Managing the present

Kristin Ross

The problem with the past is that it is unpredictable. This may be one reason why French president Nicolas Sarkozy has recently generated a series of bizarre decrees – the precise legal status and implementation of which are uncertain, if not unimaginable – that attempt to manage the memory of the recent past. French schoolteachers must now read aloud to their pupils each year, on the same day, the emotional letter written by Guy Mosquet, martyred hero of the Resistance, to his mother on the eve of his execution – but without providing any contextualization that might reveal the fact that Mosquet was a Communist. In February, Sarkozy proclaimed that each ten-year old in France must 'adopt' the memory of a child who died in the Holocaust and become the official caretaker of the dead child's biography.

The outrage that greeted this initiative (nicknamed by some in the United States 'No Dead Child Left Behind', after George Bush's ill-fated reform of primary-school education, 'No Child Left Behind') was perhaps best expressed by film-maker Chantal Ackerman. She vehemently did not, she wrote, want Sarkozy rooting around in the coffins of members of her family – coffins they didn't even have – stirring up their ashes and then obliging children to become the official bearers of those ashes. For Ackerman, the problem with asking kids today 'to hold hands' with a little Jew who died sixty years ago is less the concern expressed by many commentators anxious about the mood in the *banlieues* (that of duelling or competing memories of oppression) or the concern voiced by mental health professionals that such an 'adoption' might prove traumatic to the new caretaker; it was rather Sarkozy's penchant for getting the media to instrumentalize memory to create a kind of Disneyland or 'Snow White' effect. Waking up in France these days, she concludes, is like living in a pop dictatorship.[1]

The president who now takes it upon himself to impose rigid methods for the transmission of history was the candidate who staked his claim to the presidency on a pledge to 'liquidate' the most unpredictable episode in recent history: May '68. Sarkozy's heroic role as president, he announced, would be definitively to 'turn the page on May '68' and kill the beast once and for all. Sarkozy's motivation for targeting what is now a rather distant event has been much debated in the French press. But his statement was easily the best thing to happen in recent times in the battle for the political memory of May. It issued a challenge, and it has potentially lent some unpredictability to the most 'predictable' of those rituals that make the past their business: the commemoration.

The commemoration industry is in full gear. One can still see and hear Daniel Cohn-Bendit everywhere one turns, announcing that he had intended to keep silent for the fortieth anniversary, but nevertheless taking every opportunity he can find to congratulate himself and his old comrades again for having had the foresight to lose the battle they fought with the state. Television, for its part, seems to have taken Sarkozy's desire to put an end to '68 to heart; the talk shows are staging the fortieth anniversary with an obfuscation and media moralism all too familiar to those who recall the twentieth and thirtieth anniversaries. The cast of talking heads is predictably small and predictably situated. A recent 'debate' on the television show 'Riposte', entitled '68/2008: What Revolts?' featured, on the one hand, two men who had opposed the movement from the outset, Alain Madelin and Alain Finkielkraut (and who now saw it as a juvenile exercise of letting off steam), versus two repentant former militants, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Henri Weber, on the other. Yet, despite these predictable reprisals of the tropes of anniversaries past, the commemoration is also potentially carving out a space for more concerted efforts to 'reappropriate' May and its political aspirations: a website, www.mai-68.org, has been set up to try to track the various colloquia, publications and events that fall within that project. Every campus in the United States, and every town or city in Europe – Naples, Athens, Lisbon, Leeds, Seville – feels compelled to stage an event devoted to '68, sometimes from an international perspective, but frequently focusing on French May alone. The *Nouvel Observateur* reports that some eighty-five books on '68 are scheduled to appear in the next few months. Most of these will be made up of tired recyclings of graffiti and slogans in fresh new covers. But occasional books like Xavier Vigna's *L'insubordination ouvrière dans les années 68: essai d'histoire politique des usines* (Rennes, 2007) show a new level of effort on the part of researchers to ascertain, for example, a whole terrain of militant experience, insubordination, and practices and ideas about equality that flourished in factories throughout France in the years immediately preceding May – ideas and practices that cannot now be integrated into the liberal/libertarian paradigm embraced by many of May's former actors. Work like Vigna's is, of course, important not only because it allows the force of labour to come into focus, but because it reframes the event geographically and chronologically, effectively wresting control of the narrative from the Quartier Latin spokesmen whose repentant voices continue to dominate the commemorations.

