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**Simon Ridley and Paolo Stuppia**

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**Activation of student protest: reaction, repression and memory at Nanterre University, Paris 1968-2018**

**Summary**

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of May '68, probably the most important and controversial French social movement of the twentieth century, was bound to be conflictual in a context of ongoing neoliberal university reform. This was especially so given Nanterre University's powerful symbolic status as the site that sparked the 1968 student protest. While the State and university administration prepared to celebrate a 'cultural revolution,' students were concerned about a new 'reform', President Macron's *Loi d'Orientation et de Réussite des Étudiants* (Law of Orientation and Student Success) designed to allow universities to set caps on enrolments and make university entrance selective. This chapter asks how students, in 2018 at Nanterre University, Paris, called upon their collective memory to activate struggle. How were commemorations of 1968 used both by student activists and university administration to activate and repress student protest? Taking a socio-anthropological insider perspective combined with analysis of offline and online materials, we examine how contemporary university managers have long sought to clean the campus of the remains of '68, whilst also capitalising on the legacy of this protest in order to attract students in the context of an increasingly competitive 'university market'. Student activists had their own agenda, seeking to challenge administrative ceremonies and neoliberal reform. When riot police came onto the campus, mass protest erupted, allowing activists to claim themselves as the "continutors of '68".

**Authors' biography**

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## **Introduction**

“*Commémorer c’est enterrer!*” (“to commemorate is to bury”!) was a popular slogan in March 1968 when a group of 142 students occupied the top floor of the administration building at Nanterre University in the western suburbs of Paris, creating the *Mouvement du 22 Mars (Movement of 22 March)*. Soon after, the university was closed by Pierre Grappin, the university Dean, and the French student movement erupted.

The famous *Mai 68* (May 68) saw massive student riots and the biggest general strike in the history of France. The movement has since become a controversial myth: conservatives have not stopped trying to liquidate the movement’s afterlives (Ross 2002), so much so that the heritage of ‘68 was a centrepiece during the debates leading up to the French presidential election in 2007 (Riot-Sarcey and Aprile 2008). Whereas conservative neoliberals called for the “death of 68”, left leaning neoliberals focused on an interpretation that crowned ‘68 as a “cultural revolution”. Clearly, commemorations and eulogies are powerful political tools (Abélès 1989).

Fifty years after the May ‘68 uprisings, the political context of the modern university has changed worldwide. The university has increasingly become a key part of the Military-Industrial-Academic complex (Leslie 1993; Giroux 2007) and plays a crucial role in the enactment of the neoliberal agenda (Dardot and Laval 2010; Pickard 2014). Academic marketplace values such as competitiveness, individualism, and the privatisation of higher education, have been reinforced. Furthermore, student debt and increasing fees have transformed the working conditions of administrators, faculty, scholars, staff, and students. The international unmaking of the public university has been a long drawn-out process (Newfield 2008). Opposition movements to this neoliberal process have existed worldwide, such as in Australia, Chile, England, France and Quebec, but have known only few significant victories. However, one may also argue that this resistance has helped foster a generation of young people opposed to neoliberal capitalism demanding a university that is free from market imperatives (ACIDES 2015).

In France, successive governments have been implementing increasingly neoliberal policies on higher education. From the beginning of the Bologna process in 1998, ostensibly

involving a series of European university standardisation imperatives (Charle and Soulié 2007), to the *Loi d’Orientation et de Réussite des Étudiants*, neoliberal reforms have aroused regular student protests. In the meantime, structures of activism have changed. We can mention for example the spread of new online political action and cultures (Bessant 2014). The year 2018 was marked by mass student protests in the French universities. The **recent reform**, enacted in Parliament on 19 December 2017, created a new system of access to higher education. Historically, the French Education Code had specified that any person holding a baccalaureate (the high-school graduation qualification) would be free to register in the university of their choice.

