

Red and black

Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2002. 238 pp., £19.95 hb., 0 226 72797 1.

Kristin Ross's lucidly written book on the 'survivals of May '68' tackles the 'memorial management of May', those games of memory and forgetting that make the event a prisoner of its successive representations. This book has the great merit of dismantling, with the utmost clarity, the laborious exercise of ideological mine-clearing which in thirty years of celebrations – from interpretations to commemorations – has ended up turning the greatest general strike in French history into a mere students' procession or a 'spring cleaning'. In the staging of '68 each anniversary decade marks yet another phase of intellectual and moral collapse.

In 1978, the Right was still in power and the pretenders of '68, some of them already converted to Mitterrandism, remained in the antechamber. The official Left presented its own union around the Common Programme of Government as the logical consequence of May. In 1988, the disavowal of Third Worldism and of any lyrical illusions had already taken its toll. Having ignored Rousset, Ciliga or Victor Serge, the *nouveaux philosophes* discovered the Gulag with Solzhenitsyn. The opposition between totalitarianism and democracy replaced class struggle and anti-imperialism on the ideological screen. Bruckner recommended that we stifle the white man's sob and get rid of the burden of colonial guilt. The repentant 'ex' sixty-eighters had become the eulogists of Mitterrand's modernity. Making honourable amends, the various Kouchners, Webers and other converts to social democracy now equated '68 with violence and only wished to retain from it a great movement for liberal-libertarian reform. In 1998, the 'exes', in France as well as in Germany, had been definitively converted to the realism of the Third Way; 1968 had become nothing but the upsurge of the vigour of youth, now evoked with tender condescension.

This methodical undertaking culminated in the formula of the German sociologist according to which 'nothing happened in France in 1968'. This stance

consisted in arguing that the false event or nonevent of May masked the authentic event of the Prague spring. This rewriting – to which several 'actors' of May actively contributed, preoccupied with legitimating their successive trajectories – in turn accompanies and nourishes the ideological offensive of the liberal counter-reformation.

Ross rightly underlines the fact that this historical revision constitutes above all an exercise in depoliticization and dehistoricization. Far from opening up an unexpected field of possibilities, the event is inserted as a simple link within an ineluctable process of modernization and cultural *aggiornamento*. Instead of revealing the explosive contradictions at the heart of contemporary capitalism, the social irruption of '68 would represent 'the fulfilment of its deepest desires': 'Following this teleology of the present, official history thereby eliminates the memory of past alternatives in which we could get a glimpse of outcomes other than the ones that actually took place.' The temporal rupture disappears into the repetition of the same. Clearly, nothing took place that could have upset the unchanging order of works and days.

Ross targets two complementary discourses that contribute to this political neutralization. On the one hand, we find a sort of (auto)biographical appropriation, in which May '68 is represented as the revolt of a generation or as a 'generational drama'. The advantage of this operation is twofold. It allows one to exorcise the spectre of class struggle in favour of the recurrent conflict of generations: as the saying goes, youth will have its fling! It also allows the establishment of media-friendly spokespersons for the generation in question as the (sole) legitimate interpreters of the event: in accordance with an implacable – biological – law of ageing, which would constitute a maturation and progress in what concerns both wisdom and reason, the bohemians would have become bourgeois and the Cronopes would have turned into the Famous. Order finally reigns in the best of all possible capitalist worlds.

Taking her cue from the pioneering work of Karl Mannheim, Ross expertly dismantles the ideological function of the concept of generation and the use of the royal 'we' among the repentant witnesses: 'We invented the Third World', declares Jean-Pierre Le Dantec (former director of *La cause du peuple*); 'We discovered the Third World', echoes Bernard Kouchner. Already in 1985 Guy Hocquenghem rose up against this generational glue, which in the name of an 'age class' imposes a sort of connivance or complicity between people who nevertheless find themselves – from some time back – in opposing camps of the social struggle.

According to Ross, the other great neutralizing procedure directed against May resides in sociological anaesthesia. Sociological recuperation would dissolve the singularity of the event in statistical quantification and the ponderous tendencies of the *longue durée*. On a smaller scale, this approach would repeat the ideological exercise that was applied with a certain degree of success to the French Revolution on the occasion of its bicentenary. In the midst of a historically determined process of modernization, an accident would have proven necessary (the stubbornness of the king's incompetent advisors in 1789, the blunders of the police in 1968) in order to send the situation skidding off the rails, only for history then to resume its normal course. According to this theory of the 'skid', the eventual bifurcation and the plurality of possibilities disappear under the crust of the real, effaced by the ineluctability of the *fait accompli*: after

a simple detour or an unfortunate setback history returns to its course, like a long and tranquil river.

