

VOICES

Ronald Fraser

For his book on 1968, Ronald Fraser collected voices and slogans from around the globe.

My most vivid memory of May '68: The new-found ability for everyone to *speak*—to speak of anything with anyone. In that month of talking during May you learnt more than in the whole of your five years of studying. It was really another world—a dream world perhaps—but that's what I'll always remember: the need and the right for everyone to speak—*René Bourrigaud, student at the Ecole Supérieure d'Agriculture, Angers, France*

Freedom is the consciousness of our desires—*French slogan*

People were learning through doing things themselves, learning self-confidence. It was magic, there were all these kids from nice middle-class homes who'd never done or said anything and were now suddenly speaking. It was democracy of the public space in the market place, a discourse where nobody was privileged. If anything encapsulated what we were trying to do and why, it was that. . . .—*Pete Latarche, leader of the university occupation at Hull, England, 1968*

It's a moment I shall never forget. Suddenly, spontaneously, barricades were being thrown up in the streets. People were building up the cobblestones because they wanted—many of them for the first time—to throw themselves into a *collective*, spontaneous activity. People were releasing all their repressed feelings, expressing them in a festive spirit. Thousands felt the need to communicate with each other, to love one another. That night has forever made me optimistic about history. Having lived through it, I can't ever say, "It will never happen. . . ."—*Dany Cohn-Bendit, student leader at Nanterre University, on the night of the Paris barricades, 10/11 May 1968*

The unthinkable happened! Everything I had ever dreamt of since childhood, knowing that it would never happen, now began to become real. People were saying, fuck hierarchy, authority, this society with its cold rational elitist logic! Fuck all the petty bosses and the mandarins at the top! Fuck this immutable society that refuses to consider the misery, poverty, inequality and injustice it creates, that divides people according to their origins and skills! Suddenly, the French were showing they understood that they had to refuse the state's authority because it was malevolent, evil, just as I'd always thought as a child. Suddenly they realized that they had to find a new sort of solidarity. And it was happening in front of my eyes. That was what May '68 meant to me!—*Nelly Finkielstein, student at Nanterre University, Paris*

For most of us the issue is not what's right and wrong. Most of us have a pretty clear sense of that. The issue is, what am I going to do? Am I going to do what's right, or am I going to do what's expedient? Because often to do what's right means you just get blown away, you know. So when somebody finds a way to do what is right and be effective at the same time, people just go OOOOF! Because now they're liberated, now they can do what's right!—*John O'Neal, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist during the civil rights campaign in the American South*

My world had been very staid, very traditional, very frightened, very middle-class and respectable. And here I was doing these things that six months before I would have thought were just horrible. But I was in the midst of an enormous tide of people. There was so much constant collective reaffirmation of it. The ecstasy was stepping out of time, out of traditional personal time. The usual rules of the game in capitalist society had been set aside. It was phenomenally liber-

ating. . . . At the same time it was a political struggle. It wasn't just Columbia. There *was* a fucking war on in Vietnam, and the civil rights movement. These were profound forces that transcend that moment. 1968 just cracked the universe open for me. And the fact of getting involved meant that never again was I going to look at something outside with the kind of reflex condemnation or fear. Yes, it was the making of me—or the unmaking.—*Mike Wallace, occupation of Columbia University, New York, April 1968*

Hey Hey L. B. J.

How Many Kids Did You Kill Today?—American anti-Vietnam War chant directed at President Lyndon B. Johnson

We'd been brought up to believe in our hearts that America fought on the side of justice. The Second World War was very much ingrained in us, my father had volunteered. So, along with the absolute horror of the war in Vietnam, there was also a feeling of personal betrayal. I remember crying by myself late at night in my room listening to the reports of the war, the first reports of the bombing. Vietnam was the catalyst. . . .—*John Levin, student leader at San Francisco State College*

I was outraged, what shocked me most was that a highly developed country, the super-modern American army, should fall on these Vietnamese peasants—fall on them like the conquistadores on South America, or the white settlers on the North American Indians. In my mind's eye, I always saw those bull-necked fat pigs—like in Georg Grosz's pictures—attacking the small, child-like Vietnamese.—*Michael von Engelhardt, German student*

The resistance of the Vietnamese people showed that it could be done—a fight back was possible. If poor peasants could do it well why not people in Western Europe? That was the importance of Vietnam, it destroyed the myth that we just had to hold on to what we had because the whole world could be blown up if the Americans were "provoked." The Vietnamese showed that if you were attacked you fought back, and then it depended on the internal balance of power whether you won or not.—*Tariq Ali, a British Vietnam Solidarity Campaign leader*

*We won't ask
We won't demand
We will take
and occupy
—French slogan*

So we started to be political in a totally new way, making the connection between our student condition and the larger international issues. A low mark in

mathematics could become the focal point of an occupation by students who linked the professor's arbitrary and authoritarian behaviour to the wider issues, like Vietnam. Acting on your immediate problems made you understand better the bigger issues. If it hadn't been for that, perhaps the latter would have remained alien, you'd have said "OK, but what can I do?"—*Agnese Gatti, student at Trento Institute of Social Sciences, Italy*

