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Donald Reid, *Opening the Gates. The Lip Affair, 1968-1981*. London: Verso, 2018. xvi + 492 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. £32.00; \$48.00 (U.S.). ISBN 978-1-78663-540-2.

Review by Julian Jackson, Queen Mary, University of London.

Historians of May 68 have broadly speaking taken two different approaches. There are those who situate the events of that year in a longer timescale dubbed “les années 1968” which starts somewhere in the 1960s and (depending on the author) stretches into the mid-1970s even to 1981; there are those who, while not denying the subsequent impact of 1968, prefer to focus specifically on the events of May-June 1968. The former approach is best represented in the collective work co-edited by Michelle Zancarini-Fournel and published to coincide with the fortieth anniversary;[1] the latter in the book published by Ludivine Bantingy, to coincide with the fiftieth.[2]

For historians taking the longer timeframe, two conflicts which erupted in 1973 are particularly emblematic: the one on the plateau of Larzac where farmers opposed the expansion of a military camp on to their land; the other at the Lip watchmaking factory near Besançon. Now, in this exhaustively researched and richly documented book, Donald Reid, also the author of an article on the Larzac struggle,[3] has provided us with what must surely be the definitive study of the Lip conflict. This excellent study is sometimes a dense read—the story is a complicated one—but it repays the effort.

Reid, who has in recent years written extensively on the memory of the Occupation and Resistance, made his reputation with a book on the unsuccessful struggle of the miners of Decazeville to protect their industry and their jobs in 1961-62.[4] But the Lip conflict took place on a much wider canvas than the Decazeville one. This book is not just about the workers of Lip but also about the way in which their conflict became a laboratory of experimentation for the many different political currents that had emerged out of May 68. For the former Gaullist and *gauchiste* convert Maurice Clavel, the Lip struggle was the “first dream of the people in the thirty years since de Gaulle’s *appel* of 1940”; to forget the story would be a “sign that our people have renounced their identity” (p. 4). Jean-Paul Sartre commented, somewhat obscurely, that “Lip is *Madame Bovary*”—by which he meant, Reid surmises, that Lip could also be seen as a “text that created a world from the world that created it” (p. 5).

The Lip factory had started out as a watchmaking workshop founded in Besançon in 1867 by Emmanuel Lipmann. By the time his grandson Fred Lip joined the firm in 1931, the company was the largest watchmaker in France; by 1962 it was the seventh largest in the world. Fred Lip

managed his firm with a mixture of eccentric authoritarianism and theatrical paternalism. He introduced his “court” of directors with the words “here are my slaves”; there were stories that he hid under a table before one meeting to hear what the directors were saying about him--and then leapt out to berate them (as one might imagine in a film of Louis de Funès). In 1968 when the factory was occupied, Lip armed himself with a pistol that he said he was ready to use against protestors. But this did not stop him telling the head of the national business organization of watchmakers that he should resign because “the students had blown away the old professors” (p. 58). One feels that although the conflict that broke out in 1973 was in some sense a reaction against the strange environment he had created for his workers, in another way he may unwittingly have helped to create a sense of collective identity for them.

The background to the conflict of 1973 was the increasing role played by multinational firms in the French economy. In 1967 Lip sold part of his firm to the Swiss conglomerate Ebauches SA. For Lip it was a way of finding new opportunities to sell outside France (he said that de Gaulle had told him he could sell to the Swiss but not the Americans); for the Swiss it was a way of penetrating the French market. Having ousted Lip in 1970, the Swiss firm planned next to reduce the Lip plant to being an assembly plant for their watches. This involved laying off about half the company’s employees. Where the usual response of union confederations might have been to challenge dismissal while seeking better severance pay and assurances about other employment opportunities, the Lip workers responded by setting up an Action Committee (very much in the style of May 1968) which voted to occupy their factory and continue to produce watches. In the words of Charles Piaget, one of the union activists who played a leading part in the conflict, the workers were refusing “to be the playthings of economic destiny” (p. 74). Piaget was strongly marked by his experience in the Action Catholique Ouvrière (AOC), and left Catholicism strongly marked the social and political culture of the Lip workers. Jean Raguénès, the Dominican priest who worked at Lip and became one of the most charismatic leaders of the conflict wrote “everyone follows Piaget because he resembles a priest” (p. 41). As Reid writes, “what Lip workers drew from Left Catholic culture could be more radical than the efforts of the Communists” (p. 12). Having occupied the factory, and briefly sequestered two of the provisional administrators, the workers decided to hide a stock of watches, and start up production. When military police were sent in to evacuate the factory in August after six weeks of occupation, the workers continued producing watches in “phantom workshops” scattered around the region using watch parts and machines that they had taken away in anticipation of being expelled.

