

“Barricades of May ’68 Still Divide the French”

Steven Erlanger, *New York Times*, April 30, 2008

NANTERRE, France — Forty years ago, French students in neckties and bobby socks threw cobblestones at the police and demanded that the sclerotic postwar system must change. Today, French students, worried about finding jobs and losing state benefits, are marching through the streets demanding that nothing change at all.

May 1968 was a watershed in French life, a holy moment of liberation for many, when youth coalesced, the workers listened and the semi-royal French government of de Gaulle took fright.

But for others, like the current French president, [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), who was only 13 years old at the time, May 1968 represents anarchy and moral relativism, a destruction of social and patriotic values that, he has said in harsh terms, “must be liquidated.”

The fierce debate about what happened 40 years ago is very French. There is even a fight about labels — the right calls it “the events,” while the left calls it “the movement.”

While a youth revolt became general in the West — from anti-Vietnam protests in the United States to the [Rolling Stones](#) in swinging London and finally the Baader-Meinhof gang in West Germany — France was where the protests of the baby-boom generation came closest to a real political revolution, with 10 million workers on strike, and not just a revulsion against stifling social rules of class, education and sexual behavior.

For André Glucksmann, a prime actor then and still a famous “public intellectual,” May 1968 is “a monument, either sublime or detested, that we want to commemorate or bury.

“It is a ‘cadaver,’ ” he said, “from which everyone wants to rob a piece.”

Mr. Glucksmann, 71 and still with a mop of Beatles-like hair, wrote a book with his filmmaker son, Raphaël, 28, called “May 68 Explained to Nicolas Sarkozy.”

Mr. Sarkozy, in a stinging campaign speech a year ago as he ran against the Socialist candidate, attacked May 1968 and “its leftist heirs,” whom he blamed for a crisis of “morality, authority, work and national identity.” He attacked “the cynicism of the gauche caviars,” the high-livers on the left.

In 1968, “The hope was to change the world, like the Bolshevik Revolution, but it was inevitably incomplete, and the institutions of the state are untouched,” Mr. Glucksmann said. “We commemorate, but the right is in power!”

As for the French left, he said, “It’s in a state of mental coma.”

For Raphaël Glucksmann, who led his first strike at high school in 1995, his generation has nostalgia for their rebel fathers but no stomach for a fight in hard economic times.

“The young people are marching now to refuse all reforms, to defend the rights of their professors,” he said. “We see no alternatives. We’re a generation without bearings.”

The events (or movement) of 40 years ago began in March at Nanterre University, just outside Paris, where a young French-born German named Daniel Cohn-Bendit led demonstrations against parietal rules — when young men and women could be together in dormitory rooms — that got out of hand.

When the university was closed in early May, the anger soon spread to central Paris, to the Latin Quarter and the Sorbonne, where the student elite demonstrated against antiquated university rules, and then outward, to workers in the big factories.

Scenes of the barricades, the police charges and the tear gas are dear to the French, recaptured in every magazine and scores of books, including one by photographer Marc Riboud, now 84, called: “Under the Cobblestones,” a reference to a famous slogan of the time from the leader-jester, Mr. Cohn-Bendit, now a member of the [European Parliament](#): “Under the cobblestones, the beach.”

Mr. Cohn-Bendit, known then as “Danny the Red” for the color of both his politics and his hair, is also thought responsible for other famous slogans of the time: “It is forbidden to forbid” and “Live without limits and enjoy without restraint!” — with the word for enjoy, “jouir,” having the double meaning of sexual climax.

The injunction was especially potent in a straight-laced country where the birth-control pill had been authorized for sale only the year before, noted Alain Geismar, another leader of the time.

Mr. Geismar, a physicist who spent 18 months in jail — but later served as a counselor to government ministers — wrote his own book, “My May 1968.”

Now 69, Mr. Geismar, a former Maoist, uses an [iPhone](#). He happily displays his music catalog, which is mostly Mozart.

The movement succeeded “as a social revolution, not as a political one,” he said. While the de Gaulle government responded with the police and mobilized troops in case the students marched on the presidential palace, he said the idea never occurred to student leaders, who talked of revolution but never intended to carry one out.

