



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Memory and Oblivion: The Case of the '68 Events in France

Panota, Alexandra

Citation

Panota, A. (2022). *Memory and Oblivion: The Case of the '68 Events in France*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master thesis in the Leiden University Student Repository](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3454097>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Universiteit
Leiden

Memory and Oblivion

The Case of the '68 Events in France



To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Walter Benjamin, VI thesis, *On the Concept of History*.

Student: Alexandra Panota (S2957566)

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Vineet Thakur

International Relations MA

Global Conflict in the Modern Era

Thesis

Word count (main text): 14976

Table of Contents

Chapter 1..... 2-13

- Introduction
- Literature Review and Conceptual Framework
- Methodology
- Chapter Scheme

Chapter 2: The Political Origins and Aspects of May-June '68 Events..... 14-31

- Firing at the Clocks
- Algeria Revisited
- The Meanings of Vietnam
- Solidarities and Subversion
- Overview

Chapter 3: The Dominant Narratives..... 32-45

- Divide and Rule
- Génération-68
- Nullity
- The Pinnacle of Individualism
- Overview

Chapter 4: Final Remarks 46-49

- Unfinished Business

Bibliography 50-55

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In many places around the world a constellation of social and political upheavals, closely related to each other, erupted during '68, which led many to characterise it as the 'global '68'. There were three dimensions to this revolutionary global year. In the western countries, these uprisings were anti-capitalist, in the East anti-bureaucratic or anti-Stalinist and in the Global South anti-imperialist (Mandel in Traverso 2018). An oversimplified periodisation of the most critical events of this year begins in January with the Tet offensive of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. Thereafter, in March, the battle of Ville Guilia took place, which was a clash between Italian militants¹ and the Italian police. April was the onset of the Prague Spring when sweeping reforms were introduced by Alexander Dubček, soon to be crushed by the invading Soviet forces. In May, France was the centre of a student uprising which in mid-May engendered a general strike. As student movements broke in several parts of the world, including in Germany, Italy, Brazil, Argentina, Japan, Pakistan, and the United States, another student protest, in Mexico City, ended with a gruesome massacre at the hands of the security forces in October (Traverso 2018). These events were accompanied with a revolutionary air which appeared at the time to have the ability to challenge the political status quo (Parkinson 2018).

The memorialisation of '68 in these countries followed different pathways, varying from complete silence around the events, as for example in Japan, to an endeavour to synthesise an 'official memory' of what happened, like in France (Sommier 2011). Particularly, in the latter case, which is the country of interest for the given study, the

¹ The term "militant" is used throughout this study without the negative connotations that have been attributed to it. Contrarily, I have adopted Daniel Bensaïd's (2015, 15) approach to this word according to whom: "Militancy? A word that doesn't have a good reputation in an age of individualism without individuality. It has the sepia colour of outmoded heroism. (...). At least militancy has something collective about it, not just a solitary pleasure but a principle of solidarity and shared responsibility".

events of '68 are often reduced to one signature moment, 'May '68', referring to only the student protests in Paris. The dominant narrative, as Kristin Ross (2002, 8) emphasises, has generated "a temporal reduction [that] has produced an abbreviated chronology whereby what we understand by 'May' has become, quite literally, what transpired during the month of May '68". On 2 May '68, following months of protests by students against the authorities and the university administration, the Rector decided to close the university of Sorbonne. The next day, and here is when the 'events' supposedly begin, few members of, what subsequently became, the 'March 22 Movement' arranged a small meeting in order to discuss the Rector's decision.² They focused on how they should respond to the authorities' offensive as well as to the planned attack of an extreme right-wing movement, known as *Occident* (Singer 2013, 118-119).

The same day, heavy armoured police forces were called into the Sorbonne on the pretence of an imminent riot (Reynolds 2011). This led to mass demonstrations, which culminated in the Night of the Barricades (10-11 May) and a few days later, the occupation of some university buildings by the students. The end of May events is considered to be the radio broadcast given by France's president Charles De Gaulle on May 30, after a large demonstration in Champs-Elysees of conservative and right-wing middle and upper-class constituents in favour of him, in which he refused to step down as the president and alluded to the possibility of an army intervention and of dissolving the National Assembly (Vinen 2018).³

The hyper focus on the May events, in particular on the students from the Latin Quarter of Paris,⁴ invariably leads to erasure of other memories of '68 (Sommier in El

² The March 22 Movement is further discussed in chapter 2.

³ Since the present study needs to be concise, several important historical events such as the right-wing demonstration in Champs-Elysees on May 30, the Grenelle Agreements, which effectively put an end to the strikes, the elections of June 1968 -among others- could not be analyzed. For a comprehensive approach of the historical events related to the events of May-June '68, see Debord 2018; Minakakis 2018; Ross 2002; Singer 2013; Vinen 2018; Wolin 2008).

⁴ "The Latin Quarter of Paris was home to most educational institutes, especially pre-1968. It is therefore known for being a student quarter" (El Chazli 2018).

Chazli 2018). For example, it is barely mentioned that the day after the mass demonstration of 13 May the student unrest spread to the workers and the peasants all around France (Singer 2013). Young workers– and not the unions – decided to join their struggle with the students and occupied several factories. By June, almost 10 million workers from every professional sector and across the country were on a general strike (Minakakis 2018). This was the largest post-war general strike that paralysed a western industrial country, which some scholars see as raising the possibility of a radical revolution (Debord 2018).

Even those few who do indeed include the general strike in their analyses tend to atomise each struggle and speak of the separate struggle of the students, of the workers and of the peasants. Laval (2018, 9) argues that this undermines the political unity of their collective struggle. Moreover, what happened outside of Paris in provincial France, and the demonstrators' young adolescence 'background noises' are kept out of the limelight (Ross 2002, 26). Specifically, atomization of these struggles leads to a search for discrete immediate causes, while shifting the focus from the collective pull of determining factors: including De Gaulle's political hegemony during 1958-'68, the repeated police repression, the obstructive towards the movement role of the French Communist Party (PCF) and of traditional trade unions, the colonial French heritage, prominent example of which was the Algerian war experience, the prior to '68 workers' strikes and the more current struggle of the Vietnamese (Bensaïd 2015; della Porta 2018; Duhan 2013; Fillieule 2018; Ross 2002; Sommier 2011; Young 2021).

As several scholars have argued, most subsequent depictions of May have either underplayed or erased the deeply political dimension of the '68 events in France (Ashton 2004; Bensaïd 2015; Laval 2018; Parkinson 2018; Rancière 1998;2018; Reynolds 2011; Ross 2002;2018; Traverso 2016; Wolin 2008). Ross (2002, 8) explains, that during the French events of '68 the majority of those who participated at the demonstrators' side of the barricade, had strong ideological targets which were capitalism, American imperialism, and Gaullism. But it is quite peculiar that we have

now reached to “a consensus view of ‘68 as a mellow, sympathetic, poetic ‘youth revolt’ and a lifestyle reform”.

Through such “management of May’s memory” May ‘68 has been depoliticized and dehistoricized (Bensaïd 2015). It now mostly stands for a momentary revolt of the younger generation against “an authoritarian, repressive cultural conservative, state-oriented form of capitalism” and a cry for a shift to “a modern, hedonistic, sexually free, liberal form of individualism and mass consumer capitalism”, an urge to turn the Gaullist society towards neoliberalism (Traverso 2018). Although May ‘68 has come to be inscribed as a crucial moment in Cold War cultural politics, certainly in France, Wolf Lepenies asked damningly: “But nothing happened in France in ‘68. Institutes didn’t change, the university didn’t change, conditions for workers didn’t change ... 68 was Prague, and Prague brought down the Berlin Wall” (cited in Bensaïd 2015, 333)⁵.

These critiques suggest a process of narrative construction, through the management of memory, which has resulted in concealing the political qualities of those events (Bensaïd 2015). Along that process, the principles and ideas of what the demonstrators and strikers were representing have been mistranslated to the point that, as Ross (2002) argues, May’s subsequent representations have overtaken a fundamental aspect of it, its political dimension. The paradox of May’s memory can be clearly seen. A mass movement that strove to “contest the domain of the expert, to disrupt the system of naturalised spheres of competence (especially the sphere of specialized politics) [was] translated in the years that followed into little more than a ‘knowledge’ of ‘68, on the basis of which a whole generation of self-proclaimed experts and authorities [assert] their expertise” (Ross 2002, 6-7).

Hence, despite May ‘68 being a society wide event with political dimensions, why is it now memorialised primarily as a cultural youth revolt? My investigation attempts to focus on two aspects of the May ‘68 memorialisation. Firstly, I attempt to retrieve the

⁵ This statement was uttered at a lecture given by Ross at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study in 1999.

‘political’ origins and aspects of May-June ‘68 events. Subsequently, I focus on the predominant narratives, their vectors and when, how, and why they have become the prevalent readings. Thus, this thesis asks the following questions: Which are the aspects of the ‘68 events that have been silenced, what instead are the narratives that have dominated in its memorialisation and why?

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Since part of the thesis is an analysis of literature and media coverage of the dominant narratives of May-June ‘68 events, in this section I epigrammatically allude to some of these ‘hegemonic’ versions that I analyse more closely in the third chapter. Further on, I will elaborate on my conceptual framework in this section.

Isabelle Sommier (2011) describes ‘68 as a ‘taboo topic’ in most of the countries that experienced political and social uprisings then, since it is quite evident that the historiographic debate around it is clouded by ‘political games’. In France’s case one can notice that an ‘official memory’ had been constructed through a careful processing of the history itself, which has led to selective representations of the events that were easily espoused by the wider public due to their intense media exposure. However, according to Ross (2002, 6) the construction of the official story goes beyond than asserting that some of the more radical ideas and practices introduced during May “came to be recuperated and recycled in the service of the Capital”. Contrarily, the prevalent narrative “asserts that today’s capitalist society, far from representing the derailment or failure of the May movement’s aspiration, instead represents the accomplishment of its deepest desires”.

Through these types of commemorations several versions of what May represented had been put forward. These varied from an insurrection which was just a product of a “younger generation” revolting against the structural rigidities of the older one (Morin et.al 2018), namely a “family psychodrama” (Aron 1969), to a cry for a modernising transformation and the “great liberal-libertarian Cultural Revolution” (July cited in Ross 2008). Furthermore, others described it as an “anti-authoritarian

and anti-institutional as well as egoistical, psychological and hedonistic” revolt (Gauchet cited in Wolin 2018, xxviii) and an “elusive revolution” (Aron 1969).

However, the main purveyors of these narratives are, apart from some established conservatives such as the sociologists Raymond Aron and Gilles Lipovetsky, mainly some of the central figures from the participants of the May ‘68 movement. These included, among others, Bernard Kouchner, Henri Weber, and André Glucksmann. These later distanced themselves from their ‘irresponsible’ past of anti-establishment actions and turned to conventional politics or became ‘television intellectuals’ (della Porta 2018).

It appears as if two modes of “politically neutralising of May ‘68” are active (Bensaïd 2015, 70). The first being the “biographical confiscation” by the *ex-gauchistes* who became the spokespeople of May as the only “authorised interpreters” and thus excluded the workers, farmers and colonial militants (Ross 2002, 199). What Sommer calls a “family photo album tendency” which reduces a whole movement to “a few supposed leaders or trademarked representatives” (Ross 2002, 199-200). And the second is an attempt to examine May not as a singular event but to dissolve it “into weighty [sociological] tendencies” and categorise it (Bensaïd 2015, 70-71).

Therefore, it becomes clear that as Walter Benjamin (2014, 12) wrote in his fifth thesis on the Concept of History “the true picture of the past flits by [and it] can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again”. To at least represent a wider picture, if not the “true picture” that Benjamin suggests, focus should be shifted to the works of other thinkers that have striven to suggest that we should at least accept that as Daniel Bensaïd (2015, 76) has pointed out ~~that~~ “there was not a unique ‘May spirit’, but spirits in the plural, their May and ours, which opposed to both its liberal confiscation and to its regressive denigration”. As it is later examined, thinkers such as Kristin Ross, Jacques Rancière, Daniel Bensaïd and others sought to salvage the political aspects of the events. Even though, their ideas have been the steppingstone for my analysis, I have attempted to further develop them, particularly by proposing a different spectacle through which May-June ‘68 should be viewed.

