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May 68 : A Contested History

CHRIS REYNOLDS

Abstract: In spite of the unprecedented amount of literature that has been produced on the events of May 1968 in France during the last forty or so years, many questions still remain. Whether one considers the events themselves, their consequences, interpretations or explanations, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to find real consensus. This article will detail how, whilst agreement has been reached on many important areas, others remain open to debate and interpretation. It suggests that this lack of consensus amongst experts has affected the way the events are perceived today. It will be concluded that these lingering question marks have been a contributing factor in the continued debate surrounding 1968 as well as having been influential in the emergence of what Kristin Ross has defined as the 'official history' of May 68.

Keywords: May 68 ; Official History ; Kristin Ross ; Consensus ; 40th Anniversary ; CRS ; De Gaulle ; Pompidou ; Baden Baden ; Grenelle

Résumé: Malgré la pléthore du matériel consacrée à l'analyse des événements de mai 68 en France, il reste – presque quarante ans plus tard – un grand débat sur plusieurs thèmes. Que ce soit les événements eux-mêmes, les conséquences, ou l'héritage, il est difficile, voire impossible, de trouver un consensus. Bien que les analystes soient d'accord sur la plupart des grandes lignes, d'autres questions importantes n'ont pas été vraiment résolues. Cet article suggérera que le manque de consensus parmi les experts a influencé la façon dans laquelle la crise de 68 est perçue aujourd'hui. Dans la conclusion le débat continu sur mai 68 sera attribué à ce manque de consensus, qui est aussi responsable de l'émergence de ce que Kristin Ross a décrit comme 'l'histoire officielle' de mai 68.

Mots-clés: Mai 68 ; Histoire Officielle ; Kristin Ross ; Consensus ; 40e Anniversaire ; CRS ; De Gaulle ; Pompidou ; Baden Baden ; Grenelle

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The 40th anniversary of 1968 confirms the tradition of decennial commemorations whose contribution has been crucial in the vast coverage of the 'events'. However, and as [Kristin Ross](#) has argued, "*C'est l'énorme littérature sur le sujet – et non son occultation – qui, paradoxalement, a favorisé l'oubli des événements en France.*"¹ Whether one considers the upheaval, its consequences, interpretations or explanations, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to find real consensus.² As the years have gone by, opinions, influenced by ideas and portrayals that have become accepted or taken for granted, have developed and evolved. Ross observes: "*Mai 68 a connu des fortunes diverses au cours des trente dernières années, ayant été tour à tour enterré, passé au crible, trivialisé ou encore présenté comme une monstruosité. [...] Un discours a été produit, certes, mais avec pour conséquence de liquider (pour reprendre une formule de l'époque), d'effacer ou, au mieux, de brouiller l'histoire de Mai 68.*"³ A certain mystery, therefore, continues to surround this much discussed 'May 68'.

This article will assess the reasons why, despite such unprecedented focus, periodic analysis and reassessment, '68 remains the subject of intense debate and to a certain extent can be termed as indefinable. It will be argued that this is due to the absence of agreement amongst analysts and commentators concerning several important aspects. However, first of all let us begin with an assessment of consensus areas that have been pivotal in shaping how 1968 is perceived today and have ensured the emergence of what [Isabelle Sommier](#) describes as an 'official history'. The absence of consent over certain facets, the continued debate and the enduring vague nature of the crisis has facilitated the dominance of this narrow representation. Its increasing prevalence, it will be argued, has been aided by those questions that are no longer the focus of any real discussion.

¹ Kristin Ross, *Mai 68 et ses vies ultérieures* (Paris, Complexe, 2005), p. 9

² Joan Brandt, 'The Legacy of May 68 in the Era of Consensus', in 'L'Héritage de Mai 68', *L'Esprit créateur*, Vol. XLI, n° 1 (Spring 2001), p. 3.

³ Ross, p. 9.

Consensus issues

The causes are, more often than not, the starting point of many readings of [the 1968 events](#).⁴ Unanimity over the conditions that led to the explosion of 1968 during a period of relative stability is discernable. For example, it is generally accepted that after 10 years, de Gaulle's dominance and authoritarian style of leadership was dated and in need of renewal.⁵ Economically, the advantages of [the Trente Glorieuses](#) are described as giving way to increasing frustration from a working-class unconvinced of the distribution of wealth and young people more and more concerned by the spectre of unemployment.⁶ The priorities and values of this generation are depicted as having clashed with those of their parents and grandparents whose upbringings were in stark contrast.⁷ Such circumstances are put forward to explain why the university system – a microcosm of society itself – served as the spark.⁸ This institution, crippled by the concentration of baby-boomers, represented the perfect breeding ground for rebelliousness, and whose students increasingly looked abroad for inspirations at a time when romantic figures and causes were omnipresent.⁹

That the convergence of these factors explains why the 1968 events took hold is without question. However, such an approach has facilitated a certain normalisation of what happened and in turn has helped the materialisation of a progressively constricted outlook. Reducing the revolt to something with identifiable causes dilutes its '*insaisissable*' nature that made it so difficult to control and such a focus of interest and controversy. Furthermore, the heavy emphasis on the university as the origin has led to an inappropriate prominence of only one element of what was a society-wide revolt. In addition, placing the French revolt within the context of an international upheaval arguably undermines its originality and reduces it to none other than a typically Gallicized extension of a worldwide jolt. Symptomatic of this selective perspective is [Jean-Claude Guillebaud](#)'s summary of the events in 1978: "*En mai 68, les ivresses sorbonnardes et la prise de*

⁴ Such texts include Jacques Tarnero, *Mai 68, la Révolution fiction* (Toulouse, Milano, 1998), Roger Martelli, *Mai 68* (Paris, Messidor, 1988), Henri Weber, *Que reste-t-il de mai 68? Essai sur les interprétations des « événements »* (Paris, Seuil, 1988), Bernard E. Brown, *Protest in Paris: Anatomy of a Revolt* (General Learning Press, 1974), Daniel Singer, *Prelude to a Revolution* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) and many more.

