*; the GP spokesman particularly emphasises the end of the first verse, which in French refers to the violent beginning of the end of the old society. One of the country's most prominent establishment journalists would write, later that day, that the youth of France no longer seem to hold out any belief in the world they had been offered.

Yet for the GP leaders whose views Hamon and Rotman recount, the situation was becoming intolerable. They felt trapped with no room to breathe. On the one hand, they found themselves with little idea of revolutionary strategy other than to carry out violent "vanguard" or "commando" actions, such as the subsequent kidnapping of a Renault Billancourt executive, which although popular with their social base was leading them inexorably towards a level of military confrontation they could not win. On the other they had no idea of how a revolution could be prepared by relying on the most dispossessed workers, but instead saw the sentiments of these radical proletarians as an obstacle to winning over the sections of workers still under PCF leadership. This impatience with the radical minority and for recognition as the spokesman for the majority, even if the majority were not in a revolutionary mood, had led the GP to increasingly attempt to clothe itself in the costume of the French resistance against the German occupation. In an effort to accomplish this, the GP had staged a grotesque ceremony of homage to the martyrs of the French resistance shot by the pro-occupation French government at Mount Valerian. These murdered resistance fighters were members of the PCF-led Immigrant Workers Organisation whose blood sustained the armed struggle in Paris during World War 2 despite the PCF's ambiguous position towards them. By

1971, when the PCF had long ago turned fully counterrevolutionary, and not at all adverse to blaming the country's disorder on Jews and foreigners, there was no question of revolutionaries honouring these dead together with the PCF. But in their quest for a banner that would immediately rally the majority, the GP tried to echo the wartime alliance against the German occupation between the PCF and de Gaulle's followers by joining with a prominent "left" Gaullist to lay a wreath to "the victims of fascism, old and new." The goal of the overthrow of French imperialism, no matter what kind of government was in power, was becoming replaced for all practical purposes by the slogan and strategy of "resistance" against the bourgeoisie (compared to a foreign occupier).

There was unfortunate prophecy in what the press mocked as the "Gaullo-Maoist" sacraments. Wrong views about how to make revolution were contending, with decreasing success, with views that were to betray the revolution altogether in order to fully enter the mainstream without encumbrance. This came to a climax in 1973. At that point, many people who had come out of the student movement were increasingly seduced by the idea of "workers' self-management" that came to be associated with a struggle by employees at the Lipp watch factory who took over their plant rather than see it closed down and attempted to go into business for themselves. The whole idea of a vanguard was rejected as an obstacle to their consciously non-revolutionary endeavor. This mood coincided with a new wave of government attacks on the GP and its leaders. The leadership decided to bail out of its impasse. As Hamon and Rotman describe it, what these leaders feared most was the proletarian and revolutionary-minded base of GP. They dissolved the organisation in haste and shame.

It is not our intention here to do a summation of the Marxist-Leninist movement in France. Such a study could not be confined, as the Hamon-Rotman book is, to the GP, but would also have to examine

the other organisations and lines that existed then and especially after the GP's heyday. (It is worth noting that the PCMLF, founded in February 1968 by people who had left the PCF in the early 1960s, summed up at a conference in 1972 that it had never emerged as a clear pole of opposition to the GP because it shared many of the GP's errors, and thus failed to play a significant role in the events of 1968 and the years following it.) The reader emerges from the end of the second volume with a tremendous sense of waste — not the sense of regret for "wasted youth" that Hamon-Rotman's characters express, but for the wasted opportunities to build a real communist party, based on Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought, with a solid base amongst proletarians in France and real influence throughout French society, that would not have let a moment of the French bourgeoisie's weakness slip by without seizing on it for launching an insurrection or preparing for the day when it could be launched. Such an achievement would have, to say the least, had far more revolutionary impact in the long run than what was accomplished in France during those years.

