

# The New York Review of Books

## 1968: Power to the Imagination

Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Claus Leggewie  
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*Claus Leggewie:* On March 15, 1968, Pierre Viansson-Ponté, the editor-in-chief of *Le Monde*, concluded that France was bored—as a diagnosis this may have been true, but as a prediction it was totally amiss.

*Daniel Cohn-Bendit:* Viansson-Ponté was baffled by the fact that revolts were occurring everywhere—in Germany, in the United States—but not so much in France. There were some demonstrations against the Vietnam War here, too, but somehow everyone thought this would come to nothing. In fact, though, an enormous strike had already taken place at Paris Nanterre University just a few months earlier, with students demanding administrative reforms. I was a sociology major at Nanterre at the time, and in November 1967 my gut had told me that this could very well turn into something huge. (I have always tended to listen to my gut feeling.) On March 22, only seven days after *Le Monde*'s erroneous prognosis, the time had come: we occupied the university's administration building. Thus the ball was set rolling—much faster than anyone anticipated, and much faster than I could dream of.

*Leggewie:* All power to the imagination...

*Cohn-Bendit:* The feeling we had in those days, which has shaped my entire life, really, was: we're making history. An exalted feeling—suddenly *we* had become agents in world history. Not an easy thing to process when you're only twenty-three years old.

*Leggewie:* The most famous image of May 1968 contains all the ingredients of the myth of revolt. It shows you, the twenty-three-year-old sociology student, face-to-face with a



Gilles Caron/Fondation Gilles Caron (Contact)

*Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the leaders of the French student protests, in front of the Sorbonne, Paris, May 1968*

nameless member of the CRS [the reserve of the national police], in front of the Sorbonne...

*Cohn-Bendit*: Disciplinary action had been announced for that day—May 6, 1968—to counter our occupation of the university. We were defended by our professors, by Alain Touraine and others. When the reporter took this picture, we were just about to enter the university, with demonstrations already in full swing outside.

*Leggewie*: Everything that's relevant about May 1968 is present in this image: above vs. below, ancien régime vs. youth, system vs. movement, hero vs. villain, power against counterpower, order against anarchy.

*Cohn-Bendit*: In a way this image is my doctoral thesis—after all, I never went back to university as a student afterward. It made me an icon of revolt. I call it the “sun of '68” because so many people associate positive things with it: not violence, not the cobblestones that were thrown, but our tongue-in-cheek way of provoking the powers that be. Recently Raphaël Glucksmann did a survey for his *Nouveau Magazine Littéraire*, and he was astonished at his findings: more than 60 percent of the French associate positive things with '68—not, as conservatives claim, that our generation has destroyed schools, the ancient institutions of marriage, the family, or the public order. Some two thirds even approve of the slogan “It is forbidden to forbid”; they appreciate its poetical quality and the message of potential it conveys. That subtext remains ingrained in French society.

*Leggewie*: But there is also a revanchist tendency in French society, a kind of reactionary backlash to May '68.

*Cohn-Bendit*: Even many right-wing voters profess that they like what happened in '68. The only ones who don't are Catholic traditionalists, like François Fillon, and the supporters of Nicolas Sarkozy. We have to understand the psychodrama of May '68. Meanwhile, I have become the psychoanalyst of the French, so to speak. Once, after my expulsion from France had been rescinded, I got off the overnight train in Paris and was approached by a man who was perhaps ten years older than I: “Mr. Cohn-Bendit, I want to thank you.” How so? He turned out to be a member of the CRS who wanted to tell me how important '68 had been for him as well: “It was a great time, *merci*.”

*Leggewie*: Hannah Arendt predicted at the time, “It seems to me that the children of the next century will once learn about 1968 the way we learned about 1848.” But what is it that we're learning, exactly? In retrospect, Jürgen Habermas believes it caused a “fundamental liberalization” of German society that made it possible even for conservatives to change their views. Children's rights have found their way into the constitution, cannabis has been legalized not just in California, same-sex marriage is now possible, women hold leadership positions—is that our time's master narrative?

