Protest Photography from 1968 to Today

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Photography has played an important role in the formation, development and reception of protest movements. From the Paris Commune in 1871, the first political uprising to be captured by the camera, to the Occupy and anti-austerity Square movements of recent years, photography has documented protest movements throughout the world. Photography's intrinsic qualities—including its ability to keep up with the speed of short-lived political unrest, its reproducibility and memorability—have been critical to the protagonist role that photography has played in the documenting of protest. Photographs of protest travel across temporal and geographic contexts to make their appearances in newspapers, magazines, art galleries, state and private archives, activist publications, photo books, academic publications, in other photographs and even in family albums. The most reproduced photographs of protests transcend the historical and national boundaries within which they were first produced and can become recognisable symbols of the struggles they capture.

Some of the most iconic photographs of protest in the twentieth century were taken by photojournalists during the turbulence of the 1960s. Take as an example Charles Moore's photograph of a police dog attacking an African American man in Birmingham, Alabama during the Spring of 1963, which has become a quintessential image of the Civil Rights Movement. Moore's photograph graphically exposed the brutal violence and repression that was being used against Civil Rights protesters by the police. It was reproduced on the front pages of many national newspapers and in American weekly news magazines including *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life*. Its publication stirred the consciences of the American public and increased sympathy towards the Civil Rights Movement and demonstrations, including sit-ins and riots. Towards the end of the 1960s, photographs of the Vietnam War were being disseminated internationally across the mainstream media and played a crucial role in eliciting public awareness of, and increased sympathy towards, the burgeoning anti-Vietnam War movement. Eddie Adam's 1968 photograph of the execution of a Vietcong prisoner by South Vietnam's chief of National Police, Ron Haeberle's 1969 photograph of the My Lai Massacre and Nick Ut's 1971 photograph of a girl running from her Napalm-burnt village contributed to the reinforcement of the American public's growing anti-war mood. While the photographs were initially published in the mainstream

newspapers and illustrated, current-affairs magazines, they were soon embraced by people involved with the Vietnam War protest movement. Haeberle's photograph was used as an anti-war poster with the slogan 'Q: And babies? A: And babies', which was handed out by demonstrators and pinned up on walls across the United States.

To be fair, it is not only professional photographers who photograph social change. Activists and law enforcement officials document demonstrations and other manifestations of protest, and in contemporary movements, photographic production by protesters has greatly intensified with the proliferation of affordable mobile devices featuring camera apps. These protesters document events to raise awareness of political actions, while the police document to monitor and to gather evidence. 'Protest photography' is, therefore, not a single / unified photographic practice, but an array of varied practices, both amateur and professional. Photographs of protest are taken by multiple actors and are put to different uses. Police photographs (rarely made available to the public) are taken during street demonstrations for surveillance purposes and to capture evidence that can lead to detentions, arrests and prosecutions. The mainstream media publish photographs of protest to accompany related news coverage, features, opinion pieces and editorials. Usually sourced from photographic agencies and professional, independent photojournalists, such use of this type of photograph renders the images 'newsworthy'. They are often used to illustrate dramatic headlines. Activists put their own protest photographs to use in their own communication systems—leaflets, tracts and websites—and in banners and posters during protest actions. These photographs are also used as means of resisting official and mainstream representations of protest. Many such photographs eventually end up in private and public archives and libraries, with some perhaps destined to resurface in commemorative exhibitions dedicated to the protest events they depict. Some may appear in academic books, photo books and exhibition catalogues. As a protest movement develops, the oft-conflicting interests of photographers, activists, news editors and the police may become increasingly apparent. This conflict is seen, for example, when photographs are employed to construct and reinforce negative and stereotyped accounts of civil unrest—and, alternatively, when they are used to challenge such accounts. During times of pronounced social change, various visual narratives elevate economic and political conflict to a representational level and compete to prevail as the dominant narrative of record.

