

## Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Michael Seidman's review of Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne, and James S. Williams, eds., *May 68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

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<http://www.h-france.net/vol12reviews/vol12no101seidman.pdf>

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Bonjour

Je m'associe tout à fait aux réserves de ce message sur ce livre. Pour parler un peu brutalement, je ne pensais pas que ce genre de texte pouvait encore s'écrire dans des milieux sérieux.

Je vais me borner à quelques points de mon domaine de compétence

1) à propos de la soi-disant autogestion chez Lip et a fortiori ailleurs, il est tout à fait exact que "*Lip workers proved much better at selling their existing stockpile of watches than producing new ones. Rather than manifesting an enthusiastic desire to create commodities, their autogestion was an attempt to compel a failing enterprise to pay them. Workers' self-management was usually chosen only when the alternative was certain closure of the production site. The number of cases where autogestion was attempted was paltry both during and after 1968. If the workers' desire to control their workplaces was so strong, it is hard to understand the "success of the union leaders in channeling their [strikers'] demands into familiar directions which resulted in the famous Grenelle Protocol" (p. 11).* J'irai même plus loin : l'argent de la vente des montres a servi à payer les ouvriers de Lip au détriment des fournisseurs et sous-traitants, et donc probablement des ouvriers de ces derniers.

2) j'étais alors chef d'un établissement dans une zone industrielle de Châtelleraut, où cohabitaient d'assez grandes usines filiales de groupes nationalisés, et des entreprises privées plus modestes. Les usines se sont arrêtées le jour où les syndicats l'ont décidé (et ont repris de même), et les envoyés de ces usines dans les entreprises privées mitoyennes chargés d'y déclencher la grève n'ont pas été écoutés. Toutes les entreprises privées de la zone industrielle ont continué à travailler.

3) les accords de Grenelle ont eu comme conséquence mathématique la dévaluation du franc, peu après le départ de De Gaulle qui voulait l'empêcher car il la ressentait comme un déshonneur. Je dis « mathématique » car la hausse moyenne des salaires du fait de Grenelle a été supérieure d'au

moins 12 % à la hausse de la productivité, pourtant assez rapide à l'époque, ce qui par ailleurs a lancé le chômage, inexistant auparavant, et qui a ensuite été aggravé par les chocs pétroliers puis les politiques ultérieures.

4) Les conséquences intellectuelles et plus généralement qualitatives de mai 68 peuvent être discutées à l'infini. Dans mon domaine, elles ont prolongé le mépris d'une partie la classe intellectuelle pour l'économie basique. Je dis « basique » pour ne pas me lancer dans des comparaisons entre théories, et me borner à dire que l'on ne peut consommer que ce qui a été produit. Produit soit à l'intérieur des frontières (dans ce cas là, pas de problème), soit produit à l'extérieur et qui doit alors être payé soit par un prélèvement sur ce qu'on a produit, soit par de l'endettement, dont les inconvénients sont rappelés actuellement. Je pense donc que les conséquences économiques qualitatives ont été gravement négatives et pèsent encore sur les idées économiques des responsables d'aujourd'hui.

Désolé de ces considérations pas très lyriques

Bien cordialement

Yves Montenay, qui a eu plusieurs vies avant d'être universitaire

**From:** Julian Jackson [<mailto:j.t.jackson@qmul.ac.uk>]

This is a rather belated response to the review by Michael Seidman of the book I co-edited on May 68. Having been on holiday, I have only just seen the review, and given its negative tone I would hope, despite the delay, to be granted the opportunity for a short response. I ask this not so much to protect my own author's wounded *amour propre* as that when one has co-edited a book, one feels a certain responsibility to rise to the defense of contributors who find themselves (mostly) treated so unpleasantly. Seidman comments (without citing examples) of on one contributor that his 'use of language is hardly even-handed' but this is somewhat rich from someone who can in the space of a short review talk of the actors of 1968 as 'hyperbolic activists' inspired, he says on another occasion, by 'gauchiste fantasy'. Because Seidman is so convinced that the events of May 68 are of no importance since all was for the best of all possible worlds in the Gaullist France of the late 1960s, he is unable sympathetically to engage with any approach that suggests the contrary.

Our book emerged from a conference that was held in Paris in May 2008. There were many conferences on May 68 in that year in France but one originality of ours was to bring together the recent research of both French and 'Anglo-Saxon' scholars – ten of the former and eleven of the latter. As regards the former, the published volume makes accessible for the first time in English the research of some of the leading French historians of the period. These historians have transformed our approach to May 68 over the last twenty years but their work has only remained available in French. It is to be hoped that these translations, as well as the long extracts that we translated from the memoir by Virginie Linhart, will be of interest to students and scholars who do not read French and offer them some sense of the extraordinary richness of the recent research that has taken place on this period.