Conceptual Framework

This study is interested in exploring the relationship between memory and history. The May '68 events can be seen as a useful paradigm through which one can investigate “the formation, emergence and development of the representation of a historical moment and the subsequent impact on the collective memory” (Reynolds 2011, 27). Its matrix originates chiefly from two thinkers, namely Enzo Traverso and Kristin Ross. Both have emphasised the outsized role that one specific event has played in shaping ideas of social memory and forgetting: World War II. As Ross (2002, 1-2) writes:

World War II has, in fact, “produced” the memory industry in contemporary scholarship, in France and elsewhere, and the parameters of devastation (...) have in turn made it easy for a certain pathological psychoanalytic category – “trauma” for example, or “repression”- to attain legitimacy as ever more generalisable ways of understanding the excess and deficiencies of collective memory. And these categories they have in turn, I think defamiliarized us from any understanding, or even perception, of a “mass event” that does not appear to us in the register of “catastrophe” or “mass extermination”. Masses, in other words have come to mean mass of dead bodies, not masses of people working together to take charge of their collective lives.

This approach of ‘mass events’ as tragedies is evident not only in Memory Studies, but also in International Relations. While mainstream IR scholars rarely think about subjecthood outside of the relations between states, when they examine marginalised/oppressed parts of the society, they do so mostly by approaching them as victims of tragedies (Krystalli 2021; Jacoby 2014; Möller and Shim 2019). There are viewed as objects and not political agents in their own rights who within their tragedy are capable of finding their own salvation. However, classifications such as ‘trauma’, ‘victims’ and ‘tragedy’ are not useful in studying '68. In addition, neither is the tendency of thinkers who engage with memory related questions to approach them “as in issue of reinforcing identity” of the social group that is studied (Ross, 2002, 2).

May '68, far from being about a specific social category, as for example the students, had more to do with the opposite. It strove to break with the identity of a particular group and its self-interests and forge larger political solidarities (Ross 2002).

From Traverso's perspective (2021a), as victims remain the centre of memory projects, there is now a teleological fixation with a brutal and dystopic past. This has resulted in a gradual eclipse of the 20th century utopias. Consequently, he argues, there is a need to distance ourselves from the "ahistorical consciousness based on mass victims", and instead strive to adjust to the indisputable complexity of the past and not cling to the idea that in history there are only perpetrators and victims. In his words:

The memory of battles and political commitments to past causes like emancipation has little recognition. The 20th century is not made up exclusively of wars, genocide, and totalitarianism. It was also the century of revolutions, decolonisation, the conquest of democracy and great collective struggles. This memory has been delegitimised nowadays, having become hidden and covert (...). It seems to me that in order to break down the cage of "presentism" — a world locked up in the present with neither utopia nor the capacity to look ahead to the future — it is necessary to accommodate these memories. The remembrance of collective movements takes on an anti-conformist, perhaps subversive dimension to a neoliberal era dominated by individualism and competition.

Arguably, there is not an agreement about whether or not the insurrection of May-June '68 should be characterised by a lexicon that contains terms such as success or failure. Alain Badiou in a conversation with Ross (2015) has contended that the Paris Commune and by extension May '68 had been failed ventures. In turn Ross asks, what would constitute success or failure when there were no pre-decided goals of the movement as a whole that were not achieved. Indeed, the movement itself was formed *in* the movement, and not *before*. It could not be expected to have pre-decided goals against which to measure its success or failure. Furthermore, she emphasises that following the practice of some after-the-event-evaluation experts

would only work in favour of those who wish to misconstrue it and create a list with its mistakes or speak of 'lessons-learned', owing to the fact that the experimental dimension that characterised those events is then lost (Ross 2018a).

Ross' argument is solid, there were not specific pre-agreed goals to be attained. Nevertheless, even only the fact that a major aspect of May '68, the political, has been kept hidden through its ensuing representations (Bourg 2003), makes it safe to say that Walter Benjamin's (2014) conceptualisation of history is quite relevant in '68's case. Frédéric Pajak (in Beckerman 2019) explains that for Benjamin "The past has two faces: the past of the victors and the past of the vanquished" and the latter is erased from history. This is due to the fact that as Benjamin has said, history has been written by the victors and opposed to them are the oppressed and exploited classes or as he names them, the 'vanquished' -and not victims- of whom history has been systematically distorted.

Therefore, following his approach towards history, I suggest that those who participated and continued even after '68 events to believe in the existence of its political aspects, are referred to as the 'vanquished' whose memory has been erased. This alternative narrative is important not to suggest a 'correct' interpretation or to deny that other aspects such as its cultural side existed, but rather, to expose the distortive effect of dominant narratives on the political legacy of May '68. The latter have been put forward by those that directly or indirectly identify with the 'victors', the ruling classes, who have "appropriated the memory of May '68" (Memou 2011, 84). These were either those who were dismissive of the events from the outset or the several reformed-*gauchistes* who, repentant of their past, tried to deny it or even worse to distort it. By speaking about the memory of the vanquished, I argue that the side of the '68 that denotes to its political characteristics and allow us to interpret the events in its generative plurality, rests hidden.

Traverso has argued that the political Left's history is filled with defeats (2017a). In order to engage with the complexity of the past of '68 in France, apart from Benjamin's

conceptualisation of history, it seemed appropriate to introduce to the discussion of '68 a condition called 'Left-wing Melancholia'. Melancholia has been present throughout left's many defeats of its mass movements and in eventually losing the hope for a utopian future. However, he suggests that this melancholia does not imply inertia, instead it means to reassess the past without neither rejecting its emotional aspects nor acquiring pedagogical lessons from it. In his words: "this means both mourning lost comrades and remembering the joyful and fraternal moments of social transformation through collective action. We need this melancholy powered by remembrance, which is no obstacle to the reactivation of the left-wing" (Traverso 2021a). Thus, in contrast to the Memory Studies' and IR's tendency of placing the victim's memory at the centre of attention, namely a memory of evisceration and moralism, this revolutionary melancholia focuses on the vanquished and "looks at the tragedies, linked to the lost fights of the past as a burden and as a debt, that also contain in it a promise for salvation" (Traverso 2017a, 23).

This takes solace from Reinhart Koselleck's assertion that: "If history is made in the short run by the victors (...) historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished" (cited in Traverso 2017a, 51). In this study, prompted by left-wing melancholia, I attempted to challenge the cropped versions of May through the spectacle of the 'vanquished' '68 in order to resurface the hidden aspects of their history, which have been methodically silenced by the reproduction of the aforementioned dominant narratives. As an effect of this construction of 'official memory', the deeply political traits of '68 events that refer to their anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist origins, practices of direct-participatory democracy, questions of equality and the aspiration of political openness to otherness and disidentification with one's own social identity have been silenced.

Methodology

The present study follows a qualitative research design, examining how the events of '68 in France are remembered as well as resurfacing some of their key aspects which

are suppressed and why is that the case. The study adopts mixed research methods. On the one hand, I attempted to follow what Michel Foucault (2020) calls 'genealogy' in order to retrieve some historical events that have not been included in the 'official memorialisation' of '68 events, but I consider them to be vital for explaining the anticolonial/anticapitalist roots and thus political sides of the '68 events. On the other hand, I did a 'contrapuntal reading', a method established by Edward Saïd (1993), but by following a slightly different version than his original one.⁶ Specifically, I looked at indicative cases of writings or oral statements of those who I have designated as the 'victors', namely those who were dismissive of the events from the beginning or the *ex-gauchistes* and attempted to interpret them both from their perspective and from that of the 'vanquished' political '68.

As it has been probably apparent, the thesis' research strategy is centred around a single national-based case study, as the general question of remembering, forgetting, interpreting, and reinventing the past was examined within France's context, with explanatory characteristics that could possibly be utilised in other cases. Lastly, for researching the historical facts of the subject alongside with exegeses and theoretical aspects, various sources were used. More specifically I examined, primary sources, such as speeches, video documentations, interviews, material produced by those who were directly related to France's '68 events, from organisations' communiques to books and memoirs written after the events by key figures and intellectuals' testimonies of what happened. However, the majority of my sources were secondary, such as books, articles, which were written about the topic in addition to video documents and novels inspired by the events.

Chapter Scheme

This thesis consists of four chapters. Following the current chapter which has introduced this study, the second chapter addresses the aspects of May that refer to

⁶ Which follows the practice of explaining colonial texts while "considering the perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized" (Ferriter n.d.).

their deeply political characteristics and anti-imperialist/anti-capitalist origins, which are now suppressed. This has been a result of the 'after-readings' of May, some of which tried to "liquidate" it (Sarkozy cited in El Chazli 2018), whereas others to "celebrate" it (Macron cited in Ross 2019) through distorting its memory which are elaborated in the third chapter. Lastly, in the fourth chapter, I briefly summarise the main arguments of the previous chapters, mention the major limitation of this study and possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Firing at the clocks⁷

Prior of delving deeper to the political aspects and origins of May-June '68 events, it should be made clearer what we mean by 'events' and by the characterisation 'political'. By usually referring to the French '68 as the May '68 events (*Les événements de mai 68*) one can notice the unspecific and enigmatic undertones attributed to them. No one really agrees on what their context and consequences really were and as Rok Benčin (2020,2) has stressed, the easiest way to deal with them, is by “denying their existence”. But something – no matter how “untranslatable” and “unfixable” – happened. Surely, the unspecified context of those events has been the reason for speaking of a kind of “non-event, a strange kind of revolution of non-revolution, micro-events that did not add up to a singular nameable historical event” (Young 2021, 434).

How do we then define an 'event'? Looking for a definition, Ashton (2004) turns to three key thinkers, Hannah Arendt, Maurice Blanchot and Walter Benjamin, who all suggest that an event is basically characterized by the disruption of time or of routine processes. Jacques Rancière (2018, 286) similarly writes: “an event means that something has happened that has disrupted the usual course of things”. Thus, when thinkers like Lepenies, as we saw previously, suggest that nothing substantial happened in May '68, the event is already reduced to a non-event.

Moreover, Rancière argues that, in sociological enquiries, analyses of 'events' are often reduced to looking for deviants. These are located in specific social groups. From a sociological perspective, things are described according to tendencies and

⁷ A reference to Walter Benjamin's XV (2014, 21-22) thesis on the Concept of History, in which he writes: “The conscious desire to break the continuity of history belongs to the evolutionary classes in the moment of action. It is just such a consciousness that expresses itself in the July revolution. During the evening of the first day of struggle, simultaneously but as a result of separate initiatives, in several places people fired on the clocks in the towers of Paris”.

classifications that oblige subjects to act according to a predetermined manner that agrees with the characteristics of their respective social group's identity. The focus is invariably on the instigators' identities and roles in the society. He calls this logic, 'police order', i.e. "an order that reduces the political stage to the interplay of well-identified social groups and the effects of a global social evolution" (Rancière 2018, 286). Police order results in preventing more holistic ways of understanding an event and approaching it by keeping people in a specific social order or in other words keeping them in their lines or categories.

Ross (2002, 23-24) extends this metaphor of 'police order' to a sociological approach of enquiry to real-life similarity of functions and consequently collaboration between the two fields. The "cop on the street" approach of sociologists ensures that their focal task is to "make sure that properly functional social order functions properly" by securing the distribution of people to their places, social identities and functions "as well as the system that legitimates that hierarchical distribution".

Unsurprisingly, in '68, police presence dramatically rose as the fear of a disruption of the public(/police) order was increasingly becoming a real possibility. This was done because the '68 events fundamentally questioned this social order. As it is discussed later, the significance of '68 events lies precisely outside of these categorisations and distributions and within a breach of an established social category, of spatial borders and boundaries of nationality. In what Ross (2002) calls as 'crisis of functionalism' the transcendence from existent divisions – without this obliterating differences – was necessary in order for other forms of political subjectivity to emerge. In addition, Benčin (2020, 1-2), utilising the works of Badiou and Rancière, manages to acutely display the significance that immediacy and distance held in the politics of the '68 events, revealed through the practices of their actors. By immediacy he refers to on the one hand the break/distance from "political mediation and representation" and on the other to the cultivation of an "immediate link between different social groups and problems". The result was a completely new conception of politics, which the goal of the given study is to closely examine.