These schools of thought, moreover, are the same ones which, not content with simply banalizing the event, make it responsible for all of society's atavisms and 'delays'. By opposing the course of modernization, the French Revolution would have created a country of small rural proprietors, with hundreds of cheeses and wines, to the detriment of industrialization. Likewise, May '68 would have generated the social rigidities that stand in the way of the necessary liberal reform.

The liberalization of moral standards, the right to contraception and abortion, narcissistic hedonism, individualism without individuality, have ended up imposing themselves, after a few years, in all developed societies. The French singularity of May 1968 – the fact that ink and saliva are still shed in its name, that books and essays continue to be written about it – is to a great extent the consequence of the international context (its simultaneity with the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the Prague spring, the student uprisings in Mexico or Pakistan), but, above all, of the general strike. Between 7 and 9 million strikers, according to statistics? No matter, we are indeed dealing with the biggest general strike of the twentieth century. The last of a cycle, some might remark so as to reassure themselves: the final bouquet of the workers' struggles begun in the nineteenth century, the last convulsion of a world in the process of disappearing, as symbolized by the workers' fortress of Renault-Billancourt and by



an old philosopher perched on a barrel to harangue a species of worker on its way to extinction (in an extinct world, where pedestrian crossings [*passages cloutés*] were still covered in nails [*clous*], where cops wore leaden pelerines, and telephones had round dials). Yet we can argue with just as much (if not more) verisimilitude that it was the first civic and social strike of the twenty-first century, the beginning of a new cycle of resistances and protests against commodity reification. The strike constituted a general uprising of the salaried society in an urban country, in which the peasantry represents a mere 7 per cent of the active population, and in which the salaried workforce makes up 80 per cent. This explains the movement which starts from the universities and the factories then to penetrate all pores of society, agitating the worlds of culture, communication and even sport; and also the aspiration – whose extent is new – to autonomy, self-management and the democratic control of struggles.

Ross's book has the indisputable merit of resituating the sequence of May – from 3 May (the student explosion) to 30 May (de Gaulle's speech announcing general elections) – in both space and time. In time: it recalls the deep links between the radicalization of '68 and decolonization, the war in Algeria; she underlines the role of Éditions Maspero, of the books by Fanon, Sartre, Nizan. In space: it insists on the international context, the Cuban revolution, the death of Che in Bolivia, the liberation struggle in Indochina, the Cultural Revolution. It is these conditions and this context that make the event a political event, a moment of crystallization of possibilities, and not a religious miracle pure and simple. Where superficial journalism only wants to see a lightning flash without either antecedents or premisses, the event instead reveals the potentialities harboured by an undecided situation, a situation that is determinate but not predictable.

The post-'68 legend thus represses precisely that which accounts for the singularity of May '68 (as compared to the student revolts on American or German campuses), to wit, 'the May of the proletarians'. Without the general strike, who would still be interested in this date? Ross correctly remarks that the revisionist enterprise dissolves the figure of the worker (and, to a lesser degree, that of the anti-colonialist militant), preferring to it that of the sole student leader. Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman's book, entitled precisely *Generation* (published at the beginning of the 1990s) is exemplary in this regard. Diametrically opposed to the *Annales* tradition, or to Daniel Guérin's vision of the French Revolution, Hamon and Rotman's book proposes an anecdotal history, centred on the

biographies of a few actors (all of them products of the student movement); in other words, a history made by the princes, captains and great men of this world. It is significant, moreover, that when it comes to evaluating the impact of the event in terms of the number of dead, media commentaries insist upon the fact that 'there were no victims in '68'. If it is certainly true that restraint, sometimes going to the extent of producing a mere simulacrum of conflict, was remarkable on both sides (as testified by the memoirs of chief of police Grimaud or those of the union leaders), it is just as significant that in general this count 'forgets' the deaths not only of the lycée student Gilles Tautin but also of the two workers murdered in the grounds of the Peugeot factory at Sochaux.

A large part of the critique developed by Ross is thus both corrosive and salubrious. However, the re-politicization that she calls for against the depoliticization practised by the dominant discourses remains inconsistent. Essentially, it can be summed up in a handful of debatable generalities, whereby the political dimension of '68 would revolve around 'the political opening to alterity', the encounter with the colonized, the deconstruction of social identities, and so on.

