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Julie Pagis, *May '68: Shaping Political Generations*. Trans. Katharine Throssell. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 321 pp. Figures, tables, appendices, bibliography, index €109.00 (hb). ISBN 978-94-6298-375-5.

Review by Ben Mercer, Australian National University

In *May '68: Shaping Political Generations*, Julie Pagis provides an incisive analysis of the construction of political generations in a welcome translation of her *Mai '68: un pavé dans leur histoire* (2014). Pagis asks who made '68, whether there was a '68 generation, what the biographical consequences were of participation in '68, and what the children of '68ers inherited from their parents. The investigation is partly autobiographical. Pagis is herself a child of '68ers, daughter of agronomical engineers who resigned from professional employment to become farmers in south-east France. One impetus for the study is that Pagis did not identify with the cliché of children of '68ers settling scores with their parents. The result is a fascinating and original study on May '68 and its long aftermath, and an important contribution to the literature both on May '68 and its memory.

Pagis constructs her corpus via two primary schools, Vitruve in the 20th arrondissement of Paris and Ange-Guépin in Nantes. Both offered experimental forms of learning and attracted children of '68ers. The process of identifying the pupils of these schools led to 665 questionnaires, of which 350 were completed (182 parent questionnaires and 162 children) to create a group of 169 families. Pagis then complemented the resulting statistical data with 89 life history interviews (51 of former '68ers and 38 of children). This construction of a group for close analysis is a considerable achievement and creates an original and rich data set for conclusions about some '68ers, or at least “certain '68ers who were characterized by specific educational strategies” (p. 34). The life stories are especially fascinating and provide an important and necessary contrast to the statistical data. One of the primary pleasures of the book are these brief life stories scattered throughout its pages. Focused neither on the leadership nor those who became famous in the revolts, and turning its attention to both '68ers and their children, the book offers an original and important contribution to the study of 1968.[1]

Who were the '68ers? Pagis argues for the “heterogeneity of those who participated in May '68” (p. 46) and affirms that there is no single '68 generation. She effectively debunks the idea that a crisis of jobs or downward social mobility explains social revolt in 1968.[2] Instead, she suggests upward social mobility was an important aspect in generating conflict, especially among women and students—both groups who discovered a contradiction between the opportunities available to them and the social and cultural mores of the time. Many of those who became '68ers drew on

a family heritage of activism (often religious), radicalized by the structural transformations of the school system and gender relations. Different cohorts were radicalized by different moments--Algeria for an older generation, Vietnam for a younger one, with a third not radicalized until '68 itself. The emphasis on heterogeneity, and the poverty of the generational category, is a necessary and valuable reminder of the diversity of actors in 1968. More broadly, Pagis' depiction supports the interpretation of '68 as a broad crisis of authority.[3]

Pagis emphasizes not only the diversity of '68ers but also the heterogeneity of '68s, the events experienced in a multitude of different ways: "Rather than seeking to find *the* meaning of the events of May-June '68, or to explain who the '68ers *really* are, we can instead say that they constitute a 'collective person,' partly based on cohesion through vagueness" (p. 83).

There's much to be said for this formulation, and it avoids the obvious pitfall of ascribing the events to a single cause, or limiting their meaning to a single experience. Abandoning the attempt to find the key to May '68, Pagis connects many of the common interpretations to the sociological groups to whom they apply. In particular, "occupation proved to be a decisive factor in terms of their relationship to the events" (p. 84). Those who were younger, students or women tended to be affected by the events the most: "84% of those who were students during the events declare they belong to 'generation '68' compared to just over half of those who were working at the time" (p. 215). Furthermore, women and students tended to interpret their experience as much through the perspective of personal emancipation as through broader political events. Conversely, those who already worked, or had a history of activism prior to 1968, reported their experience of the event as political rather than personal, subscribing less to the theme of personal emancipation. The interpretations of '68 as a moment of personal emancipation, or political revolt or revolution, emerge here as partial representations based on particular sets of experiences. Pagis thus rejects any characterization of '68ers as one or, for that matter, two generations: "there are instead a dozen 'micro-units' of generation '68' that share a common pool of experiences (prior, during and after the events of May '68)" (p. 211).[4]

May 1968, therefore, contains very different meanings, and in some instances, could be more important to an individual with only marginal participation than someone who participated fully in the events but entered them already politicized with a history of activism. Historians have now long noted the tendency of the memory of 1968 to focus predominantly on events in Paris, during May, and student protagonists.[5] Pagis's research suggests one reason for this: that group is precisely the one for whom the events of May '68 remained most important. For questions of memory, it was shared experiences *after* 1968 that determined a sense of generational belonging *to* 1968. Thus, many women saw '68 as more important to them than men did, and understood the post-May period ending later than male activists. The relative importance and impact of feminism after 1968 allowed those who saw themselves as feminists to imagine 1968 as having been more of a turning point than those whose far-left activism was progressively devalued in the subsequent decade. Gendered patterns further marked the memory of interviewees: "the male interviewees tend to claim that they *shaped* 1968, whereas the women say they *were shaped by* 1968--considering their trajectories as marked by a before-1968 and after-1968" (p. 217). Although the analysis is undoubtedly marked by the date of the interviews (2004) and, as Pagis notes, the large number of interviewees who had undertaken psychoanalysis, this fine-grained analysis of how '68 is represented among different sociological categories should be a starting point for discussion on the personal memory of the events.