To sum up this first contact with what constitutes '68 a political event, one should turn to Ross (2002, 15), according to whom "in May everything happened politically – provided, of course that we understand 'politics' as bearing little to no relation to what was called at the time 'la politique des politiciens' (specialised, or electoral politics)". So, indeed, the 'clocks were stopped', and this stop meant that something profoundly political and revolutionary had been apocalyptically revealed.

Algeria Revisited

Indisputably, the French case was part of a wider process of synchronised events which, as mentioned earlier, ascribe it to the global '68 phenomenon. Nevertheless, this should not result in ignoring that simultaneously it was a singular instance with its own autonomous logic and peculiarities that constitute it as unique (Rancière 2018). The fact that sociological commentators did not foresee the looming events of '68 has led many to argue that there were not prior signs that could indicate what was coming (Pezzini 2015). Should one follow the predominant tendency that looks only at what happened during the 31 days of May, they would fail at grasping the salient role that other events and players acquired in the wider period and hence limit themselves on what occurred with the students in Paris (Duhan 2015).

However, by extending the temporal and spatial scope of the events of '68 it would become possible to realise that the revolt was something almost unavoidable. Wolin (2018, 69) suggests that by '68 plenty occurrences had piled up that had resulted in a broader dissatisfaction within the French people. Events, as Julian Bourg (2003) argues in the case of May-June '68, have three stages: the first is what happens before the explosion of the events, the second is what transpires during these and the last is its afterlives. In this chapter I have focused on the first stages with the purpose of displaying that the uprisings during '68 had fundamentally political aspects. Even though, this analysis does not seek to propose a comprehensive genealogy of the

events that led to the eruption of the May-June events, it seems necessary to at least highlight some of these catalysts.

When speaking of the causes that led to the eruption of May '68 events, demographics is usually mentioned. In French historical narrative, 'The Glorious Thirty Years' that followed World War II, in which France experienced an unprecedented financial growth and simultaneously a massive population increase (Wolin 2018, 72-73).⁸ This change was also represented in the large increase in student numbers in French universities⁹, since between 1958 and 1968 the number of students in French universities increased from 175,000 to nearly 600,000. Universities infrastructure was insufficient for this, and the quality of education was suffering (Ali 2018, 268). To deal with increasing numbers, French government carried out some reforms, most famous of which were the 'Fouchet Reforms' in 1967, through which the system of admission to the universities would become more competitive (Singer 2013).¹⁰

Most analyses focus on these university-specific factors as primary reasons for student dissatisfaction and the '68 revolt (such as Aron's and Pompidou's approaches). However, this erases from our memory a decade of turmoil in France that preceded '68 (Blommaert 2018). Indeed, it is forgotten that a key slogan of '68 for the demonstrators was '*Dix ans, ça suffit!*' (Ten Years are enough) (Young 2021, 435). This indicates that the '68 events were not like 'a bolt from the blue' nor were they only about universities being overcrowded (see Aron 1969). Instead, it had a political pre-history linked to France's colonial past (Ashton 2004), ten years of Gaullism that "choked the French society" (Ali 2018, 268) and influences by Third-Worldism.

⁸ The latter was on the one hand a result of the so-called 'baby boom' and on the other the increased demand for unskilled workers which led to massive immigrant flows from African countries (Duhan 2013).

⁹ For an analysis of France's demographics, see Singer 2013, 69-70.

¹⁰ Their main aim was the abatement of the open admission system, according to which anyone who had succeeded in the nationwide final high school exams (the baccalauréat) was eligible to be submitted to the university. These reforms, however, would generate additional issues, since by limiting the access to universities, it would bring about class biases, which would make even clearer the "centralization, authoritarianism and elimination" (Schnapp and Vidal-Naquet cited in Bourg 2013, 122) that the French university system stood for.

For Robert J.C Young (2021, 432) May was in its substance an “anticolonial revolution, since it was directed against a President and government that were imposed on France ten years previously by the colons of Algeria”. General Charles de Gaulle’s role both around the developments in Algeria as well as the consequence that had in France was more than decisive. Since France had been occupied by Nazi Germany and had lived through Marshal Pétain’s Vichy France, those who were critical of France’s ‘occupation’ of Algeria felt that from France being the occupied nation, it had now become the occupier. This perception gave rise to grave feelings of political alienation and scepticism towards France’s political institutions (Wolin 2018, 43).¹¹

In May 1958, when the Algerian war counted four years of atrocities committed from both sides, the French side for the first time seemed to change its mind on the possibility of negotiations. Opposing to that turn of events, the colonial Algerian generals carried out an “ultracolonialist coup-d’état” in Algeria and concurrently in France (Young 2021, 436). The putsch’s most prominent organisers were Generals Jacque Massu and Raul Salan and their main objective was to block the possibility of negotiations (Wolin 2018). Franz Fanon would depict General de Gaulle’s return to power as “the direct consequence of the war in Algeria” (cited in Young 2021, 436), since in the eyes of the generals de Gaulle was the only person capable of advocating for an Algérie française (Wolin 2018). With regard to the desire to not let Algeria become an independent state, neither the ‘official left’, composed mostly of PCF, seemed keen on that prospect (Parkinson 2018).

Slightly before the ratification of the Évian Accords which laid down Algeria’s independence, two distinct events took place that had been pivotal for the politicization of some French people who would later participate in the ‘68

¹¹ From 1848 Algeria’s governance had been set under the charge of the Ministry of Interior, which meant that Algeria was considered an extension of France and not just a distant colony. Years later, this facilitated in making the Algerian War a domestic issue, which was referred to as a police operation and not a war (Blanchot 2010). In March 1944, Algerians even though were awarded French citizenship, they were classified as “Muslim French” or “Muslim French from Algeria” (Cornell 2015, 2).

mobilisations. On 8 February 1962, around Charonne, a Parisian metro station, a mass demonstration against OAS' (Organisation Armée Secrète)¹² brutal attack was planned by left-wing parties and trade unions. The Police responded brutally and nine people died in the police beatings and ensuing trampling along a narrow metro entrance. This was an instance of the state attacking its own people, which those who would later partake in '68 mobilisations did not forget (Ashton 2004; Duhan 2013; Rancière 1998; Ross 2002). During May '68, Charonne was evoked as a main point of reference in graffiti and slogans so that the demonstrators could show the state-supported violence they were fighting against (Provenzano 2019).

However, another event had preceded Charonne, which does not have a specific name, instead it is evoked by the date it occurred, 17 October 1961, if not by "a haunting image: drowned Algerian bodies floating in Seine" (Ross 2002, 42). On this date, around thirty-four thousand Algerians, peaceful and unarmed after an FLN (National Liberation Front) call for a demonstration took the streets against a curfew imposed by the prefect of the Paris police, Maurice Papon¹³, directed towards "Muslim Algerian workers", who were "advised" not to be on the streets of Paris after 8.30 P.M (Rancière 1998). This constituted a notable example of the state's racist effort to intensify the "information-policing procedures in the identification and contrôle of Arabs" (Bourg 2003, 122).

During this demonstration, the regular police accompanied by the special riot units, the CRS¹⁴, and the mobile gendarmerie basically conducted a massacre throughout Paris, since they opened fire and in other cases clubbed to death numerous fleeing demonstrators (Ashton 2004). Afterwards, the police would throw unconscious or

¹² OAS was a far-right paramilitary group comprised by French dissidents who were against the independence of Algeria and regularly carried out terrorist attacks both against Algerian people and French supporters of Algeria (Attia 2012).

¹³ Maurice Papon was also a collaborator of the Vichy Government, who ordered the deportation of Jewish people. Moreover, he participated in acts of torture against imprisoned Algerian insurgents while being the prefect of police in Algeria. He later became president of Sud-Avion factory, ironically enough, the first of the French factories to go on strike in 1968 (Attia 2012).

¹⁴ Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité.

already dead Algerians into the river. Later it became known that the police had been advised to “Settle your affairs with Algerians yourselves. Whatever happens you’re covered” (Papon in Ross 2002, 43). Even though the exact number of those who were killed during that incident is not known for the government imposed a news blackout, recent estimations suggest numbers as high as 200 (Ashton 2004).¹⁵ The police repression and the French state’s efforts at concealing the number of deaths, created a chasm within a portion of the French people or as Rancière (1998, 29) puts it a “disidentification with the French state, which had done this in [their] name and removed it from [their] view”.

Under Maurice Papon, the police underwent a massive process of militarization, whilst the French army in Algeria took on policing responsibilities (Blommaert 2018). As several critical scholars have argued, policing practices circulate through people, ideas and tactics between the colony and the metropole. They eventually brutalize the domestic space as the same tactics are employed on minorities, trade unions and other subalterns (Camp and Heatherton 2016). The French police departments were filled with more and more *anciens combattants* from Indochina and ex-army officials and *parachutistes* from Algeria (Ross 2002, 52). Increasingly violent acts, such as torture and the state-led murders, were normalized – the origins of which could be even traced back to the Vichy years (Bourg 2003). Apart from immigrants, police’s targets included trade unionist and striking workers who were seen as elements causing French society’s destabilization through advocating socialist ideas and later in ‘68 for similar reasons demonstrators. Ross (2002, 35) shows that the policing powers that De Gaulle and Papon put in place during the Algerian years were readily used in ‘68. In both cases the police used even the same animalistic vocabulary. “Ratonnades” (little rats), a word used for the Algerians trying to escape police violence was also employed for students in ‘68 that the police hunted.¹⁶

¹⁵ Official police statements, in an attempt to cover-up the massacre, maintained that only three deaths had occurred and that the Algerians had opened fire first (Duhan 2013). However, the following days, dead bodies carrying marks of blows and strangulation, started to float in Seine, proving that police’s statement was untrue.

¹⁶ For an analysis of the animalization of revolutionary bodies by counter-revolutionary powers, see Traverso 2021b, 85-92.

Following the massacre on the Seine on 17 October 1961, the ‘official left’ which was mostly represented by the PCF and CGT¹⁷, confined itself in just writing some articles in the party’s official newspaper, *L’Humanité*. They did not extend their support to the Algerian cause and organized no demonstrations. However, within the student movement, a new dissident political force arose which highlighted the Algerian cause. Two relatively unknown and small student groups, Comité Anticolonialiste and the FUA¹⁸, demonstrated against the police brutality which targeted Algerians. As opposed to the largest student organisation, UNEF¹⁹, which placed the student interests as their main issue and the Algerian cause as a secondary, the Comité Anticolonialiste and the FUA put the Algerian issue first. These organisations by adopting direct actions against the war, helped its members to engage with general problems of the French society and not only with students’ issues, which laid the foundations for a wider critique that was directed against the Gaullist system (Ross 2002).

Consequently, the Algerian War and the encounter with the ‘colonial Other’ engendered the first major chasm or in Rancierian terms a ‘disidentification’ with the State and a detachment from mediation and pre-existent modes of representation such as the traditional parties and trade unions (Benčin 2020; Rancière 2018). Up until ‘68, formation of new political groups that did not abide by the traditional apparatuses and parties, and that did not put as their central cause the promotion of their respective social category’s interests flourished. Hence, May’s significance lies in what Cornell (2015) phrases as “transcendence of borders” be that of nationality, social category, class, space, or time. The demonstrators succeeded in disrupting the ‘police order’, namely the logic of the social, through which people were separated into their distinct social groups/identities with the purpose of not letting them to encounter each other (Rancière 2018).

¹⁷ Confédération Générale du Travail.

¹⁸ Comité du Front Universitaire Antifasciste.

¹⁹ Union nationale des étudiants de France.

