

LESSONS FROM PARISIAN PROTEST CULTURE
LAUREN ELKIN DISCOVERS MAY 1968 THROUGH THE EYES OF MAVIS
GALLANT

February 28, 2017 By Lauren Elkin

Living in Paris, I'm always aware of the people's ability to explode into rebellion, given the right circumstances. Writing about the May 1968 uprising for the *New Yorker*, the Canadian short story writer Mavis Gallant describes her ambivalence towards the events of May, her admiration for the bravery of the students tempered by impatience for the "false siege psychosis" the population indulges in, creating a crisis situation that does not abate for months. It's true anywhere—any social demonstration will be equal parts sincere and self-mythologizing. But the Parisian readiness to stand up and march, to speak truth to power, and to make visible one's dissent, has always impressed me; it's part of why I wanted to live here. I can't claim to be exempt from the desire to mythologize it. But I'm aware that this is a dangerous thing to do.

"Streets are the dwelling place of the collective," Walter Benjamin wrote in his *Arcades Project*. Whether we acknowledge it or not, in the street we can stand together in favor of an idea. Marching is an instinctive response to feeling wronged, or desperate, or compelled to make a statement, or have an impact. It makes us feel stronger to be part of a group. It feels good. Marching is a political act, but it's a social one as well. We have so few occasions for doing the same thing at the same time, and when we do it we feel we belong to something bigger than us.

As far as mythologized collective uprisings go, you can't do much better than 1968 in Paris. It all began at Nanterre University, where I used to teach, a modern campus in the western suburbs of Paris, built in the mid-1960s. In March 1968, a group formed called *Les enragés* ("the angry ones") to protest the fact that male students weren't allowed to stay the night in the female dorms. The minister of sport was visiting the campus to inaugurate a new swimming pool, and a feisty student called Daniel Cohn-Bendit interrupted his speech to hassle him about a recent report published by the minister of youth: "400 pages on the young and not a word about sexuality!"^[2] Cohn-Bendit was almost expelled and became a folk hero to the students; they protested in his defense until the university was shut down, and then they went to protest in the Latin Quarter, in the heart of Paris ("Latin Quarter meeting place, Latin Quarter vicarious myth," writes Antonio Quattrocchi in his iconic account of the events) and got themselves arrested while other students occupied the Sorbonne. The rector of the university closed it down, and allowed the police to come in and disperse the students. After several days of marching and skirmishing with police, the students' leader, with Daniel Cohn-Bendit at his side, articulating their demands in a voice hoarse from shouting: Amnesty for all demonstrators. Reopening of the universities. And the disappearance of all police from the Sorbonne.

A week after the students' protests began, the unions declared a general strike for Monday the 13th of May. One by one, that week, the factories went on strike. On Thursday, at the Renault factory just outside Paris, one young worker (this is Quattrocchi's account) said "I have had enough," and gets up from his machine. One by one his colleagues joined him, and within half an hour their workshop was empty.

That's all it takes: one person to stand up and say I've had enough. Revolutions are made by individuals. Pass the pavé.

But of everything I've read and seen about them—from academic studies to popular films—it's Mavis Gallant who best captures Paris during that eventful time, not only because her descriptions are so vivid, but because she refuses to romanticize what's happening around her. Gallant observes 1968 from an ironic distance, which is, I think, the only real way for a writer to respond. The barricades, for instance—they are not the spontaneous expressions of resistance thrown up by students, she and a friend realize through investigation; the rocks are too big to have been dug up from the pavement, they must have been carried by truck.[4] She sees through the pose everyone is frenetically trying to maintain: the high school students who don't really know why they're marching but beg to stay out late; the well-meaning marchers who talk to Gallant, a foreigner, "as if I were a plucky child recovering from brain fever in a Russian novel. Turned out she thought I was an Algerian, and that was her way of showing she wasn't racist." There are the people in the neighborhood who create a false siege mentality, claiming there is no bread and milk in the Sorbonne neighborhood, which a quick call to a friend proves isn't true, and the violence of the counter-protestors, the wealthy bourgeois out on the Champs-Élysées shouting "France for the French!" Gallant writes that the Place Maubert is like "one of those dumps that smolder all the time, with a low fire that you can smell for miles. Blackened garbage, singed trees, a burned car. Don't want to see more. Walk down the Seine. Keep turning my ankles—so many holes in the ground, and so many stray wood, stone, and iron things. Nothing has a shape or a name." [5] With the piles of garbage everywhere, the whole city looks like it's been knocked over, like a giant overturned garbage can.

