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Chris Reynolds, *Memories of May '68: France's Convenient Consensus*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011. viii + 189 pp. Bibliography and index. £95.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-7083-2415-8; £19.99 U.K. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7083-2416-5.

Review by Julian Bourg, Boston College.

Chris Reynolds divides his study of the memory-history of 1968 into two parts: a critical assessment of the dominant narrative he sees strangling interpretations of that year, and a revisionist sketch of how to rectify this long-lasting situation. He argues that the prevailing “convenient consensus” about May '68 can best be dealt with by recovering the actual “diversity” (p. 5) of what took place during May-June 1968. The reigning stereotypical memory-history has reduced the magnitude, complexity, and seriousness of *les événements* to the flimsy formula of “May, Paris, Student” (p. 12). The phrase is Isabelle Sommier's, and Reynolds follows her, Gilles Bousquet, Vincent Porhel, Jean-Pierre Rioux, and especially Kristin Ross in the view that the real 1968 has been covered up and obfuscated by endless discussion about it.[1]

Such a process of “active forgetting” (Ross) has been advanced by self-serving former far-left '68ers who have promoted their own memories and experiences in ways that have distorted and monopolized the historical record (p. 36). This process of representational reductionism began already in 1968, and it has worsened through decennial anniversaries from 1978 to 2008 as voluminous accounts have intensified the diminishing selectivity of what happened in May-June 1968. From belittling the events' “revolutionary” features to playing up their irrationality to drawing pessimistic lessons from their “failure” and reducing them to a youthful Parisian tantrum that merely helped modernize France--accumulative judgments from the tenth through fortieth anniversaries have focused on a limited set of themes and meanings. Through the interplay of “living memory and historical framing,” changing decennial contexts have concealed underlying continuities (p. 28). Excessive attention paid to certain “spectacular, romantic” parts of 1968--far-leftist students in the Latin Quarter before May 30--explains dominant “narrow” versions of the events, which themselves still remain poorly understood (pp. 6-7). Consequently, the events of May-June 1968 have been robbed of their “significance” and “extensive impact” (pp. 27-28). So total has the convenient consensus become that an exception such as Hervé Le Roux's 1997 film *Reprise*, giving voice to anonymous worker disobedience at the Wonder factory strike in 1968, stands out conspicuously.

So far, this disparaging appraisal of the state of historical-memorial understanding, infused with overtones of political frustration, has not much new about it. Reynolds' original contribution is to put pressure on the specific dynamic by which, as it were, the more one talks, the less one says. The convenient consensus (narrow, ill-informed, popular) has curiously been reinforced by constant chatter about and disagreement over 1968. An air of indecision hovers over certain aspects of both what transpired and what it meant. Were the events anticipated or did they come out of nowhere? Was police action moderate or excessive? Why did the workers reject the Grenelle accords? Why did Charles de Gaulle go to Baden-Baden? Because even forty-plus years later these questions yield few clear answers, consensus centers instead on certain hackneyed images: Danny the Red; the attempted clearing of the Place de la Sorbonne; the Night of the Barricades; graffiti and Beaux Arts posters; the General Strike;

the political rally at Charléty; de Gaulle's disappearance and pendulum-swinging return. As a result, other elements of the moment that do not fit into the established tripartite story—from students to workers to de Gaulle—are ignored. Reynolds is certainly right, for instance, that a small cast of characters has dominated public memory of 1968 and that the month of June, which saw the first deaths of the 1968 protests in France, has often been ignored. Again, the new insight here relates to how disagreement stokes debate: every ten years the quantity of materials on 1968 increases, but their myopic qualities have fixed in place “a certain, restricted perception of the events” (p. 51). In sum, many, many books about 1968 have flatly misled.

If revisiting the familiar story of May's stereotypical representation yields Reynolds some explanatory insights—consensus via disagreement, obfuscation via avalanche—he makes a real contribution with his modest survey of French university students' attitudes toward and knowledge about 1968. Conducted in 2002–2003 among five hundred students throughout the country, the survey asked whether May 1968 was a positive experience in France, whether the French should be proud of the events, if they provoked real changes in French society, and the extent to which they have had an influence on the students' own lives. Reynolds furthermore wanted to assess the quality of students' knowledge about what happened in 1968 and especially the extent to which their understanding reflected the convenient consensus. Thus the survey investigated the perennial issue of Paris versus the provinces as well as impressions of the police, responsible parties, victims, and problem-solvers (pp. 138–142).

