May '68

Whittaker, Vicki, Whittaker, Presses de la Fondation Nationale de Sciences Politiques, Pagis, Julie

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Whittaker, Vicki, et al.  
May '68: Shaping Political Generations.  
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.  
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/66525.

For additional information about this book  
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66525

For content related to this chapter  
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2361068
The long-term consequences of May ’68

After having the feeling that everything had opened up, and that anything was possible, you can’t accept that the door can just close again, you can’t go back to how it was before, so you stick your foot in the door, to stop it closing.

Pierre, born in 1947, son of blue-collar Communists

By June 1968 the collective euphoria had waned, the political crisis was over and the social barriers had been resurrected. But what had become of the activists? To what extent had the events of May-June destabilised those who participated, from the interested bystanders, to the revolutionaries who fought to ensure that nothing would ever be the same again? How did these participants attempt to bring about the promised utopia? Were their visions of the world and of themselves marked by the events? In the wake of the events, the ’68ers interviewed here were faced with difficulties linked to their need to find a place in a society they had hoped to see crumble, their search for a social role not among those they had previously decried, and their desire to preserve their personal and political integrity without becoming permanently marginalised.

From the end of the 1970s in the United States, various studies attempted to respond to the question of what had become of the student protestors,¹ as the social movements of the 60s were in sharp decline and these “former” activists were now mostly working and old enough to start families. These are primarily quantitative studies which converge on the persistence of political behaviour specific to the study population of former activists, compared to the non-activist population. They found “former activists to be more likely than nonactivists to define themselves as politically radical, espouse more leftist political attitudes [...] and remain active in movement politics” (McAdam, 1988, p. 213). However, with just a few exceptions (McAdam 1988; Whalen and Flacks, 1989), these studies have difficulty proposing a sophisticated sociological interpretation of these biographical consequences. Remaining at a very general level, they are unable to attribute them to either the social characteristics of the former activists, nor to forms of participation in a political event. In other words, they fail to identify intragenerational differences.

¹ For an overview of the literature on the biographical consequences of activism see Fillieule (2005, p. 31-39), and for the United States see Mc Adam (1999).
This chapter continues the reflection on the formation of generations and questions the long-term biographical consequences of May '68. Did the events really re-deal the cards of social destiny? Or were future paths merely the reflection of prior divergences? In order to disentangle generation effects from cohort effects and life cycle effects (Kessler and Masson, 1985, p. 285-321), we will compare the political, personal and familial trajectories of these interviewees. Which of them continued with activism, and in which political organisations were they active? How did those who had presented themselves as revolutionaries negotiate their “exit” from these roles, at a time when involvement in the extreme left was seen in a very negative light? How did they manage to reconcile the end of their youth (understood as a period of “professional and conjugal uncertainty,” Mauger, 1995, p. 35), and the maintenance of time-consuming activist activities? What became of their activism as they aged (Willemez, 2004)? How were they able to convert (or not) their dispositions for activism into other spheres of social life, particularly personal or professional? At what cost? Political disengagement may have very different costs depending on the “degree of social legitimacy of the defection and the existence of possible alternatives” (Fillieule, 2005, p. 20), and depending on evolutions in professional and family life. It is therefore necessary to conjointly consider the effects of activism on different life spheres, to shed light on their possible complementarities or antagonisms.

This chapter takes a statistical approach in order to provide elements of response to these questions and reveal the collective profiles of former '68ers. The diversity of '68ers’ trajectories after the events will be firstly statistically objectified by the construction of a social space of the biographical consequences (political, professional and personal) of participation in May ‘68. The second part of the chapter will be dedicated to demonstrating the existence of specific effects of participation in the events, on the destinies of '68ers.

The social space of '68ers’ destinies

The political event as a trigger for activism

Only 44% of interviewees² had experiences of activism before May '68, yet 70% of them said they continued their activism in the years that followed.

² Remembering that the corpus is made up of 182 interviewees.
This difference is an initial, rudimentary way of underlining the role of the events as a catalyst for activism.

