

Building a Revolutionary Movement in Paris, 1968

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What Revolution?

In May of 1968, students across France mobilized to protest the decisions of university administrators to expel students involved in protesting the war in Vietnam. At the height of these protests, over 11 million workers went on strike (more than 1/5 of France's population) and France's major cities were upended by demonstrations and conflict between police and protestors. In this project, I sought to analyze the political consciousness of the anti-capitalist students involved in this revolt. Beyond the why, I was particularly interested in how they sought to construct new systems of social organization and management to replace the repressive organizational structures of capitalist life. In pursuing this, I looked at the significance of the "Action Committee" as an organizational form, in both revolutionary thought and revolutionary action in order to better understand what made the student revolt of 1968 so different from the movements that came before it.



Revolutionary Theory

Rather than engage in a purely economic struggle, student organizations contested the totality of capitalist life, arguing that all of human existence, whether inside or outside the sphere of production, had become dedicated not towards the furtherance of humanity, but to the continued production of commodities. In particular, they condemned the way people were reduced to spectators unable to make decisions in modern capitalist society. To change this, many radicals turned to the "council" as a form of organization that would allow people to participate directly in the common management of both society and their own lives. The transformation of society and the transformation of the individual were seen as a singular process — individuals could never achieve real freedom if bound up in a repressive social structure.



Revolutionary Action

Action Committees were the primary form of organization that thrived during the May events — they involved a group of people joining together to coordinate and execute whatever their chosen task might be. Common examples included Neighborhood Action Committees and factory Occupation Councils, which seized factories, kept workers fed and campaigned for worker's rights. Committees also formed around specific issues or interest groups, such as rights for immigrant laborers or improving conditions in slums. Collective decision-making was the means for producing a more equal society that empowered individuals, but a society managed in such a manner was also precisely the reorganization of power that these radicals hoped to achieve.

After the Revolution

The organizational structures of the May revolt were useful for keeping life moving during the widespread disorder, but also, radicals hoped, in proving to the masses that a different organization of social and economic power was both possible and desirable as an alternative to the lack of freedom offered by capitalist life. However, the forms of organization that characterized revolutionary action in 1968 played different roles in student and worker consciousness respectively. While for students, councils were both a means and an end, the role of occupation committees for most workers was simply as a means to improve conditions within the framework of the capitalist system. This posed a major challenge to student groups who placed an emphasis on revolutionary action over revolutionary theory. For many of these theorists, the development of anti-capitalist sentiment among the working class was simply an organizational problem — if the masses were put in a situation where they could hold power and manage their own affairs, they would naturally come to understand that capitalist life deprived them of that power. Despite the failure of the revolt, the events of '68 demonstrated the possibility of a different mode of social organization and brought a formidable challenge to the postwar capitalist order on both material and social grounds.



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