*Cohn-Bendit:* The revolt accelerated a development that was already in progress, which is why some contend that our societies would have modernized and liberalized anyway. Rubbish—that’s just not how history works. Yes, there was a tendency toward liberalization and democratization, but no, it was we who steered it in a certain direction.

*Leggewie:* What about French exceptionalism?

*Cohn-Bendit:* Well, France did not just democratize, like Germany and other Western societies. Triggered by the general strike, the country underwent a social revolution as well. The mass uprising was never officially called—it was the workers themselves who began occupying their factories one after the other. The trade unions felt completely powerless. They just accepted the *fait accompli* and conceded, okay, this is a general strike then.

*Leggewie:* Social movements suddenly spread like ink on blotting paper.

*Cohn-Bendit:* And in the end—much to the dismay of the generation of ’68—the welfare state, represented then by Jacques Chirac [secretary of state for employment], and the unions, led by the Communist Georges Séguy, agreed that the revolt had to end. They convened a round table, now known as the *Grenelle*, and negotiated tremendous pay increases, the strengthening of workers’ councils, and much more. But the Communists didn’t understand that we had cleared the way for them. And the Trotskyists didn’t understand that the revolution cannot be permanent.

*Leggewie:* Alain Krivine, who’s still one of the Trotskyist leaders, recently declared in *Le Monde* that he won’t lay 1968 to rest—unlike this Dany Cohn-Bendit guy who “gets applauded by all the right-wingers in the European Parliament for his sneers and a kind of liberalism that has nothing to do with ’68.”

*Cohn-Bendit:* Two Trotskyists wrote a book in 1968 called *The Dress Rehearsal*.<sup>1</sup> What they meant was: ’68 as a prelude to the actual revolution, somewhat in the way that the Kronstadt naval mutinies of 1905 were the overture to the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917. And this they have kept repeating for fifty years now: one day we will start a real May Revolution, one that succeeds after all, the ultimate socialist revolution.

*Leggewie:* So not just liberate women, children, and gays, but finally get rid of capitalism.

*Cohn-Bendit:* We have to acknowledge that capitalism has changed immensely. It’s another world we’re living in today. I wouldn’t want to miss 1968—it *was* a great time—but we need to look ahead.

*Leggewie:* What we miss, indeed, is a social utopia for today. While the dogmatic left strives for a reenactment, a repetition of the revolt, the radical right aims for a revision: the cultural revolution of ’68 must be undone.

*Cohn-Bendit*: In Germany and France, and in the US as well, the right is currently pressing for a “conservative revolution” that remedies our sick post-1968 societies. Whenever an immigrant misbehaves, it’s Cohn-Bendit’s fault. Cohn-Bendit told people to stop obeying and start destroying it all—the schools, the family, marriage, the church.... That’s just as absurd as the whole revolutionary myth.

*Leggewie*: The reality was that power imploded in May 1968, affecting the Élysée, the government and administrative apparatuses, even the military and the police.

*Cohn-Bendit*: Yes, as is currently depicted in three works about ’68. In *Le tombeur du général*, the conservative journalist Christine Clerc has told the story from the government’s perspective and invented one story about me. A witness she quotes reports how Charles de Gaulle went berserk in one of the emergency meetings: “Why don’t you just shoot them? Then all this racket would be over.” But the education minister advised against it: “Monsieur le President, you should *meet* this Cohn-Bendit!” Such a meeting did not transpire, of course, which is why Clerc invents a nightly encounter at the Élysée between General de Gaulle and Dany le Rouge. We’re chatting, he collapses, I help him up and get him a drink of water, and so on. Then there is an interesting play, featuring Aunt Yvonne [de Gaulle’s wife], myself, and others. It depicts the episode on May 29 when de Gaulle escaped to General Jacques Massu’s military quarters at Baden-Baden.

