

French Revolution — 1968

Whether it fizzles, as it seems finally to be doing, or triumphs, there are many lessons to be learned from the phenomenal month-long French Revolution of 1968. First, it gives the lie, once and for all, to the widespread myth that revolutions, whether or not desirable, are simply impossible in the modern, complex, highly technological world. When the mythologists were confronted with the Chinese, Vietnamese, Algerian, and Cuban revolutions, all clearly triumphant, they said: Oh, well, perhaps there can still be revolution in the underdeveloped countries, but *not* in the Western world. Then came the successful Hungarian Revolution of 1956 — successful until the Soviet re-invasion. The excuse then was that Oh, well, Hungary was still a largely rural and undeveloped country.

But now France, mighty France — cradle of the Western world, and birthplace of revolutions. France, a possessor of the H-bomb, stopped in its tracks and almost toppled by that famous revolutionary weapon never until now successfully used: the general strike. Modern, complex technology requires skilled people to work it, and if these people refuse to work, bingo, you have a revolutionary situation. So now we know and we will know forevermore, that revolution *is* possible in the developed Western world.

A second interesting item is what sparked the massive general strike — it was the same spark that ignited each and every ghetto rebellion in the

U.S. cities last summer: massive police brutality. As in Columbia University, the police brutality was directed against students, who were beaten, clubbed, gassed, and grenaded by the French police. The question: Why is it that in the U.S. most people were angry at the students and supported the police, while the reverse happened in France?

One answer to this puzzle is the very different attitude toward the cops in France. Every Frenchman, regardless of income and social class, has a deep, abiding hatred in his bosom of the police. For one reason, Frenchmen tend to be devoted to freedom of speech and demonstration, and they understand that it is always the police who invade that freedom; secondly, every Frenchman has had his teenage bust-up with the cops.

For it is a French tradition that when a Frenchman receives his coveted high-school diploma, he engages in a traditional cut-up called the "monomial"; and it is also traditional that the monomial is always busted up with great brutality by the police. So every Frenchman has a keen hatred of the police force nourished within him; hence the common French nickname for the police: not so much the well-known *flics*, or "cops," but *les cognes* (those who-hit-people). Cops, to the French, are those who go about hitting people, and when they did so in violation of a century-old tradition of no cops on the university campus, all of France exploded. Another important lesson is the counter-revolutionary role, probably the main reason for the revolution's ultimate defeat, played by the French Communist Party. The student rebels, who tend to be anarchists, correctly regard the Communist Party as a pillar of the existing Establishment. The Communists opposed the students from the beginning, then finally joining the bandwagon, then induced the workers to surrender their demands. All of France now knows what the New Left has been saying for years: that the Communist Party is a pillar of the "conservative" Establishment. If Americans began to absorb that fact, their view of the world would be far different from what it is today.