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Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne, and James S. Williams, eds., *May 68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 436 pp. Illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $87.40 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0230252585.

Review by Michael Seidman, University of North Carolina Wilmington.

This collection of essays emerged from an international conference held at the University of London Institute in Paris to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of "May 1968." The opening essay by Julian Jackson makes the case that the events of May were of great importance to French society. Student protests inspired workers to initiate the largest strike wave in French history, which affected nearly all social sectors.

For Jackson, "the word *'autogestion'* encapsulated a whole series of diffuse ideas that sum up the spirit of May" (p. 6). Yet Jackson exaggerates when he states that *autogestion* or "workers' self-management …was embodied in the strike at the Lip watch-making factory at Besançon in 1973 when, to avoid the factory's closure, the workers began running it themselves." In fact, Lip workers proved much better at selling their existing stockpile of watches than producing new ones. Rather than manifesting an enthusiastic desire to create commodities, their *autogestion* was an attempt to compel a failing enterprise to pay them. Workers' self-management was usually chosen only when the alternative was certain closure of the production site. The number of cases where *autogestion* was attempted was paltry both during and after 1968. If the workers' desire to control their workplaces was so strong, it is hard to understand the "success of the union leaders in channeling their [strikers'] demands into familiar directions which resulted in the famous Grenelle Protocol" (p. 11).

Making May into a "revolution," as this volume does, implies that the pre-1968 Fifth Republic was reactionary and immobile. Thus, Jackson argues that the Gaullist regime "offered limited opportunities for the expression of legitimate political protest" (p. 7). However, before 1968 the Communist Party and *groupuscules* of the extreme left and right flourished. Like many others, Jackson asserts that the protesters challenged nearly all "social political, professional or associative structures" (p. 7). Nonetheless, sacred cows--of which the "working class" was most significant--persisted during May. As Jackson recognizes, activists largely marginalized gender and sexual issues, which came to the forefront only several years after 1968. This problem of periodization--when did "May" start and when did it end--is only partially solved by the concept, which is often employed throughout this collection, of "*les années 68*." This imprecise but very French notion continues to privilege the revolutionary *annus mirabilis* of 1968.

In "The Moral History of 1968," Julian Bourg shows that the right, at least in its *sarkoziste* form, also regards May as a revolutionary moment since it attributes many current problems to the changes which are said to have resulted from that month. Bourg defends the legacy of May by succinctly tracing how its "antinomian revolt" transformed itself "into an embrace of law" (p. 25).

Boris Gobille affirms that the essence of the May-June revolts was a two-front war against both exploitation and alienation. Strikers' demands "for a reduction in working hours encapsulates the critique of both alienation and exploitation" (p. 39). However, Gobille does not address the tensions, explored by Jean-Pierre Le Goff, between these two strands of sixties' emancipatory thought.[1] Viewing the May-June strikes as a simultaneous struggle against both alienation and exploitation does not sufficiently distinguish them from previous or future work stoppages.

Citing the fine social history of Xavier Vigna, Gobille argues that May gave rise to a new period of "working-class 'insubordination' lasting until the end of the 1970s" (p. 40). However, this periodization of "insubordination" is not fully convincing.[2] Since Vigna and Gobille fail to explore resistance to work before the 1968 strike wave, they cannot credibly argue that the decade following 1968 was especially "insubordinate." Strike statistics do not indicate any major increase in days lost to work stoppages in the decade before and after 1968, even if the number of strikes and strikers did rise.[3] We do not know how the micro-conflicts Vigna examines were different either in kind or degree from comparable mini-struggles prior to 1968. Thus, Gobille's argument is undermined by his reliance on Vigna's work. Finally, Gobille laments but fails to analyze sufficiently the decline of *autogestion*, an intrinsic part of what he terms the struggle against alienation.

Although Xavier Vigna entitles his contribution "Beyond Tradition: The Strikes of May-June 1968," he demonstrates instead important continuities with past work stoppages: "The authority of the union officials sanctioned, and probably also encouraged, the majority [of workers] not to participate … The presence of the workers in occupied factories was indeed sometimes quite fleeting" (p. 50) "Despite what has often been said, the idea of 'autogestion,' which had been taken up by the CFDT, was not seriously on the agenda in the 1968 strike movement" (p. 52). These statements contradict the *autogestionnaire* theme present throughout this volume. Furthermore, in contrast to Gobille, Vigna points out that "there was hardly any reduction in the length of the working week" (p. 51).