*Leggewie*: To resign? To prepare a coup?

*Cohn-Bendit*: De Gaulle had told everyone that he would go to his native Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, but in reality he fled to Baden-Baden. In the play *De Gaulle 68—La Révérence*, Churchill makes an appearance, berating the general: “You won the war and now you’re scared of a twenty-three-year-old redhead? Get your act together!” I’m talking to him as well—about communism.... The third work, *Les 99 jours de Cohn-Bendit*, a novel, is the counterfactual account of a ninety-nine-day Cohn-Bendit administration, based on the premise that we assumed power in May ’68.<sup>2</sup>

*Leggewie*: What would that have been like?

*Cohn-Bendit*: Oh, a state of pure chaos, that goes without saying. I’m the good guy in the novel, as always: the one who wants to improve everybody’s lot. Eventually I’m toppled by left-wing extremists, but they’re also fighting one another, so in the end de Gaulle is restored to power.

*Leggewie*: Sounds like something Michel Houellebecq would come up with.... Speaking of “the good guy,” contrary to your image of being very polarizing, you in fact usually act as a mediator—a position you refer to as “centrist.” In the summer of 1968 you co-authored a book with your older brother, Gabriel, a paraphrase of Lenin entitled *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, intended as an attack on the French Communist

Party (PCF). Your brother also took you to your first demonstration when you were eleven years old to protest the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Uprising—in front of the PCF’s headquarters. Is anticommunism in your blood?

*Cohn-Bendit:* We left-wing libertarians were anticapitalists *and* anti-communists. There were all kinds of crazy factions within the Communist camp: four different Trotskyist groups, as well as some Maoists who in criticizing liberal democracy would invoke the Chinese Cultural Revolution and declare their sympathy for countries like North Korea or Albania. Though for different reasons, all these factions were fighting the PCF, which was strictly pro-Soviet and styled itself as a guarantor of order. Georges Marchais, the PCF’s general secretary at the time, published an editorial in the party’s paper, *L’Humanité*, in which he picks on the “the German anarchist Cohn-Bendit” who’s attempting to ensnare French workers. He didn’t write it, to be sure, but everyone understood him to mean “the German Jew.”

*Leggewie:* When you got expelled from France, thousands were chanting, “We all are German Jews.”

*Cohn-Bendit:* In moral terms, that was 1968’s greatest event: Africans, Arabs—all the world called themselves “undesirable” German Jews. That’s when multiculturalism was born.

*Leggewie:* International solidarity was also the slogan of a big rally at Berlin’s International Vietnam Congress in February 1968. You were delegated...

*Cohn-Bendit:* No way, I won’t be “delegated”—ever.

*Leggewie:* True. So you went there as a free rider of the French anarchist group Liaisons des étudiants anarchistes. What were the relations between German and French students like? In Germany, the revolt was almost over by May 1968...

*Cohn-Bendit:* I was very impressed with the “Critical University” approach, the Germans’ vision of a new kind of university: a free and critical community of leaders, not subjected to capital, state, and the authorities. But at the Vietnam congress I was wary of their unconditional support of the Vietcong. After all, North Vietnam was a Stalinist affair and, once again, I had a clear gut feeling that I wouldn’t want to live in such a world. The enthusiasm of the German radicals alienated me. In [the German student leader] Rudi Dutschke’s speech, for example, there was a very clear-cut line separating good from evil. We were much more skeptical, also of that Jesus-like figure everybody was talking about then, Che Guevara.

*Leggewie:* Our solidarity with the national liberation movements was immense. We firmly supported those who fought what Mao called a “people’s war.” What we largely ignored,

however, was the suppression proceeding from the liberators themselves, once they had seized power. The first instance of this was Algeria, which quickly became a frontline state against Israel.

