

May '68: The Effectiveness of Students and Industrial Workers Through a Contentious Politics Lens

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Abstract

May '68 was a transformative social movement that emerged from the tension between rapid socioeconomic changes and the persistence of conservative power structures in France. Student protests gained national attention with the Sorbonne occupation and violent clashes with the police. Within days, workers across the country independently joined the movement, initiating the largest strike in French history. However, students and industrial workers had different objectives: while students opposed capitalism and government authority, workers sought improvements in socioeconomic conditions and workplace self-management (*autogestion*). This paper utilizes a comprehensive framework of contentious politics to examine the objectives, repertoire, and performance of social actors, alongside government responses, to analyze the outcomes of the movement and the effectiveness of students and industrial workers in achieving their goals. Today, many ideals of May '68 continue to resonate with younger generations, especially the commitment to fairness and social justice. These principles underscore how contentious actions empower young people to find their voices and actively engage in the democratic process to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Keywords

Contentious Politics, May '68, March 22 Movement, French Student Movement, Youth Protest, Night of the Barricades, *Autogestion*, Grenelle Accords

1. Introduction

On Monday, May 13, 1968, the French newspaper *France-Soir* featured the headline "The entire Latin Quarter transformed into a battlefield last night" alongside

images of explosions and students attempting to climb over a large barricade of bricks, wooden planks, and other debris (France-Soir, 1968: p. 1). The student barricades, evoking the historic barricades of the Paris Commune in 1871, emerged from a rapidly growing wave of protests that began at Nanterre University just 49 days earlier. The legacy of the Commune could be seen in slogans like “Long live the Commune!” (“*Vive la Commune!*”) painted on the walls of Paris (Eslinger, 2022). But how did the protests escalate so quickly and with such intensity?

Contention has been part of French history for over four centuries, providing an avenue for popular participation in the political process through collective action (Tilly, 1986: p. 386). Although social movements rarely achieve their goals through contentious collective action, these interactions often have long-term effects beyond their direct policy successes or failures (Tarrow, 2022: p. 170). Analyzing the May ‘68 Movement through the lens of contentious politics sheds light on the effectiveness of participants in achieving their intended outcomes.

Youth protests became a global phenomenon in 1968, driven by a desire to challenge the established order and reshape societal values. French students began protesting at Nanterre University through the March 22 Movement. Driven by the ideology of the New Left (*Nouvelle Gauche*), students initially demanded changes in the university system but soon started challenging the capitalist regime. May ‘68 quickly spread to the Sorbonne University and the streets of Paris’s Latin Quarter, where students built barricades as symbols of resistance to oppression (Touraine, 1971: pp. 157-158). The government’s brutal reaction to the protests resulted in violent clashes with the police, which were captured and further politicized by the national media. As authorities conceded to some of the students’ demands, industrial workers mobilized, feeling empowered by what they perceived as the government’s growing weakness. Within days, a nationwide strike broke out involving between 7.5 and 10.0 million workers, the largest in French history. They demanded improvements in socioeconomic conditions and self-government (*autogestion*) (Dogan, 1984: pp. 247, 274; Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: pp. 261-262).¹

While the movement gained significant national and international media visibility, it lost momentum by the end of May. Following the unrest, the Gaullist center-right achieved a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections. Despite successfully rallying millions and challenging the establishment, an analysis of the immediate outcomes—university reforms, the fragmentation of the French left, and the strength of capitalism post-May ‘68—suggests that students and industrial workers did not fully achieve their extensive goals, settling for limited concessions.

However, the movement’s lasting influence on French culture, particularly its focus on individual freedom, contributed to positive social change over the decades that followed (Cohen, 2008: pp. 20, 27). In the long term, substantial political

¹Sources differ on the number of workers who participated in the strike: Dogan (1984) mentions 10.0 million Gilcher-Holtey (1998) mentions 7.5 million to 9.0 million.

and social changes unfolded, showing that complex societal transformations occur over extended periods, and highlighting the need for complementary perspectives beyond contentious politics to fully understand the movement's enduring impact.

2. French Social Movements and Contentious Politics

France's rich history of social movements and protests, spanning over four centuries, raises important questions about what motivates people to take to the streets to voice their shared frustrations and hopes. What common causes can bring them together to advocate? What aspects of the French political system have allowed the tradition of collective action to develop?

While the analysis of complex economic, political, and social changes that drove France to cultivate a tradition of contention is beyond the scope of this paper, a general understanding of the country's political system and its democracy provides insightful analytical context. Over the past two centuries, France underwent important social changes due to the development of the capitalist system, particularly the proletarianization of work, the development of a national labor force and the growth of the national state.² These changes did not happen smoothly, leading to protests by citizens whose rights were limited by the government (Tilly, 1986: pp. 5-7).

After World War II, social activism expanded in France. During this period, France's democratic regime encouraged citizens' broad political participation while avoiding arbitrary government retaliation and protecting their civil rights in most cases. Until the widespread adoption of social media in the past few years, most people outside the centers of power did not have "a microphone", and endured their hardships and struggles "in silence". Despite facing strong opposition, ordinary citizens have managed to confront those in power through collective action. Public acts of contention also gave the French population insights into the government's goals, as citizens "scanned contentious events for political messages", allowing protests to gain center stage in the French democratic process (Tilly, 1986: p. 386).

3. Contentious Politics Framework to Analyze May '68 Social Actors' Effectiveness

In *Contentious Politics*, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2015) define contentious politics as "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors' interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets". To put it simply, "[c]ontentious politics occurs when ordinary people... join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents" (p. xiii, 7-9). Tilly and Tarrow developed a comprehensive

²The development of capitalism created three fundamental conflicts: the opposition of labor and capital, the power concentration over factors or production, and the competition of market participants (Tilly, 1986).

framework to identify common mechanisms and processes across a range of contentious political events. Applying these analytical tools and foundational concepts to May '68 provides an in-depth understanding of its dynamics and long-term implications.

Characterizing May '68 according to this analytical framework highlights its essential aspects, strengths, and weaknesses. Understanding the background and context leading to the mobilization of social actors reveals their ideologies and the nature of their demands (claims) and objectives. Breaking down streams of contention into distinct events allows for the examination of social actors' interactions in the context of opportunities (incentives) and threats (constraints). Reviewing contentious performances and repertoires, and government responses sheds light on the outcomes and social actors' effectiveness in realizing their objectives (**Figure 1**).

