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Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. ix + 238 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-72797-1.

Review by Michael Seidman, University of North Carolina-Wilmington.

As its title indicates, Kristen Ross's new book concerns May 1968 and its subsequent interpretations. According to the author, May shattered the conventional "social identity" of both students and workers and thus allowed "politics to take place" (p. 3): "What has come to be called 'the events of May' consisted mainly in students ceasing to function as students, workers as workers, farmers as farmers" (p. 25). The general strike that began in the middle of that month opened "the vast expanse of possibility," even though "only a small number of texts and documents about May convey ... something about the nature of that experience" (p. 4). Ross laments that historians largely have ignored 1968 (p. 5), while sociologists have distorted and "contained" it. "The official story" (p. 7 and p. 8), i.e. the mass media's representation of May, has "stripped [it] of any violence, asperity, or overt political dimensions" (p. 6). In the current version, promoted in part by "the New Philosopher phenomenon" (p. 179), "successful experiments in worker/student/farmer solidarity in the provinces and elsewhere are erased" (p. 9). Except for a few perceptive historians, novelists, and filmmakers, Ross claims that May 1968 has been reduced to student and generational revolt.

Ross argues that May was the culmination of the efforts of worker and third-worldist militants during the early sixties, a period that she terms its "prehistory" (p. 8 and p. 9). During the Algerian war, students broke free from the defense of their own narrow interests and battled for a great national and international cause. The "political awakening occasioned by the Algerian war" fomented "the birth of a new form of political thought and subjectivity in France, whose accomplishment was the great political, philosophical, and intellectual ruptures of the end of the 1960s" (p. 38). May was "a pivotal if not a founding moment" (p. 7). In the spring of 1968, the individual and the social merged in creative ways; thus, engagement in the revolutionary community happily completed individuality. In fact, the events were so dangerous for the power structure that "CGT functionaries, de Gaulle, the Communist Party, or the police themselves" made vehement attempts to separate students from workers (p. 25). Nevertheless, activists were able "to create a rupture" (p. 26) with the "repressive" (p. 47) and "Bonapartist" (p. 59) Gaullist state. Workers felt an instinctual kinship with students struggling against the cops. Wage earners' strikes, "by erupting outside of the confines of the big French labor confederations and outside the desiderata of any of the various left parties, particularly the Communist Party, had come to threaten the very existence of those institutions and organizations" (p. 68). The success of the Vietnamese Communists had convinced leftist militants that everything was possible. "The link between 'student May' and 'worker May' were the organizational forms and practices that developed around Vietnam militancy" (p. 92).

Ross's arguments would be more convincing if her bibliography were richer. For example, the author unfortunately omits the early but still valuable contributions of Adrien Dansette, *Mai 1968* (Paris, 1971) and Lucien Rioux and René Backmann, *L'Explosion de mai* (Paris, 1968). Alain Delale and Gilles Ragache, *La France de 68* (Paris, 1978), whose perspective would not be hostile to Ross's, is also forgotten. If she had reflected on these works by traditional but competent historians and journalists,

she could not have claimed that historians have “abdicated their responsibilities” (p. 5) and have neglected the “violence, asperity, or overt political dimensions” (p. 6) of May. Perhaps even more important, Ross has totally ignored the magnum opus of Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974* (New York, 1998) and is uninterested in the social/cultural transformations of what he calls the “long sixties.” Unlike Marwick, Ross begins her much more political “May” in March 1968, when an anti-imperialist student broke a window of the American Express office in Paris. She is not particularly drawn to issues of periodization which she seems to dismiss “as merely technical polemics about categories like the *longue* or *moyenne durée*” (p. 120). Nor is she aware of the recent and excellent German literature also written from the perspective of the “long sixties.”[1] These neglected works, which place 1968 into a larger stream of changes, challenge her judgment that May 1968 was “a pivotal if not founding moment” (p. 7) and that the years leading up to it were merely its “prehistory” (p. 8 and p. 9).

Perhaps a deeper reflection on the French sociological literature would have modified her attack against the practitioners of that discipline. After all, sociologists—such as Alain Touraine, Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Henri Lefebvre—were highly sympathetic to the May revolts and indeed shared Ross’s view that the events constituted a significant “rupture” (p. 26) or what three of them called *une brèche* in twentieth-century French history.[2] Nor is she apparently aware of thoughtful contribution of the sociologist and philosopher Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68: L’Héritage impossible* (Paris, 1998), who argues that May was irreparably torn between counter-cultural and Marxist currents.

