

H-France Salon
Volume 10 (2018), Issue 3, #2

Still, It Moves: May '68 at Fifty

Julian Bourg
Boston College

The articles in “May '68: New Approaches, New Perspectives,” the April 2018 special issue of *French Historical Studies*, were first workshopped together in a February 2017 colloquium at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. The experience, the editors Donald Reid and Daniel Sherman say, reflected the will to revive the 1968-era “mantra ‘Work differently, live differently’.” Peer-to-peer author dialogue was intended to disrupt the typical hierarchies and roles of editorial labor. “The struggle continues” – “La lute continue” – the editors conclude (p. 191). While less than an editorial collective manifesto, the gesture nonetheless evokes the immediate presence and resonance of the events of May-June 1968 for scholars of France, thereby unapologetically collapsing the distance of fifty years.

“May '68: New Approaches, New Perspectives” shows how the celebrated synecdochic year of the Sixties continues to speak to us, not least in its inspiring eventfulness and indisputable sense of possibility. What seems new on the golden anniversary of 1968 is a productive paradox: enough time has passed that the events of that era can be approached freshly. So much time has gone by, in fact, that accusations of uncritical nostalgia actually seem to ring hollow; there are now several generations that know very little about the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, while “work[ing] within the conceptual frameworks of the long 1968 and the global 1968” (p. 185), these essays express a renewed desire to return to the events themselves, almost in the spirit of the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl’s long-ago call of going “back to the things themselves!” – “*zurück zu den Sachen selbst!*” To follow that analogy one step further, these articles approach the events of 1968 with modesty and precision, bracketing out the noise of memorialists, the older conceit that May 1968 mattered more than happenings elsewhere, and even the presumption that simply studying Europe reinforces Eurocentrism. The events were at once influentially iconic and merely one moment of centerless global ferment, “a node in a much larger, international concatenation of ideas and activism, dreams and disappointments” (p. 181).

In spite of nobly sharing credit with the authors, Reid and Sherman are still owed tremendous thanks for having produced this volume. Reid’s attentiveness to labor and Sherman’s perceptive reading of visual culture are on display in their introduction.¹ Setting aside questions of curation (articles not accepted, the logic of tables of contents), the essays by Françoise Blum, Bethany S.

¹ Donald Reid, *Opening the Gates: The Lip Affair, 1968–1981* (London: Verso, 2018); Daniel J. Sherman, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945–1975* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Sherman et al., ed., *The Long 1968: Revisions and New Perspectives* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2013).

Keenan, Salar Mohandesi, Tony Côme, Sandrine Sanos, and Ludivine Bantigny and Boris Gobille do “mark a new stage” in our understanding of the events [*les événements*] and “bring life” to specific conjunctures (p. 191). As signs of what may still come, they promise a potential deglaciation of the Sixties, a process by which the cumulative freezing effects of witness prerogative, cynicism, and time itself can be undone. Such a thaw is not unrelated to broader historical conditions in our own time: anti-democratic and nationalistic politics, crises and critiques of capitalism, terrorism and war, refugees and immigrants, activist mobilizations, and so forth. Our own circumstances help create the need to re-engage with a time of pervasive contestation. Relevance is a criterion of historical attention, and “1968” continues to stand in part for volitional movements and living traditions that still matter.

For scholars of France, the contributions to the special issue offer a sample of historiographical tendencies on the fiftieth anniversary 1968. Some of those directions—extended timelines and global force fields—are not surprising; others—micro-chronology, hinges between aesthetics and politics, and social emotions—stand out. More specifically, three main interpretive trends seem notable: (1) the default mode of addressing the global Sixties through local case studies, (2) the quicksand challenge of representing May ’68 in institutions and culture, and (3), as mentioned, the notable call to return to the events themselves. Before seeing how these trends emerge by way of each of the six essays, however, some general observations about historiography, the status of archives, national scholarly styles, and the global/local matrix can be made. Curiously, only Françoise Blum substantively positions her essay with respect to existing historiography. Her contribution addresses a continuing deficit: in spite of the shift in recent years toward the comparative and global, the Southern hemisphere remains neglected. Her intervention joins others’ efforts to fill this lacuna.² The more general tendency in these articles not to engage the mountainous extent of (especially French) scholarship on 1968 is somewhat disconcerting; it underscores the preponderance of the logic of the case, as if global scales and proliferating scholarship drive research toward the local, discrete, and fragmentary. That said, at the same time, these articles share a freshness, something of a first view, that reflects the distance of fifty years and thus also the opportunities for new approaches. Gone are what Daniel A. Gordon has called the “memory barons” – witness participants whose voices crowded the interpretive stage for decades – as well as the previously prevailing obligation to refer to each decadal anniversary of 1968 in light of previous ones.³

