Excerpts from *Chronicles of May 1968*

(Selected Articles Originally Published Between 11–20 May 1968 in the French newspaper *Libération*)

Editor's Note: The following articles are excerpted from Chronicles of May 1968, *Editions Rivages.*

"I Become a Combatant; We Man a Barricade"

Romain Goupil, *Libération*, 11 May 1968.

Several hundred secondary school students are gathered in the courtyard of the Lycée Voltaire. Facing them, I am about to greet them with my usual "comrades!" Immediately, there is whistling and yelling. Perplexed, I turn around to see who behind me merits such jeering. No one. I repeat, "comrades!" and am met with the same jeers. So I begin again, this time trying "my dear friends!" There is applause and wild laughter from the students. Now I have their attention. . . .

We pass through the halls of the school interrupting classes before reaching the neighboring school, then the girl's school where they open their doors to us, then the next. We reassemble all the students and invite them to gather at Place Denfert-Rochereau. Our idea is to have all the secondary school students in the city arrive there in one organized march. This is easier said than done. But we manage more or less to converge all the smaller processions into one impressive mass of secondary school students that eventually reaches Place Denfert-Rochereau. We number around 10,000 students—from 14 to 17 years old—among the total of 20,000 demonstrators. This changes everything.

Curiously enough, this immense mobilization does not seem all that extraordinary to me. As a militant for the past two years in the Jeunesses Communistes Révolutionnaires (JCR) [Revolutionary Communist Youth—a Trotskyite group], I participated in a number of less spectacular, yet effective, demonstrations attempting to sustain permanent unrest. During 1967, about sixty of us organized against the Vietnam War and for Che and the Black Panthers. In December of 1967, when the Fouchet Reform damaged the university admissions process, I managed to lead a strike at Lycée Condorcet, where I had begun my second year. This

© South Central Review 16.4–17.1 (Winter 1999–Spring 2000): 100–108.

led to my immediate expulsion from the school, provoking a sizeable demonstration by the students. They demanded my re-admittance to the school, but without success.

This is why it was so easy to draw the lycée students into the movement when the month of May came. The idea of tearing down the "barrack schools" had already gained force. In Paris the schools are not co-educational, and it is impossible to enter them if one has long hair, jeans, and tennis shoes. The dirty pictures we cut out of *Paris-Hollywood* have been retouched and pubic hairs on the nude women erased. The girls are even more regimented. They have to wear smocks and are not allowed to wear make-up or high-heels. The lycées are practically closed to the working class, who is relegated to technical schools or apprenticeships. The lycées serve to groom the elites of the future.

The scholarly path of literature, reflection, critique, and analysis is considered the most noble. Our teachers, often communists, engage us in lively political discussions. As great readers, there's nothing we do not know about the worker's movement, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the revolutionary state, *spontanéisme*,[3] armed struggle, and terrorism. And even if we argue among ourselves as Trotskyites, or with the Maoists or anarchists, everyone agrees on the denunciation of the treasonous revisionism and degenerate bureaucracy of the Communist Party. As one voice, we are also against the extreme right militants, recognizable by their green raincoats, loafers, and Ray-Bans. It is a uniform, a sort of identification code. On the other hand, wearing long hair is a sign of rebellion and this has led to a great debate between fans of Antoine and those of Johnny Hallyday.[4] There are also the more radical Beatles and Stones fans.

The demonstration organizes around the Lion at Denfert with the usual disputes over the question of leadership. The idea—a sort of Jericho operation—was to surround the Sorbonne with a non-stop sit-in until the doors were opened. But as the demonstration moves gradually towards the Latin Quarter, its size becomes gigantic and uncontrollable. The general staff are literally overwhelmed. Thus arises the idea of setting up a defense rather than sitting on the ground like idiots. I notice a guy collecting things from a construction site and another who begins to pry the paving stones from the street with an iron bar. It's in the midst of this absolutely crazy strategy that the barricades begin to rise, often in dead-end streets or built against the iron fence of the Luxembourg Gardens. Incredibly, the cops facing us leave us to build our barricades, and we soon understand why: we're all sixteen years old, the age of their own children. The prefecture has also obviously given orders to avoid confrontation and not to block off the entire quarter, to leave escape routes open in the police lines. The police attack slowly, first launching an enormous amount of tear gas grenades. People throw water from their windows to help diminish the effect of the gas. This is wild. I become a combatant like everyone else, manning first one barricade, then another. . . . At 5:30 A.M., the quarter is nearly raked over. The only people remaining are the professional brawlers: bottles of gasoline begin to appear that have probably been siphoned out of parked cars by the demonstrators.