The survey results show that French university students in the early twenty-first century agreed that 1968 was a positive experience for France. They seemed to grasp that the events affected the entire country, with negative consequences for the government and lasting social changes for French citizens. They were less clear, however, on exactly how 1968 changed French society and their own lives. Reynolds reads this “lack of understanding of some of the finer details” as a symptom of the power of the convenient consensus (p. 61). And yet when he finesses this observation with the admission that “it is impossible for young people to be interested in the finer details of historical events such as 1968,” one wonders if French students have been less victim to the convenient consensus than, like members of their generation elsewhere, not very historically aware (p. 65). I will return to the survey in my conclusion, since it provides further evidence that the convenient consensus may not be as dominant as Reynolds maintains.

The best part of Reynolds' book is when he turns from the diagnosis of what ails the historical memory of 1968 to the proposed remedy; namely, overcoming the convenient consensus by appealing to the untold diversity of the event field. More than just calling for revision, he delivers two concrete examples: the reformist spirit of university students in May–June 1968, and the scope of protest movements outside of Paris, exemplified here by circumstances in Brest and Strasbourg. Against the reductive snapshot that highlights far-left radicals, Reynolds shines a light on student proposals for reforms of the university system. Although the evidence falls short of the claim that “pragmatic and realistic trends...made up the bulk of the numbers” of 1968 protestors, he nevertheless demonstrates that viable projects for the reform of the hierarchical, impersonal, and centralized university system circulated among student protestors (p. 99).

Importantly, the Minister of National Education after 10 July 1968, Edgar Faure, seemed to have an ear to the ground when he submitted *La loi d'orientation de l'enseignement supérieure* to the National Assembly, where it passed on 12 November 1968. Although filled with half-measures and inadequately implemented, the Faure reform reflected a relatively rapid response by de Gaulle's government to widespread student dissatisfaction with the university system. Its efforts to decentralize academic life and to invite student participation in university management “satisfied many of the demands of the 1968 movement and marked an important turning point in the history of the French university system” (p. 92). Reynolds' contention that we ought to pay more attention to student reformists and less, say, to Situationists, the March 22nd Movement, and Trotskyists is fair.

The second set of case studies used to de-center the convenient consensus relates the story of 1968 outside of Paris. “The diversity of these provincial movements,” Reynolds writes, “in terms of composition, spread, and magnitude highlights the difficulty of generalizing how the events of 1968 were experienced across the nation and, in so doing, problematizes the stereotypical narrative” (p. 116). It is true that most analyses of 1968 penned over the past forty years have focused on the capital. Following rhythms distinguished from Paris and from one another, movements in Brest and Strasbourg serve Reynolds as counterpoints. Protests in Brest were characterized by a high level of cooperation among students and communist and non-communist labor unions and, given the fragile state of the economy in Brittany, centered on bread-and-butter issues. Events in Strasbourg focused on university reform and the elaboration of so-called *Commissions Paritaires*, experiments in the self-management of education. So impressed was then Minister of National Education, Alain Peyrefitte, that he permitted the Strasbourgeois’ experiment in “autonomy” to continue for a time (p. 117). In both Brest and Strasbourg, violence was minimal, in contrast to Paris and its environs, which saw regular pitched street battles in May and deadly confrontations in June. Again, Reynolds helpfully draws our attention away from the standard storyline; rather than stopping at the complaint that we ought to uncouple 1968 from Paris, he shows us briefly how to do it.

In its conclusion, *Memories of May '68* assesses the fortieth anniversary of the events in 2008. The predictable barrage of print and media portrayals dwarfed previous outputs and was aided by then-presidential candidate Nicholas Sarkozy’s inflammatory speech of April 2007 in which he proposed to “liquidate” the inheritance of 1968.[2] Reynolds sees in 2008 mainly a continuation of the convenient consensus via the republication of earlier books, rehearsals of conventional narratives, and the repetitive appearance of the small cast of familiar ‘68ers. The “doxa” and “stagnant...debate” remained fundamentally unchanged (pp. 126-127). This verdict is, in some sense, unfortunate given the unprecedented scale of memorialization that year, which included original and serious historiographical contributions. Indeed, even if he does not draw strong lessons from them, Reynolds notes such new approaches and directions--on regional diversity and longer timeframes; the transnational Sixties; the recovery of actors such as immigrants, religious believers, farmers, and, crucially, the working class; and the kind of meta-historical reflection to which *Memories of '68* itself contributes.