How central was thus Algeria to the struggle in '68? Cornelious Castoriadis (in Blanchot 2010, xxxix) argues:

...through the struggle against the war, in demonstrations, draft resistance, secret organising, aiding the Algerians, discussions about their revolution, a minority of students became conscious of what they opposed *in their own* society... Algeria was the occasion, the catalyst for an opposition in search for itself, becoming more and more conscious of itself.

While stepping away from social givens, a new political subjectivity emerges, which “pass[es] by way of the Other” (Ross 2002, 80). Thus, in addition to the closer to home Algerian Other, in the 1960s French militants’ interest in third-worldism widened through figures such as the Cuban, Chinese-Maoist, Black Panther and Vietnamese militants (Sommier 2011). But, again, the impact these had for the politically active French, leading to the eruption of May '68, is almost completely erased in the commemorations that emerged in 1980s. Around the 1960s, with the Cold War at its peak, national liberation movements and revolutions arose in several places around the world from Cuba to China. Perhaps the most unifying struggle for those active in '68 was the Vietnam War, in which American imperialism would unfold in all its glory (Ali 2018). Here, France’s colonial past is still relevant, since in 1954 France was defeated in the Indochina war. In 1965, the war took an even worse turn with the dispatch of 300,000 soldiers, constant bombings, napalm usage, assassinations, and torture procedures (Sommier 2011, 38).

The Meanings of Vietnam

In the eyes of the '68 militants, notions of anticapitalism and anti-imperialism were manifested in the struggle in Vietnam, which became the “central rallying point for the International Left” (Wolin 2008, 73). From the American bombing of Hanoi in 1966 and especially after the Tet Offensive, the idea that the collective will of a nation could stand strong against the US war machine symbolised the primacy of the human against the machine and became a source of inspiration (Minakakis 2018). During the mid-

1960s Maoist doctrines which had anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist connotations such as “all revolutionaries are involved in the same struggle” (Memou 2019, 16) helped the French militants “in connecting [the] anti-colonialist mobilization to the struggle of those other ‘privileged Others of political modernity: workers” (Bourg 2003, 122).

Now, the ‘Other’ expands, obtaining a wider context in which contains the possibility of incorporating other political agents, in this case the Vietnamese peasant. The identification with the Vietnamese, both symbolic and a way of stirring things domestically meant that: “the Vietnamese fighter provided the transitional figure between the Algerian peasant of the early 1960s and the French worker during 1968” (Duhan 2013, 23). The French militants’ understanding of an identification between the Vietnam peasant and worker lies also in the fact that their struggle is brought about “from below”. For instance, French workers broke from the strict confines of the CGT’s trade unions and turned to more radical practices, as happened in the 1967 wildcat strikes of the factory workers of Rhodiaceta in Besançon (Duhan 2013).

Evidently, Europe ceases to be the main focus of the 1960s political active French and the so-called Third World becomes the centre of their attention (Singer 2013; Sommier 2011). The traditional and quite frankly racist cliché, which assumes that the West constitutes the place of ‘thinking’, whereas Third World is the place of ‘doing’ is disrupted, given that at this time is not only the Vietnamese or Cuban militant inspirational, but also the thinker originated from these countries. The colonised people were seen as political agents in their own right and not as victims (Ticktin 2011). Figures like Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, Malcom X etc. inspired these French radicals, who dismissed the conservative French left of PCF which supported Algérie française.

These anticolonial works became available predominantly due to François Maspero’s homonymous editions and bookstore, *La joie de lire* (Young 2021). Thanks to him, a varied repertoire became accessible comprised by anti-Stalinist Marxist and third-worldist works (many of which were censored, banned or hard to find), which allowed their readers, to become aware of what was going on in the rest of the world as well

as to their own country. At the time close to May, Maspero had with an internationalistic motive shifted his focus from the colonial other to the domestic (immigrant/native) worker, precisely because he thought that “everything is linked” (Maspero cited in Duhan 2013, 20).

Ex-militant, Henri Weber (2014, 97), had written that “the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movement constituted for the May militants the main entrance into politics and a constant mobilisations’ starting point”. For the French militants, the anti-imperialist struggle was seen as “an essential part of the struggle against capitalism” and for that reason they supported national liberation movements (Ticktin 2011, 21). The significance that the Vietnamese struggles had on them is comparable to the one the Algerian War had 10 years earlier (Wolin 2018). Both constituted the main reason behind the emergence of new organisational forms and practices far more radical than the past ones. These helped in providing a wider terrain for people’s politicization and direct contact with the issue at hand. A case in point is the creation of the Maoist-composed *Comités Vietnam de base* (CVB) and the ideologically-varied *Comité Vietnam National* (CVN), against the traditional communists’ tendency of engaging with issues that concern one’s own social category, initiating a kind of delocalisation (Sommier 2011).

Even the fact that the official beginning of the initial disputes between the students and the university’s management started on March 22 at an anti-Vietnam war demonstration signals the importance Vietnam had on the militants. There, an attack on the American Express office²⁰ in central Paris took place and led to the arrest of several students. After that, students from different ideological groups or even unaffiliated militants but with common anti-imperialist, anti-Gaullist, anti-consumerist sentiments, decided to create the ‘March 22 Movement’ through which they would “think separately and strike together” which again indicates an innovative organisational character (Singer 2013, 63).

²⁰ Acting as a symbol of American imperialism.

Although within the March 22 Movement there were multiple fragmentations there were not specific demands apart from opening the university and freeing the arrested students. But there was a general sentiment of disappointment/disidentification with the existing capitalist society and with the university as an institution that reproduced it. Their main goal was “to mobilise, to turn passive onlookers into actors” and specifically to prompt the working class to join them in their desire to “abolish the separation between labor and management” and create a classless society, since they knew that they could not achieve such radical changes while being confined in the boundaries of the university (Singer 2013, 63-65).²¹

Andrea Cavazzini (IS 2004) argues that the students’ desire to come into touch with the workers was based on their realisation that the institution of university was in essence a factory producing subjects according to the needs of capitalism. Their refusal to partake in the reproduction of this system, in which in some years they would probably become the ‘bosses’ who would exploit their workers or become the exploited workers themselves, meant that their thought process was corresponding to a social class analysis of the world. Students basically said: “*We don’t want to be trained in order to become the instruments of the capitalist exploitation of the working class*” (Rancière 2018, 290).

To get directly into touch with indigenous/immigrant workers intellectuals or students took up jobs in factories. Through this Maoist-inspired practice called *établissement*, both students/intellectuals and workers realised that the gap dividing them was insignificant (Mann 2011). In addition, the immigrant workers were for the first time included into discussions relating to direct conflict with the state. Until then, PCF had not attached any significance to immigrants for the mere fact that they could not be mobilised for electoral purposes. Hence, a “necessary displacement, a physical, and not merely textual or theoretical, trajectory outside of one’s proper space in the hope

²¹ Bensaid (2015, 57) specifically notes that the March 22 Movement “defined itself as anti-imperialist (solidarity with the Indochinese and Cuban peoples), anti-bureaucratic (solidarity with the Polish students and the Prague Spring) and anti-capitalist (solidarity with the workers of Caen and Redon).

of creating new social relations *à la base*” was undertaken to strengthen the unity of different social identities against the exploitative capitalist system (Ross 2002, 95).

The aforementioned CVBs supplied the '68 activists the formula of assembling the comités d'action. These were small groups of mostly people who did not belong to already existent groups and organised by profession, neighbourhoods, factories, universities, or schools engaged in the same anti-capitalist battle. Their main goals were to materially support the strikers and find ways “to retain the unorganised, the ‘mass’ unaffiliated who had come out onto the streets for the fighting and the demonstrations” and “define a common political line from the bottom up” and to answer to “the fundamental democratic need of the masses” (Tracts of comités d'action cited in Ross 2002, 78). These new political formations standing against the traditional political representation, namely the bureaucratic habits of the ‘traditional communists’ and the bourgeois hierarchies did not have official leadership (Memou 2019). As Duhan (2013) mentions, some action committees actively helped in strengthening the relationships between the foreign and indigenous workers. For example, the strike committee at Nanterre organised French lessons for Yugoslavian workers, other committees gave to foreign workers advices on how to avoid being exploited by landlords, while others planned free food delivery to ghettos in Paris.

In general, these practices did not happen only in May or by young Parisian students. Specifically, Sommier (in El Chazli 2018) by examining places outside of Paris notices that there were not just a younger generation revolting against the old one and distinguishes three generations that participated during the uprisings. First, the older generation who had been politicised through the Algerian War, second, the generation that was politicised by the Vietnam War and third the generation that later focused on women or LGBTQ+ issues. Fillieule (2018), also highlights that in provincial France and despite the ‘celebrities’ of Paris who distanced themselves from the May-June events, the influence of these new forms and practices that were cultivated during that time continued to be present to their political and organisational lives.

Solidarities and Subversion

The practices of direct democracy followed by students among of which were teach-ins, sit-ins, occupations of public buildings, demonstrations and public meetings, were met with extreme police violence (Memou 2019). The protests and clashes with the police reached their climax on the Night of the Barricades (10 May). At this night's demonstration in which participants inspired by their 1830, 1848 and Paris Commune predecessors, built barricades with paving stones and overturned cars, they proved their readiness for the imminent street-fighting. Police countered them with disproportional violence and tear-gas. Police brutality combined with the students' decisiveness were vital in spawning French public's sympathy. Workers joined the students' struggle on 13 May by going on strike, which eventually expanded to a general strike encompassing all professional sectors and, in some cases, lasted until June (Mathieu 2018; Perry 2008).

A considerable portion of the strikers following the students' example did not have traditional demands, such as a rise in salaries. Their slogan was "Metro-boulot-dodo" (commute-work-sleep): a description of their lives (Wolin 2008). Thus, by joining the students and showing their support they were also responding to their feeling of alienation by demanding a better quality of life (Duhan 2013). This meant being opposed to the idea of a relentless progress, the teleology of both liberal/capitalist and Stalinist systems of organisation. This would not be achieved through some minor reforms, but ideally with the destruction of the current system (Singer 2013).

But the alternatives do not offer themselves in clear teleology either. Badiou admits that while the students were heading towards the workers' base, they were contemplating:

What are we going to do there? We haven't got a clue, apart from the vague idea that the student revolt and the workers' strike have to unify, unify outside of the classic mediating organisations (in Benčin 2020, 6).

In cases where students arrived at occupying factories and were let inside, this provided for some the first in-person encounter with the realities of the workers'

struggle. Some students spent nights in the factories and according to some records from these encounters:

we eat, we drink fraternally and above all discuss. But about what! If not the revolt, the revolution, the worker-student relations, the necessity to unite the struggle into one struggle of the free university of student power, of workers' power, of the role of the middle management in the strike, of the refusal of the students to become exploiters, of self-management (Le Madec in Perry 2008).

Students by using traditionally workers' symbols such as red and black flags, building barricades, occupying university buildings, were using the latter's language in order to open communication between these two worlds (Bensaïd and Weber 1968, 23). Alongside this attempt and the new organisational modes, probably the most important element of May-June movement, which again has been underplayed by later depictions, is the power of the streets. The basic rationale behind the connection of the French-middle class students and the working-class stems from the fact that the streets provided the place for them to get into direct contact. That means that both were getting out of their social identities' prescribed spaces. Out of the universities, out of the factories and out of the way politics should conventionally be conducted. For instance, as Ross (2002) notes, in Censier, instead of students attempting to connect with the workers, the opposite happened. As the street clashes with students and the authorities were heating up, unemployed workers and young workers – against the orders of their unions– joined them.

Maurice Blanchot (2010, 91), an active militant through his whole life and member of the Students' and Writers' Action Committee during '68 wrote: "Streets have awakened: they speak. This is one of the decisive changes. They have become alive, powerful and sovereign once again: the place of all possible freedom". There is a unique significance regarding the demonstrators' practice of re-claiming public space "from its guardians, the police". The latter had not only dominated the streets but by invading Sorbonne on May 3, after a call from Rector Roche, and clearing it out of students, they had tried to take over "what has been by history and tradition endowed

as the *exclusive space* of the students” (Pezzini 2015, 35). In response, demonstrators built barricades to keep the police outside of a space larger than the university, the streets, the epitome of public space.

