

The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968

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Since the thirtieth anniversary in 1998, the May 1968 events have – with the striking exception of Kristin Ross's 2002 *May '68 and its Afterlives* – tended to be on the back burner, so that Michael Seidman's exhaustively documented account may well revive what has been virtually from the beginning a rich source for publication and analysis. That his project has taken fifteen years to bring to completion is hardly surprising when one considers the vast quantity of documentary research undertaken, embracing national and departmental archives, the records of the Paris police, contemporary periodicals, tracts and posters from the period, and the wealth of analyses, interpretations and autobiographical accounts that began appearing almost as soon as the events were over and have renewed themselves at regular intervals ever since. 'May' remains a source of fascination because of its elusiveness and resistance to any kind of unitary reading. It was widely seen at the time as the incipient apocalypse of the consumer society, the harbinger of socialist revolution (for Trotskyists, Maoists and the loosely-defined tendencies described as gauchiste), or in the reformist-speak of the French Communist Party the greatest general strike in French history, asserting the power of the working class against their capitalist oppressors. Subsequent readings, given credence by the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the virtual disappearance of revolution from the European political agenda, have tended to view it as the *Götterdämmerung* of the PCF, paving the way for Mitterrandist social democracy, as a 'cultural revolution' in a distinctly unMaoist sense – the loosening-up of a hitherto ossified and hierarchical society – and/or as the assertion of individualism against the collectivity, whether this is viewed positively (as by Gilles Lipovetsky) or negatively (as by Régis Debray).

Seidman approaches the events sympathetically but with a carefully-argued sense of their limited long-term impact and at least implicitly their diminished contemporary relevance. Kristin Ross argues powerfully that the political lessons of May are still extremely important, and her book – more of an ideological reading, less of a historical account – thus valuably complements Seidman's, whose epigraph 'Lovin' eyes can never see,' from Percy Sledge's 1966 hit *When A Man Loves A Woman*, suggests the affectionate political and ideological scepticism that informs his approach. The events, for Seidman, were important not because of the changes they effected but 'by virtue of the transformative power that much of the media, many scholars, and ordinary French people have attributed to them' (p. 12). He does not, however, give us much in the way of analysis of May-as-myth, which is not to be interpreted as a criticism; the plethora of other texts he cites do this several times over, unsurprisingly in different, even contradictory ways. His concern is more with showing that much that has been regarded as radical and challenging in the esprit de mai had in fact been at work in French society for some time. The Algerian War, with the widespread opposition it aroused, is a key moment here. Less palatably perhaps for greying soixante-huitards, he draws attention to the messy and

often violent turn that the events began to take once they had lost their momentum and sense of direction. Those, such as the present author, who maintain that May was a period characterised by largely symbolic violence may find that that argument loses some ground as Seidman's account nears its end.

Seidman begins with a lucid account of the various student leftist movements active at Nanterre and the Sorbonne in the late sixties. Maoists, Trotskyists, anarchists and Situationists all receive attention, though Seidman is careful to point out that hedonism was as important as ideological conviction; his account of protests in university residences not only at Nanterre but in Antony brings important new material into focus. More generally, indeed, his argument has something in common with the 'me-generation' view of May articulated by, though not confined to, Lipovetsky. Once students had acquired a degree of social and sexual freedom, they – like the proletariat who were more interested in better pay and shorter hours than in the philosophical ramifications of workers' control – were on the whole satisfied to allow society to return to normal, for all the disapproving grimaces of recuperation from revolutionary groupuscules. Protest against police repression of students, like many another leitmotif of May, predated the events rather than being galvanised into existence by them.

The differing emphases of various student groupings and the dramatis personae involved – Grimaud, Missoffe, the inevitable Cohn-Bendit – are clearly exposed in Seidman's second chapter, though it is a pity that he makes no reference to literary and filmic representations of Nanterre. Robert Merle's *Derrière la vitre* and Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* have certainly stimulated students to whom I have taught this period. Gender politics is given rather more space than it was notoriously felt to merit at the time, notably concerning disagreements about who should be entitled to visit – or even take up residence in – whose hostel. The 'protection of property, not morality' (p. 71) is seen as a major preoccupation of the authorities, as indeed it sometimes seems to be of Seidman's. If 'incendiary protestors put the city at risk' (p. 92), they did not actually burn any of it down, and the half-disapproving tone of Seidman's remarks here and elsewhere might be thought to go beyond salutary demystification in the direction of bourgeois retrenchment.

The third chapter, 'Incendiary occupations,' moves the action to Paris, with a praiseworthy focus not only on the usual suspects – Geismar et al. – but on the twists and turns of the far Right, the electoral Left and politically unaffiliated moderates. The police are seen as victims as well as practitioners of violence – an attitude, we may recall, shared by Pasolini whose sympathy for the Italian protests of 1968 was tempered by his recognition that it was the police, nightsticks and all, rather than the students who came from the truly oppressed layers of society. The different discourses deployed to bring about unity between workers and students, for Seidman never a realistic possibility, are well anatomised. Gender relations, as ever, appear the most obsolete aspect of the movement; 'girls (...) typed, cut stencils, looked after children in the nursery, made beds in the improvised communal dormitories' (p. 126) – unlike, Seidman points out, some of their US counterparts, such as at Columbia. This chapter also contains welcome illustrations and analysis of the posters that were so important a feature of May.