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Even still, in the black-and-white footage you can find on the internet, it looks amazing. People clustered on balconies. Students up on the Lion de Belfort with 30,000 people massed around in the Place Denfert-Rochereau. You watch the video and hear what it sounded like, and it sounds just like a march today. The din of far-off traffic and voices. Someone beating on a drum like the regular chugging of a train. Someone blowing a whistle with an insistent staccato beat. The increasing roar of the crowd as it gets closer. The sing-song cry of the sirens. The chant: lib-ér-éz! nos! ca-ma-rades! People silhouetted against the smoke, in balletic leaps as they hurled paving stones, running away from the police, getting into fistfights. Masses and masses of people, walking together with arms linked. A shot of hands waving in the

air, punctuating their demands, like something out of Fosse, here and there a cigarette between the fingers. Imagine that. A revolutionary gesture with your smoking hand. [6] People on the balconies up and down the Boulevard Saint Michel, excited without understanding why. Gallant recognizes that this kind of civil disobedience so easily becomes a form of entertainment. In the early days of the student uprising, Gallant describes the atmosphere as “Electric, uneasy, but oddly gay. Yes, it is like a holiday in a village, with the whole town out on the square”; as the crisis dragged on through the month of May, “Everyone enjoyed the general strike so much that no one has gone back to work, from the sound of it.”[7] Flaubert noticed this feeling as well: “There was a carnival gaiety in the air, a sort of camp-fire mood,” he wrote of the revolution in February 1848; “nothing could have been more enchanting than Paris in those first days.”[8] He captures the performance of certain values that such an uprising makes necessary, certain words to pronounce, like a Shibboleth, to prove your stripes: “it was necessary to criticize the lawyers all the time, and to use the following expressions as often as possible: ‘Contribute one’s stone to the building . . . social problem . . . workshop.’”[9] The same in 1968, the same in 2011, all that changes is the vocabulary. Gallant laments the inauthenticity of her era: “Everything tatty, a folklore now—China, Cuba, Godard’s films. Our tatty era.”[10]

There are two elements of the protest: the march and the barricade. The forward movement and the resistance. A demonstration can’t become a protest without the forces of order saying no to their no. Both play their part. The barricade is a symbol of revolution, but the police kettle is just another kind of barricade. The very things that stir our heart in a revolution may be co-opted by the forces of order—or the other way around. Gallant sees a man beating with a stick “the three-plus-two rhythm that used to mean ‘Al-gé-rie fran-çaise’ but now stands for ‘CRS S-S’”: “Algeria for the French” or “CRS = SS”; the blind imperialism of the French in Algeria, or resistance to authority: same catchy beat.[11]

Napoleon III tried to learn the lessons of the 1830 and 1848 revolutions, recognizing that whoever owned the streets of Paris would own the battles that took place there. To this end, he asked his personal urban planner, Baron Haussmann, to take these mass uprisings into account in his redesign of the city. Walter Benjamin describes the way he did this in the Arcades Project: “Widening the streets is designed to make the erection of barricades impossible, and new streets are to furnish the shortest route between the barracks and the workers’ districts. Contemporaries christen the operation ‘strategic embellishment.’”[12]

But wider boulevards just call for larger barricades.

Barriers never do their job; there is always someone willing to go the long way around. Which, I am convinced, is the only reasonable way past them: steam right through, by all means, but that is the way toward violence and armed conflict. In 2003 I thought I was being pragmatic, siding with Sontag against Woolf, but maybe Woolf had it right after all. Find a way around. (Unless you’re dealing with a genocidal maniac. There’s always an unless.) “On s’en fout des frontières,” they chanted in 1968. We don’t give a shit about borders.

There has to be an element of surprise, if the doings of many people are to put paid to apathy, to burst through their everyday habits and worries, and reroute thought. There has to be a feeling of pushing against boundaries. In 1968, reading the accounts, you can see them—students, workers, everyday people—searching out that tipping point, where it all turns over. Something in the city, the charged energy between the people marching, pushing everything forward. Tip-tip-tip—There it goes—or almost—

What Gallant does find heartening in 1968 is the students' defense of Cohn-Bendit. By mid-May the government was calling for his expulsion not only from Nanterre, but from France. Having been born stateless, the child of German Jews who had fled the Nazis, despite having lived in France nearly all his life his "Frenchness" was up for debate. "I hear them chanting, 'Nous sommes tous des juifs-allemands,'" Gallant writes—We are all German Jews. She can't believe her ears. "This is France, they are French, I am not dreaming. . . . It is the most important event, I think, since the beginning of this fantastic month of May, because it means a mutation in the French character: a generosity. For the first time, I hear a French voice go outside the boundaries of being French." [13] That they are able to identify to this point with the Other, a people so recently expelled from France, handed over to be exterminated, is an incredible leap of empathy. Could this empathy be the real legacy of 1968? Whatever their motivations—whether they were caught up in the joy of it, or in the cult of personality around Daniel Cohn-Bendit, or just trying to piss off their parents, or the police, or call them for not standing up 20 years earlier, the youth of 1968 walked up the Boulevard Saint-Michel shouting We are all German Jews.