This physical displacement from their natural place was something radical, people from different social groups/categories/classes/nationalities somehow became as Rancière (1998) would put it an ‘impossible coalition’. People collectively refused to abide by “the capitalist functionalist understanding of social identity” and be confined to “the prescribed narrow units with which one was allowed to identify” (Cornell 2015, 3). The idea of a relationship of alterity, emerged prior and during ‘68, which was based not just on an ethical but on a fundamentally political concern. It echoed antinationalistic sentiments and an openness to internationalistic practices, which were ignored by traditional communists.

The immediate experiments in which all these alterities participated introduced a revolutionary unity that transcended any borders. These essentially signalled the advent of equality, not by promising a future programme as the “enemy” would have done (Blanchot 2010), be that the PCF or a bourgeois party, but as a lived experience, as if it had already been achieved, it was “a refusal that affirms” (Benčin 2020, 5). In a “new dialectics between equality and ‘otherness’” different classes, races, genders, nationalities, social categories came to be connected (Traverso 2018).

During the ‘68 events, the Minister of Interior Fouchet referred to the actions of demonstrators as ‘pègre’ (underworlds) which the newspaper, *L’Humanite*, quickly embraced. Some Action Committees acted instantly, one of which stated: “We who have participated in the actions attributed to a so-called pègre, we affirm that we are all rioters, we are all ‘la pègre’” (in Ross 2002, 108). Following the same logic demonstrators created a political subjectification that incorporated both the included and excluded when they chanted “We are all German Jews”.²² Ross (2002, 108) explains that “by de-naturalizing la pègre, by loosening the ties that bind the word to

²² This slogan was chanted by young French demonstrators during May when the then anarchist student, Daniel-Cohn Bendit, a Jewish and legally German citizen, had left France for a conference in Berlin and after he returned, the French government denied him entrance on the grounds that he was a foreign agitator (Singer 2013).

its sociological connotations, the word—be it German Jews or *pègre*— becomes available as a new political identity or subjectivity. By embracing the improper name, the name now stands in for a group that is not sociologically identifiable”.

The occupations, building of barricades, and demonstrations were an ‘exemplary act’, namely an act that “goes beyond itself and be brought beyond itself” (Rancière 2018, 293). Blanchot (2010, 99) explains that what makes an exemplary act overpowering “is that it bears the necessity of violence that has been suffered for too long, suddenly intolerable, and responds to it with a decision of infinite violence (...)”. In ‘68 the instance of “highest violence was no doubt the instant of nonviolence” when people shouted something that had never been uttered before, “We are all German Jews”. It was the act of ultimate disidentification from whichever category people belonged to. Demonstrators by identifying with a group such as ‘German Jews’ which would initially be considered something stigmatizing, laid the foundations for a new political and open subjectivation to appear between the chasm of two identities ‘German’ and ‘Jew’ (Rancière 1998, 30), which combined were not anymore a “classifiable sociological category” (Memou 2019, 17).

According to Blanchot (2010, 106), the significance of May ‘68 lies in the fact that through the events “students never acted as students in this so-called student action, but as those who unveiled a collective crisis, as the bearers of a power of rupture questioning the regime, the State, and society”. And the same goes for workers and peasants. Overall, as Ross (2002, 25) notes:

May was a crisis in functionalism. The movement took the form of political experiments in declassification in disrupting the natural givenness of places; it consisted of displacements that took students outside of the university, in meetings that brought farmers and workers together, or students to the countryside (...) [in] a new kind of mass organising (against the Algerian War in the early 1960s and later against the Vietnam War) that involved physical dislocation. And in that physical dislocation lay a dislocation in the very idea of politics—moving it outside of its place, its proper place, which was for the left at that time the Communist Party.

Overview

In this chapter I attempted to locate the origins and aspects of the May-June '68 events which reveal their political dimension. Mostly but not exclusively, through the Algerian and Vietnam War, parts of the French society became politicized, but in distance from the traditional political means. They became aware of “what they oppose in *their own* society” and critical towards capitalism and imperialism, personified by Gaullism. Majority of the leftists broke from the rigid confines of the traditional left and from the functions of their own social category/class and adopted new organizational forms and practices. These were based on direct-participatory democracy and on a revolutionary solidarity between fundamentally different people which echoed a profound desire for equality.

CHAPTER 3

Divide and Rule

If the '68 events were only a student uprising in which students were demanding more progressive changes regarding their interests, they would not pose such a threat towards the state (Bensaïd 2015). They would even be welcomed by the labor unions' leadership, who as CGT's leader, Georges Séguy (in Singer 2013, 67), had stated they were searching for such a "responsible organisation" to cooperate with. Singer (2013, 66-67) underscores that the actual danger was that students wanted to "break out of their ghetto and turn to the workers. (...) to join in the common struggle (...) [and] change society, not just the university". Even the former Paris police Chief, Maurice Grimaud, had admitted that he had fully understood that this was the fundamental threat, since when asked in an interview whether the state could have collapsed in '68, he answered:

The real danger was when the workers took part. First of all, on 13 May, a great united demonstration of solidarity after the night of the barricades, then the following days when, spontaneously, the youngest workers, without consulting the unions, decided to follow the students (in Perry 2008).²³

The threat that the radical spirits of equality, disidentification, and the collective struggle of the 'Others' were posing meant that somehow their political dimension had to be enervated. Most emphatically, this was done by means of cutting short workers' and students' practice of spatial displacement and thus direct contact. The authorities, cunningly assisted by the leadership of the PCF-influenced CGT, limited students' and workers' presence in the streets through their ruthless use of violence (Mathieu 2018). As a result, workers and students returned to their socially prescribed

²³ He continued by saying: "At last, from 16 and 17 May, when the large forces of the CGT and CFDT [union federations], understanding that their credibility was at stake, call for the generalisation of the strike. It is then that the fragility of the state appeared clearly. The police could disperse a demonstration, overturn ten or 20 barricades, it could not clear out 100 or 500 factories, workshops, department stores, banks and train stations. And less still get them back to work" (Grimaud in Perry 2008).

space since the authorities basically let them to occupy the factories/working spaces and the campuses.²⁴

This broke communication between students and workers but also between the workers of different factories (Cornell 2015), and thus they could no longer co-organise and collectively make their decisions about for example what strategy should they follow for the strike or for demonstrations. An illustration of that self-inclusion constitutes the time when students arrived at the gates of the Renault car factory, and they were greeted by closed gates. Their conversation took place while having railings between them. One of the major concerns of the CGT was “to frame the mobilisation as a workers-only struggle by avoiding demonstrations that would put them in contact with students and the students’ more disruptive methods”, instead they preferred promoting methods of occupation, which they found more controllable (Mathieu 2018, 90). According to Singer (2013, 154) the CGT also “wanted to reduce contact at the base, among the rank and file, to a minimum” so that they could manipulate better the workers by limiting the outside of the CGT information.

The practice of occupation paradoxically helped both the authorities and the CGT in individually dealing with them and in restoring their lost supremacy within the workers respectively. For Ross (2002, 68-69), the government’s strategy of pushing away the workers from the streets and into the factories was best mirrored by the then Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou, who had stated: “I wanted to treat the problem of the youth separately”. This strategy of ‘separation and containment’ adopted by the authorities and state representatives was more than effective since it succeeded in first separating them and secondly creating a picture in which the workers started to recede from it. Of course, this perception was reaffirmed even by the most reproduced photographic documents, that used to capture a state of disorder with just students in the streets of Paris clashing with police (Memou 2011;2019).²⁵

²⁴ On May 11 Georges Pompidou decided to reopen the Sorbonne to the students two days later.

²⁵ For example, Memou (2019, 11) refers to “Claude Dityvon’s photograph of the young protester with the long hair who throws the stone in a Cartier Latin Street [which] has attained an iconic status, dwelling into the collective memory as the representative of the movement and obscuring visual

Hence, the violent disruptions of the social functions that each social category/class/identity had to be confined to, evident through the union of intellectual contestation and workers' struggle based on practices of equality was kept outside of the 'official memory' of the '68 events.

Génération-68

Notwithstanding, it was not exclusively due to the government's attempt to separate the students', (native/immigrant) workers', farmers', unemployed and intellectuals' collective struggle. Bensaïd (2015) and Hocquenghem (1986), two of the few 'leading' figures of '68 that after the events remained faithful to their ideals and also Rancière (1998;2018) and Ross (2002;2008;2018a;2018b;2019) had recognised that a distorted picture of May '68 had been propagated by other sources as well. The narratives based on the family psychodrama discourse and generational conflict would have some vouching that nothing substantial had happened during May '68, whereas others would argue that it was perpetrated by the sociological category of 'youth' while having merely cultural effects.

In the immediate aftermath of the events several sociologists, who tried to make sense of what happened, dominated the discussions around them. Their approaches would end up being some of the main narratives through which the events would be explained for the years to come. Possibly the most influential interpretation of the events was put forward by the leading figure of French Right, Raymond Aron, who during the events had written several articles in *Le Figaro* and later published the book *The Elusive Revolution* (1969). Aron (1969, ix, 41) would characterise them as "the event that turned out to have been a non-event" or an "elusive revolution" perpetrated by middle-class students parallelized with what "rats" do when they feel overcrowded. In his book he used terms such as "delirium", "psychodrama", "tragi-comedy" in order to characterise what he downgraded as a "blather" or "quasi-

representations, which are at variance with the stereotypical figure of the young (often violent) protester".

revolution” that expressed a kind of youthful fraternity in a semi-criminal community (Aron 1969, 12,21,27,54). As Wolin (2018, 8) notes, Aron did not consider the events as having any political dimension and preferred to shift the focus to “the ‘clinical’ plane of adolescent social psychology”.

Another well-regarded sociologist engaged with the discussion surrounding May '68 was Alain Tourraine who elaborated his views in his book *Le Communisme Utopique* (1968). From his vantage point, the events initiated a new kind of conflict “in which new social classes misplaced the working class from the centre of the revolutionary process” and argued that they highlighted the importance of cultural and lifestyle aspects (cited in Memou 2019, 11). According to Reynolds (2011) both thinkers downplayed the rebelliousness and radicality of the events by arguing that the revolt was the product of distinct and unrelated issues mismanaged by the authorities. Moreover, by focussing on the students and claiming they were the only instigator, this resulted in erasing from the picture the workers, immigrants, peasant etc. that had also participated (Memou 2011;2019).

This discourse of a ‘youth/student revolt’ was further popularised through Hervé Hamon’s and Patrick Rotman’s two-volume fiction book, *Génération*, published in 1988 in which they wrote a supposed-biographical history of the time before, during and after the '68 upheavals (1962-1975) while having as protagonists a select band of prominent Parisian students. Through their books, the magnitude of the crisis was reduced, since they ignored the strike, the actions in the provinces and depicted the events as a Parisian student revolt, that eventually accelerated France’s modernisation (Reynolds 2011). Justifiably, their texts were characterised by Bensaïd (2015, 74) as an “ahistorical historiography [which] simply dismisses what Adolfo Gilly calls ‘the politics of the people’, or the politics of oppressed”.

However, these opinions did not acquire dominance only due to these types of debatable approaches. Their solidification was achieved mostly by some of the more prominent figures and self-designated leaders of the movement. Bensaïd (2015) has called these the ‘exes’ or ‘converted/reformed-*gauchistes*’ who were repentant of their involvement in the upheavals and tried to justify their subsequent trajectories of

reconciliation with the market and state politics by altering their past. The mere fact of their personal experience granted them the legitimacy to speak for what they considered the whole '*Génération-68*' and enabled them to propose selective and biased interpretations according to a "teleology of the present in which later outcomes (1980s) decide the value of earlier situations (1960s)" (Bourg 2003, 119). Bensaïd (2015, 70) explains that a 'biographic confiscation' had occurred "that reduc[ed] the event to a 'generational drama' all the better to spirit away the spectre of class struggle in favour of a recurrent generational conflict" But this thinking process goes even further. Since according to them the youth is inciting revolt and disobedience, and youth eventually passes, these too –soon or later– will pass (Bensaïd 2015; Ross 2002).