Those who now remain do not seem to be the children of the bourgeoisie, but those marginalized youths from the working class suburbs. With daybreak, we

number a handful manning a barricade on rue Thouin, near Contrescarpe. We have been so preoccupied that we haven't noticed that the quarter has completely fallen into the hands of the police, and that they are approaching us from behind. A cry to flee goes up, and I take cover on the roof of the Ecole Normale Supérieure where I break through a ventilation grate to drop three meters into an office below. I stay there for hours, convinced that the cops outside have let loose like they did in 1961 when all those Algerians were thrown into the Seine. I imagine also that it's perhaps the Commune and that everyone is lined up with their hands in the air. Then I very conscientiously wash my hands.

Romain Goupil, soon to be seventeen years old, is a student at the Lycée Voltaire in Paris. He is a militant activist in the Jeunesses Communistes Révolutionnaires [JCR—Revolutionary Communist Youth] and founder of the Comités d'Action Lycéens [CAL—Student Action Committees].

In 1998, Romain Goupil is a novelist and filmmaker. His latest publication is A Mort la Mort!, *Julliard.*

"Drop It, Old Man"

Mavis Gallant, *Libération*, 12 May 1968.

I listened to the nightmarish news during the middle of the night. Around two o'clock, when the order was given by the Compagnies Republicaines de Securités (CRS) [riot police] "to regroup and charge," I cried to myself, "no, not that!" I have never seen a "charging" of the barricades in particular, but when one has seen the police charge even once, it is something one never forgets. They charge like horses, seemingly invincible. Yet, how the youths are becoming brave! Until now I had only seen them run.

I finally fell asleep. I thought I had dreamed, but on the eight A.M. news (*Europe 1*) the journalist said, "Did you sleep well? Because here is what happened in your own city last night . . ." and he proceeded to tell the story. Streets were ripped up near the Gare du Luxembourg. The people who live around the area all wear expressions of bewilderment. Paving stones were torn from the streets. Rue Royer-Collard, where I live, appeared to have been bombed. Automobiles have been burned to an ugly greyish black. They are the small cars, the ones easily lifted and moved, not the cars of the rich. It is said that even the automobile's owners didn't complain because from their own windows they had seen the police charge. Armed men against unarmed children. It's sickening! And I had also thought French youth were all apathetic!

They say there were two fatalities: one student and one member of the CRS. A tract announces (already!) that one student had his throat cut "against the window of 24 rue Gay-Lussac." They say that it wasn't the students but the incendiary grenades of the police that burned the cars, but it is more likely that both were at

fault. A friend of H whose car was burned found handfuls of partially burned tracts that had been used as a firebrand. They say that the police clubbed the wounded, that the people hid the students and tended their wounds, and that the police forced their way into the apartments. When the police threw the first tear-gas bombs everyone in the neighboring houses threw pans of water so that the gas would remain on the ground. A shopowner said, "I've sold nothing all day. I gave out water for free. I didn't make any money." But there's a sense that pressure has been exerted on these shopowners. This doesn't please me. They are "encouraged" (by whom?) to display publicly their solidarity with the students. But in the end their shops were ransacked and the shopowners were in solidarity with no one. Be that as it may, it does not please me. It too closely resembles what happened at the Liberation.[1]

I hear that a Belgian tourist bus stopped and a father and son got off in order to take a photo of the son with a paving stone in each hand on top of one of the remaining barricades. Then they boarded the bus again. I didn't see this, but I saw many people taking photos. This never occurred to me. What a bizarre attitude on the part of these men and boys, as they gather the stones, hold them aloft, and pretend to throw them. They imagine themselves as heroes. Equally troubling are those professors who suddenly join the side of the students. If they thought the reforms necessary, why in God's name didn't they do something before it got to the point where the youths were throwing stones? Maurice Duverger,[2] a political science professor with a graying crew-cut, was on the television romanticizing the barricades. I wanted to tell him to "drop it, old man."