⁵ Maurice Agulhon, André Nouschi, Ralph Schor, *La France de 1940 à nos jours* (Paris, Nathan/HER, 2001), p. 233.

⁶ Michel Winock, *La Fièvre hexagonale: les grandes crises politiques 1871-1968* (Paris, Seuil, 1995), p. 345.

⁷ Jean-Pierre le Goff, *Mai 68, l'héritage impossible* (Paris, La Découverte, 1998) p. 33.

⁸ Alain Touraine, *Le Mouvement de mai ou le communisme utopique* (Paris, Seuil, 1968) p. 84.

⁹ G. Dreyfus-Armand, R. Frank, M.-F. Lévy, M. Zancarini-Fournel, *Les Années 68: Le temps de la Contestation* (Paris, Complexe, 2000), p. 27.

*l'Odéon, ce n'était que la version française – hexagonale et pour tout dire « parisienne » – d'un frémissement bizarre qui courait la planète.*¹⁰ " The great dearth of regional analyses is a particularly revealing characteristic of the limitations of the 'official history'. When examining the conditions that led to 1968 much accent is placed on Parisian experiences, with the capital seemingly representative of the nation as a whole. However, France saw upheaval across the country and while students from the [Latin Quarter](#) were instrumental in triggering the crisis, the subsequent wholesale revolt revealed the existence of a general social malaise. Every region experienced the events in its own way with varying motivations behind its diverse demands.¹¹ However, coverage of the crisis is largely dominated by Paris.¹² Consequently, little is known of the true magnitude of the nationwide insurrection, the driving forces behind provincial revolts and the ensuing impact of 1968 on regional issues. Despite a growing importance attached to the significance of events in provincial France,¹³ and some particularly revealing regional case studies,¹⁴ the overriding depiction is one of a principally Parisian student movement that precipitated a general strike. Only when the focus moves to the widespread nature of the strike movement do regional divergences receive, admittedly limited, coverage.¹⁵ The underlying characteristics of regional student and social movements are ignored. Provincial events are represented as evolving strictly in relation to the unfolding developments in the capital.¹⁶

With the benefit of hindsight much consensus centres on the political, economic, social and international climate prior to May 1968 with the result that it is now possible to pinpoint the circumstances that came together to produce such a seminal set of events. However, this approach has helped mould the characteristics of the limited representation that prevails today.

¹⁰ Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *Les Années orphelines 1968-1978* (Paris, Seuil, 1978), p. 17.

¹¹ Danielle Tartakowsky, *Le Pouvoir est dans la rue* (Paris, Aubier, 1998) p. 166.

¹² See Raymond Aron, *La Révolution introuvable* (Paris, Fayard, 1968), Edouard Balladur, *L'Arbre de mai* (Paris, Atelier Marcel Jullian, 1979), Le Goff, *L'héritage impossible*, Epistemon, *Ces idées*, Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération. 1. Les Années de rêve* (Paris, Seuil, 1987), Guillebaud, *Les Années orphelines* and Weber, *Que reste-t-il*.

¹³ The call for papers for the 'May 68: Forty Years On' conference to be held at the University of London in Paris features requests for studies of May 68 outside the capital. Also, the research group *GERME (Groupe d'études et de recherches des mouvements étudiants)* is participating in a study programme in the coming months that will feature analyses of 1968 in Dijon, Lyon and Amiens.

¹⁴ François le Madec, *L'Aubépine de mai. Chronique d'une usine occupée. Sud-Aviation, Nantes 1968* (Nantes, CDMOT, 1988), Georges Chaffard, *Les Orages de mai* (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1968).

¹⁵ See Jacques Capdevielle, René Mouriaux, *Mai 68 – L'Entre-deux de la modernité. Histoire de trente ans* (Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1988). Joffrin, *Histoire des événements*, Philippe Labro, *Les Barricades de mai* (Paris, Seuil, 1968) and Martelli, *Mai 68*.

¹⁶ Martelli, pp. 62-5.

Such conclusions can equally be drawn from how the events themselves are analysed and recounted.

It is generally agreed that the events took place in three specific phases.¹⁷ Phase one, which has become known as the 'student crisis', runs from 3 to 13 May. It includes the period beginning with the police intervention in the courtyard of the Sorbonne on 3 May, the escalating violence and rise in support for the student movement culminating in the infamous 'Night of the Barricades' on 10 May. It was as a result of this night of terrible violence and extreme police brutality that the one-day strike (supported by all the unions) and the massive demonstration of the 13th were organized.¹⁸ The second phase, between 14-27 May, is known as the 'workers' crisis'. Throughout this stage, the one-day stoppage expanded to an all-out general strike in which France was brought to a complete standstill. It is characterised by the different attitudes of the two major unions, the CFTD (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*) and the CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*), and the inability of the communist-controlled union to stop the spreading of the strikes. The powerlessness of Pompidou and de Gaulle in dealing with the situation and the eventual rejection of the Grenelle agreements on 27 May gave the impression, briefly, that the state had exhausted all possible avenues to a resolution.¹⁹ The events then moved into their shortest, yet most critical, phase. The political crisis, from 27-30 May, saw France on the brink of an overthrow of the Gaullist regime. This chapter is distinguished by the President's mysterious trip to Baden-Baden, the failure of the Left to find common ground, the General's eventual return, his defiant address to the nation and the subsequent massive demonstration in support of him. It is widely recognised that the rise of the 'silent majority' on 30 May in support of de Gaulle brought the curtain down on the events of 1968.