The new law introduced a competitive process for enrolling students called *Parcoursup*, and was criticised by many staff, faculty, students, and their unions, due to its discriminatory effects and heightened levels of social selection. **As Fanny Bugeja-Bloch and Marie-Paule Couto (2018) have shown, young women from working class backgrounds are particularly affected in a negative way.**

At Nanterre University, the movement against this reform was active until students encountered several instances of police repression. Those policing interventions contributed to the activation of student protest.

The local context is important: in 2018 the university administration had decided to dedicate the academic year to the fiftieth anniversary of May 68 and to thereby capitalise on the neoliberal interpretation of ‘68 as a “cultural revolution.” However, the symbolism of police entering the campus in 2018 to quash the movement, as it had done in the sixties, highlighted the significant contradictions in how the “myth of 68” was being interpreted by the university senior management.

Taking an insider student-teacher perspective, in this chapter, we first contextualise student protests at Nanterre University against the backdrop of the creation of the institution in the 1960s. We then turn our attention to antagonist uses of memory by the university administration and by students in 2018. Finally, we demonstrate how repression by both the State and university administration was a key element in sparking protest against the new law.

### **An insider perspective**

While we write now as scholars, we worked in student movements (Stuppia 2014; Ridley 2019) and as teachers at Nanterre university during the 2018 protest. This first-hand experience gave us unique insight that informs the socio-anthropological perspective we offer in this chapter.

This insider perspective provided privileged access to a rich variety of sources gathered from observation, participation and autoethnographic experiences, to material gained from interviews with students and faculty. We also collected relevant newspaper articles, thirty leaflets covering every single call for student general assemblies, posters, and documents gathered during the movement. Dozens of memes, photographs and videos, mainly extracted from ten Facebook groups and pages, three twitter accounts, and the university's official communication, completed the paper trail of the 2018 movement.

Our description of events shows the importance and impact of recent student protests, challenging the claim that students are apolitical and apathetic (Bessant and Pickard 2018). In France, while much has been written about university reforms since the sixties, today, few researchers focus on contemporary student protests and fewer still take an ethnographic approach.

Moreover, according to historians Jean-Phillippe Legois and Jean-Louis Violeau, there is a nostalgic narrative in the analysis of French student movements that systematically refers to '68 as the unsurpassable radical model (Legois and Violeau 2007, 212). This nostalgia of radicality is important and Legois and Violeau criticise its effects. Indeed, as we recalled in the first lines of this chapter, May '68 is the most controversial social movement of French recent history. Significantly, it has also become a battleground over a "memory war" (Blanchard and Veyrat-Masson 2008).

This chapter asks whether, and if so, how students called upon their collective memory of May '68 to activate protest at Nanterre University. We seek to understand how May '68 was used by students in their reaction to neoliberal inspired reform of the university. What is this "spirit of 68" invoked during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and how may it be called upon in different political and symbolical ways?

### **In search of identity at Nanterre University**

Nanterre University had a personality split ever since its inception in the early sixties. The campus was built on an old military base in the locality of “*la Folie*”, stuck between slums – the “*bidonvilles*” – and what would soon become continental Europe’s largest business district: La Défense.

First imagined by the French government as an annex of the Sorbonne University to help mitigate its overcrowding, the Nanterre campus was originally composed of a separate arts faculty and a law faculty. The first buildings were established in less than a year, and minimal funds were allocated to ensure a quality of life for students because of unexpected costs (Kerhuel 2016). Studying on a building site led students to compare the new university to the barren lands of the far-west, a pun on the location of Nanterre, west of Paris and in the middle of a huge wasteland. Furthermore, the university was built for commuter students, with a direct train to central Paris.

The first years on campus were utopian for faculty that sought to show how they could be an autonomous institution, and free from the control of their Sorbonne masters. The heads of faculty saw themselves as demigods in a new realm (Grappin 1993), and pioneers on a new frontier. However, the optimism soon faded as the huge influx of students meant difficult working conditions for everyone. In 1966, staff and faculty unions were already calling for strikes, and students were also showing signs of unrest. On 21 March 1967, students protested about gendered discrimination in the women’s halls of residence. They decided to occupy the place. In response, the first presence of police forces on campus was in the early hours of 22 March 1967, with the intention to put an end to the student occupation. Students left peacefully, but rumours of a blacklisted students spread. Sociologist Henri Lefebvre sided with students and claimed the existence of the blacklist. His ideas, close to those of the leftist and anarchist Situationist movement (Pas 2008; Marcolini 2012), were influential for a small radical activist group called the *Enragés de Nanterre* (Viénet 1968). The following year started with student and staff strikes: about four hundred people gathered in a general assembly in November 1967, opposing the Fouchet reform that sought to introduce selection at the entry of the university.