However, these figures mask certain differences between respondents – depending on their prior experiences of activism in particular. 83% of those who were activists before May ’68 continued as activists afterwards, compared to just 54% of those who had no experience of activism before the events. Another difference lies in the intensity of participation in the events (see Figure 4 below).

Although they may appear obvious, these results obscure a dual reality. Indeed, for first-time activists the intensity of participation in the events is very closely correlated to the probability of continuing their activism in the months and years that followed, whereas this is much less the case for the other activists (see Figure 5).

Although this seems self-evident, it is very important to bear in mind in order to avoid interpretations relying on overly mechanistic generalisations on the socialising effects of the events. In other words, it is impossible to

---

3 I constructed a variable to measure intensity of involvement based on the questions dealing with frequency of participation: in demonstrations, in general assemblies during May ’68, as well as in a dozen other activities (political meetings, billposting, confrontations with police, occupation of universities, factories etc.). A number of points are attributed to each category of the questions, in order to obtain a numeric variable, which is then recoded into four new levels.
understand what activism produces without also simultaneously studying what produces activism.

**Trajectories inflected by participation in May ’68**

Did those who had never participated in activism before May ’68 go on to launch new battles in the years that followed? Or did they join pre-existing organisations? What did their elder comrades, some with nearly ten years of activist experience, go on to do? In order to characterise the forms of activism pursued in the period between 1968 and 1974, the responses to the open-ended question on militant activities after May ’68 were recoded (see Box 3).

**Box 3  Coding types of activism after May ’68**

Among those who continued with activism after the events of May-June 1968, there are five levels of responses that correspond to the main militant activities:

- “Far-left” concerns activists involved in anarchist, Trotskyist, and Maoist organisations (levels regrouped because their small sample size rendered quantitative analysis impossible).

---

4 Doug McAdam for example shows that the former activists in the Freedom Summer participated in the emergence of the student movements of the 1970s, the fight against the Vietnam War, and feminist movements.
Confining the study of the effects of participation in May-June 1968 to the political sphere would mean forgetting the way politics is embedded in familial and personal environments. Yet these are privileged sites for the reconversion of dispositions for protest (Tissot, Gaubert and Lechien, 2006), particularly at a time when the cost of activism in far-left organisations was increasing due to the progressive devaluing of these organisations. In order to address the need for social re-positioning, which became increasingly apparent during the 1970s, whilst still remaining faithful to previous engagements, former activists deployed different strategies of “symbolic manipulation of the future” (Boltanski, Bourdieu and de Saint-Martin, 1973). These strategies aim to extend the opening in the realm of possibilities into the professional sphere.

In response to the question of whether May ’68 had had an impact on their professional trajectories,6 42% of interviewees responded in the affirmative, 20% said it had a “slight impact, and 28% responded in the negative.7 An

5 The occupation of the Lip watch factory between 1973-1974 was an important event in the history of French industrial action. At its height, it mobilised tens of thousands of people around France.

6 The question was formulated as follows: “Did the events of 1968 have an impact on your professional trajectory? 1. Yes; 2. A slight impact; 3. No. If yes, what did this impact consist of?”

7 Age and social origin are the two main variables correlated with a negative answer (statistically significant). The older interviewees in the corpus and those from the working classes said they experienced fewer professional effects. This can be explained by the social conditions of professional conversion – the more advanced one is in one’s career, the greater the cost of
initial tabulation of their responses to the open-ended question (“If so, what did this impact consist of?”) allows us to list the different effects of activism on the professional sphere: from dissatisfaction with one’s work, to dropping out of school to become a full-time activist, but also things like reinventing or redefining professions suited to protest aspirations, returning to full-time study or the critical renewal of certain professions (through unionism in particular). The statistical analysis of this textual data, allows us to identify four main forms by which dispositions for protest can be reconverted into the professional sphere (summarised in Figure 6 below):

