

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 353: Paris 1968: The Students' Revolt

Hello, and welcome to a very special episode of The Rest is History.

Excellent translation.

So last week, Dominic, we were in Amsterdam.

Today, as people can probably guess from Dominic's flawless French, we are in the city of light in Paris,

and we're continuing our European adventure thanks to Wyze.

Oh, yes. So Wyze, Tom, I mean, we know what Wyze is.

It's the account that lets you send, spend, and receive money internationally.

It is. That's why it's used by 16 million people, Dominic, all over the world.

Yeah, it's built to save you money, Tom.

You can probably hear some sirens in the distance.

That's Parisian colour, isn't it, Tom?

It really is.

We've come here today to talk about one of the kind of the great scenic episodes in Parisian history, a topic that you've chosen.

Les Événements, the events of 1968.

So students hurling cobblestones and people in polo necks doing...

Fressing as clowns.

All that kind of thing.

Yeah, absolutely.

May 1968. So here we are.

We are literally sitting opposite the Sorbonne, the most famous university in France.

We're in Samuel Pati Square.

We're facing the great facade of the Sorbonne.

This ancient university, founded, I think, the 13th century, something like that.

One of the oldest universities in Europe.

And if you'd been here in May 1968, yes, the air would have been thick with the stench of tear gas that would have been barricades.

Did you just say that the air would be thick with the stench of tear gas?

I did say that.

Brilliant.

You're a great writer.

Yeah.

What?

You see, this is the colour that people tune into the rest of this history for.

So people were throwing cobblestones at the police.

There was the heady centre of revolution in the air, Tom.

And...

What was that?

Well, this is the same...

This is the question, isn't it?

Yeah.

So to Anglo-Saxon listeners, what the French would call Anglo-Saxon listeners anyway, this is absolutely classic French behaviour.

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I mean, this is all that we expect from the sort of post war France.  
In time, actually, France didn't really have a reputation for youthful protest.  
So the revolutions of the 19th century were in the past.  
You know, it's a long time since the Paris Commune.  
That's alone the French Revolution.  
Since the Second World War, France had actually, or French youngsters,  
had actually been reasonably quiescent.  
So France had had, you know, constitutional turbulence.  
In 1958, because of the war in Algeria, Charles de Gaulle being brought to power.  
But that wasn't really driven by university students or anything like it.  
Well, I remember when the Beatles played in Paris, they were amazed.  
It was the only place where there was no screaming.  
Right.  
Well, that tells the same story.  
So France's reputation in the 1960s, or the reputation of French youngsters,  
and of the sort of mood of the French public, was that it was actually quite staid.  
Because there's this famous headline, isn't there, in Le Monde in March 1968,  
saying that what defines our public life today is boredom.  
It's boredom.  
Exactly.  
And actually, even at that point, you know, there's been lots of protests in the United States.  
There's been civil rights movement, marches against the Vietnam War.  
But all the coverage in France often says, well, French kids would never do this,  
because they are actually much too busy getting degrees and going into the workforce.  
And we're not like that.  
And actually de Gaulle, so Charles de Gaulle, the great hero of the liberation  
and of resistance to the Nazis in the Second World War.  
So he's president of France.  
We'll come on to him much later, in particular in the second episode.  
And sees himself as the embodiment of France.  
As the embodiment of France, exactly.  
He's in his 70s, de Gaulle is the figurehead.  
And he had said in 1966, he described the young layabouts in England,  
is because England has lost its sense of responsibility,  
its sort of sense of moral discipline.  
He complains about the long hair.  
The long hair, exactly.  
But in France, his argument would be,  
when in France we don't have this problem, we still have a sense of France,  
and it's a certain sense of France.  
A certain sense of France, as Julian Jackson's biography is called.  
And that's the opening line of de Gaulle's memoirs.  
Isn't it All My Life?  
I've had this certain sense of France.

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And France, in 1968, is a country actually that has done very well. So it has decolonized, I mean, in a very bloody and turbulent fashion. But that's a really important part of the story to come, isn't it? So they were the colonial power in Vietnam.

Yes.

And they skedaddled from that after a humiliating defeat.

Yeah, a DnB and Fu.

And then they also had to pull out of Algeria, which had been part of France.

Part of the fabric of the French nation.

Yes.

And very traumatic for all concern.

Exactly.

Exactly.

And that's what brought de Gaulle to power, that he had resolved the Algerian crisis effectively by ending it, by pulling out of France and a million people leaving Algeria and moving largely to the south of France or to the suburbs of Paris.

But France has done well economically, socially, since the end of the Second World War.

We're at the sort of towards the end or sort of midway towards the end of the what they call the 30 Glorious Years.

So every year the economy grew by about 5%.

There's full employment.

There's a real sense that, you know, today's young generation will be far better off than their parents.

We'll come onto this later, particularly when we get onto the strikes of 1968.

Lots of people from rural France, which had long been far more agricultural than Britain, lots of people had moved to the cities.

And we're in these suburbs that we're all very familiar with, on the Bourlier.

The Peripherique.

Yeah, exactly.

And these suburbs are pretty grim, aren't they?

They're kind of utilitarian, lacking the kind of droid of eve.

Right.

Right.

I mean, argue more.

Of a charming French village, or indeed the centre of Paris.

Well, Tom, we're, I mean, we're sitting here facing the Sorbonne.

You know, it's a beautiful day.