This 'conflict of representations' is exemplified by the 1968 uprising of students and workers in France in May and June of that year. The events of this time, or 'May '68' (as it came to be known), started as a student movement, which demanded the democratisation and decentralisation of the French educational system. The protesters' criticisms soon expanded to incorporate a rejection of De Gaulle's repressive

and undemocratic government, along with authoritarian and hierarchical societal structures in general. At the ideological core of this movement resided a robust critique of capitalist order, its culture of consumption, its social injustices and the growing social and cultural emphasis on individualism. Workers and professionals from many sectors joined forces with the students in strike actions and university occupations, for what became known as the biggest industrial action that France had ever seen at that time. The movement had global aspirations—it expressed solidarity with liberation movements in Third World countries and opposed the imperialist war in Vietnam and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The rejection of power as expressed in imperialist activity, communist acts of repression, and colonial rule was a shared stance of the different political groups that participated in the May '68 movement, as well as other student movements that erupted later that year in the United States, Poland, Yugoslavia, Mexico, Germany and Italy. Whilst each movement was undoubtedly a product of its own national socio-political context, a variety of well-documented, trans-national relationships, including intellectual collaborations, were forged amongst members of these movements. The year 1968 was, without doubt, one of global protest.

Nonetheless, the Parisian revolt attracts much of the discussion and documentation of the political events of 1968. As it unfolded in May and June, a number of photojournalists, including Bruno Barbey, Gilles Caron, Claude Dityvon, Ellie Kagan, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Serge Hambourg and Marc Riboud, took to the streets of Paris to document demonstrations, barricades, university occupations and clashes between the protesters and the police.[1] Photographs were taken from within the demonstrations themselves, for example Barbey's and Dityvon's photographs of students violently clashing with police. The photographing of war zones and other violent situations had become easier for the post-1945 generation of photojournalists due to the wide availability of portable cameras such as the Leica model. Vivid photographs of dramatic events were in high demand in the mainstream newspapers and popular illustrated magazines. Photographers needed physical strength, quick reflexes and a sharp eye to deliver the best photojournalism to their agencies. Barbey famously climbed a traffic light on the Boulevard de la Bastille in Paris to take his much-reproduced photograph of a young male protester clinging to another traffic light, standing with his clenched fist raised in the direction of the Place de la Bastille (p. 8). From Barbey's vantage point, individual figures are indistinct—only a large homogenised crowd of small figures can be seen in the photo. The protesters' banners are shot from the reverse side, so while the odd word can perhaps be made out, their slogans are largely illegible. Barbey's elevated position enabled him to include in the background the landmark July Column (the *Colonne de Juillet*)—a symbol of the French

revolution's success in 1830, which placed in this context becomes symbolic of the May '68 protesters' hopes for their own struggle's successful outcome. The photograph was taken on 13 May 1968. The next day, workers began occupying factories across France in a series of guerrilla strike actions, which culminated in an attempted general strike involving approximately two-thirds of the French workforce.

In addition to photographing barricades, demonstrations and street fighting, photojournalists also took an interest in the individuals who were emerging as key protagonists of the May '68 movement. Amongst them was Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a known figure in Marxist-anarchist political circles at that time and a sociology student at the University of Paris' campus in Nanterre. The status he subsequently acquired as a 'spokesperson' for the May '68 protesters was largely derived from the French media's interest in him. The designation of 'May '68 spokesperson' was somewhat ironic, given that the movement was developed and organised collectively by a variety of political groups and action committees. As such, it lacked any formal leadership and its activists tended to resist hierarchy and centralised structures. The many photographs of Cohn-Bendit taken during this period may have resulted from photojournalists responding to the mainstream media's appetite for a suitably charismatic male 'leader' of the movement to be identified. Gilles Caron's photographs of Cohn-Bendit include one of the most reproduced photographs of the period—in which Cohn-Bendit, with a lively and mocking expression on his face, confronts a policeman (p. 147). Photojournalists, striving to capture an 'iconic' image of the May '68 period, sought to reflect the dominant cultural and political conceptualisations of leadership and authority of that time.