In the vicennial commemorations of the events, some of these reformed-*gauchistes*, posed as the authorised custodians of the memory of a '*mass*' movement (della Porta 2018), all the while vanishing "the actors who represented the essence of May, the [anonymous] masses" (Bourg 2003, 124).²⁶ In their 'testimonies', they usually omitted the story of the worker and colonial Others as well as the questions of equality that had been posed during the upheavals (Stephens 2003). Instead, they shifted the focus to a 'cultural youth revolt' discourse and buried the political characteristics of the events.

Ross (2002) points to several paradigms of these ex-*gauchistes*' revisionists accounts. For example, she mentions a French televised show, *Le Procès de Mai*²⁷, aired in 1988 dedicated to commemorating May '68 in which Bernard Kouchner, an ex-militant and co-founder of Doctors without Borders, is the host accompanied by several other ex-militants and experts each of whom expressed their own take regarding the events. In a court-like setting with an audience composed by young people of 'the '88-generation', May '68 "was accused of engendering a major crisis at a time when France was doing so well" (Reynolds 2011, 20). Kouchner, by using examples such as the dress

²⁶ However, it should be mentioned that in the tenth anniversary of the events, some of the political aspects of the upheavals, such as the police violence, the Vietnam War and the workers' strike were mentioned in televisual commemoration programmes or in books (Ross 2002).

²⁷ Translation: May's Trial.

codes that high school students needed to adhere to or the fact that contraception was not widely accessible, implies that the uprisings' root causes were the need for a cultural lifestyle change due to the fact that France was culturally regressive.

During the show, on the one hand, journalist Dominique Jamet depicts the events "as a waste of time and a psychodrama" (Reynolds 2011, 20) while Annie Kriegel, former history professor and avid anti-communist, and economist Michel Albert insist that May '68 hindered the modernisation of French universities as well as France's economy. Moreover, ex-feminist Annette Levy-Willard spewed her criticism towards 'ultra-feminism' as being responsible for the loosening of the people's morals. On the other hand, ex-militant Henri Weber²⁸, to dispute these portrayals of the events and salvage a positive picture, spoke of a libertarian and democratic movement and claimed, "sexual liberty and the MLF²⁹ not only as results of '68 but as its greatest achievements, leading to 'a society modified for the better'" (Ross 2002, 149).³⁰

Throughout the show the speakers-experts do not address the issue of violence unless they refer to the one inflicted by *gauchistes* during the post-May period. The police violence or that enacted by imperial powers in the Algerian or the Vietnam war, or even the street-fighting had completely receded from their memory. Now the state was presented as passive without any agency whilst violence was a characteristic of only an extremist minority of the 1970s. According to Ross (2002, 151-153), by rejecting the presence of violence and the political aspects of the movement, they tried to pose a picture of a peaceful transformation which was seeking "a newly reinforced, bourgeois private life, sexual liberty and the women's movement (...) [which were] conceived as rehabilitation of the private against the excess of the public that helped put the flowering of the individual back on track".

²⁸ Henri Weber was a former Trotskyist who was member of the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR), alongside with Daniel Bensaïd, with whom after the events had co-authored the book: *Mai 1968: Une Répétition Générale*. Paris: Maspero. In 1986, as Bensaïd (2015) notes, was 'converted' and became a member of *Parti Socialiste*.

²⁹ Mouvement de libération des femmes.

³⁰ Ex-anarchist Cohn-Bendit who had left behind him his militant years and engaged himself with conventional politics would also be one of those ex-gauchistes who supported the idea that May '68 was in essence a cultural youth revolt and a sexual liberation movement (Memou 2011; Ross 2002).

Conveniently, what these custodians of '68's memory were referring to was in accordance more with the zeitgeist of the 1970s-1980s and less with 1960s (Bourg 2003). Castoriadis (2018) has contended that cultural questions such as sexual liberation, contraception or abortion were indeed posed during the events. However, they were conceived as issues of the subject's autonomy and not as a need to turn to an unconditional private hedonistic society. From Hocquenghem's standpoint, that era's homosexual liberation movements, for example, had been "coopted by consumerism and by the new political organizations of the Left, and thus emptied of their subversive potential. As the focus of the movements shifted increasingly inwards towards questions of culture and identity in the late 1970s as opposed to outwards towards social revolution" (Haas 2004, 406).³¹

Nonetheless, even though they remained marginal efforts, some 'unrepentant' militants who were also actively involved in the events tried to dispute this generational discourse which highlighted only these cultural aspects. In 1986 Hocquenghem penned an Open Letter³² in which he accused his old comrades³³ for betraying their past ideals, defecting to Mitterrand's side, and for becoming what they loathed the most in their militant years "bourgeois conformists, unscrupulous careerist, and petty seekers of power and wealth" (Haas 2004, 409). For him, it was not so much that they had converted to liberalism but that they had abused the legitimacy given to them through their participation in the events in order to "impose their vision of politics on future generations, silencing their demands and censoring their imaginations" (Haas 2004, 419). From Bensaïd's (2015, 8) side, he did not care

³¹ In 1987, Hocquenghem during an interview had stated that: "If we called ourselves a 'revolutionary homosexual action front' it was because, for us what was most essential was not homosexuality but revolutionary action. It was a way of saying not only that a revolutionary could be homosexual too, but that being homosexual might be the best way of being revolutionary" (cited in Haas 2004, 406-407).

³² Specifically, he had written: "Generation: for years, I swore to myself never to pronounce this word... I do not like the idea of belonging to a coagulated block of disappointment and cronyism, which only begins to feel its identity with the massive betrayal of maturity. One only becomes a generation after one has retracted, like a snail into its shell or the confessed prisoner into his cell; the failure of a dream, the strata of rancour and bitterness, the undissolved remainder of a former uprising is called a 'generation'" (Hocquenghem 1986, 15-16).

³³ He even accused them by name. Among others he mentions, André Glucksmann, Bernard Kouchner and Serge July.

about the “rhetoric of betrayal” Hocquenghem was referring to. However, he too abhorred the fact that the entirety of those active during the events were:

Caught in the net of a generation [that] imposes affinities that are not agreed, which the heart no longer shares. (...) It is increasingly hard for me to recognise myself in that ‘generation’ of old hams who refuse to get off the stage. The derisory tag of ‘68-er’ is ever more hateful when borne as the pennant of a certificate of imperial nobility.

Nullity³⁴

During the show, Kouchner, in a self-deprecating way, criticised those involved in the events as being ignorant of the plights of the Third World. The man who had even travelled to Cuba in 1964 to interview Fidel Castro (*Europe 1* 2016), completely expunged a fundamental aspect of the 1960s associated with the “anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in places like Vietnam, Algeria, Palestine, Cuba” (Ross 2002, 156) and said “We discovered the Third World” only years later (cited in Bensaid 2015, 6). By the newly discovered Third World he means ‘the victims’ of droughts, floods and totalitarian states or ‘the barbarians’ responsible for the totalitarianism of their country and by no means “the combative Third-World or the Third-World Other as the militant, articulate thinker and fighter” (Stephens 2003). Ticktin (2011, 21) stresses that the Third-World Other’s political agency was dissolved in an ahistorical and apolitical present where “instead of politics, there were victims and saviours – and a new civilising mission” to embark on. This means that the historical circumstances that caused crises in the Third World and rendered people as ‘victims’ were not taken into consideration and hence “questions of scale and responsibility are blurred by the

³⁴ In an interview with Gilles Deleuze, when asked about what he thinks of the New Philosophers he replied: “Nothing. I think that their thought is worthless. I see two possible reasons for this nullity. To begin with, they resort to the use of concepts that are as coarse as a hollow tooth. (...) the weaker the content of the thought, the more important the thinker becomes, the more the subject of enunciation asserts its importance in relation to the empty utterances (“I, as a lucid and courageous subject, I am telling you.... I, as a soldier of Christ.... I, member of the lost generation.... We, insofar as we are responsible for May '68..., insofar as we no longer let ourselves be deceived by illusions...”) (Deleuze 1998, 37).

portrayal of such situations in terms of good and evil, giving rise to a politics ‘pregnant with tyranny’” (Wolfreys 2002).

Kouchner, however, is part of a larger analysis which relates to the way in which the Third-Worldism of 1960s was replaced by the discourse of human rights, strictly related to victim’s rights. Besides, the late 1980s was the culmination of ten years of work of the so-called New Philosophers, the outriders of this discourse (Ross 2008). According to David Macay (2019, 383) “the ideal new philosopher was someone who had at various times been an orthodox communist, a Maoist and a militant catholic” and would thereafter fiercely reject all types of Marxism and devote themselves to liberalism, human rights, and anti-statism. These thinkers influenced by the popularisation of the French publication of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, in the mid-1970s had pioneered a campaign focused on the East European dissidents and against totalitarianism and would gain massive media exposure (Dean and Zamora 2021).

Ex-maoist André Glucksmann³⁵ began to concern himself with “the concept of totalitarianism first developed in the immediate post-war period” and reintroduced it to an audience that was dealing with the disappointments engendered by “the eclipsing of hopes raised by May 1968” (Wolfreys 2002). Many New Philosophers influenced by Glucksmann’s works, adopted particularly one term which he had given to it great interest, the ‘pleb’. By that he meant the figure of an individual suffering such as the far-away Gulag inmate, which later evolved into the starving victim of the Third World (Ross 2002). These helpless beings, contrarily to the figure of the proletariat/colonial other, from which the ‘68 events initially had been inspired by, was resigned to “its own limited destiny – to seek neither power nor honour nor wealth, but simply to avoid oppression” (Wolfreys 2002). For ex-*gauchiste* Bernard-Henri Levy “there can be no socialism without the camps” and “a Soviet camp is Marxist, as Auschwitz was Nazi” (cited in Macay 2019, 386). For them, revolution is equated to totalitarianism and thus the retreat from politics was essential, as attempts

³⁵ Glucksmann had not admitted that he was part of the New Philosophers’ circle, but everyone considered him as one of their members (Macay 2019).

to change the world eventually led to subjugation (Lecourt 1978). “THE revolution must be declared impossible, uniformly and for always” (Deleuze 1998, 41).

In this context, apart from the more theoretical practices of the New Philosophers, the new humanitarian missions can be included. During the 1980s, several *ex-gauchistes*, such as Kouchner, the self-proclaimed “mercenary emergency medicine” (cited in Ticktin 2011, 22), turned to practices that did not address the chronic problems of the Third World but engaged with emergency situations and missions of care that were mostly about rescue, the so-called “ambulance-politics [that] remobilizes neoromantic colonialist tropes” (Ross 2002, 180). Here lies the beginning of the ‘right to intervene’ discourse which is based on “a moral imperative to intervene based on suffering [and not] on a political or democratic movement” (Ticktin 2011, 78). However, according to Ticktin (2011), this kind of moralism is antipolitical due to not addressing the need for changing the dominant order, which was to be blamed for the majority of these crises. Hocquenghem (1986), had described his former comrades’ new undertakings as “warrior moralism” and claimed that they had suffered a crisis of masculinity, which meant that they had to compensate for their conversion to liberalism by showing their strength through supporting rescue missions or military interventions.

What this different approach towards the ‘third-world other’ reveals is a “retreat from politics into ethics” (Rancière 1998, 31). Instead of a political connection with ‘the other’ cultivated through solidarity and the fact that the latter’s ideas became the inspiration for those during ‘68, ‘the others’ are now recognized “as objects meriting [just] concern and generosity” (Bourg 2003, 123). Deleuze (1998) had seen deeper than the surface and had realised that this change, was targeting the ‘68 in total and that the New Philosophers, particularly, were mostly interested in cultivating ‘the hatred of ‘68’.³⁶ Their underlying objective was not a vague type of Marxism, but “the idea of revolutionary exit from the crisis of the imperialist system”, like the one that

³⁶ Deleuze (1998, 40) had stated that the New Philosophers were: “jockey[ing] to see who could bad-mouth May ‘68 better. It is in relation to that hatred they had constructed their subject of enunciation ‘We insofar as we did May ‘68(??), we can tell you that is stupid and that we won’t repeat it’.”

mobilized those in the Algerian War or in in May '68 (Lecourt cited in Wolfreys 2002). Also, their choice to become the voice of an eternally voiceless pleb that conveniently cannot disprove them seemed superficial if not hollow, since they did not simultaneously care to engage or make any connections for example with the mass of Algerian workers who were also struggling in France (Lecourt 1978). Instead, they achieved in obscuring the questions of equality that had been risen during '68 by replacing them with a discourse about an abstract freedom and rescue of the suffering and voiceless individual (Ross 2002).