*Cohn-Bendit:* And an authoritarian one-party system. Camus was right, Sartre wasn't. Camus was in favor of Algerian independence, but he didn't support the National Liberation Front. He was thinking of his mother, who was an impoverished *pied-noir*. The Algerians were perfectly justified in liberating themselves from France, but unfortunately we were slow to realize how the new rulers perverted the momentum of liberation. When you read Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* today, with the preface by Sartre, it's very violent, even bloodthirsty. Little wonder that it became the favorite book of the German Red Army Faction.



Marc Riboud/Magnum Photos

Protesters in Paris, May 1968

*Leggewie:* “1968” did not begin in Paris or Berlin, though, but in Berkeley, on the American West Coast, around 1965. That’s where the Vietnam protests originated, as well as the Free Speech Movement led by Mario Savio, the teach-ins, the sit-ins, etc.

*Cohn-Bendit:* Yes, the revolt was far more American in origin than the Europeans cared to admit. I was in the States in 1965–1966 and met Mark Rudd. The American SDS was characterized by a veneration for the US Constitution that was totally foreign to us. The militancy of the Weathermen and the Black Panthers came later, in part as a reaction to their being violently suppressed by the FBI. But essentially the revolt was spurred by the idea of a counterculture, which was mainly carried via rock music. “Woodstock Nation”: that was the myth of a new America, and we were all for it.

*Leggewie:* Who were your musical idols?

*Cohn-Bendit:* I saw Bob Dylan at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965 and have been a fan of folk music ever since. I was a Stones fan, too—though I also listened to the Beatles. And of course I liked the great French *chansonniers*: Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, and Hugues Aufray, who covered Dylan in French. In 1968 Joan Baez came to Paris for a discussion with students; it took place in a theater with over two thousand attending. She didn't want to sing, she wanted to debate, but the Marxist-Leninists criticized and lectured her. At one point I'd had enough and shouted, “You guys suck! At least the Yankees have created a real movement. The French Left and the Algerian War: nothing!”

*Leggewie:* Hannah Arendt would never approve of violent revolts, but she did feel that 1968 marked the birth of something new.

*Cohn-Bendit:* Arendt saw 1968 as the liberating revolt of the next generation. She actually wrote a letter to me that was supposed to be conveyed by Mary McCarthy. The letter never made it to me, but it was later discovered. It said: “Your parents would have been proud of you. Get in touch if you need help.”

*Leggewie:* What was your take on Europe back then? What about the “United States of Europe,” a cause you later espoused as the Greens’ whip in the European Parliament?

*Cohn-Bendit:* Europe was not an issue, not at all. France and Germany had considered each other hereditary enemies until well into the late 1940s. And yet we just didn’t care about French-German reconciliation when it came. We enjoyed the new mobility, traveled back and forth between the two countries, yes. But “Europe” was not on our minds much, not as a grand idea and not as the basis for political institutions either.

*Leggewie:* There was one exception, though: in 1973, Michel Rocard, then the leader of the small Unified Socialist Party, co-authored a polemic called *Le marché commun contre l’Europe*. He argued against free-market capitalism, but in favor of “Europe”—a socialist Europe, that is.

*Cohn-Bendit:* And this marked the first step toward one of the crucial issues of today: overcoming the traditional nation-state.

*Leggewie:* But what happened to anti-capitalism?<sup>3</sup> In the early 1970s you led a group called “Revolutionary Struggle,” which infiltrated the Opel factory in Rüsselsheim near Frankfurt.

*Cohn-Bendit:* That was really just a practical inquiry into industrial sociology. We didn’t intend to launch a new Communist Party but merely to find out how to build new networks and alliances—in *situ* and involving migrant workers for the first time. And we learned a lot. For many...

*Leggewie:* Like Joschka Fischer, who would go on to become Germany’s foreign minister.

*Cohn-Bendit:* ...this was an important chapter in their lives.