The wife of a *garde mobile* [riot police section of the gendarmerie]—a voice of the people—lives in my neighborhood. She is a very simple and ordinary woman who knows many people. She explains, "when my husband returned home this morning he told me that the barricades were manned by 40- or 50-year old North Africans. This is why the police had to be so brutal." And this is what people actually believe, this housewives' indignation: "they should go back home!" I have the curious feeling that this is all going to be placed on the shoulders of foreigners, the new proletariat, the Spanish and Portuguese . . . and, of course, the Arabs. The Arabs always get it.

In the evening, you can still smell the gas on the Boulevard Saint-Michel. Last night seems so distant. Eyes sting and burn under swollen eyelids. Young people stroll along the boulevard beneath the trees and street lamps. There are no automobiles. It's a beautiful evening and these aimless walkers (the curious on the sidewalks and the youths in the street) make one think of the processions in Mediterranean villages.

The *gardes mobiles* and members of the CRS are middle-aged, overweight, and robust. They have come from Marseille and Bordeaux—you can tell from their license plates—in black buses and gray armored cars. They are strong, yet strangely relaxed, taking up their places at the intersection of Boulevard Saint-Michel and Boulevard Saint-Germain. Both boulevards swarm with tourists. I have a hard time believing that the youths here are students. I think of the

students on the barricades last night, but these today seem to have nothing in common with them. One would think they are, rather, young proles from the suburbs—those called "black shirts" during the 1950s. H.T. says I am mistaken, but no matter. The students form a loose little group and spread out as they ascend Boulevard Saint-Germain. The police don't move, and these nervously agitated students, increasing in number as they move along the boulevard, make me think of waves approaching the rocks. The mere presence of the police provokes and I do not understand at all why they don't withdraw the police forces from the Latin Quarter. In the end, a compact crowd crosses Boulevard Saint-Germain singing *La Marseillaise* and making the Nazi salute to the cops. The police laugh. Obviously, they have just arrived here. If they were the same police from last night, they would not be laughing.

Mavis Gallant, thirty years old, is a Canadian novelist who has lived in Paris since 3 May. Her journal will be published in The New Yorker *under the title "The Events of May."*

"At Flins, the Workers Were Fed Up"

Paul Rousselin, *Libération*, 15 May 1968.

At 7:55 A.M., work begins at Renault Flins. I receive a telephone call from my colleague in the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) [French Democratic Work Federation] in Cléon announcing that they have begun a factory occupation strike. In an instant, I leave my workshop post and rush to the electricity distribution post and to the sole telephone I am allowed to use, thanks to a crew chief. Indeed, my job in the syndicate is to make connections between the different Renault factories. I phone the head of the CFDT in Billancourt and not long afterwards we gather the CFDT activists. We decide to call a strike. Meanwhile, the Confédération Générale du Travail [CGT—General Labor Confederation] is silent. We know full well that the CGT activists don't make decisions on their own. So that they are unable to take orders from higher up, we blockade the telephone line we share with them, the only one they would be able to use.

Unlimited Strike. At 10:30 we give them an ultimatum: the CFDT is going to call a strike with or without the help of the CGT, but we would like them to join us. Finally they accept. We draft a tract we both agree upon and go from workshop to workshop in pairs of delegates from both the CGT and CFDT to ask for the workers to lay down their tools. We are still thinking that it is going to be a matter of a two- or three-hour work stoppage, afterwards continued by only a small minority of strikers.

At the time, work stoppages resulted in an assembly outside in the parking lot, strikes in the factory itself being prohibited. At this moment, however, a very young CFDT activist, Jean-Jacques Bonet, had the intelligence to pass through the workshops with his group of strikers on the way to the parking lot. And, surprise,

it turns into a throng of workers. Everyone goes towards the canteen. There the strike leaders climb onto the large balcony, about seven or eight meters high, the place where speeches and announcements are given, but now without the sound system. The people amass below and we all decide together to strike. It is 11:00 and the strikers are still in the minority. But there's a snowball effect and by noon 70% to 80% of the production workers are on an unlimited strike. The decision to occupy the factory is made in the afternoon. No one had thought that the movement would attain such a magnitude.

