

All Power to the Imagination: Radical Student Groups and Coalition Building in France During May 1968 and the United States during the Vietnam War

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ABSTRACT

Student-led social movements in May of 1968 in France and through the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States captured the attention of each nation at the time and have had a profound impact on how Americans and French understand their respective states today. Both movements held the lofty goal of completely reshaping their respective societal structures but the vast differences of the cultures in which they were carried out resulted in distinct end results. In France, student protests sparked mass mobilization of the nation and, at their height, were seen by most of the country in a positive light. The broader movement that involved worker participation as well also won material gains for workers in the nation. Across the Atlantic, on the other hand, student protests were met with mostly ill will from the American working class. This work will particularly focus on the ways in which a history of strikes and a popular Communist Party in France both allowed for mass mobilization and stopped the students from pursuing more radical change. It will also work to challenge dominant narratives in political science around coalition building.

I.

In mid-May, 1968, as 10 million people marched in demonstration through the streets of every major French city, student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit sat down for a wide-ranging interview with philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Bendit cogently articulated his goals for the student movement as well as its potential challenges. “The aim is now the overthrow of the regime,” he said. “But it is not up to us whether or not this is achieved. If the Communist Party, the [general confederation of labor union] CGT and the other union headquarters shared it... the regime would fall within a fortnight.”¹

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, “Jean Paul Sartre Interviews Daniel Cohn-Bendit, May 20, 1968,” *Verso*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3819-jean-paul-sartre-interviews-daniel-cohn-bendit>.

Six years later and across the Atlantic Ocean, the Weather Underground, a militant leftist organization in its fifth year of operation which was composed of young radicals, published a book entitled *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism*.² The Weather Underground wrote, “Our intention is to disrupt the empire... to incapacitate it, to put pressure on the cracks, to make it hard to carry out its bloody functioning against the people of the world, to join the world struggle, to attack from the inside.”³

II.

Radical social movements aimed at the overthrow of capitalism and capitalist-based governments existed throughout the Western world through the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Italy, West Germany, France, and the United States, these movements were particularly wide ranging and distinctly impacted each society, causing momentous political and cultural upheaval. This work will focus on the latter two nations.

The mass mobilization that shook France was confined largely to one month: May, 1968. In the middle of March, France’s leading newspaper *Le Monde* called France’s citizens too “bored” to protest in the same manner that was occurring in West Germany and the United States.⁴ A mere six weeks later, after the occupation of the University of Nanterre on March 22nd sparked conversation about collective action around the country, French students occupied the University of Paris at the Sorbonne, in the Latin Quarter of Paris, sparking nightly clashes with the police. Streets were barricaded, all transportation was shut down, and worker mobilization reached a height of 10 million on strike. Notably, students’ grievances were separate from those of the workers. The students rallied around a popular slogan of the time, “all power to the imagination,” which captured their collective interest in enacting changes to the educational system that would allow for a more free and accepting university structure.⁵ Comprised of Trotskyites, Maoists, anarchists, and others on the Left, many also believed in the violent overthrow of the 5th Republic of France and the complete reshaping of society. As Suzanne Borde, who in May, 1968 had recently left her childhood home for Paris, said, “Everything changed [in May, 68], my way of thinking, everything... My favorite expression at the time was “*La Vie, Vite*” (Life, Quickly)! I wanted to change the

2 Political Statement of the Weather Underground, *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism*, (United States: Communications Co. Under Ground), 1974, https://archive.org/stream/PrairieFireThePoliticsOfRevolutionaryAnti-imperialismThePolitical/Prairie-fire_djvu.txt.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Alissa J. Rubin, “May 1968: A Month of Revolution Pushed France Into the Modern World,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/05/world/europe/france-may-1968-revolution.html>.

5 Mitchell Abidor, *May made me: an oral history of the 1968 uprising in France*, (Chico: AK Press, 2018), 3.

usual way of life.”⁶

The workers, who made up the lion’s share of the protestors but had fewer public clashes with the police, were concerned less with political ideology or societal restructuring than with material gains that would make their lives better, such as wage increases. Their protests ran in conjunction with the students’, but their union was a tenuous one: the French Communist Party (PCF) and its associated labor union Confédération Général du Travail (CGT) controlled much of the political action amongst the workers and was deeply suspicious of the goals of the student movement from its nascent stages.⁷ Ultimately, two central events led to the movement’s demise. Maybe ironically, the first was originally interpreted as a success: the protests led to governmental upheaval and President Charles de Gaulle’s temporary departure from the country. After weeks of uncertainty, representatives of de Gaulle’s government negotiated what came to be termed the Grenelle Agreements with the leadership of the CGT. Resulting in more bargaining power for unions as well as a 35 percent minimum wage increase and a 10 percent increase in average real wages, these concessions pacified many workers, leading them back to the factory floor.⁸ Second, upon returning to the country on May 30, Charles de Gaulle organized a significant counter-protest on the Champs-Élysées, dissolved the legislature and called for new legislative elections that took place in late June. De Gaulle’s party, the Union of Democrats for the Republic (UDR) won a massive victory and went back to being firmly in control of the nation, while the PCF lost more than half of their seats.⁹

Social protest in the United States was not so neatly circumscribed into a few months. Anti-Vietnam War protests took many shapes over numerous years. For the purposes of this work, analysis will be confined to the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organization, its offshoot groups, and their respective impacts on the broader movement. Launched with the Port Huron Statement in 1962 before the official beginning of the American War in Vietnam in 1965, the organization purposefully did not couch its goals in traditionally communist or Marxist rhetoric, because unlike in France, there was no appetite for it in the United States. Rather, they argued quite persuasively, “We are people of this generation, bred in at least moderate comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.”¹⁰ While fewer than 100 people signed the Port Huron State-

6 Abidor, 2018, 79.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Michael Seidman, “Workers in a Repressive Society of Seductions: Parisian Metallurgists in May-June 1968,” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1993), 264.