The working class enter the stage in chapter 4, contextualised with references to important earlier movements such as the 1963 miners' strike. From the start, Seidman is sceptical about how far there was real enthusiasm for profound social change on the shop floor. Impressive though the extent of the strike movement was, there were whole areas, such as small businesses, that remained largely unaffected, and white-collar workers – a category that presumably included the vast majority of graduates – were touched less than might have been expected. More surprising still is Seidman's contention that 'in most cases strikes were initiated by unions or their militants' (p. 167), at least until we reflect that unions may have sought, often successfully, to channel and contain the energies of their militants, but were not always, as classically at Renault, capable of controlling them. Nevertheless, the narrative that emerges in this chapter confirms that the rapprochement between workers and students was a partial and transitory one. The lower participation among non-French workers, the patchy enthusiasm for workers' self-management outside relatively restricted groups of white-collar employees, the importance of fuel supplies – maintained by 'a Popular Front at the pumps' (p. 191) of a rather different kind from that of 1936 – are all documented in such a way as to make it plain that the full-scale revolutionary upheaval demanded by many in the student movement was

never likely to come about. The Second Night of the Barricades (24–25 May) is seen as a key moment in the alienation of the movement from many of its sympathisers. The French state, so often cast as the villain of the piece, brutal and inept by turns, is perceived by Seidman as more in control of the situation than might have been expected. The gauchistes' other *bête noire*, the unions, are seen as only fleetingly outflanked by the rank-and-file rejection of the Grenelle agreement, faced with which they 'displayed their continuing ability to domesticate rapidly impulses that may have been initially outside their control' (p. 198).

The title of chapter 5 – 'The spectacle of order' – acts as a sobering reminder that the Situationists' *bête noire*, the 'society of the spectacle,' was at work on the side of the Gaullian state as May drew to a close. De Gaulle's celebrated 30 May speech, recalling the nation to order and evoking his London appeal of 18 June 1940, is viewed by Seidman as fitting into a pattern also diagnosed by Raymond Aron – elections called, as in 1945–6 and 1958, to defuse radical social upheaval and reaffirm the viability and legitimacy of the state. Revolutionary student movements were taken by surprise, while the unions were fearful of forcible repression. Workers who had taken full advantage of the widening availability of credit in the 1960s began to fear that it might soon be payback time. Seidman's view that 'consumption had to be taught' (p. 233) as France modernised would seem to indicate that by 1968 its lessons had been well learnt; rhetorical denunciation of the consumer society interested a great many workers less than enjoyment of its benefits. The brutality of the police repression at Flins, a Paris suburb which housed a large Renault factory, cost the 17-year-old lycéen Gilles Tautin his life. 'The real and symbolic importance of the car throughout the events' (p. 240) – as for Kristin Ross in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995) – was thereby underlined. This chapter suggests how once de Gaulle had made his strategy clear the movement lost its way, becoming increasingly combustible (literally) as it petered out. The workers' gains – a gradual reinstatement of the forty-hour week, substantial wage increases, even a measure of compensation for their financial losses – were, certainly by today's standards, spectacular. Yet the employers' 'right to manage' was not significantly eroded, and 'the solidity of both the state and consumer society' (p. 259) was able to face down its greatest challenge.

Seidman's answer to the question posed in his conclusion – 'A modest or mythical May?' – is a foregone conclusion. For him, the consumer society 'had effectively smothered revolution while integrating hedonism' (p. 282). This may, however, be to beg the question of whether such integration, and the more accepting and latitudinarian attitudes that made it possible, could have come about in a society so ossified in many ways, as 1960s France was, without some kind of dramatic upheaval. Perhaps Seidman is asking the wrong question; modest compared to the utopian apocalypse expected by many participants May may have been, but its myth unquestionably had effects in the specifically political as well as the cultural sphere. Many of the reforms introduced under Mitterrand in 1981 – the lowering of the homosexual age of consent, the decentralisation of monolithic state power evidenced by the setting up of regional assemblies, even, and most importantly, the abolition of the death penalty – were clear manifestations of the *esprit de mai*. Even during Giscard d'Estaing's single-term presidency (1974–1981), the disappearance of the fierce censorship practised under de Gaulle and Pompidou and the *loi Weil*, giving women greater control over their fertility, could be seen as a belated satisfaction of some of the movement's demands.

Nowadays, of course, hardly anybody any longer believes in revolution. Yet – and here Kristin Ross's analysis is pertinent – environmental and anti-globalisation movements continue to represent a challenge to the established political order whose energy and vigour owe much to the example of May. 'Revolution' is of course a profoundly ambiguous term, denoting at once a radical break with existing order and some kind of recurrence of it. 'What goes around comes around', and perhaps in a 'post-marxist' perspective history repeats itself less as farce than as myth, acting as a reminder that there was a time when optimism of the will bade fair to triumph over pessimism of the intellect. Seidman's cold shower may cause his readers to shiver, but it has the potential to invigorate as well.

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The author would like to thank Professor Reader for his kind and generous review, and does not wish to comment further.

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