



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

Custodians of memory: the lost figures of May '68

This is the Published version of the following publication

Stephens, Julie (2003) *Custodians of memory: the lost figures of May '68*.
Australian Review of Public Affairs, 3 (4). ISSN 1832-1526, 1443-8607

The publisher's official version can be found at
<http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/07/stephens.html>
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/15526/>

Custodians of memory: The lost figures of May '68

Julie Stephens, Victoria University

Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, University of Chicago Press, 2002 (238pp). ISBN 0-2267-297-1 (hard cover) RRP \$69.00.

The 'blaming the sixties industry' that emerged in the United States from the late eighties has its own distinctive counterpart in France. The events of May-June 1968, where nine million people stopped working and brought France to a complete standstill for five to six weeks, has inspired a voluminous literature. By the end of 1968, in France alone, no fewer than 52 books and countless journal articles about the May events were in circulation. Each decade the anniversary of '68 is marked, the 'delirious commemorative logic' (Starr 1995) of current publishing strategy ensures this literature continues to proliferate. Yet, according to Kristin Ross, as the upheaval of this period is remembered, so Left political culture is recast, reconfigured, or obscured.

Unlike America, where the protest of the sixties is blamed for everything from the crisis in higher education to the demise of the family, France has produced a 'poetic', even sympathetic version of 'youth revolt' in which the events of '68 appear as a necessary moment in the inevitable process of cultural modernisation. This official version of May promotes the 'wasn't it great on the barricades but weren't we misguided' story. Professional ex-militants tell this story in exclusively generational terms. This *story* is the target of the sharp and illuminating critique Kristin Ross mounts in *May '68 and Its Afterlives*.



Ross argues that the post-May verbiage—or what she calls elsewhere the 'narrative labour' around May—has fostered an 'active forgetting' of the events in France (p. 3). In both writings about May and the ensuing television commemorations, a dominant 'revisionist rendering' is at work (p. 154). The revised history recasts as an artistic moment events that involved the whole sphere of social reproduction, such that no 'professional sector, no category of worker was unaffected by the strike; no region, city, or village in France was untouched' (p. 4). This dominant version repeatedly refers to the graffiti and posters of the day at the expense of other texts. The official story also depicts the events as the youthful expression of a chaotic individualism, with hindsight reframing this individualism as a necessary component of a smooth transition to modernity and as an asset in the current political climate.

The idea of '68 as predominantly a sexual and cultural revolution reproduces what Ross calls 'the good natured and virtuous May' (p. 151). She contends that it seems we have a right to hear just about anything concerning May, 'except politics' (p. 154). So what else, in Ross's view has been neglected or actively targeted for amnesia in the way May '68 is remembered? Violence—police violence in particular—has been relegated to the back stage or portrayed as a fringe deviation from the main action. The oft-cited phrase that 'no-one died in '68' is 'predicated on the often explicit denial of the literal deaths that occurred in May-June, not to

mention the many suicides in the years that followed' (p. 186).

The language of '68 has also been reconfigured, Ross argues. In evocations of the May movement as a happy month of 'free expression' (p. 9), liberation of speech is a key trope. Ross is clear about what is at stake in this distortion: 'The leftist language of class, what was in fact the speech and vehicle of the movement, must be ignored as something that *blocked* the more authentic May from emerging—the May of soul, individual desire and spirituality' (p. 190). She is particularly scathing about the way repentant former militants and self-designated stars of the movement like Daniel Cohn-Bendit disavow class. She shows how their counterfeit history of May ignores the original movement's overwhelming concern with questions of equality.

Ross is most worried by the way these custodians of memory have actively written out of the story two crucial figures: the worker and the colonial Other. For Ross, the worker is the figure most aptly defining political modernity (p. 80). She points out that the voices of people who were neither celebrities nor martyrs are almost completely absent from commentaries about May '68. The anonymous militants on factory committees or 'embedded at the time in the texture of everyday neighbourhood grassroots activity' (p. 143)—those for whom May was neither a surprise nor a menace, 'but simply a stage in a long struggle' (p. 163)—are not invited to the commemorations.



Custodians of memory have actively written crucial figures out of the story.