**Figure 6  Reconversions of dispositions for protest into the professional sphere**

The four main kinds of professional effects of activism will be outlined once the social space of the destinies of these ’68ers has been constructed. Factorial analysis was used to do this (see Figure 7 below). The first variables integrated relate to what happened prior to the events, as well as during the events themselves: sex, age, social origin, occupation in May ’68 (student/worker), prior experiences of activism (or not), and intensity of participation in the events. A second group of variables reflects the main biographical consequences of activism revealed previously:

a career change. Moreover, the possession of symbolic instruments – such as diplomas and qualifications – allowing one greater mastery over the redefinition of one’s professional trajectory, is dependent on social factors.
The types of activism for the period between 1968-1974, the participation in feminist movements, the fight against the extension of the military base in Larzac (as markers of political effects);

The shift (none, slight, or major) in professional trajectories (as a marker of professional effects);

The experience of living in communes, use of psychoanalysis, declared impact of May ’68 on conjugal relationships, on bodily hexis, and on everyday life (as markers of personal effects).

In addition, a number of illustrative variables were also added: having gone “back-to-the-land;” having been an établi; having been in an “open” relationship (see “sexual liberation”); current activism; vote in the first round of 2002 presidential elections; feeling of generational belonging; and the period in which the interviewees see their political ideas as having stabilised.

The factorial plane can be read as the social space of the futures of the ’68ers interviewed, structured around two axes (see Figure 7). Two groups are clearly opposed to each other on the x-axis. On the left of the axis we have a population that is predominantly older, male, working-class, who were working in 1968, and who were activists in institutional political organisations after the events. On the right-hand side we see a younger, female population, who were students in 1968 and who joined less institutionalised forms of activism after 1968. The y-axis distinguishes the interviewees according to their experience of activism. At the top of the plane are those who were not militant before 1968, who were not very involved in the events, and who did not continue with activism afterwards. At the bottom are those who had experience in activism prior to 1968 and who took an active role in the events.

8 The interviewees are divided between the six following levels: “no activism” (33%), “unionism” (17%), “extreme-left” (16%), “feminism” (7%) “non-institutional activism” (18%), “PC/PSU” (9%).

9 These refer to subjective perceptions of the effects of May ’68 on professional trajectories, which is a real limit to this indicator. However, it seemed preferable to include this professional dimension in the statistical analysis than not, even if the indicator is imperfect.

10 In order to distinguish them from the active variables, the illustrative variables are underlined in the figure. They do not contribute to the structure of the factorial plane.

11 See note 86, Chapter 1 for a detailed presentation of this movement in which young bourgeois students went to work in factories.

12 Coded from the question “Do you feel like you belong to ”a generation ’68?”

13 The first axis represents 14% of the total inertia of the point cloud and the second 12.5%. Because the number of active levels is high, the cumulated percentage of the two first axes is quite sufficient.
Figure 7: The social space of '68ers' destinies

- Non-militant (1968-1974)
- Moderate active participation in 1968
- Born after 1948
- PC/PSU (1968-1974)

Illustrative variables underlined:
-François
- Eugène
- Anne
- Marinette
- Mathilde
- Monique

Active variables not underlined:
- Pierre
- Pieyre
- Voted Greens in 2002
- Voted left in 2002
- Voted extreme left in 2002
- Paul
- Gilles
- Larzac

Political ideas set after 1968:
- Marinette
- Mathilde
- Monique

No influence of 68 on everyday life:
- Non-militant before 1968
- No feminism
- Did not vote in 2002

Strong influence of 68 on relationships:
- Upper classes
- Women
- Far-left (1968-1974)
- Larzac

No influence of 68 on relationships:
- No feeling of generational belonging
- No influence of '68 on relationships

Political ideas formed during 1968:
- Middle classes
- Women
- Far-left (1968-1974)
- Larzac

Feeling of generational belonging:
- Non-militant before 1968
- No feminism
- Did not vote in 2002

