

## **The 1970s: Years of Politics!**

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**Against the widespread view that links the post-‘68 period to hedonism, sociologist Lilian Mathieu paints a broad range of protest movements and offers an incisive political analysis. But this period is also of interest for understanding the present: a look at the recent past enables us to analyze today’s social movements.**

Reviewed: Lilian Mathieu, <i>Les années 70, un âge d’or des lutes?</i> Paris, Textuel, 2009, 141 p. 9,90 €
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Lilian Mathieu, a sociologist at the CNRS, has for some years now ably combined empirical research on social movements with theoretical reflection. His most recent book, published in the “Petite Encyclopédie Critique” collection that he codirects with Philippe Corcuff, offers an overview of protest movements active in France during the 1970s, following the events of May-June 1968.

### **A “Tour de France” of Protest Movements**

The first part of the work presents a panorama of protest movements whose common feature was that all were critical in one way or another of relations of domination. Mathieu, well aware of the problems of a typological approach, proposes five types of movements whose history he recounts in broad strokes, drawing on an impressively up-to-date bibliography. The five categories are: workplace protests, essentially mounted by female workers; immigrant protests, which combined strikes by unskilled workers with struggles for housing and residence permits; the politicization of private life, including struggles for women’s rights and the homosexual rights movement; regional and environmental movements and the advent of ecological politics; and finally, anti-authoritarian movements, a catch-all category that encompasses all forms of resistance to repression, including movements involving in the legal and medical systems, as well as anti-militarist and pacifist groups.

## **Touraine, Bourdieu, Boltanski ... and Mathieu**

Mathieu then embarks on a critical review of various social scientific interpretations of these movements. He begins with a vigorous refutation of the theory of new social movements as developed by Inglehart and Melucci and above all by Alain Touraine and his students. Touraine is criticized because “his perspective offers not so much a sociological analysis of the contemporary world as a form of social prophecy” (p. 78) and because it contributed to a symbolic disqualification of the workers’ movement. The question of protest cycles leads the author into a discussion of the usefulness of the idea of political opportunity structures, where the question becomes which political and institutional contexts are more or less favorable to the emergence and success of social movements. The idea of sociomorphological transformations, introduced most notably by Pierre Bourdieu and Gérard Mauger, is also discussed, especially in relation to changes in the educational system. These authors treat *déclassement* (downward social mobility) as one of the essential causes of the mobilization of the new petite bourgeoisie. More recent work has refuted this hypothesis, however, particularly among students. To end his survey, Mathieu presents the thesis of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello concerning the transformation of capitalism, which has supposedly disarmed social criticism and incorporated artistic criticism.

The third part of the book seeks to build on these interpretations with a political reading in which Mathieu develops the notion of a “social movement space,” which he pioneered.<sup>1</sup> This concept, inspired by Bourdieu’s concept of “field,” refers to “the set of practices and meanings constituted by all protest mobilizations in a given society” (p. 103). He also calls attention to the interdependence of different movements, which is explained by the manifold commitments of certain militants (“multipositionality,” in the language of political science). In the careers of certain activists, moreover, these commitments are to sharply contrasting causes. The concept also includes relations with other fields, especially the political and trade union fields. Using this concept, and in some respects conducting a retrospective analysis of the social movements of the 1970s in the light of his very detailed knowledge of the social movements of the 1990s, Mathieu describes in broad outline two successive processes of autonomization of the social movement space, owing in particular to the decline of “militant leftism” after 1972, which made room for a

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<sup>1</sup> See his remarkable article “L’espace des mouvements sociaux,” *Politix* no. 77, 2007/1, pp. 131-151.

particularly impressive expansion of the social movement space. This was followed by a phase of reduced autonomy, as the Socialist Party progressively co-opted issues, slogans, and militants. In the end, “the social movement space was virtually absorbed by institutionalized party politics” (p. 119) after the election of François Mitterrand in 1981. Mathieu notes that the leaders of quite a number of organizations and associations joined the government as ministerial staff members, particularly those from the Syndicat de la Magistrature and the GISTI.