Revisionist histories also neglect how identification with the colonial Other, dating back to the Algerian war of 1954–1962, shaped political sensibility in France in the 1960s. Ross's rich discussion of the now-observed 'Third Worldism' of the sixties is her book's most pointed contribution. For Ross, the 68ers' identification with the Third World, and their preoccupation with figures like Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh emerged not from naïve romanticism—although there was certainly an element of this—but from the reality of Algeria or Vietnam, where 'three thousand tons of bombs were dropped every minute by the U.S. for three years' (p. 166). The solution they offered to the problem of the Third World was 'radical transformation of the capitalist world system' (p.89). Thus, she emphasises, Third Worldism was an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist stance.

A television commemoration screened in France in 1988 exemplifies this active amnesia. Ross describes how program host Bernard Kouchner, a former militant and co-founder of Doctors Without Borders, criticised the May movement for being unaware of Third World misery, which, he posits, activists only discovered in later years. Ross's outrage at this rewriting of history is palpable:

In one fell swoop, Kouchner assumes the power to clear away an entire dimension of the movement: its relation to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in places like Vietnam, Algeria, Palestine, Cuba... Kouchner has conducted a massive clearing of the terrain so that he and his friends can 'discover' the third world ten years later, like the first colonial explorers of virgin lands (p. 156).

A 'whole world disappears' in this distortion or forgetting. The militant or combative Third World, or the Third World Other as the militant, articulate thinker and fighter is replaced by the Third World victim waiting to be heroically 'discovered' by parachuting doctors. In a provocative analysis, Ross traces the way the agency (and in her view) the reality of the Third

World is subsumed by the discourse of Human Rights. This new figure of the victim is fixed in an ‘eternal present’, outside history and politics, by the organisations in which you would least expect such ideas to surface, like Doctors Without Borders. She charges this NGO, and others like it, with engaging in quasi-military acts of rescue prescribing the correct doses of ‘human rights and bombs’ (p. 168). Ross leaves her reader in no doubt that these acts have a ‘deceptively colonial character’.

However, Ross is engaged in her own rescue mission. In releasing the lost figures of May from the bonds of a false history, she shows the relevance of those months in 1968 to the contemporary scene. The distance between repudiating the May movement’s approach to the Third World and anti-Algerian, anti-Arab sentiment in France is not as great as ex-militants might like to think. And as the United States’ invasion of Iraq attests, the difference between a military and humanitarian intervention has become one of degree only: ‘The moral imperative used to plead the right to humanitarian interference quickly transmutes that right into an obligation and then, even more quickly, into an obligation that must be given all the force of an armed intervention’ (p. 168).



Ross is engaged in her own rescue mission.

Likewise, the global capitalist system requires the figure of the liberated, expressive individual, not the militant worker, for its continued expansion. As Ross makes perfectly clear, the consequences of neglecting the calls for equality made in May at the expense of the ‘official story’ of ‘free expression’ are not merely historical.

It is difficult to do justice to the subtlety and theoretical sophistication of *May ’68 and Its Afterlives*. Richly nuanced, the text explores a breadth of material from the period and from later rewritings. Ross’s rereading of ’68 encompasses both scholarly and popular sources. And, of course, her reinterpretation of retrospective narratives of these events creates its own story of May.

Yet there is another paradox at the heart of this study. Ross emphasises that encounters with difference—the coming together of farmers and students or factory workers and academics—allowed the ‘dream of change’ to flourish in May ’68 (p. 130). What occurred was not the experience of a ‘shared community’ as the official version would have us believe, but a ‘disidentification’ or ‘declassification’. She argues that fissures were created in previously fixed identities (such as student or worker) and that this political openness to otherness allowed something larger to emerge.

Strangely, Ross’s book could be seen as involved in its own reclassification. In rescuing the worker and the colonial subject from their hiding, she herself fixes these categories and identities which, as she so deftly shows, were crucial to the politics of May. In Todd Gitlin’s view, the meaning of the sixties is not a treasure to be unearthed, but something provisional like a ‘sand-painting’ to be ‘created and revised in historical time’ (Gitlin 1987, p. 433). Ross’s analysis lacks a sense of this provisional quality, and has at times a rescue mission flavour, like the parachuting doctors she so disdains. However, her mission succeeds. The lost figures of May are wrested from those who fabricate history in order to justify present wrongs.

REFERENCES

Giltin, T. 1987, *The Sixties: Years of Hope days of Rage*, Bantam Books, New York.

Starr, P. 1995, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

[Julie Stephens](#) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at Victoria University and the author of *Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).