Socialisation by awareness-raising and counterculture:
- Student in 1968
- Back-to-the-land

Strong influence of 68 on hexis:
- Non-institutional activist (1968-1974)
- Feminism

Separation due to '68:
- Non-militant today
- No feminism
- Voted right in 2002
- Voted extreme left in 2002

Sexual liberation:
- François
- Eugène
- Voted left in 2002
- Voted extreme left in 2002

Feminism:
- Marinette
- Mathilde
- Monique
- Voted left in 2002
- Voted extreme left in 2002

Radicalisation and far left activism:
- François
- Eugène
- Voted left in 2002
- Voted extreme left in 2002

Moderate active participation in 1968:
- Non-militant before 1968
- Marinette
- Born after 1948

Active participation in 1968:
- Marinette
- Mathilde
- Monique
- Voted left in 2002
- Voted extreme left in 2002

No biographical effects of May 1968:
- Non-militant today
- No feminism
- Voted right in 2002

Factors:
- Factor 1
- Factor 2

Illustrative variables:
- No biographical effects of May 1968
- No influence of 68 on everyday life
- No generation feeling

Active variables:
- Moderate active participation in 1968
- Born after 1948
- Political ideas set after 1968
- Socialisation by awareness-raising and counterculture
We can then distinguish several sub-groups among the interviewees, whose positions are spatially close and characterised by similar biographical consequences of activism. The first group, in the upper left quadrant is characterised by a lack of clear effects from their participation in May ’68. This lack of effects must be seen in light of the main characteristics of this group: a relative lack of militant resources, only moderate involvement in May ’68, being older and employed – rather than students – at the time. This population in fact functions as a kind of control group: the very weak exposure to the event corresponds to the relative absence of biographical consequences and the lack of a feeling of generational belonging.14

A second collective profile (on the lower left of the plane) covers a predominantly male population, from working-class backgrounds, characterised by the professional impacts of May ’68 (see “Professional effects +”), the lack of personal effects, as well as a certain confirmation and durability of previous militant activities. Older than the other interviewees, those in this group became activists well before 1968, and as a result, their political interpretation of the world was already established before then (see “Political ideas set before 1968”) and was unlikely to be radically transformed by the events. They continued to be active within institutionalised political organisations (see “PCU/PSU 1968-1974”) after May ’68. For these interviewees, the events contributed to their political socialisation by maintenance of their prior dispositions for activism, similar to what we saw with Agnès (see Chapter 2). On a professional level, they had already been in the workforce for a number of years, but they undertook a critical redefinition of their professions in light of the events. In particular, this sub-group includes teachers from working-class backgrounds who relate the transformations they experienced in their ways of teaching. More broadly, the importation of dispositions for protest into the professional sphere led to the subversion of professional relations (rejection of arbitrary authority, refusal of hierarchy, collective leadership, workers’ self-management etc.).

A third sub-group, in the lower right-hand quadrant, on the contrary experienced significant political consequences (activism in far-left organisations, becoming établis, and participation in the demonstrations in the Larzac etc.), as well as profound professional and personal effects. Here we find interviewees of both sexes, who were aged between 20 and 24 during the events. In 1968, they were mostly students and participated actively in the

---

14 For this group, enrolling one’s children in an experimental school is not linked to participation in May ’68 but to the school district (often the parents were not aware of the experimental nature of the school).
events, before becoming the incarnation of political leftism (Mauger, 1999) in the 1970s. For this group, the events played a role of political socialisation by radicalisation (for actors who were already politicised on the far left), or even socialisation by conversion for first-time activists. The substantial political effects were also accompanied by private and professional effects, due to the biographical availability of the population concerned. Younger than the previous groups, predominantly students and from a more privileged social background, this group was more exposed to the event that the previous one. For members of this group, the professional impact of May ’68 takes the form of collective criticism of the relations of production, and they either became union activists or made activism their profession. Thus, Gérard, who we discussed in the previous chapter, became a paid party organiser with the Trotskyist LCR immediately after the events, and remained there for more than fifteen years. Others changed careers, moving into the social sector or into sociocultural events, or journalism, or research in the social sciences. By working alongside dominated groups (young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, delinquents, disabled people, people with mental illness etc.) their professions became a means for activism. The investment of these interviewees from the middle classes in professional areas that were relatively undetermined, where relations between titles and positions were still not clearly codified, enabled them to reconcile their parental mandates for upward social mobility and loyalty to activism. François’ response regarding the impact of May ’68 on his professional trajectory – “define my job, my profession: revolution through popular education” – reflects these strategies of inventing new social positions (Bourdieu, 1978), which are adapted both to competences and to political aspirations. One’s profession becomes a tool for activism: you work (in the professional sense) to change the world.15

