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Manus McGrogan, *Tout!: Gauchisme, contre-culture et presse alternative dans l'après-Mai 68*. Translated from English by Jean-Marie Guerlin. Paris: *L'Échappée*, 2018. 205 pp. Bibliography, notes, and acknowledgements. €18.00. (pb). ISBN 978-2373090383.

Response by Manus McGrogan, University of Sussex.

My thanks to Ron Haas for his very positive, thoroughgoing review of my book on the newspaper *Tout!* I should begin by drawing attention to his own work on the same milieu, focusing on one of *Tout!*'s leading contributors, French gay liberation pioneer, Guy Hocquenghem.[1] It forms an excellent introduction to Hocquenghem's revolutionary ideas and activities in the period after 1968.

Indeed the under-researched period of *l'Après-Mai* (essentially the early 1970s) is the backdrop to my account of the Mao-spontaneist group, Vive la Révolution (VLR) and *Tout!* with which I hope to stimulate further enquiry into how the ripples spread from the radical eruption of '68. There are some great scholarly works on this period, not least Kristin Ross's *May '68 and its afterlives*, Michael Scott Christofferson's *French Intellectuals against the left* and French tomes *Les années '68* and *68 une histoire collective* edited by, amongst others, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel.[2] However, they tend to be broad intellectual sweeps of the period whereas, in my own work, I have reconstituted the microhistory of a newspaper that "lasted shortly but burned brightly." [3]

The VLR-*Tout!* amalgam existed at the conjuncture of the May '68 revolution and the arrival of a US-style cultural underground in France. As a case study, it exemplified all the fusions and frictions of radical left movements of the time. The interviews with former *Toutiens* and a number of other respondents (activists for the most part) proved indispensable, given the lack of written records (other than in the paper itself).

VLR's interpretation of cultural revolution rejected the power struggles of the Chinese bureaucracy in favour of a marriage of socio-political revolt and counterculture, helping pioneer a movement in which thousands of young French activists would alternately militate in the many street protests, and forge alternative lifestyles.

In his short re-telling of my story of *Tout!*, Haas explains that the VLR group unravelled due to the basic contradiction of trying to federate movements of, on the one hand, workers and Marxists, and on the other, "autonomous" women and gay liberationists. There was another crucial pressure that led to the dissolution of VLR, and that was police repression. Already

noted for their strong-arm tactics during student and worker protests of the May '68 events, the police subsequently took a militaristic approach to left-wing protest under the aegis of hard-line Interior Minister Raymond Marcellin (with the blessing of his respective superiors, Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou).

The VLR militant, Richard Deshayes, described the Quartier Latin in the two or three years after May as "noir de flics; le Quartier Latin a été occupé pendant plusieurs années après '68. T'avais un premier car en bas de Saint Michel, et le dernier se trouvait au jardin du Luxembourg, quoi. T'avais environ 40 cars, Peut-être mille flics ou plus." [4] Deshayes himself, noted for his street fighting proclivity, was shot in the face at point-blank range by the CRS during a demonstration in February 1971. He was disfigured, blinded in one eye, and dropped out of political activity altogether to pursue a decade-long court case against the Paris police.

The revolutionary Maoist and Trotskyist *groupuscules* fell foul of repression, incurring bans, fines and imprisonment. The Maoists, no longer willing or able to live up to their rhetoric of "popular war," either imploded or dissipated. The more resilient Trotskyists took a less offensive course, building strength in the student and worker movements and standing candidates at presidential elections in the years to come: Arlette Laguiller for Lutte Ouvrière and Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire. Anarcho-spontaneist currents, themselves an important element of the VLR/*Tout!* milieu, continued to agitate on the margins of French social movements.

Haas finally draws attention to the current struggle of the *gilets jaunes*, at the time of writing entering its 26th week of active opposition to the neo-liberal economic policies of President Emmanuel Macron. The coincidence of the *gilets jaunes* movement with the fiftieth anniversary of 1968 has prompted comparisons. There are some similarities. Both revolts were buoyed by grassroots spontaneity, at least in the early stages. Both were extra-parliamentary, having in common the desire to "*prendre la parole*" ("seize speech"), a watchword of '68. And both took on a quasi-insurrectional character in the confrontations with *les forces de l'ordre* on the big demonstration days.

There is also a striking parallel in the hard-line response of the French authorities then and now. It was police arrests of Parisian student activists in early May 1968 that triggered the riots. Images of CRS chasing down and brutally beating students and passers-by flashed across French TV screens during the events, adding fuel to the fire. In the case of the *gilets jaunes*, the scale of rioting belies the French media's and government's contention that the rioters have simply been a fringe of extremist "*casseurs*"; many ordinary *gilets jaunes* have joined the mêlées. At the same time, the violence meted out to the protestors during the Saturday 'Acts' (and often on their blockades) by police and CRS has been ruthless and disproportionate.