9 Sylvia Poggioli, “Marking the French Social Revolution of ’68,” *NPR*, May 13, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90330162>.

10 Politics Newsmakers Newsletter, “Students for a Democratic Society (SDS),” *Public Broadcasting Service*, 2005, https://www.pbs.org/opb/thesixties/topics/politics/newsmakers_1.html.

ment, by 1965, the SDS organized the “March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam,” which 15,000 to 25,000 people from around the country attended.¹¹ This march both attracted a degree of attention and trained future organizers of better-coordinated marches on Washington, including the November, 1969 Moratorium March on Washington, which had over 250,000 attendees.¹²

While SDS remained a strong political force through the late 1960s, by its 1969 convention in Chicago the group had moved significantly to the left ideologically and had developed political differences amongst itself that detached it from the unified spirit of the Port Huron Statement. As SDS gathered in Chicago, by the end of the weekend of June 18-22, three separate factions had emerged. One, calling itself the Progressive Labor Party (PL), argued for Maoist and worker-oriented solutions to what they perceived as the ills of America. Another, the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM), became the foundation of what was eventually called the Weather Underground—they advocated for a radicalization of SDS to fight American imperialism alongside the Black Panthers and revolutionary groups around the world.¹³ Finally, the Revolutionary Youth Movement II (RYM II) agreed with RYM on most substantive issues, but believed in a more traditional Marxist approach to solve them.¹⁴ According to sociologist Penny Lewis, none of these groups, including the PL whose entire revolutionary strategy was based on cross-class alliance with workers, enjoyed any significant support from the working class. She writes, “The obvious reason for this was the near-unanimous embrace of Cold War anticommunism in the ranks of labor and the collapse of Communist Party influence within the class.”¹⁵

Left without the possibility of even a tenuous connection between young radicals and the broad working class, the Weather Underground began to participate in militant action to attempt to bring the Vietnam war home.¹⁶ In March of 1970, Weather Underground member Bernardine Dohrn anonymously recorded a transmission and sent it to a California radio station on behalf of the group. She warned, “The lines are drawn... Revolution is touching all of our lives. Freaks

11 Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 177-183.

12 The Learning Network, “Nov. 15, 1969 | Anti-Vietnam War Demonstration Held,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2011, <https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/15/nov-15-1969-anti-vietnam-war-demonstration-held/>.

13 The Revolutionary Youth Movement, which went through multiple different iterations and had a number of names throughout its history, will be hereto referred to as the Weather Underground. This name was established by the group in 1970.

14 Paul Saba, “SDS Convention Split: Three Factions Emerge,” *The Heights*, July 3, 1969, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/bc-sds.htm>; Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: the Weather Underground and the politics of solidarity*, (Oakland: AK Press), 2006.

15 Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement As Myth and Memory*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 155.

16 Arthur M. Eckstein, “How the Weather Underground Failed at Revolution and Still Changed the World,” *TIME*, November 2, 2016, <http://time.com/4549409/the-weather-underground-bad-moon-rising/>.

are revolutionaries and revolutionaries are freaks... within the next 14 days we will bomb a major U.S. institution.”¹⁷ While her timeline was a bit optimistic, the group bombed the Capitol in March of 1971 and the Pentagon in May of 1972, all the while intending not to injure anyone (these two actions had no deaths associated). Their most famous (and infamous) deed was an accident—also in March of 1970, two members (Diana Oughton and Terry Robbins) accidentally detonated a bomb in a Greenwich Village townhouse while assembling homemade explosives, killing themselves and a third “Weatherman” who was walking into the house (Ted Gold).¹⁸ The Weather Underground did continue action after the conclusion of American involvement in Vietnam in 1975, but paired down much of its more violent activities. The group, whose members found their way to the FBI’s Most Wanted List, eventually disbanded; many now work as professors, educating and informing new generations of American thought.

III.

The outgrowth of the fragile connection between student protest and worker protest in France, as well as the lack of any significant worker mobilization in the United States, has a lot to do with the way each nation developed in the wake of World War II. During the altercations in May, 1968 in France, President Charles de Gaulle and the PCF represented two opposing poles of influence. This, in many ways, defined the conflict: de Gaulle’s fairly centrist (by modern standards) regime was forced to contend with a popular Communist Party facing a radical push from student activists combined with a wellspring of support from French workers. Interestingly, both De Gaulle and the Communists found much of their legitimacy from their actions a quarter-century prior, during World War II. De Gaulle and his supporters, along with the PCF, were the two most significant resistance forces to the collaborationist Vichy government. As such, in the first legislative election after the War in 1945, the PCF won a plurality of the vote, with 26.1 percent, and controlled the most seats in the legislature.¹⁹ De Gaulle did not participate in these elections. By 1967, while the PCF’s support had diminished, it remained a powerful force: they held 21.37 percent of the vote, a slight drop, but were able to build a governing coalition with fellow Leftist parties Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left (FGDS) and the Unified Socialist Party (PSU). Together, the three received 53.43 percent of the vote.²⁰

17 Mark Honigsbaum, “The Americans who declared war on their country,” *The Guardian*, September 20, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/sep/21/londonfilmfestival2003.londonfilmfestival>.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Philip Stöver and Dieter Nohlen, *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

20 *Ibid.*

The revolution in 1968, then, did not come out of nowhere. Not only could the PCF count on at least 20 percent of France's support throughout the 1950s and 60s, it also organized strikes. Significant agrarian protests led by the PCF occurred in 1959 and 1960, and in 1963 strikes reached a zenith of the era before 1968, as the number of days that workers were on strike was the highest in 10 years.²¹ As Kenneth Libbey, who is both a scholar of and an advocate for the PCF, argues, "the belief in the ability of a mass movement to sweep aside obstacles to its success is a dominant theme of the party. Its acceptance makes the arguments about the transition to socialism at least plausible."²² By May of 1968, significant differences existed between the often anarchist, Maoist, or Trotskyite student groups and the Stalinist PCF and CGT. However, these disagreements on ideology were not significant enough to halt the cross-coalitional movement—at least at first.