The international context during the late 1960’s (characterised by civil rights movements, collective action directed towards decolonisation, anti-Vietnam war movement etc.) helped to spark the student movement at Nanterre. Xavier Langlade, a student from

Nanterre, and part of the Trotskyist organizations *Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire* and *Comité Vietnam national*, was arrested in central Paris on the evening of 20 March 1968 after having participated in an anti-imperialist action. The news of his arrest spread, and a support movement was launched at Nanterre University the next day. A student assembly met, and an occupation of the administrative tower was decided on for that very evening to ask for the release of their comrade. One hundred and forty-two students gathered on the top floor of the building, debated, sang some songs and wrote the “*manifeste des 142*”, a statement of their claims. The occupation lasted only a few hours, as students left peacefully before the arrival of the police. The *Mouvement du 22 Mars* was officially born (Duteuil 2017).

Hailed by historians for its role in introducing anti-colonial and anti-Vietnam war struggles into French politics and as the birth of student power, the manifesto penned that night of 1968 called for debates involving the academic community on 29 March. The themes of the debates included: anti-imperialism, capitalism, critical university, workers struggle, and the situation in Eastern countries. The university administration’s response was particularly strong. Student actions were defined as “terrorism” and a “counter-terrorist offensive” (Schnapp and Vidal-Naquet 1969, 134) consisting of university disciplinary hearings and the creation of a university-based police force, was proposed. Despite calling for the protection of student free speech, the administration decided to close the university to prevent further action. Regardless, on 29 March, four hundred students came to the closed university for a day of debates, typifying the “spirit of 68”.

Reduced to its minimum, 1968 is remembered for mass student protests in the Latin Quarter, central Paris, with marches and riots in May and June. Thus, not much is known of what happened at Nanterre University during those two months, as all eyes were turned to the barricades, the Sorbonne occupation involving student activists belonging to the *Enragés de Nanterre* and the *Mouvement du 22 mars*, and the workers’ general strike. The start of 1968-1969 academic year saw the multiplication of political groups build on the dynamics of the *Mouvement du 22 Mars*. Soon after, Nanterre University came to be a citadel – known as “*Nanterre la rouge*” (Nanterre the red) – for radical left activism.

The overcrowded facilities and building site environment on campus guaranteed plenty of local protest. Built with 12,000 students in mind, the population quickly increased to 20,000 in 1976, and to 27,000 in 1986 (in 2017, the university hosted 34,000 students). The



university also attracted many antagonist political organisations, and a black economy thrived around card tables and the sale of hashish. Violent confrontations sometimes broke out. By March 1970, riot police entered the campus called upon by the university Dean Paul Ricœur after fights between political organisations got out of hand. More than a hundred people were injured in a battle that lasted two days. The conflict sealed the universities reputation as a hotspot for activism so much so that on 9 March 1970, the magazine *Nouvel Obs* headlined “Should we burn Nanterre?”.

The traces of the 1960-1970s could still be seen on the walls in the form of graffiti until the mid-1980s when the campus was cleaned up and painted over. In her dissertation, Christine Bodeau documents how the university administration initiated what she calls a “clean ideology” (1986, 17). According to Bodeau, “the death of 68” was ordered by the university administration that worked tirelessly toward erasing all the movement’s legacy with the help of a major renovation program. Anything resembling what sociologist Everett Hughes called a “bastard institution” was dismantled.

The black-market spaces on campus were cleared, and specific areas were allocated for posters, destined to replace the collage of leaflets, graffiti’s and frescos. Bodeau asks, why were there no protest over these cleansing exercises?