² Chen Jian et al., ed., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Tamara Chaplin and Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney, ed., *The Global 1960s: Convention, Contest, and Counterculture* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Burleigh Hendrickson, “From the Archives to the Streets: Listening to the Global 1960s in the Former French Empire,” *French Historical Studies* 40:2 (2017): 319-342; and Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett, ed., *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (New York: Berghahn, 2013).

³ Daniel A. Gordon, “History at Last? 1968-2008,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 17:3 (2009): 336.

Just as there is minimal mapping of the historiographical terrain, so too no massive mining of archival sources is on display. Although one might have expected heavier reliance on the *inédit* (previously unpublished), perhaps it is still too soon. More personal papers will be handed over in coming years, and fifty years is a standard waiting period for some state material.⁴ To be sure, especially Keenan, Blum, and Bantigny (the latter's contributions to her joint article with Gobille can be discerned) make productive use of newly uncovered materials, marshaling evidence in the service of compelling arguments about interstate and interagency dynamics, analogies between French and African unrest, and emotion during the French events.

In terms of style and sensibility, the contributions of French scholars (Blum, Côme, and Bantigny/Gobille) noticeably contrast with those of their colleagues working in North America (Mohandesi, Keenan, and Sanos). Although a small sample size, and even if one should not make too much of them, national differences do appear. Blum and Côme contribute to de-centering France in the story of 1968 in ways that end up still referring to the metropole as a center. Their articles also reflect familiar French historical methods: reportage of the incident, comparison of instances, reconstruction of the field. There is little reliance on theoretical apertures, and their French-African and French-German cases tend to speak for themselves. For their part, Bantigny and Gobille bring an original theoretical rigor and precision that triangulates the history of emotions, conflict sociology, and primary historical documentation. Their interdisciplinary account generates the kind of abstract insight that many non-French academics find inspiring. In comparison, Keenan's and Mohandesi's essays gesture toward compelling insights, respectively, on the logics of transmission and the force of circumstances, but they tend not to fully draw the larger take-away lessons. In contrast to Bantigny/Gobille, the larger theoretical meaning and payoffs of their cases remain largely implicit. Yet they also approach the international differently than Blum and Côme: the inescapable impact of the global—here, the Vietnam War—in France itself. Rather than place France in dialogue with other places, they assume porous boundaries and the always latent manifestation of the global in and through the national and local. Sanos's intensive approach to two of Diane Kurys's films is a virtuoso performance of the kind of close reading of representations familiar to practitioners of Anglo-American cultural studies. Such methods can often trace their genealogy to imported 1968-era French thought itself, in this case implicitly and indirectly. Again, while one ought not to make too much of such impressions (which get increasingly messy upon closer inspection), the global and international are factors in knowledge production as much as for the objects of study.

Beyond eschewing historiography, making productive use of new sources, and marking differences in national scholarly cultures, a final general feature involves these essays' default to the local as a way to handle the global. To make the point negatively: these contributions generally avoid thinking about 1968 in terms of large-scale processes and dynamics, as, for instance, Eric

⁴ Archives nationales de France, "68, les archives du pouvoir," <http://www.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/68-les-archives-du-pouvoir>.

Hobsbawm and Immanuel Wallerstein did.⁵ Insofar as 1968 is recognized as a year and “1968” as an era of global ferment, the pull in these essays toward the micro is striking. The big picture appears as background more than as explanatory leverage. One wonders what to make of this shying away from judgements about large-scale and global processes. Complexity and ambiguity are good reasons to cling to the virtues of the case, but much is left unturned. Blum reconstructs North-South solidarities even as her reference to the “end of empire” remains under-thematized. Mohandesi tries to catch the tail of a unified international revolutionary front with results that are vague. Thinking systematically about 1968 is certainly not easy, yet the continual pull of the pendulum toward the local may not be unrelated to political readings of 1968 that run up against the barricade of the “pure daydream” which leads to disappointment (François Miele, cited in Côme, p. 332) as well as against nostalgia and ambivalence (Sanos). Politics, not least for many protagonists in the Sixties, was about thinking big. The logic of the case sometimes seems to squeeze and constrict the political.