In the case of Leftist groups in the United States, whether they marched under the Maoist banner of coalition-building with the working class (in the case of the PL movement) or had more anarchist tendencies as well as interest in engaging with black revolutionary groups such as the Black Panthers (in the case of the Weather Underground), they had very little historical precedent or organizational support upon which to draw. Even at its relative peak in 1944, the Communist Party in the United States (CPUSA) only had a confirmed membership of 80,000.²³ In the context of the Cold War, it became impossible to be an avowed Communist in public life. In a period often called the "Second Red Scare" or "McCarthyism," the United States Congress convened the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in order to attempt to find and punish Communists whom they believed to be working for the Soviet Union. In 1954, the United States government formally outlawed the CPUSA.²⁴

While in the French case the Communist Party was associated with brave resistance to World War II, politicians in the United States were able to successfully present the CPUSA as a subversive group intent on aiding the Russians in the Cold War.²⁵ As an ideology, McCarthyism faded through the 1950s and was eventually seen for what it was: a witch-hunt. However, in the Cold War context, a genuine Communist Party in the United States would have been something of

21 Kenneth R. Libbey, "The French Communist Party in the 1960s: An Ideological Profile," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Volume 11, No. 1, Jan. 1976, 151.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Revelations from the Russian Archives, "Soviet and American Communist Parties," Library of Congress, August 31, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/sova.html>.

24 New World Encyclopedia, "Communist Party, USA," 2017, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Communist_Party_USA#The_later_50s.2C_60s.2C_and_70s.

25 Irving Louis Horowitz, "Culture, Politics, and McCarthyism," *The Independent Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1996), 101-110.

an anachronism at best. Thus, radicals in the United States had to both divorce themselves from any extremely weak institutions that did exist and strive to create their own culture and identity. The divergent histories of France and the United States shaped not only the popularity of social movements in the late 1960s, but also the strategies and tactics employed by student radicals in both nations.

IV.

A shared characteristic of the radical students in France and the United States was their distaste for slow-moving, marginal improvements. In fact, French radical students had been preaching this ideology since the early 1960s. Trotskyite dissidents, many of whom were engaged in the leadership of the 1968 movement, submitted a manifesto to the socialist publication *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1961 outlining many of the same principles as the Weather Underground did eight years later. They argued, “One hundred and fifty years of ‘progress’ and ‘democracy’ have proved that no matter what reforms are applied to the capitalist system they will not change the real situation of the worker.”²⁶ As is typical of the French case, revolutionary politics are more wrapped up in the labor movement than in the United States. The manifesto continues, “The workers will not be free of oppression and exploitation until their struggles have resulted in setting up a *really socialistic* society, in which *workers’ councils* will have all the power, and both production and economic planning will be under *worker management*.”²⁷

Fredy Perlman, a student who aided in the shutdown of the Censier Annex of the Sorbonne, believed in a direct connection between the actions at the Universities and the larger strikes. He saw the main contribution of the students at the Censier to be the formation of worker-student action committees, in which the two groups coordinated actions together. Perlman, who published a booklet entitled *Worker-student Action Committees, France, 1968* in 1970, wrote, “The formation of the worker-student committees coincides with the outbreak of a wildcat strike: ‘In the style of the student demonstrators, the workers of Sud-Aviation have occupied the factory at Nantes.’”²⁸ For Alain Krivine, the founder of one of the most influential activist groups for youth during 1968, Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire, increased rights for workers were essential to the success of the movement. However, he did not believe that leaders of the unions or the Communist Party best represented the workers’ interests. He says, “For me [leftwing political leaders Pierre] Mendès-France and [François] Mitterand were shit... Mendès-France and

26 “Manifesto of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*” in *The French Student Uprising: Nov. 1967-June 1968*, ed. Alain Schnapp and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, translated by Maria Jolas, (New York: Beacon Press, 1971), 66.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman, *Worker-student Action Committees, France, May 1968*, (Paris: Black & Red, 1970), 5.

Mitterand could be an alternative, but for us it was a bad one.”²⁹ Student demonstrator Isabelle Saint-Saëns largely agrees. “When we marched with the workers we felt united with them, but it remained theoretical as well,” she said.³⁰ Nevertheless, the students did see the workers as the key to their success, because they were willing to mobilize and they held such tremendous political power because of their sheer numbers.³¹

As opposed to the situation in France, protest in the United States was based largely around denouncing the imperialism inherent within the conflict in Vietnam. In the shadow of the SDS convention in June of 1969, student radicals who formed the leadership of the splinter group of the Weather Underground sprang into action. Leadership of the organization included many young radicals who had been involved in the demonstrations against the Vietnam War at Columbia University the year before, including Bill Ayers, Bernardine Dohrn, and Mark Rudd, who famously wrote in a letter to Columbia President Grayson Kirk:

“You call for order and respect for authority; we call for justice, freedom, and socialism. There is only one thing left to say. It may sound nihilistic to you, since it is the opening shot in a war of liberation. I’ll use the words of LeRoi Jones, whom I’m sure you don’t like a whole lot: ‘Up against the wall, motherfucker, this is a stick-up.’”³²

The Weather Underground’s first major action, termed the “Days of Rage,” was scheduled to take place from October 8-11, 1969 in the streets of Chicago. The action’s specific purpose was to protest the trial of the “Chicago Eight,” a group on trial for antiwar activism during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.³³ While they hoped for the participation of around 50,000 militants they got only a few hundred. The action, which included the looting and burning of downtown Chicago appeared not to have a particularly cogent mission, was panned by the mainstream media, but also by many fellow Leftist organizations, who argued that the organizers were alienating the broader public from their cause.³⁴

The Weather Underground itself, though, argued that the “Days of Rage”

29 Abidor, 2018, 45.

30 Abidor, 2018, 91.

31 David Drake, “Sartre and May 1968: The Intellectual in Crisis,” *Sartre Studies International*, (Vol. 3, No. 1, 1997), 45.

