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Xavier Vigna, *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68: Essai d'histoire politique des usines*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007. 378pp. Chronology, index, sources and bibliography. €22.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7535-0446-2.

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The next year or two will undoubtedly see at least a trickle, if not a deluge, of conferences and publications designed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the events of May 1968 in France. Given the large existing literature on the period, some may match up to the claims that they will undoubtedly make to present a critical and original re-evaluation of the largest strike wave that the western industrialised world has ever known, while others will fall short of such ambitions. What Xavier Vigna's book demonstrates, however, is that there is still some mileage for contemporary historians in re-analysing events in the recent past that have already been subjected to extensive and rigorous academic scrutiny.

Indeed, *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68* is not only timely, but also provides fresh perspectives on the 'events' by focussing on the question of worker politics and placing them within longer-term economic, political and social developments. Vigna essentially argues that due to its scale and nature, the strike wave of May 68 can be seen as the start of a ten-year cycle of conflict that only comes to an end in the context of economic crisis in the late 1970s. During this period a form of *ouvriériste* politics and political expression emerged in the factories of France, challenging not only the State and employers but also trade union organisations and their political allies, most notably the *Confédération Générale de Travail* (CGT) and the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) who claimed to be the organisations of the working class. This is not to say that worker insubordination started in May 1968, as important strike movements took place in 1965 and 1967, the *Confédération française du travail démocratique* (CFDT) had deconfessionalised in 1964, and its 1966 unity in action pact with the CGT appeared to herald a new era of worker power. Indeed, Vigna's useful chronology at the end of the book gives detailed information on worker action from 1965 through to 1979, when the steelworkers in Longwy and Denain lost their fight against redundancies, bringing to an end a period of considerable worker radicalism and contestation.

Despite the antecedents, however, the strike wave of May 1968 is seen to be the inaugural event in this ten-year cycle of worker insubordination. The presence of Trotskyite and Maoist revolutionaries within the factories, and contact with the student movement outside, meant that occupied factories were transformed into political spaces in which the organisation of work, hierarchies in the workplace and the system of job grading and wages were all challenged despite being neglected by unions in industry and national level collective bargaining. Radical, sometimes violent, action also emerged, with the 'productive strike' representing the high point of worker insubordination. As at the Lip watch factory in 1973, workers occupied factories and on occasion reorganised production, dispensing with the hated Taylorist practices that prevailed. Indeed, themes of autonomy and equality emerge from workers' discourse, questioning not only the legitimacy of the *patronat*, but also of trade union movements and representatives in the workplace. The CGT, in particular, appeared out of touch with the workers, seeing the ballot box as the route to power and proving itself incapable of taking into account and channelling the new demands emanating from the workplace, thereby precipitating its decline.

The response of the State and the employers was to engage in limited reforms of work organisation and collective bargaining while attempting to repress and circumvent the trade unions. Such attempts found more fertile ground, and were extended, with the onset of economic crisis from 1974 onwards as redundancies sapped the strength of the workers, and struggles became more defensive. Employers also took advantage of the crisis to weaken the collective strength of workers through the development of a peripheral labour force of part-time and temporary workers. Under such conditions, the militant left ran out of steam and the process of trade union decline accelerated. Furthermore, the electoral strategy embraced not only by the CGT, but also by the CFDT (which had until 1973 taken up the *autogestionnaire* cause articulated by workers), meant that any rank-and-file worker response to the employers' counter-offensive was not taken up by them. The result was the failure of the workers' movement, something that was cruelly confirmed by the arrival of the Left in power in 1981 and the ensuing industrial restructuring and accompanying mass unemployment.