Charting the amplification of the 1968 revolt using these three phases allows for an appreciation of the manner with which the upheaval spread so quickly across so many sectors of French society. However, by dividing the events into three separate crises, it is possible to glean the impression that there was no real convergence of participants and their ideas. The pre-eminent portrayal suggests that there was virtually no contact between workers, students and politicians. This notion has aided the concretisation of the belief that the student 'movement', incapable of providing a viable political alternative, was hijacked by a working-class movement

¹⁷ The majority of texts produced on the events split them into the three phases mentioned. Such texts include: Brown, *Protest in Paris*, Singer, *Prelude to a Revolution*, Alain Griotteray, *Des Barricades ou des réformes* (Paris, Fayard, 1968), Joffrin, *Histoire des événements*, Pierre Sorbon Lepavé, *Le Journal insolite de Mai 68* (Paris, Raymond Castells, 1998), Winock, *La Fièvre hexagonale*.

¹⁸ Joffrin, p. 131.

¹⁹ Claude Fohlen, *Mai 1968: Révolution ou psychodrame?* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), p. 12.

that was only really ever interested in material gains. The possibility of the 1968 revolt posing any significant threat to the political status quo of the time is consequently undermined. The effects of this quite rigid, chronological overview are not restricted to undermining any possible interaction between the diverse participants. Limitations can also be perceived through the virtual absence of coverage of what took place in June 1968. As mentioned earlier, the majority of analyses regard the General's speech on 30 May as spelling the end of the crisis. What happened in the weeks that followed is little analysed. With such minimal coverage one could be forgiven for believing that what occurred in June was of no significance. This, of course, is not the case. The events leading up to the general election at the end of June could be considered as less exciting or romantic than what happened during May. However, this period was not without notable incident. After all, it was during June that '68 saw its first fatalities. The police cranked up the violence to bring the strike to an end and to ensure the smooth running of the election campaign. The Sorbonne, Théâtre de l'Odéon and other occupied buildings were cleared of demonstrators.²⁰ It was then that the government implemented some of the most oppressive measures.²¹ Many left-wing groups were outlawed,²² the sale of their newspapers was forbidden, demonstrations were banned, and the government benefited from the help of groups like the CDR (*Compagnies de défense de la République*) and the SAC (*Service d'action civique*) to guarantee that there would no longer be any chance of the movement starting up again.²³ Yet, as Capdevielle and Mouriaux point out: "*Rares sont ceux qui parlent des événements de mai-juin 1968.*"²⁴ One can only speculate as to why this has become the case. It is arguably easier for all concerned to focus on the spectacular, romantic and positive elements of May as opposed to the more negative June 1968. In the light of the heightened degree of violence, the deaths and the realisation that the revolt was coming to an end, it is of no real surprise that June is increasingly absent from the focus of the 'May 1968 industry'.²⁵ Whether calculated or not, the elimination of June 1968 does little to provide a complete picture of the events. The simple fact that what happened in this spring of 1968 is all too often described as the events of 'May 68' and not often enough the events of 'May-June 1968' only serves to underline the scant importance attached to a vital period of the overall crisis.

²⁰ The Odéon was evacuated on 14 June and the Sorbonne on the 16th.

²¹ See Maurice Rajfus, *Sous les pavés, la répression* (Paris, Cherche Midi, 1998).

²² On 12 June the newly appointed Minister of the Interior, Raymond Marcellin, outlawed eleven extreme left-wing organisations, including the JCR, the Mouvement du 22 mars, and the FER.

²³ Fohlen, p.46.

²⁴ Capdevielle and Mouriaux, p 131.

²⁵ Keith Reader, 'Joyeux anniversaire! The May 68 industry,' *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2000), pp. 249-252.

Analysts appear to concur as to the structure of how the events should be presented. However, as with the causes, the increasing dominance of a certain method to analyzing the crisis has arguably facilitated the emanation of a stereotypical image of it that has progressively minimised its seriousness and significance. Such a reductionist consequence is equally apparent when considering the level of consensus surrounding the role of some of the major protagonists.

It is commonly acknowledged that the policy of the French Communist Party and its trade union, over which it had supreme control, was fundamental to how the events unfolded. Much is made of the paradoxical attitude of the PCF. In name at least a revolutionary party, it is held up as one of the major reasons for the failure of the '68 crisis to become a revolution. From the outset, the PCF is portrayed as strongly opposed to the movement. This initial attitude is often summed up by an article in *L'Humanité* on 3 May 1968 by the future leader of the PCF, [Georges Marchais](#), in which he attempted to differentiate his party from what it considered as irresponsible left-wing elements with which the working-class was advised not to become involved. When the events moved into the second phase, the PCF realised that they would not be able to stop the spread of the general strike. However, students were kept at a distance and the strike's aims were limited to purely material demands. The PCF/CGT did not wish to undermine an opportunity for such significant gains through fraternisation with elements beyond their control.²⁶ It was not until 28 May that the PCF turned its attention, only very briefly, to the possibility of overturning the Gaullist regime.²⁷ However, even then it was only half-hearted and they were partly responsible for the failure of the Left to provide a united front in a possible provisional government. The fact that when, on 30 May, de Gaulle proposed a General Election, the PCF was one of the first to accept the offer, thus ending any hope of a revolution, is often pinpointed to emphasise the PCF's desire to see a maintenance of the status quo.

