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2008

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#### Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Daniel J. "1968 and the Meaning of Democracy." *The Intercollegiate Review* 43.2 (Fall 2008): 4-13. <https://home.isi.org/1968-and-meaning-democracy>.

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*Daniel J. Mahoney*

## 1968 AND THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

During a recent visit to France, I had an opportunity to witness the ongoing French commemorations of the “May events” that shook that country to the core forty years ago. Parisian bookstores prominently displayed a massive literature on those events, while magazines were filled with nostalgic evocations of the three or four weeks that are said to have changed the world. *Le Monde*, the house journal of the establishment Left, went so far as to reproduce, each day, the front page of the newspaper on the parallel day in May 1968. Those old front pages perfectly captured both the obligatory leftism and the indulgence toward “Youth” that dominated that venerable paper’s response to the implosion of the French social and political order. One article by Maurice Duverger was representative of the atmosphere of 1968: that famous political scientist cheerfully seconded the student movement’s call for the abolition of exams, since examinations took professors away from precious scientific research and at the same time reinforced the alienation of the young. In the giddy, carnival-like atmosphere of the time, this passed for serious analysis.

Today, a majority of the French (or at least of the French intellectual class)—and not all of them on the Left—look back nostalgically to the “turning point” that

was May 1968. Some of this is the self-indulgence of a generation that is no longer so young. Some of it is compensation by a Left that now reluctantly admits that revolution, even of a “mimetic” kind, is no longer a serious option for France and Europe. But the “commemorative” character of the French response to the fortieth anniversary of the May events risks obscuring the farcical dimensions of that eruption; more seriously, it risks obscuring 1968’s truly revolutionary and ideological dimensions as well. Lost in the celebration of 1968 as the birth pangs of an unproblematic “post-modern democracy” is a concrete feel for the nature of the event itself.

### A Global Phenomenon

We often forget that “1968” was a truly global phenomenon. Americans easily recall Berkeley and Columbia, and Europeans recall Paris and the Sorbonne. But that momentous year also saw unrest in Dakar, Mexico City, Tokyo, and elsewhere: the

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rise of a revolutionary New Left throughout the Western world, and in a different key the quasi-miraculous “Prague Spring” in Soviet-dominated Czechoslovakia. The latter gave undue hope to some on the Left that Leninist-Stalinist tyranny could be transformed into “socialism with a human face.”

There were both general and particular causes at work. “1968” surely had deep roots in cultural and social developments that were in the process of transforming the entire Western world. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), for example, the Roman Catholic Church suffered from self-inflicted wounds. That hoary institution transformed itself seemingly overnight from an authoritative bastion of traditional wisdom to a church in apparent freefall. Its “progressivist” elements did not hesitate “to kneel before the world,” celebrating socialism and revolution, secular humanitarianism, and every “democratic” development in society at large. In America, the moral promise of the civil rights movement, rooted in an appeal to

American principles of liberty and equality bolstered by biblical religion, were co-opted by the Black Power movement and other manifestations of identity politics. The Women’s Liberation movement and the recently manufactured birth control pill (it was introduced in France in 1967) conspired, for better or worse, to sever sexuality from a natural order and individual liberty from its larger familial and social contexts. In France, social institutions as diverse as the Church and the Boy Scouts scrambled to adopt less hierarchical “power

structures” in the years immediately before 1968. Everywhere an ideology of liberation challenged the old bourgeois ethos of self-command and self-control. “1968” was in some important respects an explosion in a dramatic process already well under way rather than the unanticipated announcement of a new world.

