

THE FRENCH “SIXTIES”

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Jeremy Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Detente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68: L'Héritage impossible* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998).

Although a call for papers for a fortieth anniversary conference on May '68 noted that “little serious historical research has been undertaken on the Events of May,”¹ historical production on 1968 and the French 1960s has accelerated in the last decade. Recent publications in French include monographs on specific groups (youth, intellectuals, Jews, and Catholics),² the extreme Left,³ and the Vietnam War⁴; as well as an important edited collection of articles.⁵ While the French have largely remained on this monographic terrain—the one important exception being Jean-Pierre Le Goff’s *Mai 68: L’héritage impossible*—English and American historians have written broad interpretive works that seek to answer some of the biggest questions about the French 1960s. The latter, along with Le Goff’s history, are the focus of this essay, which seeks on the fortieth anniversary of the events of May 1968 to offer an interim report on the central interpretive issues of the French sixties.

Jeremy Suri’s *Power and Protest* addresses some of the most important and difficult questions regarding the 1960s, notably the world-wide nature of the upheaval and the relationship between international and domestic political

developments. Suri argues that the interplay between foreign and domestic politics helps explain both the origins of the radical unrest of the 1960s and its defeat in the 1970s. Focusing on the United States, the Soviet Union, West Germany, France, and China and using archival and other sources in English, French, German, and Russian, Suri's effort is ambitious, wide-ranging, and original.

Suri argues that developments in the cold war gave birth to dissent, first by creating rising expectations of change and then by frustrating them. Rising expectations had been created by the superpowers' activist cold war rhetoric such as that of Kennedy's "New Frontier" and Khrushchev's promises to spread Communism and bury capitalism. Similar rising expectations had been created in China and France by the charismatic leadership of Mao culminating in the Cultural Revolution and de Gaulle's pursuit of *grandeur*. De Gaulle's Fifth Republic was broadly similar, Suri argues, to Mao's China during the Cultural Revolution, insofar as de Gaulle sought "perpetual revolution" (71), and, by promoting popular activism in pursuit of *grandeur*, "inspired domestic energies" that he "could not control" (85-86). In the early 1960s, the enormous, but nearly unusable, power of nuclear weapons resulted in a stalemate of the cold war, which, in addition to destabilizing alliance structures, gave birth to dissent by preventing charismatic leaders from meeting "the rising popular expectations that they inspired" (165). Thus developments in the international order explain the simultaneous eruption of protest in multiple countries in 1968. Within this framework of analysis the Vietnam War was an effort by American leaders to head off dissent by living up to their liberal democratic "New Frontier" rhetoric. Of course, its failure, by belying the rhetoric, only multiplied the dissent it was supposed to defeat. Sparked primarily by contradictions of the cold war stalemate, dissent found inspiration in the writings of Daniel Bell, John Kenneth Galbraith, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Wu Han, and Herbert Marcuse and found a base of support in the growing youth population in each country. The revolt of 1968 was, in Suri's telling, above all that of youthful students.

On the other side of 1968, Suri argues that detente emerged in part as an effort by the great powers to stabilize their domestic politics. Great powers cooperated through secret diplomacy that sidelined domestic populations, "affirmed one another's legitimacy" (214), and allowed them to focus on fighting domestic disorder. West Germany's *Ostpolitik* became an instrument to freeze the status quo in central Europe and stifle troublesome citizen initiatives; the US-China rapprochement helped Mao and Nixon marginalize domestic radicals; and the Nixon-Brezhnev summit of 1972 committed the two powers to a politics of mutual accommodation against the forces of domestic dissent. Successful in defeating dissent, great power cooperation ultimately depoliticized populations frustrated by their inability to change political systems whose legitimacy they questioned. In this way, detente contributed to a "democratic deficit," "constrained political and economic reform," "encouraged narcissism," and "prolonged Cold War sacrifices" (263-65).

Power and Protest holds many attractions for historians of the cold war. For one, it answers the long-standing call of diplomatic historians for histories that are truly international (and not just focused on the foreign policies of one or two countries) and integrate diplomatic and domestic histories. No less important is the book's uncanny ability to appeal simultaneously to the Left and the Right by, for example, taking the argument common in the hawkish American Right in the 1970s and 1980s that detente propped up the Soviet regime and applying it to the United States and other powers as well. Yet, a historical approach is only as good as its execution, and what is attractive politically is not necessarily good history. Here the evaluation of Suri's work focuses on issues relevant to understanding the French 1960s.⁶

Did de Gaulle's effort to mobilize France to achieve *grandeur* contribute to the rise of dissent there? The parallel drawn between de Gaulle's initiatives and Mao's Cultural Revolution seems, regardless of Suri's effort to point out the obvious differences, misplaced. Suri presents no evidence that de Gaulle's rhetoric actually mobilized the population or that it produced rising expectations. Rather, unlike Mao during the Cultural Revolution, de Gaulle was nearly irrelevant "both as a protagonist and target of attack" during the events of May until his disappearance on the twenty-ninth and speech on the thirtieth of May.⁷ De Gaulle's rhetoric of *grandeur* was probably met less with rising expectations than skepticism and indifference by students who sensed its hyperbole and phoniness: a point Suri half admits, but without acknowledging that it contradicts his thesis (186). Further, if frustrated rising expectations played a role in sparking May '68, would one not be better advised to look for them in the great postwar economic boom that was beginning to cool off in the mid 1960s?

