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**Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman**, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968*, Foreword by Douglas Kellner. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. xxiv + 192 pp. Pictures, map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$57.50 U.S. (hc). ISBN 0-7914-4965-3. \$18.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7914-4966-1.

Review by Michael Seidman, University of North Carolina-Wilmington.

This new treatment of May 1968 in France is aesthetically pleasing. The red, white, and blue cover is eye-catching and attractive. The illustrations, which include photographs and black and white reproductions of some of the deservedly most famous posters of the period, are historically appropriate and visually impressive. The organization is logical and coherent. The text is divided into two parts. The first (approximately 70 pages) recounts and evaluates the May events. The second (100 pages) translates and interprets primary sources that illustrate themes which the authors consider significant. Although this book is far from a reliable guide to the events of 1968, the authors have achieved certain successes. In particular, the second section of the book, which includes translations of primary sources, will be useful pedagogically. These documents are organized around four central themes--the student struggle against technocracy, ideological debates among the "progressive" middle classes, relations between students and workers, and the meaning of libertarian socialism. Still, it must be said that a careful reading of these primary source selections contradicts some of the authors' own interpretations. *Poetry* also has a few other accomplishments to its credit. It recreates the feverish atmosphere that characterized the May events among radical students, and it provides a stimulating--if disputable--interpretation of Prime Minister Georges Pompidou's actions.

In general, however, the content of the work does not match its level of organization or aesthetics. The title--although poetic--correctly suggests that this book is a celebration of May's radicalism, not an analysis of it. The authors wish to establish the revolutionary credentials of May by a consideration of how it challenged capitalism, changed French political and social life, and established a new tradition of opposition. Perhaps these are laudable goals, but Feenberg, a philosopher, and Freedman, an anthropologist, have not engaged in sufficient research or reflection to be convincing.

Factual errors and questionable statements abound from the very first pages: "A week after the closing of Nanterre [May 3], the group of radicals swelled to fifty thousand, and in another ten days, ten million" (p. 3); and "Ten million workers transformed a student protest into a revolutionary protest by joining it in the streets" (p. xxi). The most reliable estimate of the number of strikers that I have found is seven million,[1] and although the demonstrations of May-June were huge, they never surpassed several hundreds of thousands. It should also be remembered that many of the seven million striking

workers could not get to their jobs because of the lack of transportation. For this and other reasons, the overwhelming majority of strikers cannot be identified as "revolutionaries."

According to *Poetry*, Nanterre "was a suburban outpost of bourgeois family life" (p. 3). This is an odd description of a locality which symbolized an ugly industrial suburb for many French people of various political persuasions. The authors seem to believe that at student meetings at the faculté of Nanterre, "everyone spoke as inspired, and no adherence to a doctrine was required" (p. 7). In fact, known right-wing students were intimidated, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit was charged with assault in one case. Stalinists were hardly tolerated. More importantly, since the authors seem not to have engaged in the necessary spadework, they ignore recent works that treat in a sophisticated manner issues of freedom of speech in the 1960s. A historian/participant of radical movements in Italy has recognized that "too little attention was paid to the different capabilities of individuals for expressing themselves in an assembly or on a commission. The absence of any institutional acknowledgment of forms of authority highlighted the role of charismatic figures. The idea of democracy as participation with equal rights of speech was called into question by a certain movement elitism."<sup>[2]</sup>

Had the authors been familiar with the work of Jean-Pierre Duteuil, they would not have declared that the incipient March 22 Movement occupied the administrative building "the entire night" (p. 7). Duteuil affirms that the occupiers left at 1:20 a.m. prior to the arrival of police.<sup>[3]</sup> Regarding the May 3 occupation at the Sorbonne, the event which triggered confrontations in Paris, the authors suppose that "no one ever imagined an alliance between university officials and the police to repress a political meeting. Understandably, students fought back" (p. 12). In my opinion, radical students would have indeed given credence to this alliance since they believed—as the authors recognize—in "black lists" that police used against students. More significantly, *Poetry* ignores the dilemma of the Sorbonne rector who felt—unwisely in retrospect—that he was compelled to call in police to halt the disruption and minor vandalism (i.e. destruction of chairs and tables) that was occurring inside his institution. Feenberg and Freedman do show that the police reaction to ensuing student demonstrations during the First Night of the Barricades (May 10) was needlessly brutal.