The fact that the PCF was to prove one of the most formidable obstacles to a revolution in 1968 is no longer in question. However, the fact that so much attention is focused on pitting the communists against the students only serves to further strengthen the circumscribed image of the revolt. Excessive emphasis on the role of the PCF/CGT in rendering a revolutionary outcome of the crisis impossible anchors the impression that the majority of the 'movement' was made up of exclusively extreme left-wing elements intent on wreaking havoc with their utopian political agendas. As the years pass, the 1968 revolt is increasingly portrayed as an irresponsible, bon-enfant tantrum by a group of spoilt, Parisian students. The great diversity of participants, their ideas and motivations is ignored and subsumed into a certain image of what those involved were actually striving for, how they behaved and how their movements were organised. The fact that

²⁶ Balladur, p. 135.

²⁷ Sorbon-Lepavé, p. 117.

even the PCF was opposed has facilitated a further undermining of the credibility of the 'movement' – a term that in itself has its limitations. Just as the chronology of the events has been simplified with significant implications for how they are seen today so too has there been categorization of those who participated that has had a diminishing impact. When assessing 1968, many analyses allude to a 'movement'. This is particularly the case when describing the upheaval within the university world. One could consequently be forgiven for considering the upheaval as having been orchestrated by a single organisation with a common set of aims and objectives. Nothing could be further from the truth. The 'movement' was in fact an extremely diverse collection of groups and organisations with different ideologies and aims.²⁸ There were Trotskyites, Leninists, Stalinists, Maoists, Situationists, Communists, and Anarchists all of whom, throughout the events, were continually in competition with each other.²⁹ Furthermore, while such groups have become increasingly considered as typifying the entire 1968 upheaval, the truth is that they formed only a minority of one section of an entire society in revolt. In fact, most of those involved were non-militant students, not at all politically motivated.³⁰ Many on the front line were simply protesting against the heavy-handed tactics of the police and the intransigence of the state. [Cohn-Bendit](#), [Sauvageot](#) and Geismar are often considered as having been the leaders of the student movement. This, however, was not the case.³¹ It would be a misjudgement to declare that any of these media-chosen personalities were the leaders of a movement that prided itself on a deliberate absence of direction. The lack of attention afforded to the heterogeneous nature of the student 'movement' and the over-emphasis of the role of such a minority is symptomatic of the increasingly blinkered view that has come to dominate the history of the events in general.

That agreement has been reached over the role of the PCF has unquestionably aided an understanding of certain elements that rendered 1968 so exceptional. However, on the other hand, it has arguably paved the way for the dominance of the narrow representation mentioned above. Further contradictory implications of the events' history are evident in analyses of the part played by two other major figures.

From the beginning of the events, General de Gaulle is described as seeming to completely misunderstand the revolt or failing to consider what was happening as important. This attitude is seen to have increased the frustration of those involved and precipitated the surge in public support for what had started as an exclusively student movement. When considering his

²⁸ Epistémon (Didier Anzieu), *Ces idées qui ont ébranlé la France. Nanterre, novembre 1967-juin 1968* (Paris, Fayard, 1969) p. 37.

²⁹ Brown, p. 48.

³⁰ Didier Fischer, *L'Histoire des étudiants de 1945 à nos jours* (Saint-Amand-Montrond, Flammarion, 2000) p. 396.

³¹ Brown, p. 161.

performance during the events of May '68, his address on the 30 May in which he appeared magically to resolve one month's chaos in a four-minute speech is often cited. However, the reality is somewhat different and many point to his difficulty in coming to grips with the situation in 1968 as the beginning of a process that would lead to his departure the following year.³² There is a marked difference with the attitude of the Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou. Despite some initial errors, such as his own state visit to Afghanistan and his much criticized decision to concede on initial student demands, the position taken by Pompidou was certainly much more pragmatic and realistic than that of the General. He worked tirelessly throughout the events with the Chief of Police, with de Gaulle, and at the Assembly to ensure that the crisis be brought to a successful conclusion. The content of the miraculous speech made by de Gaulle on 30 May was forced upon him by the Prime Minister. He persuaded the General that the best thing to do would be to dissolve the Assembly and call for a general election. This, of course, is exactly what de Gaulle did.³³ Of the two leaders in power during the events of 1968, it was undoubtedly Pompidou who emerged the stronger. De Gaulle's sacking³⁴ of his Prime Minister is regarded by all as an acceptance of the latter's qualities to become President. As de Gaulle himself declared: *"Il était bon qu'il fût, sans aller jusqu'à l'épuisement, placé en réserve de la République. C'est ce qu'il souhaitait. C'est ce que j'ai décidé en l'invitant, comme on sait, à se préparer à tout mandat qu'un jour la nation pourrait lui confier."*³⁵

The general consensus is that the events were extremely detrimental for de Gaulle while, at the same time, Pompidou's performance confirmed his credentials as a capable successor to the General.³⁶ Much is made of de Gaulle's very negative approach, particularly in the opening weeks of the crisis. And while he was the focus of much opposition, portraying him as the source of most of the frustration is to further water down the diversity of the 1968 outburst. Grievances were numerous and varied across the nation and 1968 was much more than a simple desire to oust the President. Additionally, an over-emphasis on the individual errors of de Gaulle and Pompidou in some way obscures the precariousness of the situation. The escalation of the crisis could be interpreted as as much a result of clumsiness and miscalculation on the part of the President and

³² Agulhon, Nouschi, Schor, p. 233., Regis Debray, *Modeste contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire* (Paris, Maspero, 1978) p. 41.