### May 1968

Despite these major social and cultural transformations, nothing in France seemed particularly out of the ordinary on the eve of May 1968.<sup>1</sup> No one anticipated that ongoing disputes about the organization of the French university system would give rise to momentous social and politi-



*Paris, May 1968: violence at the carnival*

cal upheavals. Unrest at the University of Nanterre, fueled by the activism of anarchist revolutionaries led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, soon spread to the Sorbonne. In the days after May 3, that august institution was more or less commandeered by student radicals. Students clashed with police even as they—and sympathetic professors—“contested” the traditional structures of state and society. Student protesters combined violence with a festive atmosphere celebrating their emancipation from traditional educational obligations

and social and cultural restraints. In the face of this rapidly deteriorating situation (and of public opinion's remarkable indulgence toward the student "revolutionaries"), the government of Prime Minister Pompidou began to lose nerve.

The initial student phase of the May events was followed by a nation-wide general strike (of up to ten million workers) that lasted two weeks and shut down the economic life of the country. This second, "economic" phase of the crisis was followed by a "political phase" that lasted from May 27 until May 30. For the first time, it looked like the strong, self-respecting constitutional order inaugurated by Charles de Gaulle in 1958 might collapse under the combined assaults of a student revolution, a general strike, and the machinations of leftist political forces. A takeover by the Communist Party and other "popular" forces became a real possibility for the first time. It was only on May 30 that France began to step back from the abyss.

After initial hesitations—and a lackluster television address on May 24—President de Gaulle seized the initiative with a truly decisive radio address to the nation on May 30, 1968.<sup>2</sup> He announced his decision to dissolve the National Assembly and to call for elections. He denounced the "intimidation, intoxication, and tyranny" exercised by various revolutionary groups as well as the danger posed by a "party which is a totalitarian enterprise." He lamented the fact that as a result of this intimidation teachers were prevented from teaching, students from studying, and workers from working. And he reassured the French people that "the Republic will not abdicate." Hundreds of thousands of citizens responded to de Gaulle's radio address by descending on the Champs Élysées for a massive rally in support of the Republic. The tide had now turned. The general strike began to run out of steam.

It took another couple of weeks (and three "nights of the barricades") for order to be restored to the Sorbonne and the Left Bank. In the elections at the end of June, the Gaullists for the first time won an absolute majority in the National Assembly. Things had come full circle.

We have noted that revolutionaries of the Left (Trotskyites and Maoists of various stripes) played a major role in radicalizing the student movement. These subterranean revolutionary "groupuscules" outmaneuvered the Communist Party and claimed to speak for the young as a whole. Some of these militants (André Glucksmann, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and the other "new philosophers" of media fame come to mind) later broke with revolutionary ideology and became vocal defenders of "the rights of man." These *soixante-huitards* ('68ers) now tend to read their own intellectual and political trajectory into the nature of the event itself. They remain partisans of 1968 even in their new centrist or even conservative incarnations. But in truth there is an element of bad faith and wishful thinking informing the "libertarian" reading of 1968. The "libertarianism" of 1968 directed nearly all its anti-authoritarian ire at bourgeois society and was remarkably indulgent toward the totalitarianism of the Left. The "Marxist consensus" so abundantly on display that year did not at the time reflect the slightest clarity about the real nature of communist totalitarianism. That was to come later, under the impact of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, a work that had a much more dramatic impact in France than anywhere else in the Western world.

#### Aron's Witness

In retrospect, it is easy to forget the massive abdication of good sense by so many who ought to have known better during

the course of the May events. The great exception was the French political philosopher, sociologist, and journalist Raymond Aron. His columns in *Le Figaro* and his lively, eloquent, and insightful book *La révolution introuvable* (*The Elusive Revolution*) were beacons of clarity and civic courage in the midst of the “revolutionary psychodrama” (as he pointedly called it at the time).<sup>3</sup> Aron was the first to expose the “imitative” character of students and intellectuals play-acting at revolution, risking the destruction of bourgeois society and the liberal university with little or nothing constructive to offer in their place. He recalled Flaubert’s and Tocqueville’s powerful critiques of the revolution of 1848 (where a similar “literary politics” guided the pseudo-Jacobins of that time) to highlight the French propensity to make revolution in the place of a serious effort to bring about reforms.<sup>4</sup> A man of remarkably balanced judgment, Aron was angered by the inability and unwillingness of those in positions of responsibility to resist the delirium of the time. In *The Elusive Revolution* he eloquently defends his refusal to “take too seriously” the various actors in the “revolutionary comedy”:

