Contemporary observers of the student protests of 1968 in Western Europe invariably remarked upon the enormous outpouring of speech that characterised the revolt. Endless discussion in student assemblies, the demand for debate, and repeated challenges to the speech of authority figures constituted the daily diet of protest. Words as much as actions appeared to be the revolts’ major events. This diffusion of discourse led Raymond Aron to dismiss the revolts as purely symbolic, while Michel de Certeau saw the ‘capture of speech’ in 1968 as equivalent to the capture of the Bastille in 1789. Later historians have understood the politics of speech as either part of the growth of tolerance in the 1960s or an intense ‘democratisation of debate’. This paper explores the origins and contradictions of the ‘seizure of speech’ in the student protests in 1968. While some aspects of the protest reflected and contributed to a democratisation of speech, the revolts also saw the rise of charismatic male authority and new hierarchies that narrowed as much as they opened the space for debate.

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