The Pinnacle of Individualism

Several other thinkers and *ex-gauchistes* from a conservative or 'neo-republican' standing point, also jumped on the bandwagon of explaining the events by proposing equally misleading approaches, most of which represented them as the advent of a neoliberal and individualistic life. One of the first supporters of that idea was –ex-militant turned Mitterrand's official adviser– Régis Debray (2008, 79). He had argued that “a natural harmony [existed] between the individualistic revolts of May and the political and economic needs of the immense liberal capitalism” as well as “the ideology of the 68-ers [dominated] due to their ability to translate the needs of the ruling class in ideas”. Additionally, he blamed '68 of being “the cradle of a new bourgeois society” and “a ruse of Capital” since the outcome of the events would only turn a conservative bourgeois state into a modernised or Americanised version in which society would be reigned by a generalised consumerism (Laval 2018, 13).

Moreover, Gilles Lipovetsky's account articulated in his book, *The Age of Emptiness* (1983), was one of those that reinforced the idea that the events were the cause for “the emergence of a 'total' individualism that was based on an 'ego hypertrophy' and [for the] spread of small communities with 'lilliputian micro-interests' at the time when the meaning of the collective was devoured by the private sphere” (cited in Rosanvallon 2020, 317). Lipovetsky's approach would inspire two other thinkers, Luc

Ferry and Alain Renault, who wrote the book *La pensée 68*³⁷ (1985). In it they attempted to make a deceptive connection between the events and an ideological assemblage that was foreign to them. By linking the 'thought of '68' with the works of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and Bourdieu, they contended "that it was not only a premonition of the rise of contemporary individualism but, more importantly, that it was an inherently 'anti-humanist' tendency" (Memou 2011, 87-89).

However, Ferry's-Renault's approach was more than problematic, since the thinkers they were pointing at for 'corrupting' the youth, at the time had not directly or indirectly participated in the upheavals. Specifically, some had not even commented on the events whilst others had been critical towards them (Castoriadis 2008). Castoriadis (2018) would strongly criticise Ferry's-Renault's work and argue that the ideas of what he had called "French Ideology" which were preaching about the death of the man and by extension of politics, did not play any role for the preparation of the events and in reality, they were unknown to the '68 actors, but also antithetical to the latter's aspirations. He also wrote that:

"'68 thought' it is in fact the anti-'68 thought, the kind of thinking that has built its mass success on the ruins of the '68 movement. The ideologists that Ferry and Renault discuss, are the thinkers of the debility of humans in face of their creations; and it is that exact feeling of debility and the discouragement of the fatigue, they rushed to legitimise after '68 (208).

In 1998, Sociologist Jean-Pierre Le Goff would systematise the aforementioned approaches in his book *Mai 68 l'Héritage Impossible*. He asserted that the ideas expressed during '68 were the harbinger of a "managerial ideology" which would not have prevailed if it were not for setting some focal '68 ideas such as autogestion, under the service of capitalism. Furthermore, he considered these ideas responsible for "the decline of authority, the ignorance towards traditions and the fact that institutions and primarily the school were now weak" (Rosanvallon 2020, 319).

³⁷ Translation: The '68 Thought.

Like Le Goff', the authors of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello furthered the idea that May '68 constituted the essential turning-point that signalled the shift from a "rigid Fordist 'spirit' of capitalism to the modern neoliberal spirit of capitalism" (Parkinson 2018). According to them, '68 represents the moment when people distanced themselves from a 'social critique' of capitalism that counters selfishness and inequalities for the sake of solidarity and adopted an 'artistic critique' (Rancière 2018). Benčin (2020, 3) emphasises that in their scenario of '68 as a 'renewal of capitalism', they argued that the '68-actors by supposedly ignoring a social critique and engaging with an artistic one, "social problems of the working class got replaced by the themes of individual autonomy, freedom and creativity [and that] the artistic critique of capitalism paved the way for a modernised version of capitalism that incorporated such freedom and creativity within its forms of exploitation".

However, apart from completely misrepresenting May-June '68, what those who argue that it was a 'modernisation sock' or a 'renewal of capitalism' fail to mention is that these outcomes would have already occurred despite May '68. Several other western capitalist countries, such as Spain or Norway, constitute the proof, as this rejuvenation happened without the eruption of revolts similar to the French May '68 (Ross 2002).

If one thinks in more contemporary terms, they will realise that these distorting and oversimplified approaches are reproduced even today through the viewpoints of those who have acquired the highest governmental positions. Specifically, Nicola Sarkozy, in 2007 while being a presidential candidate, declared that the legacy of May '68 needs to be "liquidated", because the majority of the current troubles of the French society, from "the intellectual and moral relativism" (cited in Laval 2018, 12) to capitalism's cynicism, stemmed from it (Oikonomou 2020). Unsurprisingly, these approaches remind us of Liptovetsky's or Ferry's-Renault's opinions. By contrast, years later during the 50th anniversary of the events, the current president, Emmanuel Macron, would wish to "celebrate" the one-dimensional May '68 propagated by Weber and Kouchner, namely the neo-liberal assertions that allude to France's 'positive' modernisation and cultural transformation (*France 24* 2017). Still, in any

revisionist re-reading of the events, the same reason lies behind the need to reduce it to just a cultural youth revolt that either had positive or negative effects, the fear of their mass and political quality (Ross 2002, 207).

Overview

In this chapter I examined some of the multiple narratives around May '68 that have dominated within its memorialisation and why did that happen. Briefly, these varied from considering it a family psychodrama to a cultural youth revolt. For some it had no substantial effects, thus it was relegated to a non-event. Contrarily, the idea of being a cultural youth revolt with (neo)liberal connotations led some to assert a positive version that refers to the modernisation of France, whilst others to a negative which corresponds “to the emergence of an all-powerful hedonistic individualism” (Laval 2018, 11). What can be concluded from all these approaches is that “we have a right to hear just about everything concerning May ‘except politics’” (Stephens 2003), since its radicality and mass proportions were uncontrollable threats towards the status quo and thus it was essential to neutralize it, by depriving it from its political characteristics.

CHAPTER 4

Unfinished Business

Through approaching May-June '68 as a history of the vanquished that has been systematically distorted or kept hidden it becomes possible to understand that the dominant narratives propagated both by uninvolved thinkers and *ex-gauchistes*, do not represent the whole picture. Memou (2011, 84) refers to Benjamin, who had “elaborated the difficulties that the historical subject encounters in their efforts to save an image of a past endangered and under threat of becoming a tool of the ruling classes”. The memory of the '68 events has been exposed to that particular danger. To resurface the now silenced anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-Gaullist aspects and origins of the events is to gain a deeper understanding of one of their basic dimensions, namely the political and to realise the process of appropriation that their memory has undergone.

In the second chapter of the thesis, I tried to do just that. By pinpointing some catalyst moments both from before and during the '68 that allude to the events' political origins and dimensions. It can be argued that their prehistory dates back to the Algerian War, to the encounter with the colonial Other and the police violence that reached extreme levels. Subsequently, parts of the French were further politicised during the Vietnam war, which constituted the case that sparked world-wide mass reaction against the U.S intervention and in favour of the Vietnamese people who fought heroically. The Vietnamese figure was connected to the at home Other, the (immigrant/native) worker, who at a lesser extent was exploited by the same capitalist and imperialist power. The Algerian and Vietnamese struggle accompanied by the realisation of the difficulties which the working-class was facing, enabled a considerable portion of the French society to fundamentally question western capitalism and imperialism and primarily the Gaullist system which was reproducing them.

During that time people started to 'dis-identify' with the state, with the role that their social category/class had ascribed them to act upon and with the traditional ways politics used take place. New modes of organisation and practices emerged which led to extending the terrain of people's politicisation and provided opportunities for more direct ways to engage with every day's issues. These were far more radical than the traditional communists' lacklustre ways of organisation and attracted apart from the already political active constituents, unaffiliated people. As a result, people different from each other met and created an impossible-revolutionary alliance through practices of direct equality that echoed a political dimension that transcended any kind of boundaries set by the so-called police order.

Throughout the third chapter, I attempted to elaborate on the after-readings of the events which acquired dominancy. Often, these were far from what the events initially represented, or they were focusing only on its cultural aspects. In accounts of well-regarded sociologists and reformed-*gauchistes* the sociobiological category of 'youth' was posed as their sole instigator, which resulted in concealing all the other alterities that had actively participated or that had inspired the participants. Some viewed them as a 'psychodrama' with no substantial effects, whilst others argued that they had only cultural impacts, which some considered them positive, such as a modernised France and others as an advent of a cynical capitalism and an individualistic hedonistic private life. In these dominant narratives one seems consistent, it had no political dimensions.

Apart from the topics that were discussed, by examining '68 it provides us an opportunity of grasping the present moment, since similarities with today are more than a few, even though not visible at first sight. As Ross (2018b) has stated, there is not any point in engaging with the case of May if not for shedding a light in the current time that we live in. While examining '68 one can understand from "where we are coming and where we still are", so that we can figure out where should we go from now on and break out of the numbness that the continuous defeats have brought about (Traverso 2016).

Turning to Benjamin, he was asking historians to live in the present, while looking ahead at the future and try to bring to life the hopes and salvage the pain of the past's

oppressed classes through their remembrance. For it is not merely the picture of our “liberated grandchildren” but also our “enslaved ancestors” that should mobilise us (Benjamin 2014, 19). This could be done only through realising that an invisible linkage exists between past, present, and future. However, now people, having an enclosed horizon due to the current neoliberal perception of time (‘presentism’), can only think of their everyday life due to the frantically quick pace of our modern times, in which as Frederic Jameson has put it “it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (cited in Wandarva 2012). Thus, the aforementioned linkage has been broken since people have stopped believing in a forthcoming salvation that could come by through the ruins of the past (Traverso 2011).

The main limitations of this thesis, thus, is that it is restricted only on the history of “our enslaved ancestors” and does not seek to explicitly propose a connection with the current times that we live in. Yet, this limitation gives the opportunity to become the starting point for future research which might focus on the ways that May-June events and its after-readings resonate with current times. While I agree that the paradigm of ’68 radiates a potentiality-futurity (Pezzini 2015), in a hypothetical attempt to connect it with the present struggles, I would not support that it should work as a strict model that today’s movements need to reproduce (Ross 2002) or as the final battle that was lost (Bensaïd 2015). Instead, it needs to be seen as an “unfinished business” a moment within a probably unending process, not the “historic peak launching an assault against heaven” (Bensaïd, 2015, 65). ’68 should be considered as a time in which people adopted new political practices and forms and as such to work as an inspiration for the current and future struggles (Pezzini 2015).

Turning back to the present study, from its vantage point, the narratives of those who ended up identifying themselves with the ruling classes, the victors, have systematically attempted to distort the past of the ’68 events, by silencing its political characteristics. Consequently, they have achieved in neutralising ’68’s political radicalism and downgrading it to a cultural youth revolt. This misleading myth “has persisted because it constitutes a formidable call to demobilization for future generation. If every revolt ends with compromise and everyone for themselves, what

is the point of any undertaking?" (Fillieule 2018, 6). Clearly, the victors by appropriating the past they can control the future (Bensaïd 2015). Thus, prompted by left-wing melancholia, I attempted to approach the '68 events as a history of the vanquished, whose memory has been kept hidden or has been distorted through the reproduction of the discussed dominant narratives. The purpose of resurfacing their now suppressed political aspects and roots lies in the desire to at least represent a broader picture of the May-June '68 events. Maybe then, after the re-politicisation of this 'unfinished business' it can become one of the steppingstones for the struggles to come.

