
H-France Review Vol. 5 (September 2005), No. 94

Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968*. New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2004. x + 310 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, chronology, glossary, and index. \$75.00 U.S.(hb). ISBN 1-57181-675-5; \$24.95 U.S (pb). ISBN 1-57181-685-2.

Review by Rosemary Wakeman, Forham University.

In *The Imaginary Revolution*, Michael Seidman takes up the mythic history of the French May and takes us on a journey through the unrest and intellectual turmoil that marked this remarkable moment of rebellion in Paris. There is much worth reading in this excellent book, including an introductory chapter that sets out the controversies and historiography around 1968 and how it has come to represent such a decisive turning point. Seidman uses both old and new archival sources (including newly-opened police archives) to narrate and analyze events. He comes to several important conclusions that help retrieve 1968 from a web of polemics and sets it within a convincing historical and interpretative context. Seidman argues that the events of May 1968 can be best understood in the context of short and long-term continuity. This contextualization of this one spectacular year in the decade of the 1960s and in the longer history of revolutionary turmoil in France provides an exceptional perspective. Seidman laces his discussion with comparisons to the 1848 revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871, and to the events of May 1968 in West Germany, Italy, and the United States. The effect is a refreshing understanding of the events not simply as a mythic youthful revolt, but as a broader desire for rupture that defines French revolutionary tradition.

The first chapters provide a bold reassessment of the radical political and cultural activities of French students well before May 1968, especially the protests against the Algerian War. One of the most pioneering aspects of Seidman's research is his discussion of the seedbeds of revolt not just at Nanterre and the Sorbonne, but in places such as the dormitories at Antony in the Paris suburbs, where students were protesting university regulations as early as 1962. The combination of "sex, drugs and revolution" evinced the blend of hedonism and social transformation that students sought. Seidman focuses on the leaders and movements that stirred this boiling pot of discontent, above all the National Students Union, the Situationists, and of course Dany Cohn-Bendit. In later chapters, Seidman argues that the barricades of May-June "were not merely 'symbolic,' as some recent historiography has argued. On the contrary, they produced a high level of nonlethal violence" (p. 11). Seidman leads us down into the combustion of urban warfare: the barricades and burned-out automobiles, the tear gas and Molotov cocktails, the savage street fighting, the police brutality, the incendiary blazes. Students occupied many institutions and streets of the Latin Quarter, where they held property and commodities under siege. The violence marked the central districts on the Right Bank of Paris as well. The destruction of property became one of the most important debates around the events, and Seidman gives this reality its just due. Thousands of square meters of cobblestones were dug up. Acts of arson that threatened to set the city ablaze and attacks against revered figures such as firefighters cooled the public romance with the students. It was, in fact, small property owners who took the lead in re-establishing some degree of normalcy during the chaotic months of May and June.

Although much of the book focuses on students and the university atmosphere of Nanterre and Paris, Seidman argues that the events of 1968 cannot simply be reduced to a revolt by the youth. Although more traditional, worker protests and strikes formed a critical part of events in 1968. The rather shaky notion that reached across these two quite different camps was the student's utopian *ouvrièrisme* that looked to the workers as the only true revolutionary class. When rumors circulated during the first

Night of the Barricades (May 10) that 20,000 workers had mobilized in the middle of the night to rescue the besieged students, an older worker shattered this fantasy with the realism that "The workers are sleeping" (p. 112). Nonetheless, students called for *autogestion* in what Seidman reveals as a rather naive vision of workplace democracy. It had little resonance among the union rank and file. Labor unions focused on the bread-and-butter issues of the minimum wage, higher salaries, job security, and reduction of the work week. But they found common ground with students in protests against the CRS and police brutality. This unity only lasted, according to Seidman, through the May 13 strike movement. Workers did, however, profit from a momentarily weakened state to advance their own demands. The general strike of May-June 1968 and the Grenelle Accord that followed attempted to right the socio-economic disparities that had grown enormously during the Fifth Republic. Seidman begins an intriguing analysis of the ethnic and national groups who also profited from the May movement, and points as well to the general ambivalence toward feminism and women's issues. A real strength of this book is this analysis Seidman brings to bear on many aspects of 1968 that have rarely received adequate attention.

All and all, Seidman comes to the conclusion that the success of 1968 was "rather limited" (p. 12) despite fears that the Gaullist regime was in mortal danger. Unlike the revolutions of 1789, 1848, and 1871, the state was able to restore normalcy quickly, and the protests changed little that was not already in the process of transformation in the late 1950s and 1960s. What it did do, however, was to leave a lasting legacy of transformative power invented by the media, by scholars, and by the thousands of *soixante-huitards* who continue to look at this moment as symbolic of a youthful, new France. Here, Seidman takes up the imagery of 1968 created by posters produced during the events, and then reiterated by the media. As the primary visual representation of the revolt, he believes them to be its most lasting cultural inheritance. The text includes a variety of black-and-white images as examples of the seven hundred designs that were produced. The *Atelier populaire* at the *École des Beaux-Arts* served as the model for revolutionary forms of artistic expression. The content of the posters was *ouvriériste* and internationalist. The designs mocked De Gaulle and the State's CRS forces with clever *détournement* tactics that bordered on humoristic advertising. Here it would be interesting for Seidman to tell us more about how these tactics and images were appropriated by the media and about their long-term influence. This is important given Seidman's view that the "tender obsession with 1968" (p. 280) in the French social imagination is probably undeserved. If anything, he concludes, the events demonstrated the continuity of social and political trends rather than any real break from them. The youthful hedonism that had stirred the fires of revolt was simply integrated into the mainstream of French society.

All and all, this is a terrific book written in a lively narrative. Seidman provides us with a breadth and depth of knowledge and a balanced analysis that make his version of May 1968 usable for scholarly study as well as for the classroom.

Rosemary Wakeman
Fordham University
rwakeman@fordham.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172