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Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xx + 468 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7735-3199-4.

Review Essay by Rosemary Wakeman, Fordham University.

The anniversary of '68 has, as we know, produced a mini-industry of scholarly locution on its meaning and significance. In a recent review of Julian Bourg's *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*, Gerd-Rainer Horn remarked that this anniversary may be the last opportunity for the generation of '68 to weigh in on the debate. A new generation of researchers is shouldering the task of interpreting what has been a particularly Gordian knot for historians, especially of a certain age. Julian Bourg is one of these new recruits to 1968 scholarship. Horn rhetorically sighs in his review that our author in question was not even born in 1968.<sup>[1]</sup> And this is a good thing. Bourg brushes aside the self-examination of the *soixante-huitards*. Instead of taking sides in the interminable battles between Right and Left over the legacy of '68, Bourg chides them both and then moves on to his own concerns and those he sees of his generation: the realm of ethics.

Bourg argues that "We live in an age of ethics" (p. 334). Indeed, from the point of view of the early years of the twenty-first century, ethics could not be more relevant. Nor could the diverse threads that Bourg deftly analyses in his outstanding intellectual history of '68: violence and prisons, identity politics, women's rights, and the nature of radicalism. Putting events forty years ago into historical context now requires coming to terms with contemporary waves of student-led protests of which the demonstrations in Iran are the most recent. The images flashed across the internet of Neda dying in the streets of Tehran have outstripped the outcries against a half-killed Rudi Deutschke or students mowed down by Soviet tanks in Prague. Sexual violence has somehow become an ordinary tool of war and oppression. And yet as Bourg wryly remarks, contemporary political debate is a cacophony of "rights" for everyone and everything. Making sense of the radical intellectual trajectories of '68 requires a new, steely perspective on the realities of ethics, human rights, and the lack of them.

From this bold viewpoint, Bourg reevaluates 1968 as perhaps a failed revolution, but a successful turn toward an ethical discourse that included the self, others, institutions and associations, and humanity in general. Even though the actual protagonists may not have understood what they were accomplishing, their militant intellectual activism, staged amid the turmoil of May and its aftermath, managed to revitalize French civic life. Bourg thus rescues May 1968 from the dustbin of history and elevates it as a "historic sea change" (p. 5) in the way we perceive moral principles and individual rights whether they be for gays and women or for the ethical treatment of animals. This is a decidedly more optimistic interpretation than Michael Seidman's and Kristin Ross's that '68 became a phantasma (and in Ross's estimation a counterfeit one) because there was little concrete to shout about.<sup>[2]</sup> Bourg masterfully takes us through a dizzying array of intellectual possibilities opened by '68, including those that fell short, on the route to the ethical turn.

There are three questions that seem worth posing in this Forum about Bourg's outstanding book. First is whether 1968 was indeed a watershed in political ethics and the degree to which it depended on important antecedents. Revolutions, even those that disappoint, always dub themselves transformational. Bourg is well aware that intellectuals were talking about ethics before 1968 and in his discussion of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for example, recognizes the relevance of the Second World War and the Liberation for postwar intellectuals. The Second World War elicited an outpouring of discussion on ethics and morality. Bourg's main thrust in articulating the varied influences on '68 intellectuals is Marxism, whether the Communist Party's official version, Maoism, or Trotskyism. These various strains of Marxist thought were essential to the revolutionary, liberational quality of the '68 revolt. But Marxism and structuralism were not the only intellectual frameworks. Historian Michael Kelly argues that it was humanism that "defined the parameters of what was thinkable..."[3] in postwar France. Its preoccupations with Man, the individual, and society, its ideal of human brotherhood, were the touchstones for intellectuals from a variety of political persuasions. The French humanist movement of the 1950s and 1960s deserves fuller attention in Bourg's intellectual exploration. It may be a better link than Jansenism. Were the New Philosophers of the 1980s drawing on this humanist tradition in their reflections on the ethical dimensions of human experience? Did key thinkers in the progressive Catholic social reform movement such as Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit* help lay the groundwork for ethical fascination? Sunil Khilnani also makes the point that after the rupture of the Occupation, "the French intellectual aspired to the realm of the universal..."[4] This legacy is worth considering in the post-1968 turn to the language of ethics. It may have played an important role in the formation of the generation of 1968 rather than "religion" being something some intellectuals turned to as they deradicalized afterwards. The particularistic brand of French social, humanist thought is what got thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Sartre into such hot water with the Communist Party. As Bourg remarks, the curious blend of left-wing social Catholic reformism, republican universal values, and humanism made Michel Foucault's thinking difficult to pin down.