The final sub-group, situated on the right of the factorial plane is characterised by the predominance of professional and private effects, combined with non-institutional activism (see “non-institutionalised activism” 1968-1974) and participation in feminist movements. This population is primarily female, made up of the youngest members of the corpus, who were university or high school students in 1968, from middle and upper-class backgrounds. Like the previous group, they found themselves in situations of social, professional, and romantic indetermination in May ’68. However, unlike the former group, these interviewees had had no experience of activism prior

15 This collective profile is presented in detail in the next chapter, where François’ trajectory is analysed.
to May ’68, and as a result the events provoked a socialisation by political awakening. Having no affinities with existing political organisations (or less than the other interviewees) and therefore fewer political resources to fight against the return to ordinary social structures, they sought to perpetuate the broadening of possibilities experienced during May and June ’68 by other means. In the 1970s, they participated in the politicisation of causes outside the political sphere (particularly concerning the family, the condition of women, the environment, or the school). Mathilde16 (situated on the right side of the plane) thus really became involved in the protest space in 1969 through the alternative crèches and more generally through the different forms of politicisation of the private sphere. As an “anti-authoritarian activist” she fought family and school institutions, lived in different communes in the 1970s, refused to be a salaried worker (even though she had a degree in journalism), was a member of the pro-contraceptive pro-abortion movement MLAC, and was active against nuclear armament. These are typical examples of the countercultural leftism of this population. Unlike the previous group, interviewees situated at this pole do not bring activism into their working practices, in order to transform the modes of production. Instead, they (individually) refuse to be employees, through various alternative approaches and exit strategies (Bennani Chraïbi and Filliéule, 2003, p. 71). These took the form of professional breaks, and trajectories of social marginalism. The belief in being free to “choose one’s life”17 can be understood in light of their social origin in the upper classes, and the resources that enable one to break away from a future that is all laid out. Professional breaks and transgressive individual trajectories are the primary tools of “activism” here, in the hope of spreading the model by setting the example (changing one’s own world, in order to better “change the world”).

As we can see, factorial analysis allows us to visually and concisely account for the different political, professional and personal effects resulting from participation in the events of May-June ’68, and to connect them to the social conditions that made them possible. Some of these effects are complementary. On the factorial plane, we can see that feminism, strong professional impact, countercultural activism in the 1970s and the green vote in 2002 are all situated in close proximity to each other, which means they

---

16 The case of Mathilde, who was born in 1948, to catholic royalist artisans, schooled in a catholic boarding school, and in opposition with her family, is developed in Chapter 1 as part of the matrix of statutory incoherencies. It will be once again discussed in Chapter 5 dedicated to this sub-group and the utopian communities that are characteristic of.

17 A term that they use to describe the professional impact of May ’68.
are associated with each other for the interviewees who are found in this part of the plane. Inversely, the factorial analysis shows that other effects are mutually exclusive, through their distance on the plane. For example, those who engage in the critical renewal of their everyday lives differ from those who are union activists in their workplaces. Schematically, we can summarise the factorial analysis as follows:

Moreover, there is a clear correlation, between each sub-group, their current voting preferences and their contemporary militant practices. The sub-group situated in the lower left-hand quadrant thus generally voted Communist (PC) in the 2002 presidential elections (see “vote PC in 2002”). The group in the lower right-hand quadrant is still actively militant today (see “Militant today”) and votes for the extreme left. The group on the right-hand side of the x-axis votes Green. These results contribute to the reflection on how political generations are constructed, and suggest the persistence of distinct generational units, even forty years later.