To be sure, global spaces are variously conceived in these essays. Following Blum’s historiographical mapping, such attention to the global is expected since it continues the trends of the previous decade. Approaching May ’68 as an intersection of global routes as well as a contributor to global processes—such spatial “crisscrossing” speaks to us and cannot be grasped apart from the varied temporalities they imply (Sanos, p. 359). The notions of the “long Sixties” or *les années 68* (the ’68 years) are not new, but in extremely compelling ways the authors here establish the significance of precise chronologies—timings mattered.⁶ To contrast the previous point about the reticence to think big, here we have the great virtues of the case: several of these essays reveal the power of contingency, circumstances, and even non-linear temporalities. In sum, while appeals to the global spatialization and extended timelines of 1968 may not be surprising, these essays tend to make productive use of these moves, establishing detailed embodiments of transnational forces and of micro-chronological dynamics.

Françoise Blum shows how the French events of 1968 should be read alongside analogous mobilizations in Guinea (1961), Congo (1963), Senegal (1966–1969), Dahomey/Benin (1969), and Madagascar (1971–1972). To see May 1968 as having appeared in the midst of a more general period of anti- and postcolonial agitation shifts the frame: the broader trend line is in Africa, and France seems peripheral. Blum’s main point, however, concerns the “common elements” and “filiations” between France and these new nation-states (p. 197). Often these commonalities took the form of analogies: youth contestation of educational institutions in both the global North and South; the personal charisma of Charles de Gaulle and Léopold Sédar Senghor turning the tide in each of their countries. Beyond analogy, there were direct lines of flight and impact: the

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, “1968—A Retrospect,” *Marxism Today* (May 1978): 130–36; Immanuel Wallerstein, “1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries,” *Theory and Society* 18:4 (July 1989): 431–49; and “New Revolts against the System,” *New Left Review* 18(November–December 2002): 29–39.

⁶ Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958– c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, Robert Frank, Marie-Françoise Lévy, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, ed., *Les années 68: Le temps de la contestation* (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 2000).

involvement of African students in the French events, French teachers in Africa supporting their students. While rightly emphasizing the obvious anti-colonial cast of many African social movements, in the end Blum powerfully celebrates their “interclass dimension”: they often enacted “new solidarities” within particular countries and internationally (p. 214). What remains tantalizingly suggestive without fuller treatment is the claim that these movements hastened decolonization (“crises that enabled history to accelerate”) and contributed to the “end of empires” (p. 215). Anti- and postcolonial experience from Dakar to Antananarivo shows the high stakes of the relative successes and failures of the African ’68 years: repression in Guinea, youth taking power in Congo, shouts of “Vive Senghor! Vive De Gaulle!”, the fall of Philibert Tsiranana in Madagascar, and so forth. There is much more to be learned about long-term effects and non-effects. What of these movements’ legacy since the 1970s?

Bethany Keenan’s and Salar Mohandesi’s articles on Vietnam similarly displace May 1968 even as they focus on France. They make for terrific complementary reading. Their precise chronological reconstructions exemplify the value of careful historical explanation, and they convincingly demonstrate how the Vietnam War figured significantly in the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of the May events. For Keenan, those events are assumed as a backdrop of contestation that continued to unfold throughout 1968 and into 1969. The 1968 Paris peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam offered the possibility of improving the reputation of France and of De Gaulle in particular, whose previous criticisms of American militarism could be forgotten. It mattered that these talks unfolded amid the 1968 crisis. The Americans were worried that anti-U.S. protests would make them look bad, and the Foreign Affairs Ministry, eager to please, pressured the Interior Ministry to crack down on activists. One could call this the geopolitics of avoiding embarrassment. American diplomats might have been thinking, for instance, of student radicals’ 18 March 1968 attacks on American businesses that Mohandesi mentions (p. 237). Keenan meticulously reconstructs the ins and outs of bureaucratic infighting between the competing ministries that culminated in a curiously contradictory position: protests were allowed as long as they were not “public” or took place in the provinces; that is, as long as they were held away from the peace talks (pp. 258–60). The bizarre ruling pretended to preserve free speech while censoring it. Although the hardening of French policing measures by the Interior Ministry doubtlessly had much to do with general anxiety about social discord, still, Keenan’s triangulation of American, French government, and protestor positions is a compelling object lesson in blow-by-blow historical reassembly. One missed opportunity is that she might have done more with the conspicuous labor the category of “the public” was made to do. Was this new? What were its consequences? What can government and protestor action at this time teach us more generally about French civil-social space?