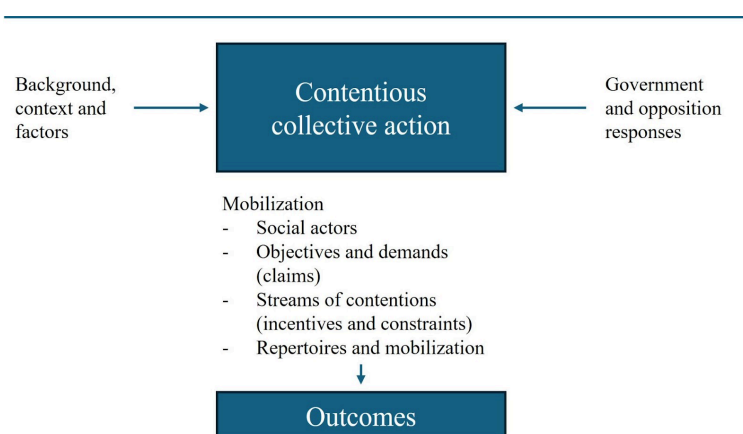


Figure 1. Contentious Politics Framework^a. a. This graphic framework was developed by the author through a synthesis of concepts from *Contentious Politics*, representing an interpretive model rather than a direct reproduction (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

4. Characterization of May '68 within Social Movements and Contentious Politics

May '68 was a controversial and complex movement, and scholars have yet to agree on a definition that fully captures all its fundamental characteristics. Social and political scientists have used different terms to describe it, including “a new social conflict”, an “institutional crisis”, a “critical moment”, a “quasi-revolution”, a “cultural breakdown”, and a symbol of “global revolt” (Gilcher-Holtey & Matern, 1998: p. 253; Krawatzek, 2018: p. 208). Considering its main features—type of engagement, organization, actors, and objectives—May '68 can be described as contentious collective action driven by an umbrella militant social movement against the French government, authorities and capitalist institutions, to effect change.³ Throughout May '68 and the preceding March 22 Movement, protesters

³This new definition was developed by synthesizing concepts in *Contentious Politics* and *Power in Movement* by many authors which cannot all be cited in this paper.

actions ranged from non-violent to violent, with different networks aligning to create a coalition (Tarrow, 2022: pp. 114-116).

This paper focuses on the effectiveness of students and industrial workers, the two largest groups, in achieving their goals.⁴ Before May '68, the students and the industrial workers movements operated in parallel, each maintaining their own distinct history and identity. During May '68, each group had its own goals and strategies, often converging and diverging, reflecting a lack of cohesion. Once they demobilized, these social movements continued on their separate trajectories. In addition, understanding the divide between the Old Left—represented by the French Communist Party and labor unions—and the New Left—represented by the Trotskyists, Maoists, anarchists, and socialists, and supported by students and young workers disillusioned with existing political institutions—adds depth to the analysis of social networks (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 264).

May '68 started as a militant movement, spontaneously initiated by students who began to protest and attracted workers to join them. The movement relied on individual engagement rather than the support of conventional institutions, as exemplified by student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who was unaffiliated with any political party and embodied a spirit of independence. The movement grew rapidly through militant actions and popular momentum, but the absence of clear leadership posed challenges. May '68 increasingly relied on institutional support from leftist parties, student organizations, and the workers unions as it expanded. Despite attempts by these institutions to control the movement, individual militants remained the central focus, often acting independently and at times going against political or union leadership, as seen when industrial workers rejected union negotiated concessions through the Grenelle Accords. Therefore, this paper takes into account first-hand accounts of participants and their unique perspectives.

Unlike movements oriented towards a specific policy area, such as the feminist movement or the civil rights' movement, May '68 main goals cannot be inferred from its name. Its collective goal can only be broadly defined as driving societal change, given the students' and industrial workers' different ambitions (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 255). Students, who started the movement demanding reforms to the university system, expanded their demands to include broad societal changes and the dismantling of the capitalist system. Workers, who depended on the capitalist system for their jobs and prosperity, wanted to adapt it by improving labor conditions, increasing benefits, and decentralizing factory governance through *autogestion*. Despite this apparent conflict, students and workers overlapped in the need to oppose the government and negotiate with the authorities that limited their rights and resources (Tilly, 1986: p. 6).

Ultimately, the movement's success in achieving demands not only depended on the nature of the claims themselves but also on its strengths and weaknesses, particularly social actors' ability to negotiate and compromise. Understanding

⁴Other social groups were involved, including rural workers, intellectuals, leftist parties and the general public.

these dynamics is essential to assess the effectiveness of students and industrial workers in achieving their goals, or if the movement was always destined to fall short of their ambitions.

5. Background and Factors Leading to May '68 (1945-1968)

In the decades leading up to May '68, France experienced major socioeconomic and political changes, creating both opportunities and threats for activism. These factors compelled militants to take action, setting the stage for the protests (Tarrow, 2022: p. 9).

5.1. The Glorious Thirty

During the period following World War II, known as the Glorious Thirty (*Trente Glorieuses*), the French economy experienced strong growth, expanding from its agrarian base into the industrial and service-oriented sectors (Touraine, 1971: p. 28). High employment rates led to prosperity and job security (Sirinelli, 2003: p. 337). With the rural exodus, many people moved to cities, where credit availability enabled rapid social mobility and the expansion of the urban middle class, which gained access to higher education, better-paying jobs, and homeownership (Borne, 1990: pp. 41-42, 44-45).

The shift towards suburban living in large housing complexes in the *banlieues* presented new difficulties for the young population (Borne, 1990: pp. 48-49). In 1968, baby boomers represented 16% of the population, compared to only 12% in 2024.⁵ The 1960s counterculture movement inspired acts of “refusal” and “resistance” among the youth, challenging established norms and social structures (Sirinelli, 2003: pp. 337-338).⁶ With the erosion of traditional values and the rejection of conventional gender roles and moral standards, students experienced a profound disconnect from previous generations (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 28-29). This desire for change faced strong resistance from the government. In his May 14 speech to the National Assembly, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou criticized the bourgeois youth for lacking discipline and challenging “institutions on which humanity relied for centuries”. According to Pompidou, while the working-class and peasant youth “worried” about their professional future, the university youth questioned “civilization itself” (Pruilh, 2008).

Under the Fifth Republic, the French government worked to solidify its authority by ramping up investments in education and social security and laying the groundwork for the modern welfare state (Borne, 1990: pp. 35-39). President Charles de Gaulle, seen as a nation’s war hero, won the 1958 presidential elections with a strong majority. Often ruling by special decrees and overstepping his constitutional bounds, he created a parallel government through a large private office. He coexisted comfortably with the socialist and communist minorities until 1965, when François Mitterrand, the opposition candidate, received 45% of the votes in

⁵Baby-boomers, between 16 and 24 years-old, in 1968 totaled over eight million people (Sirinelli, 2003).

⁶In the 1960s, the hippie movement in the United States reached France.

the second-round elections. In the 1967 elections, de Gaulle's coalition retained control of the National Assembly by a small margin, indicating a shift in the political landscape and growing popular discontent with the regime. The changing popular sentiment opened an opportunity for social activists to threaten de Gaulle's dominance of French politics, questioning a decade of presidential political maneuvering and the very legitimacy of his government (Krawatzek, 2018: p. 210; Freiberg, 1971: p. 18).