I refuse to salute our “admirable youth.” Too many grown men have done so. Barricades which are symbolically effective seem to me to be neither an intellectual nor a moral achievement. If young people have some exalted memory of the barricades, well and good. Why should old people be obliged to counterfeit sentiments which they do not feel? If the young denounce the brutality of the C.R.S. (the French riot police) while in the same breath preaching the cult of violence themselves, the contradiction seems to me to be nothing more than a good technique of subversion. But men of my generation or of the generation

after do not want to feel that they were caught up in what I persist in calling collective madness. They do not accept that they are out of their minds.<sup>5</sup>

Aron had long been a critic of the over-centralized and overcrowded French university system and had even left the Sorbonne “in disgust,” as he put it, some months before May ’68. And while he respected General de Gaulle as an authentically great man, he also freely acknowledged the limits of Gaullist *hauteur*, the quasi-monarchical style that had set the tone for the French Fifth Republic. He was also critical of the civil service authoritarianism of the Fifth Republic’s governing class and of the quasi-neutralist bent of French foreign policy.

In Aron’s view, the Fifth Republic was a *liberal* order that respected fundamental political and personal liberties. But its approach to governing was excessively aloof and oligarchic and thus insufficiently “republican” in character. A necessary strengthening of executive authority had led to an excessive depoliticization of French society. Still, if Aron could not simply accept the Gaullist vision of France he personally felt “closer to the Gaullists than to their opponents.” He was “deeply wounded by” 1968’s “radical negation of patriotism and by the substitution of the name of Che Guevara for that of a resistance hero [Charles de Gaulle].”<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, Aron’s voice was largely absent from the French commemoration of the May events (although the distinguished French quarterly *Commentaire*, founded by Aron in 1978, published an excerpt from *La révolution introuvable* and two broadly Aronian reflections on the May events in its Summer 2008 issue). This relative absence of Aron’s perspective in the contemporary debate is problematic for several reasons. Aron’s writings on 1968

serve as a powerful corrective to the ongoing French tendency to become “obsessed by their memories or the myths of their past” and to mistake “riots and disorder” in the streets of Paris “for a Promethean exploit.” In addition, Aron’s writings on 1968 make abundantly clear what was at stake in the final “revolutionary” days of May before de Gaulle’s May 30 radio address awoke the good sense of France’s silent majority.

There were only two plausible *political* alternatives to the Fifth Republic. The first was the rule of a “totalitarian enterprise,” the Communist Party, which had been driven by the power vacuum at the end of May to call for a “popular government” (a government of the Left, dominated by the Communist Party). The second possibility was the establishment of a Sixth French Republic headed by an official of the non-communist Left such as François Mitterrand or Pierre Mendès-France. Such a republic would be the product of lawlessness and would be “truly unworthy” of a self-respecting people and nation. As we have seen, Aron was ambivalent about the established political regime in France. Yet he vigorously supported the continuity of the legal government. The Gaullist republic “was based on universal suffrage” and did not violate “fundamental liberties.”<sup>7</sup> All of the available political alternatives—generalized lawlessness, communist despotism, or a power play by the opposition—were much less acceptable.

One can continue this sort of analysis. The distinguished French historian Alain Besançon has written a masterful new memoir on May ’68 that appeared in the aforementioned Summer 2008 issue of *Commentaire*.<sup>8</sup> As Besançon observes, the Communist Party did not really want revolution. In part it feared the abyss opened up by a truly revolutionary situation; in part the French Communist Party and its