Mohandesi also focuses on the role of the Vietnam War, filling in the 1965–1967 pre-May story. French mobilization against the war was strong, sustained, and helped shape the radical left. The May events did not come out of nowhere. Solidarity with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese intensified as the war did, leading to calls, as American radicals would put it, to bring the war home to the West. Like Keenan, Mohandesi is sensitive to chronological precision, reminding us that the Tet Offensive and a key international student anti-war meeting in Berlin both took place in February 1968. The fact that American and South Vietnamese forces were on the ropes inspired European and American radicals; if Vietnamese insurgents could fend off a superpower, then

young radicals in the West ought to feel emboldened about prospects for success. Mohandesi effectively conveys the power of the moment's political emotion, its outrage and hopes. Such emotion was aroused prior to the May events, and this article supplements Bantingy and Gobille's focus on that month.

Indeed, Mohandesi's article sometimes displays an immediacy and urgency that might have been written in 1968. Jean-Paul Sartre is used to explain the emergent "field of the possible," and at times one is unclear if this is a history of Trotskyism or a Trotskyite history (p. 238). Alongside frequent valorization of revolutionary intentions, there is also a good kind of nostalgia (return home) that needs to be taken seriously. We are far enough away from 1968 that it can be rediscovered as a source-site of exemplary political engagement. In our own moment of renewed social movements, street protests, and clarifying distinctions between left and right, it is newly possible to revisit 1968 with critical sympathy. Beyond the Baby Boomers' trips down memory lane and beyond Generation X's living under the shadow of the Sixties, it is time for fresh eyes on 1968: its possibilities, risks, efforts, and accomplishments as well as its follies, excesses, and absurdities. Unfortunately—and this is a problem for both Mohandesi and his historical protagonists—some of the era's formulas for political action—a "real mass political force," an "international front"—were inescapably vague and thin (pp. 224, 226). What organizational forms were these supposed to take? Lead to? What would it mean to put "into practice" Che Guevara's slogan "create two, three, many Vietnams" (p. 233)? It is far from clear that historical actors at the time had coherent answers to these questions. Donald Reid provides a great example of such an answer when he shows how the idea of creating many Vietnams was embraced during the Lip strikes of the 1970s, not as violent guerrilla warfare but, citing the Dominican priest Jean Raguénès, as "autonomous centers ... filled with the perfume of self-management."⁷ While Mohandesi is right to restore a forgotten ethos, a more thorough examination of what it meant that "many" saw the May events as "one front in the worldwide revolution" might be useful (p. 239). The risk of sympathy is idealization and oversimplification—whether imagining Vietnam in 1968 or imagining 1968 today.

More modestly, Mohandesi suggests that appeals for a "second front" in the Vietnam War led concretely, as a February 1968 tract said, to "a new type of political demonstration," actions that lay the immediate groundwork for the May events (p. 236). Breaking windows at the American Express offices in March helped make possible the Sorbonne occupation in May. Mohandesi approaches extremely valuable insights on the "resonances" between conflict in Vietnam and in France. A complex logic of transmission was at work, involving inspiration, emulation, imitation, adaptation, and (like Blum) analogy. It was possible to *feel oneself* part of a universal struggle while acting in one's local situation. As with Keenan and "the public," it would have been useful for Mohandesi to dig a little deeper into the ambiguities of this logic. It seems to have mattered that activism inspired by Vietnam seemed tended to lose sight of the war during its final terrible years. Yes, the 1978–1979 mobilization on behalf of the Vietnamese boat people was not unrelated to earlier radical solidarities, but it was also extremely different. That said, more generally,

⁷ Reid, *Opening the Gates*, 8–9; and cf. Reid and Sherman, "Introduction," 187.

Mohandesi is certainly right that “radical internationalism” was a productive force during the 1960s and 1970s.⁸

What makes the Vietnam War so interesting within the force field of May 1968 is that however important it was in the months leading up to the events, it largely disappeared overnight as a major preoccupation among radicals. Once attention turned to arrested students, occupation, and strikes, the war seemed far away. The peace talks faced no significant protests in May and June. For both Keenan and Mohandesi, then, Vietnam figures prominently in the before and after of the events while being generally sidelined during them. Keenan’s selective focus on ministerial machinations does not impede the judgment that the war was merely one factor among many. Mohandesi is convincing that Vietnam “stood at the origins of” May 1968, although his admission that radicals “felt the best way to aid Vietnam was . . . to translate Vietnam into a domestic idiom” and that they “assimilated Vietnam so thoroughly it seemed to disappear as an issue” tends to undercut the claim for the war’s centrality (pp. 245–246). Quickly forgetting the other side of the world made for a rather weak international proletarian front.