Their analysis of workers' strikes during May and June, however, lacks precision. It is not the case that "over one hundred thousand workers in thirteen major factories went on strike and occupied their plants without a word from the unions" (p. 33). On the contrary, although a few strikes were spontaneous, the unions and their militants interpreted workers' desires and formulated bargaining positions in almost all striking metallurgical firms, and the same could be said for other industries.<sup>[4]</sup> The authors see May as the rebirth of anarchosyndicalism and assert that strikers were both radical and revolutionary: "The issue was no longer simply reforms or salary hikes, but a total opposition to state authority" (p. 33); and "Workers turned" "to advocates of the anarchistic theory of self-management" (p. 34). Little evidence supports these assertions, and serious studies have concluded that blue-collar wage earners made relatively few demands for workers' control.<sup>[5]</sup> In addition, only a small minority of wage earners ever occupied their factories. Unlike the strikers of 1936, the number of workers in 1968 actively engaged in the occupations remained a tiny percentage of the work force. For example, only several hundred out of a work force of 5,000 occupied the Renault factory at Cléon. At Renault at Flins, approximately 250 of 10,000 were occupiers. At the flagship plant in Boulogne-Billancourt, only a few hundred of the 30,000 workers remained inside.

Other claims are unsubstantiated: "No one worked. No planes, trains, mail. No gas" (p. 43). The authors overlook that the military and police—and their civilian helpers, including thousands of "petty bourgeois" shopkeepers, truck drivers, and farmers—worked overtime to ensure essential communication and transportation, including supplying Paris with food and fuel. Even the CGT cooperated to make sure that emergency services (and its own leadership) could acquire gasoline. In other words, contrary to the periodization of *Poetry* (and many other works on May), the "counter-revolution" was at work even before General de Gaulle's address to the nation on May 30.

The authors are unfamiliar with French labor history of the 1960s: Immediately prior to the Grenelle negotiations (May 25), "there existed for the first time in many years an accord between the two major unions," the CGT and the CFDT (p. 57). Once again, this was not the case. Only two years earlier, in 1966, the two major confederations signed a common platform that included wage demands, which, at least partially, prepared the way for the May 1968 strike wave. Yet the most surprising statement that I encountered in this work involves peasants, not workers: "[On May 24] two hundred thousand farmers surrounded the city with their tractors, blocking the roadways; five hundred thousand came to the CGT march between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m." (p. 52). The authors cite no source for this claim. The figures that they provide for the CGT march on May 24 are very seriously inflated. Above all, their reference to a massive demonstration of peasants or farmers in May is completely baffling. I certainly have not read (or remembered) everything about the French May, but never in my decade-long studies of 1968 have I encountered an allusion to this protest. Most analysts believe that peasants and farmers were either hostile or indifferent to the May protests, which constituted an urban/industrial movement that largely ignored rural/agricultural issues. Major farmer and peasant organizations, such as the FNSEA, did not wish to weaken the French state when it had to conduct Common Market negotiations that were scheduled to open at Brussels at the end of May.[6]

Putting aside for a moment these factual and evidential mistakes, the major intent of *Poetry* is to show the significance of May 1968 as a turning point in French (and Western) history. The authors' perspective reflects the concept of May held by much educated opinion in France. Writers as varied as Régis Debray, Luc Ferry, Alain Renaut, Edgar Morin, and Cohn-Bendit have claimed that May marked the beginning of a new, more liberated period in France. However, this interpretation of a "revolutionary" May should have been tempered by a consideration of recent work which views the French May as part of a larger Western cultural revolution taking place from the late 1950s to the early 1970s.[7]

Whatever its virtues and vices, *Poetry* may help rekindle flagging interest in the meaning of the French May, and that is an important end.

## NOTES

[1] Antoine Prost, "Les grèves de mai-juin 1968," *L'Histoire*, no. 110 (April 1988), p. 36.

[2] Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation*, tr. Lisa Erdberg (Hanover and London: University of New England Press, 1996), p. 63.

[3] Jean-Pierre Duteuil, *Nanterre 1965-1968: Vers le mouvement du 22 mars* (Paris: Acratie, 1988), p. 164. This aspect of Duteuil's account is supported by sources in the departmental archives of the Hauts-de-Seine.

[4] Michael Seidman, "Workers in a Repressive Society of Seductions: Parisian metallurgists in May-June 1968," *French Historical Studies* 18:1 (Spring, 1993), p. 260.

[5] Sylvain Zegel, *Les idées de mai* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) p. 43 ; Pierre Dubois, Renaud Dulong, Claude Durand, Sabine Erbès-Séguin, Daniel Vidal, *Grèves revendicatives ou grèves politiques* (Paris, 1971), p. 16.

[6] On FNSEA corporatism, see John T. S. Keeler, *The Politics of Neocorporatism in France* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 15.

[7] Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: cultural revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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