Perhaps in another ten years they'll shout: We are from the banlieue, too.

I thought of that after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, when I stood alongside one and a half million people in the streets near République, in mourning, solidarity, and defiance, in the biggest manifestation in Paris since the Liberation in 1944. How much fracturing and dissent was covered over that day? A few people talked about how they wouldn't go, that they refused to march behind Sarkozy, or Netanyahu, or Ben Ali, that they rejected the binary invented by the media, pitting freedom against extremism, "us" against the terrorists, calling it a "superficial consensus" that willfully tried to forget "the fractures, the profound divisions in France." [14] And yet none of us on the ground that day would have claimed that the group was unified in anything other than a desire to speak up and shout back, as we walked with our children, and our dogs, and our signs reading Je suis Charlie, Je ne suis pas Charlie, Je suis Ahmed, Je suis les frères Kouachi, Je suis manipulé, Je suis Charlie Juif Musulman Policier. We were everybody, we were everything. We were an entire city of opinions. We argued with each other along the route, and in the cafés, and when we went home that night. The key is to keep arguing.

We stood for an hour on Boulevard du Temple. We shuffled forward a few inches at a time, the crowd chanting Char-lie and li-ber-té, occasionally bursting into the Marseillaise, repaving the ground with our good intentions while singing the bloodiest of national anthems. Marchons, marchons, until impure blood waters the furrows of our land. If you're going to sing the song, you have to face what it's saying. The fractures are right there in its lyrics, its xenophobia, its violence. Can we

reroute it, remake it, in the way we receive it from those who left it to us? There's a children's verse to the French national anthem, about how they will rise up once the adults are dead and gone: we will have the sublime pride of avenging them or following them. Who knows what the children are learning as they march with us today, but nothing would have been better had we all stayed at home. What if everybody had stayed home? Who inherits the city then?

Here there was once a prison. Here there were once theatres. Here lived Gustave Flaubert. Here they tried to kill a king. Here Daguerre took a photograph, and it is thought to be the earliest surviving picture of a person. I took a picture of a woman standing on a balcony in a long black dress, in a black hat, covered with netting, standing on her balcony motionlessly, looking at the crowd. She looked like an apparition from another century.

A few days earlier, I went to the Place de la République to see the impromptu shrine that the statue of Marianne, symbol of the Republic, had become. People had drawn pictures and scrawled slogans in French and English on the marble base of the statue, *Criéz fort, L'engagement, ce mot qui donne un sens à la liberté, Liberté de penser et aussi d'écrire, C'est l'encre qui doit couler et pas le sang*, What kind of society are we building. They had left drawings, pens galore, piles of flowers, tea-lights that never seemed to go out. That first night all these people climbed the statue and hung from it defiantly, as if it were a barricade.

One day this will all be a memory.

And one day beyond that it will be a plaque.

And one day they'll all walk past it, with something else to protest, or prove, and maybe they will think of us.

[1] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. New York: Belknap Press, 2002, p 243.

[2] The minister retorted something along the lines of "Well with your face, you probably don't have to worry about things like that."

[3] Quattrocchi, p. 46.

[4] Gallant, *Paris Notebooks: Essays & Reviews*. New York: Random House, 1988, p. 41.

[5] *Paris Notebooks*, p. 41.

[6] But where are the young women? The accounts of the time are always male, and our fantasies of it are male as well. Olivier Assayas's *Après mai* (2012). Philippe

Garrel's *Les amants réguliers* (2005). (There's Louis Garrel again.) Bertolucci has gorgeous Eva Green chaining herself to the gates of the Cinémathèque in *The Dreamers* (2003), cigarette dangling from red lips, chest heaving. But the film is solidly from Michael Pitt's perspective; Eva's there as temptation, as problem. What about the girls? What were they doing, thinking, hoping? The only female account I can find – besides Gallant's – is Jill Neville's *The Love Germ*.

[7] PN p. 12.

[8] PN p. 293.

[9] *Sentimental Education*, p. 300.

[10] PN, p. 22.

[11] Gallant p. 42.

[12] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, p. 12

[13] Gallant, p. 33.

[14] Bilger, Philippe. "Philippe Bilger : pourquoi je ne participe pas à «la marche républicaine.»" *Le Figaro*, 11 January 2015. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2015/01/11/31003-20150111ARTFIG00045-philippe-bilger-pourquoi-je-ne-parcipe-pas-a-la-marche-republicaine.php>

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