This disregard of important historiographical contributions and her emphasis on May as a break with the past lead the author into a large range of both major and minor errors. Ross sees May as both a political and intellectual starting point: “A new renegade historical practice could continue the desire of ’68 to give voice to the ‘voiceless’” (p. 116). Yet well before May, many historians and sociologists (among them Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Pierre Bourdieu) were researching the “voiceless.” Her overly brief treatment of what she calls “the prehistory” of May leads to the assertion that until May 3 1968 “never before had the police entered the Sorbonne” (p. 29). However, Alain Montchablon has pointed out that police had occupied the Sorbonne in February 1964.[3] Contrary to her claim (p. 56), Occident, the extreme right-wing *groupuscule* which possessed the largest presence on the streets of Paris in 1968, could not have helped to spark the formation in 1961 of the Comité Anticolonialiste or of the Front Universitaire Anti-fasciste since Occident was born three years later in 1964.[4] The author informs us that the “works [of Marcuse] were unread in France until after May” (p. 193). However, according to an article in a recent collection that Ross praises several times, *Eros and Civilization* and *Soviet Marxism* were widely available in French as early as 1963.[5] Furthermore, at least a half dozen of his articles circulated in either academic (such as *Annales ESC*) or militant (for example, *Arguments*) periodicals. Readers interested in the still-captivating poster production of the period will not be rewarded with a precise or accurate analysis: “Of the hundreds of posters produced in the popular studio of the Beaux-Arts school, almost none ... makes an allusion to the existence of a student movement” (p. 207). It is true that artists did devote their aesthetic talents to supporting workers’ actions, and in the most complete published collection, 123 posters focused on workers’ issues. Nevertheless, twenty-three were concerned with students and twenty-five called for worker-student unity.[6] Examination of a smaller published collection revealed that seventy-eight involved wage earners and seven concentrated on the student movement.[7]

More consequently, it is hard to believe that in the middle of May the police had become “the lone, unmediated representatives of the State” (p. 27) since the military, large sectors of the bureaucracy, and a significant minority of public opinion remained loyal to the regime throughout the entire month. It is wishful thinking to assert that the government became “a shadow and ... all but evaporated into smoke or dust” (p. 79). On the contrary, in 1968 the Gaullist state—unlike its republican predecessors in 1795, 1848, or 1871—showed that it could feed and fuel Paris throughout the crisis. A close study of the

demonstrations would also negate the author's declaration that there was "no possible dialogue between *matraqueurs* and *matraqués*" (a formula repeated twice, on p. 30 and p. 187). In fact, police archives reveal that student (UNEF) marshals did inform officials about demonstrators who were armed and dangerous. Those—such as Ross and Maurice Rajsfus—who emphasize the significance of post-May "repression" neglect the importance of the long-term growth of tolerance in the "long sixties." [8] This tolerance allowed the operation of radical bastions—such as the Sorbonne, Censier, Odéon Theater, the medical and law schools—until well into June or even at the beginning of July.

The workers' movement is no more accurately portrayed than its student counterpart. The author repeats the relatively unsubstantiated story that "these strikes were directed against the union leadership as much as against the factory management" (p. 32). On the contrary, the unions, including the CGT, adapted quite quickly to the outbreak of the strikes and either led or took rapid control of nearly all of them. Trade unionists, employers, and police regarded the work stoppages as "*grèves comme les autres*." [9] The author asserts, again twice (p. 8 and p. 184), that "nine million people" were on strike in May and June. Yet the best estimate by Antoine Prost (whose name the author misspells several times) is seven million. [10] Ross underestimates the material gains won by 1968 strikers when she characterizes the increase of the minimum wage as "small" (p. 68) and compares it negatively to the supposed greater gains of the Matignon Agreement of 1936. In fact, the employers conceded a 35 percent hike in the minimum wage. The percentage gained in 1968 thus greatly exceeded the 7 to 15 percent won during the negotiations in 1936. The CGT quite plausibly argued that the strikes produced the largest increase in the minimum wage since its introduction in 1950. [11] Madeleine Colin, a prominent official of the CGT, asserted that some young women "saw their salary double" in an environment of only moderate inflation. [12] The results of the strike, which began an evolution toward the forty-hour week, constitute the one rupture which Ross dramatically deemphasizes.

Returning to her theme of May as *une brèche*, Ross inflates the numbers of workers who occupied their factories: "The workers [were] enclosed, for the most part, in occupied factories" (p. 68). It seems that the author is unaware that the number of workers actually engaged in the occupations remained a tiny percentage of the workforce. Merely several hundred out of a workforce of 5,000 occupied the Renault factory at Cléon. [13] At Flins, approximately 250 of 10,000 were occupiers. Only a few hundred of the 30,000 workers at Boulogne-Billancourt remained inside the flagship plant. Not recognizing that only a few workers were interested in occupying their plants, she also exaggerates the influence of the unions, which, she asserts, planned the sit-down tactic to separate workers from students: "Not only did occupation anchor workers back in their proper, habitual place, preventing contacts with students, more importantly it broke interfactory communication" (p. 72). "In 1968, striking workers tended to stay tied to their workplaces, secluded from other workers and students within their own occupied factories" (p. 210).

