

“Hot Water on All Floors” By Michèle Bernstein¹

Was May 1968 a revolution (a brief one)? Opinions differ, arguments abound. It was in any case a major uprising. Since the boring fashion today is to mark birthday anniversaries, let's take this opportunity to celebrate May 68.

Everyone who was there will tell you that it was, first and foremost, a festival. The traces of the inscriptions that, from one day to the next, appeared on the walls of Paris testify to this. I hesitate to call them “graffiti.” These phrases have a resonance that is too important and too novel to be lumped in together with the graffiti of yesteryear. There were neither demands about wages nor appeals for a heaven-sent savior. Walter Lewino² responded well and quickly by wandering the streets of the Latin Quarter and the surrounding areas with his friend Jo Schnapp, a photographer, in order to capture the inscriptions before they were covered over.

In fact, what the walls were saying was, most often, of situationist³ inspiration. The work of a situ or a sympathizer,⁴ someone in spontaneous agreement, who knows. . . . What did the walls want? To see life with new eyes. There was a rejection of the consumer society, there was freedom, love (“I came on the paving stones”), irony, without which the human being is not a thinking creature, and especially utopia: “Be realistic, demand the impossible.” We know that utopias leave indelible traces.

The situs – a group so small that the word “groupuscule” could have been created just for them. There were 10 or 20, and they sought no more, only making themselves known back then through a journal that was distributed privately (but to the best possible readers). Then in 1966 through a pamphlet whose insolence and timing made a great deal of noise in the universities, *On the Poverty of Student Life, Considered in its Economic, Political, Psychological, Sexual and Notably Intellectual Aspects, and Several Means to Remedy Them*⁵ (I quote the entire title so that no one can be deceived about the poverty in question), and by two books, two lovely theoretical polemics, [one] by Guy Debord and [the other by] Raoul Vaneigem. They impassioned more than one person.

At least two powerful groups opposed each other: [first] the Communists (the price of sardines). Strengthened by their numbers and their union, they negotiated with the government in power at the time. For a few advantages that were quickly gobbled up by inflation, they hastened

¹ Michèle Bernstein, “Eau chaude à tous les étages,” a new preface added to Walter Lewino, *L'Imagination au pouvoir*, originally published with 41 photographs by Jo Schnapp, éditions Éric Losfeld (Paris, June 1968); expanded edition by Éditions Allia, (Paris, 2018). Translated by NOT BORED! 7 May 2022. It would appear that this essay's title alludes to a musical about four women written by Yves Coudray.

² A French writer and journalist (1924-2013).

³ Bernstein herself was a founding member of the Situationist International (SI). Her participation in the group appears to have ended in 1967.

⁴ It turned out the author of many of these inscriptions was Christian Sebastiani, who later joined the SI. It is said that when Lewino found this out, he offered to share the royalties from his book with the situs, which was an offer that they happily accepted.

⁵ The situationist Mustapha Khayati was the principal author of this pamphlet.

the end of the May movements. A sad memory. Quickly recaptured by market society, [and struck by] the horrors of the Soviet and affiliated regimes that had exploded into view, they experienced many disillusioned tomorrows. . . . Where are they now?

Then there were the Maoists. They were “trendy” before this word started to be used. They’d invested in a good portion of the traditional [cultural] spectacle, the theater and the cinema, quite a lot of literature and even – heavens! – a little philosophy: we saw the unfortunate [Jean-Paul] Sartre, always behind the times, distributing copies of their newspaper while perched on his soapbox. The little red book looked good sticking out of a pocket. But, as someone once said, you can’t lie all the time to everyone. The statue of the Great Helmsman deflated like a fairground balloon. The former Maoists didn’t cover their heads with ashes,⁶ they continued along their little ways in the disciplines that they’d chosen and, no stupider than the others, succeeded brilliantly. Obviously no one today boasts of his or her Maoist past: ridicule hurts.

For their part, the situationist inscriptions [of May 1968] have hardly aged at all and surely not shamefully. The retirees of today who were too young back then, other generations that weren’t even born yet, will feel less assailed by their sauciness⁷ than their parents were, back when the walls laughed, shouted and embraced the passers-by: what we have already incorporated is less clear. And yet it is obvious that – from the most rebellious person who dreams of barricades to the most determined defender of Order (with a capital “O”) who cannot find words harsh enough to vilify the “leftists” who, of course, have done so much to harm France – everyone has changed. In their language, their physical appearance, their loves; in the way they raise their children. Such is the marvel of [our] heritage.

⁶ A sign of mourning among certain religious communities.

⁷ The French word used here, *verdeur*, also means vigor and tartness (cf. a green apple).