Most significantly, Mr. Geismar noted, the movement was “the beginning of the end of the Communist Party in France,” which deeply opposed the revolt of these young leftists it could not control.

The leftists also managed in important ways to break the party’s authority over the big industrial unions.

The society of May 1968 “was completely blocked,” Mr. Geismar said — a conservative recreation of pre-World War II society, shaken by the Algerian war and the baby boom, its schools badly overcrowded.

“As a divorced man, Sarkozy couldn’t have been invited to dinner at the Élysée Palace, let alone be elected president of France,” Mr. Geismar said. Both the vivid personal life and political success of Mr. Sarkozy, with foreign and Jewish roots, “are unimaginable without 1968,” he said. “The neo-conservatives are unimaginable without ’68.”

André Glucksmann, who still supports Mr. Sarkozy as the best chance to modernize “the gilded museum of France” and reduce the power of “the sacralized state,” is amused by Mr. Sarkozy’s fierce campaign attack on the events of May 1968.

“Sarkozy is the first post-’68 president,” Mr. Glucksmann said. “To liquidate ’68 is to liquidate himself.”

But there is also a fashionable absurdity to the commemoration. The designers Sonia Rykiel and Agnès b. discuss their views of May 1968 in every magazine, there are documentaries and discussions on every channel and a Parisian jeweler, Jean Dinh Van, Vietnamese-born, has reissued a silver cobblestone pendant he made at the time, “to celebrate 40 years of liberty” — and, in his case, success. (The smallest, with chain, \$275.)

Even Fauchon, the expensive gourmet store whose color is hot pink, has lined up with the zeitgeist. The store is selling a metal box containing green tea from China called “le thé Mai 68” and adorned with slogans (including: “poetry is in the streets” and “imagination to power”). Described as “subtly perfumed with exotic fruits, grapefruit, bits of lemon peel and rose petals,” Fauchon calls it “the tea with the perfume of revolution.” Price: about \$23.50.

Mr. Sarkozy himself is trying to get into the spirit. In April he met Mr. Cohn-Bendit who gave him a copy of his own book, called “Forget 68” and inscribed it, naughtily: “For Nicolas. Imagination to power, but when? Greetings. Dany.” Mr. Sarkozy “laughed and said, ‘I’ll read it,’” Mr. Cohn-Bendit said.

“I say forget May 1968,” he said. “It’s finished. Society today bears no relationship with that of the 1960’s. When we called ourselves anti-authoritarian, we were fighting against a very different society.”

Jean-Pierre Le Goff is a sociologist at the National Center for Scientific Research and author of “May 68, The Impossible Inheritance.” May 1968 “belongs to no one,” he said. But he finds a deep fault, an abyss between generations. Then, “the great mass of youth was on the stage of history as an actor for the first time, and there was an ideology of positivism and progress.”

Now, France is depressive, he said, “and the young are afraid of everything.”

At Nanterre, a sprawling university on the edge of Paris with some 32,000 students, a poster in the library advertises a lecture on Marx entitled: “An analysis still valid, but needing several corrections.” A student has drawn an “X” over Marx’s brain and written: “All this is finished!”

If in 1968, students wanted a freer, better life than their parents, today students want to live no worse. Thomas Wastin, 24, is studying human resources, and says that students simply reflect the larger society. “Forty years ago, they wanted to change everything,” he said. “But today students aren’t selfish, exactly, but they are very worried about losing what they have. Today, we march and say, ‘Don’t touch the system.’ ”

Raphaël Fonfroide, 22, an art-history student with a ponytail and a beard, said the real impact of 1968 was personal, not political. “All this for us is pretty abstract,” he said. “We grew up in a world where most of our parents are divorced,” and the children bore the brunt of the new liberalism. The year 1968 “changed our parents, but the world was supposed to change, and it didn’t.”

Gregoire Le Ber, 22, said that “today, it’s impossible for us to conceive of a new system, as they did, but we can make the world better incrementally,” citing issues of the environment and social justice.

Virginie Mullet, 21, is studying history. “We’re all worried about how to work in this France,” she said. As for May 1968, “all this is a little overdone,” she said. “It’s all these old people celebrating themselves.”

Students, using trash can lids as shields, marching near the Gare de Lyon in Paris in May 1968. Such images remain a powerful symbol in today’s France.