Early summer day in Paris.

Blue sky.

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It's very, what's her name in Paris?

Emily in Paris.

Emily in Paris.

That's not, I'd never thought of the rest of this history in that light before, but no, but Paris looks wonderful.

And one reason it looks so wonderful, I would argue, is because basically the city decanted all its problems to the, to the Peripherique.

And among those problems is the question of, it's not just workers, but of how do you house students?

Because there's a kind of massive boost to the student population.

So the Sorbonne, this ancient medieval university is inadequate.

There's not enough space to house all the people who want to come and study in Paris.

Exactly.

Exactly.

So there'd been a huge baby boom in France, far bigger than in Britain.

They had raised the school leaving age.

So far more people in education.

In 1968, the number of students in French universities had doubled since 1960 and trebled since 1950.

That's far greater rate of expansion than anything in Britain.

So what had happened is that the French government had built annexes and overflows and things in basically porter cabins and kind of awful kind of 60s kind of tower blocks and things.

Often on the edge of cities, they recruited hastily lots of new lecturers and teachers who actually often weren't very good.

And the students, I mean, this is a perennial problem, by the way, of French education.

I mean, I remember when I lived in France in the 1990s, students were complaining about this all the time, that they were taught in overspill lecture theatres.

The lectures were on loudspeakers.

They never even got to see, let alone to speak to the lecturer or the professor.

This is particularly an issue in the late 1960s.

I came across an amazing statistic that even though the number of students in Britain in the 60s was a fraction of those studying in France, that France granted half as many degrees as British universities did in the 60s, basically because three-quarters of French students just chopped their courses in because they were so bad.

Because they're so miserable.

So are these students sort of radical?

Some are, there's a small minority who are radical, but often one of the things that radicalizes them, you mentioned Vietnam.

So Vietnam is definitely there in the background.

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They are influenced by what they're seeing on TV in the United States.  
Because presumably the French have a particular sense of responsibility about Vietnam.  
I think they have an interest in it actually,  
rather than a sense of responsibility, it's fair to say.  
I think they also, there's obviously a very, very, how shall I put it,  
a pungent strain, Tom, of anti-Americanism.  
By the way, we're competing with a bin.  
There's a bin lorry.  
This has plagued us actually since Amsterdam, Tom.  
It's always the way, isn't it?  
Yeah.  
I mean, everyone knows this, who does life recordings.  
But there is also a mood more generally, beyond the universities,  
that people want to consign de Gaulle to the dustbin of history.  
Well, he's old.  
He's old.  
So there's this, a guy has fined 500 francs, I learned,  
for shouting at de Gaulle in his car as he went by.  
Retire.  
Right.  
So, I mean, that's great.  
That's fine for that.  
That's harsh.  
It seems quite repressive by British standards.  
That's one thing that people also,  
I mean, they don't get about France today even.  
France is a much more hierarchical society,  
much more paternalistic than often people in sitting in Britain  
who have the fantasy of France believe.  
So it's still a very Catholic country.  
It's sort of officially, at least, not a diverse country.  
I mean, there are a lot of new immigrants and things,  
but they don't feature.  
They've all been parked on the periphery.  
They've all been locked up in their tower blocks.  
There is a real sense of deference to authority far greater,  
I would say, than in Britain or America at the same time.  
So therefore, presumably rebelling against it becomes more fun.  
Exactly.  
So actually, even though at the beginning of 1968,  
all the sort of talk is,  
well, there's stuff going on in America and so on,  
but it will never spread to France because, you know,  
we're not like that and our kids aren't like that.

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I think, particularly in these places where nobody really looks.  
So out in the suburbs, in these kind of Jerry built sort of breeze block,  
unfinished building site universities,  
there is a sense of discontent that is mounting.  
And Tom, all it takes is the trigger.  
And as we see the bin lorry go around the corner,  
I think we should seize this moment to go to a cafe.  
Let's walk through the Latin Quarter.  
So in a cafe, we could have just before we get on to the explosion.  
Yeah.  
Perhaps could we have just a brief chat about French philosophy  
and observed its theater?  
That sounds awful.  
We'll be sitting in a, you know, in a cafe.  
I knew you would try to bring that up.  
I know.  
So let's go do that.  
Well, let's go to the cafe.  
So Tom, all right, here we are in the cafe.  
There's been a slight dispute about whether to sit inside or out.  
We're sitting outside.  
We're sitting outside, which is as I wanted.  
It is.  
I wanted to sit inside because I always imagine philosophers  
in Paris sitting inside the cafe.  
Yeah.  
But as ever, you bullied me.  
No, that's absolutely wrong.  
True.  
I think there's a general sense that it's actually a lovely day.  
It is gorgeous, isn't it?  
It's a beautiful Parisian day.  
Because you don't like Paris, or are you being converted now  
to the beauties of...  
I'm officially repenting.  
Are you?  
Actually, this is lovely.  
I'm really enjoying this.  
Paris is working her magic on you.  
I've never been in such nice weather.  
The city looks gorgeous.  
It's golden.  
They're riversane glistening in the sunlight.  
Dominic, so you may actually come back after this.