### III "We Loved the Revolution So"

In contrast to Caute, who declares the idea of revolution insane, and to Hamon and Rotman, who describe it as an idea better dead and buried, Dany Cohn-Bendit's book attempts to show some continuity between the *enragés* in revolt in 1968 and social movements of today. Cohn-Bendit is the one figure most of the world's newspaper readers most associated with the French May 1968. Today he describes himself as "a thorough anticommunist" and a pacifist, but not repentant. His short book gives something of the rich flavour of the different contradictions in play during that period, although taken as a whole what the reader learns the most about are the present views of the author.

It consists of a series of interviews with people who played an impor-

tant role in the sixties and early seventies in France, West Germany, Holland, Italy, the U.S. and Brazil. Though those interviewed have some things in common today, as well as a common past, a certain contrast and debate emerges. Abbie Hoffman argues that demonstrations and protests are still necessary, against Jerry Rubin who defends getting rich by any means necessary. In the same spirit as Rubin, the former West German radical turned Hesse state minister Joschka Fischer and the ex-GP leader July spit out the oldest renegade sophistry: when former revolutionaries have "made it," the revolution has won and continued revolution has become the enemy. July explains that the 1981 election of Socialist President Mitterrand marked the triumph of what was good about 1968, after 13 lost years. Another former GP leader, still working in the shipbuilding yard where he once organised a contingent to attend Pierre Overney's funeral, explains that the present Socialist bosses in the now-nationalised yards are worse than the former ones. "We need revolution," he concludes, "but we [workers] just can't make one." Depressed that many workers who surround him are in the clutches of the PCF or its rival, the fascist Le Pen, and afraid that such people will never "be able to take off their blue work uniforms," he has become a nudist.

A Brazilian journalist who once plunged into armed struggle explains that now that the country has a constitution and elections, violence is no longer valid. The absurd irony of this claim is even more striking in the television series the book is based on, when the former revolutionary declares that his goals for "democracy" have been fulfilled while he and Cohn-Bendit gaze out at the sea from a hilltop overlooking the vast slums of Rio de Janeiro. Another Brazilian former fighter with similar views points out in passing that violence is the only possible response those struggling for social change can expect in an oppressed country whether it has a constitution or not.

In one of the book's most interesting exchanges, a German

feminist activist vigorously contests Cohn-Bendit's contention that the oppression of women has been reformed all but out of existence. (As if any evidence were needed, ample testimony is provided by the book's photos of women — which present women as either ultra-feminine or ridiculous, and mostly as naked.) Perhaps the most disgusting interviews are those with former members of the Italian Red Brigades and the German Red Army Faction who shed tears of pathetic repentance for having taken up arms without shedding the slightest light on the question of how the imperialist bourgeoisies are to be overthrown.

Cohn-Bendit, like Hamon-Rotman, considers violence "the great temptation" in the 1960s and '70s, and like them, he concludes that escalating violence forced many radicals to decide whether they really sought to overthrow the system or merely to reform it. There is some profound truth here, even though some of the people who mouth it are only trying to justify selling out.

First, many people who in one way or another were part of that upsurge did have something to lose, and when it became apparent that there was not going to be a successful revolution in their countries in the near future, they did have to choose between risking privileges or returning to the comfortable places the bourgeoisie had prepared for them. Second, and more importantly, the vision of many such people did not go beyond the narrow horizons of a demand for a more perfect bourgeois democracy, a freedom that meant above all freedom from the evils they themselves most felt and an equality that above all meant an equal chance for themselves and others like them. As Marx once said of petit-bourgeois rebels, they tend to take the conditions for their own liberation to be the universal demands of mankind. Violence was not necessarily a dividing line issue with such people then, because at times it seemed to serve the ends they sought, but ultimately many tended to see all forms of struggle as ways to put pressure on the ruling classes.

The many people Cohn-Bendit interviews have more in common than being veterans of the same decade. To a large degree, it seems that there was much in common in their views even during the 1960s, whether they considered themselves anarchists or Maoists. This book confirms what is also revealed in the Hamon-Rotman volumes. Although many people waved the "Little Red Book" of *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, which at that time outstripped the *Bible* as the world's bestseller, this did not mean that they fully understood revolution as the violent overthrow of one class by another, which Mao had called a universal principle, nor the proletariat's goal of fighting through to free all mankind by eliminating all classes and class distinctions. Sometimes the Chinese Cultural Revolution was one-sidedly seen as the liberation of the individual, which was the same content often given to the 1960s upheavals in the West and which in fact was a major ideological current within them. This wrong understanding of the content and goals of proletarian revolution was the other side of the coin of the failure to grasp the strategic necessity of preparing and ultimately leading revolutionary war.