32 Mark Rudd, “Letter to Columbia President Grayson Kirk,” April 22, 1968, in “‘The Whole World Is Watching’: An Oral History of the 1968 Columbia Uprising,” by Clara Bingham, *Vanity Fair*, April 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/03/the-students-behind-the-1968-columbia-uprising>.

33 History.com Editors, “Chicago 8 trial opens in Chicago,” A&E Television Networks, November 16, 2009, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/chicago-8-trial-opens-in-chicago>.

34 Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 255; Eric Alterman, “Remembering the Left-Wing Terrorism of the 1970s,” review of *Days of Rage* by Bryan Burrough, *The Nation*, April 14, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/remembering-left-wing-terrorism-1970s/>.

were part of a larger effort to “bring the war home.”³⁵ At this point in the antiwar fight, the Weather Underground had decided that they could not count on the participation of workers because of their lack of any significant socialist or communist sympathies. As such, they planned demonstrations and militant actions to raise the consciousness of the greater populace to the horrors of the war abroad. Friends and siblings who were drafted, sent to Vietnam, and often killed in action particularly galvanized American youth. Partially to announce the formation of the Weather Underground, the group released a manifesto entitled “You Don’t Need A Weatherman To Know Which Way The Wind Blows.” A subsection of this argument, “Anti-Imperialist Revolution and the United Front,” states,

“Defeating imperialism within the US couldn’t possibly have the content, which it could in a semi-feudal country, of replacing imperialism with capitalism or new democracy; when imperialism is defeated in the US, it will be replaced by socialism- nothing else. One revolution, one replacement process, one seizure of state power- the anti-imperialist revolution and the socialist revolution, one and the same stage.”³⁶

Student radicals in the United States saw the need to engender violent revolution in order to move to a state willing to accept socialism as a rational political ideology.

The stated aims of the two movements, then, were quite similar. Each believed that their government was not truly democratic, and that there was a distinct need to expel the ruling elite from power. The two groups framed the issue using a shared language of the Left that dealt primarily with expressing solidarity with the oppressed. Divergence in the movements appeared in each group’s understanding of their own role in society.

In France, while students were suspicious and sometimes downright dismissive of the PCF and the CGT, they believed they needed the participation of the workers (many of whom were members of those organizations) to succeed. The split at the SDS convention in June of 1969, on the other hand, further alienated the Weather Underground even from fellow Leftist organizations. While the Weather Underground hoped to gain more support for its cause amongst the general populace, the group also understood the nature of the political system in the United States and made the conscious decision to exist outside of it. In “You Don’t Need a Weatherman...” they wrote, “How will we accomplish the building of [a

35 Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

36 Karin Asbley, Bill Ayers, Bernardine Dohrn, John Jacobs, Jeff Jones, Gerry Long, Home Machtinger, Jim Mellen, Terry Robbins, Mark Rudd, and Steve Tappis, “You Don’t Need A Weatherman To Know Which Way The Wind Blows,” *New Left Notes*, June 18, 1969, https://archive.org/stream/YouDontNeedAWeathermanToKnowWhichWayTheWindBlows_925/weather_djvu.txt.

Marxist-Leninist Party]- It is clear that we couldn't somehow form such a party at this time, because the conditions for it do not exist in this country outside the Black Nation."³⁷ Much of the reason for both the divergent outcomes as well as the divergent tactics and framing of the student movements in France and the United States have to do with the political opportunity structures that existed in each nation during the late 1960s. These are broadly rooted in the historical differences in the treatment of Communism as an ideology in both nations.

V.

Many scholars have argued that the character of the revolution of May 1968 was defined by the youth and, to a lesser degree, intellectuals in the nation.³⁸ Maybe more important for mass mobilization in France, though, was the history of strikes in the nation. According to French historian Stéphane Sirot, while in other nations strikes are often the result of failed negotiations, in France they frequently occur either during or before negotiations with labor bosses.³⁹ Strikes are such successful tactics of negotiation because they work on two levels. First, they have an offense element through mass demonstrations that attract the attention of the media. Second, they work defensively in that by refusing to work, they put pressure on bosses to find a quick solution. In their paper, "The Shape of Strikes in France, 1830-1960," published in 1971, scholars Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly argue that French strikes, while fairly prevalent throughout this period, changed fairly significantly in character in this time period.⁴⁰ This, according to Shorter and Tilly, has largely to do with the significant expansion of industrial unionism at the end of the 1930s around the European continent.⁴¹ They use measurements of size, duration, and frequency to calculate the shape that these strikes took. Below is an example of their model:

37 Asbley et al., "You Don't Need A Weatherman To Know Which Way The Wind Blows," 1969.

38 Alain Silvera, "The French Revolution of May 1968," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, (Vol. 47, No. 3, 1971), 350.

39 Ben McPartland, "So why are the French always on strike?" *The Local*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20160331/why-are-french-always-on-strike>.

40 Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, "The Shape of Strikes in France, 1830-1960," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, (Vol. 13, No. 1, January 1971), 60-86.

