

# **The Utopian Years?**

## **Radical Left movements in the France of Pompidou**

Individual abstracts

### ***L'Imagination au pouvoir: Radical left press in the aftermath of May '68***

Manus McGrogan, University of Portsmouth

In the wake of 1968, 'new', 'parallel', 'alternative' papers mushroomed; whether far left *brûlots*, such as *Rouge* and *La Cause du Peuple*, "counter-informational" broadsheets and bulletins like *Les Cahiers de Mai*, or the mags of the US-inspired cultural underground, *Actuel*, *Le Torchon Brûle*, this radical press advertised the collective and sometimes utopian drive for an alternative world in the France of the early 1970s. Some, like *Tout!*, embodied all of these subversive values, fracturing on the contradictions between proletarian workerism and provocative gay liberation. In all, these under-researched publications exemplified a true press effervescence, like a rocket lit by the fires of May exploding in the France of the early 1970s.

They also signaled the urge to 'liberate the press', as demanded by the posters of May, to substitute new modes of communication. Staples such as *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* were seen as staid, grey and conservative. For the radicals, their papers represented the newfound freedoms and passions of the 'Movement of May', reflected in the engaging, defiant tones, kaleidoscopic imagery and colours. Carried on a surge of optimism that often belied the divergences between on the one hand, hard (Marxist) political propaganda sheets, and the free-lovin' *underpresse*, and on the other, semi-professional, well-funded ventures and the DIY *ronéo*-ethic of the grassroots, the unified dimension of this parallel press, mirroring that of the movements that spawned it, would not last past the mid-seventies. Yet several titles, including *Charlie Hebdo* (born under the Pompidolian censor's eye) and the once-Maoist *Libération*, endure to this day.

My paper draws on the study of a range of press titles and the oral testimony of their creators to interrogate the hopes and desires of this alternative milieu, and asks how militants looked to the future.

**'Power at the end of a gun':  
The emergence of the 'armed struggle' from the French leftist underground of the 1970s**

Fanny Bugnon, Université d'Angers

The late 1960's are synonymous with an important modernization of Western societies and economic crisis, an important example being Pompidou's France. In this context, forms of protest were changing, with new subjects and practices, which in activist terms meant the radicalization of sections of youth. The new "generation of protest" was symbolised by the acronym « *JEUNE* » (*jeune étudiant urbain nécessairement engagé* ; in French: "YOUTH", as in youth, student, urban, necessarily committed).

In the 1970's, a section of left activists chose to express itself politically, through violence. Bomb attacks and murders were justified by anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric, as in other countries like Italy, Germany, Japan or Spain. In France, these manifestations of political violence occurred during the long 1970's, with groups like *Nouvelle résistance populaire* (NRP), the *Brigades internationales* (BI), *Groupes armés révolutionnaires internationalistes* (GARI), *Noyaux armés pour l'autonomie populaire* (NAPAP), autonomous groups or *Action directe* (AD).

Like the other Western groups, what appeared new was this use of political violence, as well as the participation of women, a fact often seen as a consequence of the second wave of feminism. These different groups, who claimed the use of violence for political ends, existed from the beginning of the 1970's through to the middle of the 1980s, a period characterized as the « long 68 years ». The media were fascinated by them. If political violence constitutes an important part of the utopianism inherent in political critique, both in symbolic and practical ways, the topic was more present in the French media at the beginning of the 1970's, the subject of newspaper articles and special columns.

Is it because Pompidou's France is presented as a period of modernization, channeling post-68 *contestation*? Or because 1974 is generally considered to be a turning point for activism with rising militant disengagement and the desire to erase ideological conflict ? It seems that the theme of political violence invites us to rethink chronologies of activism and political history. Gender analysis can also be completed by a generational approach.

Therefore, this paper aims to show how political violence can be considered both as an « afterlife » of 68 and as a manifestation of France in the 1970's.

**State, media and movement: the feminist fight  
for free abortion and contraception in Pompidou's France**

Bibia Pavard, Université de Paris Sciences-Po

This presentation will focus on one of the main claims of the French Women's Liberation Movement: free abortion. It will first study the emergence of the WLM arguing that the abortion issue brought together activists from different political backgrounds and generations. The abortion fight contributed markedly to the feminist movement's visibility in the media and to leftwing parties and leftist movements, especially after the 343 manifesto in 1971, and the Bobigny trial in 1972.