Thus today various of Cohn-Bendit's interviewees and the author himself declare that they have come to support the parliamentary system. This represents a certain capitulation to imperialism and the most philistine willful ignorance in the face of an imperialist system which makes life hell for the vast majority of the world's people no less today than twenty years ago, but it does not mean, as many of these people themselves seem to think, that never again can there be sudden changes of mood and violent opposition to the government on the part of the middle classes in the imperialist countries.

Tariq Ali's autobiographical book runs in a similar vein, except that since he was never very radical in the first place there is not much obstacle to the reader accepting his contention that his views have not changed much. Ali, who became a Trotskyite at the height of his

notoriety, ends his book by praising Gorbachev as a symbol of the possibilities of reform in a time when Western reformists are immersed in despair. His anecdotal reminiscences are interspersed with sharp-tongued bits of poems written by the English romantic poets, inspired by the French revolution of 1789, to denounce those amongst their ranks who sold out the bourgeois-democratic movement "just for a ribbon to hang at their throat." These poems could be useful today but for the fact that Ali seeks more than analogy; he is also upholding the political content of these poems as a model. He considers it his work to repair "the English revolution of 1640 and its failure to create lasting republican institutions or to crush the economic power of the landed gentry." This, so long after British capitalism has ceased to be revolutionary and so far along in its history as a thoroughly republican predator of nations, is reactionary and absurd. Yet this is exactly the content of the "socialist democracy" he envisioned. Further, this is now coupled with the most abject reformism: "it was impossible for movements in advanced capitalist societies to make a *single* leap from a capitalist state to a socialist system." His 1960s failure to understand the reformist project as a gradual one is the only thing for which Ali repents.

The offspring of a bourgeois Pakistani family and later a "critical" intimate of Ali Bhutto when he was Pakistani head of state, Ali seems to have found himself equally at home amongst the British bourgeoisie who populate this account of the 1960s to an undeserved extent. This book is really far more of an "upstairs" than a "downstairs" affair. But it has its moments. Although his family was pro-Soviet and supposedly Communist, Ali recounts that when he arrived at Oxford in Britain what excited him most was not the campus talk about socialism, but a speech against God. Quickly learning to swim in left Labour waters, he was to try to combine support for the Vietnamese in that war with the belief that the antiwar move-

ment must remain within the political limits set by imperialism.

For instance, some people who remember when the daily press labeled Ali the very height of radicalism in Britain may be surprised that what he apparently considers a highlight of his career is the way in which he succeeded in preventing the major part of the 100,000 people who took part in the October 1968 London march against the war in Vietnam from attacking the U.S. embassy. (There's not much street fighting in *Street Fighting Years*, despite its title, which amounts to false advertising.)

This tactical stance was in line with his fear of alienating the Labour politicians and their backers high and low (especially high) who were willing to support the movement if they were allowed to set the political terms. In fact, Ali is not nearly as hard on the left Labour opponents of the U.S. in Vietnam or the U.S. "antiwar" politicians as the avowed capitalist Caute, who comes off quite a bit more radical in this regard.

Although those who called themselves Maoists in the UK were not at that time the major phenomenon that they were in France or other countries, it is interesting to note that Ali considers "the Maoists" to be the exact opposite pole of what he stood for, from the tactical plane (regarding demonstrations) to the world level. His admiration for the Chinese Revolution from the point of view of Third World nationalism takes second place to his bitter reproach of Mao for having broken with the Soviet Union. This parallels Ali's own inability to really break with the Labour Party, despite his lack of enthusiasm for imperialist domination.

