May '68

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6 Micro-units of Generation ’68

The preceding chapters have shed light on various socialising effects brought about by participation in May ’68. Figure 10 below provides a synthesis of the diversity of responses mobilised in the months (or years) that followed the events, in the face of the twin requirements to remain faithful to past commitments whilst achieving social reintegration. Yet it is not enough to simply list these different forms of activist reconversion to construct a sociology of post-’68er political trajectories. Indeed, we have seen that the quest for political alternatives, and for ways to bring one’s environment (particularly professionally) into line with one’s political aspirations, are dependent on the resources an individual is able to mobilise, as well as on age, social status in ’68 and on forms of participation. It is therefore time to connect the different results concerning biographical phases that occurred prior to, during or after the events of May-June ’68.

To do so, this chapter proposes a synthesis of different results from the study, centred on the question of the formation of political generations. The subjective aspect of generational belonging (the generation for itself)59 and the question of the gender of political generations will be covered in the first section. We will then move on to constructing a limited number of collective trajectories, to account for the variations in biographical possibilities among ’68ers. We will also ultimately invalidate the hypothesis according to which May ’68 produced only one (or two) “generation ’68(s),” and show that there are instead a dozen “micro-units of generation ’68” that share a common pool of experiences (prior, during and after the events of May ’68), which will be developed here.

Social conditions for the identification with “generation ’68”

Up until this point we have managed to observe a certain number of effects (political, professional and personal) of the events of May-June ’68 on the trajectories of the participants. We have also noted the persistence of distinct generational groups nearly forty years later. For Karl Mannheim, these are the results of the persistent imprints of a shared foundational event, but

59 Gérard Mauger shows how Mannheim’s approach to “generations” lends itself to a Marxist reading, in the sense that it identifies the “generational situations” of actual groups called “generational units” (Mauger, 1991).
May '68
Opening up of the realm of possibilities

Social weightlessness: (Temporary) indetermination of possibilities

Everything that was taken for granted is thrown into question → a shift in the sense of limits → social deregulation

Dissonance between aspirations and abilities to satisfy them

Suicides
Depressions
Escape: drugs, travel etc.

Back to the land
Rejection of the institutions of reproduction → counter-culture:
- Communal living
- Alternative schooling (Vitruve etc.)

Activism through one's profession: subversive teaching, journalism, social sciences research etc.

Political and/or union activism

Collective strategies for mobilization

Constraint of social reintegration

Two non-exclusive solutions to the obligation of social reintegration and the resulting double bind:

1) Attempt to modify one's environment to bring it into line with one's aspirations:
   - Local environment → utopian communes
   - Global environment → union and political activism

2) Attempt to modify oneself to respond to the pressures of the environment

“turmoil” despair

Collective mobilization in disengagement

Individual escape

Collective strategies for mobilization

Refuge: drugs, travel etc.

Back to the land
Rejection of the institutions of reproduction → counter-culture:
- Communal living
- Alternative schooling (Vitruve etc.)

Activism through one's profession: subversive teaching, journalism, social sciences research etc.

Political and/or union activism

Collective strategies for mobilization
only become genuine “generation units” with the subjective dimension of generational consciousness (a generation for itself). It is therefore important to understand this feeling of generational belonging.

Nearly 70% of interviewees claim they belong to a “generation ’68,” but this rate varies significantly depending on which sub-group is being studied. How can we account for such an unevenly distributed generational consciousness? How can we grasp its social determinants?

Firstly, this feeling of belonging is most likely influenced by the different effects (political, professional and personal) of May ’68, which we have studied in the previous chapters. This hypothesis is confirmed by the clear correlation between an individual’s feeling of generational belonging and the (stated) impacts of the events of May ’68 on his or her world view (see the first line of Table 6 below).

Although this may appear obvious, behind it lies a dual process that must be investigated: on one hand, there are biographical effects due to the participation in an event, and on the other there is the retrospective construction of an experience that is supposed to have structured the system of reference of the individuals (of various ages and social backgrounds) who participated (in different ways) in that event. It is important to incorporate the contrasting effects of “memory work” (Percheron and Rémond, 1991, p. 170 onwards) into the common usage of the notion of generation, which is associated with an event producing lasting effects and founding collective identity. Naturally, this “memory work” depends on what became of the actors after the events. This is why it is important to deconstruct the feeling of generational belonging (by associating it with its various social determinants) in order to provide elements of response to the question of what conditions are required for identification with “generation ’68.”

Firstly, two thirds of those who say May ’68 had a clear impact on their reading of the world were not activists before the events. We can see here the idea of impressionable ages or social situations for those whose political consciousness had not yet been fully formed by prior experiences of activism. This result raises the paradox we have already discussed above: those who say they share a strong feeling of generational belonging do not bear a sociological resemblance to the leaders we generally think of when we talk about “generation ’68.” Similarly, the interviewees who consider

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60 The question was phrased as follows: “Do you feel like you belong to a “generation ’68?” Yes/No.