5.2. International Youth Protests in the 1960s

Gasset and Klimke (2009) describe youth movements in the 1960s as a global phenomenon, listing 39 protests worldwide. Young people believed themselves to be in a struggle against the established order. A "wave of protests, rallies, marches, sit-ins and battles with the police" against the capitalist establishment in the West and the "deformed workers state" in the East "brought hope and inspiration", allowing the youth movements to gain momentum and rebel against political and social structures (p. 5).⁷ The 1960s counterculture, which originated in the U.S. and spread globally, was driven by advocacy for personal freedom and anti-war sentiments. In addition, the rise of the New Left after the Prague Spring, the increasing progressiveness of the Catholic Church, and the civil rights movement all contributed to a rejection of "the old bourgeois ethos" (Mahoney, 2008: pp. 4-5).

In the U.S., the Students for a Democratic Society wanted to reshape social values and institutions. Japanese student grassroots protests focused on resisting strict educational norms and societal expectations. Italian students contested rigid university systems, while German students opposed capitalist structures. Although youth movements largely developed independently, they shared common values and goals, such as greater autonomy in educational systems, societal transformation, and opposition to the Vietnam War (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 253; Dansette, 1971b: pp. 13-18). The student protests stemmed from a "crisis of representation", as universities restricted students' political expressions, and student organizations failed to truly reflect their interests. Consequently, students turned to non-traditional forms of representation, using protests to challenge and disrupt the universities' structures (Mercer, 2021: pp. 130-131).

The May '68 movement in France started late, after protests in nations such as the U.S., Japan, Poland, Italy, and Germany had already reached their peak (Gasset & Klimke, 2009: p. 5; Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 259). The press played an important role in romanticizing and amplifying youth protests, increasing their appeal to the general public. During the 1960s, the press was "a prime national symbol" and had the power to "shape the perception of politics". Newspapers provided an outlet for journalists, intellectuals, academics, and civil society representatives to express their views and impact public discourse (Krawatzek, 2018: pp.

⁷In the 1964 "Open Letter to the Party", the Polish activists J. Kuron and K. Modzelewski captured the momentum of youth protests and contentious actions across the globe in the 1960s (Gasset & Klimke, 2009).

213-219). In 1968, global youth protests peaked and received extensive coverage by the French press, raising awareness among French protesters and activists of events happening “across borders and across oceans” (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 259).⁸ While center and left-wing newspapers (*Le Monde*, *L’Humanité*) framed youth as idealistic, right-wing newspapers (*Le Figaro*) depicted them as disoriented and lost (Krawatzek, 2018: p. 217).

5.3. French University in Crisis

The French university system struggled to accommodate the increasing student enrollments due to inadequate infrastructure and limited resources. Between 1938 and 1968, the student population in universities increased tenfold, while the general population grew by only 20%. Operating within a centralized and underfunded structure, universities became overwhelmed with large class sizes, outdated curricula, inflexible teaching styles, and limited intellectual innovation (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 34-35). Students from all backgrounds entered the university system, driving mobilization against its shortcomings and creating strong incentives for students to take social action to reform it.

The university crisis became a catalyst for the student movement, allowing students to advocate for an anti-capitalist agenda. Protesters during May ‘68 demanded greater influence over university decisions regarding curriculum choices and spaces for social interaction. While the government eventually recognized the need for university reform, students saw the 1967 response as too little, too late, and seized the moment to voice their frustrations and expand their base (Freiberg, 1971: p. 11; Dansette, 1971b: pp. 39-40).⁹

5.4. Old Left and New Left Ideologies

In the late 1950s, a “New Left” emerged across Europe and the United States, influenced by socialist academics in Britain. This movement, which distanced itself from the Marxist emphasis on the working class and traditional communism, expanded through small groups, labor unions, and intellectual circles (Loyer, 2009). By the late 1960s, the French Left experienced a significant clash of ideologies as part of the global shift within leftist movements. The disagreements ranged from emphasizing individual freedom to advocating for the complete overthrow of capitalism. The CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) and the PCF (*Parti Communiste Français*) represented the Old Left and the working class (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 264). Successfully integrated into the French political system, they opposed systemic changes, and initially criticized the student movement which they considered to be bourgeois. The PCF, which held 22% of the seats in the National Assembly in 1967, relied on traditional structures and

⁸France saw isolated youth protests against the university system and the Vietnam War in Paris (1964) and Strasbourg (1966).

⁹Alain Peyrefitte’s proposed reforms to address the crisis, but implementation was delayed and faced challenges.

was unwilling to adopt more radical New Left’s ideals. The New Left viewed the PCF as embodying many restrictive aspects of the communist movement (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998, p. 268; Freiberg, 1971: pp. 15-19).

In contrast, the French New Left, loosely organized as a movement rather than a party, rejected bureaucratic and authoritarian structures. Comprising the “skilled working class” and “young intelligentsia”, the New Left opposed alienation and exploitation, and supported individual freedom over subordination to the collective. They spread social and cultural revolutionary ideas through direct actions since they considered traditional organizations and parties conforming to the “welfare state model” ineffective and lacking the will to change the status quo. A core New Left principle, *autogestion* called for self-management and decentralized decision-making within societal structures in industry and the university system, reducing hierarchies and the concentration of power, and giving industrial workers self-determination (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 265). Student activism shifted towards the New Left and away from the PCF during the Algerian War, as the UNEF (*Union nationale des étudiants de France*) viewed the party’s position as overly conservative. By May ‘68, New Leftists had attracted intellectuals—sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and professors—who played a significant role in inspiring students to protest for ideological reasons. However, both students and intellectuals often lacked a concrete implementation plan, leaving the movement with powerful ideas but limited direction for achieving tangible goals (Loyer, 2009; Dansette, 1971b: pp. 21-22). While the May ‘68 Movement spans the period from May 3 to May 30, this paper also examines the March 22 Movement, which merged into May ‘68, and the demobilization in June, as shown in the Timeline in Table 1.

Table 1. Timeline.

Date	Events
March 22 Movement	
November 1967	Students at Nanterre University begin a strike against the administration for implementing the Fouchet Reform without their input, igniting tensions.
January 1968	Daniel Cohn-Bendit publicly mocks Youth Minister François Missoffe, escalating tensions at Nanterre University.
March 1968	March 22 Movement starts: Cohn-Bendit leads an occupation of the Nanterre administrative tower, leading to class suspension and heightened student activism.
April 1968	During the university closure, students organize protests and meetings, planning further actions during the Easter break.
May 2, 1968	A fight breaks out among students at Nanterre. As a result, Nanterre University shuts down, and students move to the Sorbonne.
May ‘68 Movement	
1st Phase: Students Protest (Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter)	
May 3, 1968	Students gather at the Sorbonne to protest, leading to clashes with police and the closure of the Sorbonne. Several students are arrested.