Bibliography

- Ali, Tariq. 2018. *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties*. London: Verso.
- Aron, Raymond. 1969. *The Elusive Revolution: Anatomy of a Student Revolt*. London: Pall Mall Press.
- Ashton, Dore. 2004. "May' 68 and Its Afterlives." *Third Text*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0952882032000182749>.
- Attia, Maurice. 2012. *Το μαύρο Αλγέρι*. Αθήνα: Πόλις.
- Badiou, Alain, and Kristin Ross. 2015. "Contre-Courant: Le Débat Alain Badiou-Kristin Ross." Mediapart. 2015.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpTi6L31MSo&t=183s>.
- Beckerman, Gal. 2019. "The Agony of Walter Benjamin." *The New York Times*, April 26, 2019, sec. Books.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/26/books/review/frederic-pajak-uncertain-manifesto.html>.
- Benčin, Rok. 2020. "Distant Immediacy: Badiou and Rancière on May '68 and Its Consequences." *European Review* 29 (6): 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1062798720000824>.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2014. *Θέσεις για τη Φιλοσοφία της Ιστορίας*. Αθήνα: Λέσχη των Κατασκόπων του 21ου Αιώνα.
- Bensaïd, Daniel. 2015. *An Impatient Life: A Memoir*. London: Verso.
- Bensaïd, Daniel, and Henri Weber. 1968. *Mai 1968: Une Repetition Generale*. Paris: Maspero.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 2010. *Political Writings, 1953-1993*. N.Y.: Fordham University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2018. "Did Anything Happen in May 68?" *Ctrl+Alt+Dem* (blog). April 30, 2018. <https://alternative-democracy-research.org/2018/04/30/did-anything-happen-in-may-68/>.
- Bourg, Julian. 2003. "Hello to All That: Rescuing May 1968." *French Cultural Studies* 14 (1): 117–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097155803014001007>.

- Camp, Jordan T, and Christina Heatherton. 2016. *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*. London Verso.
- Cornell, Nica. 2015. "A Response to Kristin Ross May 1968 and Its Afterlives." *The Franz Fanon Blog*.
https://www.academia.edu/48975199/A_response_to_Kristin_Ross_May_68_and_its_Afterlives.
- Dean, Mitchell, and Daniel Zamora. 2021. *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*. London; New York: Verso.
- Debray, Régis. 2008. *Mai 68, Une Contre-Révolution Réussie: Modeste Contribution Aux Discours et Cérémonies Officielles Du Dixième Anniversaire*. Paris: Mille Et Une Nuits.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1998. On the New Philosophers and a More General Problem Interview by Bertrand Augst. *Discourse*.
<https://www.istor.org/stable/41389496>.
- Duhan, John. 2013. "Vive Le Proletariat: The 1968 Revolt of French Workers and Students." Honors Theses, West Michigan University.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/2376/.
- El Chazli, Youssef. 2018. "Far from the Parisian Center: The Lesser-Known Side of May 1968." *Mada Masr*. June 2, 2018.
<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/06/02/feature/politics/far-from-the-parisian-center-the-lesser-known-side-of-may-1968/>.
- Europe 1. 2016. "Bernard Kouchner: 'Fidel Castro et Moi-Même Étions Jaloux l'Un de L'autre,'" November 27, 2016.
<https://www.europe1.fr/international/bernard-kouchner-fidel-castro-et-moi-meme-etions-jaloux-lun-de-lautre-2912021>.
- Ferriter, Lindsay. n.d. "Contrapuntal Reading." *Academics.hamilton.edu*. Accessed May 17, 2022.
<https://academics.hamilton.edu/english/ggane/contrapuntal.html>.
- Fillieule, Olivier. 2018. "Introduction. An Exploration of the Long 68 and Its Afterlives." In *Changer Le Monde, Changer Sa Vie. Enquête Sur Les Militantes et Les Militants Des Années 68 En France*, 11–40. Actes-Sud: Arles.

- Foucault, Michel. 2020. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*. S.L.: Penguin Books.
- France 24. 2017. "Macron Plans to Commemorate May '68 Paris Riots," October 20, 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20171020-macron-plans-commemorate-may-68-paris-riots>.
- Haas, Ron. 2004. "Utopia Aborted: May '68 in the Philosophy of Guy Hocquenghem." *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 32. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0642292.0032.023>.
- Hocquenghem, Guy. 1986. *Lettre Ouverte À Ceux Qui Sont Passés Du Col Mao Au Rotary*. Agone: Paris.
- Internationale Situationniste. 2004. *Για την Αθλιότητα των Φοιτητικών Κύκλων*. Αθήνα: Ελεύθερος Τύπος.
- Jacoby, Tami Amanda. 2014. "A Theory of Victimhood: Politics, Conflict and the Construction of Victim-Based Identity." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2): 511–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829814550258>.
- Krystalli, Roxani C. 2021. "Narrating Victimhood: Dilemmas and (In)Dignities." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23 (1): 125–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1861961>.
- Laval, Christian. 2018. "May '68: Paving the Way for the Triumph of Neoliberalism? Rereading the Event with Foucault and Bourdieu." <http://www.ladeleuziana.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Laval.pdf>.
- Lecourt, Dominique. 1976. *Ετεροδοξία ή Επανάσταση*. Αθήνα: Αγώνας.
- Macey, David. 2019. *The Lives of Michel Foucault: A Biography*. London: Verso.
- Mann, Keith. 2011. "A Revival of Labor and Social Protest Research in France: Recent Scholarship on May 1968." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 80 (Fall 2011): 203–14. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41307204.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac3c536035333d9105ee8a829994b7285&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1.
- Mathieu, Lilian. 2008. "The Spatial Dynamics of the May 1968 French Demonstrations." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 13 (1): 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.13.1.v026824740577226>.

- Memou, Antigoni. 2011. "Photography and Memory: Rethinking May '68." *Philosophy of Photography* 2 (1): 83–96.
https://doi.org/10.1386/pop.2.1.83_1.
- . 2019. "Forgotten Solidarities in the Atelier Populaire Posters." *Art & the Public Sphere* 8 (1): 7–21. https://doi.org/10.1386/aps_00002_1.
- Möller, Frank, and David Shim. 2019. "Visions of Peace in International Relations." *International Studies Perspectives* 20 (3): 246–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky014>.
- Morin, Edgar, Claude Lefort, and Cornelius Castoriadis. 2018. *Μάης του '68: Η Ρωγμή*. Αθήνα: Ύψιλον/Βιβλία.
- Oikonomou, Georgios. 2020. "Η εξέγερση του Μάη του '68 και οι εχθροί της." LiFO. May 10, 2020. <https://www.lifo.gr/culture/arxaiologia/i-exegersi-toy-mai-toy-68-kai-oi-ehthroi-tis>.
- Parkinson, Donald. 2018. "May 1968: The Birth of Neoliberalism?" Cosmonaut. November 24, 2018. <https://cosmonautmag.com/2018/11/may-1968-the-birth-of-neoliberalism/>.
- Perry, Matt. 2008. "May 1968 across the Decades." International Socialism. March 31, 2008. <http://isj.org.uk/may-1968-across-the-decades/>.
- Pezzini, Hugo. 2015. *Occupy La Rive Gauche: A Reading of the May '68 Student Uprising in Paris*. *Www.academia.edu*.
https://www.academia.edu/31393640/Occupy_La_Rive_Gauche_A_Reading_of_the_May_68_Student_Uprising_in_Paris.
- Provenzano, Luca. 2019. "Beyond the Matraque: State Violence and Its Representation during the Parisian 1968 Events." *The Journal of Modern History* 91 (3): 586–624. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704568>.
- Rancière, Jacques. 1998. "The Cause of the Other." *Parallax* 4 (2): 25–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/135346498250217>.
- . 2018. "Re-Politicizing 68." *Crisis & Critique* 5 (2): 285–99.
<https://doi.org/http://crisiscritique.org/nov2018/ranciere.pdf>.
- Reynolds, Chris. 2007. "May 68: A Contested History." *International Web Journal* 10.
<http://sens->

- public.org/IMG/pdf/SensPublic_CReynolds_AContestedHistory.pdf.
- . 2008. "Understanding 1968 – the Case of Brest." *Modern & Contemporary France* 16 (2): 209–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639480801975925>.
- . 2011. *Memories of May '68: France's Convenient Consensus*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Rosanvallon, Pierre. 2020. *Η Δική μας Διανοητική και Πολιτική Ιστορία, 1968-2018*. Αθήνα: Πόλις.
- Ross, Kristin. 2002. *May '68 and Its Afterlives*. Chicago (Ill.): University of Chicago Press.
- . 2008. "Managing the Present." *Radical Philosophy* 149 (May/June 2008). <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/managing-the-present>.
- . 2018a. Ο Μάης του '68 πέρα από τις Επετείους και τις Μνήμες Interview by Yavor Tarinski. *Babylonia*.
- . 2018b. *A Coffee with Kristin Ross: On the Continuations of May '68*. Εκδόσεις Βαβυλωνία. *Babylonia*. https://www.academia.edu/40827793/A_Coffee_with_Kristin_Ross_On_the_continuations_of_May_68.
- . 2019. Kristin Ross | Against commemoration: Unearthing the lives and afterlives of May '68 Interview by Peter Bouscheljong. *BLACKOUT ((Poetry & Politics))*. <https://my-blackout.com/2019/02/08/kristin-ross-against-commemoration-unearthing-the-lives-and-afterlives-of-may-68/amp/>.
- Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Singer, Daniel. 2013. *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.
- Sommier, Isabelle. 2011. *Η Επαναστατική Βία: Οργανώσεις, Διαδικασίες, Αδιέξοδα*. Αθήνα: Σαββάλας.
- Stephens, Jullie. 2003. "Custodians of Memory: The Lost Figures of May '68." *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, 3 (4). <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/07/stephens.html>.
- Ticktin, Miriam Iris. 2011. *Casualties of Care Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley Univ. Of California Press.

- Traverso, Enzo. 2011. *Η Ιστορία Ως Πεδίο Μάχης: Ερμηνεύοντας τις Βιαιότητες του 20ου αιώνα*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις του Εικοστού Πρώτου.
- . 2016. “Enzo Traverso: The Memory of the Twentieth Century Left.” Versobooks.com. January 6, 2016. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2414-enzo-traverso-the-memory-of-the-twentieth-century-left>.
- . 2017a. *Αριστερή Μελαγχολία: Η Δύναμη μιας Κρυφής Παράδοσης*. Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Εικοστού Πρώτου.
- . 2017b. “The Left is a history of defeats”: an interview with Enzo Traverso Interview by Sonya Faure. Verso. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3077-the-left-is-a-history-of-defeats-an-interview-with-enzo-traverso>.
- . 2018. “Global 1968.” Verso. September 12, 2018. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4023-global-1968>.
- . 2021a. “About the Complexity of the Past.” Magazine of the European Observatory on Memories. 2021. <https://europeanmemories.net/magazine/about-the-complexity-of-the-past/>.
- . 2021b. *Revolution: An Intellectual History*. London; New York: Verso.
- Vinen, Richard. 2018. *1968: Radical Protest and Its Enemies*. New York: Harper.
- Wandarva. 2012. “This Courage Called Utopia.” The Disorder of Things. November 9, 2012. <https://thedisorderofthings.com/tag/fredric-jameson/>.
- Weber, Henri. 2014. *Πρέπει Να Απαλλαγούμε Από Την Κληρονομιά Του Μάη Του 68*; Αθήνα: Ηλίβατον.
- Wolfreys, Jim. 2002. “The Disposable Heroes of Hypocrisy.” *International Socialism* 2 (96). <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2002/isj2-096/wolfreys.htm>.
- Wolin, Richard. 2018. *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Young, Robert J. C. 2021. “May 1968: Anticolonial Revolution for a Decolonial Future.” *Interventions* 23 (3): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801x.2020.1843517>.