As we have seen, space and memory of 1968 are two of the main subjects of student protests at Nanterre University. The attention put on everyday life and social uses of space may be analysed by the teachings of sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1981), who influenced generations of students and faculty. Even in the quietest years, where no significant protest was to be heard, political organizations recruited student activists by claiming the legacy of 68 and of “Nanterre the red”.

A new struggle, combining space and memory, erupted around a decade after Bodeau’s dissertation. Between 2000 and 2004 a new generation of students opposed the creation of a security force on campus as they feared it would become a repressive tool at the hands of administration. They also fought the installation of security cameras and the building of a wall designed to reduce open space for activism. When radical students acted and demolished part of this wall, one was arrested and sent to prison pending trial, sparking a wave of student indignation. The university administration sought to end conflict over the wall claiming it was built for environmental safety reasons.

In addition, more government neoliberal reforms aroused much agitation in 2003, 2006 and 2007. Then in 2008, the University changed its name from “*Paris X-Nanterre*” to “*Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense*,” in order to give the university a more corporate identity. This symbolic transformation aimed at rebranding the University was a failure. The reference to the business district was widely criticised by faculty and students alike.

The fiftieth anniversary of May ‘68 saw an opportunity for the University administration to change name again. 2018 saw “*Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense*” become “*Université Paris-Nanterre*” and a brand-new red logo with an exclamation mark was created. This time, the administration decided to combine both space and memory: famous patronyms were given to all the buildings that only had functional letters.

The 2018 commemorations of 1968 also saw a host of new “street art,” including a fresco reproduction of a collage by artist and alumni Yvan Messac on the wall spanning the E (now Ramnoux) and D (now Lefebvre) buildings. Lefebvre was not the only figure to be honoured by the changes. The first Dean, Pierre Grappin, remembered by activists as “*la matraque*” (Billy Club Grappin) for calling riot police in 1968, was chosen to rename the central administrative tower. This rebranding of the environment capitalised on the past to give a new “alternative” image of the University in order to attract students in a context of an increasing competitive university market.

Created at a time when the neoliberal was gaining traction and the traditional university model was being modernized to suit ‘the knowledge industry’ (Kerr 1963), Nanterre University is engaged in an ongoing struggle to find its identity.

### **Calling on the “spirit of 68”: neoliberal performance and student myth**

The 2017-2018 academic year opened under a new sign created by the administration to commemorate May ‘68. A massive canvas setup at the campus entry read: “*1968-2018 Prop/ositions*”, a significant play on words mixing “propose” and “dare” that was to be the official slogan for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

This sign aimed to promote the audacious “spirit of 68”, whose paternity was claimed by Jean-François Balaudé, the University President, during his welcome address to members of staff on 1 September 2017. A similar speech by Balaudé about the “spirit of 68”, streamed live on the university’s Facebook page, was given at the beginning of 2018. Again, Balaudé

explained that the fiftieth anniversary of 68 would resonate all over the world and that the institution was to capitalise on this international visibility. Declaring that “the lessons of 68 had been heard”, he asserted it is now time for the university to “claim, re-appropriate and reinvent the heritage of 68”.

Paradoxically, one of the main issues that students debated on 29 March 1968 was the administrative appropriation of their activism. Indeed, in the document that summarises the discussions that took place on the lawns of the closed university, they wrote: “all revolutionary contestation of power is expressed through oppositional creativity. The recuperation of this creativity by power itself is the negation of contestation and the negation of creativity itself” (Duteuil 2017: 235). Much graffiti found in the Sorbonne or the streets of Paris in May 1968 also explicitly mentioned the fear of misappropriation (Viénet 1968: 147).

In 2017/2018, the university administration decided its first celebration of the “spirit of 68” was to be a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds for eight famous street artists to paint a series of monumental murals. Thus, the project “*Sous le Street art, le Louvre*” – a pastiche of the most famous ‘68 slogan “Under the paving stones, there is a beach!” – was announced and publicized on the university website, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but only 139 people participated, raising little more than a third of the expected budget.