Continued

May 6-8, 1968	Thousands of students march through Paris, clashing with police and demanding the reopening of the Sorbonne. Protesters also demand the release of arrested students.
May 8, 1968	Thousands of students march through Paris, passing by the National Assembly.
May 9, 1968	The government proposed to reopen the Sorbonne, but students decide to occupy it before its official reopening.
May 10-11, 1968	During the <i>Night of the Barricades</i> , 12,000 students build barricades and demand police vacate the Sorbonne. Students have violent confrontations with the police occur.
May 11, 1968	The Prime Minister agrees with students demands, including the reopening of the Sorbonne, but students occupy it instead, further intensifying the conflict.
2nd Phase: Workers Strikes (National Protest)	
May 13, 1968	Labor unions organize a solidarity strike, expanding the protests' reach and prompting nationwide strikes.
May 14-17, 1968	Strikes spread across France, involving between 7.5 million and 10 million workers and halting most economic activities.
May 24, 1968	De Gaulle gives a televised speech proposing a referendum on regional and educational reforms, which is poorly received by the public and protesters.
May 25-27, 1968	Negotiations of the Grenelle Accords are announced by Pompidou but rejected by workers. Negotiations fail.
May 27, 1968	A large meeting at Charl�ty Stadium attracts 22,000 participants, including students, worker unions, and political party representatives.
May 29, 1968	De Gaulle proposes a referendum which was poorly received. De Gaulle secretly flies to Germany to meet General Massu and secure military support.
May 30, 1968	De Gaulle delivers a second televised speech, announces the dissolution of the National Assembly, and calls for elections, aiming to restore order. De Gaulle supporters march in the streets of Paris.
Demobilization	
June 5-24, 1968	Gradual demobilization begins, with workers and sectors making concessions and calling off strikes.
Jun 14, 1968	The government evacuated the Odeon Theater, signaling the end of the occupation.
June 16, 1968	Police clear the Sorbonne, bringing the student occupation to an end.
June 23-30, 1968	De Gaulle's party wins a majority in the National Assembly elections as public sentiment shifts towards stability.
July 10, 1968	Maurice Couve de Murville becomes Prime Minister, replacing Georges Pompidou, and marking a return to order and stability in France.

6. May '68 Social Actors

Alain Touraine (1981) argues that a social movement is not a uniform "concrete ensemble", and no single entity or organization can represent the diversity of all social actors. Although organizational leaders may advocate for their members' interests, they cannot fully reflect the voices of millions. For Touraine, a movement often requires "personal involvement" from social actors (pp. 150-151).

Unaffiliated activists have played a significant role in modern movements, including May '68, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter (Carothers & Youngs, 2015). Therefore, this paper draws on primary sources such as interviews, first-hand accounts, images, and recorded testimonies to capture individual perspectives.

While youth protests spread globally in the 1960s, the French movement stood out due to the significant participation of workers (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 258). May '68 involved social actors from different socioeconomic backgrounds. It marked the first time of a large-scale collaboration between students and workers in France. However, the dynamic between these two groups was far from straightforward, as militant students attempted to engage workers to strengthen their cause while workers focused on their own economic goals, leading to a complex and uneasy alliance (Touraine, 1971: p. 70).

6.1. Student Movement

The protesting students had little interest in traditional politics, particularly those under 21 years old who were ineligible to vote. Before May '68, many students gained experience through their involvement with the communist student unions and the UNEF, protesting against the Algerian and Vietnam Wars. The Vietnam War became a symbol of the dangers of the capitalist threat to democratic governments, leading to a perceived "naked aggression" (Cohen, 2008: p. 20; Freiberg, 1971: p. 10).

The students' political agenda in May '68 carried global significance (Cohen, 2008: pp. 21-22). Drawing anti-capitalist inspiration from the Cuban Revolution and a romanticized Che Guevara, they wanted to oppose the capitalist regime and disrupt the status quo (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 49-50). Students distanced themselves from the Old Leftist ideals that focused on proletariat emancipation and rigid institutions. The New Left youth expanded their goals to include a wide range of causes beyond those immediately concerning them (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 258).

In *La Sorbonne par elle-même*, a compilation of documents produced by students during May '68, Perrot et al. (1968) captured the symbolic revolutionary aspirations behind the movement. One student manifesto declared that, despite their bourgeois background, university students refused to become "erudite" members of an elite disconnected from the broader society. They believed that the goal of overturning the entire system, rather than simply improving workers' conditions within capitalism, gave legitimacy to their demands (pp. 161-162).¹⁰

Alain Touraine (1971) explains that the students' struggle against capitalism translated into a defiance of "authoritarian structures in industry" and "technocracy". While these concerns did not resonate with industrial workers, students, often seen as the "children of the bourgeoisie" and future "professionals", protested against the very "technostructure" they were being prepared to join (pp. 27-

¹⁰La *Sorbonne par elle-même* is a compilation of primary sources gathered during May '68.

28). Caught between two worlds and faced with contradiction, the students turned to rhetoric to drive their revolutionary discourse. Despite their militant rhetoric, the students of May '68 did not take direct action to overthrow the government or incite a revolution. Instead, they shattered the illusion of a society united by prosperity, exposing its internal conflicts and contradictions.

J. W. Freiberg (1971) describes the student movement as “revolutionary... in the absence of a revolutionary issue”, as the economic prosperity of capitalism made it difficult to overturn. Students tested the limits of France’s democracy and liberalism through revolutionary rhetoric rather than proposing an actionable program. Instead, they revealed their ideological beliefs and, in the process, provoked the authorities into deploying massive police forces, leading to the radicalization of more students and showcasing the state’s repressive control of all French society. As the movement progressed, students found new symbolic ways to convey their utopian aspirations (pp. 9-11).

The student movement’s weak organization and shifting leadership hindered its effectiveness. The fragmented student movement, which consisted of approximately 15,000 students organized in small groups (*groupuscules*), represented a wide range of political ideologies, ranging from anarchism (anti-authoritarianism) to Trotskyism (proletarian revolution) to Maoism (mass movement against the bourgeoisie) and moderate socialism (structured approaches). These diverse ideologies often led to disagreement, especially in major student organizations like the UNEF, further weakening their ability to cohesively articulate demands (Dansette, 1971b).

Although natural leaders emerged during the May '68 events, the student movement struggled with a lack of leadership continuity. In the early stages, Daniel Cohn-Bendit became the de facto leader of the Nanterre March 22 Movement, gaining recognition for his confrontational and provocative tactics towards the authorities. Jacques Sauvageot, then acting president of UNEF, played a key role in organizing the Charléty meeting on May 27, a crucial moment in the movement. Alain Geismar, who led the SNE-Sup (*Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieur*), showed fluctuating positions, at times accepting government concessions and later retracting his agreements. He made a great impact during the radio broadcast on May 10, when he publicly supported the demonstrations, effectively bringing negotiations with the government to a halt (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 125-127).