Tony Côme also pursues international crisscrossing in his reconstruction of the Institut de l’Environment design school and its relationship to the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm. The challenge at hand was institutionalizing the aesthetics of 1968: imagination, creativity, equality, community, multiplicity, and so forth. It is one thing to participate in irruptive events in their extraordinary effervescence; it is another to prolong that energy, channeling it productively into sustained re-orderings that realize emancipatory aspirations. In other words, institutionalization posed serious challenges to aspects of the ethos of May 1968. Once imagination took power would students still be required to take exams and receive degrees? The Institut de l’Environment provides a case study to be read alongside the more famous example of the post-1968 experimental University of Vincennes. Like Keenan and Mohandesi, Côme also displays the virtues of tight chronological reconstruction. Already in 1965 French arts students were inspired by the Hochschule at Ulm, which had developed a reputation for experimentation, innovation, and for being a school “in movement” (Claude Schnaidt, cited in Côme, p. 308). Founded after the war by Inge Scholl and her husband in the memory of Inge’s brother and sister, the White Rose resisters Hans and Sophie Scholl, the school embodied a flexibility and openness missing in French academies. In September 1968, however, the German school, inspired in part by events in France, dissolved itself after a teacher/student alliance collapsed. German artists and instructors now looked across the Rhine, where some of them moved. Dramatizing through false analogy, French officials including André Malraux declared that the inhospitality that had been shown Bauhaus émigrés in the 1930s would not be repeated. The Institut de l’Environment was thus created on the principle of “change through the simple fact of exchange” and with the intention to “satisfy social needs” (Jean-Louis Violeau and Schnaidt, cited in Côme, pp. 317, 319).

One could read the Institut as an attempt to canalize the energies of May, to recuperate them, as radicals of the moment might have said. And yet, set alongside the November 1968 Faure educational reforms and the Vincennes experiment, for instance, the French state during the 1968

⁸ Salar Mohandesi, “From Anti-Imperialism to Human Rights: The Vietnam War and Radical Internationalism in the 1960s and 1970s,” PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2017.

years did show itself capable of addressing movement aspirations. The Institut attempted to put into practice the ideal of “decompartmentalized pedagogy” [*pédagogie décroisonnée*], developing a flexible interdisciplinary curriculum on urbanism, architecture, industrial design, and communication (p. 320). The practice was messy, and not surprisingly structural and functional issues arose: Should there be limits on student admissions? Who should decide degree requirements? Divisions arose among the students as well: some were apolitical, others in favor of self-management, others were communists. By 1971 the experiment was breaking down, just as the Ministry of the Environment was formed. Côme ends his account with a familiar move: balancing the tragedy of failure with the long-term survival and influence of the styles of 1968. If the Institut did not survive, perhaps in part it was because the spirit of '68 could not be bottled and contained by institutions and their inevitable limits, entropy, bureaucracies, and exclusions. Noble failures are noble after all.

Côme’s reference to the Bauhaus émigrés and Scholl siblings illustrate how the Nazi era and the Second World War partially shaped the time horizon of 1968. Sandrine Sanos similarly notes this extended time scale in her analysis of Diane Kurys’s films about the era, the first three she ever made—*Cocktail Molotov* (1980), *Diabolo Menthe* (1977), and *Entre Nous/Coup de Foudre* (1983)—a trilogy “haunted by the ghosts of World War II and the Holocaust” (p. 338). Dramatically, *Cocktail Molotov* centers on 1968, *Diabolo Menthe* on 1963, and *Entre Nous/Coup de Foudre*, which Sanos does not examine, on the wartime years. More than any other article in the issue, Sanos approaches the events of 1968 indirectly. Not only are Kurys’s films meandering post-facto representations of 1968, but Sanos’s rigorous reading adds further layers of mediation. We are confronted with the impossibility of seizing the events, of representing their happening or deciding on their meanings. In contrast to the hot emotion Bantigny/Gobille excavate, Sanos presents cold nostalgia, the sense of missing something that, if it had even taken place, is dissolved in the crossfade of filmic time. Her formalist, critical analysis of *Cocktail Molotov* and *Diabolo Menthe* foregrounds the interstices between desire and politics, history and memory, gender and Jewishness, circling around May 1968 as a blank screen and concluding with a profound sense of ambivalence. Kurys’s films are undeniably notable for their indirect approach to 1968, and Sanos’s sharp analysis amplifies their effect, enabling her to “step sideways” and avoid the usual “stories of rupture and failure.” Building on Kurys’s own backward-looking and somewhat distorted glances toward the Second World War, Algeria, and May 1968, Sanos’s focus on temporalities that resist containment parallels Côme’s treatment of an ethos inassimilable to institutional regularization. It is not coincidental that both articles are concerned with the pivot between aesthetics and politics variously conceived.