In fact, whereas VLR's Deshayes was shot and disfigured by police in 1971, no less than twenty *gilets jaunes* protestors have been partially blinded by police "flashball" shots to the face over the last six months. Hundreds more have sustained serious injury from police rubber bullets, grenade fire and baton charges. Amnesty International has condemned the violence, as well as Macron's promotion of the "anti-vandal law," which it says infringes citizens' basic rights. This is a mirror image of the *loi anti-casseurs* enacted in 1970 to criminalise and curb leftist street agitation.

However, beyond the terrible repression, the dynamics and composition of the movement today, as well as the context in which it takes place, differ markedly from that of '68 and its aftermath. For historian Danielle Tartakowsky, this makes comparisons less "pertinent."<sup>[5]</sup> The general strike of '68 was grounded in the workplaces, as were the wildcat strikes, *séquestrations* and occupations of subsequent years, whereas the *gilets jaunes* hotspots have been roundabouts, motorways and city streets. Although the trade unions eventually caught up with (and muzzled) the movement in '68, today they are structurally absent from the *gilets jaunes* movement, even if many individual union members continue to take to the streets each Saturday.

Moreover, the new social movements that VLR and *Tout!* sought to federate in the wake of '68 were of a different nature, the forerunners of identity politics today. There has not been the same degree of attention afforded such movements by the *gilets jaunes*. Indeed, there have been reports of racism and homophobia on the blockades and demonstrations. Given its widespread and nebulous nature, one would expect expressions of ordinary prejudice, regrettable though they are. It is also well known that the far right have attempted to make inroads into the movement in some places. But to characterise the *gilets jaunes* as right wing and reactionary, as some have done in an effort to malign the movement, would be mistaken.

The *gilets jaunes* constitute a heterogeneous social movement of the twenty-first century, suffering the poverty and *précarité* that are the hallmarks of pan-European economic austerity. The heart of their movement is proletarian in the true sense of the word, with protestors having little or nothing to their name. They have emerged from a deep alienation and disaffection with the French political system and its political parties. Unsurprisingly, they refuse to talk to, and instead call for the head of, their smooth-talking ex-banker President.

The initial 'populist' opposition to Emmanuel Macron's petrol tax quickly has snowballed into a more radical contestation of fundamental aspects of French political and economic life, exposing a veritable revolt from below. Furthermore, the *gilets jaunes* have demonstrated a capacity for ordinary people to self-organise, discuss their common problems, and institute forms of "direct democracy" (not unlike the assemblies and occupations of 1968). There is now a network of GJ assemblies that periodically converge for national conference.

The internal debate has allowed the *gilets jaunes* to enunciate some clear demands for, in order of priority: public referenda, fully funded public services, (re)-nationalisation, social and fiscal justice, and environmental action. All of these were distilled from the real and virtual interviews and discussions in and around the "*Vrai Débat*"<sup>[6]</sup>, the *gilets jaunes*' alternative to Macron's *Grand Débat*, widely seen as the government's initiative to re-impose its moral authority and stymie the street movement.

These demands further refute the notion that the *gilets jaunes* are a backward-looking bunch; if anything, their ecological concerns point to a fight for the future, echoing the slogans of French school students' (many of them their own children) climate marches. It remains to be seen whether the movement will radicalise further, allowing questions of oppression to be addressed, and solidarity to be shown for ethnic minorities, gender and sexual groups, both amongst the *gilets jaunes* and external to the movement.

## NOTES

[1] Ron Haas, 'Guy Hocquenghem and the cultural revolution in France after May 1968', in Julian Bourg, ed. *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* (Lexington books, 2004), pp. 175-200.

[2] Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: the Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Publishing, 2004); Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, Robert Frank and Marie-Françoise Lévy, eds., *Les années '68: le temps de la contestation* (Paris: Complexe/IHTP, 2000); and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, Philippe Artières, eds., *68, une histoire collective, 1962-1981* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

[3] Manus McGrogan, "Tout in context: French radical press and the crossroads of far left, new movements and counterculture, 1968-73" (PhD thesis, University of Portsmouth, 2010), p. 269.

[4] Manus McGrogan, *Tout! gauchisme contre culture et presse alternative dans l'après mai 68*, p. 34.

[5] <https://www.ouest-france.fr/societe/gilets-jaunes/gilets-jaunes-mai-68-une-comparaison-pas-vraiment-pertinente-6111418> , 9 May 2019.

[6] <https://www.le-vrai-debat.fr/>, 9 May 2019.

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