16 1968 and After
Sadie Plant

The “Events” of 1968

For 1968 to suddenly appear in a series of chapters on philosophers sug­gests that something of peculiar significance to European philosophy hap­pened in that year of rioting, barricades, and political turmoil. The unprece­dented wave of discontent which swept much of the world in 1968 was significant wherever it arose, but in France, where it nearly succeeded in destroying the state, the effects on the cultural and intellectual life of the country were enormous; so much so that only an impoverished understand­ing of recent European philosophy is possible without some sense of the atmosphere and themes of 1968. The debates about humanism and subjectivity, power and desire which inform the work of writers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Irigaray, Deleuze and Guattari are intimately entangled with the events of that year. While there are many other paths through which the philosophical significance of 1968 could be pursued, the trajec­tory through poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory which these philosophers trace is perhaps the most interesting way of considering the impact of what is variously referred to as May ‘68, the May events, or just les événements, the events.

The events, then, involved a three week general strike by some ten mil­lion workers, mass demonstrations, university and factory occupations and battles with the police, government threats of military intervention, and the near-collapse of the state. The sense of frenzied activity with which people grappled with the possibilities and purpose of such an enor­mous interruption is unmistakable in the legacy of cultural experiment and political argument left by the extraordinary variety of voices which were raised against the social order. For discontent was confined neither to the students, whose activities had sparked off the wave of occupations and strikes, nor to the workers in their traditional role of revolutionary subjects. The hostility to power and authority was exercised in hospitals and schools, football teams and personal relationships. Revolution was in the air, but no-one really knew why or how it had arisen. No one seemed to be in charge, and a cacophony of questions was directed at no one in particular. People were desperate, but what did they really want? It was not a question of satisfying material needs; perhaps some other needs, or
desires never before so insistently expressed? People were protesting, but about what, and against whom, were their dissatisfaction raised? They refused to be led, criticised the elitist vanguardism of the organised revolutionary left and demanded to speak for themselves, and challenged every aspect of their lives. To what authority does one complain about everything? This was a situation to which there was no obvious response; it was literally unthinkable, and there are many senses in which the attempt to think it through has shaped subsequent European thought.

That the events caused such confusion and consternation is hardly surprising. With the rest of the advanced industrial world, the France of the 1950s and 1960s was enjoying a period of affluence and stability, and the possibility of revolution or even serious unrest seemed remote. But in a matter of months, small confrontations between students and the university establishment escalated into wholesale challenges to authority and hierarchy, and the students’ demands for control over their own lives, from the organisation of halls of residence to the content of courses and lectures, quickly caught on in the factories and across a wide spectrum of French life. Calls for a general strike on May 13th were met with an enthusiasm which brought France to a standstill and outraged managers, ministers, and, significantly, the leaders of the traditional organs of protest: the unions and the French Communist Party. The demands of the activists were beyond the understanding of all these authorities, but there was, of course, a particular irony in the established opposition’s response to the uprising. Vehemently opposed to the strikes and occupations, the Party and the union leaders insisted that the students were provocateurs, that the workers would lose the political advantages they had supposedly won by their hitherto disciplined protests, and that the time for revolution was not ripe. The strikes and occupations were wildcat, organised by informal, ad hoc committees and with a flagrant disregard for the official organs of union bureaucracy and hierarchy.

Moreover, the demands of the workers were rarely framed in ways that could be easily understood. They were demanding neither pay rises nor changes in working conditions, but asking for nothing in particular and everything in general: a complete change in their ways of life. It was unclear to everyone how the disruption had started, who was to blame, and what the outcome would be.

France is in revolutionary ferment [declared the Observer in May 1968]. Who is responsible? Who put the spark to the dead wood? In the permanent disor-