6.1.1. Students’ Repertoire of Contention: The March 22 Movement at Nanterre University

Both students and university professors were instrumental in initiating the March 22 Movement at Nanterre University. Founded in 1964, the university was overcrowded and isolated, struggling with an inadequate transportation system and poor social facilities (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 57-58). As the university saw an increase in enrollment, many students from affluent Parisian neighborhoods attending Nanterre felt isolated in its suburban setting. Initially led by a small group of social science students, the movement gained traction and expanded to

approximately 1500 students within four months, reflecting a growing sense of dissatisfaction on campus (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 79-80).¹¹

The scope of the students' demands also widened. In November 1967, students began striking against the Fouchet Reform's implementation (Freiberg, 1971: p. 10; Dansette, 1971b: pp. 61-63).¹² However, students soon called for broader reforms of the entire university system and ultimately challenged the capitalist regime itself. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, leader of the New Leftist group *les Enragés*, emphasized this shift in his 1968 interview, stating that "the students [were] rejecting the role that society [had] assigned to them", refusing to become "future executives who [would] later exploit the working and peasant classes". He aimed to expand the movement "beyond the university" and align it with the struggles of workers and peasants. He also criticized the Old Left and the Communist Party for failing to "hold a revolutionary position that would allow for a radical transformation of society" (Hugues, 2008).

Students initially employed a non-violent repertoire of contention, including strikes, protests, sit-ins, direct provocations of government officials, leaflet distribution, and symbolic acts targeting university authorities. Tension intensified in January 1968 when Daniel Cohn-Bendit publicly criticized Youth Minister François Missoffe, a confrontation which became emblematic of student defiance, testing the limits of authority and turning acts of insolence into symbols of resistance. In March, Cohn-Bendit led the occupation of the university's administration tower, resulting in the suspension of classes. As tensions increased, students began to engage in direct confrontation, leading to clashes with university security and police forces. This approach drew media attention, which depicted the students as victims of government repression (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 73-75).

University professors, often outspoken critics of the university's administrative and educational systems, played a role in encouraging a spirit of dissent among the students. The crisis at Nanterre revealed deep divisions among the faculty. Sociology Professor Henri Lefebvre observed in an interview that the March 22 Movement originated within Nanterre's social sciences department, where education encouraged students to critically assess society and aspire for change (Hugues, 2008). Dominique Gros, then a political science professor at the Besançon University, explained that, while many professors supported the student movement, a substantial number accused progressive faculty of promoting revolutionary ideas among students (Gros, personal communication, 2024).

The response of the government and university administration to the student protests was ineffective, creating opportunities for students to organize themselves. The movement became increasingly radical as *les Enragés* escalated their confrontational tactics, pushing the boundaries of traditional student activism by openly challenging and mocking university authorities. The administration's decision to close Nanterre University unintentionally gave students more time to

¹¹Enrollment in Nanterre grew from 2300 in 1964 to over 11,000 by 1967 (Dansette, 1971b).

¹²The Fouchet Reform addressed changes in the education such as diversification of knowledge and development of entities dedicated to research.

organize. During this time, approximately 1500 students gathered to discuss university issues, using the closure as an opportunity to plan their next steps. On May 2, a teacher was injured during a protest, leading to the complete closure of Nanterre and prompting the March 22 Movement to relocate to the Sorbonne (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 80-85).

6.1.2. Students' Repertoire of Contention: The May '68 Movement at the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter

On May 3, the student movement gained momentum, bringing the protests into the heart of the city, at the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter, sites strategically located and deeply connected to the legacy of the Paris Commune (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 88-90). Moving to Paris also provided students with extensive media exposure, essential for spreading their message effectively.

Clashes with the police resulted in the closure of the Sorbonne and the arrest of several students. In response to the police's actions, UNEF organized protests (Dansette, 1971b: p. 92). Protesters engaged with the public directly through street demonstrations, visuals such as posters, and the press (Cohen, 2008: pp. 21-22). During the intense clashes with students on May 3, May 6 and May 8, though the police did not fire their guns, they wounded hundreds of protesters (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 89-105). On May 8, 25,000 students marched through Paris, passing by the National Assembly without attempting to stop during its deliberations, showing a complete disregard for the traditional political process (Barrillon, 1968).

Initially peaceful, demonstrations turned violent as students confronted police repression. On May 10, during the *Night of the Barricades*, 12,000 students demanded that police vacate the Sorbonne. They built barricades, leading to a violent police response (Dansette, 1971b: p. 117). The barricades invoked the symbolism of the Paris Commune of 1871 and the 1944 liberation of Paris, creating a powerful image of defiance (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 261). This added revolutionary meaning marked a strategic shift and intensification of the protests, attracting broader public support (Cohen, 2008: p. 22).



Figure 2. "Rue Gay-Lussac the morning after May 10, 1968 disturbances" (France TV Info, 1968).

A scene from the Latin Quarter captures the intensity of the May '68 protests (**Figure 2**). Protesters built barricades from materials such as scrap, stones, and cars, creating defensive barriers against police forces. These makeshift barricades provided physical protection for the demonstrators while symbolizing their determination. The strategic use of urban elements shows the protesters' creativity and resourcefulness. **Touraine (1971)** explains that the barricades were not "an offensive weapon" and the movement, despite their rhetoric, was not a "political movement attacking institutions" or "trying to seize control of power", as it lacked the capacity to organize a sustained political struggle (p. 159).

The clashes during the *Night of the Barricades* led the police to eventually withdraw from the Latin Quarter, shifting the movement's focus. As the police emerged as a clear and tangible adversary, protesters shifted from abstract critiques of university structures to a direct confrontation with state authorities. This shift in message made their tactics more effective in gaining the support of workers and the broader public.

For the first time, protesters did not run away from the police in street confrontations after they chanted slogans and waved banners. Instead, students attacked the police barriers (**Touraine, 1971: pp. 158, 162-163**). Marvin Gallant, a seventeen-year-old student at the time, remembered the *Night of the Barricades*, describing how he listened to "the nightmarish news in the middle of the night" about the CRS (*Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*), the French riot police, preparing to "regroup and charge" against the barricades. Gallant panicked, recalling "the sight one never forgets" of the police charging with relentless force. However, this time, he noticed a change: "the youths [had become] brave", choosing to resist rather than flee, and standing firm against authorities (**Goupil et al., 1999: p. 102**).