Soviet masters were broadly satisfied with de Gaulle’s “independent” foreign policy. There was an implicit “pact” between the Gaullists and the Communists that had served to maintain order in France. But at the time there was no guarantee that that pact would hold. And, in fact, after May 27, the pact had dangerously frayed. The Communists, stung by the opposition of their own rank-and-file union members to the Grenelle accords (dramatic concessions offered by the Pompidou government to put an end to the general strike), and by revolutionary agitation on the ultra-Left, were increasingly prepared to cross the Rubicon—to engage in *real* revolutionary action. De Gaulle was not being demagogic in his speech to the nation on May 30: he genuinely feared that a Communist takeover was a distinct possibility in France. On the eve of the May 30 address, such anti-communist stalwarts (and critics of May ’68) as Aron, Annie Kriegel, and Alain Besançon seriously contemplated the possibility of going into exile if everything was indeed lost. Elegiac French accounts of 1968 as a legitimate “democratic” protest against Gaullist authoritarianism and the stifling conformities of a hierarchical social order therefore grossly obscure the political stakes of the May events. “1968” was much more than an “eruption of the social” as so many analysts suggest today. In May 1968 a “revolutionary psychodrama”—a seemingly harmless talkfest—brought France, and France alone in the Western world, perilously close to a genuine revolutionary conflagration.

### The Thought of ’68

Besançon has perceptively noted the yawning gap between the heady language in which the actors of 1968 expressed themselves and the “uniformity” of that event’s consequences. Understanding that gap is

crucial to deciphering the “mystery” and “ambiguity” of 1968. The May events did not have a single or uniform profile. The remarkably juvenile slogans—“Demand the impossible,” “It is forbidden to forbid,” “Take your desires for realities”—in themselves are without any serious intellectual interest or content. They are, however, revealing popular expressions of a deep-seated antinomianism connected to the thought underlying 1968.

To the extent that the movement had a coherent ideological profile it can be found in the conjunction of the philosophy current in France in the 1960s—“structuralist,” Byzantine, obscure—with a diffuse “leftist” ideology that paid homage to Mao, Trotsky, and Castro. This ideology had its “hard” core in the revolutionary “groupuscules” mentioned above, which played a major role in radicalizing events in both the universities and the factories. This ideology’s “soft” core was anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical, what might broadly be called “left-libertarian” in orientation. In both its soft and hard manifestations, the radicals of 1968 evoked a revolutionary alternative to bourgeois society that somehow would not culminate in Soviet-style bureaucratic despotism (by now, the Soviet Union seemed hopelessly “petrified” to them).

The partisans of 1968 were mesmerized by the vision of “direct democracy” in an industrial society and appealed to “participation” (“*autogestion*”) as the only legitimate governing principle within every educational, social, economic, and political institution.<sup>9</sup> Authority as such was identified with domination and repression. Of course, this overlooked elementary social realities and necessities. Aron nicely highlights the “scorn for facts,” for elementary social realities, that underlay the radically egalitarian vision of the Parisian intellectuals:

Many higher intellectuals have an incredible scorn for facts. The formula “there are no facts” is much acclaimed in Parisian circles. Of course, I am aware that in a sense this formula is philosophically true. There are no facts which have not been construed from documents by an historian. I am aware of this kind of consideration—after all, I began my career as a philosopher by making speculations of this kind. But when all is said and done at times I am tempted to...state that every society is subject to the constraints of *fact*—the need for production, for organization, for technical hierarchy, the need for techno-bureaucracy and so on. French intellectuals are so subtle that they end up by forgetting the obvious.<sup>10</sup>

In a famous book that has given rise to endless polemics, *La pensée de 68*,<sup>11</sup> the French philosophers Luc Ferry and Alain Renault analyzed “the thought of ’68,” the anti-humanist philosophical currents that preceded, informed, and were given new life by the revolutionary spectacle of that year. Some of Ferry and Renault’s critics have vociferously denied that thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan had much of a “causal” role in the May events. Their writings were too abstract to influence a broader public and some of them (Foucault in particular) were initially skeptical of the students and their motives. But all of this is beside the point. Ferry and Renault did not claim that “anti-humanism” or sophisticated Parisian nihilism *caused* the May events. They made the more limited and plausible claim that the French philosophy of the 1960s created an atmosphere that nourished the spirit of ’68 and informed the actions of many of its key players. In important respects, Ferry and Renault were merely developing an insight that Aron had already highlighted in *The Elusive Revolu-*

tion (they cite him generously at a crucial moment in their book).