I will then examine the use of a new form of protest starting in 1973: the practice of illegal abortions at the crossroads of feminist activism and advocacy of a new way of practicing medicine carried out by leftist doctors. The Karman method of abortion practiced outside the hospital, without anesthesia, became a way to put into effect the utopian plan to "change life here and now". Illegal abortions also contributed to putting the issue on the political agenda. However the new law proposed by the government in 1973 was rejected by Parliament.

Even though the project was eclipsed by Simone Veil's bill voted a year later after Pompidou's death and the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to replace him, it shows an attempt by Pompidou's government to respond to a demand for social change. My presentation will finally focus on the conflicted memories of abortion liberalization in today's France, feminist activists and state actors with competing claims to its authorship.

**(Mis)reading youth activism in 1970s France:  
the case of the *lycéens* against *la loi Debré* 1971-73**

Chris Warne, University of Sussex

From 1971 to 1973, high school students in France emerged as prominent actors on the political stage. A series of events (the Guiot affair in February 1971 and the death of Pierre Overney in February 1972) saw them demonstrate in large numbers, expressing solidarity with young individuals perceived to be the victims of injustice. Such public expressions of discontent culminated with the campaigns in March and April 1973 against the reorganisation of military service contained in the Debré law. Political engagement now seemed to be a formal rite of passage for France's youth, and disruption in schools a staple of the academic year.

Contemporary observers were struck by a number of key features of these demonstrations and campaigns. They were impressed by the relative autonomy of the movements that developed in France's high schools, particularly in the sense that the initiative was clearly taken by the students themselves. This autonomy was expressed in a certain disdain and distancing from existing political

structures and institutions, particularly the communist dominated high school students' union UNCAL: the more flexible and spontaneous strike and action committees, heavily influenced by the Trotskyite LCR, found a much-readier audience and willing constituency. Other factors were highlighted: contemporary reports underline the geographical reach of the movement beyond Paris and deep into the provinces, going far beyond the traditional large urban centres of protest. Similarly, for the first time a student-based movement encompassed more than the prestigious male-dominated, *lycées* of the Paris region: it equally affected technical colleges, and girls' schools were drawn into the movement. Five years after May 1968, several commentators remarked on the solid implantation of its themes in the next generation of activists: the emphasis on direct democracy, on fluid and flexible forms of organisation, and tactics of protest borrowed from abroad (the sit-in); the use of humour and visual culture as expressions of protest; the greater visibility of libertarian and counter-cultural themes, especially anti-militarism. Confident predictions were made in some quarters about the future of protest: what would lie in store when these students reached the university?

With hindsight it is easy to see that such predictions were misplaced: the story of the mid-late 1970s in France seem to be more about the decline of youthful activism rather than its expansion. So did contemporaries simply misread the movements against the Debré law? What factors would explain the apparently ephemeral nature of such expressions of protest? In order to address these questions, this paper grounds an investigation of high school student activism within a broader understanding of the evolution of French youth in this period, in particular in the ways it was represented and understood by adult society, and in relation to the forms and patterns of youth culture that emerged at this time.

### **Immigrants and Intellectuals: The Rise of Anti-Racism, 1971-1974**

Daniel Gordon, Edgehill University

The exploitation of immigration as a political issue by the Right in Europe over the last twenty-five years is well known. Yet for twenty years previously, this issue had already been raised by the Left, as part of its critique of capitalism during the years of social upheaval opened up by the revolt of 1968. This paper recounts the rise during the Pompidou presidency of a multifaceted range of protest movements for the rights of immigrant workers in France. Within these movements took place a fascinating but today largely forgotten encounter between two worlds, the immigrant and the intellectual. The paper focuses on the birth of an autonomous immigrant workers' movement between 1971 and 1974, that existed within a symbiotic but problematic relationship with France's radical left. The murder of the Algerian teenager Djellali Ben Ali, and a hunger strike by the

Tunisian activist Saïd Bouziri, sparked a movement that mobilised onto the streets of Paris some of France's best-known intellectuals from Jean-Paul Sartre to Michel Foucault, invented the idea of the *sans-papiers*, and opened up a whole cycle of immigrant activism over the ensuing years. This paper surveys this movement at its height, and examines the difficulty of creating solidarities between it and French workers.