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And if you do...  
Oh, jeez, my wisecard.  
You would use your wisecard as we're going to do now  
because we're going to order a coffee, aren't we?  
Absolutely.  
We're going to use our wisecards for coffee.  
I will just say this, that whether you are taking on Rio or Rome,  
Miami or Mumbai, or in our case, Tom, Paris or Amsterdam,  
now, here's good news.  
You will always get the mid-market exchange rate  
when you convert currencies.  
And Tom, I know you're passionate about avoiding markups.  
I hate markups.  
You don't.  
You really don't like...  
Hidden fees.  
Hidden fees.  
And there are neither of those things.  
So, as usual, a large lorry has just turned up,  
which always happens.  
And I knew this would happen,  
which is why I wanted to go inside.  
But I'm not going to say I told you...  
Tom, I will modify you now with a lovely French coffee.  
What do you like?  
I would like a...  
Café au lait.  
Bonjour.  
Café au lait pour...  
Pour le monsieur.  
Ce vieux gentil homme.  
Il y a un café doit pour moi.  
Merci.  
OK, let's talk philosophy.  
Go ahead.  
So, part of the kind of the vibe in Paris in the 60s...  
Yeah.  
...they're very into their situationist,  
absurdist theatre.  
The transfiguration of the absurdity of bourgeois life.  
I knew you were going to bring all this stuff up.  
So, I know the answer to this.  
Yeah.  
Do you think that this has any influence on...

Do you see us on wheat?

No, see, I don't actually.

I think it's absolutely true that people are staging happenings and they are...

I mean, existentialism is old, by the way, at this point.

People often think existentialism and...

Sartre, Camus, all that stuff is one of the drivers of this.

But I'm talking about Antoinette...

Auto.

Auto, right.

Absurdité.

Yeah.

All that kind of thing.

And also, the rising French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Michel Foucault.

So, he's published Les Moëles shows, which I think is...

I can't remember what it's called.

Words and things.

Yeah, but it's not translated as that.

I think...

I can't remember order of things, is it?

OK, I'm not as familiar with Foucault as well.

But anyway, so in that, in Les Moëles shows, he is essentially arguing that everything is oppression.

Yes, of course.

That culture, knowledge, patriotism are merely discourses of power.

Yeah.

I mean, again, I know that you...

Because I know your material is spent, that you will poo-poo this.

But does this idea that...

So, the kind of the catch words for goalism, patrie, all that kind of...

All that kind of thing.

Well, la France.

Yeah.

That these are simply discourses of oppression.

Does that kind of steal the student leaders?

Does it provide them with a kind of ideological backbone?

I don't really think it does.

I actually think that stuff becomes important after 68.

OK.



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And it does create the memory of...  
I mean, it does become associated with the memory of 68,  
particularly in the 70s.  
Because Foucault himself is in Tunis at the time, isn't he?  
He is, exactly.  
He's in North Africa, and he is...  
I mean, he's the philosopher who's most identified,  
I suppose, with the event more of 1968,  
and the spirit of 68.  
But he's in North Africa,  
and as the events unfold,  
he's actually writing to friends saying...  
What's going on?  
I've got no idea what's going on.  
Yeah, but that doesn't matter.  
I don't understand this.  
I mean, the influence of a philosopher  
isn't to be measured by whether the philosopher himself  
is in person.  
But this is not like Rousseau in the French Revolution.  
During the event more of May 1968,  
people aren't generally quoting Foucault.  
Foucault's name does not appear in a lot of the coverage.  
Nobody is pointing the finger at...  
I think this is something that actually...  
I mean, some listeners to this may say,  
oh, no, no, this is far too reductionist.  
But actually, I think a lot of this  
is actually generated afterwards.  
By the people in Poland,  
in cafes, trying to explain what has happened.  
See, I actually think when you get down to the...  
We talked about the trigger.  
And you were talking about this...  
Well, we were talking about the grimness of the suburbs.  
And of the new university buildings and so on.  
The trigger is, in many ways, very, very mundane.  
So the place, it's seven miles northwest of Paris,  
and it's a suburb called Nantes.  
And in Nantes, they have started to build in 1962.  
Basically, one of these annexes,  
one of these overspilled buildings,  
overspilled campuses for the Sorbonne, where we were earlier.  
And there are about 12,000 students at Nantes.

And Nantes is the middle of nowhere.  
It is basically a massive building site.  
The buildings haven't been finished.  
The students have kind of been lied to.  
They've been told there are all these tremendous facilities.  
But actually, as the Guardian,  
the British newspaper, put it at the time,  
on 7th May 1968, it said,  
Nantes was ironically meant as a model for the future,  
but it's turned out to have the academic atmosphere  
of a railway station.  
Not even that?  
No.  
The railway stations at least have kind of cafes.  
Right.  
So in Nantes, there is nothing.  
And it feels you're a long way from your seven miles  
out of the city.  
You can't get into the city.  
The transport links are rubbish.  
There are no facilities.  
These grim, unfinished kind of tower blocks.  
The lectures are really boring.  
And also, Dominique, I mean, again,  
the Anglo-Saxon sense of French life  
is that everybody is engaging in sexual congress.  
This is just what the French are all about.  
But actually, in Nantes at this time,  
it's pretty monastic.  
It is because you can't...  
The girls and boys are not allowed to...  
They're not allowed to mix effectively at night after dark.  
So basically, you're not allowed to visit the opposite sexes,  
halls of residence at night.  
You know, you're all locked up in your kind of rival,  
you know, your monastery or your nunnery.  
Now, there are some students who are left-wing.  
There's no doubt about that.  
And those students will often go on about the police.  
And I mean, there is a kind of institutional memory  
in the sort of French student left  
of the extraordinary brutality of the French police.  
So the French police had killed hundreds of Algerians  
at the beginning of the 1960s,