³³ Pompidou was not happy with de Gaulle's disappearance to Baden-Baden and was obviously in disagreement over the need of a referendum: 'Mon Général, le référendum a eu lieu hier. Vous l'avez emporté, il faut que je parte pour vous laisser les mains libres' (quoted in Balladur, p. 336.).

³⁴ For a detailed analysis of the process leading Pompidou's replacement with Couve de Murville see Jacques Foccart, *Le Général en Mai: Journal de l'Élysée – II. 1968-1969* (Paris, Fayard/Jeune Afrique, 1998). pp. 245-285.

³⁵ Agulhon, Nouschi, Schor, p. 249.

³⁶ D.L. Hanley and A.P. Kerr, *May 68: Coming of Age* (London, Macmillan, 1989), p.70.

his Prime Minister as it was of the existence of a determined movement striving for change. Finally, the real political impact of the General's departure is minimized as a result of two factors. Firstly, the sweeping majority obtained by Gaullists in the June 1968 general elections is seen as further proof of the inability of the '68 'movement' to harness the outpouring of rebelliousness and public backing in order to threaten Gaullist hegemony, thus confirming the irresponsible image largely propagated today. Secondly, although de Gaulle was forced to step down, it was not as a direct result of the '68 upheaval. And, in any case, the man who replaced him was none other than his *dauphin*, his very own choice and in many ways a continuation of his ideas, morals and concept of the nation. This is yet another example of a problematic area of the history of 1968. Paradoxically, it is areas such as these, upon which there is little debate, that have been decisive in laying the ground for the rise in a restricted depiction of the events.

This first section has flagged up the advantages and disadvantages of the unprecedented level of attention afforded to the 1968 events. On the one hand, consensus in many areas has facilitated a certain degree of understanding of the main themes and issues of the crisis. Whether discussing the causes, what actually happened or the leading players, there certainly appears to be agreement amongst analysts and commentators. However, while such consensus areas can perhaps explain why – even amongst young people today³⁷ – 1968 appears to be generally well understood, it has been suggested that their impact has not been all positive. In fact, it is argued that principal areas that are no longer the focus of any real debate have been crucial in anchoring a specific representation of the events, one that does not tell the full story. The conditions from which the crisis is described as having erupted, the manner in which its unfolding is structured and confined to a specific time span, the categorization of its protagonists and the telescopic focus on only certain elements are all factors that have been fundamental in shaping the narrow image so prevalent today. As the second section will demonstrate, the rise and predominance of the 'official history' has been assisted and strengthened by the distinct lack of agreement in several other pivotal areas.

Areas of disagreement

The debate concerning how 1968 should be interpreted is one that has been present since the events' conclusion and upon which no real agreement has ever been reached. This lack of consensus is highlighted by the sheer diversity of readings proposed. As well as describing the

³⁷ Chris Reynolds, 'Current Attitudes to the 1968 'Events': A Questionnaire' *French Studies Bulletin*, No. 98. Spring (March) 2006. p. 8-12.

crisis as anything from a dress rehearsal for an imminent revolution³⁸ to a carnival-like psychodrama³⁹, early texts also saw it as the beginning of a new era of class struggle that would prove influential in the development of society.⁴⁰ Later, the crisis became shrouded in negativity as one-time revolutionary inspirations lost their romantic appeal. 1968 has been described as furthering the dominance of capitalism in France by breaking down the barriers to modernisation thus creating the exact opposite of what it supposedly aspired to.⁴¹ The alleged individualism of the 1980s, reflected in the apathetic, egotistical indifference of the population at the time, is portrayed as having originated in the '68 movement.⁴² The perceived march towards narcissistic individualism has been described as having been given a boost by the ideas expressed in the revolt of 1968.⁴³ Only one branch of an international revolt, the events have been described as a generational conflict characterised by misplaced revolutionary tendencies that has nonetheless succeeded in bringing about significant changes to French society, particularly in terms of cultural advances.⁴⁴ More recently, the events have come under criticism as an irresponsible moment that has created significant difficulties for French society.⁴⁵

The issue of making sense of the 1968 events is not only multi-faceted. As society develops, the legacy and heritage of the crisis is adapted to fit in with new circumstances. The quest to define 1968 has created a situation whereby examinations of how the events are interpreted have become as prevalent as interpretations themselves.⁴⁶ However, the sustained and varied debate surrounding this issue has done little other than to confirm this 'brouillage d'histoire' mentioned by Kristin Ross. As it remains open to discussion, there appears to be no limitations to the labels that can be attached to this extraordinary set of events. The more time passes the more it appears to be difficult to truly pin down what happened, why and what the consequences have been. The overall inconclusiveness as regards the interpretation of 1968 has meant that those notions that dominate the stereotypical picture of the crisis (e.g., Parisian, bourgeois, student, utopian, etc)

³⁸ Daniel Bensaïd and Henri Weber, *Mai 68: une répétition générale* (Paris, Maspero, 1968).

³⁹ Aron, *La Révolution introuvable*.

⁴⁰ Touraine, *Le Communisme utopique* and Edgar Morin, J.-M. Coudray, Claude Lefort, *La Brèche* (Paris, Fayard, 1968).

⁴¹ Debray, *Modeste contribution*.

⁴² Luc Ferry, Alain Renaut, *La Pensée 68. Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris, Gallimard, 1988).

⁴³ Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ere du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris, Gallimard, 1983).

⁴⁴ Weber, *Que reste-t-il*.

⁴⁵ François Goetz, *Mai 68, une imposture qui nous a coûté cher* (Paris, Editic, 1993), Laurent Guimier and Nicolas Charbonneau, *Génération 69. Les trentenaires ne vous disent pas merci* (Paris, Michalon, 2005).