41 Shorter and Tilly, 1971, 63.

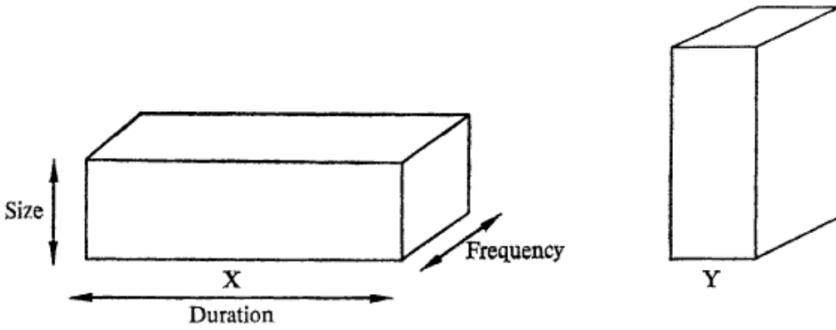


Table 1.1

This table shows two distinct strike scenarios. What Shorter and Tilly refer to as “Industry X” represents a scenario in which strikes are long but small and occur fairly infrequently. “Industry Y” has strikes that occur more frequently and with a larger size, but do not last for as long.⁴²

By the 1960s in France, the model for strikes looked quite a bit more like “Industry Y” than “Industry X.” Below is, once again, Shorter and Tilly’s graphic explanation of this phenomenon, based on the historical cataloging of strikes:

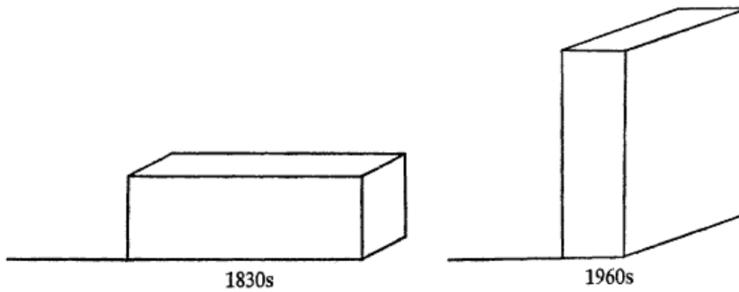


Table 1.2⁴³

This is significant in that massive, short demonstrations, while not necessarily more successful than those that are smaller and play out over a longer period of time, are wont to receive more attention from the public and the media due to their dramatic nature. The sheer mass of strikes through the 1960s made it easier for workers to mobilize around issues that ran adjacent to the concerns of the stu-

⁴² Shorter and Tilly, 1971, 66.

⁴³ Shorter and Tilly, 1971, 67.

dents, such as rights to self-management in any workplace, but were certainly not the same.

Conversely, in the United States before 1968 there were few examples of large scale strikes. Other than the steel workers' strike in 1959, which included around half a million participants, frequent general strikes had not existed in the nation since the 19th Century.⁴⁴ Additionally, while union activity was certainly stronger in the 1960s in the United States than it is today, the protests of the 1960s were more focused on the antiwar effort than the rights of workers.

VI.

Likely due at least partially to their comfort with general strikes and mass mobilization, the French populace largely supported the students and their efforts to protest, expressing ire for the police force when they clashed. On May 10, 1968, in what has since been termed the “night of the barricades” (because of barriers that students constructed to slow down police), French police and students clashed violently in the streets of Paris. 80 percent of Parisians, though, supported the students and believed fault in escalating the violence lay with the police.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, cultural differences between the youth and both the ruling class and worker allies persisted in France as well, which manifested themselves in the priorities of the students. Before the revolution of 1968, the French schooling system was extremely restrictive. Students could not voice their own ideas in the classroom and the gender and sexual politics of the university were also extremely conservative—men and women were often divided. Thus, in considering how all of French society should change, the University system was at the front of many students' minds. As Perlman argued about the revolutionary movement,

“What begins [when the Universities are occupied] is a process of collective learning; the “university,” perhaps for the first time, becomes a place for learning. People do not only learn the information, the ideas, the projects of others; they also learn from the example of others that they have specific information to contribute, that they are able to express ideas, that they can initiate projects. There are no longer specialists or experts; the division between thinkers and doers, between students and workers, breaks down. At this point all are students.”⁴⁶

As might be expected, while many supported the broad protests of the students and their right to do so, concepts like the total change in University structure, for which Perlman argued, were less popular or important to much of French

44 David Montgomery, “Strikes in Nineteenth Century America,” *Social Science History*, (Vol. 4, No. 1, 1980), 81-104; Investopedia, “The 10 Largest Strikes in U.S. History,” 2012, <https://www.investopedia.com/slideshow/10-biggest-strikes-us-history/?article=1>.

45 Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian students and workers in 1968*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 120.

46 Perlman, 1970.

society. Thus, the French students created their own political ideology and culture that was often separate from that of the more institutionalized labor movements.

However, while their culture and their priorities often separated them from the workers, the French students also believed the workers to be necessary to their success. When the Grenelle Accords were signed and a majority of the workers agreed to go back to work, students quickly demobilized. As scholar Mitchell Abidor argues in the introduction to his oral history *May made me*, “For the workers, it was not the qualitative demands of the students that mattered, but their own quantitative, bread-and-butter issues.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, French students were incapable of understanding or accepting this. Abidor continues, “The *ouvriérisme*—the workerism—so strong on the French left led the students to think the workers were the motor of any revolution, which left the vehicle immobile because the engine was dead.”⁴⁸ So, after the workers returned to work, the students also quite quickly demobilized.