throwing them into the River Seine,  
and then killed Unionists, straight Unionists and protestors.  
So there is a sort of radical, a small radical group.  
That killing, I mean, how was it kind of 200?  
The figures...  
I mean, I disputed.  
A lot.  
As many as 400, or possibly as few as 200 Algerians  
who were killed by the police and thrown into the river.  
It's a theme of a cachet.  
That's that great film with Daniel O. Tyane.  
Which is extraordinary.  
I tell you something about the difference between France and Britain.  
That in France, the CRS, the riot police, are famously...  
They are really hard.  
They are very hard men.  
And we'll come on to this later.  
The guy running the French...  
The Parisian police, Maurice Papon,  
who had been involved in Vichy,  
who has a very, very chequered record  
as deporting Jews from Bordeaux.  
And the chant is CRS, SS.  
SS.  
So there is this sort of sense that there are some...  
You know, there are issues, shall we say.  
And there's one student in particular,  
at Nanterre, who is synonymous with...  
I know you're a big fan of his, Tom.  
Danny the Red.  
Danny the Red.  
Danny LaRouge.  
Danny LaRouge.  
Yes, so he is the son of two German Jews  
who took refuge in France from the Nazis.  
And then obviously, when France becomes occupied,  
they have to live in hiding.  
So his background is very...  
He lives his whole life under the shadow of that.  
Absolutely. You know what he's studying, of course.  
Sociology.  
Sociology, but of course.  
Of course.  
He has red hair, but when he comes to prominence,

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he is assumed to be basically communist,  
to be very much on the left.

But actually, he isn't.

He's a libertarian.

Yeah, exactly.

He's a... Well, he became a green MEP.

And he has a brilliant run-in, doesn't he,  
with the Minister of Youth and Sports?

Yeah.

It's Michael François Miesoff.

So Miesoff arrived at Nanterre in January 1968  
to finally open the long-awaited sports center in Stringpool.

And Daniel Comben-D is the leader of the radical students.

And he barracks Miesoff.

And he shouts at him.

It was such a French bit of behavior.

He shouts to him and he says,  
your recent report on the problems of youth  
have said nothing about sexual problems.

Yeah.

It's exactly what I expect a French student needed to shout.

Miesoff replies,  
and they wonder with a face like yours,  
you have these problems  
and tells him to jump in the swimming pool to cool off.

Yeah.

And then Comben-D shouts back,  
you're obviously a fascist  
because people who build swimming pools for young people,  
that's what Hitler did.

Yeah.

This is like the Hitler Youth all over again.

Yeah.

And it's just a ludicrously French exchange, isn't it?

Even though he is German.

Yeah.

Well, Comben-D is kind of Franco-German, isn't he?

Right.

But this will become important later on, won't it?

Exactly.

Whether he's French or German.

But this is all quite, you know,  
lowly kind of stuff.

But on the 22nd of March,

a group of students,  
including all these sort of small far-left groups,  
and pleasingly, Tom,  
a small number of poets and musicians.

Yes.

And theatre students.

Theatre students.

So Maimartists, surprisingly.

Yes.

Clowns.

Right.

So these are the orager.

Right.

They're enraged.

The great thing about this story  
is everybody behaves precisely as they ought to.

Yes.

It's carry-on.

Carry-on French students.

It is.

So the Maimartists, the clowns,  
the far-leftists, whatever.

The absurdists, situationists.

They basically,  
they occupy an administration building  
and non-there.

And they hold a sort of meeting.

This is very late 60s behaviour, isn't it?

And they hold a meeting to discuss,  
to attack the bureaucracy of the university,  
and to talk about class discrimination at university,  
and also to talk about how they want to visit the girls.

Yeah, of course.

D'accord.

This is actually, what's that?

Basically, at the root of this,

I can see our producer, Theo,  
who's French, laughing at our pitiful Anglo-Saxon attempts  
to explain this very important moment in world history.

Now, the administration of the university  
completely not to overreact.

They're very top-down.

They're very autocratic.

You know this brilliant slogan

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that the students and non-there have.

They shout,

professors, you are as old as your culture.

Which, of course, in the case of the Sorbonne,

I mean, it is incredibly old.

Yeah.

I mean, it's 700 years old.

Yeah.

And it's never been closed down, has it?

But that is what then happens.

So, Tom, our coffees are arriving.

Oh, excellent.

What a wonderful moment this is.

Merci.

Hello.

I'll use my WISE app.

So easy.

Merci bien. Merci.

So, Dominic, you've used your WISE app.

Yeah, I have.

Couldn't have been easier.

Let's get back to the story.

So, as we were saying before,

the general culture is very authoritarian,  
very top-down, very paternalistic.

And the administration of the university,  
and this is a common theme in so many European universities  
in the late 60s, they completely overreact.

So, even though actually the students then leave the building,  
they are called in for sort of disciplinary hearings,  
and they are suspended.

They're the leaders of this.

And what then that triggers is, of course,  
more protests by other students.

So, you get this building momentum throughout April 1968  
with students at Nantes protesting,  
bigger and bigger protests.

And then on the 2nd of May,

the rector of the Sorbonne, who's the Monsieur Roche,  
he shuts down the whole Nantes campus.