There are large gaps in Suri's account of dissent and the 1968 explosion in France. Absent from his pantheon of dissenting authors who inspired the 1960s revolt is anyone from France. Presumably Suri sees Herbert Marcuse as an inspiration of the French 1960s as he "provided a common anthem" (129) for world youth revolt. Yet, Marcuse was not well known in France before May 1968: his *One-Dimensional Man* came off the presses in French translation only on 28 April 1968.⁸ Even after the events of May, Marcuse remained an author of secondary importance in France, probably because his emphasis on student rather than worker revolt did not appeal to the *ouvriéristes* French *gauchistes*.⁹ This points to a larger problem: Suri's failure to acknowledge the importance of workers' strikes in May-June 1968. To be sure, the strikes are mentioned and credited with paralyzing Paris, but their magnitude is never indicated. The events remain in Suri's account largely a student uprising in keeping with his thesis that the growth of the young student population and of educational institutions "provided the *infrastructure* for dissent in each of the great powers" (129).

More important than these specific problems is the book's larger methodological shortcoming as comparative history. For Suri, international develop-

ments are translated directly, without mediation, into domestic politics. Yet, each country's domestic political configuration was structured differently from the others by the cold war. A transnational study of the cold war's impact on dissent needs to examine how shifts in the cold war interacted with domestic political structures. It is not enough to seek the roots of the cold war's domestic impact in shared experiences of vaguely rising expectations created by cold war rhetoric (an explanation that is probably more credible for the United States than a country such as France in which the cold war was something less than the crusade it was in America). If there is a common impact of the cold war on domestic politics, it is probably to be found in its freezing of domestic political possibilities. In the United States it excluded social-democratic options; in West Germany it made the Social Democratic Party (SPD), unelectable because too Marxist; and in France it turned the French Communist Party (PCF) into a pariah party and consequently cast much of the working class into a political ghetto. With the thawing of the cold war, domestic political constraints loosened, creating the possibility in the West that the Left might come to power. Yet, in France political change was blocked by de Gaulle's stranglehold on political power after 1958, which May '68 demonstrators commented upon with the slogan: "Dix ans, ça suffit!" And, on the far Left, hopes for radical political change were further frustrated by the parties of the Left, which seemed to compromise their principles in their eagerness to reenter the political mainstream. This, at least, is how two events crucial to the emergence of 1960s dissent in West Germany and France were seen: the SPD's 1959 Bad Godesburg Program that abandoned Marxist orthodoxy and the PCF's 1956 vote in favor of granting the government emergency powers to prosecute the Algerian War. If 1968 was a world-wide year of revolt, this was due in large part to the crisis of the Vietnam War of that year and the accumulated blockages of the different national political systems. If the French events of 1968 were more dramatic than those elsewhere, it was because workers, excluded throughout the cold war and enjoying only limited income growth earlier in the 1960s, took advantage of the student protest to strike in massive numbers.

Suri's discussion of the origins of 1970s detente shows even more clearly the need to take domestic political structures into account. France is absent from Suri's chapter on detente, undoubtedly due to the relatively minor role that France played in detente's emergence in the 1970s. Yet, one might still ask whether detente helped French leaders defeat domestic dissent as Suri claims it did in general. In Suri's defense, one might cite French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's apparent efforts to enlist Brezhnev's help in diffusing the Union of the Left alliance between the Socialist and Communist Parties, which co-opted the energies of post-'68 militancy and was the main threat to Giscard's power. Yet, what is most remarkable is not the opportunity that detente provided Giscard, but rather that which it afforded the Left. The reduction of cold war tensions made the possibility of Communists in the

government seem less threatening and thereby made the success of the Union of the Left, culminating in Mitterrand's 1981 presidential election victory, possible. In short, detente may have given Giscard some opportunities to work with Brezhnev for domestic political gain, but structurally it surely hurt him in his efforts to contain the Union of the Left and the energies unleashed by May '68.

Focused entirely on domestic developments is Arthur Marwick's *The Sixties*, a comparative study of over 800 pages of the "cultural revolution" of the 1960s in the United States, Britain, France, and Italy. *The Sixties* argues that the events of 1968 and 1969 have been given too much attention. The attempts at radical political change in those years were ultimately relatively unimportant. The radicals of that period were caught up in a "Great Marxist Fallacy" according to which existing society was rotten to the core and soon to be completely transformed by revolution. This, Marwick asserts, was never a real possibility. Rather, the 1960s were important because they saw a cultural revolution that was the work of majorities and largely entrepreneurial counter-cultural movements that "*permeated and transformed*" (13) rather than confronted mainstream culture. Generational conflict was less important than some assert as people of all ages participated in these changes. This cultural revolution was facilitated by the "measured judgment" of people in authority, a term that Marwick contrasts with Marcuse's concept of "repressive tolerance." If there was violence in the 1960s, it is largely the result of the police, which the more tolerant authorities above them could not control.

Marwick's cultural revolution of the "long sixties" saw its "first stirrings" between 1958 and 1963, accelerated from 1964 to 1969, and reached new radical heights before concluding in the years between 1969 and 1974—the three periods into which the book is divided. Marwick describes this cultural revolution empirically as sixteen related developments (17-20). It might be summarized in terms of its results: a transformation of material conditions aided by new technologies and especially economic growth that allowed large numbers of people to enter consumer society; a subversion of hierarchies of class, race, and gender; a new moral permissiveness and frankness in social relations; a championing of individual and civil rights; and a growth of international exchanges and challenges to traditional identities that began to turn Western societies into multicultural ones. In many respects, the cultural revolution was, Marwick stresses, one of personal liberation.