Taken in isolation, none of these arguments are particularly original. However, the events are placed in a long-term perspective, providing fresh insights not only into the events, but also into their longer-term consequences for French labour. Secondly, unlike most accounts of May 1968, the focus is very much on the factory as an arena of political debate and conflict, both during the events and in the decade following them. In this respect, Vigna re-evaluates the role of workers in the recent social and political history of France, challenging reductionist stereotypes that often understate the workers' dimension to events such as those of May 68 by equating workers with their trade union organisations and left-wing political parties, thereby denying their capacity for autonomous political expression and action. Indeed, what Vigna shows is that the daily factory experiences and struggles of workers gave rise to a common culture and references, and hence to a distinct form of worker politics and action that crystallized discontent around a small number of guiding principles, sometimes with, but equally often without, the support of their trade unions. Workers themselves, then, turned the factory into a political space at a point in time when the working class was at its numerical height, giving them a central place in politics and society. An understanding of this place and of their rejection of the Taylorised, hierarchical world of the factory in the name of greater egalitarianism and autonomy is therefore crucial to an understanding of the social history of May 68 and the following years.

The emphasis is thus on the workplace experiences and voice of the workers themselves, although other actors in the political history of the factory are not overlooked. Indeed, the research for this book is meticulous in its use of a wide range of sources. Based on extensive archival research from trade union and government--including police--sources, a picture of the 'ten-year cycle of conflict', and of the role of workers within it, is built up. The detail is rich and certainly contributes to a better understanding of the grievances and political responses of workers of the time, as well as of the reaction of the State and employers to them. Indeed, concrete examples of the conditions, debates and actions in factories abound and are articulated with wider national political, economic and social changes to produce not only a convincing view of the development, then decline, of radical worker politics over the decade, but also some food for thought about the subsequent decline of the French labour movement.

The approach is not unproblematic, however. Tracts produced during conflicts are often taken as a surrogate for the workers' voice, and the discourse within them subjected to minute examination to tease out and explain aspects of worker politics. The problem here is one of selection bias as such tracts were produced by the most militant of the workers, often those with links to revolutionary groups, and they may therefore give a false picture of the militancy of the workforce and the radical nature of worker politics. To an extent, such a criticism is recognised by Vigna when he reminds us that strikes are the exception rather than the rule (p. 16) and that the revolutionaries were in the minority in May 68 (p. 269). Nevertheless, in concentrating on the question of worker insubordination and avoiding questions such as whether May 68 had any revolutionary potential, whether such potential was merely a function of scale rather than of the content of the demands, or whether it was for many workers merely about better pay and conditions, Vigna does neglect the views of a large proportion, probably the majority, of

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the workforce. Indeed, only five pages (pp. 233-238) are devoted to conservative workers, their organisations and their reactions to the events of May 1968.

This said, being rooted in the factory experience, *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68* does shed new light on the events of May 1968 and the subsequent social and political conflicts of the 1970s by reinterpreting them in the light of the grievances, aspirations and actions of workers. Painstaking archival research and an attention to detail also result in another strength of this book in that the diversity of worker experiences are taken into account both geographically and in terms of worker sub-groups. Thus, unlike many works on May 68, the analysis of the events extends beyond Paris and the iconic case of Sud-Aviation in Nantes. Thus, traditional bastions of industry such as the Bouches-du-Rhône or the Seine-Saint-Denis, as well as areas of recent or scattered industrialisation such as the Deux-Sèvres or Haute-Loire, are examined to demonstrate the diffusion of worker insubordination on a national scale and in very different industrial and geographic contexts. Furthermore, particular attention is paid to the specific situations and responses of immigrant and female workers. While there is nothing new in emphasising the emergence of such groups as collective actors during and after the events of May 68 in France, it is the detailed and concrete examples and analysis of their problems and responses in the factories that provide both fascination and elucidation for the reader.

This, then, is a stimulating read, and a welcome addition to a corpus of literature on May 68 in France that has tended to focus on the (Parisian) student movement or on institutional actors and neglected the autonomous political production, in terms of words, ideas and actions, of at least a part of the workforce in France. Anyone, be they student, teacher or researcher, interested in the events of May 1968 in particular, in the French labour movement, or more widely still, in contemporary French history, politics and society in general will find much of interest in this absorbing book.

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