

May '68 in France. The Myth and the Debate 40 Years later

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Four decades after the events of May 1968, it appears that the public debate on the subject has hardly lost any of its former vitality in France. It is mainly the media, the intellectuals and the politicians who endlessly mine this inexhaustible source of reminiscence and ideological dispute, while the majority of the French people show only limited interest in the phenomenon.

And indeed, the media have thrown themselves into the subject. Prompted by the multitude of publications, Serge Moati talks of 'a tide, a flow of reminiscence, a media tsunami', while Jean-Pierre Rioux calls it a 'gigantic *Mai pride*'. The print media are offering numerous special issues and publications. In May, the catalogue of the French National Library listed 175 books and brochures on the subject of '68 that were published after 2007, 140 of them in 2008. Prominent among the authors are those who were among the key players then: Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the founder and icon of the March 22 movement in France, Alain Geismar, one-time secretary general of the national union of higher education (SNE-Sup), Jacques Sauvageot, then temporary president of the students' union UNEF, diverse co-founders of the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR), and Serge July, member of the movement of March 22 and co-founder of the Gauche prolétarienne (GP).

A controversial item among the present-day works of the former '68ers is a book entitled *Mai '68 expliqué à Nicolas Sarkozy* that was written by André Glucksmann and his son, Raphaël. Moreover, some 'classics' were reissued on the occasion of the 40th anniversary: written by sociologist Edgar Morin, philosopher Claude Lefort and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis, *Mai '68. La brèche. Suivi de vingt ans après* was republished in 2008. Indeed, books co-authored by academics and researchers, with social and political scientists as well as historians and philosophers in the van, form a characteristic feature of the current rash of books. At the same time, the large number of publications in other categories that deal with the events of May '68 deserve mention as well – documentations and special issues, novels, eyewitness reports and photo books, collections of posters, graffiti and slogans, and comics. All this is complemented by conferences, exhibitions, and discussion forums as well as by dedicated internet blogs and other derivative products. Nor should we forget television, which keeps airing features and documentaries on the events of the time.

Now, what was it that triggered such a wave of media activity and publications 40 years after the event? First, the media and publishing industry is pinning its hopes on the interest of the public. Second, the media feel compelled to cover such a symbolic event in France, if only to remain competi-

tive. Another reason may be that social science has decreed that the former '68ers should hold a place of eminent importance.

Another question is how the public will react. In a survey conducted by Ifop for the journal *Paris Match* in May, 47 % of interviewees stated that they had been talking about the anniversary with relatives, friends, or colleagues in the past week. Apparently, the jubilee failed to trigger any enthusiasm among the people, possibly because of the glut generated by the media and the publishing industry. Moreover, none of the books published ranks among the top titles. Thus, not a single book commemorating the events of May '68 is to be found among the 100 best-selling books at Amazon.fr or Fnac.com. Moreover, the number of DVDs sold on the subject is negligible as well.

Most young people appear relatively disinterested in the May '68 festivities. 48 % of interviewees talked down the importance of the jubilee, and 33 % believed that, while May '68 might have influenced former generations, it had no impact on themselves. Finally, 16 % thought that the relevance of the event was being overrated.

During his campaign for the office of President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy gave a thundering speech on April 29, 2007 in which he laid the blame for most of the evils besetting French society today on May 1968 which, he demanded, should be 'liquidated'. The left responded with an uproar. Specifically, Mr Sarkozy said that '68 had established 'intellectual and moral relativism' because it was generally believed that 'the pupil is the equal of the teacher', that 'anything goes, that there is an end of authority, politeness, and respect'. He blamed '68 for the crisis of authority at the schools. He denounced the spread of crime and uncouth behaviour. He condemned those on the left 'who ceased talking about the workers and caring about their lot from May '68 onwards'. According to Mr Sarkozy, '68 'introduced cynicism in society and politics', and its values 'promoted the aberrations of financial capitalism'. He let his audience know that the legacy of May '68 included mannerisms which he detested, such as confessions of regret in official commemorations and 'the apology of communitarianism'. He called for liquidating the legacy of May '68 'once and putting an end to 'the spirit, the patterns of behaviour, and the ideas of May '68'. Instead, 'reviving morality, authority, labour, and the nation' had become indispensable in politics.

Mr Sarkozy may have had several objectives in mind when he gave the speech, such as reoccupying the centre of the debate in which, as he believed, he had been marginalized by his opponent, Ségolène Royal; uniting all right wing forces in the rejection of anything and everything which May '68 stands for; demonstrating that the right wing had now shed all its complexes; and, finally, breaking up the 'anti-Sarkozy front' by which he believed himself to be surrounded.

André Glucksmann and Daniel Cohn-Bendit doubt Mr Sarkozy's honesty, even regarding him as one of the '68ers himself. Mr Cohn-Bendit believes that 'if there is one '68er at the Elysée, it is him. Enjoying life without restraint is exactly what he is doing, and he never stops!' If Mr Sarkozy called for liquidating May '68, he was lying in his teeth.

His argument that '68 is done for may well have helped Mr Sarkozy to win the elections. However, this does not necessarily mean that the majority of the French share his attitude. Opinion polls indicate that doubts are justified, for they show that most Frenchmen believe that May 1968 had an important and positive influence. In terms of importance, 1968 outranks even the end of the Cold War, the end of the war in Algeria, and the victory of the left in 1981. In global terms, the influence of May '68 on society is judged positively by the French. Asked whether they would join Mr Sarkozy in demanding that the legacy of '68 be liquidated, 47 % said they thought that the impact of May '68 on the society of France was negative, while 49 % thought it was positive. 77 % admitted to having sided with the students and strikers at the time, while only 14 % defended the forces of law and order. Moreover, the proposition that May '68 had had a positive effect on the division of duties among men and women, trade union law, sexuality, relations between parents and children, and mores in general was endorsed by a majority in each case. There appears to be a consensus on all this, although the left-wingers hesitated least to attest that the heritage left behind by that time is positive.

According to a survey conducted by the CSA Institute, 78 % of interviewees believed that May 1968 had brought social progress. This view was endorsed even by the majority of those who had no personal memories of the time. There is more or less general agreement that May '68 had a negative impact on the school system, although opinions diverge in this case according to the ideological roots of each respondent. Another majority view is that the influence of '68 on teaching was positive, although the approval rate declines in this case with the increasing age of the respondents. Perhaps this results from the growing number of publications which allege that education levels at schools are declining swiftly. All these surveys show clearly that it is the older segment of the population that is more inclined to answer no when asked whether they consider the heritage of May '68 a good thing.

There are three points of view that dominate the debate. According to Marcel Gauchet, May '68 is still part of the 'living present', instrumentalized by publishers and the media mainly for commercial and by Nicolas Sarkozy for ideological purposes. Others believe that the ideology which opposed May '68 has triumphed, meaning that the French society has moved sharply to the right. Others again refer to a clash between the allegedly pampered generation of

the baby boomers and the following generations, the baby losers. Nevertheless, an Ipsos survey conducted in 2007 indicated that these two groups of generations are fairly close, and that their value concepts are converging, particularly those relating to existential philosophy. 'The tendency towards solidarity and consensus outweighs that towards war', as Rémy Oudghiri and Julien Potereau put it.

It is likely that the 40th anniversary of May '68 marks the end of an epoch. For Marc-Olivier Padis, May '68 is now history. And Daniel Cohn-Bendit advises: 'Forget '68. It is past. However, this does not mean that the past is dead; rather, it is buried under 40 tons of paving stones that have ploughed up and changed the world since then.'

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