61 Daniel Bertaux, Danièle Linhart and Béatrix le Wita also raise this “paradox”, emphasising the role played by the book Génération in the construction of a single “generation ’68”, whereas
that their current political ideas were created by May '68 are significantly more likely to also say that they feel like they belong to “generation '68” than those who were already politicised before 1968\(^{62}\) (see Table 6 below). Age is indeed responsible for this correlation – scarcely more than half of the interviewees born before 1944 claim they belong to generation '68, compared to 70% of those who were aged between 20 and 24 in 1968, and 85% of those who were under 20. These results support Karl Mannheim's hypothesis: “experiences are not accumulated in the course of a lifetime through a process of summation or agglomeration, but are dialectically articulated" around and in relation to the experience of the “natural world view acquired in one's youth,” which still remains determinant and “tends to stabilise itself as the natural view of the world” (Mannheim, 1972, p. 298-299).

\[\text{Table 6  Deconstructing the feeling of generational belonging}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think that the events of May '68 modified your “reading of the world?”</th>
<th>Percentage of interviewees who say they feel they belong to a ‘generation '68’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Not at all</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A little</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Quite a lot</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Significantly</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you have the impression that your current political ideas can be traced back to:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The period before 1968?</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- May ’68?</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The period after May ’68?</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Were you -</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Born before 1944?</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Born between 1944 and 1948?</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Born after 1948?</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>During May ’68, were you -</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A student?</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Working?</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for them, “it was not one generation that ‘created’ May 68, but two” (Bertaux, Linhart and Le Wita, 1988, p. 76). The rest of this chapter demonstrates that the idea of two political generations remains overly simplistic.

\(^{62}\) Here we use the responses to the question: “If you think of your political ideas as they are today, do you feel that: 1) you have had them since you were a child or an adolescent; 2) you have had them since May 68; or 3) You adopted them more recently?”
Age masks the importance of the one’s social situation in May ’68 however: 84% of those who were students during the events declare they belong to “generation ’68,” compared to just over half of those who were working at the time. Youth – in the sociological sense of the term – is thus the most appropriate variable here. Like social indeterminacy (temporary), conjugal indeterminacy should also be a factor in an individual’s exposure to the events. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that 75% of interviewees who were single during May ’68 claim a generational belonging, compared to 55% of those who were in a couple at the time.

More generally, Table 6 reveals the multiplicity of variables with a statistically significant correlation to the feeling of generational belonging. Having lived in a commune in the 1970s thus increases the probability of feeling like you belong to “generation ’68,” as does considering that May ’68 had an impact on your way of dressing, how you raised your children, or your current lifestyle. Similarly, the interviewees who consider that May ’68 altered their professional trajectory are more inclined to express a feeling of generational belonging. Although the intensity of participation in the events themselves is one of the variables in the generational equation, it is
the shared experiences (political, professional and private) after 1968 that contribute to forging these generational bonds.

Finally, social origin does not appear to be significantly correlated to the feeling of generational belonging. This is not true for sex however: female interviewees tend to express their feeling of generational belonging more than their male counterparts (77% compared to 60%). This cannot be interpreted unequivocally, to the extent that the women in the corpus are also slightly younger than the men, and especially given that less than half as many women were activists before 1968.

The use of logistic regression enables us to go further and disentangle these causal relations by constructing a hierarchy of the effects of different variables on the feeling of belonging to “generation ’68” (see Table 7 below).

The results of the regression provide responses to some of the questions posed above. Indeed, sex, social situation in 1968 and the forms of activism between 1968 and 1974 are the three variables most significantly correlated with the feeling of generational belonging, along with the – subjective – impression of owing one’s current political ideas to May ’68. This allows us to confirm that it is not being young as such that is important here (age is not statistically significant) but rather the fact of being a student (rather than working), which has an impact on the feeling of belonging to a generation. The next most important variables are the intensity of participation in the events, and the type of professional impact (which are correlated, but contribute less to the generational equation).

Men shaped 1968, but women were shaped by 1968? Gendered generations

Two (non-exclusive) hypotheses can account for the clear gender difference in the feeling of generational belonging: either the participation in May ’68 objectively had more impact on women’s trajectories than on men’s, or the women interviewed are more inclined to overestimate its impact on their trajectories (compared to their male counterparts).

Indeed, the women systematically award May ’68 with greater biographical impact on their current political opinions, the way they educated their children, their perceptions of the couple, or even their way of dressing, and this is confirmed in the interviews. Twice as many women declare that there was a certain continuity between their aspirations as ’68ers and the situation they found themselves in after the events. Finally, the women in the corpus consider the “end of the post-May period”63 to be later in their

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63 The expressions in quotation marks correspond to the formulations in the questionnaire.
trajectories than the men do, for those who do not entirely reject the idea of a “return to order.” Annick,64 for example, rejects this notion altogether, saying “[there was] no return to order, things were never the same again.”

In other words, the male interviewees tend to claim that they shaped 1968, whereas the women say they were shaped by 1968 – considering their trajectories as marked by a before-1968 and after-1968. For the women interviewed here, the events of May ’68 thus played a greater role in socialisation by awareness raising, for which politicisation is a by-product of participation.