It remains an open question the extent to which such writing marks a decisive shift in understanding May '68, yet it is likely that more was afoot in 2008 than the reaffirmation of the convenient consensus thesis. Also in his conclusion Reynolds makes the strongest case for a claim that appears at the beginning of the book: that the convenient consensus emerged through the “unlikely tango” of two actors, each of whom has benefitted from constricted versions of 1968; namely, former radical leftists and the French state (pp. 33, 123). Ross had already exposed the former in *May '68 and Its Afterlives*. The issue of state collusion in the “forgetting” of 1968, however, is another matter. Not without good reasons, Sarkozy is accused of dismissing 1968 in order to foreclose any possible renewal of radical contestation in the early twenty-first century. Here, the overtones of political frustration common to Ross and Reynolds emerge: if the true story of 1968 could be told, then it could serve as a vital resource for reawakening radical, especially working-class politics. The convenient consensus has served a policing function. While the case seems plausible with respect to Sarkozy, at the same time, the polemical use he made of 1968 was exceptional when compared to Jacques Chirac in 1998, François Mitterrand in 1988, or Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1978.

There are two points to make here. First, the state has not really been involved in the memorialization of the events; the media and what Daniel A. Gordon has called “memory barons” have obviously played a greater role than politicians and state functionaries in that process (p. 137).[3] But the era of the mediatization of public memory is also the era of cynical dissensus. If the barons show up every ten years on radio and television to hold forth on 1968, they have always been criticized and sometimes despised for doing so. Since the late 1960s, critique has always accompanied the consensus. The second point concerns the position of political frustration from which Reynolds and others expose the

convenient consensus. His account is haunted by an epistemological earnestness that aims for the “true” ’68 to be revealed. This critique depends on recuperating and restoring what has been forgotten, more specifically exhuming and resuscitating a buried reality. The language is striking: the problem with the convenient consensus, he says, is that it does not appreciate the “true scope, magnitude, and nature of the events” and that it fails to achieve a “complete understanding” and draw a “complete picture” of what happened (pp. 7, 34, 38, 49, 52, 59, 73, 78, 98–99, 133).

The irony is that arguing over the true meaning of 1968 is now a classic trope of the discourse Reynolds exposes but, in this case, also unintentionally joins. It is not clear what a complete history of 1968 could look like. Of course, the alternative of reveling in the multiplicity of the many 1968s is also a predictable move. A further criticism is that Reynolds does not substantiate broad claims about the allegedly true scope, magnitude, and nature of the events. He states without making the case, for instance, that the events of May–June 1968 changed the entire country, that they were serious and significant, and that most protestors were not radical (pp. 40, 68, 99). He is on firmer ground when he investigates the specific examples of university reform, Brest, and Strasbourg.

Reynolds’ survey of French university students also provides evidence that works against his main argument. For example, a strong majority of students did not understand the events of 1968 to have taken place only in Paris whereas, according to the convenient consensus model, Paris-centric versions of 1968 predominate. To be sure, some 85 percent of respondents were not from the Parisian region—a fact that surely increases the salience of regional awareness. And yet Reynolds stretches to reach conclusions opposite to what the data suggests: “Whilst the majority of those questioned disagreed, that over one-fifth of respondents agreed that [the student revolt] was largely restricted to the capital is indicative of the influence of the stereotypical portrayal on an understanding of the nationwide nature and impact of the crisis” (p. 104; cf. pp. 61, 65).

But 80 percent disagreed! It may be, for instance, that students are right that 1968 was more influential on educational, as opposed to “regional issues” (pp. 73–74). On one hand, until we know more about how 1968 is supposed to have affected regionalism in past decades (a case for Brittany could certainly be made), we cannot fully evaluate recent perceptions. On the other hand, if provincial students do not see the legacy of 1968 in their own lives, one ends up in the unenviable position of having to tell them that they are wrong and, for Reynolds, wrong because they have been misled by the convenient consensus. To be fair, Reynolds is merely describing the general currency and effectiveness of dominant narratives about 1968. His overall stance is largely fair. A final, minor point about the survey is that Reynolds’ translation of the term “*neutre*” as “not certain” instead of “neutral” enables him to bend the material to his advantage.