As Aron noted in the midst of the events, Parisian intellectuals (with a few notable exceptions) succumbed to nihilism of a particularly crude variety when they confused their “critical function” with an “absolute condemnation of society.” They practiced—even perfected—the “literary politics” of the revolution of 1848 that had been condemned by Tocqueville in his *Recollections*. Too many preached or tolerated “the cult of pure violence” with no thought of an alternative society except a vague vision of a radiant future without hierarchy or vertical structures of authority. At the same time, the same figures showed limitless indulgence (and fascination) toward murderous tyrants in far-off lands about which they knew little or nothing.

Forsaking the Stalinism of old, Parisian intellectuals succumbed to a *gauchisme* tinged by the fashionable intellectual nihilism of the day. And in the midst of the crisis, the “cult of action” associated with the existentialist-cum-Marxist Jean-Paul Sartre, made a (temporary) comeback on the streets of Paris. Aron writes:

The god of the intellectuals of the sixties was no longer the Sartre who had dominated the post-war period, but a mixture of Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Althusser and Lacan. All passed for structuralists, although they were structuralists in different ways. The most refined of the intelligentsia watched Godard’s films, read Lacan without understanding him, and swore by the scientificity of Althusser and acclaimed Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism. Oddly, some of these avant-garde intellectuals claimed to be scientific with respect to ethnology or economics, but Maoist when it came to action. During the May period the scientificity disappeared and the cult of

action, the cult of the cultural revolution, spread in various forms. Sartre and *Dialectical Reason*, the *groupe en fusion*, the revolutionary mob, had taken their revenge on the structure of society.<sup>12</sup>

The intellectuals discussed by Aron showed little regard for the fragility of civilized order. They celebrated every assault on established authority as a victory for personal freedom and authenticity.

One of the defining traits of the New Left everywhere was its conflation of liberty with “liberation” and its willful refusal to distinguish authority from authoritarianism. Nor was this a passing phase. In the years after the May events, as Roger Kimball and Roger Scruton among others have documented, “the thought of ’68” became the official philosophy of the humanities in universities throughout the Western world. The scientism of the structuralists gave way to radical social constructivism and intemperate efforts to subvert—to “deconstruct”—traditional wisdom and established social institutions. Egalitarian moralism coexisted with a fanatical repudiation of the idea of Truth, with a dogmatic insistence that morality and justice have no other supports than the linguistic categories and cultural assumptions of a contingent social order. The academic partisans of “deconstruction” give no more thought than their forebears in France to the effects of such easy-going nihilism on the capacity of free men and women to live together in a spirit of responsibility and mutual respect. Without some sort of grounding, “equality” and “justice” become will-o’-the-wisps, ideological slogans to express contempt for a reality that does not live up to the languid dreams of demi-intellectuals.

### “Social” Consequences of 1968

If the quasi-revolutionaries of '68 failed to replace the existing political order in France, they were far more successful on the “social” plane. It is a mistake to deny altogether the real benefits that accompanied this upheaval. The democratization of mores, the weakening of heavy-handed “paternalist” authority in the family, Church, and political order, the growing demands for genuine consultation between employers and employees and rulers and the ruled: all these did serve to revitalize the democratic energies of modern society. These developments, legitimate within limits as a corrective to the rigidities of a traditional social order, were, however, well underway before 1968. With the explosions of May they took on a strikingly destructive cast. As Chantal Delsol has pointed out, along with the (qualified) benefits that flowed from the May events came excesses of every kind. New ideologies were committed “to effac[ing] from the earth all the authority of the old societies, with the goal of installing their own.”<sup>13</sup> This new authoritarianism was more illiberal than anything found in the old order since it showed limitless contempt for the habits, practices, and judgments that had long served to support civilized human existence.