Ross never approaches the situation from the standpoint of the political strategies at play. The balance of power between classes is at no point the object of analysis, any more than the balance of power between political currents or the debates over the orientation of the general strike and its consequences. The author's overt contempt for sociological research comes back to haunt her. By haughtily ignoring (as the bibliography attests) an entire literature which in any case does not constitute an apologetics, she ends up supporting her argument with references taken from very fragmentary and superficial accounts (drawn in particular from the book by Nicolas Daum). The result is a very deformed image of reality. If the sudden appearance of the Neighbourhood Action Committees can be considered an interesting symptom of a territorialization of the struggle and of an aspiration towards local democracy, the phenomenon nevertheless remained very limited, dispersed, and was far from being capable of contesting the union leadership's hold over the majority of the movement. The Maoist practice of the workers' enquiry is accorded disproportionate importance, whilst at the same time it is presented in an uncritical manner; in fact, much could be said about the demagogic populism that this practice often dressed up with falsely erudite considerations. If it is indeed very pertinent to recall the original work produced for some years by the journal *Révoltes logiques* (edited by Jacques Rancière), there is not a

single mention of a whole host of publications like the journals of the PSU or *Critique Communiste* or the *Cahiers de la Taupe*, or of the far Left newspapers of the 1970s. Paradoxically, this refusal of sociological research ends up playing into the hands of the generational narrative, by giving it a central, albeit critical, role in the refutation. Thus, the often very intelligent recourse made to cinematic or literary manifestations cannot but remain superficial. An ideological critique of ideology is not enough to restore the political dimension of controversy.

If the activity of the far Left (too readily identified by Ross with its Maoist components – which in fact remained quite ephemeral) does indeed anticipate transformations at work in the long term, the political scene in 1968 remained largely dominated by the strategies of traditional organizations, and of the Communist Party (PCF) in particular. It is not enough to observe that the gains of the general strike (which were substantial in terms of salaries and union rights) remained symbolically very inferior to those of 1936 or 1945, whilst the level of mobilization was actually greater. Of course, one can condemn the compromise made by the union leadership during the Grenelle negotiations. Nevertheless the question remains why these disappointing results did not provoke greater fractures within the unions and the majority parties (there is nothing here that could compare to the crisis that followed the Renault strikes in 1947). May '68 is the starting point for a molecular process that erodes the grip of the traditional apparatuses over the workers' movement, but it is still necessary to measure the amplitude and rhythm of these phenomena.

Unable to raise themselves above their own subjective perception of the event, some have made a mountain out of '68, turning it into their hour of personal glory, their most intimate altar. Conversely, for others it is today a question of good manners to forget the general strike and to retain from May '68 only a student escapade on the way to liberal-libertarian modernization. The reality is in fact situated somewhere between these two stances: we are dealing with a general strike that had a political impact, in which the elements of a duality of power remained embryonic, and whose breadth of demands was limited by the absence of any real political continuation on the part of an essentially respectful Left.

Instead of according this question of power in '68 the importance it deserves, Ross turns it into the symptom of its ebb and regression. The question of power thus does not even pose itself in the heat of the event, emerging only when the event has turned to

ashes. Refusing to get involved in the dispute between Raymond Aron and Pierre Goldmann, for whom the absence of an armed confrontation would suffice to mark the limits of the situation, Ross affirms that 'the real question lies elsewhere, and is alien to the parameters of a revolution, whether failed or otherwise: why did something happen rather than nothing?' According to her, the theme of the conquest of power would remain prisoner to a 'narrative determined by the logic of the State'. Her presentation of the opposition between an imaginary Lenin and an equally imaginary Rosa Luxemburg does not go beyond clichés and platitudes. Her own tale of May, often very subtle when it comes to deciphering cultural symptoms (with regard to the film *La Reprise*, for example), thus ends up opposing one discourse of depoliticization with another. In this perspective, the strategic problem of May would find itself reduced to the failed meeting between workers and students, and to the desynchronization between the respective temporalities of the world of workers and the world of students.

It is not surprising that in this way Ross moves from the necessary and legitimate rehabilitation of the event to its fetishized hypostasis; and it should elicit no surprise that she finds the formula for this absolute and unconditioned event in the work of Alain Badiou: 'something that takes place by excess, beyond any calculation'. Such an approach in no way prepares us to follow and comprehend political currents and their trajectories, throughout the 1970s and beyond. It is as if politics, once reduced to the strong time of the event, were to be extinguished along with it.

The last part of the book briefly signals the fact that in the wake of the strikes of winter 1995, the scene of the debate has once again changed. Without actually turning crimson (to borrow from the title of a film by Chris Marker), the air has begun to gain some colour. The activity of social movements testifies to this, but also the rebirth of a socially aware cinema and the results achieved by the far Left during recent French elections. It would not have been in the least otiose to deal with the question of the links between this recent renewal and the heritage of another '68 – whoever its messengers may be – since it is indeed true that there is no rupture (and in particular no generational rupture) without an element of continuity. But Kristin Ross's unilateral approach to the 'memorial management of May' does not prepare her to reconsider the balance sheet of '68 from this angle.

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Translated by Alberto Toscano