Preconceived ideas of what 'leadership' should look like noticeably excluded women. Female figures, when photographed, were represented in one of two broad and stereotypical modes: some were pictured carrying flags or with raised clenched fists at the head of demonstrations, in the familiar and stylised mode of Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. In these instances, the female participants are rendered as problematic emblems. In other cases, they were represented as passive, inactive and appearing to lack their own political agency. Through these photographs, the reality of a diverse, collective body is reduced to an emphasis on individuals, and most frequently the individual is a young male protester of student appearance. Protesting older workers and professionals were photographed far less commonly—an omission that contributed to erroneous interpretations of May '68 as a 'student movement' or 'youth revolt'. Such retrospective interpretations overlook one of the movement's most distinctive and important characteristics, that is: its unique societal alliance made up of students, workers, farmers, professionals and the unemployed.

Bruno Barbey – Posters: to the left Daniel Cohn-Bendit laughing at a riot policeman, to the right a poster comparing the riot police to the Nazi SS. Paris, May 1968

Bruno Barbey – Barricade built out of movie posters, Rue de Lyon, near the Bastille, 12th arrondissement, Paris, 24 May 1968

While most of these photographs appeared with detailed captions and extensive commentary in the French mainstream press, their publication was often complicated. *Paris Match*, the most popular of France's illustrated weekly news and general-interest magazines, was well known for its features and use of full-colour photography. It covered the events of May '68 briefly in its 11th and 18th of May issues, and became unavailable from the 18th of May until the 15th of June. This 'unavailability' may have been related to the fact that in France French broadcasting was subjected to a 'governmental model' of broadcast operations, and that state broadcasting took charge of the situation. The government's control of Radio Television Française (RTF) intensified during the events of that May. On the 10th, French television programmes (for example *Panorama*, a weekly news review show) made no mention of the growing demonstrations and occupations taking place in Paris and in other parts of the country. As a result, reports from the occupied Quartier Latin and other protest sites by pirate and international radio stations such as Europe 1 and Radio Télé Luxembourg (RTL) became the main source of information for French and wider international audiences. The French mainstream media reports were generally disapproving in tone. Even *L' Humanité* (the official newspaper of the French Communist Party) regarded the struggle with suspicion, and characterised the student protesters' actions as mere opportunism, and contrary to the interests of the working class. Public mistrust towards the mainstream media grew as events accelerated. When journalists, producers and technicians in the mainstream media joined the nationwide strike, the public turned to alternative media sources for updates.

The public's intensified mistrust towards the mainstream media created, conversely, a confidence in publications produced by the protesters and their supporters. These included the newspapers published by the various groups involved in the occupation, the leaflets circulated within the ranks of the protesters and posters that were produced collectively in the occupied École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts —the so-called *Atelier Populaire* (p. 22). The wide range of photographs, graffiti, drawings and political cartoons produced by the movement became weapons in the struggle. They expressed the students' demands and critiqued the government, state censorship and police violence. The provocative posters questioned the values of conventional and conformist 'bourgeois' society, rigorously critiqued De Gaulle's repressive government and denounced the privileged status given to artists in a 'bourgeois culture' which, by romanticising the figure of the artist, was argued to erroneously set them apart from other types of workers. Photographs published in the various newspapers produced by protesters and their *comités d'action* (action committees) became the movement's mouthpieces. They circulated information about events, political ideas, goals and strategies. These publications were circulated by activists who pasted them onto the walls of the Sorbonne during May and June. One of the most significant of the protest newspapers, *Action*, had a detachable front page for use as a poster and was noted for its absurdity, eccentricity and humorous slogans, as well as cartoons (many of which were drawn by 'Siné'—the pseudonym of Maurice Sinet, the renowned anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist French political cartoonist).[2]

In several of the photographs published by *Action*, the police are depicted as violent and repressive personifications of an authoritarian state. They became a key focus of the students' criticism. Nearly all issues of *Action* during the events of May '68 featured photographs of policemen brutally beating protesters with their batons and cartoons that were highly ironic in their representations of the police. One, a (now-famous) cartoon by Siné, depicts two policemen holding up a bloodied student in front of their superior officer, who sports a moustache resembling that of Hitler. It is accompanied by the caustic and ironic caption: "*Il était armé? Oui, chef... d'un diplôme*" (Was he armed? Yes, sir...with a degree). The issue featured lengthy articles that explained how the police brutality provoked violent counteractions by the protesters and how television and radio had misrepresented these clashes. In fact, coverage of these events by both the left- and right-wing mainstream French press was accusatory towards the students, condemning their violence and insulting language, and calling their actions irresponsible. Photojournalism depicted the protesters in aggressive poses, gesturing violently. The students' own publications, meanwhile, represented and discussed violence (such as running street battles and the defence of barricades) as necessary and legitimate acts of resistance.