The artworks were inaugurated on 25 January 2018 for “*La nuit des idées*” (night of ideas), a cultural manifestation created by the *Institut Français*, a public industrial and commercial organisation that promotes France and francophone culture around the world. The hosting of this initiative was thought by the administration to promote the neoliberal interpretation of 1968 as a “cultural revolution”.

The theme for the 2018 “night of ideas” edition was to be “*l’imagination au pouvoir*” (All power to the imagination), another famous ‘68 slogan. As a leftist motto, it had been misappropriated and transformed into a publicity catchphrase.

The night of 25 January 2018, small troops of theatre students, orchestrated by the arts faculty and the university management, performed various sketches that exposed a series of stereotypes associated with the May movement all over campus. The celebrities chosen by the university administration leave no doubt as to the neoliberal interpretation: not one had a different interpretation of 1968 than that of the mainstream “cultural revolution”. Sociologist Jean-Pierre Le Goff, for example, was one of the main protagonists. His book, *Mai 68*:

*l'héritage impossible* (1998), criticised what he calls “cultural leftism” in a neoliberal analysis similar to what the far right and alt-right call “cultural Marxism”. It is significant that the university administration chose the most conservative interpretation possible.

The university’s position toward its own students during that night was also intriguing. Students were invited to a party at the *Maison de l’étudiant-e* (a new building meant to house student associations on campus), which was to take place at the very same time as official debates of the “night of ideas” started in the main lecture theatre. As some students reported, to be asked to go and party while the “adults” were having serious discussions felt like being asked to “go sit at the kiddies table”. Historian François Cusset analysed this strategy, showing that opposition between “adult debate” and “childish manifestations” is constantly used by conservative opponents of revolt, who refuse to treat student activists as serious political agents (Cusset 2008, 75).

The subject chosen for one panel of debates, “*imaginer le travail autrement*” (imagine work alternatively), would have been of interest to the undergraduates, many of whom struggle in underpaid work placements or in precarious “uberised” jobs. Furthermore, in 2016, students protested about the *Loi Travail*, a labour law reform that gave generous advantages to employers. In 2018, a student of Nanterre University was still in prison for actions committed during the 2016 movement: this point was one of the main issues raised by local student protest.

At the theatre where this debate was to take place, a group of four student activists were attempting a critique of the university administration. Their leaflet that they distributed, titled “1968-2018 : *La fac fête sa contestation*” (1968-2018: the University is celebrating its own contestation), pointed out the hypocrisy of the commemorations.<sup>1</sup>

Stopped at the entrance of the lecture theatre by campus security, the student group was accused by the guards of scrawling graffiti on one of the new murals. Consequently, the students were banned by the administration from entering the building and participating in the event.

Using preventative measures to restrict the freedom of speech of these protesting students and simultaneously claiming to reinvent the “spirit of 68” echoes back to the preventive closing of the university on 29 March 1968. When students protest on campus they

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<sup>1</sup> The full text may be found here: <https://paris-luttes.info/1-universite-de-nanterre-commemore-9434>.

are met with censorship, suppression or worse. Having banned real protesters from entering, the university administration could implement a premeditated performance: jumping onto the stage shouting famous 68 slogans such as “*Il est interdit d’interdire!*” (it is forbidden to forbid), art students chosen by the faculty performed an unoriginal re-enactment aimed at entertaining the audience.

Our observation of the night of ideas reveal how the university used the “cultural 68” to create a ‘Trojan horse’ for neoliberal subjectivation, cutting out rebellious and reflexive aspects of the past, and replacing free speech with free enterprise. However, the institution also allowed the development of an alternative narrative of ‘68. A symposium was organised by some professors, students and participants of the 1968 movement. Their objective was to search for the remaining “traces of the *Mouvement du 22 Mars*” as very little academic work has been carried out on this movement. This initiative refused the *Prop/ositions* label but found the support of some research laboratories that may oppose the university central administration in the name of academic freedom.

