

Forget 68

by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Editions de l'aube, 2008, 127 pp.

Philip Spencer

Also under review: *Mai 68 Explique a Nicolas Sarkozy*, by André and Raphaël Glucksmann, Paris: Editions DeNoel, 2008, pp 234.

The 40th anniversary of May 68 has brought forth a proliferation of publications of variable quality, not to mention accuracy. Amongst the various books, articles, poster and photo albums, two stand out as genuine efforts by participants to reflect seriously on its legacy, from what appear at first to be quite different current political positions. The first (written jointly with his son Raphael) is by Andre Glucksmann, whose decision to vote in the recent presidential election for Sarkozy aroused the ire of many on the left. Its title suggests an effort at some kind of self-defence but actually it is a work which raises some profound issues that anyone on the left ought to feel the need to engage with. The other is a series of interviews with Daniel Cohn-Bendit, provocatively entitled 'Forget 68,' though anyone reading it will not want to do so in a hurry, for he makes a quite impassioned defence of some core values that rather too many who claim to be on the left today seem to have forgotten.

But despite their obvious differences, there is much in common between these two sets of reflections. Both Glucksmann and Cohn-Bendit share a continuing enthusiasm for a famous slogan of May, chanted by millions on one of the great mass demonstrations that 'we are all German Jews.' (I ought to reveal at this point that I was myself a very young participant in these events which changed my life along with millions of others). It was a slogan brandished in open defiance of the repulsive attempt by both General de Gaulle and the French Communist Party to use nationalism and racist anti-Semitism to mobilise popular opinion against the student and rank and file workers' movement. It was an attempt which backfired spectacularly, as it revealed the deep complicity and the essentially symbiotic relationship between these two ostensibly opposed forces. But it was more than that. It expressed a core value of the movement – its radical, anti-racist internationalism and universalism, a commitment to solidarity with anyone who was in revolt against illegitimate authority, West or East, North and South. The movement of May was both against the Vietnam War and against Communist Party dictatorship

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and terror in Eastern Europe; it was a revolt against both Western capitalism and Stalinism.

What they also agree on, however, was that this was a revolt not a revolution. It did not aim at a seizure of power on the old Bolshevik model, with the attendant danger (repeatedly realised) of a new elite monopolising power and exercising state violence against enemies real and imagined at increasingly terrifying levels. In fact, as Cohn-Bendit makes clear, there was a deliberate decision not to go down this road but rather to create a space within which ordinary people could debate with each other and think for themselves, in which alternative forms of social, economic and political organisation could be imagined and tried out. This was the profound meaning behind the decision by the students to occupy the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter, and which then inspired the mass, spontaneous occupation of factories and workplaces. (The demonstrations were spontaneous from the beginning. The first big one began with about 50 people inside the Sorbonne. I left it myself quite early thinking it would peter out fairly soon, leaving my flat-mate there. He only re-appeared at 3.00 in the morning and told me that hundreds of other students had joined in because they saw the police attacking the students. None of them had been organised to do so. When they were arrested in turn, their friends joined in and the ranks of the demonstrators swelled exponentially, to the considerable surprise of the organisers, who found themselves joined in prison by people they had had not seen at all when the original demo was broken up!)

This radical, democratic spontaneity was the source of the movement's strength. It enabled problems to be posed at all levels of French society, in education, in the workplace, in the home, between men and women, even if there was not yet agreement on how they could be solved. Of course it is true that the movement was rolled back, that elections were held in which De Gaulle was returned to triumphantly to power. There was a reaction, not only politically but socially and economically, although the feminist movement, inspired in many ways by May, did make irreversible changes in French society. For the revolt, to misquote Marx, continued its work like a young mole. France was never the same again. De Gaulle himself was evicted from office within a year even if it took another decade before the Right was forced to relinquish its hold on power. But by then the Communist Party's stranglehold on the left was definitively broken.

It is at this point, Glucksmann argues, that core elements of the legacy of May began tragically to be abandoned, as the Left, having flirted briefly with idiotic

terror in its Maoist form (though revealingly never as much as its counterparts elsewhere) capitulated to reactionary political and ideological forces in its own ranks. Politically it acquiesced in the election of Francois Mitterrand, a shady and dubious figure from the past and not originally on the left at all (very far from it actually) but who rehabilitated the French Communist party in some ways, albeit as a junior partner in an electoral alliance. Once elected president, it was Mitterrand who was to commit French troops to training and abetting the genocidal Hutu Power racists in Rwanda. Ideologically, after the collapse of communism in 1989 (which we had all prematurely envisaged back in May), many on the left sought to forget too quickly the horrors of Stalinism and ended up throwing themselves into what readers of this journal will readily recognise as the anti-imperialism of fools.

But these two developments are connected. For how, as Raphael Glucksmann so bitterly asks, could those of us involved in May, who championed a revolt that would change the world, not respond to the catastrophe of Rwanda? What kind of radical change in the order of things have we envisaged, if it does not involve mobilising to halt or prevent genocide? What kind of imagination has the left restricted itself to, if it can only see evils out of one half-closed eye, and ignore far greater evils elsewhere, the mass murder of Tutsis, Kurds, and Chechens, just as it drew a premature veil over the long nightmare of Stalinist terror. None of these immense murders, as Glucksmann points out, were committed by western capitalist states. For the bitter truth is that all these genocides were committed by states which claimed to be anti-imperialist. The refusal to see that equal or greater dangers could come from this camp, to have the courage to look reality in the face, is perhaps the greatest betrayal of all of the spirit of May.

These are problems that the legacy of May requires us to think about and not to brush under the carpet. To their immense credit, some from the generation of 68, like Cohn-Bendit himself or Bernard Kouchner or Joschka Fischer in Germany have sought to think hard about them, even if their answers have sometimes differed. In doing so, they have remained loyal to a fundamental set of values that were at the heart of the May events, a cosmopolitan form of solidarity and a commitment to think for oneself, not to be blinded by conventional 'wisdoms' of right or left. These values have been too often forgotten by too much of the left today (for how else could a Stalinist like George Galloway have become the darling of British anti-imperialists?). It is the great virtue of these two books that they remind us again of that particular legacy of May 68.

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