*Leggewie:* We were both revolutionary tourists in Portugal in 1975. I was there with my small family, you—such was my impression—always as part of an extended family, be it when playing volleyball at the beach or when attending political assemblies in Lisbon. Living in a pack and politicizing everything that’s private: Is this the essence of ’68?

*Cohn-Bendit:* “Pack” is the right term. Already in the spring of 1968 that’s how we used to spend our days and nights in Nanterre. We were searching for forms of a larger community

and wanted to burst all *petite bourgeois* structures—like your nuclear family.

*Leggewie*: For members of the generation of '68 there were three deadly sins: voting, eating oysters, and getting married. You committed all three of these sins, eventually.

*Cohn-Bendit*: When I got expelled from France and came to Germany, some “comrade” asked me: What does socialism mean to you? I responded: “Oysters for all.” Which didn’t go down well with the puritans within the SDS. At one point I just found myself in a close romantic relationship and got married—though only after fifteen years, when our son was already seven. I first voted at age forty, for the Hessian Greens. They also put me up for election, first in Frankfurt where I became the first (and unsalaried) incumbent of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and then from 1994 through 2014 for the European Parliament. By then we had learned that social movements are subject to high and low tides: the water keeps on rising, but then it stops and recedes again—and everyone gets really depressed. Elections and parties are important because changes need to be enshrined in laws.

*Leggewie*: The squatting movement was rather rough in the 1970s. Rioting and conflicts with the police were the order of the day. How close were you and your affiliates to the groups that established the Revolutionary Cells or the Red Army Faction (RAF) as urban guerrillas?

*Cohn-Bendit*: We are politically responsible for what happened. Some merely played with the guerrilla myth, but others were very serious about it. When Rudi Dutschke shouted “Bring the war home!” at the Vietnam congress, this could be understood in two different ways: as a call to organize a lot of rallies or to engage in armed struggle. If you put things so ambiguously, you cannot very well decline responsibility for the terrorism that ensued, certainly not while you keep on blaming conservatives for the rise of Nazism. We did disavow the fascination of rioting, and when we joined the Greens it was in acknowledgment of an important insight: pseudo-revolutionary violence would change nothing, but peaceful reforms might. Some insisted that Fischer was forever unacceptable as foreign minister because he had once thrown stones and got into fights with the police. That’s just as dumb as it was when leftist extremists held the industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer’s involvement in the SS against him as late as 1977, totally ignoring that he had become a different person since the war. When Schleyer was murdered, he was the victim, and the RAF terrorists were the perpetrators, the real fascists.

*Leggewie*: Many years ago, your brother Gabriel’s autobiography appeared under the title *Nous sommes en marche*. In 2016, Emmanuel Macron launched a movement of the same name. Is it because of him that you have been spending more time in France again lately?

*Cohn-Bendit*: The French president is one of the few politicians today with whom profitable debates about certain topics are possible: Europe, global affairs, the legalization

of drugs, refugees, everything. As to me and France: I'm well liked in Germany but I'm loved in France. As an embodiment of 1968 I have become part of the French DNA. For the film I made with my friend Romain Goupil...

*Leggewie*: *La traversée*, released in May 2018, exactly fifty years after the events...

*Cohn-Bendit*: ...we went on a road trip through France and filmed some fifty encounters. Everyone was friendly: the imams, the peasants, even twenty-five members of the National Front we met for dinner. They were all keen on talking and explaining things to me. That's what I like about France. Traveling the country as it is today is my homage to 1968.

*Leggewie*: One of the slogans of '68 was "Under the pavement: the beach." Now you have written a book entitled *Under the Cleats...the Beach*. Is this supposed to be a joke?

*Cohn-Bendit*: No, it's the very personal story of how I have experienced the joys and frustrations of soccer since childhood. I was scared stiff of the fiftieth anniversary of '68. Apart from this interview I will not comment on it whatsoever, and I'm not participating in any veteran reunions—or '68 bashings, for that matter. Let me repeat: it *was* a great time—but now it is history.