Diabolo Menthe tells the story of two French-Jewish sisters—Anne and Frédérique—grappling with adolescence in the mid-1960s. Sanos shows how themes often associated with 1968—history, politics, desire, and sexuality—preceded the events of that particular year. Temporality is doubled over in ways that call to mind Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the fold: while being explicitly set in 1963, the 1977 film gestures toward 1968. With the recently concluded Algerian War and the 1961 Charonne massacre hovering in the background, the politics of desire and the desire for politics overlap as Anne and Frédérique come of age through disaffection, rebellion, sexuality, and stuttering political engagement. 1968 before 1968, as it were.

Released three years later in 1980, *Cocktail Molotov* intensified this displacement by zeroing in on the inaccessibility of the 1968 events themselves and thus the difficulty of seizing their meaning. The protagonists, Anne, Frédéric, and Bruno, go on a road trip to Italy; once they hear about the May events, they head back to Paris. Along the way a parade of characters shares incongruous interpretations about what has been happening. The multiplicity of the May events is refracted through prisms of social class, generation, and partial information as “snippets of news and random encounters create a disjointed sense of time” (p. 349). The trio never makes it to History even as they grapple with the personal-political dilemma of emancipation as profoundly as any student manning a Latin Quarter barricade. In her 1968 without 1968, Anne gets pregnant, goes to Switzerland to have an abortion, and weighs moving to Israel to live on a kibbutz. In both *Cocktail Molotov* and *Diabolo Menthe*, the “young girl” [*jeune fille*] characters grapple with questions of Jewish and sexual identity. Their “awakening” to sexual and political consciousness erases the tidy boundaries between the interior spaces of subjectivity and the exterior world of politics (Claude Petit-Castelli, cited in Sanos, p. 355). No desire without politics, no politics without desire. Looking back from the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kurys imagines how the ethos and projects of 1968 both preceded and surpassed the iconic events of that year.

In the end Sanos emphasizes and even celebrates the “margins, silences, and oblique (or anecdotal) references of cultural texts that seem to have little to do with politics” (p. 358). On another level, though, reading representations critically performs a clear political operation that in highlighting the “ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary” foregrounds ambiguities and “ambivalences” (Svetlana Boym cited in Sonos, p. 359). The good news is that interpretation is never finished because it refuses foreclosure. We are not done with “1968.” More tragically, Sanos concludes, “Kurys’s female characters long for an elsewhere that will allow them to escape the ordering of bodies in a community. They are displaced subjects, never quite at home in the world they inhabit. Kurys’s nostalgia may be, in fact, symptomatic of the ambivalent realization that to be a female subject in the late 1970s is still to live [as the character Anne in *Cocktail Molotov* says] ‘in parentheses’” (p. 360). This powerful judgment speaks for itself.

Pushing a little further, however, one might observe that for all the attention to the open-ended, inconclusive, fragmentary, and ambivalent, there is something totalizing in Sanos’s treatment. She may go too far in suggesting, after Kurys, that “*only* a fragmented, mediated, and ‘episodic’ narration fits the event” (emphasis added, p. 348). The move is common in a certain style of critical analysis whose theoretical genealogy points back to the Sixties themselves. In what would be a very real irony, there are ways in which the politics of fragmentary margins have themselves become a certain kind of totalizing orthodoxy. Is ambivalence or living in parentheses a normative model or a problem to resolve? Both? How? Why? Like Mohandesi, Sanos transports us to the era, but also like him, her solidaristic unpacking takes little distance from its object. She criticizes racism and heteronormativity in the Kurys films but not the ways that they also possess profoundly anti-political characteristics. In this way, more might be made of how the films said as much or more about time they were produced – the late 1970s and early 1980s – than about the era they depict, the 1960s. We should in general be asking some tough questions about the legacy of 1968-era theoretical antinomianism, the politics to which it has led and more importantly the political blockages it may have symptomized and reinforced. The critique of representation obviously looks a little different in the era of fake news than it did before.