Although Vigna is a excellent corrective to some of the book's more starry-eyed visions of May, he asserts unpersuasively that "it is clear that the entry of the unions and traditional organizations of the working class into the 1968 movement to some degree distorted the reality of the strikes" (p. 56). There is little evidence that unions, which largely controlled the strikes, "distorted" their "reality" or the demands of the workers. Like other historians, *gauchistes*, and CFDT activists, Vigna imagines the strike and occupation at the Rhône-Poulenc factory in Vitry to be the "centre for the elaboration of a new social order" (p. 55), but even at this highly touted model only 1,500 of a work force of 3,500, or 43 percent, were actively involved.[4]

Philippe Buton's study of the Maoist press demonstrates that its "continuities and overlaps with the orthodox Communist press were much greater than the differences" (p. 64). The Maoists' fixation on violence encouraged them to draw inspiration from the supposed glories of Stalinist Russia. However, after 1968 Maoists focused more on the French Resistance, and they fantasized that the struggles of 1968 were equivalent to the great battles of the Vietnam War.

Todd Shepard presents the case that May was "a catalyst in the subsequent rebirth of the far Right" (p. 77). He correctly points out that President de Gaulle's amnesty of the last pro-OAS exiles cemented the right's solidarity. In addition, he turns up surprising findings that the leftist occupation of the Odéon overjoyed former collaborator, Lucien Rebatet. However, he is less persuasive when he argues that "large sections" of the mainstream right saw 1968 student protesters as Gaullist (p. 87). Nor is it clear to what extent the Gaullist right adopted "the

language of anti-Algerian racism" (p. 88). After all, attempts to "limit Algerian emigration" (p. 88) certainly preceded 1968 and were a staple of French immigration policy after World War II.[5]

Daniel Gordon shows that anti-imperialism was shared by nearly all May activists. Immigrant militants (and the poster makers of the Atelier Populaire) denounced the "new slave trade" (p. 96), which supposedly forced proletarians from the Antilles and other ex-colonies to go to France. These hyperbolic activists thus trivialized the experience of their ancestors who were shipped across the Atlantic under the most dreadful conditions. Gordon demonstrates that when immigrants did not come from the former colonies, "there was an alternative language of denunciation: anti-fascism" (p. 97). This *langue de bois* reveals that the word fascism (and thus anti-fascism) became meaningless in 1968. Gordon illustrates how the CGT reached out to immigrants, which at least partially challenges the assertion in the introductory essay that the CFDT was more interested in organizing immigrants than the CGT. Gordon attributes the internationalist egalitarianism of May to activists' "anti-statism" (pp. 100, 104), but he might have better seen it as a result of a nearly universally shared Marxism, which was not necessarily anti-statist. Nevertheless, he is correct that the May movement's emphasis on proletarian unity was implicitly hostile to multiculturalism.

Abdellali Hajjat examines the Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (MTA) from 1970 to 1976. These dates raise the issue--never addressed in his chapter--of the relationship between the 1968 "Revolution" and *tiersmondisme* which preceded and followed it. In direct contradiction to Gordon, Hajjat asserts that immigrants were excluded from trade union structures and "their claims barely considered" (p. 114). "Had the unions been more responsive to their needs the Arab workers would undoubtedly have integrated themselves into trade union structures, something which did, in fact, occasionally happen" (p. 116). The reader wonders how this integration could "occasionally happen" if the unions "openly rejected" Arab workers (p. 114). Furthermore, Hajjat's use of language is hardly even-handed and demonstrates an uncritical *tiersmondisme* characteristic of 1968 and beyond: In Europe, "the deaths of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in September 1972" divided the *gauche prolétarienne*; whereas, in America, the FBI "savagely repressed" the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement (p. 118).