### **‘68: A Generational Affair?**

Clearly, then, this book is far more than an introductory survey. It is filled with stimulating analyses. It is learned without being pedantic and precise without lapsing into jargon. To be sure, it is unfortunate that the analysis of the evolution of the educational system is so brief. Still more unfortunate is the author’s exclusively national orientation, because this was a period in which activists were internationalists, and issues, action agendas, and individuals circulated widely. But to do justice to this dimension would require a work of vast scope, which no one has really attempted to date.<sup>2</sup> As a historian, I would rather consider the overall framework of analysis that Mathieu proposes. He takes “May ‘68” as the “point of departure” of his study (p. 15). Although he refers to a historiographic school devoted to “the ‘68 era,” he somewhat distorts its interpretive framework, since the basic assumption of this school (which in my view accounts for its fruitfulness) is that ‘68 was not a point of departure but rather a turning point, or, in the case of France, an “epicenter” in a broader phase of protest.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the collective work *Mai juin 68*, which brings together mainly political scientists and sociologists, envisions a phase of protest extending from 1945 to 1968 and marked by “crises in authority relations” and “critical trajectories.”<sup>4</sup>

By neglecting what came before ‘68 and focusing his attention exclusively on the 1970s, Mathieu runs the risk of looking at only a single generation of movement activists, the ‘68

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<sup>2</sup> In the article cited above, Mathieu urges other researchers to test the validity of his concept outside the French setting. See “L’espace,” *art. Cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Geneviève-Dreyfus-Armand et al, eds., *Les années 68. Le temps de la contestation*, Brussels, Complexe, 2000 ; Philippe Artières and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, eds., *68 une histoire collective (1962-1981)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008 (« L’épicentre » is the title of the second part of the book, devoted to the analysis of May-June 1968; Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Le moment 68. Une histoire contestée*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Dominique Damamme et al., eds., *Mai-juin 68*, Ivry-Sur-Seine, L’Atelier, 2008. Lilian Mathieu contributed a rich analysis of demonstrations in Lyon, Saint-Etienne and Roanne in May-June ‘68, pp. 195-206. I have attempted to give an idea of the richness of all these works in “Clio contre Carvalho : l’historiographie de 68,” *Revue internationale des livres et des idées* n°5, May-June 2008, pp. 17-22. This review is available without footnotes at : <http://revuedeslivres.net/articles.php?idArt=205>

generation, primarily students, which superficial historians assimilate to the baby-boomers. This is indeed the generation on which his analysis is focused, albeit implicitly, when he discusses its withdrawal from militant activity (particularly on p. 93). Similarly, when he makes 1970-71 the starting point for feminist and homosexual movements, he neglects the earlier but fundamental roles of the French Movement for Family Planning (founded in 1956) and Arcadie,<sup>5</sup> which involved an older generation of militants. One might extend this analysis to the protests against the Catholic Church in this post-Conciliar period, which became, as Mathieu recognizes, “a major center of militant recruitment” (p. 113).<sup>6</sup> The hypothesis, first suggested by Gérard Mauger, that the decline of militant leftism after 1972 should be seen as the explanation of the autonomization of social movements in relation to the political field (p. 110), therefore seems somewhat reductionist. In my view, this autonomization might be seen as a more gradual phenomenon, which began with increasing disillusionment with the political left, and especially the Communist Party, on the part of growing numbers of left-wing activists from the mid-1960s on, or perhaps even earlier, from the war in Algeria.

But this broadening of the chronological frame is useful, I think, mainly for enriching Mathieu’s concept of social movement space. He insists on the interdependence of social movements, whose relations to one another are constantly shifting. Building on the work of militant sociology, he points out the extent to which multiple commitments encouraged connections between mobilization sites and, even more broadly, between movements. I would add, modestly, that consideration of a broader temporal framework would probably make it easier to identify phenomena of “hybridization”, in which one social movement joined with another once the social movement space became more autonomous.

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<sup>5</sup> Julian Jackson, “Qu’est-ce qu’un homosexuel libéré ? Le mouvement Arcadie dans les années 68,” *Clio HFS* n°29, 2009, pp. 17-35.

<sup>6</sup> The essential work is Denis Pelletier, *La crise catholique. Religion, société, politique en France (1965-1978)*, Paris, Payot, 2002.