Creating a confrontation with the university administration you could significantly expose the interlocking network of imperialism as it was played out on the campuses. You could prove that they were working hand-in-hand with the military and the CIA, and that ultimately, when you pushed them, they would call upon all the oppressive apparatus to defend their position from their own students.—*Jeff Jones, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), New York regional organizer*

We Are The People Our Parents Warned Us Against
—*J. J. Jacobs, SDS, during the Columbia University occupation*

Those who are disgusted with the inhuman aspects of their society should D R O P O U T of it and give themselves full time to making this world a more beautiful place with their every act. If all of us would stop spending our time and energy trying to save America from within and would instead unite in our own society to set an example, all of the really stupid things that are going on would be effectively pointed out to the rest of the people.—*John Sinclair, counter-culture leader, Detroit*

Everybody was terribly young and didn't know what was going on. One had a sort of megalomaniac attitude that by sheer protest and revolt things would be changed. It was true of the music, of the hallucinogenics, of politics, it was true across the board—people threw themselves into activity without experience. The desire to do something became tremendously intense and the capacity to do it diminished by the very way one was rejecting the procedures by which things could be done. It led to all sorts of crazy ideas. *Anthony Barnett, sociology student, Leicester University, England*

Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh!
Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!
—American slogan

The NLF is going to win

There was a readiness for violence which came from an enormous anger, a rage. If it hadn't been so, we wouldn't have built barricades with other people's cars, without thinking for a moment to ask their owners. Wouldn't have overturned a bus as a matter of course and set fire to it. Yes, emotionally, we were out for

war now, civil war. . . .—*Barbara Brick, student at Munich University after the assassination attempt on the West German student leader Rudi Dutschke, in April 1968*

The CS gas made you vomit. But I believed you could vomit just as well going forward as back. I kept telling people, "If you don't breathe through your nose, the gas won't do you any harm." I may have even believed it myself for a time! But it was the kids who showed us the only thing that worked. With a bit of rag or blanket in their hand, they'd pounce on the cannisters the moment they landed and throw them back. It was unbelievable! And although it didn't stop them choking, at least it made the police choke as well.—*Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin), Derry riots, Northern Ireland, August 1969*

Two cops came around the corner. They put their .327 Magnums up to my head and cocked the hammers. It was raining and I had my hands in my trench coat. We were armed at different times, but I wasn't armed then. They said, "Take your hands out of your pockets real slow." I was a goner if I did, I knew they'd say you were going for your gun. I couldn't make my hands come up. I kept telling them I didn't have one. What was racing through my mind was that it would be really stupid for the ruling class to do this right now, at the height of the strike. And then another part of my mind was saying that these two cops had probably never heard of the ruling class. They're just going to kill the straight-haired nigger, as the tactical squad called me.—*Hari Dillon, student at San Francisco State during the strike, November 1968–April 1969*

I began to realize what it was all about. The state had mobilized. It taught me two lessons. Students by themselves would never get anywhere. Secondly, that the contribution of student activism, intelligence, humour and organizational ability had to go into the workers' movement in some way.—*Paul Ginsborg, research fellow, Cambridge, England*

The duty of a revolutionary is to make the revolution.—*Widely adopted slogan of Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary leader*

One talked about revolution to begin with because the Vietnamese were having a revolution, or because the Cubans had a revolution. Then, by analogy, which may not have been that sound but was certainly strong polemically, people would pose the question: How do we think about the black movement in the U.S. in terms of revolutionary models? Is there a paradigm of the revolutionary society? Of the revolutionary personality? As the discussion got heated, people more and more started to think, Well, what would we be if we were revolutionaries? If we students became revolutionary?—*Carl Oglesby, former president, SDS*

In all extraordinary situations, and none is more extraordinary than a revolutionary situation, the world seems open all of a sudden. The traditional barriers

between "home" and "abroad" break down to some degree. It's not only the revolutionary's "extraordinary" state of mind, but the fact that the outside world changes. It becomes a matter of course to take part in unknown people's activities, whether at home or in a foreign country. Even normal, traditional people suddenly open their doors to strangers. That all this happened in 1968 and the following years indicates that there was at least a revolutionary climate if not a "revolutionary situation."—*Anna Pam, West German SDS*

You'd read about things like this happening in Russia in 1917. Now it was happening in our own streets. It was amazing! Here were barricades keeping the British army and police out of our streets, out of "Free Belfast." It wasn't as politically explosive as it could have been, but if you didn't make the best use of the occasion the first time—so what? You'd learn for the next time.—*Michael Farrell, People's Democracy student leader, on the uprising in Belfast, August 1969*

We had the idea that the social revolution had to start from daily life. Start from even the smallest unbearable aspects of daily life, like wearing a tie or make-up. Start to make our relationships of a different order to the existing one. Start to take things back into our hands, reappropriate what had been expropriated from us. The revolution must be a festival—the festival of the oppressed.—*Elsa Gili, researcher at Turin University*