Photos of anti-hierarchical meetings at the occupied Sorbonne that emphasise their collective ethos appeared in *Action*, and they provide a stark contrast with professional photojournalists' images of singular or dominantly framed figures such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jacques Sauvegeot and Jean-Paul Sartre (pp. 28–29), who were anointed as the 'leaders of the movement' by the mainstream media. The *Action* photographs are accompanied by rich textual material that documents a collective body of activists experimenting with various forms of direct democracy, such as anti-hierarchical meetings, open assemblies, occupations of public buildings, sit-ins and teach-ins. The fierce refusal of any kind of leadership was intended to act as a negation of traditional / conventional politics and the organisational structures of the trade union movement, as well as other established left-wing political institutions. This was one of the reasons why the French trade unions did not initially embrace the coalition between the striking students and the workers, who joined wildcat strikes across France in support of the students' aims (p. 17). That alliance and the acts of solidarity between the diverse range of socio-economic groups, who

participated in May '68, were vividly represented in silkscreen posters made by the Atelier Populaire, which celebrate the striking similarities between the demands of students, workers (both indigenous and foreign) and professionals. The posters that celebrated this solidarity—one of the most radical aspects of the protests—are notably not the most widely reproduced.

As the protests and violence came to an end, *Action* and many other student-run publications were outlawed by the French government. Nowadays they are, along with posters, tracts and other visual documents produced by the movement, 'hidden' in public archives in France and remain largely unpublished and understudied.[3] Shedding light on them allows contemporary viewers to discover parts of the movement that were overlooked by professional photographers and neglected by news editors of the time, including: the unique solidarity amongst students, workers, farmers, professionals, migrant workers and anti-colonial militants, the experiments in direct democracy, and the networks of communication that forged links to other struggles around the globe. Re-engaging with this 'forgotten' visual material enables us to raise questions about the relationship of photography with historical memory and, in particular, the role of photography in the various ways in which the events of May '68 have been represented, re-thought, discussed and remembered since the early 1970s.

Photographs used in exhibitions commemorating May 1968 (which have variously marked its 10th, 20th, 30th and 40th anniversaries) have contributed to the construction and reinforcement of the dominant narratives that have grown up around May '68. This commemorative process has tainted the possibility of remembering with the fact of 'forgetting'. The 50th anniversary of the events—marked by this current exhibition and book—offers the opportunity to ask the following questions: which photographs have been selected by the gallery to represent such an influential and ambiguous protest movement as May '68? What are the aesthetic, perceptual and political effects of bringing photographs of protest into a gallery space? Do institutional framings of the photographic documentation of protest events intensify or diminish their radicalism? What, ultimately, is the visual legacy of May '68?

The legacy of May '68 has been bequeathed to subsequent radical political struggles. The demands for democracy, freedom, justice and the rights of women and immigrants made by the late 1990s anti-capitalist movement, with its slogans: 'Abolish Capitalism Now' and 'Another World is Possible', resonated with May '68's demands, and its slogan 'Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible'. In their critique of hierarchy and institutional party political structures, their open assemblies, anti-hierarchical forms of organisation and experiments with direct democracy,

Bruno Barbey — Meeting of workers and students at Charléty stadium 81, boulevard Kellermann, 13th arrondissement, Paris, 27 May 1968

Bruno Barbey — Strikers at the Renault factory listening to the report of the Grenelle Agreements, Boulogne-Billancourt, suburb of Paris, 27 May 1968

we can see in the recent Greek and Spanish 'Square' protest movements and the 'Occupy' Movement, a resurrection of the unfulfilled potential, anti-capitalist demands and revolutionary aspirations of May '68. Oliver Ressler's 2012 video installation *Take the Square* captures the recent anti-hierarchical meetings that took place in Madrid, Athens and New York (pp. 42–43). Shown on three parallel screens, the work celebrates horizontality as an integral part of these experiments with direct democracy. The shared ideas, strategies and tactics between these contemporary movements (greatly facilitated by the Internet) highlight the global dimensions of those recent protest events. Marcelo Brodsky's mixed-media *1968, the Fire of Ideas* acts as a reminder that, long before the coinage of the term 'globalisation', the chain of cross-border political mobilisations that was seen worldwide in 1968 justifies the conclusion that May '68 was in fact one aspect of a truly *global* movement (pp. 36–41).