Michael Sibalis shows that "the spirit of May" (p. 123) largely ignored the gay liberation movement: "The dominant leftist ideologies, shaped by Marxism, had no place for homosexual [or, for that matter, feminist] militancy in their worldview" (p. 130). Massimo Prearo adds that the gay movement appeared in the wake of May when the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (FHAR) posited that gayness was a revolutionary force. Reflecting a "new anthropological conception of the individual" articulated by Herbert Marcuse and Pierre Bourdieu, these gays believed that only a collective movement--not isolated individuals--could achieve group and personal liberation. Echoing the title of this volume, Anne-Claire Rebreyend attributes to May the launching of a new "period of 'intimate exposure' during which the sexual expectations of individuals were freely stated for all to hear" (p. 148). In other words, she follows Michel de Certeau who argued that May represented the "liberation of speech."[6] She later modifies this periodization by claiming that no autobiography regarded "the May events as representing a true revolution" (p. 150).

Anna-Louise Milne attempts to "decentre the events" of May. Her laudable goal of moving away from a Paris perspective, however, is marred by jargon: "Decentring the events means acknowledging how a very heterogeneous set of social actors simultaneously declared the obsolescence of the main representative formations that had previously obtained, generating an

equally heterogeneous range of actions, with the result that it was unclear, at least for a while, where this 'movement' would go" (p. 167). Similar turgid examples abound in her chapter.

Michelle Zancarini-Fournel makes the important point that the presence of *lycéens* in protests in small towns throughout France made provincial public opinion less hostile to the movement. She examines the conflict between the government's censorship and the unions' struggle to control newspaper reporting. She contrasts the repressive policing in Lyon with its more flexible counterpart in Paris. The violent police interventions at Sochaux and Flins in June had the counter-productive consequence of prolonging the strikes.

Vincent Porhel investigates factory disputes in Brittany in the "68 years," a praiseworthy but hazy attempt to place May in a larger temporal perspective. He claims that the Breton working class was "moulded by a network of trade-union activists" formed by the Catholic youth movement (JOC) (p. 192). Although Brittany was the only region where numbers of CFDT affiliates exceeded those of the CGT, Porhel's identification of the class with its purported representatives is questionable. Nevertheless, in 1968 the region experienced its first massive strike wave, which was highly influenced by events in Paris. Although peasants were largely hostile to the movement, unionization among factory workers increased after the strikes. The 1972 work stoppage at the Joint Français became a symbol of growing Breton regionalism and uttered one of the last demands for *autogestion*.

With "Peasant Insurgency in the '1968 Years' (1961-1981)," Jean-Philippe Martin is the only contributor who provides a specific periodization of *les années 68*, and his argument that a synthesis of Catholicism and Marxism combined to influence peasant protest is stimulating. Anne-Laure Ollivier capably chronicles the May events in Marseilles where PCF and the ex-OAS militants and sympathizers competed. As in much of the rest of the nation, the events led to an increase of Gaullist political representation.

Richard Jobs skillfully demonstrates the importance of travel in the sixties by following the trail of Daniel Cohn-Bendit. He argues that youth "sought to create their own kind of European community....Just as the traditional Grand Tour preceded the rise of the modern nation-state, the Grand [sic] Tours of 1968 challenged the nation-state by anticipating its decline" (p. 232). Jobs claims that Georges Marchais called Dany "a German Jew," but the source of this citation is unclear. Although "youth" is a useful concept to explore the travels of the young during this heightened period of consumption, Jobs is aware that "youth" is a very complex and divided category.

Christelle Dormoy-Rajramanan recounts the fascinating story of the birth of the experimental university center, Vincennes, at the end of 1968. The idea of a more democratic or participatory university experience was pursued by the left-wing Gaullist, Edgar Faure, who became National Education Minister in July. The Vincennes experiment, which several prominent progressive mandarins encouraged, showed that the Gaullist Fifth Republic was not as immobile or as intolerant as some have argued. While the government wanted to disperse the agitators from the Latin Quarter to the *banlieue*, Vincennes students could take courses from a large number of Communist professors.