Marwick's book is important. Based on extensive research in published primary sources and significant archival research on some topics, it competently narrates developments in four countries, often in considerable depth. Moreover, Marwick's general thesis appears convincing, notably that there was a cultural revolution, that it involved large sectors of the population, even majorities in some cases, and that it was probably more important in the long term than the political upheaval of the late 1960s. Some of Marwick's case studies, such as his gripping account of the struggle over abortion rights in

1970s France (700-12), offer striking confirmation of Marwick's arguments regarding the nature and mechanisms of change. Marwick's book is greatly enriched by his exploration of topics that have hitherto received little attention, such as changes in attitudes towards beauty and personal appearance, and his multinational approach to old topics, such as the international influence of British pop culture. For all these reasons, this book will long be required reading for anyone interested in the 1960s in the West.

Notwithstanding its achievements, *The Sixties* has important flaws in both its general argument and in its account of French developments. Marwick appears to be most interested in the British and American sixties and bases his model of the cultural revolution upon them. Perhaps for this reason, Marwick's conceptualization of the 1960s does not fit France (or Italy) very well. This is most evident in his discussion of the early 1960s, which deals with topics such as the emergence of youth culture, the loosening of moral strictures, and struggles over race. In many of these areas developments in France are given little attention, and when they are, they point to France's slower development, thereby casting doubt on Marwick's claim that the beginning of the sixties cultural revolution can be dated back to the late 1950s. For example, we learn in Marwick's comparatively brief discussion of French youth that awareness of youth as a separate social category comes later in France (the early 1960s) than in America and Britain (the late 1950s). The loosening and reform of censorship in the early 1960s, which Marwick considers to be one of the signal early developments in the cultural revolution, was a phenomenon unique to Britain and America. In France (and Italy), by contrast, censorship was, as Marwick recognizes, tightened in this period. Marwick's fifty-page chapter on race, which includes no more than three pages on France, says little about the Algerian War and decolonization, which are almost entirely absent from the rest of the book. For Marwick, this early period saw "only ... the first beginnings of race as a problem in France and Britain" (242). Although it may be true that public discussion of race or immigration as problems was uncommon in the period, by dismissing these issues, Marwick misses the larger point that decolonization and specifically the Algerian War were central to the French sixties. Concerned with highlighting the early manifestations of cultural revolution in America and Britain, Marwick is unable to explain the coherency of French developments, beyond stating that they deviated from the Anglo-American norm.

In his account of the middle and late 1960s, Marwick argues that the real revolution, the cultural revolution, proceeded largely independently of the radicals and would have occurred without the upheaval of 1968. Focused on dismissing the revolutionary politics of the era as wrongheaded, Marwick fails to explain it. His diatribe against the major thinkers of the period is not helpful. Structuralist and post-structuralist thought is accused of being essentially "*marxisant*," retaining Marx's "epochal view of history" (289). Marwick dismisses such thinkers' explorations of the social and cultural construction of

reality as dogmatic and suggests that their complexity is "a confidence trick" (296, quoting Edmund Leach). In concluding that "Foucault, Barthes, and the others ... simply compounded the error" of Marxism by trying to make it "more subtle and persuasive" (347), Marwick not only abusively simplifies their thought, but also sheds little light on more important questions, notably how their thought responded to the exigencies of the period and informed the radical projects of the 1960s. Marwick's lack of interest in explaining these projects is further evidenced by his failure to discuss Sartre, whose influence, particularly in France, was significant. Another important absence from Marwick's discussion of 1960s radicalism is the Vietnam War. To be sure, Marwick is not hostile to the antiwar movement, which, he says, was "completely justified" (674) in its outrage, but he does not seem to think that it was all that important. In Western Europe, Marwick writes, "the Vietnam war served mainly to confirm their [left-wing groups'] belief in the evils of American imperialism. And, since their own governments refused to condemn American involvement, it became yet another issue to add to their own more immediate grievances" (543). Not only does this misread the specific situation in France, where de Gaulle condemned the war, but it also underestimates the extent to which the war discredited the hegemonic power of the United States and thereby cast the entire capitalist world into a legitimacy crisis.

Marwick asserts that radical upheaval was largely unnecessary and that the violence that occurred during it was mostly the responsibility of the police and secondarily of "fundamentalist minorities"; cultural revolution would have prevailed without it. In Britain, at least, it did. There, the "measured judgment" of authorities opened the door to reform. Yet, Marwick's effort to specify the relationship between the cultural revolution and politics is marred by his failure to explain adequately why events in France and Italy took such a different turn from those in Britain. I would suggest that if Britain avoided the upheaval of France and Italy it was because Britain did not have a serious crisis of its university system (enrollments grew only moderately and funding was adequate, as Marwick recognizes), did not go through a fundamental socio-economic transformation (its growth rates were among the lowest in Western Europe and the exodus of its rural population to the cities had occurred in the nineteenth century), and enjoyed "consensus politics," whereby the Conservative and Labour Parties alternated in power without fundamentally challenging the postwar corporatist Keynesian welfare-state settlement.¹⁰ By contrast, France (and much of the following is also true of Italy) had a major university crisis characterized by exploding enrollments in insufficient facilities, experienced unprecedented socio-economic change that amounted to a "Second French Revolution,"¹¹ and was saddled with a blocked, conflictual political system in which Communists and workers were excluded and the paternalistic de Gaulle dominated. The challenges were too great and the political system too inflexible and narrowly based for sweeping change to be enacted through peaceful reform. Despite advances in some areas such as the Neuwirth

Law of December 1967 that liberalized contraception, it is unlikely that the French cultural revolution could have been accomplished, set in law as it was in the 1970s and early 1980s, without a significant shock to the political system. This Marwick obliquely recognizes, but without questioning his broader conclusions, when he writes that “the events of 1968 were the precipitating factor” for “noteworthy relaxations in the authoritarian regime” (618).