⁴⁶ Philippe Ardent and Olivier Duhamel, 'Mai 68', *Pouvoirs*, no. 39 (1986), Ph. Bénéton and J. Touchard, 'Les Interprétations de la crise de mai/juin 1968', *Revue française de science politique* vol. 20 (juin 1970), pp. 503-544., Ferry and Renaut, *La Pensée 68.*, Claude Fohlen, *Mai 1968*, Weber, *Que reste-t-il de mai 68?*

are given increased credibility, mainly as a result of their prominence. Many factors can help explain just why 1968 is so immune to definition, including the lack of agreement over some important areas of debate.

Due to the relative political and economical stability in which France found itself prior to the events, the vast majority of texts indicate that the crisis was completely unforeseeable.⁴⁷ However, there are those for whom the crisis was not only predictable, but also inevitable. One of the most revealing accounts comes from the Dean of Nanterre at the time of the events, Pierre Grappin. In *L'Île aux peupliers*,⁴⁸ he details clear signs that things were beginning to get out of hand, signs the government was aware of. He describes how both personal friends⁴⁹ and the then minister for education Alain Peyrefitte⁵⁰ warned him in advance that Nanterre was going to be the scene of serious difficulties. Another example of what can be considered as a warning of what was to come is the now famous article, 'La France s'ennuie', by the journalist Pierre Viansson-Ponté, published in *Le Monde* not long before the events. Detailing how the population was bored, Viansson-Ponté describes the weary General de Gaulle faced with the static and unexciting period in which France found itself. By drawing comparisons with the highly exciting and romantic events taking place elsewhere in the world, this article was not only prophetic but also accurate in pinpointing some of the factors that would go on to inspire the revolt.⁵¹ Some other commentators see 1968 as the fruition of an ongoing process of politicisation resulting from the issue of decolonisation: "*En 1968, le ciel s'était déjà obscurci. L'événement fut précédé d'une longue gestation, datant de la mobilisation contre la guerre d'Algérie [...].*"⁵² Others, such as Jacques Kergoat, point to clear working class unrest in the years leading up to 1968: "[...] *il faut être aveugle pour ne pas voir, à côté des grands appels sans réponse, tous les mouvements sectoriels et locaux, sporadiques, violents, déclenchés un peu partout: Le Mans, Mulhouse, Nantes, Caen ne sont pas des accidents. Ils sont les symptômes les plus nets d'un mouvement national, profond, diffus et qui se cherche.*"⁵³

All in all it would have been impossible for anyone to predict exactly what was going to happen. In no way could anyone have foreseen the tumultuous month of violence and uncertainty

⁴⁷ Capdevielle and Mouriaux, p. 10, Le Goff, p. 59.

⁴⁸ Pierre Grappin, *L'Île aux peupliers. De la résistance à Mai 68: Souvenirs du doyen de Nanterre* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1993).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁵¹ Pierre Viansson-Ponté, *Le Monde*, 15 March 1968.

⁵² Ross, p. 34.

⁵³ Jacques Kergoat, 'Sous la plage, la grève', in *Retours sur Mai*, ed. Antoine Artous (Montreuil, La Brèche-PEC, 1988), p. 53.

that was May 1968. However, what is clear is that there were indications of mounting tension that could have served as warning signs to possible future social unrest. The debate surrounding the predictability of the crisis is in keeping with the difficulties in coming to firm conclusions on important questions surrounding the events. The malleability of the history of 1968 is clear in this example. For those wishing to criticise the government of the time, certain areas can be pointed up in order to bemoan the state's inability to anticipate such obvious discontent. However, and as discussed earlier, highlighting such causes only serves to undermine the great surprise with which the events struck. On the one hand, the authorities can claim irresponsibility as a result of such unpredictable and exceptional circumstances. On the other, those wishing to lend credence the extraordinariness are bound to be weary of concurring on the existence of quite normal reasons for such a revolt. Finally for those who refuse to see the events as none other than a freak occurrence, they too can point to an unprecedented convergence of domestic and international factors as the main explanation for such an outlandish rebellion. In other words, whether or not the events can be considered as predictable or as a surprise is in fact dependant on one's appreciation of what 1968 means or meant in general. No consensus on interpretation leaves areas such as this, and discussions on the role of some of the important actors and turning points, open to discussion.

Despite the great importance of the police, and in particular the CRS (*Compagnie républicaine de sécurité*), there seems to be significant differences on how their role is portrayed. On the one hand, we have what can be described as the official position which describes the behaviour of the police as commendable in the face of extreme provocation. Such analyses often refer to the fact that there were very few deaths in relation to the level of violence as indicative of their excellence faced with a situation of immense difficulty.⁵⁴ Victim to a calculated attempt on behalf of certain elements of the student 'movement' who deliberately aimed to provoke violent confrontations, the police undoubtedly suffered from being in an unenviable position. It is subsequently unsurprising to find many who credit the forces of order for their 'sang-froid'.⁵⁵ However, when one considers some of the images recorded from the clashes between the police and the protestors in 68⁵⁶ or reads some of the first-hand accounts⁵⁷ of victims, the impression is very different. There were clearly examples of what can only be described as extreme brutality that call into question the idea that the behaviour of the police was exemplary.⁵⁸ Such tactics increased sympathy for the

⁵⁴ Maurice Grimaud, *En Mai fais ce qu'il te plaît* (Paris, Stock, 1977), p. 169.

⁵⁵ Foccart, p. 137.

⁵⁶ For such footage see documentaries such as Claude le Brun, *Mai 68 – 5 Ans après* (1973), Lawaetz Guide, *Mai 68: Il y a 25 ans* (Gaillon, 1993), Pierre-André Boutang, *Histoire de Mai. Première Partie* (1978).