"Le Bagne." By afternoon I am still unaware that, among Renault factories, Billancourt and then Le Mans are going to join the strike. But Sud-Aviation in Nantes is already occupied. This raises our spirits, not to mention the particular climate the student uprising has created. The workers had been fed up with conditions and for them this strike is a release. They speak only of the pace of production; a crushing pace that renders them literally stupefied. The question of wages is not even the main concern in their demands. At the time, production was based on a minute cycle: per minute, a car would pass on the assembly line and you repeated the same gestures each minute standing upright under the car body, bent into the trunk, or stooped underneath the frame. When you wanted to go to the restroom you had to be replaced. In 1968, we were still working 47+ hours per week. The last reduction in work hours was in 1966: ten minutes less per day, of which five minutes were recovered due to an increase in the rate of production. The rare workers who managed to leave the assembly line remembered it as a "bagne" [penal servitude]. In the end, the pace would result in nervous depression and quitting work for some. For those who remained, it was often apathy and sometimes alcoholism.

The "beetpickers" of the factory. The attraction of the giant factory was nevertheless strong, since the wages at Renault were on average 15% to 20% higher than those at Peugeot for example. Renault management had also conceded a fourth week of paid vacation well before this was extended to everyone according to a law voted on just at the beginning of May 1968. Since the opening of the Renault factory in 1952, the socio-political organization practiced there had gone over badly with the employers of the recruitment zone. This was the case especially with the large local agriculturists who had seen several of their workers choose the factory over the fields. In 1968, most of the "specialized workers" at Flins were ex-farm workers whom those from the factory labor tradition often treated as "beetpickers." In contrast to Renault Billancourt, there are almost no immigrant workers at Flins—by the will of management.

That evening, I sleep on a wooden bench in the locker room. Many of us spend the night in the factory and organize our occupation. We soon feel at home. Everyone is happy, saying, "finally we have the strike we have awaited for so long." Radical actions were rare: the CGT did not like them. I remember their anger some time back when we had called on the workers at Flins to join us in a march on Nationale 13 [a national highway]. Having come from the countryside, most of the latter demanded that we do things in this way. But the CGT, and especially the Communist Party activists, always alleged all sorts of pretexts in

order to put on the brakes. In fact, the CGT viewed Renault—as a state-run corporation—as a vanguard exception in the destruction of capitalism. During the more than four weeks the strike lasted at Flins, we had fundamental disagreements with the CGT activists. They centered their demands on wages, while we at the CFDT spoke of quality of life and union rights. This is why the Grenelle agreements were rejected in their entirety. The CFDT in Flins did not accept them either because we figured that the strike should result in negotiations between the unions of Renault and state management and not by a politico-syndical negotiation. We got the better of the argument there, but it turned out to be a flash in the pan. During the following months, factory management proposed overtime hours and I was disappointed when a large number of workers accepted them.

Paul Rousselin, forty-four years old, is a worker at Renault Flins and Secretary of the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail [CFDT—French Democratic Workers' Confederation] syndicate at Renault.

—1998: Paul Rousselin is retired.

"The Students Openly Court Us"

Jean Bréheret, *Libération*, 20 May 1968.

At Place Royale in Nantes, the demonstration numbers around 3,000 to 4,000 peasants with our tractors at the front. Our goal: to re-baptize it as the "Place of the People," an entirely symbolic action. It is not a commonplace occurrence to lead a crowd of peasants to take such action. Our environment is universally rightist and has never ceased to be such. In fact, since the beginning of the recent events only the militants have been somewhat leftist, but without adhering to a party. Communism does not interest us and the methods applied in Eastern Europe do not seduce us, even if we don't have much of an ability to judge such things. The CDJA of Loire-Atlantique team of which I am president is strong and dynamic. It also feels close to the workers even though our problems are very different. We peasants certainly do not have bosses on our backs, and work on the farm (we all practice polyculture and raise animals) leaves us with a certain amount of liberty in how we organize our time. It's a relative liberty, since the hours we put in are great, after all. . . .