Anger was rising within universities since the new reform and the *Parcoursup* algorithm were announced in November 2017. Just like fifty years before, faculty and students protested the university reform cutting costs and implementing selection at the entry of the university. The symbolic date 22 March 2018 was chosen by public sector unions for a national walkout against the flood of reforms orchestrated by Emmanuel Macron.

Nanterre University administrators, however, decided to maintain its programme for a long day of celebrations of ‘68 called “*printemps des utopies et des libertés*” (spring of freedom and utopias), including a free breakfast. That morning, a group of students decided to protest about the event and called out what they saw as disgraceful and hypocritical commemorations.

Graffiti appeared everywhere on campus spreading the slogan “*commémorations d’hypocrites*” (hypocrites’ commemorations). The “breakfast open to all”, at which the university president was to address the public, was stormed by a couple of hundred students demanding that the university refuse to implement the new reform<sup>2</sup>. A series of other issues were also raised such as support for the student still incarcerated since 2016, solidarity for

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<sup>2</sup> A video of this event may be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RReuvWnUXb0>.

undocumented students, and institutional budgets. Specifically, protestors stated that they “do not wish to commemorate, but to continue May 68”.

**Student protest and live activation of memories: “*Ils commémorent, on continue*” (they commemorate, we continue)**

The long-term memory of protest was bound to be stirred by students during the fiftieth anniversary of ‘68 in a context of ongoing neoliberal university reform. However, it was not the opportunity hoped for by some commemorations, but rather a series of repressive episodes by the State and the university administration that sparked mass student protests.

On the evening of 22 March 2018, at Montpellier University in the south of France, students occupied a lecture theatre. In the middle of the night, a group of masked men armed with clubs and wooden planks entered the university and violently evicted the protestors. As videos taken with mobile phones were released to the press prompting hundreds of thousands of views, outrage grew and the student movement galvanized. The following Monday, Tolbiac University in Paris was occupied. It became the “*Commune libre de Tolbiac*”, a hub for student protest.

For its symbolic value and because of its ease of access, Nanterre University was chosen as the location for a national student strike coordination on the weekend of the 7 and 8 of April 2018. Balaudé, the University president, had not allowed for the event to take place on campus, claiming it would attract people that had no business protesting university reform. Fearing there would be an occupation such as the one that took place at Tolbiac University, Balaudé requested that riot police be stationed nearby, ready to clear the university of any protestors.

Disregarding the ban, the **national student strike coordination** was maintained as many students had come from all around France to Nanterre, where they were to meet in a lecture theatre and discuss how to oppose the reform for two days and one night. No trouble was reported during the **coordination**, and Balaudé even tweeted his satisfaction, congratulating himself for holding an event he banned. But when security guards arrived on campus on Monday morning, they realised that a small group of students had begun an occupation of a Lecture hall, requesting the reform be withdrawn.

The riot police were immediately called upon by Balaudé. Upon seeing the heavily armoured **Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (CRS)** entering campus, occupiers took to the roofs in a defensive move. The raucous caused by the intervention of the riot police on campus meant the word spread fast: an assembly gathered as several hundred students wanted to discuss the standoff.

However, the riot police were still on campus. With their backs to the wall in room E02 where they were holding their assembly, students were evicted by the police with the use of force. Seven students were arrested that day and would spend the night in a police cell.

Many students, faculty and staff were shocked. The repression caused huge levels of outrage as homemade videos of the event were live streamed on Internet. Instantly, “*Sauvons l’université!*”, an association created in 2007, along with the main trade union in the education sector union “*Fédération Syndicale Unitaire*”, called for a strike against the reform and against the police entering campus. Together they published a statement in reference to 68, titled “*Commémorer c’est enterrer!*”.<sup>3</sup> It highlights the hypocrisy of the administration accused of eulogizing the “spirit of 68” whilst stifling faculty dissent and muzzling student protest.

The police entering Nanterre University on the anniversary of 68 made national headlines. The next day, Tuesday 10 April 2018, another assembly was called upon by students. More than 1,800 students gathered at Nanterre University to protest about the reform, a turnout ten times the size of the **national student strike coordination** that took place the previous weekend.