In most imperialist countries the 1960s upsurge was intertwined with splits in the ruling classes that were both aggravated by it and gave it a certain amount of fuel. It was unfortunately all too common for radicals to become confused by this and to end up throwing away revolutionary opportunities in the name of "broad alliances." In Britain, to a larger degree than elsewhere, the 1960s suffered especially from an inability to break even temporarily

with sections of the ruling class. The influence of Trotskyism in Britain was an expression of this. The political paralysis interacted with the comparatively homogeneous middle-class composition of the movement, which, in short, did not go as far as in some other countries. While the failure to distinguish between proletarian revolution and various varieties of social democracy and revisionism, and to hew a revolutionary path on that basis, may have taken a ludicrous form in the case of people like Ali, in general it was genuinely tragic.

#### IV Will It Happen Again?

Hamon and Rotman tell us that the idea that 1968 was "only the beginning" was an "historical misunderstanding," because in fact what was happening was sudden readjustment in basically healthy societies. Cohn-Bendit, for his part, says he still swears by the slogan "under the cobblestones, the beach," referring not only to the sand the students found when they dug up the pavement but also to a whole vision of a utopian society. The difference is that now he hopes to land on that shore by way of parliamentary reform. These views are truly far more out of touch with reality than any previous ideas anyone might have had, when one considers how much the parliamentary system in these countries rests on worldwide exploitation and oppression, and what the consequences are in terms of crisis and revolt.

The idea that the 1960s "won," as argued by Jerry Rubin and Serge July, really means that such people "won" by changing sides. This claim of victory is no less false when expressed by others who point to gains regarding the availability of abortion and birth control, loosened restrictions on personal conduct and other things. The assertion that life under imperialism is gradually getting more and more tolerable clashes with the present situation for very large sections of the masses in most imperialist countries as well as the countries they dominate.

A sort of inside-out form of this argument is given by Caute, who asserts that the 1960s were defeated,

because the war in Vietnam continued and was followed by other imperialist aggression, and because the following decades have seen such blatant, open reaction. Those who view today's imperialist world darkly are more attuned to reality than those who declare it rosy, but both these versions have in common the idea that the imperialist system can become something different without revolution.

It is true, for instance, that the events of 1968 occasioned an overall series of adjustments in French society. In the U.S. and Britain, the 1950s saw a certain bourgeoisification of sections of the workers who had had nothing before the second world war. This realignment within the working class had lagged in France until the 1960s, and it sharpened more after 1968. This was the most important of France's post-1968 "modernisations." To give a different example, one could say that the 1960s saw a certain modernisation of U.S. society, especially the demolition of the legal edifice of segregation that had arisen to enforce the semi-feudal ties that previously held Black people to the land. To cite a third example, after 1968 throughout most of Western Europe there were changes in the prevailing archaic university system which, in the end, were quite necessary in order to satisfy imperialism's evolving needs. But what about 1905 in Russia, which unlike 1968, did see an attempt to seize power led by the proletarian party? Did not the Tsarist government bring about important reforms, including the building up of the middle class in the countryside, the establishment of a parliament, etc., in other words, a certain modernisation of the country, without in any way removing their foot from the neck of the masses? Didn't a great many people at that time — including some less far-sighted Bolsheviks — conclude that Lenin was wrong and revolution impossible?

The fact that revolution did not fall into anyone's lap in the imperialist countries during the 1960s does not prove revolution was impossible. This is not to say that the conditions for a successful insurrection based on the most advanced sec-

tions of the proletariat fully existed then, especially taking into account the political, ideological and organisational weakness of the revolutionary forces at the height of the regimes' crisis. But given the degree to which, for a time, the governments found themselves isolated and the ruling classes were on the defensive, reality itself gave a certain taste of the elements and possibilities of an all-the-way revolution.

There is a two-fold lesson that applies to today's as well as yesterday's imperialist countries: revolutionary crisis can break out suddenly and without warning, though they do not break out without basis; and if the revolutionary communists do not play their full role in leading a successful insurrection then no crisis will in and of itself produce proletarian revolution.

