

Chapter 4. The Revolution

In May of 1968 the "Student Revolution" broke out in Paris, and spread throughout most of the western world. There were strikes and demonstrations which sometimes bordered on insurgency, and a complete overhaul of the university curriculum was demanded, with the elimination of exams, self-determined learning, and one-third parity. In extreme cases there was a call to destroy data centers of institutions that were suspected of participating in military research. This was a "cultural revolution" that changed the western world, but which nevertheless, seen from a present-day perspective, seems strangely unreal.

The 1968 revolution spanned (to speak mathematically) an almost continuous spectrum of theoretical and practical approaches, goals and their resulting movements. This spectrum stretched from chaotic seminars in smoke-filled cafes where intellectuals discussed Sartre and Marcuse, across radical student groups ready to resort to violence, founders of the legendary communes, who prepared the ground not only for the squat scene, but also for such groups as the "Red Army Faction", through to drop-outs and hippie groups which firmly believed in the imminent end of our technological civilization, prophesied the complete collapse of society and planted the seeds of a new society intended to survive this collapse in the remote countryside. Grothendieck was no theorizing intellectual, and although it is difficult to make a clear distinction, the author tends to the opinion that he was more influenced by the hippie movement than by the French "May Revolution" where sociology and political science were predominant.

Cees Nooteboom captures the atmosphere of Paris in May 1968 as follows:¹

The first impression was as if a gigantic lid had been lifted and all of a sudden ideas and dreams which had been suppressed until then were released into the realm of the real and possible. In changing their surroundings people end up changing themselves. People who had never dared to say anything suddenly had the feeling that their thoughts were the most important thing in the world - and they spoke that way. Shy people became communicative. The hopeless and lonely suddenly discovered that a common power lay in their hands, The traditionally apathetic suddenly experienced how deeply they were involved. A tremendous wave of comradeship and solidarity gripped those who until then had seen

¹ Quoted from Wikipedia; http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mai_68

themselves as isolated and powerless marionettes, dominated by institutions which they could neither control nor understand. People set about talking to each other without the slightest trace of constraint. This state of euphoria lasted for the whole fourteen days in which I stayed there. An inscription written on a wall expresses it best: "Already ten days of joy."

How Grothendieck reacted to the outbreak of the May upheavals, which led to a general strike that paralyzed the whole of France, is not exactly known. Poenaru recalls that Grothendieck went to the student meetings in Orsay and was at first shocked by the wave of aggression, hatred and contempt with which he was met as a leading representative of the "establishment". He saw scientific research as threatened, and tried in vain to present and explain his point of view in discussions. Poenaru further reports - basing himself on information from Grothendieck's wife Mireille - that afterwards, as if stunned, Grothendieck reflected for several weeks at home on what he had heard and experienced in the student meetings. He came to the conclusion that the students - at least "in principle" - were right. All of a sudden something in his personal life changed; for instance, he went to the cinema, something he had never done before and would never do again.

Remarkably, Grothendieck hardly mentions the 1968 revolution in *Récoltes et Semailles*.² Hitherto it has not been possible to find documentary evidence to establish that the Student Revolution led to the turning point in Grothendieck's life. But there can be no doubt that from the very beginning Grothendieck was convinced of the sincerity of this youth revolution, and that he believed that western civilization and capitalism were heading towards a profound crisis. He began to wonder if his occupation with science represented the right path, and indeed, if such an activity was not in fact irresponsible. Many university people and intellectuals, particularly in France, shared these feelings; it was simply the zeitgeist (which is more powerful than anything else). Grothendieck, however, reacted to it with characteristic intensity, rigor, and lack of consideration for others, and possibly with a sizeable portion of messianic spirit and obstinacy.

² Later on he saw the revolution as God's work in the world, namely as evidence of a new age.