A final example of how *Memories of May ’68* works against itself in ways that open up further reflection has to do with how Reynolds’ critique of the convenient consensus enables us to interrogate memory as a category of historical analysis both with respect to 1968 and, in my view, more generally. This conclusion requires reading his argument (memory hinders more than it helps historical understanding) against his methodology—the pursuit of what he calls the “symbiotic relationship” between history and memory (p. 12). Perhaps we should not really be surprised at the diminishing selectivity of memory, the privileging of particular perspectives and the narrowing of the field of “what counts.” Political frustration may provide normative grounds for denouncing such reductive myopia, but epistemologically, memory is inherently characterized by selection and distortion. Indeed, memory is altogether an exception within the more general phenomenon of forgetting. (A parallel argument could be made for the ontological condition of events: no *post facto* representation can ever fully capture the splendor of the immediate; it is a basic tendency of events to grow cold after their moment has passed.) Thus, we should not be scandalized by France’s convenient consensus about 1968 because memories of events are subject to an almost natural process of degradation and decay. Inherent character, natural process—against these qualities of memory, one might contrast history. Whatever “history” is, it is not

commemoration. 'Calling to mind' is not 'inquiring/finding out.' Since Vico, history is what we make, not nature.

A basic virtue of Reynolds' study is to have traced the fault lines of memory in ways that invite more general questions about the value of this now widely-accepted category of historical analysis. *Memories of May '68* shows how memory is faulty, not in the sense of being creatively unstable or contestable, but because it interferes with historical understanding. Memories are often wrong, polemical, partial, and—as undergraduates like to say these days—biased. Our own memories are usually self-interested. Memory is no substitute for explanation. "Setting the story straight" involves historical reconstruction via evidence and argumentation, hence Reynolds' appeal to the real.[4] To some extent, the very interest in memory as a supposed resource for historical understanding emerged during the period Reynolds explores. The turn to memory can be read in part as a symptom of the late twentieth-century breakdown of coherent philosophies of history, the rise of epistemological skepticism in the humanities, and the ascendancy of multimedia visual culture—phenomena not without important links to 1968. Everyone has memories, and leaning on that notion creates an endless register of relative perspectives.

Yet memory-oriented studies tend to privilege the memories of those whose moral status comes from victimization (where are the memories of fascists and murderers?). The absence of victims in Reynolds' study of memory and 1968 stands out. Instead, the emphasis is on setting the story straight according to criteria of truth and illusion, or perhaps complete truth versus distorted partiality. He thus highlights the way that memory-history depends on the real—whether naïvely unreconstructed or, as in the case of psychoanalytically-informed studies of genocidal trauma, sophisticated—to produce knowledge. Memory depends on history after all.

Reynolds also raises the question of whether one can talk about memory-history without referring to the state, either its official memories or the counter-memories mobilized against its power. Again, a more conventional historicity returns. Have we forgotten the lesson of psychoanalysis, the field which more than any other gave memory its modern intellectual relevance, that memories are unreliable and that if they are an important source of knowledge about the past they need to be checked neither against the narcissism of endless pain nor according to the fantasy that everything counts, but rather by modest and resolute rational analysis? Chris Reynolds reminds us to be suspicious of memory.

NOTES

[1] See Isabelle Sommier, "Mai 68: sous les pavés d'une page officielle," *Sociétés Contemporaines* 20(1994): 63-82; Gilles Bousquet, "Où en est-on de mai 68?" *Contemporary French Civilization* 1(1992): 68-89; Vincent Porhel, *Ouvriers bretons: conflits d'usines, conflits identitaires en Bretagne dans les années 1968* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008); Jean-Pierre Rioux, "A propos des célébrations décennales du mai français," *Vingtième Siècle* 23(1991): 49-58; Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2002). It is noteworthy that Sommier, Bousquet, Rioux, and others were already decrying memory obfuscation in the early 1990s.

[2] Nicolas Sarkozy, *Discours à Bercy* (29 April 2007), <http://www.betapolitique.fr/Le-discours-de-Bercy-de-Nicolas-00743.html> (accessed 1 June 2008).

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

[4] Take "setting the story straight" as a shorthand for historical writing that uses narrative and argument to make truth claims, however rhetorically qualified. Reynolds' revisionism seeks to straighten out the crooked convenient consensus. Obviously, historical writing can also problematize

truth games--"queering" the story, as it were, rather than setting it straight. Here, Reynolds' critical appeal to multiplicity is pulled back and restrained by a monistic notion of "correct" history.

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