The student movement focused on three main demands: lifting sanctions on detained students, removing police from campuses, and reopening universities. UNEF at the Sorbonne strongly condemned what it perceived as fascism and police repression (**Dansette, 1971b: pp. 88-89; Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 261**). This shift aligned with broader concerns about state violence, turning the movement's effort to retake the Sorbonne into a symbol of resistance. Opposition to police brutality became a central tactic to garner support and shift public opinion. Both nationally and internationally, the arrests and violence against students were widely condemned (**Touraine, 1971: pp. 163-164**).

The pattern of ineffective government responses created additional opportunities for the student movement. With Prime Minister Pompidou abroad and President de Gaulle supporting police repression, a disruption in communication slowed down the decision-making process and provided students with time to organize and expand their activities (**Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 262**).

After May 13, the student movement focused on "opportunities to speak [rather] than to fight", as students occupied university campuses, disrupting traditional operations. The conflict shifted into a crisis, raising the question of whether

students truly aimed to transform the institutions or merely sought a cultural reform (Touraine, 1971: pp. 259-260). Students continued to organize large gatherings, including a 22,000-person meeting at the Charléty Stadium, consisting primarily of students, union and political party representatives (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 283-287).

May '68 used powerful iconography to effectively communicate the importance of revolutionary ideals. The iconic photograph by Jean-Pierre Rey, known as the *Marianne of '68*, shows a woman waving a flag, symbolizing her revolutionary spirit. The picture evokes strong emotions, similar to Delacroix's (1830) painting *Liberty Leading the People* (Figure 3).

Delacroix's painting became a symbol of the 1830 Revolution, depicting a personification of Liberty as a powerful woman leading the people into battle, symbolizing the legacy of resistance and the pursuit of freedom. Similarly, the image of the *Marianne of '68* encapsulated the May '68 spirit, showing a modern Marianne, the national symbol of the French Republic, marked by youth and defiance.



Figure 3. *Marianne of '68*- 21 Manifestation unitaire, Paris, 13 mai 1968 (Rey, 1968/2018, cover); Delacroix's *Liberty* (Delacroix, 1830).

During May '68, radio broadcasting played a critical role in organizing and mobilizing demonstrators, especially through peripheral radio stations such as *RTL* and *Europe n° 1* (Charnelet, 1998). Unlike state-controlled television, radio stations, which had more freedom and popularity among young generations, became a powerful tool for protesters. The immediacy of radio allowed real-time communication of grievances and goals, extending the movement's reach. In his May 14 speech to the National Assembly, Prime Minister Pompidou criticized the "harmful" role of radios, accusing them of being complicit with the protesters. According to the Prime Minister, "under the pretext of informing", these stations were "disseminating information" and "call[ing] others to demonstrate" (Pompidou, 1968: p. 408).

6.2. Industrial Worker Movement

During the Glorious Thirty, industrial workers enjoyed economic gains as the

labor movement successfully integrated with the Fifth Republic, benefiting from rapid economic expansion. While strikes occurred from time to time, their primary focus was on improving working conditions and wages rather than challenging the broader economic or political structures. Consequently, there were no clear indications of the discontent that surfaced during May '68 (Abidor, 2018: p. 2). This period of capitalism was characterized by mass production and a “well-paid, non-ideological labor force”, with wage increases and reduced working hours managed through economic growth and efficiency planning. As May '68 began, most industrial workers seemed to have “a stake in the continuity” of “the existing order”. Except for young skilled workers with advanced technical studies, the majority of workers avoided the protests. French unions, such as the CGT, were influential in the public sector, but had limited leverage in the private sector, focusing more on wage protection through strikes than revolutionary transformations (Touraine, 1971: pp. 195-199).

During May '68, a new generation of young workers, aligned with the New Left, joined the student protests, seeking greater control over industry and influence on society. These workers shifted their focus from traditional union strongholds, like mining and public services, to newer sectors, such as chemicals, automotive, and education. They were no longer satisfied with better wages and working conditions and sought instead *autogestion*. Notably, many industrial workers chose to strike independently, without relying on formal union support (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: pp. 263-264; Touraine, 1971: pp. 200-202).

The two major labor unions had different ideologies: the CGT aligning with the Old Left principles and the CFDT (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*) aligning with New Left principles (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: pp. 263-264). Similar to the PCF, the CGT initially hesitated to establish a connection between students and industrial workers, only engaging once civil unrest intensified (Dansette, 1971b: p. 234).

For many workers, protests and strikes represented practical means to gain leverage over the government and employers to obtain tangible benefits. In a 2018 interview, Alain Krivine, founder of the JCR (*Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire*) and a May '68 activist, observed that, while industrial workers and students occupied shared spaces, workers never demonstrated genuine interest in student concerns or a socialist revolution (Abidor, 2018: pp. 44-46). Dominique Gros noted that the movement's backbone lay in the massive strikes that “affected practically every company” and focused on specific demands, including “union freedom, wage increases”, and “company board participation”. In contrast, student activism tended to focus on less concrete “ideologies” (Gros, personal communication, 2024).

Industrial Worker' Repertoire of Contention

Strikes have been an important element of labor contention in France for many decades. During the Popular Front in 1936, workers organized large-scale strikes which were instrumental in securing labor reforms, including wage increases, the

right to unionize, and paid vacations.

On May 13, labor unions launched a general solidarity strike, significantly expanding the scope of the May '68 protests beyond the student movement. The industrial workers' strike began at Sud-Aviation, initiated by young workers, and quickly expanded to other companies, including Lockheed and Unilec. As they reached critical industries, such as automotive manufacturing (Renault), railway transport (SNCF), and the public services (PTT), unions rapidly coordinated actions, demonstrating their organizational capacity. Once millions of workers joined the strikes, the movement exerted considerable pressure on the national economy, forcing the government to negotiate (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 264).

The industrial workers' initial demands mirrored those of prior strikes and focused on socioeconomic benefits. However, the CFDT, which represented the aspirations of young workers to democratize industry, advocated for an anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian governance through *autogestion* (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: pp. 265-266). The labor unions lost control over the events when the strikes expanded. In negotiations with the government, CGT leaders Benoit Franchon and Georges Seguy were unable to secure terms acceptable to workers in order to end the strike (Dogan, 1984: pp. 248-249).

The strikes used a broad repertoire of contention mechanisms, rapidly spreading as workers occupied factories. Organized picketers and strike committees played important roles, as the number of strikers increased from the initial 300,000 to between 7.5 million and 10.0 million in just ten days, effectively paralyzing most of the French economy (Dogan, 1984: p. 247; Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: pp. 261-262). In some industries, particularly steel and automotive, workers had violent clashes with the police, resulting in the deaths of two workers (Dansette, 1971b: p. 334).

7. Government Response

During May '68, rumors circulated that the Communist Party intended to seize control of the presidential palace (*Palais de l'Élysée*). This perceived threat supposedly led to President de Gaulle's controversial decision to travel to Germany to seek military support, although his exact reasons remain unclear. The government's internal division further complicated the situation, with the President favoring a hardline approach, while Prime Minister Pompidou pushed for negotiation. This disagreement within the government leadership created opportunities for strikers to expand their demands during negotiations, using the government's instability to press for further concessions (Dansette, 1971b: p. 242).