Finally, a word about Marwick’s notion of “measured judgment.” For Marwick measured judgment generally prevailed in the 1960s, especially as one moves up the chain of authority. Therefore, while the police were largely responsible for violence, the measured judgment of political leaders prevented violence from getting out of hand. Yet, at least in France, politicians and administrators could restrain the police.¹² And, measured judgment may have been less common than Marwick would have it. In the events of 1968 in France, measured judgment was often lacking at the top. For example, de Gaulle, who favored repression, famously ordered the forced evacuation of the Sorbonne and Odéon theatre on May 19, which if carried out would likely have been disastrous. The student uprising might never have gotten off the ground had it not been for the lack of measured judgment of the authorities determined to discipline troublemaking students such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit. It is also important to recognize that some enjoyed the tolerance of measured judgment more than others. In May ’68, striking factory workers were certainly not treated with the same consideration as rioting students, who were, after all, the future elite. Significantly, of the eight deaths directly attributable to the upheaval of May and June ’68, five were factory workers, and only one was a student, Gilles Tautin, drowned in an action to support striking workers at the Renault Flins factory. In West Germany, measured judgment was mostly lacking in the response to dissent and Rote Armee Fraktion terrorism in the 1970s.¹³ Marwick’s concept of measured judgment is useful, but its absence is as important as its presence for understanding the course of the 1960s in the West.

Michael Seidman’s *The Imaginary Revolution* is in many respects the political complement of Marwick’s thesis. Against interpretations of the events of 1968 as a rupture in French history, Seidman argues that their impact was modest. Political revolution was never a real possibility as the “power of the centralized state and the attractions of consumer society ... effectively smothered revolution while integrating hedonism” (282). Nor did the events result in a cultural revolution as cultural liberalization had begun well before May.

Unlike the wide-ranging works of Suri and Marwick, Seidman’s monograph focuses tightly on the events of May and June ’68 in Paris and their immediate origins. Deeply researched, it is especially rich because it is the first history of the events based on archival sources. The archives deliver no big surprises, but they allow Seidman to paint a more detailed picture of the events and render his conclusions with greater authority than his predecessors.

Seidman’s account of the origins of the student uprising highlights grievances with the overcrowded and dysfunctional educational system and the

struggle for sexual freedom in the dormitories. Modernizing educational reform efforts only heightened student discontent as they complicated degree requirements and added administrative headaches while threatening to introduce selective admissions and failing to address student grievances about the quality and funding of their education. Conflict over dorm regulations began in the Anthony dorm complex in the suburbs of Paris in 1962 and was resolved in 1966 with the toleration of visitation rights and even cohabitation by the complex's director. Seidman concludes from the history of this struggle at Anthony and Nanterre that "much of the battle for sexual freedom seems to have been fought and often won prior to 1968" (38), an arguably optimistic conclusion given that, although visitation rights were tolerated at Nanterre, the minister of education continued to refuse to change the dorm rules there (46). While Seidman credits the mobilization against the Vietnam War for uniting the diverse leftist groups, he otherwise gives it relatively little attention. Much more important in the origins of May '68 was the struggle against repression, notably police violence, which mobilized the mass of otherwise indifferent students on the Nanterre campus in early 1968 and then in Paris beginning with the arrests of students at the Sorbonne on May 3.

Most French student radicals were, in contrast to those elsewhere in the West, uncritically *ouvriéristes*. They believed that the working class was revolutionary and that their role as students was to link up with workers and help them achieve their revolutionary destiny. Such efforts to achieve unity with workers were seldom successful. Indeed, for Seidman, the general strike of May 13, called by the unions to protest police repression of students, was the apogee of unity between workers and students. One partial exception to this was the significant presence of nonstudents, notably youth from the industrial suburbs of Paris, in the riots in the Latin Quarter.

In contrast to the image of May '68 as a libertarian fête, Seidman emphasizes that student radicals were often authoritarian, violent, and destructive of property. Protecting property was an overriding concern of authorities—more important than defending the moral order—and its extensive destruction turned otherwise sympathetic university professors and later the Parisian population against the student movement. Unique to Seidman's account is the attention that he gives to the numerous instances of arson during the events, which may have been part of an effort to purify Paris and certainly "put the city at risk" (92).