Yet can we consider that these effects are specific to participation in the events of May ’68? In other words, did the event cause the participants’ trajectories to deviate from their otherwise probable destinies? Factorial
analysis does not allow us to reason in terms of “all other things being equal,” nor to dissociate the factors linked to the trajectories prior to May '68 from those linked to the event. In order to identify the long-term effects specifically linked to participation in the events, let us now analyse the political behaviour of the interviews, forty years later.

Generational impact forty years later

Comparing political destinies

From a classical perspective\(^{18}\) we can compare the destinies of former activists with those of their peers who did not participate. At the time of the study, between 2004 and 2006, 36% of interviewees said they were “very” interested in politics today, and this figure increases to 80% if we add those who said they were “quite” interested. As an indicator for the general population, in 2002 10% of French citizens said they were “very” interested in politics, and 32% said they were “quite interested.”\(^{19}\) Moreover, half of the interviewees said they still participate in militant activities, a level that is comparable to McAdam’s results for the former activists in the Freedom Summer (McAdam, 1988, p. 354). In addition, at the time of the interviews, 25% of these interviewees here were members of a political organisation or non-profit organisations; 60% said they demonstrate “often” or “from time to time” in defence of public services, against racism, or against war;\(^{20}\) 18% were members of a local association in their town; 10% had run as political candidates or had had electoral responsibilities in their town, and 82% voted in all elections.\(^{21}\) They were also members of multiple associations (often simultaneously), 30% were members of cultural associations, and 32% were members of humanitarian associations.

Nearly forty years after 1968, the people interviewed here stand out in terms of their opinions – whether in terms of anti-economic liberalism,\(^{22}\) or

\(^{18}\) Most Anglo-Saxon publications on the biographical consequences of participation “test” the persistence of characteristics associated with participation in a foundational event.

\(^{19}\) According to the French Electoral Panel study (PEF) 2002, Cevipof-Minister of the Interior.

\(^{20}\) Whereas, in the PEF study by Cevipof mentioned above, 81% of French citizens say they “never” participated in a demonstration during the last two years.

\(^{21}\) Compared to 45% of the general population according to the PEF study.

\(^{22}\) 83% of respondents disagree with the idea of privatising public companies, compared to 51% for the general population, according to the PEF study.
the acceptance of cultural differences, the rejection of security policies, or “cultural liberalism.” At this stage, it is impossible to talk of generation effects. But these elements do confirm the main results of the Anglo-Saxon studies on the persistence of politically left-wing representations and practices of former activists.

On a professional level, the effects of May ’68 activism identified above have long-term material consequences. Among the effects quoted by the interviewees are: “hard times and no retirement;” “I never saved, so I have trouble paying for my children to go overseas;” “seventeen years without a pay rise;” “1969, I refused to sit the state teaching certificate, to be a teacher, on political grounds. 1975, I was teacher in a private school by necessity and not by choice” etc. The trajectories of the ’68ers analysed here reveal various situations of downward social mobility, as possible consequences of participation in the events of May-June 1968.

These results thus contest – both on a political and a professional level – the widespread representations of a universally opportunistic, upwardly mobile generation, which swapped the ideals of youth for the principles of the stock market, and who are assumed to have ended up in executive positions in the areas of advertising, media or politics.

Pursuing the identification of the specific impacts of participation in May ’68, will require finer intragenerational distinctions, comparing for example the collective destinies of two sub-groups characterised by different kinds of involvement in May ’68. The most reasonable solution here consists of comparing collective destinies according to the intensity of participation in May ’68, based on a variable with two levels: “active participation in May ’68” and “moderate participation in May ’68,” which cover 42% and 58% of the interviewees respectively. Do these specific past experiences provoke specific long-term effects?