Alain Besançon also locates the deepest meaning of 1968 in a broadly Tocquevillian framework. Besançon acknowledges that the May movement had elements of psychodrama. Some of its features were indeed “accidental and insignificant.” But its deepest meaning only became apparent later. If the American and French revolutions installed democracy in the political realm, “'68 has extended the field of democracy to the whole of the social order.” With a comment (and pathos) worthy of Tocqueville, Besançon notes that “the revolution is not finished.” By this he means that the “democratic revolution” contin-

ues to transform and to undermine every authoritative institution. Everything, including truth itself, must bow before the tribunal of autonomy and consent.

The most convincing interpretations of May '68 bring together Aron's political perspective with a broadly Tocquevillian appreciation for the ongoing effects of the modern “democratic revolution.” At the time of the May eruption Aron hesitated to endorse André Malraux's interpretation of it as entailing the “end of a civilization.” This kind of analysis seemed unduly apocalyptic to him. Ten years later, however, in his *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, Aron freely spoke of the May events as inaugurating a “crisis of civilization,” a systematic assault on all those authoritative institutions (e.g. the Church, the army, the university) that were necessary to sustain a free and civilized human order. But rather than seeing May '68 as the founding moment of authentic democracy, Aron saw it as a profound “corruption” of the democratic principle.

This pregnant line of argument has been developed by Dominique Schnapper, the distinguished French sociologist and member of the French Constitutional Court (who is also Raymond Aron's daughter). She writes suggestively about a “philosophy of in-distinction” that has become widespread in the Western democratic world.<sup>14</sup> The democratic principle of human and civic equality has been radicalized, as Tocqueville predicted, into a *passion for equality* that perceives “every distinction...as discriminatory, every difference as inegalitarian, every inequality as inequitable.” The relations between civic equals which is at the heart of democratic political life becomes the unchallenged model for *all* human relations. Moreover, a laudable respect for the accomplishments of different cultures has given way to an absolute relativism that denies the very idea of universal moral judgments and a

universal human nature. Such “extreme equality,” as Montesquieu already called it in Book 8 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, is a *corruption* of democracy lurking at the heart of the “democratic” eruption that characterized May 1968.

### The Revolution Continues

The problem confronting the West today is that this corruption or radicalization of democracy is too often confused with democracy itself. In his magisterial *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* Pierre Manent refers to democracy’s “immoderate friends,” who are also its worst enemies. They are its enemies because they undermine the distinctions necessary to preserve democracy’s moral health and political vigor. In France today, a new intellectual industry has arisen dedicated to safeguarding the ideological legacy of 1968. The partisans of “humanitarian democracy” vehemently denounce critics of 1968 and its legacy as “reactionaries,” even as they deny there is any discernable “*pensée de 68*.” A recent book, for example, expresses venomous disdain for “*la pensée anti-68*” even as it tries to save Aron (although only half-heartedly) for the camp of “progress”! The important thing, its author tells us, is to recognize 1968 as a “precious moment,” the founding moment of a democracy that broke down authoritarian mores, liberated social energies, and defended citizenship in its new meaning as “participation.”<sup>15</sup> The old historicist appeal to the camps of “progress” and “reaction” lives on. But now everything stands or falls not with one’s judgment of the Soviet Union, the homeland of “socialism,” but with one’s commitment to the memory—and the “values”—of 1968. Somehow, I do not see decisive progress.

The censorious response of the ideological guardians of 1968 to the slightest

criticism of their moral authority reflects one of the most salient features of that event: it undermined the moral and intellectual continuity of Western civilization. The partisans of 1968 date the birth of a European democracy worthy of the name—humanitarian, open, postnational, and postreligious—to the social upheavals of the late 1960s. The “old West,” all the old worlds (as Charles Péguy might put it), whether Christian, republican, or classically liberal, are relegated to a “culpable past.” That past is suspect precisely because it recognized the importance of other values than “the rights of man” and exhibited a now unacceptable toleration of wars, colonialism, social paternalism, and religious authoritarianism. At most, this older liberal and Christian West is given its limited due as the “prehistory” of a self-confident, humanitarian, global democracy. More frequently, it is looked at warily as a model to be studiously avoided.