The alliance between the students and the workers in France was further complicated by the students’ tenuous relationship to the PCF and CGT, organizations which were active participants in the society that students were striving to upend. The PCF and CGT, naturally concerned with their parties’ success, framed their arguments and made agreements based on the existing political opportunity structure in France. Many student radicals, on the other hand, saw it as their charge to revise those very structures. The PCF was thus forced to walk a fine line between maintaining its own institutional legitimacy and representing the more revolutionary elements of its own party. According to Libbey, French Professor Georges Lavau thus argues,

“[the PCF] has assumed the role of *tribune*: articulating the grievances of discontented groups as well as defending the gains of the workers against attempts by the bourgeoisie to undermine them. The PCF has thus become a legitimate channel for protest, protecting the system from more destructive outbursts. This protection failed in 1968, of course, but Lavau contends that the party’s role of *tribune* nonetheless coloured its response to the crisis.”⁴⁹

Lavau and Libbey’s contention that the PCF lost the role of *tribune* in May of 1968 is worth noting because although the CFDT and the CGT were the ones to negotiate with de Gaulle’s government, they had lost control of the

47 Abidor, *May made me*, 11.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Libbey, 1976, 147.

situation. They were able, ultimately, to demobilize the workers, but they lost significant support, which showed in the elections of June, 1968 where they lost half of their seats.

The Grenelle Accords in many ways crystallized the differences between the *gauchiste* students and the institutionalized, Stalinist political parties. These differences, which existed throughout the movement, were momentarily put aside as everyone took to the streets. After most workers returned to the factory floor, though, student radicals, as well as radical elements within the Communist Party, discussed their disappointment with the limited scope of the Grenelle Accords. Prisca Bachelet, who was helped to organize the nascent stages of the movement during demonstrations at the University of Nanterre on March 22, 1968, said of the leaders of the CGT, “they were afraid, afraid of responsibility.”⁵⁰ Éric Hazan, who was a cardiac surgeon and a radical Party member during 1968, argued the Communists’ actions at the end of May and their negotiations with the government amounted to “Treason. Normal. A normal treason.”⁵¹ Student Jean-Pierre Vernant argued, “The May crisis is not explained and is not analyzed [by the Party]. It is erased.”⁵²

The students and their allies had good reason for frustration. They believed the Party theoretically meant to represent them betrayed many of the principles for which they were fighting. Members of the Communist Party also quite obviously held distaste for many of the student radicals. In a very obvious reference to the student movement, Communist Party leader Roland Leroy said at the National Assembly on May 21, 1968, “The Communists are not anarchists whose program tends to destroying everything without building anything.”⁵³ For their part, the students’ significant miscalculation, was that they believed Party leaders like Leroy did not speak for the interests of the workers. H  l  ne Chatroussat, a Trotskyite, argued at the time, “I said to myself, [the workers] are many, they’re with us... so why don’t they tell the Stalinists [the PCF] to get lost so we could come in and they could join us?”⁵⁴ To the contrary, many of the workers who went on strike in the factories were uninterested in broader political change or politics in general. They simple hoped for a positive change to their material conditions. As

50 *Ibid.*

51 Mitchell Abidor, “1968: When the Communist Party Stopped a French Revolution,” *New York Review of Books*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/19/1968-when-the-communist-party-stopped-a-french-revolution/>.

52 Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The French Student Uprising...*, 1971, 558.

53 Abidor, “1968: When the Communist Party Stopped a French Revolution,” 2018.

54 *Ibid.*

Colette Danappe, a worker in a factory outside Paris, told Mitchell Abidor, “The students were more interested in fighting, they were interested in politics, and that wasn’t for us.”⁵⁵ Danappe continued about the Grenelle Accords, “We got almost everything we wanted and almost everyone voted to return... Maybe we were a little happier, because we had more money. We were able to travel afterwards.”⁵⁶

At first glance, it would appear that the situation in the United States and the goals of antiwar demonstrators would have made it easier to mobilize a broader cross-section of the population. By mid-May of 1971, 61% of Americans responded “Yes, a mistake” to the Gallup poll question, “In view of developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam?”⁵⁷ However, a larger segment of the older population in the United States was against the war than the younger generation. These older Americans did not support the war, but largely did not support protest movements either.⁵⁸ The lasting images of social movements in the United States in the 1960s all include what came to be referred to as “the counterculture.” The counterculture is depicted, stereotypically, as young men and women with flowers in their hair, listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival, and holding radical aspirations for the dawn of a new age in America. This group was generally maligned by significant portions of older generations of Americans in particular, who believed the youth movement to be related more to drug use than to any serious concern. While the counterculture’s goals of promoting peace and community were in many ways quite sincere, with the fear of the draft adding to their outrage, an older generation of Americans refused to take their style of protest seriously.

		<i>Popularity of Grievance</i>	
		Low	High
<i>Political Allies</i>	Low	No mobilization.	Radical mobilization; institutional change unlikely.
	High	No mobilization; political outcomes unpredictable	Mass mobilization.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

57 Lydia Saad, “Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam,” Gallup, May 24, 2016, <http://news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx>.

58 *Ibid.*

Table 1.3

This table explains mobilization. The situation in France in May of 1968 can be found in the bottom-right box: the broad-based grievances of students were largely supported and they found political allies in the labor and Communist parties. In the United States, mass mobilization did not occur on the same scale, because although the popularity of the grievance was high (as support for the American War in Vietnam was low), no significant political allies (who could have been found in the older generation of anti-war Americans) existed. This situation can be found in the top-right box.