But not the Sorbonne.

But not the Sorbonne in Paris,  
where we had just been.

He thinks that will shut the whole thing down.

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And actually what that does is it just moves the protests from Nantes, into the centre of Paris, seven miles into the centre, into the heart of Paris, where we are now. Because the students at the Sorbonne itself start to protest. They occupy a lecture theatre. The police are called in. Hundreds of people are arrested. You know, again, completely heavy-handed. And hundreds of students are beaten by the riot police. And then the Sorbonne is shut down. For the first time in 700 years. Yeah, it's extraordinary, isn't it? Over what is ultimately a pretty fooling thing. I mean, it tells you actually how creasant the French student society had been in the 50s and 60s, that basically the authorities see what's actually pretty, you know, classic student protest behaviour, standard stuff. And they completely overreact to it, as though this is the beginning of the French Revolution. So a lot of historians say the big driver of May 1968 is really, it's not even the stuff on the entail. It's actually police overreaction and police violence. So we talked before about the killing of the Algerian protesters. They'd killed trade unionists at Charon Metro Station in 1962. There is an awful lot of resentment of the heavy-handedness of the police. And when they start to do this to middle-class students, and that's the key, they have a bit of a sense of entitlement. Quite rightly, they think they're entitled not to be beaten up by the police. They react. So by about the 6th of May, it's quite interesting to go through the chronology, because often people assume this is all one great blur. But actually, if you go through it,

you can see the escalation.  
On the 6th of May,  
the student union plus the lecturers union  
call big marches.  
They're planning big protest marches.  
Once again, the authorities completely overreact.  
They shut down large parts of the centre of Paris.  
And isn't part of the reason for that,  
the fact that the Vietnam peace conference is going on in Paris?  
Right.  
And so De Gaulle is very worried about this.  
And De Gaulle magnificently says that,  
surely they're rioting,  
because they're afraid of taking their exams.  
Well, this is the extraordinary thing.  
His Minister of Education is a man called Alain Peruvitte.  
He goes out and he gives a speech,  
saying to the students,  
let me remind you,  
your exams start within days.  
This is very important for you.  
Stop messing around and do some revision.  
But De Gaulle is going so far as to say,  
well, they're rioting,  
so that the exams will be cancelled.  
Because they're afraid of failure.  
They're afraid of failure.  
Snapefakes.  
Exactly.  
Exactly.  
Very sunbrooky in there.  
Yes.  
Approaching De Gaulle there.  
So the marches banned  
tens of thousands of people march anyway  
around where we are now.  
So we are quite close to the river.  
From our cafe,  
I'm across the,  
admittedly, the multiple lines of traffic.  
And it's at this point that the students,  
as the police kind of weighed in,  
the students start building barricades.  
And anybody who's seen Les Miserables



will know that the idea of building barricades,  
it goes back to the Paris Commune  
and before that to the revolution.

But you see Dominique,  
this again,

just to go back to Absurdist Theatre  
and the sense of people playing a part.

Yeah.

I mean, are they not playing the part  
of French revolutionaries here?

They are, absolutely.

I believe, Tom,

people on the internet will call this  
laughing.

Wouldn't they?

It's a line of action role playing.

I prefer to think of it being...

Absurdist Theatre.

Absurdist Theatre.

No, they're like...

Well, it's kind of situationalist.

You do something that then creates a situation  
that then becomes the drama  
and then you feed into the drama.

And so in this case,

the drama that they're feeding into is a revolution.

Yeah.

They're playing the part of revolutionaries  
and then the revolution happens.

It's actually right.

Everybody,

I mean, that's what we said

was the great thing about this story.

Everybody is playing a part.

It's playing the part that's been assigned to them.

So this is the first night of the barricades,  
the first night of violence.

So what night?

Is that 7th of May?

6th and 7th of May.

6th and 7th of May.

It's the first night

where people are building barricades,  
where they are tearing up,

pulling up bits of the street  
to throw at the police.  
There's a lovely report, actually,  
by the aptly named Peter Lennon  
in the Guardian  
the next day on the scene in the Latin Quarter.  
And he says,  
buses with their tyres slashed  
and windows broken were strewn across the street.  
Cars upended with windows smashed  
marked the spots where the hardcore  
of the students put up fierce resistance to the police,  
who with nerves shattered after a full day of rioting  
clubbed the demonstrators when they caught them  
and sometimes bystanders with a sickening ferocity.  
Policemen and journalists with long years  
of experience of Paris riots  
almost disbelieved the evidence of their eyes  
as they viewed the scene of destruction.  
The roadway was torn up in numerous places  
where students had armed themselves  
with stones and pieces of tarmac.  
Shop windows were shattered  
and the blue pool of tear gas  
was hung over the strangely silent  
Place Saint-Germain,  
usually the gayest of night spots,  
but tonight, like a quarter in morning.  
So British observers as well  
are getting into the whole idea that  
they're loving it all as well.  
So I think, actually, the most recent  
thing like this is the Paris Commune  
in 1871.  
And this idea, so what had happened then?  
France had lost a war against the Prussians.  
Within Paris itself  
sort of left-wing groups,  
the Communards  
had set up their own  
revolutionary administration.  
They tried to build their own utopia,  
which had then been crushed  
by the French army from outside,