The picture Seidman paints of the workers' strikes is crucial to his case that May's impact was "modest" and could not have been otherwise. Workers, Seidman argues, were more interested in consumption than revolution or a radical agenda of workers' control or *autogestion*. Neither the employers' organization (the CNPF) nor the ministry of the interior believed the strikes were radically new, and much evidence supports this judgment. Worker participation in strike votes and factory occupations was low, a sign that workers sought more to escape the factories than to control them. Contrary to the belief that the strikes

were a revolt of mostly young workers at the base against the unions, it was the unions or union militants who initiated most strikes, with older workers often playing a crucial role. The CGT, often blamed for discouraging strikes, did nothing of the sort. Indeed, both the ministry of the interior and the police held it responsible for them. The rejection of the Grenelle Accord by the workers does not indicate that workers wanted qualitative change or revolution. Rather, rejection proceeded from the judgment that, given the magnitude of the strike wave, the material gains offered were too small. Nor did their rejection, quickly championed by the unions themselves, represent a repudiation of the unions as they had neither signed nor fully endorsed the agreement.

Revolution was also unlikely because the state never lost control. Throughout the crisis, it ensured essential needs were met. By using strike-breakers and quickly resolving strikes at the key markets supplying Paris, it was able to keep the capital fed. A system of priority access to gasoline supplies for retailers, truckers, medical personnel, the police, and others prevented a potential paralysis of essential services. Troops picked up garbage, assured postal and telephone service, and kept some domestic air traffic going. Also crucial was the care taken by the Paris prefect of police, Maurice Grimaud, to avoid lethal violence that might have escalated the crisis. Rather than summarily repress the student rioters, the government sought to use their violence to turn the population against them. Thus it pushed the crowds into western, bourgeois Paris and kept tangible reminders of student violence on the streets by refusing to clean up property destroyed in clashes with police. After the violence during the night of May 24-25 the government had largely achieved its political goal and turned opinion against the students. Thus, for Seidman, de Gaulle's speech of May 30, while important, was not the turning point that it is often said to be. Firmly in control, the state had initiated the restoration of order well before the end of May.

Seidman's account confirms a long-standing historiographical trend toward seeing the events of May as falling far short of threatening political revolution. His view of the limited nature of worker demands draws on a developing historiography in this direction.¹⁴ More original is his research showing how the state maintained its authority by assuring basic alimentary, transportation, and communication needs during the events. Also important is his emphasis on the *ouvriérisme* and violence of the student radicals, which offers an important correction to interpretations of the events as a libertarian cultural revolution. Seidman's history is hardly exhaustive—the provinces are notably absent from his account—but future research will not likely overturn his basic conclusion that revolution was improbable in May '68.

More questionable is Seidman's further conclusion that the events of 1968 had only "modest consequences" (282). Seidman examines only the most immediate results of the events such as the *loi d'orientation* of November 1968, which reformed higher education. Yet, the impact of May extends far into the 1970s and beyond. Neither the militant mobilizations of the late 1960s and

early 1970s, nor the rise of the Union of the Left, which capitalized on these militant energies and culminated in Mitterrand's election in 1981, are discussed. A strong case can be made that neither the *alternance* of 1981 nor many of the reforms of the 1970s and early 1980s would have been possible without May '68. At the very least those reforms would have taken a rather different complexion and the political history of France a rather different course without May '68. And, well beyond the immediate aftermath of May, whenever the French take to the streets in large numbers, May as a threat or promise of radical upheaval continues to haunt public life and have an impact on behavior. It is not for nothing that in his January 2007 inaugural address as his party's presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy spoke of Georges Pompidou as a French hero for having "avoid[ed] the worst in May 1968."¹⁵

Kristin Ross's *May '68 and Its Afterlives* seeks to rescue May '68's history from distortions she contends began in the late 1970s and reached full bloom around the twentieth anniversary of the event. It was at this point, Ross argues, that an "official story" emerged that ignores the great worker strikes of 1968 and the anti-imperialist struggles of the sixties and presents the events as a non-violent generational conflict, a harmless cultural transformation that broke the restraints on French modernization and culminates in today's capitalism and narcissistic individualism. Rather, for Ross, May represents an unprecedented rupture with ordinary social identities in which people experienced and advocated a radical egalitarianism that broke with existing institutions. Recovering that event in all its radicalism and explaining its occultation in later years are Ross's twin tasks. Although Ross ignores Marwick's work and published her book before Seidman's, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* might be read as a critique of their line of interpretation.

For Ross, the experience of May '68 was above all an opening to otherness and a radical egalitarian refusal of hierarchy. May was not a cultural movement, Ross argues powerfully in her analysis of the *Atelier populaire des Beaux-Arts*, which produced many of the posters of May. May was profoundly political, but it was not about the seizure of power, which later interpretations have emphasized at the expense of the egalitarian upsurge that made it truly radical. The prehistory of May begins with the identification of left-wing militants with the colonial other during the Algerian War, an opening to the other that was sustained in the mobilization against the Vietnam War. By 1968, the prior identification with the third-world other allowed student radicals to transcend their sociological identity and connect with workers in a radical, direct-democratic critique of hierarchy. Workers, who had begun in mid-1960s strikes to question "the model of production, the power structure of the unions, and beyond that, the model of Gaullist society itself" (32), felt solidarity with students beaten by the police. The result was a worker-student nexus that threatened the entire sociopolitical order.

Ross's analysis of May '68 has significant virtues. She reminds us how the events were experienced by many of the participants and places them in the

broader context of decolonization that is comparatively absent from other accounts. Her shift of the focus from the problem of the seizure of power to that of the corrosion of structures and institutions by a direct-democratic critique helps remind us why May '68 seemed so radical, a "crisis of civilization" for many. Suggestive—albeit exaggerated—are Ross's analyses of the transcendence of social identities and of the role of police repression in the development of the movement.