Second, Bourg's excellent study asks us to reflect on the figure of the intellectual in the media age. Bourg succeeds admirably in illuminating the intellectual firestorms about violence, gay identity, and the feminist critique of rape that took place on the pages of *Libération* and *Le Monde*. The superb telling of these impassioned debates carried on in the press after 1968 is one of the great merits of this book. But why they *mattered* to students protesting in the streets, why and how they acted as a successful communicative language amid the turmoil and afterwards are important questions to ask. Was *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972) on the lips of students and would-be revolutionaries in the aftermath of '68? Bourg's book begins with the graffiti "It is forbidden to forbid," and in the book's images we see Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre holding a press conference, the "Ten Hours Against Rape" meeting, the avant-garde street posters that 1968 created as political medium. But there seems limited connection between this demonstrative, full-bodied political activism and the "philosophy of desire" and "dark sexuality" Bourg describes as essential to intellectual discourse. The lofty standing of French intellectuals, the authority of their pronouncements, was derived in part from their social activism from the Resistance, to movements for Algerian independence, to 1968. The passions derived from 1968, the street protests, graffiti and tracts, the political avant-gardism and antinomian revolt against norms by an array of cultural elites from artists and film-makers to student leaders was the collective universe from which Bourg's intellectual ferment was derived. Did intellectuals carry on the revolution as subversive Festival? Was Guy Hocquenghem out in the street in search of his own *dérive* (*La Dérive homosexuelle*, 1977)? His embrace of the marginal and deviant world of homosexuality was not far from the Situationist's embrace of the marginal and deviant world outside the capitalist spectacle. Both embraced the

dark worlds to make them speak otherly. And they were subversive in the media age. How did these radical intellectual movements stage their protests for the television cameras? Or was it simply studly high-brow intellectuals who became television stars? Television allowed the New Philosophers to strut their stuff in full view of mass audiences. The buzz and popularity of such shows as *Apostrophes*, the intellectual's communing with State-run TV and how they justified its use while they waxed eloquent on anti-statism and ethical purity is an essential part of the turn away from revolution. The New Philosophers as media phenomenon, despite all the outrage against them, is worth in depth consideration. As Kristin Ross has shown, media stardom gives us important clues as to how '68 became such a multihued and yet rather sterile imaginary.

Lastly, the *soixante-huitards* called into question the internal order in France and an international order that was the legacy of the Second World War. The pan-European dimensions of this struggle and the commonalities in intellectual radicalism across nations would add to Bourq's study. It would be good to know the connections he sees between his French intellectual militants and those elsewhere. In a recent review of the anniversary interest in the Prague Spring, for example, Jacques Rupnik refers to the "revolutionary lyricism" and "the obsolete nature of the political discourse employed in Paris" in 1968 in comparison to the real fight for freedom in Prague.[5] It is difficult not to see more than a grain of truth in this assessment while reading the intellectual contortions of the well-intentioned portrayed in Bourq's book. As he argues, some of these strains ended in dark alleys, others lived to see the light of day...or perhaps the camera lights on the set of *Apostrophes*. But did any of it really matter? Was ethics simply a form of Left-wing melancholy? Bourq forces us to consider whether the vocabulary of ethics and its profound contemporary political influence is not just a matter of derevolutionizing by the generation of '68, but a more complex sea change in which the Right had a stronger hand. Or was ethics a displacement of politics altogether? Tom McDonough's *The Beautiful Language of My Century*[6] offers a parallel study to Bourq's from the point of view of cultural criticism and the avant-garde. McDonough points to the language of negation, the representations, the objectification and reification that took the place of both political engagement and ethics. We now have a language of ethics, but little meaning to the term. Distinguished historian and intellectual Tony Judt recently remarked as well that particularly troubling today is that public affairs are considered in economic terms rather than moral or ethical terms that would better serve the public good.[7]

## NOTES

[1] Gerd-Rainer Horn, Review of Julian Bourq, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* in *Le Movement social*, 228(July-September 2009): 183-184.

[2] Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004) and Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3] Michael Kelly, *The Cultural and Intellectual Rebuilding of France after the Second World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 127.

[4] Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution. The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 33.

[5] Jacques Rupnik, "The Year of Two Springs," *Eurozine*, eurozine.com, 18 May 2008.

[6] Tom McDonough, *"The Beautiful Language of My Century": Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2007).

[7] See the *Europe NYC* newsletter (November 2009) for a summary of Tony Judt's lecture on "What is Living and What is Dead in Social Democracy," 19 October 2009.

Rosemary Wakeman  
Fordham University  
rwakeman@fordham.edu

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