by the forces of reaction.  
And that shadow, I think,  
hangs over the whole story.  
And 1968 feels to me  
like, as you would call it,  
a situationist theatrical version,  
or as I would put it,  
a cosplaying  
of the Paris Commune of 1871.  
But they, I mean,  
comparing themselves to the commune  
is part of the stoking thing, right?  
It is, absolutely. So this first day  
of the barricades does not end anything.  
There are more demonstrations the next day.  
On the 7th of May,  
tens of thousands of people then are marching  
against police brutality.  
So it's not just students, it's also sympathisers.  
And they are chanting,  
long live the Paris Commune.  
So here's a question. One of the pieces  
of this time, it's kind of brilliant.  
I have something to say, but I am not sure what.  
And one of the things that people  
talk about this period  
is that everybody is suddenly talking,  
that people are coming to cafes  
or sitting around and discussing things.  
But, I mean, to protest against,  
I don't know, the old-school regime  
or oppression or whatever,  
I mean, these are very abstract words.  
Do they have a kind of  
coherent body of...  
So basically, it's just  
a way of anger  
and resentment  
at the man.  
Yeah, I mean, some listeners may think,  
oh, this is far too simplistic.  
They had genuine grievances. But remember...  
But are they asking... I mean,  
I made all this kind of generalised stuff

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about we're against oppression and colonialism or whatever.  
Are they saying we want to be able  
to mix with girls and boys  
after lights or something?  
That has slightly been lost.  
So they're not protesting about specific issues like that.  
So now that the Murrades have gone up,  
the stuff about, like, we'd actually like access  
to the girls' halls of residence after dark,  
that has slightly been lost.  
Because it's now... That's the tragedy of this, Tom.  
It's now a revolution. That's the tragedy of the story.  
Yeah. The original, perfect, reasonable demand  
has been overwhelmed  
by nonsense. It's a French tragedy.  
Yeah.  
Yeah, so now it's become a protest against...  
It's even not just de Gaulle.  
So de Gaulle is kind of feature,  
sometimes people are the old man, enough of de Gaulle.  
But it's actually more  
a generalised protest  
against authority.  
And against old men.  
I mean, this is true in most Western European,  
indeed, the United States.  
The people in charge are old men.  
Conrad Adenauer...  
I mean, it's the decade  
of Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson in Britain.  
It's the... Lyndon Johnson in the U.S.  
Sort of grey men.  
There's always men, isn't there? It's never women.  
Who have lived through the Second World War.  
And so, isn't there also a sense  
that they are protesting against  
the legacy of the Second World War?  
Which in France has some currency  
that talk about the role played  
by the older generation  
in the liberation, say, of France  
is so much hypocrisy.  
Because actually, they were all collaborationists.  
But it's not merely suffocating.

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And the taint of Naziism hasn't been purged.  
Right, that it's not merely suffocating and stifling  
for the old men to be telling you about their own heroism.  
But it's a lie.  
C'est un bon.  
It has this hideous record of collaboration.  
I mean, this is even more the case, obviously, in Germany  
with the Bader-Meinhof group,  
the Red Army faction.  
They are...  
It's even more overt that actually this regime  
that pretends to be a democratic regime  
is actually a successor state to the Nazis.  
I mean, when people are shouting,  
CRSS in France...  
I mean, De Gaulle had a very good line.  
He said basically, if they really were the SS,  
nobody would be around anymore to shout,  
you know, I know the SS.  
But De Gaulle is off the stage  
at this point.  
He's the president, the all-seeing eye.  
Has he come to the conclusion that it's not just  
about students trying to avoid exams?  
I think he knows that something is going on.  
He goes off to Romania.  
He goes off to Romania on a trip later in May.  
We'll talk about De Gaulle a little bit in the next episode.  
Well, a lot in the next episode.  
At this point, De Gaulle is veering between conciliation  
and repression.  
So sometimes he says, we should just give the students what they want,  
but other times he says, just shoot them.  
You know, man up.  
This is what he's sort of saying to his aides.  
I mean, it's just idle chatter.  
He doesn't mean it.  
But in the meantime, you know,  
more big demonstrations.  
The 10th of May is the really big night of the barricades.  
Hundreds of arrests.  
Hundreds of shot windows smashed.  
You know, so we are looking.  
We're right by the street and you can sort of see the cobbles.

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So basically, people are digging into the street.  
They're ripping up the cobbles  
and they're throwing them at the police.  
There's the sort of the cloud of tear gas  
that hangs over everything.  
The police are consistently behaving very badly.  
So the same Guardian reporter,  
Peter Lennon, a few weeks later when he looks back at this,  
he says, you know, I saw  
the police  
beating wounded demonstrators.  
I saw them breaking into apartments, looting.  
But isn't this how violence escalates?  
Of course.  
The police are kind of getting brained by cobblestones.  
And then they react.  
They're also losing it and beating up students.  
And so the students get angrier and chuck more cobblestones.  
And so it goes on.  
Anyway, so this is all going on.  
And it's on TV, Tom.  
The one crucial thing we haven't mentioned.  
The two technological things that really matter in 1968  
are one, radios and two, TV.  
So the students have cheap transistor radios.  
You know, they wouldn't have had them 20 years earlier.  
They have them now.  
That means they are listening to the news  
as it is happening.  
And that is further radicalizing them.  
And what also happens is because of TV,  
the rest of France  
is watching it on the next day's news.  
So they are watching the pictures  
and they are seeing the violence and a lot of people are  
that some people are shocked  
by the students.  
Some people are shocked by the police  
and other people are enthused and excited  
and they want to join in.  
And so you get this sort of wave occupations  
elsewhere in the country. It's now gone beyond Paris.  
The goal  
at this point does start to think,