⁵⁷ UNEF/SNESup, *Le Livre noir des journées de mai* (Paris, Seuil, 1968).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

movement and effectively helped it spread from a strictly student revolt to an all-out general strike.⁵⁹ Throughout the events and particularly towards the end, the police were used by the state as a tool to bring the crisis to a conclusion. Beyond their responsibility of keeping order they were also used in June to help break the strike. This period of the events remains in fact the most controversial (and as we have seen above not exactly at the forefront of the 1968 folklore) since this was when three people died as a result of police action.⁶⁰

The problem is clear; can the behaviour of the police be described as commendable as many pro-government or official texts claim? Or, can we talk of excessive violence as some of the first-hand accounts and recorded images of the confrontations lead us to believe? That an assessment of the role played by arguably one of the most important elements of the revolt remains so inconclusive is yet another example of the difficulty forming a complete picture of what happened in 1968. Due to the inconclusive nature of this debate, it would appear that those on each side of the barricades can interpret and recount what happened as they see fit. It is this adaptable manner of some pivotal issues that has prevented solid conclusions, encouraged varied and continued debate and facilitated the anchoring of the 'official', limited history. Important turning points in the unfolding events, such as the rejection of the Grenelle agreements or General de Gaulle's trip to Baden-Baden also remain open to interpretation and as such contribute to the pliable nature of the overall interpretation of the crisis as well as adding further layers of mystery and intrigue.

Following an exhausting round of negotiations, Prime Minister Pompidou was convinced that, with the Grenelle agreements, he had finally managed to find the resolution to the crisis. The general feeling was that the major participants were satisfied with the results and the end of the strike seemed inevitable.⁶¹ What happened afterwards was surprising and has been a particularly divisive subject of debate. When the CGT leader, Georges Séguy, attended a meeting at the bastion of the working-class at the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt, in which he outlined the concessions gained,⁶² the workers rejected the agreement, causing a sensation. The crisis then moved into its most critical phase and opened up the real possibility of an overthrow of the

⁵⁹ David Caute, *Sixty-Eight: The Year of the Barricades* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1988), p.190, Hamon and Rotman, *Génération 1*, p. 490.

⁶⁰ A student, Gilles Tautin, drowned trying to escape from the CRS on 10 June. Two workers died in confrontations with the police at the Peugeot factory in Sochaux; Pierre Beylot was gunned down by the CRS and Henri Blanchet died as a result of a CRS grenade bringing down a wall in the factory.

⁶¹ Michel Gomez, *Mai 68 au jour le jour* (Paris, L'Esprit frappeur, 1998) p. 76.

⁶² The principal concessions gained included a 35% increase in the SMIG (Minimum wage), a 10% rise in salaries, the recognition of trade unions within the workplace, and a two-hour reduction in the working week. These concessions were considered as a victory by the unions.

regime. However, whilst the significance of the rejection is undoubted, the reasons behind it are not so evident. On the one hand, it is argued that they were rejected quite simply because the workers found what was proposed inadequate. This explanation is easily countered as the greater part of what was proposed was later accepted and implemented. Furthermore, the concessions offered were considerable and included certain elements that the major trade unions had been demanding for quite some time (in particular, the recognition of union activity in the workplace). It is also difficult to accept that the CGT, which until this point had been in complete control of its members and was clearly directing the strike movement to obtain material gains of this sort from the government and the employers, would have so gravely misunderstood the feelings of its troops. Critics of the CGT, however, have claimed that the fact that the workers rejected the agreements only served to show how out of touch the CGT was with the movement.⁶³ Another explanation given for the rejection is much less controversial but equally inadequate. It is claimed that the agreements were rejected because of a misunderstanding between two of the leaders of the trade union. The suggestion goes that before Séguy arrived at Billancourt, the meeting had already begun and that the speaker who was charged with warming up the crowd, Aimé Albeher,⁶⁴ had not been aware of the results of the negotiations and called for the strike to continue. Therefore, the workers had already made their decision and, regardless of what Séguy had to offer, were agreed on the continued action. That the union leader was surprised is clear.⁶⁵ However, that an organisation so capable of controlling the strike up to this point spectacularly failed due to a minor misunderstanding appears unlikely.⁶⁶

Yet another important factor of the '68 crisis appears clouded. Without agreement on explanations for such significant turning points in the crisis, complete understanding becomes very problematic. Furthermore, the rejection of the Grenelle accords becomes different things to different people. On the one hand it could be viewed as confirmation that the working-class was much more concerned with qualitative rather than quantitative demands. On the other, it could be argued that it was confirmation that the working-class were opportunistic and saw this as a chance to wrest as much material gain from the authorities as possible. Finally, the idea that the rejection was the result of a simple misunderstanding sits well with those who are intent on playing down the significance of this rejection. This chapter of the crisis, even forty years later, is left with numerous possible interpretations and, as we will see, is not the only one. It was in the

⁶³ Singer, p. 184, Gretton, p. 190.

⁶⁴ CGT secretary from 1967 to 1972.

⁶⁵ Kergoat, p. 59.

⁶⁶ Balladur, p. 265.

atmosphere of the working-class rejection of Grenelle that one of the most intriguing and highly debatable episodes of 'mai 68' would take place.