The Americanization of the French May

The tactic used by Sarkozy to try to erase all traces of the memory of May was a little different from usual, and confirms what I have come to think of as a progressive 'Americanization of the memory of French May'. For some time, the dominant tendency on the part of self-proclaimed memory functionaries in France was to transform the political dimensions of the movement into artistic or poetic ones. At the peak of the concerted assault on a political memory of May, the twentieth anniversary in 1988, for example, the only textual evidence cited by books claiming to be somehow 'about' '68 (*La Pensée '68* and *L'Ere du vide*, to name just two) was the graffiti. Graffiti, it seems, was the absolute condensation of the *esprit* of '68, while boxes and boxes of militant tracts of all tendencies at the BDIC at Nanterre, testimonies from activists, or footage of frontal violence by the police simply disappeared from view. Under the guise of celebrating an expansive liberation of personal expression, this emphasis was of course geared towards flattening or reducing the significance people might attribute to, say, the largest labour strike of modern times in France.

May 1988, which functioned as a kind of preview to the commemoration of the Bicentennial of the French Revolution the following year, was also the culmination of ten years' work on the part of New Philosophers and other ex-*gauchistes*, seeking to apologize for their illusions and delusions in the service of *maîtres penseurs*, Stalin or Mao – delusions that led them to fight for systemic change, a fight that they by then saw only as leading ineluctably to the Gulag. In 1988, the nadir in the history of May's memory, so many aspects of the political climate of the '68 years had become invisible (the general strike of some 9 million people, the labour unrest in French factories in the early 1960s, Vietnam, Third Worldism, police riots, the aftermath of the Algerian War) that what remained was nothing much more than a pleasant, poetic festival of liberated self-expression, a countercultural vision much more reminiscent of England or the United States – countries with a weaker militant tradition than the one sustained in France during those years. And countries that had a more creative counterculture as well!

But now even that festival of hedonistic individualism and unlimited desire (*jouir sans entraves*) is under attack as seedbed to the moral degeneracy, unwillingness to work, and general national decline Sarkozy claims to have taken it upon himself to eradicate. Writing in *Le Monde diplomatique*, Serge Halimi saw Sarkozy as a masterful tactician, borrowing from the United States, after careful study, and particularly from presidents like Nixon and Reagan, the strategy of associating '68 with themes of moral decay and national weakness in order to focus voters squarely on moral values and distract them from thinking about economic inequality. Thus, it seems, they would be prepared for the hard necessities and economic 'shock treatment' he was intent on putting into place after the election. This all seems accurate. But another factor is at work. Once upon a time, what I'm calling the 'festival' or 'countercultural' aspect of '68 was seen as the most easily commodified aspect of the movement, the most implicated in, and the least capable of offering resistance to, the workings of capital. Now, however, that same hedonistic consumerism, narcissistic subjectivity or individualistic desire has merged for many on the Republican Left with the threat posed by minorities: a *foulard*-wearing schoolgirl, a call for gay rights, an immigrant coalition. In the new configuration, these minority figures are indistinguishable from the deluded shopper who inhabits the pages of the commodity-panic literature of a Baudrillard or a Debord: they are all a symptom of the democracy that emerged during the upheavals of the 1960s – democracy that must now be curbed for the survival of the Republic, the family, and the correct transmission of history.