Deepening the attention to affect and yet cutting against the tendency toward extensive timelines, Bantigny and Gobille return to the May events themselves. The move makes sense, and we might have expected it as an inevitable pendulum swing opposite to the momentum of recent years toward the global and non-iconic. After iconoclasm rightly attacks idolization, it is possible to return to the previously fetishized with more realistic and proportional judgments. At the fortieth anniversary Gobille wrote one of the best short treatments of May-June 1968, and Bantigny's 2018 book promises to be among the most engaging and influential examples of a new literature.⁹ The return to the events is notable and reflects a new chapter in histories of the history of 1968. After the narrow monopoly of the memory barons from the 1970s through the 1990s, followed in the 2000s by new attention to events outside of Paris and France – this new phase might restore the complex texture, originality, influence, and significance of May 1968 itself.

Bantigny and Gobille's "L'expérience sensible du politique" brings together social-symbolic structural dynamics with substantial archival detail. Starting with the straw man that the social sciences treat emotions as irrational and de-politicized forces, the authors build on Frédéric Lordon's notion of "seditious passions" and Haim Burstin's concept of "protagonism" to claim that social action requires as necessary conditions both subjective affective investment and objective conditions of limit and alternative (pp. 277–78). Like Sanos, the approach seeks to suture desire and politics, but in contrast to the frame of tragic ambivalence, here the mode is that of possibility. For Bantigny and Gobille, affective investments can be individual and shared, and exterior conditions can spur emotion and be affected in turn. In May 1968, a "crisis of sensibility" intersected with a "sensibility of crisis" (p. 279). The authors identify the further paradox by which emotions and events fed one another in ways that made them each the condition of possibility for the other: "emotion understood as disposition making the event possible only became a true motor of the uprising thanks to the event: a disposition is there but it is only activated because the event activates it" (p. 280). Structural preliminaries and dynamics at work prior to 1968 generated subjective emotive experiences that fed and were reinforced by events that in turn facilitated an exteriorization of emotions into explicitly political and public registers. In other words, subjective feelings—at once individualized and shared—that particular circumstances were "insupportable" transformed into a "collective expression of the unacceptable," that is, into social acts (p. 280). In sum, emotions themselves can be understood as "acting social forces" that help explain the how, why, and what of the May events (p. 281).

Four political emotions are treated: joy, anger, hate, and fear. The "joy of the possible," the sentiment that all can be involved in politics and that (again echoing Sanos) the seemingly irrelevant "margin" can be reconfigured as that which "opens a space of a recoil/retreat [*récul*]" (p. 281, citing in part Michel de Certeau). Such poetic, ephemeral enthusiasm is admittedly difficult to find in the archives; as for Côme and Sanos, the event resists being seized. The political economy of emotions involves actions, effects, and counter-actions. Bantigny and Gobille are right to insist on such systematic dynamic interactionism. The "irenic" hope of a certain affective moment generated further emotions: anger that led toward "conflictuality" (from agonism to

⁹ Boris Gobille, *Mai 68* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008); and Ludivine Bantigny, *1968: De grands soirs en petits matins* (Paris: Seuil, 2018). See also Gobille, *Le Mai 68 des écrivains: crise politique et avant-gardes littéraires* (Paris: CNRS, 2018).

antagonism; cycles of violence/counter-violence between the police and protestors), and hatred (from antagonism to “repulsion”; mutual and “mirroring hatred” between the police and protestors) (pp. 285, 288, 290). Finally, out of hardening conflicts and mutual invective, fear came to take hold: the government, the police, the communist party, students—fears festered in isolation as mutual incomprehension and recrimination filled in the spaces between firmly drawn battle lines. As Reid and Sherman note in their Introduction, one of the virtues of Bantigny and Gobille’s contribution is that it examines structuring dynamics that cut across positional divides; in other words, they focus on the police as much as the protestors.