The contemporary West which 1968 has bequeathed to us above all defines itself by its adherence to “democratic values.” For a long time, however, the old and new dispensations, political democracy and older moral traditions and affirmations, coexisted without too much (practical) difficulty. In response to the inhuman totalitarianisms of the Left and the Right that were the scourge of the twentieth century, churchmen discovered the virtues of liberal constitutionalism and political liberals rediscovered the moral law at the heart of Western civilization. Faced with the totalitarian negation of constitutionalism, the moral law, and the very ideas of unchanging truth and common humanity, liberals and conservatives rallied in support of a West that was still able to draw upon the best of both the modern and the premodern traditions. 1968 shattered this anti-totalitarian consensus and gave birth to “postmodern democracy.”

The relentless assault on the principle of authority proceeds apace. This process is so regularized that we have ceased to notice or appreciate its truly revolutionary character. Our political orders are bereft of statesmanship, the family is a shell of its former self, and influential currents within the churches no longer know how to differentiate between the sublime demands of Christian charity and demagogic appeals to democratic humanitarianism. Europeans have increasingly severed a legitimate and salutary concern for human rights from its political context, which is self-government within a territorial state indebted to the broad traditions of civilization. They desire what Pierre Manent calls “pure democracy.” They increasingly defer to an “idea of democracy” which has no tolerance for the crucial historical, cultural, and political prerequisites of democratic self-government. 1968 played a central role, as both cause and effect, in this reduction of a capacious tradition of liberty to an idea of democracy committed to a single principle: the maximization of individual autonomy and consent. One of the enduring lessons of May 1968, therefore, is surely that the “idea” of democracy is never sufficient unto itself. As pure abstraction or ideology, democracy risks becoming a deadly enemy of self-government and of human liberty and dignity, properly understood.

(Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 605–748. I have cited the English translation of that work, *The Elusive Revolution*, that was released by Praeger in 1969. In a few places I have modified the translation.

4. See Aron’s references to Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* and Tocqueville’s *Recollections* in *The Elusive Revolution*, II, 151–154, and 162.
5. *The Elusive Revolution*, 122.
6. *Ibid.*, 140.
7. *Ibid.*, xvi.
8. Alain Besançon, “*Souvenirs et réflexions sur mai 68*” in *Commentaire*, 31, no. 122 (été 2008): 507–520.
9. “Participation” was also a central tenet of de Gaulle’s political philosophy. But the French statesman understood this notion in a more traditional, “Christian Democratic” manner.
10. Aron, *The Elusive Revolution*, 110–111.
11. Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *La pensée 68* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988). Gallimard reissued the book for the fortieth anniversary of May 1968.
12. *The Elusive Revolution*, 125.
13. See the illuminating conversation with Chantal Delsol (“*Le père chasse de sa maison*”) dated May 15, 2008, at [www.libertepolitique.com](http://www.libertepolitique.com).
14. Dominique Schnapper, “*Relativisme*” in *Commentaire* 31, no. 121 (printemps 2008): 126–130.
15. See Daniel Lindenberg’s *Le rappel à l’ordre: enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil, 2002) and Serge Audier’s pseudo-Aronian *La pensée anti-68: Essai sur les origines d’une restauration intellectuelle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

### Notes

1. On this point, see Raymond Aron, *Thinking Politically: A Liberal in the Age of Ideology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1997), 207–211. For the chronology of the May events, I have drawn on Aron and a wide variety of other sources.
2. De Gaulle’s “*Discours du 30 mai 1968*” is widely available on the internet.
3. *La révolution introuvable* can be found in the best available anthology of Aron’s writings, *Penser la liberté, penser la démocratie*