Jean-Louis Violeau claims--with some hyperbole--that contemporary art was born "within May 68" (p. 263). He points to the "dissolution of the individual artist within the collective" of poster producers of the Beaux Arts (p. 270). Yet the May Revolution could not overcome the

Flaubertian dilemma of the artist torn between the state (with its *Maison des artistes*) and the market which thrived before and after the events.

Kate Bredeson provides new perspectives on creation and destruction during the Odéon occupation. Emmanuelle Loyer convincingly argues that May shook the world of theater more than the cinema. The spirit of protest spread among "the leading apparatchiks of cultural action," including forty-odd directors of the Maisons de la Culture, who renounced their own "privileges" (p. 317). Roxanne Panchasi provides an interesting but not fully convincing analysis of Louis Malle's *Milou en Mai* (1989). Following Kristin Ross' interpretation of May as a political revolution, Panchasi argues that "Malle's film…disappoints in its lightness and deliberate distance from the key sites, events, and politics of May" (p. 331). Yet the purpose of this volume's section, "Decentring May," was to view the events from provincial perspectives, which is precisely what Malle accomplished in his film. In my opinion, Malle was correct to make a comic film about 1968 and a serious one about the Occupation (*Lacombe Lucien*, 1974).

Again repeating Ross's argument about the supposed revolutionary nature of the strike wave, Natalie Rachlin resurrects the *gauchiste* fantasy that the workers were "betrayed by the trade unions and the political parties" (p. 348). She declares that "all that Jocelyne [the heroine of *Reprise* (1997)] wants is soap, a clean workplace, a humane pace on the assembly line and the right to a three-minute toilet break" (p. 351). My own interpretation is that Jocelyne's refusal to return to that "*taule*"--in this case, the factory--transformed her into perhaps the most famous and certainly the most cinematic resister of wage labor during 1968. *Reprise* and *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder* (1968) were the successors of *A Nous la Liberté*.

Roland-François Lack insightfully examines the actress, Bernadotte Lafont, who "incarnates the socially grounded fantasies of sexual liberation that have come to be associated with May 68" (p. 357). Although Tamara Chaplin may overestimate the generation gap that allegedly separated young and old, she ably investigates the new openness to sex and sex education, along with the rear-guard resistances it provoked.

The epilogue by Virginie Linhart, the daughter of the Maoist, Robert, is a continuation of *Génération*. Unlike the original, Linhart focuses not on the *gauchiste* leaders but on their children. Thankfully, her thoughtfulness avoids the *People* magazine flavor of the Hamon and Rotman bestseller.

This collection has the virtue of offering brief English-language texts of current research on "*les années 68*." The topics are, as a rule, the protesters and their supporters. A number of contributors identify strongly with their subjects, share illusions about *autogestion*, and avoid addressing thorny issues of periodization.

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NOTES

[1] Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68, l'héritage impossible* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998).

[2] Xavier Vigna, *L'Insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68: Essai d'histoire politique des usines* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007). Vigna's periodization also repeats that of sociologists, such as Alain Touraine and Serge Mallet, who saw '68 as the beginning of a new era in labor history. See Alain Touraine, *The May Movement, revolt and reform: May 68, the student rebellion, and workers' strikes, the birth of a social movement*, trans. Leonard F. X. Mayhew (New York: Irvington, 1979) and Serge Mallet, *Essays on the New Working Class*, trans. Dick Howard and Dean Savage (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).

[3] Michel Forsé, *Recent Social Trends in France (1960-1990)*, trans. Liam Gavin (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1993), p. 150; Michael Rose, *Servants of Post-Industrial Power? Sociologie du Travail in Modern France* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1979), 140, 148. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 176. For another statistical view, see Stéphane Sirot, *La grève en France: Une histoire sociale (XIXe-XXe siècle)* (Paris; Odile Jacob, 2002), p. 33.

[4] *Lutte Socialiste*, December 1968; Gilles Martinet, *La conquête des pouvoirs* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1968), p. 69, which sees Rhône-Poulenc at Vitry as a model of "*tendances gestionnaires*."

[5] Vincent Viet, *Histoire des Français venus d'ailleurs de 1850 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2004).

[6] Michel de Certeau, *La prise de parole: Pour une nouvelle culture* (Paris: Desclée du Brouwer, 1968).

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