Yet was the French leftists' opening to otherness an opening to workers as they actually were or to an imagined working class that they had invented?¹⁶ Ross's evidence of working-class radicalism comes almost exclusively from *gauchistes* publications, which often mistook their desires for reality.¹⁷ Nor does Ross present convincing evidence that a significant worker-student linkage was established in May. One cannot help but conclude that, regardless of the revolutionary aspirations of some, May '68 was not as profound a crisis as Ross wants to believe. That is, one must ask whether the radical students' egalitarian, *autogestionnaire* ideology was truly a disinterested flight from their position in society. As the analyses of Todd Gitlin and others suggest, *autogestion* might rather be an ideology of the educated middle class.¹⁸ Lacking evidence for its most important argument, Ross's alternative interpretation of May '68 fails to convince.

Ross's analysis of the "afterlives" of May '68 is no less problematic. For Ross the radical challenge of the events has been covered up by an "official story" of May as a nonviolent cultural transformation. This official story is largely the work of sociologists—considered by Ross to be disciplinarily predisposed to remove the political from history—and repentant *gauchistes* who have filled the vacuum left by the failure of historians to address May's history. How and why did this official story come about? Ross's explanation is functional. The 1970s turn from politics and the condemnation of the gulag that accompanied it were fueled by a "need to repudiate May" (12) or a "need to put an end to the memory of May '68" (171). The new philosophers of the late 1970s, who for Ross were the first to "confiscate" May and turn it against the egalitarian political thrust of the events, needed to do so because they could not come to terms with the failures of their post-May militancy.

Remarkably lacking from Ross's analysis of the afterlives of May is an analysis of what happened to the revolutionary projects born in 1968. Ross's discussion of the failures of post-May militancy is largely limited to a summary of the already summary contemporary analysis by Danielle and Jacques Rancière, who are seen by Ross as remaining true to May as it actually was. This severely limits Ross's ability to explain changing interpretations of May, and, perhaps more importantly, saves her from confronting the problem of whether the meager results of post-'68 revolutionary militancy do not implicitly bring into question her thesis that May was a radical egalitarian political rupture.

One must also ask whether there has been an "official story" regarding May '68. Ross's analysis of the confiscation of May in the broadcast media is based

largely on one example, "Le Procès de Mai," shown on Antenne 1 on 22 May 1988 and hosted by Bernard Kouchner. While the content of the program follows what Ross presents as the "official story" line, she does not prove that this program is representative. Ross's characterization of publications on May is similarly selective. One of Ross's targets is Patrick Rotman and Hervé Hamon's *Génération*, a two volume history published in 1987 and 1988. For Ross, by focusing on a few student leaders who mostly went on to successful post-revolutionary careers in the 1980s, *Génération* depoliticized May, made it into a "purely cultural revolution" (201) and reduced "what was sayable about '68, to one tiny, ideological trope: the family or generational saga" (203). Yet, *Génération* is far richer than the generational trope that provides the book's title. It examines in great detail (over 1,000 pages) the twists and turns of the extreme Left from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. It discusses at length topics that Ross claims have been forgotten in the "official story," such as the importance of both the Algerian and Vietnam Wars in the prehistory of the events. It is an important source for those seeking to understand the French 1960s. No less significant is Ross's complete silence on another important publication of the twentieth anniversary: Henri Weber's *Vingt ans après. Que reste-t-il de mai 68?*¹⁹ Weber, who had appeared on Kouchner's program and is one of the former *gauchistes* whom Ross blames for the "official story," refuses to repent for his militant past and offers a nuanced interpretation of May '68 and its impact. Contrary to the "official story" line, Weber does not evacuate the political from May '68 and argues that the movement cannot be reduced to the events of May, but rather stretches back to the early 1960s and forward to the mid-1970s. If Weber believes that May was above all the work of the era's generation of adolescents and post-adolescents, he does not use the concept of "generation" to remove politics from his analysis or to reduce the 1960s to a conflict of generations. Rather, Weber argues that the militants of May formed a generation insofar as they were shaped by common political experiences (of antifascism, decolonization, and the decline of Communism) and the common and unique experience of living through the postwar economic boom and the era's "cultural contradictions of capitalism". Weber rejects Gilles Lipovetsky's argument, which Ross rightfully criticizes, that May gave birth to narcissistic individualism.²⁰ For Weber, May's individualism was communitarian and promethean; the egotistical individualism of the 1980s was a break from it. Weber finds that May's impact was largely positive and to a significant extent political insofar as it made France more liberal, more democratic, more *solidaire*, and more egalitarian (11). While recognizing that their expectation of revolution was "radicalement fausse" (31), Weber does not abandon politics and seek to hide the political thrust of May. His account does not conform to Ross's "official story" and suggests that even in 1988, when the "official story" was supposedly at its height, the interpretive orthodoxy that Ross claims to find did not exist.

One of the major shortcomings of both Seidman's and Ross's histories is their failure to explain the post-'68 years. Happily, Jean-Pierre Le Goff's *Mai 68*:

l'héritage impossible helps us begin to understand them. Le Goff is concerned with answering precisely the question that interests Ross—and for that reason the absence of Le Goff's book from Ross's bibliography is especially strange—notably how the post-'68 years undermined the foundations of politics and community in France, leaving an "impossible legacy." One of the first serious studies of the aftermath of 1968, it is an important book.