Tensions were strong as several thousand students came together to discuss police repression on campus, university reform, and modes of action to be used for protest. Students voted to block the university – a strategy that involved blocking access to building’s with tables and chairs (Geay, 2009) – even though exam sessions were approaching.

Disagreement about this strategy among students surfaced rapidly. Radicals argued that to block exams is to free time for social struggle, whereas more conservative students were more concerned about their individual future and accused radicals of impeding on their freedom to pass exams. The administration focused on those differences and started a mailing

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<sup>3</sup> The statement may be found here: <http://www.sauvonsluniversite.com/spip.php?article8235>.

campaign against the blocking of the university. However, the university was blocked by students for the next two months..

Faculty also gathered in their own assemblies and voted in support of protesting students. But there was also much dissensus amongst members of faculty as the reform and its implementation had already caused chaos within various departments. The main dynamism tended to rest on Ph.D. candidates (also students). A group calling themselves the “68+ *de Nanterre*” went on strike, refusing to correct exam papers, and attempted to publicise their struggle on militant networks where they posted their manifesto. They created a Twitter account and a Facebook group called “@68deNanterre” that allowed for a little over 400 people to follow the protests and various activities that were held all over France.

As the struggle went on, the undergraduates took a more radical approach. They voted for the blocking of the university and for the occupation of the E building. The room from which the riot police had dragged students out of on 9 April 2018 was used as the central space for the struggle on campus.

At first, between 20 and 50 people occupied the building day and night. Various organisations installed everything needed to sustain the physical needs of the protesters. Stocks of rice and pasta, pots and pans, various cookers and even a fridge were set up in the room. It was clear that students had to learn to live together from scratch.

For some, questions related to cleanliness, alcohol and drug consumption, class, race, and gender relations, started to take up more and more time and space in a schedule that was already loaded with many alternative classes and workshops. Furthermore, students were also weary of rumoured attacks by far-right militias. As part of the occupation struggled with the creation and defence of an alternative society within the temporary autonomous zone, another part was more concerned with the festive dimension that ineluctably accompanies any occupation. A third part was mainly concerned with spreading the movement with the use of a variety of communication techniques.

As we mentioned in the first part of this chapter, Trotskyist organisations and their various offshoots have been involved in every struggle on the Nanterre campus. Their vision of revolutionary communism leads them to put much more emphasis on student assemblies, so much so, that they proved instrumental in setting the agenda for protest and the informal norms (such as the time allowed for every single student’ intervention during the debates) that



regulate the general assemblies at Nanterre University. They rely heavily on what they see as democratic participation, synonymous with voting during the assemblies. They also decorate the campus with posters, and often hand out leaflets that invoke the myth of '68, acting out the living memory on campus. These students often attempt to mirror the activism of '68 to lay claim to the movement's legacy.

Today's Trotskyists students are also very active on social media. In 2016, they created a Facebook group named *Nanterre en lutte contre la Loi Travail et son monde* to publicise their role in the struggle against the labour reform. In 2017-2018, its name was changed to *Nanterre VNR en lutte* and a series of 34 pedagogical videos were posted explaining why they were opposing the **new** reform. The video with the greatest number of views (103,000) is an amateur video of the police entering the campus on 9 April 2018. The group has more than 6,700 followers, and mainly posts news, notices, videos, and pictures of protest.

By opposition, anarchists and autonomous students preferred to focus on the occupation of the E building. There, the organisation does not so much rest on votes, but on spontaneous initiatives and discussions attempting to reach a consensus. Everyday life needs to be coordinated, which means asking where people can eat, sleep, debate, or party. It was clearly inspired by *Nuit Debout* – the occupation of *Place de la République* in central Paris (and elsewhere) during the movement against the labour reform of 2016 reproducing the *Occupy* and *Indignados* models (see Pickard and Bessant 2018). At Nanterre, students organised in forms they call “*AG pétale*”: small groups that discuss specific issues and then report back to the main body of protesters with their findings and decisions. And, just as they had done fifty years earlier, students were led to question the misappropriation of their creative contestation by the university administration.