One of the features of this research has been to ‘decenter’ our understanding of 1968. Seidman would presumably consider this term to be a ‘jargonistic’ (and ‘turgid’) – as he comments on the chapter of my co-editor Anna-Louise Milne – but it seems to me that the term is useful. It proposes that our perspective on May 68 needs to move from seeing it as only a Paris-centered event, involving primarily students, to understanding it as a massive cultural and social upheaval which affected almost every aspect of French society. It was, for example, the biggest strike movement in French history – both in terms of the length it lasted and its geographical extent – and this suggests to me that there is something important that needs to be explained as more than the result of ‘gauchist fantasy’ or the work of ‘malcontents’ (to use an admittedly non jargonistic but hardly ‘even-handed’ term favored by Seidman in his own book on 68).

Not all the contributors to this volume share exactly the same approach to May 68. Indeed the aim was to capture the multifarious nature of the experience, and not to offer any unitary view. So if one chapter by Gordon takes one view of immigrants and 68 and another by Hajjat takes a different view, the ‘contradiction’ on which Seidman seizes is a reflection of the complexity of events that we are trying to understand. It is also due to the fact that May 68 itself sparked off a whole series of revolutionary changes in French society and that these changes themselves challenged many of the assumptions of the original actors of May 68 itself: that is the nature of revolutions. What might have been true of May 68 may no longer even have been true about June 1968 – let alone May 1969. This complexity is the explanation for the term *les années 68* which so troubles Seidman. The term was first popularized by Michelle Zancarini, who is one of the contributors to this volume (and also the person who has over twenty years done most in France to encourage and stimulate research on the period), and it was coined to suggest that May 68 was the epicenter of, or catalyst for, a longer process of social and cultural upheaval. For example, as the chapter by Michael Sibalis shows, the prevailing Marxist ideologies of the students of May 68 had no place for homosexual or even feminist activism. But within two years both feminist and gay liberation movements had emerged, and these quite explicitly situated themselves within the spirit of 68 even if in the process they found themselves challenging the world view of the original actors of May 68. The periodisation of ‘the 1968 years’ is of course complex – I have tried myself to address this in an article for FHS last year – but it is only by refusing the term that Seidman can hold to the idea that ‘sacred cows of which the “working class” was the most significant’ persisted at this time.

What all the contributors to this volume do share is the idea that this was a period in which something important and interesting happened: that in fundamental ways the world changed. That is a view shared also by the conservative right of course – hence Sarkozy’s attack on the legacy of 68 in his election campaign of 2007. It is not, however, Seidman’s view – as one already knows from his book. The most interesting aspect of Seidman’s revisionism is his analysis of the response of the state to the events: he questions whether the regime came close to collapse in 1968, This is a subject which I think deserves more study and one that our own volume did not have the space to consider. But contrarian revisionism taken to extremes can just become contrarian perversity.

Seidman began his career with an equally unconvincing approach to the Popular Front which he interpreted as fundamentally a 'revolt against work' (whatever that means) – as if wanting to improve the conditions of work was somehow the same as wanting not to work at all (and ignoring the fact that one of the main ambitions of the Popular Front was to overcome unemployment). Having had this damascene conversion that the key to history is the revolt against work, Seidman seems to want to apply the same idea to May 1968. He uses the phrase twice in his review (and of course it explains the quotation marks surrounding 'working class' in the phrase quoted above). From this position of omniscient understanding he can then deliver good marks and bad with magisterial authority. One contributor is patted on the back for being 'correct' in his analysis of May's 'implicit hostility' to multiculturalism – once again it would be necessary to distinguish here between May 68 and *les années 68* - another for 'correctly' pointing out that de Gaulle's amnesty to the OAS exiles cemented right wing unity - only to be rapped over the knuckles when shown not to be 'correct' in other views. And yet Seidman's idea that May's importance is inflated seems itself to be contradicted by his grudgingly favorable comment on the extracts from the memoir by Virginie Linhart. This fascinating memoir, written by the daughter of one of the most brilliant but also most troubled activists of the period, explores how the legacy of 1968 and after has continued to haunt and overshadow the lives even of the children of those who were at the heart of the events of those years. So the legacy and significance of May remain contested: one would be tempted to repeat Zhou Enlai's possibly apocryphal (and certainly over quoted) comment on the French Revolution that it is too early to know exactly what it means. Our volume is one small contribution to that debate, and the history of May – many histories of May - remain to be written. As for Seidman's own contribution to the subject, I can only repeat what I have written about it before: 'if French society was already changing so fast, the universities so tolerant, the state so in control, and the workers so contented, why did May 68 happen at all?'

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