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OK, this is getting out of control.  
He tells, well, he and his  
Prime Minister, Georges Bompidou,  
they agree to reopen the Sorbonne.  
They think maybe, OK, well, the university is being closed.  
They'll come out. All that happens is  
they reopen it. The students occupy it  
and the students now set up. This is where you have  
your, all the stuff that  
you would love. The students  
are staging happenings.  
Of service theater, committees  
discussing the future of Vietnam.  
A million flowers are blooming.  
Exactly. Exactly. So and actually  
at this point, the police have pretty much been driven out of the  
quarter where we are now. So they've been  
they've been driven out of large parts of the left bank.  
The barricades are up. The students say,  
you know, we're running it now.  
The Revolutionary Committee is running it.  
So you might well say, if you were of a San  
Broken bent, well, who cares about a load of students?  
They'll just get pulled and all go home.  
But it's this point that the French working class  
sent to the story. So up to this point, I think  
they don't really give a damn about the students.  
You know, the students are doing their thing.  
The service theater. Exactly.  
Wearing the polo next, you know, talking about  
the crimes of imperialism.  
People who work in Renault car factories  
don't give a damn about that. But  
this is a point, I would say, in western  
Europe generally, when  
workers are  
restive across the board.  
And why are they restive? Because the  
great economic miracle is stuttering,  
inflation is rising. But we're still  
in the 30 glorious years.  
We're still in the 30 glorious years.  
You know, they don't know  
that they're still in the 30 glorious years.

They think things are stuttering.  
I mean, even a little bit of unemployment at this point, even an increase of a few thousand, tens of thousands, seems to people absolutely disgraceful and unwarranted.  
I mean, also, I think Julian Jackson, who I think is probably the best English language historian of modern France, author of the brilliant book on de Gaulle, he points out that one of the things that had really happened in France, away from the universities, away from the eyes of the newspapers, is that that economic miracle had been, as in Italy and other places, had been fueled by the movement of vast numbers of people who had previously been peasants into the cities.  
And so this is why Britain has less of an economic recovery, because that process had already happened in the 19th century. Exactly. So that's why when you look at any chart of economic growth in the 50s and 60s, Britain looks so much worse than Italy than France, because this had happened in Britain generations earlier.  
But in France, the people who are moving in, who are fueling the economic boom, whose hard work is basically paying for it, they're immigrants or they are peasants, former peasants.  
And they are moving into the suburbs of the cities. As we know, if you've ever been through them on the train even, quite grim, grey, bleak places where they feel miserable and they feel a bit like the students, essentially. And are they inspired by what they see of the students on TV?



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I mean, you said that they don't care about the students, but they must do a degree, because otherwise they wouldn't be piling in. Yeah, I think protests and, well, one of the lessons of what happens in 1968 across the world is that these things are infectious. Yeah. That people think, well, if these pampered middle-class princelings can demand their rights, why can't I? Yeah. So it starts in Nantes, or near Nantes. There's an aviation plant, and the workers go on strike, they want better working conditions. It's often more about conditions than pay, actually. They want better working conditions, better pay. They end up locking the management in their offices. And then partly because the news is traveling so fast because of TV and radio, other workers nearby start occupying their factories. There's a strike at a Renault plant near Rouen. And then that spreads to the huge Renault manufacturing plants around Paris. So it's a place called Flasse, which is in the valley of the Seine, and Bilanqueur, which is a suburb of Paris. I mean, these are massive, massive plants. So to reiterate questions, so Reddani, Daniel Cohen-Bendit, says later on that the workers and the students they were never a joint force. And he said that the workers wanted a radical reform of the factories, wages, etc. Students wanted a radical change in life. So there is the kind of the nebula demands that the students are making. But the workers, are their demands specific? Are they saying we want such and such a pay rise? We want shorter hours.

We want improved conditions and these are the conditions we want improved. Or again, is it just a kind of general we're going on strike because we want to overthrow the government? Do you know what Tom, I think it's yes and no. So let me just answer that in a second. To give a sense of how much this spreads, I said it starts on the 14th of May. By the 18th of May, 2 million workers are on strike. With the 23rd, 10 million workers on strike, that's two-thirds of the French workforce. Now, why has this happened? I think their union reps absolutely want very specific, I mean, that's the job of a union rep. Yeah, they want very specific. You know, we want an increase in pay. We want a shorter working week, a shorter working day, more time off at lunch. All these little things, better health and safety, all the stuff that basically you would want your union rep to ask for. But the workers themselves, I mean, go back to Julian Jackson, he says the strikes reveal they want not only better working conditions, but also to be heard and to be noticed. I think that's really important. That these are people who are completely, you know, they are not glamorous. They're not fashionable, they're not very articulate, and they don't appear in the French culture of the 1950s and 60s. You know, the sort of Jean-Luc Godard or the films about kind of cool students in, you know, Breton Tops. Yeah, Maoist theatre students. All of that stuff. These people don't appear in that at all. They are shut out, and they feel that they are living in a very authoritarian,