*Leggewie*: There is yet another book on May 1968, one that focuses on three Jewish leaders of the revolt: Pierre Goldman, André Glucksmann, and you.<sup>4</sup> Do you think there was a special affinity?

*Cohn-Bendit*: What's astonishing is that Jews, mostly middle-class Jews, have always participated in left-wing movements to a disproportionate extent: in Bolshevism as well as in the American SDS. I'm hesitant to make generalizations here. But perhaps it has to do with the messianic hope for another world and an idealistic desire to improve matters.

*Leggewie*: An alternative account of your life could be termed "Under the Pavement—My Jewishness." That's something else that will surprise many. After all, you didn't exactly grow up Jewish—religion played no big part in your childhood, I believe?

*Cohn-Bendit*: It's a little more complicated than that: when my mother returned to Paris after the war, she worked as housekeeping supervisor in a Jewish high school. One of her responsibilities there was organizing the Jewish holidays. So I did dip into the Jewish milieu rather deeply as a child.

*Leggewie*: But you had no bar mitzvah?

*Cohn-Bendit*: Correct. I had no religious feelings whatsoever. Again I was influenced by my brother, who became a Communist early on. I do feel that I'm rooted in Judaism, but in a cultural, not a religious sense. At the center of it all is my parents' story of escape: as German Jews and political refugees they had to hide from the Nazis and their

collaborators. That's something I cannot shake off. For a long time I tried, by identifying as a Jew merely in Sartre's sense: it's the anti-Semite that "makes" the Jew; once anti-Semitism has been overcome, I cease to be a Jew. But no, it's been part of my identity since before I was even born. I have always wondered what would have happened to me had I been older, like my brother. He could have been that boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. Whenever I looked at that famous image, I thought, This could have been me, too.

*Leggewie*: Do you consider yourself a diasporic Jew?

*Cohn-Bendit*: Absolutely. This makes for my entire multicultural identity: I can be a Jew in Paris, in Frankfurt, in London, in Montreal.

*Leggewie*: But not in Israel!

*Cohn-Bendit*: Exactly. To put it crassly: to me, Israel represents the end of Judaism. It's a nation-state and its inhabitants are Israelis, not Jews. Which is their right, of course.

*Leggewie*: You once wrote that 1968 was the last revolution without knowledge of the ozone hole: it was a time when people were still happily ignorant of the climate catastrophe. What the generation of '68 and their opponents had in common is that they were both embedded in modern industrial society. Hence the orientation toward the working class and the pro-nuclear power stance.

*Cohn-Bendit*: According to Marx, capitalism had prevailed over feudalism by fettering the productive forces, and it was socialism's task to unfetter them again.... The utopia of self-government, so foreign to someone like Macron, has made a major comeback of late. The German metalworkers' union, the IG Metall, has recently negotiated a wage deal that enables workers to opt for increases in either pay or leisure time—and thus returns to them some time sovereignty. Fifty years after 1968 I find that just phenomenal. It's very much in the spirit of '68, I think, because here we no longer have a flexibility dictated by global capitalism, but a flexibility enacted by humans themselves.

—Translated by Björn Bosserhoff

1 Daniel Bensaïd and Henry Weber, *Mai 1968: une répétition générale* (Paris: Maspéro, 1968). ↩

2 Christine Clerc, *Le tombeur du général* (Paris: Allary, 2016); Philippe Chuyen and José Lenzini, *De Gaulle 68—La Révérence* (premiering May 29 in Toulon); Vincent Quivy, *Les 99 jours de Cohn-Bendit: Histoire du gouvernement révolutionnaire (30 mai–7 septembre 1968)* (Paris: L'Archipel, 2018). ↩

3 Claus Leggewie, "No Socialism Is Not the Answer: Reappraising the Politics of '68," *Eurozine*, March 16, 2018. ↩

4 Sebastian Voigt, *Der jüdische Mai '68* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015). ↩

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