The union workers distrust us. We are nevertheless convinced that our conditions are not going to get better if we do not establish relations with the factory workers. Our slogan is "Peasants, workers, same struggle against exploitation." When there are strikes at the nearby factory of Sud-Aviation de Bouguenais or at the shipyards of Nantes, we join the workers at their strike lines and sell them our products at cost. We don't feel at all out of our element because for many of us these are our childhood friends, our brothers and our sisters. There were eight children in my family; only two of them remained farmers, while the rest became factory workers. But even though our discussions with the workers are generally straightforward—they allow us into the factories—they're more

difficult with the union workers, who are still distrustful of the peasants. The unions don't have much influence on the workers who have recently left the farms. We don't have the same status, and for many of the unionists we remain independents; that is, small businessmen. We make more of an effort in their direction than they do in ours.

This is not to mention our directors in Paris, who do not think as we do at all. We have been in opposition to them for quite awhile now. The CNJA and the FNSEA [Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles—National Federation of Farmers' Unions] still defend the idea of one peasantry indivisible in the face of the Common Market. Meanwhile, we the small businessmen of the Loire-Atlantique and of Bretagne who live from our own labor, think we have nothing in common with the large grain farmers of the Parisian basin. As a result, we don't care much for the observations of the CNJA, which has become nervous about the recent events and tries to draw us back into the ranks. They also don't like it that we have a special sympathy for the students. The students openly court us, and when the university at Nantes was occupied we went there with friends to stimulate debate.

Maoists on the Farm. Some of the students who have been influenced by Maoist currents have begun to come to the farms to work. They make an earnest effort to be peasants, but it's painful to watch. Sometimes it really gets us to see these people come from elsewhere with nothing much to teach us, but pretending to transform the reactionary peasantry into a revolutionary peasantry. For we unionists, already a small minority, this doesn't make our task any easier. We don't need any more problems. Little by little, we sense that the peasantry is worried. They believe recent events are going too far. Arguments are becoming increasingly violent, even among family members.

We ceaselessly organize meetings of the CDJA for discussion about the movement and to avoid squabbles among peasants. And we spend time in discussion with the workers, especially those who are blocking the Donge petroleum refinery. We explain that we support their blockade, but at the same time we negotiate the possibility of having fuel, especially for the dairy factories, which absolutely must continue to produce. We tell them that it's the only way to have the support of the peasants. If the dairy producers shut down and no more milk is produced, then the peasants will rise up against the movement within three days. We battle toe-to-toe with the workers every day because they've had enough of yielding to this and that "priority," such as the hospitals or the peasantry. Yet every day we receive our order of fuel and distribute it ourselves to the dairy producers. It's the workers and farmers who manage the situation these days, and not the prefect. This is both bizarre and rather agreeable. Especially for the young farmers and workers, this adventure is good and gives us hope. It breaks us out of our habits and our usual way of life. These changes have even extended to our religious attitudes. Many of the militants have questioned traditional religious practices and deserted the church.

By the end of May we are worried because we don't see any results. Pierre Mendès-France was well liked among people in the western countryside. No one

has forgotten how, when he was president of the CNJA in the 50s, he imposed a daily distribution of milk in the schools to absorb the dairy surplus. We're happy to see him organize a transition government. He is prepared to name Michel de Batisse, the president of FNSEA, as Minister of Agriculture. Batisse didn't participate at all in the movement, but he embodies the will of the peasant majority. Mendès-France has chosen peace in the countryside. . . .[5]

Jean Bréheret, twenty-seven years old, is a peasant and President of the Centre Départemental des Jeunes Agriculteurs [CDJA—Young Farmers' Departmental Center] of Loire-Atlantique.

—1998: Jean Bréheret is retired.

Translated from the French by Thomas C. Hilde

Notes

1. The liberation of German-Occupied France by the Allies at the end of World War II.
2. Duverger, ever the political opportunist, defended at the time Vichy's anti-Semitic policies during World War II.
3. A reference to the ideal of spontaneity of the protesters. Graffiti on the walls at the time often read "lei, on spontane"—"Here one 'spontanes.'"
4. France's most popular rock idol for the last several decades.
5. Apparently Bréheret is referring to the fact that Pierre Mendès-France, a former French president, was named as one of the potential presidents of a post-1968 post-de Gaulle government, but was never installed.