top-down society  
where you're expected to be deferential to the  
old men of the 1930s  
and 40s. Okay, and  
the representative of old men is the goal.  
So it's the aim of overthrowing  
the goal as president and his  
government part of  
what this general strike comes  
to have as its object. Well, first of all, the Communist Party  
will come onto this in the second episode.  
The Communist Party do not want a revolution.  
They do not want...  
They must kind of want a revolution. I mean, they're  
communists. No, they're communists absolutely don't  
at this point. Do they not want a revolution?  
They think this is bourgeois and they do. They think  
this is bourgeois nonsense.  
They think it's not in keeping with their plan.  
They think it's not in keeping with the course of history.  
No, but in the long run they want a revolution.  
Okay, fine, in the long run, but they want a revolution  
that they have planned and led and the conditions are right.  
They think, their reaction to this at first  
is they tell their people don't have anything to do  
with this. This is just not bourgeois nonsense.  
This is Mime Artists.  
A true communist never interferes  
with a Mime Artist.  
I think there is a sort of sense  
among ordinary French  
workers. It's not so much that they want to overthrow  
the goal. It's that they think the goal  
is irrelevant, actually.  
He really is irrelevant at this stage.  
As you said, he goes to Romania.  
Because some of them are chanting  
I see it in your notes  
the slogan, 10 years sassoufi.  
Yeah, that's enough.  
Exactly. And that's referring  
to the decade that de Gaulle has had in Paris.  
But I don't think that is driving it.  
I think they shout that almost as it were

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in passing. I mean, just one last point about the, we'll touch on this again next time in the next episode. The government does offer the trade unions basically everything they want. They get offered a few days later a 35% increase in the minimum wage, lots of pay for the strikers, pay increases all round, better conditions, all this. And actually, when the leader of the big union, the CGT, the big communist union, he goes to the big Renault plant at Bilanau and he says, we've got this tremendous deal. They shout him down. They say, not good enough. But at that point, I think what's happened is that the very specific demands of the kind of keen union activists have become overwhelmed. So again, a bit like the students. Yeah, by the tragedy of the all the residents. And one final question. Is Cohen Bennett right when he says that basically the students and the workers are like parallel lines? Yeah, I think so. And I think that's actually not just a French story. That is a story everywhere in the western democratic world where you have protests in the 60s and 70s. Now, normally what happens, and you see this in America a lot, but also in France and in Germany and in Italy everywhere, people try to, they dream of a worker-student alliance. The students will say, well we are oppressed proletarians just like you, in a different way, of course.

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Yeah.

You know, okay, mummy and daddy have a holiday home in there. But

our oppression is just as pernicious. And people will try.

So students will go out to the factories. This happens in France. Students go to the factories and they also... Do they stage situation as drama?

Probably do. But also they will get workers, you know, car workers, to come and address some of these sort of revolutionary committees they've set up in the sort of faculty buildings at the Sorbonne.

Well, it is.

And these scenes actually often are quite painful. They're just quite embarrassing because the people, their demands are so different, their life experiences are so different.

However, I mean, we can laugh about this now. But at the time you know, if we were here in May 1968 to sort of paint a bit of a picture for the listeners, we would have, the place would have been, there would have been students everywhere, there would have been teachings, theatrical shows.

And people talking. This is what people remember.

People sitting and talking. People talking.

Slogans everywhere. All those famous slogans.

Il y aint-a-deed, aint-a-deed. It's forbidden to forbid.

The famous one, we're talking about ripping up the cobbles.

Under the paving stones, the beach.

Sur le pavé, la plage.

And they did do a de Gaulle poster. So there'd be a picture of de Gaulle covering the mouth of a young protester. And the slogan says be young and shut up.

So this sort of sense that you don't have a voice.

And the most famous one,

the one that you still see, we could go and buy a souvenir t-shirt if you're saying Klein, Tom.

Be realistic. Demand the impossible.

Soire realiste. Demander

l'impossible. And that is

the ultimate expression, I would say,

of the sort of amorphousness,

the meaninglessness.

I mean, this is my Anglo-Saxon reductionism.

Be realistic. Demand the impossible.

What does that mean? Lots of people listen to that

and will say, that's very profound, Dominic.

You mean spirited.

I mean, it actually sounds like an advertising slogan.

It does, doesn't it? It's the kind of thing that you

would have on an advert.

I think we should take a break at this point.

So we'll do another episode on this.

So what we will do next time, de Gaulle has been

offstage, we'll bring him onstage. We'll look

at his reaction. We will look at arguably

the most dramatic day

in modern, certainly in post-war French history

at the end of May, when de Gaulle

flees Paris,

when it's not clear whether he's fleeing into

Paris or whether he's raising an army

to march on the city

to retake the city

and we'll look at what happens and the legacy

of 1968 for France and indeed

for the western world more generally.

Excellent. Excellent. Great stuff, Dominic.

Thanks so much and thank you

also to Wise.

And Wise Dominic have actually created

a travel guide to Paris. Oh, that's good.

So if you want to visit the locations

that we've been talking about.

If you want to throw cobblestones

and paint slogans on walls, this is your chance.

Absolutely. So it includes lots of the locations

that we've talked about in today's episode.

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And Dominic, people want to learn more about how you can travel like you, a historian. Most people would want to. And spend like a local and then they can visit [wise.com](https://wise.com) slash rest is history. [Wise.com](https://wise.com) slash rest is history or click the link in today's episode description. But we will see you next time where we will finish off this extraordinary story of the events of 68. Au revoir. Bye-bye.