Occupiers decided that taking photographs of the occupation would not be permitted. However, they authorised an Anthropology undergraduate to take video footage, only if the film would remain sealed for five years to prevent incriminating pictures of protesters. A student also conducted a series of oral history interviews that were to be conserved by an institution independent to the university.

Leaflets and fanzines were printed, and disposed of on a press table at the occupation's entrance. Many more digitized leaflets, texts and references, including those of the *Mouvement du 22 Mars* were to be found in a Dropbox that could be accessed on the

“*Nanterre sur les toits*” Facebook page. With 1,068 followers, this was the main online hub for the occupation. Here, nearly all the pictures posted are memes, and, in any pictures of students, faces were covered with a cut-out of Balaudé’s face. The transgressive “*détournement*” (Gervereau 1991), the hijacking of the aesthetics of liberal culture, is continued with the tools of information technology.

A lot of Situationist-inspired graffiti also appeared, and some famous images and slogans of 68 were used as memorial references to counter-frame the cultural dimension such as a picture of Balaudé’s face (instead Charles de Gaulle’s profile) with the caption “*la chienlit c’est lui*” (he is the havoc), mimicking a famous 1968 poster.

## **Conclusion**

When students protested at Nanterre University in 2018, they were bound to summon up the ghosts of May 1968. Icons were conjured up and powerful images were drawn on by activists and administration alike. Despite the attempts by the administration to “clean” the university of all the physical traces of the sixties and to reinforce the neoliberal “spirit of 68”, there has been a continuous deployment of counter-memories that may even be reactivated by institutional recuperation or repression. As ‘68 at Nanterre University was deficient in its historicization, free reign has been given for social memory allowing for various appropriations (Zancarini-Fournel 1995). The presence of Henri Lefebvre, and his theories on the production and social use of space as well as everyday life, may still be felt today: they constitute antagonistic practice in a struggle for identity.

The social memories of ‘68 are difficult to grasp. They are complex tools used both by activists to draw attention to their conflict against the neoliberal university, and by the university administration to capitalize on student protest of the past whilst curbing current movements. In 2018, as the movement progressed and was met with repression, memorial frames were increasingly drawn upon, especially as symbolic dates recur. Activist technologies at the service of mobilization were massively affected by references to 1968, and this may be seen in the graffiti, posters, leaflets, memes, tweets and online posts.

The leaflets are the most significant reflection of this opportune use of the specific local situation. According to our collection, there is no mention of ‘68 in the first papers distributed by students between September 2017 and mid-February 2018 on the Nanterre campus. The

only references to the past is the 2016 repression, with the case of an incarcerated student, in one leaflet, and the “victory” of a youth movement of 2006 against a precarious contract in another.

Allusions to famous slogans, such as “*sois jeune et tais-toi*” (be young and be silent) changed to “*sois start-up nation et tais-toi*” (be a start-up nation and be silent) appeared at the end of the month of February and in March, but mainly failed to activate student protest. However, after repression and police violence, these references became omnipresent and a mass student movement erupted. The veterans of the *Mouvement du 22 Mars* also wrote a leaflet hijacking the university commemorations. Their statement, titled “*prop/osons les CRS*” (propose or dare the CRS) criticised the violent disruption of the general assembly and the cynical political appropriation of the memory of student protest by the university administration.

The leaflet also established a comparison between Balaudé and “Billy Club Grappin” that was published on social media using the French universal masculine form. Occupiers instantly transformed the text to a masculine and feminine inclusive form, highlighting the fast-paced gender reflexive aspects of contemporary digital activism in France. However, it is paradoxical that the movement was largely ended when the university set up an online consultation, asking whether further exams should be blocked: “Yes” or “No”? The “No” vote prevailed. Student protest is an important part of Nanterre University’s identity. However, students and administration struggle over antagonist memories and interpretations of the past in an intricate environment where repression is sure to reactivate both past and present student protest.

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