The conflict, which lasted until January 1974, became an extraordinary experiment in self-liberation. As Piaget wrote about the decision to re-start production: “the bosses had all left, but the subordination that characterizes the wage earners still made us hesitate. Fear was there. We reassembled sailors who mutinied in the eighteenth century. None of us knew how to steer the boat” (p. 104). They learnt fast. Thirty-five commissions, and numerous sub-commissions, were set up to organize the production, sale, transportation, and servicing of watches. It was also necessary to organize social activities: the restaurant set up and run by the workers was one of the most important institutions in the occupied factory. Workers could move from commission to commission and experience new kinds of responsibility: “Typists sold watches; assembly line operators became telephone operators...Emancipated from their job designations and from the company hierarchy, workers embraced a new self-respect and confidence...Doing jobs they had never dreamed of in parts of the factory that had been closed to them, *ouvriers spécialisés* (OS) and office workers developed a new confidence” (p. 111). One remarkable feature of the conflict was the effectiveness with which the “popularization commission,” in charge of propaganda, set about

sending Lip's message to the rest of France. In the summer of 1973 thousands of sympathizers and journalists came daily from all over France to visit what Françoise Giroud, editor of *L'Express*, called the "battleship Potemkin in the Bay of Besançon" (p. 174). The popularization commission oversaw the production of a newspaper *Lip-Unité*, mini-cassettes for Radio-Lip, an LP, songs, two films, a theatre troupe, and a *bande dessinée*. There was even a board game called *Chomageopoly*.

While Reid vividly conveys the inventiveness of the Lip workers, and their new sense of empowerment, he never falls into the trap of romanticizing the conflict. He notes how in the longer term the workers became to some extent prisoner of their own initial success. One observer commented on how this fed a "collective imaginary that superimposed itself on the limited objective of *les Lip*"—leading one participant to comment that the representation of their struggle "did not lead us sometimes to dispossess ourselves of our own image, to make us forgo our own analysis" (p. 204). Or as Reid says: "when conditions changed they still saw themselves in the depictions others had made of them" (p. 205).

Reid is also nuanced in his analysis of the impact of the conflict on gender relations in the factory. Women increasingly spoke up at meetings and were no longer confined to circumscribed tasks. Women activists like Fatima Demougeot and Noëlle Darteville played a leading role. When one of the government negotiators arrived for talks on how to end the conflict, he was startled when a woman from the Action Committee intervened. One female unskilled (OS) worker told a journalist during the conflict: "Do you realize what this means for a woman like me, used to remaining bent over, under the same neon light, doing the same things eight hours a day, to find myself suddenly free with my time...going from one commission to another?" (p. 111). There was a Women's Group which produced a small book, *Lip au féminin*. But this publication also contained criticisms of the union leadership. Although every study of Lip remembers the role of Charles Piaget, his wife Anne remembered the conflict as a period of solitude as she remained at home looking after the couple's six children.

Reid covers in great detail not only the experience of the Lip workers but the responses of the state: "The Lip affair came at the juncture of the '30 glorious years' of growth and the beginning of a long recession, marked by debates about how the state should respond to the challenges of May 1968, and of discordant Gaullist and market economic policies" (p. 130). While President Pompidou ("Lip only interests some Parisian intellectuals on the left. France doesn't care") and his prime-minister Pierre Messmer (endlessly repeating the mantra that "Lip is over") were unsympathetic, the movement struck a chord with the left Gaullists like Jean Charbonnel who saw a chance to give a reality to their dream of "participation" (p. 244). This aspiration also resonated with a number of progressive industrialists, some in the orbit of left Catholicism and others on the new left, who were looking for new models of industrial relations. A key figure in this group was Jean Riboud, director of an important glass making firm, BSN. After complicated negotiations, Lip became a subsidiary of BSN. The new manager Claude Neuswander, previously head of an important advertising group, but also with link to the Socialist PSU, took over the running of the factory. This was the end of the most famous and heroic period of the Lip saga.

Although that saga from June 1973 to January 1974 forms the five central chapters of Reid's book, one of the most original aspects of his study is to follow in detail the sadder—and less well-known story of what came next. The new company CEH hit problems and went into liquidation in April 1976. This situation was partly due to the ambition of the new President Valéry Giscard

d'Estaing to move away from a Gaullist economic policy which favored a degree of state intervention in the economy. He had said of the Lip workers during the first conflict: "They must be punished...They are going to infect the whole social body" (p. 246).

Now commenced what the Lip workers called their second "long march." But with the growth of unemployment throughout France, the national context was now very different. As Piaget recognized, it was no longer possible to be a "beacon struggle that captures the attention of public opinion" (p. 327). And yet, as Reid says, the key issue was the same: "Lip workers had always rejected the label of job seekers. They had a factory and they had jobs; what they needed was an employer" (p. 327). This time no buyer could be found and eventually in November 1976 the workers created a cooperative called Les Industries de Palente (Palente was the place where the factory was situated) so keeping LIP as an acronym. This second struggle lasted until 1980 when the cooperative received some kind of official state recognition. It spluttered on more or less successfully through the 1980s.

Reid offers us no moral for the present apart from a brief parallel between Lip and today's alternative globalization movements. In 2018 Piaget, aged 90, was a skeptical supporter of the *gilets jaunes*. Reid ends: "Causes which were lost in Besançon may yet be won." But what his book essentially demonstrates is that the conflict whose history he has so expertly written, was rooted in a particular moment: it was the "last widespread expression in France of a belief in the creativity and oral universe of workers engaged in labor conflicts as the driving force of social transformation" (p. 2).

#### NOTES

[1] Michele Zancarini and Philippe Artières, eds., 68. *Une histoire collective (1962-1981)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

[2] Ludivine Bantigny, 1968: *De Grands soirs en petits matins* (Paris: Seuil, 2018).

[3] Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[4] Donald Reid, "Larzac in the Broad 1968 and after," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 32 (2014): 99-122.

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