This disdain for the youth movement was made obvious in the way that Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather covered clashes at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Members of the counterculture movement, calling themselves “Yippies” (included in this group were many members of the SDS), descended onto Chicago to protest the Vietnam War and the lack of democracy inside the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination selection. Cronkite had already argued on air that the Vietnam War had become unwinnable, but when he and Rather covered the 1968 DNC together, their attention was focused on normative politics as a whole—and they quite obviously had very little respect for the protestors. Each argued that it was the Yippies who provoked a bloody confrontation with the police, with Rather stating that, “Mayor Richard Daly vowed to keep it peaceful, even if it took force to keep the peace. He was backed by 12,000 police, 5,000 national guardsmen, and 7,500 regular army troops. But the Yippies succeeded—they got their confrontation.”⁵⁹

Through the 1960s, many protest and counter-culture groups (including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Americans for Democratic Action, and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, to name a few) created and sustained significant cultural differences from much of American society. Members of the Weather Underground, despite some of their uniquely militant positions, dressed and spoke in a language that was common to the broader counterculture movement. They did so largely because they felt themselves unable to work within the boundaries of a political system that, even on the left, did not come close to representing their political ideology.⁶⁰ In forming their own cultural identity, Leftist groups in the United States did manage to catch the attention of the masses, even if that attention was largely negative. In this way, their issues and demands were placed at the center of the conversation, causing a fraught societal debate.

59 Dan Rather and Walter Cronkite, “ARCHIVAL VIDEO: Protests Turn Violent at the 1968 Democratic National Convention,” for CBS News, uploaded March 14, 2016 to ABC News, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/archival-video-protests-turn-violent-1968-democratic-national-37639406>.

60 Asbley et al., “You Don’t Need A Weatherman To Know Which Way The Wind Blows,” 1969.

VII.

The legacies of the social movements of the late 1960s in the United States and France are hotly debated. Historian Tony Judt, holding an unmistakable disdain for the student movement in France, wrote,

“It is symptomatic of the fundamentally apolitical mood of May 1968 that the best-selling books on the subject a generation later are not serious works of historical analysis, much less the earnest doctrinal tracts of the time, but collections of contemporary graffiti and slogans. Culled from the walls, noticeboards and streets of the city, these witty one-liners encourage young people to make love, have fun, mock those in authority, generally do what feels good—and change the world almost as a by-product... This was to be a victimless revolution, which in the end meant it was no sort of revolution at all.”⁶¹

On the other hand, scholar Simon Tormey wrote about the events of May of 1968,

“1968 represented a freeing up of politics from the congealed, stodgy and unimaginative understandings that had so dogged the emergence of an oppositional politics after the second world war. It unleashed a wave of joyous experimentation, evanescent and spontaneous efforts to challenge the dull routine of the repetitious lives that had been constructed in and through advanced capitalism.”⁶²

As we can see, this duality of point-of-view about revolutionary movements existed both in France and the United States. While the Weather Underground, without any significant political allies and carrying a negative media portrayal from the press, has mostly been portrayed negatively in the years since, some scholars believe that they altered a broader American consciousness. As Arthur Eckstein writes, “Thousands of New Leftists agreed with the Weathermen’s analysis of what had gone awry in America... the last 50 years have seen remarkable progress in black rights, women’s rights, gay rights, Hispanic and Asian rights... Weatherman’s violence... did not impede that progress.”⁶³ Although Eckstein certainly does not offer a ringing endorsement of their militant tendencies, he does

61 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, (New York: Penguin, 2005), 412-413.

62 Simon Tormey, “Be realistic—demand the impossible: the legacy of 1968,” *The Conversation*, February 14, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/be-realistic-demand-the-impossible-the-legacy-of-1968-87362>.

63 Eckstein, “How the Weather Underground Failed at Revolution and Still Changed the World,” 2016.

argue here that the group spawned social progress in a way that they did not expect they would.

Interestingly enough, these more positive interpretations from historians and political scientists contradict the feelings of the student radicals themselves. Neither group had an exact moment of demobilization, but it became increasingly clear to young leaders throughout the early 1970s that they had not fomented the change for which they had hoped.⁶⁴ In France especially, a growing frustration existed towards the Communist Party and its Labor wing,⁶⁵ which points quite obviously to the dangers of coalition building. Students' purported political allies came to be thought of as traitors by many of the student radicals. These frustrations and divisions that were born in 1968 proceeded, if not directly led, to the French Communist Party's long slide into irrelevance during the 1970s and 80s, as Abidor argues. He writes,

“Once it lost the PCF as the mediating force to represent its grievances, the French working class fulfilled Herbert Marcuse’s 1972 warning that “The *immediate* expression of the opinion and will of the workers, farmers, neighbors—in brief, the people—is not, per se, progressive and a force of social change: it may be the opposite.” The PCF understood this latent conservatism in the working class of 1968. Not so the New Left student movement.”⁶⁶

The coalition was successful very briefly in May and resulted in positive material gains for workers—through pay raises, France became a little bit more equal.⁶⁷ The most significant legacies of movements in France and the United States, though, were separate from any coalition. The French and the American students, each galvanized to be part of the revolutionary vanguard and inspired to change their societies, felt a deep sense of disappointment after the events of the late 1960s. Broken alliances and dashed goals led to the perception that they had let themselves and their ideals down. Measured this way, revolution failed, and Judt is right to argue that in this context, “it was no sort of revolution at all.”⁶⁸ A middle ground perspective is well-explained by May '68 protestor Suzanne Bor-

64 Judt, *Postwar*, 2005, 414; Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks*, 2013, 130.

65 Abidor, “1968: When the Communist Party Stopped a French Revolution,” 2018.

66 *Ibid.*

67 As is explicated in this work, the character and legacies of May, 1968 in France are hotly debated. What is clear with regards to “equality” is that French workers received fairly significant pay raises, unions were strengthened, and some who participated in the events of May, 1968 continued in various forms to engage in politics. These people, including Daniel Cohn-Bendit who is now a pro-market Green Party minister, are referred to as “soixante-huitard.”