The answer is yes. Compared to their less active counterparts, the subgroup that was the most active in May ’68 is situated significantly more to the left of the political scale, brings together more members of political organisations, more respondents who are members of several organisations, and many who were still activists at the time of the study. Beyond their

23 13% of respondents “strongly” or “quite strongly” agree with the statement that “there are too many immigrants in France”, compared to 60% for the 2002 PEF Ceipof study.
24 56% of interviewees are favourable or quite favourable to the authorisation of the consumption of marijuana, compared to 22% in the PEF study.
25 These quotations are from responses to the open-ended question on the professional impacts of participation in May ’68.
26 75% of the most active participants in May ’68 are situated on the extreme left of the political scale today (compared to 58% of the others); 61% are still activists today (compared to 39%).
distinctive political practices, these two generational groups can also be distinguished by a certain number of self-representations in terms of group affiliation, such as claiming to be more Marxist today (among the former “active” participants), or defining oneself as belonging to “generation ’68.”

These markers of political collective identity shed light on the subjective aspect of the generation for itself. They remind us that “as much as an event, it is one’s place and one’s reconstruction in the memory of an age group that possibly constructs a political generation” (Sirinelli, 1989, p 73).

Activists today: a generation effect?

In his study of the participants (and non-participants) in the Freedom Summer (FS) in Mississippi in 1964, Doug McAdam shows that the significant variables accounting for participation (age, sex, level of involvement before the FS and number of memberships in organisations before the FS) are no longer significant in accounting for the degree of activism in the period after the FS (1964-1975). The fact of having participated or not (in the FS) then becomes the most significant variable (McAdam, 1989, p. 751), along with the links maintained with other participants, the type of employment and the family situation. He concludes that “the summer served as an instance of alternation in the lives of the volunteers and was largely responsible for the shape of their subsequent activist histories.”

I have proceeded in a similar way by performing two logistic regressions, dealing with activism in May ’68 and activism today respectively. Prior to May ’68, the only two variables that are significantly correlated to the intensity of participation in the events are prior militant experience and parents’ political opinions. In order to test for a possible effect – specific to the event itself – on the futures of the ’68ers (a hypothesis verified in McAdam’s study), a second logistic regression was performed for the condition of being (or not) an activist today (see Table 4 below). To the previous

27 47% of the most active participants say they are “Marxists” today, compared to 17% of the others. The feeling of belonging to a “generation ’68” is shared by 75% of the most active, compared to 64% for the less active participants.

28 For Nancy Whittier, actors immersed in a social movement internalised a new definition of themselves (Whittier, 1996, p. 762).

29 The term alternation describes identity changes produced by participation in Freedom Summer, that are less radical than those observed during a real conversion (McAdam 1989, p. 751).

30 The logistic regression includes the following variables: age, sex, social origin, parents’ political orientation, the existence of a family political tradition, having parents who were Resistance members, activist experience, and occupation in 1968.
variables, we added the intensity of participation in the events of May '68 and the form of activism endorsed during the period between 1968-1974. Two possibilities can be envisaged at this stage: (1) either the explicative variables for the intensity of participation continue to be the most predictive of current activist practices, in which case we cannot conclude that there is a generational effect, or (2) their statistical significance disappears in favour of later biographical elements, which would demonstrate the existence of specific effects due to the event. The results of Table 4 confirm this second hypothesis.