Le Goff argues that May '68 had the paradoxical effect of both reinvigorating a neo-Leninist political project and giving birth to a libertarian counter-culture. The former, which Le Goff identifies with the Maoist Gauche prolétarienne and the Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, emerged from student revolutionaries' conclusion that if revolution failed in 1968 it was because the PCF and CGT held workers back from acting upon their revolutionary impulses. Once the restraining force of these organizations was removed, revolution would result. The counter-cultural movement was born in the explosion of subjectivity that accompanied the liberation of speech in May. It was part of a quest for autonomy against alienation, which along with a critique of power as oppression and a call for a direct democracy, was central to the "student commune" of May.

For Le Goff, the neo-Leninist revolutionary project was based on an overly optimistic evaluation of working-class militancy. Workers simply did not have the same aspirations as the *gauchistes* revolutionaries, and consequently the post-'68 efforts of the neo-Leninists to mobilize the workers around their revolutionary projects were fruitless. This failure led the *gauchistes* to focus on the theme of repression. Repression was real under the post-May law-and-order interior minister, Raymond Marcellin, but *gauchiste* discourse lost touch with reality, turning the struggle against repression into one against a "fascism" found lurking throughout French institutions and ultimately against all forms of power and authority. A paranoid discourse on power emerged that was rooted in the *gauchistes'* disappointment with the people for failing to embrace revolution. Although given theoretical expression by intellectuals such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, this discourse should not be understood on the level of theory, but as a "règlement de comptes pratique avec une identité nationale et une civilisation" (201) through which the *gauchistes* effectively "nient ... le rôle de garant du vivre-ensemble assuré par l'État" (203). The new philosophers of the late 1970s pushed this discourse to the extreme, their diatribes against the gulag and totalitarianism being a continuation of those against repression and fascism. Thus, "avec les nouveaux philosophes, la fantasmagorie post-soixante-huitarde du pouvoir atteint son apogée" (413).

Running parallel to the neo-Leninist current and eating away at it from within, the libertarian counter-cultural movement made a key contribution to the "impossible legacy" of 1968 condemned by Le Goff. This current was hardly interested in the conquest of power and expected little of workers. Its emphasis was on a revolution in everyday life without delay. Attacking moral-

ism, it defended deviant behavior and sought a liberation of desire. It found expression in publications such as *Hara-Kiri hebdo*, *Actuel*, and *Tout! Le Goff* sees this current as valuing autonomy over everything else and thereby undermining, along with the critique of repression and fascism, the foundations of politics and society. One of Le Goff's primary foci is on the extreme currents of the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF). Le Goff sees the MLF as breaking completely with traditional militancy in its rejection of all organization and hierarchy and demand for total transparency. Some adherents even rejected the legitimacy of engaging in the struggles of others, considering any effort that does not begin with oneself as inauthentic. Their rejection of heterosexual love and maternity was, Le Goff argues, an expression of their goal of total autonomy, and their questioning of the specific role of women in reproduction was a manifestation of the "orgueil souverain" (317) of post-'68 *gauchisme*, which sought to deny all limits on individual autonomy. This goal of autonomy and unrestrained subjectivity can be seen in the other counter-cultural currents of the period. In education it was manifest in the attraction of the educational utopia of Summerhill in which authority is abandoned in order to liberate the subjectivity of children. In the end the radical critique of power and affirmation of autonomy proves paralyzing. It culminates in ultra-liberalism. For Le Goff, it is an impossible legacy of May '68 that has to be left behind if France is to recover a progressive political agenda.

The attraction of Le Goff's book is that it directly tackles the question of the decline of 1960s radicalism and seeks to explain the political demobilization of the 1980s in relationship to it. Although his sympathies are on the Left, he does not shrink from calling attention to the substantial illusions of post-'68 *gauchisme*. One might disagree with specific aspects of his argument such as his labeling the Gauche prolétarienne neo-Leninist or the importance he gives to *The Gulag Archipelago* in the collapse of *gauchisme*,²¹ but his argument about the decline of *gauchisme* is largely convincing. His parallel and interlacing histories of the neo-Leninist and counter-cultural currents are a useful corrective to accounts that generally separate the two, treating them as radically opposed to each other. The main problem with Le Goff's thesis is with the influence he attributes to the currents that he discusses. Le Goff focuses on the most extreme examples within the most extreme of the post-'68 movements. How representative, one might ask, is his example of the killing of a severely handicapped baby by his parents, who justified it in *Les Temps modernes* as humane because the baby would never be able to be autonomous (332-34)? His discussion of feminism says nothing about the more moderate currents within it. Might they have given birth to a form of militancy or associational life that tends to counteract the radical ideas of autonomy within the MLF against which Le Goff rails? Only on one occasion, when discussing education, does Le Goff give the reader any indication of the broader impact of the radical currents he discusses, and then he gives no source for his contention that "des centaines de milliers de personnes se sont imprégnées dans les

années soixante-dix de ces préceptes [those of Summerhill]" (376). There are, of course, alternative explanations for the lassitude that sets into French political life in the 1980s, such as the abandonment of socialist construction by the socialist government in power. It perhaps attributes too much influence to actors such as the new philosophers and the MLF to claim that the loss of moorings of French public life, which itself seems somewhat exaggerated by Le Goff, is primarily their doing.