The mystery surrounding de Gaulle's disappearance on 29 May only lasted a matter of hours and there has never been any secret made of where he had been. The question however, remains, why did the General go to Baden-Baden? Analysts are very much divided with three explanations in particular very common amongst those put forward. Firstly, there is the suggestion that de Gaulle left for Baden-Baden because he genuinely felt that he had no option other than to stand down. Such a scenario seems improbable for de Gaulle, particularly when we consider the difficulties that he had endured throughout his long and illustrious career. However, this hypothesis is backed up by several factors; first of all, the fact that he asked his son to follow him along with his wife and children to Baden-Baden. Was the General seriously contemplating stepping down and therefore fearing for the safety of his immediate family? This is not impossible, and is reinforced by the account of that day given by the man in question, General Massu who claims that de Gaulle arrived in a state of complete desperation.⁶⁷ Massu goes on to describe how he persuaded the General that this was not the time to abandon France and that he should return to Paris. The second explanation for de Gaulle's visit to Baden-Baden concerns the army. Many believe that the General went to see Massu because he feared a *coup d'état*.⁶⁸ If one considers that left-wing forces, and in particular the PCF, were beginning to realistically consider the possibility of seizing power, de Gaulle could be justified in fearing an imminent coup. Whether or not he really considered doing so, this visit might well have been enough to discourage the not so extremist elements on the left. This 'calling the bluff' hypothesis ties neatly in with the third explanation. Certain experts believe that this visit to Baden-Baden by the General was none other than a perfectly executed *coup de théâtre*.⁶⁹ By disappearing as he did, the General hoped to create a sense of fear amongst his supporters who, up until this point, had remained silent. In his absence, even if it was only temporary, the general public would be forced to consider what would remain if he were really to leave. This hypothesis, however dramatic, would perhaps help explain why he informed nobody of his destination. In doing so not only did he create a sense of panic that became widespread, he was also able to expose the opportunism of those wishing to take power.

⁶⁷ Général Massu, *Baden 68. Souvenirs d'une fidélité gaulliste* (Paris, Plon, 1983), p. 79-88.

⁶⁸ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Le Grand Bazar* (Paris, Pierre Belfond, 1975) p. 98, Ross *Mai 68 et ses vies ultérieures*, p. 62.

⁶⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *Mai 68 – L'Irruption...* (Paris, Syllepse, 1998) p. xiii., Winock, *La Fièvre hexagonale*, p. 355.

With his passing in 2002, *l'ultime énigme Massu*⁷⁰ will perhaps never be resolved. Although his own explanation remains dominant, others appear feasible. Just like the reasons explaining the rejection of Grenelle, the continued debate over the Baden-Baden episode allows for analysts and commentators to mould its significance in order to adapt it to their overall interpretation or view of the events. For example, those wishing to call into question the *sang-froid* of the authorities would endorse the idea that the President's visit to Massu was as a result of his inability to deal with what was happening. Intent on resigning or left with no other option than to call in the army, either way, it exemplifies the notion that he was out of his depth in 1968 and accentuates the precariousness of the situation. Conversely, it could be argued that de Gaulle was only right to verify that he had the backing of his army and that he knew exactly what he was doing in disappearing as he did. Finally, the idea that the President's brief absence was enough to bring the population back to reality lends weight to the notion that the revolt was far from being a serious, credible threat. As such, it becomes no more than a momentary blip, thus further undermining the significance of the crisis. At the time, de Gaulle's disappearance served to heighten uncertainty and the feeling that something extraordinary was unfolding. As such, it is yet another feature that renders the events so special. Furthermore, the fact that this episode, some 40 years later, remains unresolved is typical of the general elusive nature of the 1968 events and exemplifies the lack of consensus surrounding such crucial moments.

The continued debate surrounding the issue of interpreting the 1968 crisis reveals the sheer difficulty of getting to the bottom of a highly complex set of events. Such problems are further complicated by the lack of consensus on some critical features of the crisis. Were the events predictable? How should the attitude and behaviour of the police be assessed? What explanation can be given for the significant turning points that were the rejection of the Grenelle agreements and de Gaulle's trip to Baden-Baden? All these questions, despite the plethora of material available and the great advantage of hindsight and perspective, still remain open to discussion. The fact that such pivotal questions remain unanswered has meant that numerous interpretations of the events appear feasible. Furthermore, the fact that some of the most compelling episodes of the crisis are still to be resolved serves to heighten the intrigue surrounding it and thus adds to the general mystification of 1968.

Conclusion

The constant presence of 1968 in topical debates, together with the now traditional decennial commemorations have ensured the iconic status of these events. However, despite such a positive

⁷⁰ Alexandre Duyck, *Le Journal de Dimanche* 27 October 2002.

impact of the history of 1968, this article has argued that its portrayal has not been without negative consequences. Characterised by consensus, limitations and disagreement, the sheer mass of coverage has given rise to a certain, restricted perception of the events. The possibility to shape and mould some important aspects has been crucial in the rise of the stereotypical and limited idea of 'Mai 68'. The popular history has been logically and increasingly based on those areas where consensus has been achieved. However, and as demonstrated in the first section, these do not exactly tell the whole story and, as a result, have facilitated the predominance of this limited outlook. Increasingly, the events are seen as no more than a tantrum by a spoilt generation that has gone on to create diverse problems for 21st century France. That such a perception exists is due largely to how the events have been analysed and represented. The overall impact of the nature of 1968's history can therefore be described as two-dimensional. While unquestionably essential in the acquisition of such a special place in the collective memory of the French, the dominant representation is, in my view, based on restrictive analyses. Such limitations stem from the fact that the portrayal from which perceptions are naturally formed stops short of presenting the complete picture. If anything like 1998, the 40th anniversary will confirm the dominance of such a narrow outlook on 1968. It nevertheless provides an excellent opportunity to re-examine those areas that remain shrouded in mystery and to undertake a much more holistic approach in order to overcome the aforementioned inadequacies of the 'official history'.