It cannot be concluded that the revolutionaries went too far, that they rushed ahead of events, but rather that they lagged behind them and failed to make the maximum advances possible.

Although the world has changed since the 1960s, the nature of the imperialist societies has not changed. The illusion that these societies are basically healthy is one that only a privileged minority can easily share. In a phrase almost identical to Cohn-Bendit's conclusion, Caute tells us that what is happening today is "the greens, not the reds," that is, parliamentary-focused social movements and not out-of-control or revolutionary outbreaks. This is not true, taking the world today as a whole (Palestine, South Africa, Haiti, South Korea, Algeria, Burma, for instance). Nor is it an all-sided description of what has been going on in the imperialist countries themselves (West Berlin, Paris, New York, London and Madrid have all seen significant riots in the last few years).

The setback caused by the loss of socialist China and the subsequent collapse of much of the international communist movement that looked to Mao Tsetung was a grave blow. But it is still a fact that where there is oppression there is resistance. The growing influence and abilities of the Revolutionary

Internationalist Movement hold out hope of great revolutionary leaps. In Peru there is not only a revolutionary upheaval but a people's war led by a real Maoist Communist Party, the PCP, a participating party of the RIM. Really, looking at the earth as a whole from the point of view of revolution, not much of today's world can be said to be very stable.

The most important difference between the 1960s and now does not lie in the obvious difference between the overall level of struggle within the imperialist countries then and now. Rather it lies in the relative reserves Western imperialism disposed of then, reserves which it no longer possesses, and the overall *heightening* of all the contradictions of the world imperialist system. No imperialist government today could so easily buy its way out of a social crisis as the French bourgeoisie did in 1968. In those days many Western imperialist governments could attempt to distance themselves from the job the U.S. was carrying out in Vietnam on behalf of the West bloc as a whole; further, the U.S. was able to cut its losses and disengage from that war. In today's world, even a regional war that did not soon involve all the major powers East and West in one form or another is inconceivable. Furthermore, the West and East imperialist blocs cannot disengage from their conflict with each other — neither can allow the other uncontested world supremacy.

The fault lines in imperialist society through which the 1960s erupted have not been forever sealed. The bottom layer of dispossessed proletarians in the imperialist countries has not disappeared; in fact, in almost all of them there has been a sharply increasing economic polarisation amongst the wage workers themselves, and if a certain strata of the middle classes have prospered this is not necessarily true of the middle classes as a whole in these countries. There have been certain reforms to eliminate no longer useful anachronisms, but who could plausibly argue that any aspect of life in any imperialist country is less subordinate to the needs of profit and slaughter? A number of people

in these books point to increased awareness about the oppression of women as one of the most important gains of the 1960s — but can it really be argued that today this oppression has become less explosive in any of these countries? Clearly there is a class that has nothing to lose, and it does have not to stand alone against imperialist capital.

The greatest achievement of the 1960s in the imperialist countries is that they put proletarian revolution there back on the agenda after a long period when revisionist and imperialist "common sense" declared it outmoded. The mutual interpenetration of violent revolt by students and youth in general with a powerful upsurge amongst certain sections of the proletariat and a general ferment in society overall, in the context of the storms raging in the oppressed countries and the Cultural Revolution in China, allowed the idea of revolution to repossess its reality in France and the U.S., to take two rather different examples.

In the 1960s, some people, looking for a revolutionary crisis through the eyes of the 1930s, did not recognise the elements of one when when they saw them. Today, one factor preventing some people from envisioning a revolutionary crisis in the near future in the West is their insistence on looking for it through "1960s eyes," that is, expecting student demonstrations followed by strikes or some other pattern according to the tempo and interrelationship of events as they occurred 20 years ago. It is far more likely that the development of things in today's world will impose new and unexpected features. With that in mind, the objective and subjective elements of that time and the whole experience must be meticulously summed up and made use of, as part of preparing the analysis, line and leadership so that in the coming period some imperialist countries can be torn out of the hands of imperialism. For us the experience of the 1960s in the imperialist countries is a paving stone to be neither tossed away nor fondled, but rather used to sharpen our knives. □