Keenan also performs this service by examining state actors. We still do not know very much about the political right as well as what was called in Nixon’s America, “the silent majority,” about those who felt that ’68 was something “done” to them rather than something they “did.” In coming years, one might expect to see more attention paid to anti-’68 protagonists, agendas, and dynamics. There is no escaping the fact that contemporary right-wing politics, too, can trace their origins to the Sixties. Here, by attending to the moment’s “situational logics,” without defaulting to either the sociology of collective action or “emotional spontaneism” as explanatory guides, Bantigny and Gobille restore something of the immediacy and distinctiveness of the May events while at the same time extracting from the moment theoretical insights that may be useful to others (Bantigny and Gobille, p. 299, citing in part Michel Dobry). Nevertheless, the historian would be right to complain that the messy contingent terrain she examines can seldom be tidied up in the neat boxes of social scientific modeling.

*

Fifty years is a long time. Fifty years is nothing at all. These essays demonstrate how, as the time of memory and witness prerogative continues to pass over into the temporalities of history, distance can serve as a precondition for fresh approaches and insights. The present anniversary of 1968 provides opportunities to close certain gaps, in understanding as well as relevance. The nine colleagues collaborating on this special issue of *French Historical Studies* have all furthered that de-glacialization of 1968, breaking up seemingly fixed judgments by allowing new understandings to flow. Through the reconstruction of precise episodes, they return to the plurality of “the events” themselves: both the celebrated weeks in Paris and more broadly conceived topographies. They demonstrate, explicitly as well as unintentionally, how one of the signature leitmotifs of the Sixties was the challenge of representation itself. Without compromising on longer timelines and more global spaces, each pays scrupulous attention to the logics of his and her case, and their cumulative effect illustrates the multifaceted prism of 1968—in its own time and for what it continues to mean today. Our colleagues have advanced our understanding about de-colonization, the Vietnam War, institutionalization, cinematic representation, and emotion. Their collective work reminds us that we still know very little about many aspects of the Sixties.

The special issue joins a spate of French and English-language studies that will take time to digest. In conclusion, here are two examples. In her newly translated 2014 book, *May ’68: Shaping Political Generations*, Julie Pagis revisits the category of generation as a self-described “child of ’68.” Like Gobille, Pagis is a sociologist. Understanding how social actors experienced “de-fatalizing” politicization during the extra-ordinarily effervescent events of 1968 requires tracking

how preexisting positions entered into crisis. Some people maintained and reinforced earlier commitments; others rapidly achieved new awareness or experienced “conversion” to radicalism. Pagis also follows where such logics of action led: some protagonists maintained commitments for years afterwards whereas others experienced rapid “de-activation.” Like Côme, she attends to how energies unleashed in 1968 were and were not maintained over subsequent years¹⁰ 1968 before, during, and after 1968.

Finally, Donald Reid’s magisterial reconstruction of the Lip “affair” of the 1970s restores a crucial and neglected storyline about the long 1968. He reminds us that Xavier Vigna, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, and Kristin Ross had first called our attention to the era’s “improbable encounters” between blue- and white-collar workers, the kind of “interclass” solidarities Blum emphasizes as well. Reid reads the series of strikes at the Lip watch factory in Besançon as a critical last stand of emancipatory labor projects that transpired in the midst of a more global transition during the 1970s from the postwar boom to neoliberalism. The Lip mobilizations opposed both hierarchical forms of management inherited from the past as well as new disruptive flows of deterritorialized capitalism. The enterprise, the work-place, could be a site of autonomy and community if organized through participatory democracy. Reid’s narrative is obviously tragic, although he affirms that the pursuit of humanizing our work lives continues (he points to the social Catholicism of the Lip movement as a something that “remains”). Such a “legacy ... can continue to challenge and inspire us today.” With Mohandesi, Reid invokes Sartre on “the field of possibilities.” His citation of Sartre’s comparison of Lip to *Madame Bovary* is just as apposite. “Like *Madame Bovary*,” Reid comments, “Lip is a text that created a world from the world that created it, confronted the legality of its day, and continues to challenge, inspire and haunt our imaginations.”¹¹ Not stilled, not frozen in the past, May ’68 shares this mobility, forming part of a living tradition. While parts of the past have indeed passed, died, another term for the unconditioned fate of 1968 is: life.

H-France Salon

Volume 10 (2018), Issue 3, #2

Copyright © 2018 by the H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Salon nor re-publication of 3 any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

¹⁰ Julie Pagis, *May '68: Shaping Political Generations* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 1, 5–6.

¹¹ Reid, *Opening the Gates*, 1–13.