The author defends *tiers-mondisme* (which she attempts to distinguish clearly from Stalinism), and thus it is not surprising that she asserts "May '68, in fact, marks the emergence onto the political scene of the *travailleur immigré*" (p. 95). This observation may have been more plausible before 1998 when police and interior-ministry archives were closed. However, archival sources reveal that the police reported "the major foreign groups—Italians, Spanish, Algerians, Portuguese, Poles, Yugoslavs—obeyed strike orders of the CGT, CFDT, and FO but without enthusiasm." [14] Foreign workers often viewed the strike as a French work stoppage in which they played only a passive role. [15] Their relative tranquility was significant since they composed approximately fifteen percent of the workforce in Parisian metallurgy and, as in Germany and other advanced European nations, were overwhelmingly present in the lowest paid and least skilled jobs. [16]

Ross's work is polemical, passionate, and well-written. It contains a useful discussion and list of novels, films, and television/radio shows about May. The author reminds us once again of May's political legacy and the survival of its anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist agenda in the present-day anti-globism

movement. Yet these virtues do not overcome a manifest lack of research and reflection.

## NOTES

[1] Axel Schildt, Detlef Siegfried, and Karl Christian Lammers, eds., *Dynamische Zeiten: Die 60er Jahre in den beiden deutschen Gesellschaften* (Hamburg: Christians, 2000).

[2] Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, and Cornelius Castoriadis, *Mai 68: La brèche* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1988); Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*, tr. Alfred Ehrenfeld (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969) ; Alain Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform*, tr. Leonard F.X. Mayhew (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1979).

[3] Alain Monchablon, *Histoire de l'UNEF de 1956 à 1968* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1983), p. 156.

[4] Jean-Pierre Rioux, "Des clandestins aux activistes (1945-1965)," in Michel Winock, ed., *Histoire de l'extrême droite en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p. 239.

[5] Michel Trebitsch, "Voyages autour de la révolution: Les circulations de la pensée critique de 1956 à 1968," in Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, Robert Frank, Marie-Françoise Lévy, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, eds., *Les Années 68: Le temps de la contestation* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 2000), pp. 69-87.

[6] Vasco Gasquet, *Les 500 affiches de mai 1968* (Paris: Balland, 1978).

[7] Méssa, / *Mai 68: Les affiches de l'atelier populaire de l'ex-Ecole des Beaux-Arts* (Paris: SPM, 1968).

[8] Maurice Rajsfus, *Mai 68: Sous les pavés, la répression (mai 1968-mars 1974)* (Paris: Le Cherche midi éditeur, 1998). For an intelligent overview of this question, Arthur Marwick, "Die 68er Revolution," in Peter Wende, ed., *Grosse Revolutionen der Geschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), p. 330 and Arthur Marwick, "Introduction: Locating Key Texts and the Distinctive Landscape of the Sixties," in Anthony Aldgate, James Chapman, Arthur Marwick, *Windows on the Sixties* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. xiii.

[9] "Situation sociale dans les industries des métaux de la région parisienne," 27 May 1968, Groupement des Industries Métallurgiques [GIM], Neuilly; Alfred Willener, Catherine Gaidos, Georges Benguigui, *Les cadres en mouvement* (Paris: Éditions de l'Épi, 1969), p. 21.

[10] Antoine Prost, "Les grèves de mai-juin 1968," *L'Histoire*, no. 110 (April, 1988), p. 36.

[11] Maurice Cohen, ed., *Le bilan social de l'année 1968* (Paris: "Revue pratique de droit social," 1969), pp. 12, 128, 179, 310.

[12] *Le Peuple*, August 1968.

[13] *Le Monde*, 17 May 1968.

[14] "Direction générale de la Police nationale, renseignements généraux," 28 June 1968, AN 820599/41.

[15] See Patrick Hassenteufel, *Citroën-Paris en mai-juin 1968: Dualités de la grève* (Mémoire de maîtrise, Paris I, 1987), p. 108; Danielle Kergoat, *Bullerbor ou l'histoire d'une mobilisation ouvrière* (Paris: Seuil,

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1973).

[16] On *immigrés* as percentage of the metallurgical workforce, see “La main d'oeuvre étrangère--les industries des métaux de la région parisienne,” 31 December 1969, AN 39AS287; on the German comparison, see Ulrich Herbert and Karin Hunn, “Gastarbeiter und Gastarbeiterpolitik in der Bundesrepublik: Vom Beginn der offiziellen Anwerbung bis zum Anwerbestopp (1955-1973),” in Schildt, *Dynamische Zeiten*, p. 292.

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