The filter of Israel

The fact that some of Sarkozy's cabinet members and sycophants, as well as much of the intellectual avant-garde of political reaction in France – those responsible for the new 'hatred of democracy', in the words of Jacques Rancière – are ex-'68ers, is not too surprising. Kouchner, Glucksmann, Bruckner, Lévy, Milner – their trajectory in the 1980s has been heavily documented, by myself among others. But the fact that some of these primarily Jewish and extremely vocal media figures have in more recent years gone on to popularize a synonymy between anti-Americanism, anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism, on the one hand, and anti-Semitism on the other, conveys something of the current asphyxiating political and intellectual climate in France. According to the *Grand Larousse* dictionary, 'anti-Americanism' made its debut into the French language in 1968, amidst the napalm bombings of Vietnam. Yet now anti-Americanism is, in the words of Bernard-Henri Lévy, 'a metaphor for anti-Semitism', while Alain Finkielkraut sees in America the inverted image of Auschwitz and in the Statue of Liberty the incarnation of its memory.[2]

May '68's detour through the filter of Israel presents a distinctive new chapter in the afterlives of the 1960s' insurrections – and one that perhaps someone outside of France would be best situated to analyse. The recent book by Daniel Bensaïd, *Un nouveau théologien: B.-H. Lévy* (Lignes, 2007) marks an excellent first step in confronting and analysing the audacious inversions that have solidified into a 'centre-left' consensus which, at its most insidious, casts the radical Left as nothing so much as the embodiment of a threat against Jews. But we would not, I think, be guilty of fetishizing May '68 if we traced the contemporary inversions Bensaïd discusses back to the grand Thermodorean inversion that set in circa 1976, when many of the same cast of characters took a distance from the political disappointments of the end of May through a massive spiritual rewriting of their experience. Since then they have seen their role as that of supervisors and managers of the present, enunciating norms and interdictions:

‘This is what you should think’, ‘This is what you shouldn’t think’, ‘This is what’s possible or impossible, old or new, relevant or irrelevant.’

It is within this murky inverted present and swamp of bad memory that the various social movements that make up the slow reassertion of the radical Left in France have had to find their way. The strikes and demonstrations of winter 1995; the hefty score of votes for the two Trotskyist candidates in the April 2002 election; the *altermondialiste* movement; the protests against retirement reforms and the CPE (*contrat première embauche*); the ‘no’ vote on the European constitution; the labour and student movements of this past winter – all these events and projects that have unfolded in the last fifteen years bear a relation to the incomplete process opened up by the 1960s’ insurgencies. And they give a very different kind of testimony to the somewhat unbelievable persistence of the question of ’68. An event on the scale of ’68 revealed the contingency of the social order and of authority in general – that is, its lack of foundation and the chaos at its core. Precisely because of its excess, it continues to serve, in an unscheduled and unpredictable way, as a powerful historical trope, capable of generating panic among the elites, as well as offering a way to understand and reframe the political currents, trajectories and movements that have followed it. For it is precisely the excess of an event that makes it outlive its own immediate chronology, destabilizing those histories or political agendas that make no room not only for events such as May ’68, but for any questioning of the status quo at all.

Notes

1. Chantal Ackerman, *Les Inrockuptibles* 638, 19 February 2008, p. 16.
2. Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Ce grand cadavre à la renverse*, Grasset, Paris, 2007, p. 265; and Alain Finkielkraut, cited in Daniel Bensaïd, *Un Nouveau théologien: Bernard-Henri Lévy*, Nouvelles Editions Lignes, Paris, 2007, p. 55.

Mexico 1968

The revolution of shame

Bruno Bosteels

On 2 October 1968, violent repression put an end to 123 days of student–popular militancy that had raged through the streets of Mexico City. Tanks invaded the Tlatelolco neighbourhood around the ‘Plaza de las Tres Culturas’ (named for its combination of pre-Columbian ruins, colonial church, and modern apartment buildings); soldiers stormed the plaza and, quickly occupying combat positions, started shooting in what would later be justified as a legitimate response to ‘sharpshooters’ firing from rooftops. By nightfall, over two hundred students, bystanders and residents had been killed. Ten days later, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz inaugurated the Summer Olympics, just a stone’s throw away from the university where everything had begun.

‘October 2’, or ‘Tlatelolco’, as the massacre is commonly referred to, also put its stamp retroactively on any interpretation of the events leading up to the brutal repression. Because of the deaths and detentions that followed, the history of the afterlives of 1968 in Mexico is unlike that of France. Whereas May ’68 in Paris almost immediately