Table 4  The decisive factors for current activism (logistic regression)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable = being an activist (or not) today</th>
<th>b Coefficients</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex: female</td>
<td>-0.235</td>
<td>0.400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family political tradition</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>0.387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents in the Resistance</td>
<td>-0.655*</td>
<td>0.379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social background:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Working classes</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>0.497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Upper classes</td>
<td>0.229</td>
<td>0.489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist experience pre-‘68</td>
<td>-0.0275</td>
<td>0.409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Born 1948-1957</td>
<td>-0.206</td>
<td>0.538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Born 1944-1948</td>
<td>-0.514</td>
<td>0.489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Born pre-1944</td>
<td>-0.145</td>
<td>0.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Students in 1968</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ political orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Not politicised or different opinions</td>
<td>-.924*</td>
<td>0.537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Left-wing parents</td>
<td>-0.549</td>
<td>0.584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active participation in May ‘68</td>
<td>-1.190*</td>
<td>0.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism 1968-1974</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Non-militant</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Unionism (1968-1974)</td>
<td>-2.164</td>
<td>0.550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Extreme-left (1968-1974)</td>
<td>-0.616</td>
<td>0.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Feminism (1968-1974)</td>
<td>-1.237</td>
<td>0.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Non-institutional activism (1968-1974)</td>
<td>-1.171**</td>
<td>0.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– PC/PSU (1968-1974)</td>
<td>-2.875**</td>
<td>0.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.434</td>
<td>0.832</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a: 0 = current activism; 1 = non-activist
N = 179; * p<0.1; ** p<0.01
Interpreting the logistic regression

A logistic model allows us to measure the effect of an individual characteristic on a behavioural variable, all other things being held constant. Here we are explaining the propensity for an individual to be an activist rather than a non-activist at the time of the study (the dependent variable).

The last line of the table (constant) is a measure of the average propensity of reference individuals (identified by the reference levels, in our case: male, no family political tradition, parents not involved in the resistance, born between 1948-1957 etc.) to not be activists today. Negative coefficients therefore indicate – relative to the reference individuals – a higher propensity to be activists at the time of the study (for example, in the case of those who participated actively in May ’68). Only the variables indicated with stars (b**) have a significant effect on the dependent variable however. The second column contains the standard error.

Conclusion

The variables that are significant in the first regression are no longer significant in explaining current activism. Instead, it is the type of activism in the years that followed 1968, even more than the intensity of participation in May ’68 itself, which are the most significant factors. These results therefore validate the hypothesis of a specific role for the political event in secondary political socialisation.

Yet we cannot conclude that the event has a blank slate effect, which would erase all prior distinctions and completely rewrite social destinies. However, the fact that activism both in May ’68 and in the years that followed, came to dominate over prior activism, allows us to deduce that it has a decisive role in political resocialisation through the event. In other words, although the differences between the two sub-groups before 1968 are not entirely erased, participation in the events amplified some and diminished – or even reversed – others. This is the case for the correlation between sex and intensity of activism. Thus, although male participants had more chance of actively participating in the events of May-June ’68 than females, it is women who have more chance of still being activists today (53% of the women were still activists, compared to only 45% of men).

31 Indeed the programme attributes the value 0 to the category “militant today”, and the value 1 to the category “non-militant today”. The logistic regressions were conducted using the programme SPSS.

32 48% of men in the corpus participated actively in May ’68 compared to 38% of women.
Finally, the fact that in explaining the likelihood of remaining an activist today, the type of activism between 1968 and 1945 was shown to be more decisive than the intensity of participation in the events themselves, argues in favour of a non-mechanical interpretation of the socialising effects of the events. It is not so much the active participation in the events of May ’68 that destabilises these individuals’ trajectories, as the subsequent consequences of this participation in terms of insertion into social and friendship networks. The correlation between currently being an activist and having maintained connections with people met in 1968 and in the months that followed, confirms this hypothesis. Activist friendships and social networks indeed contribute to maintaining and reinforcing protest dispositions by allowing their perpetuation. This confirms what Doug McAdam calls the self-perpetuating quality of individual activism (Mc Adam, 1989, p. 754).33

We can thus compare the role of the events of May-June ’68 to a generational prism which diffracts prior trajectories – rather than simply reflecting them – and which therefore produces several generational units.

---

33 There is a substantial literature on the importance of networks in collective action. See Diani and McAdam (2003).