On May 25, Prime Minister Pompidou started negotiations with nine unions, resulting in the Grenelle Accords (1968, as cited in Dansette, 1971a). The unions asked for a 35% increase in the minimum wage (SMIG), better healthcare funding, and reduced working hours. In response, the government made important concessions, including a minimum wage of 3 francs per hour, a 7% wage increase starting June 1, 1968, and a gradual reduction in working hours by 1970. Despite

these concessions, automotive workers at Renault Boulogne-Billancourt rejected the proposal, demanding better terms and encouraging other workers to follow suit (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 244-246).¹³

Concerned about the integrity of state institutions, President de Gaulle made a secret trip to Germany to secure support from French military units stationed in Ba-den-Baden. He also attempted to restore his power with a speech on May 29 to propose a referendum, which was poorly received (Dogon, 1984: pp. 250-252). On May 30, de Gaulle addressed the nation through a radio broadcast, announcing the dissolution of the National Assembly and calling for new elections. He warned the French people of the “totalitarian communist” threat and presented himself as the only one capable of standing up to it (De Gaulle, 1968). After the President’s speech, 400,000 to 500,000 de Gaulle supporters, who had been largely silent throughout the crisis, gathered in Paris to show their support. This public demonstration gave de Gaulle a renewed vote of confidence (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 327-329).

President de Gaulle’s supporters chose the same method of street demonstrations as May ‘68 protesters, emphasizing the importance of direct participation in the political dynamics of the time. However, while the students used creative and radical imagery and provocative slogans, the President’s supporters carried traditional displays, featuring posters with his picture and slogans like “With de Gaulle for France”. This contrast in visual messaging underscored the opposing visions for France’s future, reflecting the broader social and political conflict of the time (Sipahioğlu, 1968/2018).

In early June, recognizing a growing desire for stability among the French population, center-right political groups sought to restore order (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 231-246). Anne-Marie Gassier, then a seventeen-year-old French student, from whom May’68 felt deeply unsettling, expressed her frustration with the disruption of day-to-day life. “We thought it was going to last a long time, and we couldn’t see the end”, Gassier recalled (Gassier, personal communication, 2024). Gradually, industrial sectors negotiated concessions with government, prompting workers to end strikes and return to work (Dansette, 1971b: pp. 332-346). The government also took steps to restore normalcy, reopening gas stations to facilitate travel during the Pentecostal holidays.

By June 16, authorities evacuated the Odeon Theater and the Sorbonne, reclaiming control over key protest sites. From June 23 to 30, de Gaulle’s party won a decisive victory in the National Assembly elections.

8. Outcomes of May ‘68

As May ‘68 progressed, students shifted their focus from the initial demands for university reforms to the radical dismantling of capitalism. However, these expanded objectives were largely symbolic, reflecting deep societal discontent rather

¹³The negotiations involved representatives from the CNPF and CNPME on behalf of business owners, and the CGT, CFDT, CGT-FO, CFTC, CGC, FEN, on behalf of workers’ unions, as well as government officials.

than concrete attainable goals. Similarly, industrial workers expanded their demands beyond better wages and social security to include autogestion. The student slogan “Be a realist, ask for the impossible” captured the spirit of the time, illustrating the tension between idealistic aspirations for societal transformation and pragmatic constraints (*Collections and Academic Liaison*, 2019).

An analysis of the immediate outcomes—university reforms, the fragmentation of the French left, and the strength of capitalism post-May ‘68—suggest that students and industrial workers failed to achieve their goals. However, in the long-term, substantial political and social changes unfolded, showing that complex societal transformations occur over extended periods and are shaped by numerous factors.¹⁴

8.1. French University Reform

In the aftermath of the protests, President de Gaulle sought to address students’ grievances with university reforms, appealing to the “modernizers” in his base who viewed education as a building block of “modern society”. Although the Gaullists won the elections, affirming the Right’s strength and a public preference for stability, his authority weakened due to the dissatisfaction within his party on how he handled the May events. His initiative for university reforms reflected a strategic effort to regain the support of his party and the public (Tarrow, 1993: pp. 587, 592).

He appointed Edgar Faure, a left-leaning Education Minister, to lead the reforms and address the issues raised during the May ‘68 protests. Faure expanded the focus beyond student demands, recruiting experienced educational reformers who, before the protests, lacked the political leverage to implement changes. The events of May ‘68 shifted the political landscape, enabling them to push for extensive changes to the university system, fundamentally reshaping the structure and approach of French higher education (Tarrow, 1993: pp. 581, 584).

Faure’s cabinet had three key objectives: autonomy, interdisciplinarity, and participation. Through the *loi d’orientation*, the reforms introduced modular departments, known as *Unités d’Enseignement et de Recherche* (UERs), allowing universities greater flexibility in designing their academic structures, moving away from rigid traditional frameworks. Additionally, the reforms established mechanisms for electing governing councils, incorporating student representation in the university decision-making process (Tarrow, 1993: pp. 593-595).

The *loi d’orientation* encountered minimal political resistance, largely due to the government’s fear of renewed student unrest, contributing to their willingness to address specific student demands. As a result, the law passed with significant support in October 1968, reflecting both a strategic response to social pressures and an effort to stabilize the education sector (Tarrow, 1993: pp. 588-590).

¹⁴Examples of societal changes following May ‘68 include de Gaulle’s resignation (1969), the lowering of the voting age to 18 (1974), and significant reforms in women’s rights and education, such as the legalization of abortion (1975) and the Haby law, which reformed the education system (1975) (Borne, 1990).

However, implementation fell short of its goals. Although the UERs were designed to provide flexibility, Faure's cabinet made a "provisional" list of UERs to expedite implementation, which ultimately served as a mechanism to maintain control over university structures, limiting their autonomy. This approach diverged from the law's original vision, reducing the reform's transformative impact (Tarrow, 1993: p. 594). Although the *loi d'orientation* initially introduced substantial reforms, the momentum of May '68 did not translate into sustained educational change, and the reform became a relatively minor concession in the face of the evolving political and social landscape (Tarrow, 1993, p. 596).

8.2. Fracture of the French Left

After May '68, the French Left experienced significant fragmentation. The FGDS, which supported Mitterrand in the 1967 election, dissolved due to internal disputes. In the presidential election of 1969, the split among leftist parties led to multiple candidates, diluting their vote share. Jacques Duclos received the highest support with 21.3%, but no leftist candidate advanced to the second round, allowing Georges Pompidou to win the presidency with 58.2% of the votes. The division within the Left enabled the center-right to consolidate its political power (Penniman, 1969: p. 114).