May '68 is, without doubt, part of a critical and radical tradition, one that has influenced the formulation of contemporary anti-capitalist political demands, new forms of resistance and evolving oppositional practices. The use of digital communications technology enables the latest generation of left-wing activists to disseminate their political aims and photographs, to build coalitions and communicate with other struggles at great speed and across global borders. In 2010, photographs of the deaths of Khaled Mohamed Saeed and Mohamed Bouazizi circulated on social media and were identified as causal factors in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutionary uprisings. The photographs of the massive 'Arab Spring' public protests and the occupied squares in Spain and Greece dominated the public sphere, generated public discussion and provoked acts of solidarity across the world. Many of these photographs were taken by the protesters themselves with cheap mobile phone cameras. These images were often of poor resolution and quality, products of collective editing, sharing and distribution, and as such defied established models of authorship and copyright. Intensively reproduced online, they allowed a wider public to engage with photographs that had not appeared in the mainstream media. There are also cases of photographs taken by activists being presented as evidence in court cases, in the defence of protesters charged with law-breaking.[4]

Photography's potential to contest the political status quo and support radical struggles is also evident in the ways that artists have used the medium towards this end. Bruno Serralongue's *Notre Dame-des-Landes* stands in solidarity with the ongoing struggle of farmers and activists in ZAD (*Zone à Défendre*: "Zone to be Defended") in the French municipality of Notre-Dame-des-Landes (pp. 44–55). A campaign against plans to construct an airport that will destroy the region's biodiversity and farming has become something of a communal lifestyle for farmers and activists, who have adopted practices of direct democracy in their day-to-day

lives. Serralongue's photographs clearly resist mainstream media narratives, offering an alternative one, which speaks of resisting ecological crisis and embracing radical forms of collectivism. He is one among many contemporary photographers, artists and activists who experiment with innovative practices and forms of resistance, in response to ecological crisis, the ongoing 'refugee crisis' in Europe, the MENA region and, more widely, the resurgent nationalist-populist and far-right political parties. As the present era of global crisis evolves, we will see whether all these protesting voices will unite to express a new, collective, radical body of resistance and opposition, and what the role of photography in that may be.

1   Their reports have been published in the following: Gilles Caron, *Gilles Caron: Reporter 1967–1970*, Paris: Éditions de Chêne, 1978, Claude Dityvon, *Mai 68*, Camera Obscura, Paris 1988, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, *Protest in Paris 1968: Photographs by Serge Hambourg*, Hanover N.H.: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, London: University Press of New England, 2006, Bruno Barbey, *Mai 68 ou l'Imagination au Pouvoir*, Paris: Galerie Beaubourg, Éditions de la Différence, 1998.

2   *Action* represented the UNEF (*Union Nationale des Étudiants de France*—the National Union of French Students), the SNEsup (*Syndicat National de l' Enseignement Supérieur*—National Union of Higher Education) and the movement of 22nd March. Other significant student publications are: *Barricades*, *L'Avant-Garde Jeunesse*, *Servir Le Peuple*, *le Monde Libertaire* and *Lutte Socialiste*. For more on student publications of the time and their role in May '68 see: Antigoni Memou, *Photography and Social Movements: From the Globalisation of the Movement (1968) to Movement Against Globalisation (2001)*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, pp. 69–85.

3   For a study of the archival photographic material see: Antigoni Memou, *ibid*.

4   For example, when young protester Carlo Giuliani was shot dead by the Italian *carabinieri* in the course of the anti-globalisation protests in Genoa in 2001, activists collated thousands of amateur snapshots and footage to sustain an appeal against the Italian police.