Turning her attention to the long-term destinies of '68ers, Pagis finds that those who were activists prior to '68 very often continued their activism after, but about half of those who had no history of activism also continued the struggle. In contrast to the cliché of an opportunistic upwardly mobile generation “which swapped the ideals of youth for the principles of the stock market, and who are assumed to have ended up in executive positions in the areas of advertising, media or politics” (p. 130), Pagis traces the many costs of ongoing activism for these '68ers, including, for some, a downward social mobility in the subsequent decades. Both upward and downward social mobility emerged out of '68, although unevenly shared, and gendered in distribution. Longer term, many '68ers found themselves disenchanted with militancy, and sought material and social stability, reducing their commitment, especially as far-Left activism declined in the 1970s. Crucial to this conversion were social spaces, such as the newspaper *Libération*, which functioned as “transitional spaces between the militant and professional spheres” (p.176) on exit from political militancy, much as Vincennes had on entry. The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu provided for some the means by which they reconverted their militancy into intellectual capital.

Pagis' corpus allows some concrete analysis of the much much-mythologized worker-student connections of May '68 as well as attempts at communal living. Regarding the former, Pagis argues that “the social barriers between the worlds of students and workers were breached during and after May '68, which is often overlooked in the memory of these events” (p.157). Yet much of the evidence she adduces to the history of worker-student interactions also testifies to their ephemerality, to misunderstandings, and to the imbalances of power in such encounters. Nonetheless, universities such as Vincennes “functioned, for a time, as sites for the possible synthesis of activism, university studies and professional activities” (p.154). Pagis' emphasis on attempts to redefine parenthood, childcare and experiments in communes likewise emphasizes enduring sociological constraints: “Although communes were spaces in which society was (relatively) put on hold, where alternative class, gender and generational relations were tested, and which functioned as instruments for enabling the symbolic manipulation of the future (perpetuating the opening of possibilities), social inequalities generally ended up catching up with the protagonists in their post-communal lives” (p. 209). On these questions, there is a tension in Pagis' analysis between the affirmation of social (or at least symbolic) transformation and the acknowledgement of their long-term sociological constraints.

Pagis pays consistent attention to the way in which a predisposition towards participation in '68, its aftermath and its memory was gendered. The events of May '68 provided an impetus to female activism more than men, who were already more politically active. On exit from full-time militancy, however, male activists more successfully converted their political activism into professional outcomes: “social reintegration of women seems to have been less straightforward” (p.184). Personal outcomes also differed markedly according to gender. The divorce rate for the corpus was 60% compared to 15% for the general population, with men more likely to be in a relationship at the time of the study. A quarter of the women interviewed reported depression after 1968 and, more broadly, men did not see 1968 as impacting their “intimate relations with the social world in the way that women do” (p. 187). These results point to a very different experience of '68 and its long-term meaning for female activists compared to male ones, and once again offer an important corrective to generalizations about generations of '68ers.

Finally, in her analysis of the transmission of radicalism from one generation to the next, Pagis suggests that '68ers proved more successful at transmitting their partisan preferences than their

interest in politics. Pagis ascribes this more to the socio-economic context and climate than any cliché about a more conservative and individualistic generation revolting against their radical parents. As with the '68ers, so with the second generation. Pagis emphasizes the heterogeneity of experience, identifying no less than seven sub-groups of the second generation. Ultimately, she concludes, "the notion of generation does not help us to understand how the political event acts on individual trajectories" (p.239). This conclusion is convincingly demonstrated in a book which will be cautionary reading for anyone who wants to dabble with simplistic generational generalizations.

NOTES

[1] Cf. Virginie Linhart, *Le jour où mon père s'est tu* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

[2] See Louis Gruel, *La rébellion de '68: Une relecture sociologique* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004).

[3] See, for example, Xavier Vigna, *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années '68: essai d'histoire politique des usines* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007).

[4] Cf. Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération*, 2 vols, (Paris: Seuil, 1987-1988).

[5] Isabelle Sommier, "Mai 68: Sous les pavés d'une page officielle" *Sociétés Contemporaines* 20 (1994): 63-82, and, more broadly, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Le Moment 68: une histoire contestée* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

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