68 Judt, *Postwar*, 2005, 413.

de, who noted, “It made it possible to change the way children were educated, leading many teachers to reflect and to teach differently. Experimental schools opened... But it had no consequences on political life and failed to changed anything real.”⁶⁹ Holding a completely different interpretation of the outcome, Maguy Alvarez, an English teacher in France, told *New York Times* journalist Alissa Rubin, “Everything was enlarged by 1968; it determined all my life.” Rubin titled the article “May 1968: A Month of Revolution Pushed France Into the Modern World.”⁷⁰ So, maybe “these witty one-liners [that encouraged] young people to make love, have fun, mock those in authority, generally do what feels good,” did change France as a byproduct.⁷¹ The kicker of Alvarez’s quote is that she told it to Rubin not as she was deeply examining the political consequences of the era, but as she was walking through an exhibition of posters and artworks from the period. During his interview with Borde, Abidor noted towards the end of the discussion, “May ’68 didn’t result in anything concrete, then.” Borde responded, “Sure it did. It completely changed the way I live.”

VIII.

Much of the existing literature in the field of social movement theory is concerned with the ways in which social groups successfully frame their movements to a broader public in order to increase popular support, political allies, and best take advantage of existing political opportunity structures.⁷² This work, although not formatted with a traditional structure of similar systems design, is concerned with the comparison of a social movement that attempts to tap into public support (French student movement) with another that appears to at times actively avoid building coalitions (the Weather Underground). More than anything else, the historical differences in France and the United States led to vastly different political opportunity structures for each social movement in the late 1960s. Yet neither group compromised their idealistic political ideology, and for this reason both groups failed to achieve their ultimate goals. Nevertheless, both did change cultural aspects of the societies in which they operated.

The conclusion of these movements’ cultural success, despite their political failure, challenges existing social movement literature that argues that successful social movements should attempt always to build broad support. French student radicals found cultural success not because of their coalition with the working class but often despite it. In the United States, much of the lasting memory of the

69 Abidor, *May made me*, 2018, 84.

70 Rubin, “May 1968: A Month of Revolution Pushed France Into the Modern World,” 2018.

71 Judt, *Postwar*, 2005, 412-413.

72 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 157-183.

SDS occurred after it split into the Weather Underground. Certainly, a degree of this remembrance is negative—French student radicals with their “power to the imagination” are remembered in a much rosier light than the Weather Underground, which is often considered a terrorist organization in the United States. However, the Weather Underground and its writings continue to inspire generations of young activists, who do not necessarily ascribe to their militant tactics but are inspired by its political ideology. Coalition building can without a doubt aid in the success of a social movement. However, it can also at times minimize its impact. As we examine these two distinct approaches to creating change, our analysis shows that coalition building might support the historical imagination, but it can hinder change.

IX.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, questions of the value of coalition building have continued to roil activists, in particular in the United States, which precipitated the 2008 global financial crisis and now exists in a period of unstable economic and political development that scholars have called a “crisis of neoliberalism.”⁷³ Current social protest movements have faced some of the same issues confronting protestors in the 1960s and early 1970s—the Occupy Wall Street movement presents a worthy case study.

In many respects, the Occupy movement is the closest analog in recent history to the May 1968 movement in France. Sparked by young people, the protests were concerned with income inequality and were able to create an entirely new language to talk about money in this country through popular slogans—“we are the 99%.”⁷⁴ Branding itself a revolutionary movement, Occupy eschewed traditional leadership structures and declared an “occupation of New York City” on September 29, 2011 which resulted in a series of clashes with the police and ended in the protestors being forced out of their home base of Zuccotti Park on November 15 of the same year.⁷⁵ Protests continued for months afterwards around the world, but did not maintain the same sort of zeal as they did in September, October, and November of 2011. While the Occupy movement quickly burned and petered out in a similar way to May 68, its results are of a somewhat different character than those in France and are thus worth examining here.

Most significantly, the United States government was never forced to

73 Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2011.

74 N.R. Kleinfeld and Cara Buckley, “Wall Street Occupiers, Protesting Till Whenever,” *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/01/nyregion/wall-street-occupiers-protesting-till-whenever.html?_r=1&ref=occupywallstreet.

75 Chantal da Silva, “Has Occupy Wall Street Changed America?” *Newsweek*, September 19, 2018.

come to the bargaining table with Occupy, and their leaderless movement has been criticized for never laying out concrete demands.⁷⁶ Additionally, though, the amorphous nature of the group allowed it to buck trends of significant splintering along ideological lines—post-Occupy activism has simply dispersed to campaigns like #AbolishICE and protesting the Keystone XL Pipeline.⁷⁷ Its greatest success has likely been the proliferation of discussion of income inequality in the United States, which has led to campaigns for an increased minimum wage. However, in a similar way to the student protestors in France, questions remain as to whether “we are the 99%” has been honored or coopted. Hillary Clinton launched her 2016 presidential campaign in Iowa with the statement “the deck is still stacked in favor of those at the top.” Ted Cruz highlighted in the lead-up to 2016 “the top 1% earn a higher share of our income nationally than any year since 1928” and Jeb Bush said “the income gap is real.”⁷⁸ The rhetoric is well and good, but each of these politicians has, according to Occupy, aided in the widening of this gap. There are positive messaging lessons to be learned from the Occupy movement for other protest groups, but in many respects Occupy lost control of the narrative—the shrinking 1% now speaks for the 99%.

76 Heather Gautney, “What is Occupy Wall Street? The history of leaderless movements,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/what-is-occupy-wall-street-the-history-of-leaderless-movements/2011/10/10/gIQAwkFjaL_story.html?utm_term=.44928aed6c6e.

77 Da Silva, “Has Occupy Wall Street Changed America?” 2018.

78 Michael Levitin, “The Triumph of Occupy Wall Street,” *The Atlantic*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/the-triumph-of-occupy-wall-street/395408/>.

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