The challenges faced by the historiography of the 1960s are both empirical and conceptual. There is still much that we do not know. The French mobilization against the Vietnam War has received some attention, but its history still needs clarification. May '68 outside of Paris remains largely unexplored territory. Although the strikes of May '68 have recently received attention, their history needs further investigation.²² The post-'68 period is hardly studied. Key post-'68 mobilizations like those of Lip and Larzac have yet to find their historian. Although much has been written about French Maoism, it still awaits a comprehensive scholarly history. The study of the extensive transformation of sociocultural practices in the French sixties is still in its infancy. Perhaps the most difficult conceptual challenge facing the historiography is that of specifying the relationship between May '68 and long-term political, social, and cultural change. Doing this requires setting aside the question, upon which Seidman and Ross focus, of whether or not May was revolutionary in favor of examining specifically how May changed mentalities and practices. Le Goff's history is a step in this direction, but too focused on the ideas of the most radical currents of the post-'68 period to resolve the issue fully. Another conceptual challenge is one of comparison. It is necessary both to explain the dynamics of the French 1960s and to clarify what is unique to it, yet, as one can see from both Marwick's and Suri's books, it is not easy to do well. It requires considerable knowledge and linguistic competencies as well as sensitivity to the difficulty of structuring a comparison that focuses on the relevant level of reality and does not privilege one case over another. Both Suri's and Marwick's works are problematic in this regard, but if we can learn from their shortcomings, they can point the way forward. Although considerable progress has been made in recent years, the history of the French sixties largely remains, as a 1993 guide of archival sources called it, an "histoire à faire."²³

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Notes

1. "CFP: Conference on May 68: Forty Years On," 19 August 2006 <https://lists.uakron.edu/sympa/arc/h-france>.
2. Anne-Marie Sohn, *Âge tendre et tête de bois: Histoire des jeunes des années 1960* (Paris: Hachette, 2001); Bernard Brillant, *Les Clercs de 68* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003); Yaïr Auron, *Les Juifs d'extrême gauche en Mai 68*, trans. Katherine Werchowski (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998); Grégory Barrau, *Le Mai 68 des catholiques* (Paris: L'Atelier, 1998).
3. Isabelle Sommier, *La Violence politique et son deuil: L'après 68 en France et en Italie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998); Jean-Paul Salles, *La Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (1968-1981): Instrument du Grand Soir ou lieu d'apprentissage?* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005); and the publications of Marnix Dressen on *l'établissement: De l'amphi à l'établi: Les étudiants maoïstes à l'usine, 1967-1989* (Paris: Belin, 2000) and *Les Établis, la chaîne et le syndicat: Évolution des pratiques, mythes et croyances d'une population d'établis maoïstes, 1968-1982* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).
4. Sabine Rousseau, *La Colombe et le napalm: Des chrétiens français contre les guerres d'Indochine et du Vietnam, 1945-1975* (Paris: CRNS, 2002).
5. Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, Robert Frank, Marie-Françoise Lévy, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, eds., *Les Années 68: Le temps de la contestation* (Brussels: Complexe, 2000).
6. See the H-Diplo roundtable on *Power and Protest* for critiques of it as international and American history: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/#suri> (22 January 2007).
7. Julian Jackson, "De Gaulle and May 1968," in *De Gaulle and Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Hugh Gough and John Horne (New York: Edward Arnold, 1994), 128.
8. Michel Trebitsch, "Voyages autour de la révolution: les circulations de la pensée critique de 1956 à 1968," in *Les Années 68*, 71-75.
9. Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68: l'héritage impossible* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 283.
10. On the latter point see Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
11. Henri Mendras with Alistair Cole, *Social Change in Modern France: Towards a Cultural Anthropology of the Fifth Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), originally published in French as *La Seconde Révolution française, 1965-1984*.
12. This was the case in France according to Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 98.
13. Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), especially chapter six.
14. See notably the contributions by Michelle Zancarini-Fournel on the Grenelle Accord, Vincent Porhel on the strike at the Compagnie de télégraphique sans fil of Brest, and Frank Georgi on *autogestion* in *Les Années 68*, ed. Dreyfus-Armand, Frank, Lévy, and Zancarini-Fournel.
15. *Le Monde*, 16 January 2007.
16. The following critique deals with major interpretive issues, not specific errors of fact, detailed in Seidman's review of Ross's book: *H-France Review* 2, 133 (December 2002), <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/seidman2.html> (22 January 2007).
17. On *gauchistes* myths about workers see Vincent Porhel, "L'autogestion à la CSF de Brest," in *Les Années 68*, 379-97 and Le Goff, *May 68*, 173-74.
18. Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution*, 176.

19. Henri Weber, *Que reste-t-il de mai 68? Essai sur les interprétations des 'événements,'* new ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1998), published in 1988 under the title *Vingt ans après: Que reste-t-il de mai 68?*
20. Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ère du vide: Essai sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).
21. On these points see my *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).
22. Appearing too late to be considered in this essay is Xavier Vigna, *L'Insubordination ourière dans le années 68: Essai d'histoire politique des usines* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007).
23. *Mémoires de 68: Guide des sources d'une histoire à faire* (Lonrai [Orne]: Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, Mémoires de 68, Verdier, 1993).

Translations of the word SIXTIES from english to french and examples of the use of "SIXTIES" in a sentence with their translations: ...in beirut in the early sixties .Â Russian Czech Norwegian Spanish French Indonesian Swedish Croatian Finnish Danish. Norwegian Russian Spanish Czech Indonesian Swedish Croatian Finnish Danish. English.