While the Socialist Party and the *Convention des Institutions Républicaines* included *autogestion* in their 1972 platforms, they struggled with defining and implementing the concept. The ambiguity and internal disagreements over its practical use hindered its implementation. The decline of the PCF and the fragmentation of the New Left created power gaps. Without a strong party to champion the working class, the bourgeoisie expanded its dominance over labor. Additionally, New Left factions, such as the Maoists, resorted to more militant and violent tactics, which eroded the New Left's credibility and further led to its decline (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: pp. 266-269).

In 1981, François Mitterrand became the first socialist president of the Fifth Republic, marking a significant change in French political dynamics. His campaign resonated with younger voters, particularly those who had a positive view of the legacy of May '68. Mitterrand's victory offered renewed hope to those who saw his leadership as a revival of the progressive and transformative ideals associated with May '68.

Mitterrand's administration introduced several socialist reforms, like a fifth week of paid leave, retirement at the age of 60, and a 39-hour workweek, prioritizing leisure alongside labor. Nationalization of key industries sought to expand state control and enhance social solidarity. The 1982 Auroux laws democratized the workplace, strengthening employees' rights and expanding their role in company decision-making. However, rising inflation and unemployment led to an economic policy shift away from socialist ideas by 1983, under Prime Minister Laurent Fabius (Borne, 1990: pp. 73-74).

This period marked a shift in the socialist approach, revealing the limitations of

state intervention in reshaping society. The experience led to a growing appreciation for the role of private enterprise, highlighting the difficulty of maintaining radical change while navigating economic constraints, including inflation and unemployment. As a result, the initial ambition for transformative, state-driven reforms gradually transitioned to a more practical approach, balancing the pursuit of social ideals with economic challenges (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: p. 271).

8.3. Cultural Change and Impact on French Capitalism

The events of May '68 are often considered catalysts for cultural shifts in France, challenging social norms and initiating a broader cultural and sexual revolution. However, similar social movements, like those advocating for women's rights and LGBTQ rights, emerged in other capitalist nations that did not experience the widespread protests of May '68, suggesting that these cultural shifts may have stemmed from the general liberalization of society and the modernization of capitalism rather than being a direct consequence of May '68 (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998: pp. 275-276; Abidor, 2018: pp. 18-19).

May '68 promoted individual freedom and anti-authoritarian values, advocating for personal and social liberation. The New Left pushed for self-actualization, challenging traditional norms and institutional structures. While these efforts successfully cultivated an opposition to authority within French society, they failed to fundamentally reshape core capitalist ideals, particularly the emphasis on individualism over collective welfare. As a result, May '68 had a limited influence in transforming the economic foundations of French society.

Following May '68, French capitalism adapted to new social demands by making cultural concessions while preserving its core structures. This shift gave rise to an individualized form of capitalism, combining ideals of personal freedom and autonomy. In *Modest Contribution*, Régis Debray (1978) states that the radical rhetoric of May '68, which initially challenged capitalist structures, ironically facilitated capitalism's transformation. He argues that by prioritizing personal freedom and anti-authoritarianism, the movement diverted attention away from fundamental issues such as state power and class struggle, allowing for a gradual acceptance of American-style cultural influences. This realignment, described by Debray as the "lowest common denominator: one can change life without changing the State," allowed French capitalism to evolve and integrate the values of self-expression and autonomy, ultimately facilitating its adaptation to global economic needs.

Prisca Bachet, a participant in the March 22 Movement, remarked that protesters "acted as if [they'd] seized power and were post-revolution... While [they] assumed intellectual hegemony, [they] didn't notice that the bosses were reorganizing and modernizing, that there was new management... [they] missed the central axes" (Abidor, 2018: p. 20). Her reflection highlights a key disconnect: while the protesters focused on cultural shifts, capitalism adapted, reorganizing itself to

align with the evolving social environment.

9. Conclusion

Contentious politics provides a valuable framework for understanding social movements by analyzing key elements including actors, demands, opportunities, and strategies. Applied to May '68, this approach illustrates how a small group of radical students leveraged situational opportunities to expand their reach until millions of workers joined them. While everything seemed possible during the brief period of the protests, deeper societal changes took place gradually in the decades that followed.

The social actors of May '68 set ambitious goals: students sought to reform the university system and challenge the foundation of capitalism, while industrial workers prioritized economic gains and *autogestion*. However, a closer examination of their objectives reveals inherent contradictions. Despite their revolutionary rhetoric, students refrained from direct action to overthrow the capitalist system. Industrial workers settled for material gains through union negotiations, while skilled young workers faced challenges in achieving meaningful governance in the workplace. This lack of cohesion between students and industrial workers highlights deeper ideological and generational divides within French society itself.

The immediate outcomes of May '68 reflected only partial success. Although educational reforms were introduced, focusing on autonomy, interdisciplinarity, and student participation, compromises in implementation reduced their transformative potential, making them modest concessions in a changing political landscape. The fragmentation of the New Left and the decline of the Communist Party created leadership voids, allowing the bourgeoisie to strengthen its influence over labor. Some New Left groups, like the Maoists, adopted more militant methods, which ultimately damaged their credibility and contributed to the movement's decline.

While May '68 undeniably reshaped cultural attitudes, its economic and political impacts remain topics of debate. As public attention turned toward individualism and lifestyle, a modified form of capitalism emerged, integrating personal freedoms and libertarian values into its core economic system (Debray, 1978). By adapting to these social changes, capitalism became more deeply embedded in French society. Politically, François Mitterrand's 1981 victory brought back some of May '68 ideals, balancing traditional worker rights and the expansion of "the role of the welfare state". However, global economic pressure led Mitterrand's administration toward market-oriented policies and progressive labor laws (Gilcher-Holtey & Mattern, 1998, p. 271; Borne, 1990: pp. 72-73). While social shifts happened, the economic transformation social actors sought did not materialize.

However, understanding the impact of May '68 requires a multifaceted analysis that considers diverse viewpoints. Within the broader shift in post-war Europe, social actors challenged entrenched power structures, seeking greater personal freedom. Culturally, the movement broke away from established norms, questioning

traditional hierarchies in public and private life. The media, especially radio and alternative press, played a crucial role in amplifying the protesters' messages and shaping public opinion. Although the movement did not achieve its immediate goals, it set the stage for lasting changes in areas like youth activism, women's rights, and education reforms, among other areas.

May '68 continues to captivate scholars and the public, with over 1,200 publications exploring its legacy (Dogan, 1984: p. 245). Many of the movement's ideals still resonate with today's young people, such as youth empowerment to question older generations, solidarity with peers and less favored members of society, and a commitment to questioning the status quo. The effectiveness of gaining a voice through direct social actions remains as relevant today as it did over fifty years ago. These principles encourage active participation and democratic engagement and highlight the lasting power of grassroots social movements in driving meaningful change.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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