There are several possible explanations for this. Firstly, gender shapes the kind of skills acquired during primary socialisation, which are then available (or not) for mobilisation in the political sphere. Even though they are the same age and have the same social background, men and women do not undertake their participation in the event with the same political skills and abilities. The predominantly male nature of the activist milieu on the eve of May ’68, as well as the fact that women activists had fewer overall activist resources than men, made them more susceptible to the socialising impact of the event. Their trajectories are more significantly altered by the event, which explains, in part, the relatively greater identification with “generation ’68” among women.

We have also seen that gender has an impact not only quantitatively (on the number of people becoming involved with politics in May ’68) but also qualitatively (on the forms of activism in the years that followed). There are many more female interviewees who became involved in forms of activism outside traditional protest institutions. On the whole, they opted to participate in the critical renewal of everyday life, rather than joining pre-existing political organisations (which were marked by a significant risk of inequality and domination). Katia, who was born in 1951 in a left-wing family of low-level employees, explains in her interview:

The activist powerbase at Uni was essentially controlled by the guys, and I could see that if I wanted to have some control over things I had to break away from those activists, especially as I had some Trotskyist friends and I could tell they weren’t all feminists! [...] Given my political conscience; I didn’t have the vocabulary, or any political training, I didn’t go through the JC, or anything... So if I joined a party, I would be squashed, that seemed obvious to me.65

64 Born in 1949, the daughter of teachers, Annick became a midwife at an alternative maternity hospital in Paris.
65 Extract of an interview conducted on 12 April 2004. Katia was an activist with the MLAC in Gennevilliers in the 1970s and contributed to the opening of the women’s centre in Gennevilliers.
Even the women who were slightly older and who had been activists within political organisations before May ’68 expressed the need to open new spaces for activism. They created “women’s groups” within their organisations, or joined the MLF alongside their other militant activities, thus helping to redefine the borders of activism and to open “spaces for the construction of a new awareness of gender” (Achin and Naudier, 2008 p. 384; see also, Bereni and Revillard, 2012), as we saw in Chapter 5.

Table 7  Determining factors in the feeling of belonging to a “generation ’68” (logistic regression)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable: identifying with “generation ’68”</th>
<th>B coefficient</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– female</td>
<td>-1.706**</td>
<td>0.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– born before 1944</td>
<td>-0.225</td>
<td>0.518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– born between 1944 and 1948</td>
<td>-0.998</td>
<td>0.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– born after 1948</td>
<td>-0.225**</td>
<td>0.518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional impact of May ’68</td>
<td>-0.662*</td>
<td>0.413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of activism engaged in between 1968 and 1975:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– non-activist</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– unionism</td>
<td>-1.954**</td>
<td>0.721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– far-left</td>
<td>-0.511</td>
<td>0.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– feminism</td>
<td>-0.311</td>
<td>1.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– non-institutional activism</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– PC/PSU</td>
<td>2.209**</td>
<td>1.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social origin:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– working classes</td>
<td>-0.239</td>
<td>0.575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– middle classes</td>
<td>0.673</td>
<td>0.590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– upper classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student in 1968</td>
<td>-2.004**</td>
<td>0.604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-activists before 1968</td>
<td>1.417*</td>
<td>0.569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel that current political ideas were formed:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– before May ’68</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– during May ’68</td>
<td>-2.137**</td>
<td>0.693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– after May ’68</td>
<td>-1.395*</td>
<td>0.654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active participation in the events of May ’68</td>
<td>-1.333*</td>
<td>0.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.477</td>
<td>0.760</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a: feeling of belonging to a “generation ’68” = 0; no feeling of belonging = 1
* p<0.1; ** p<0.01
Gender also has an influence on the relationship we have to past events. Considering oneself and living one’s life as an actor who owes nothing to anyone, and who has participated in changing the course of history, are traits that are socially constructed and valued as being “masculine.” Recognising the influence of events on one’s biographical trajectory could be considered as sign of weakness for men, or on the contrary as a sign of humility in women – this hierarchy of values having been interiorised during childhood through gendered family socialisation.

The role of biographical reconstruction provides a final explanation for the gap in generational identification. Intense activism during a political crisis provides a rare opportunity to reconstruct one’s trajectory (McAdam, 1992, p. 1230). Because of the greater posterity of feminism (compared to extreme-left activism in particular) we can hypothesise that it is easier for women to see May ’68 as a turning point. The events constitute a biographical juncture between a “before,” marked by the conservative state of the moral order, and an “after” characterised by their liberation – although objectively this break did not actually happen until after 1970. Following the political and professional trajectories of activist couples in 1968 allows us to analyse this gendered task of constructing coherence in one’s political trajectory around a political event. Let us take the case of David and Annick, for example. In 1968, David was a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and an activist with the UJCl, and he later became a philosophy professor in preparatory classes. He speaks about his involvement as being a kind of activism that was “linked to a time, a context” and he thus distances himself from it. However, his wife, Annick, made her profession as a midwife into the continuation of her feminist commitment. Whereas, for David, the beginning of his professional career corresponded to the end of his activism, Annick has continued to be an activist in several feminist organisations and associations participating in various struggles for women’s rights to access legal abortions.

The fact that the female interviewees are able to conceive of their trajectories as the continuation of their past feminist engagements is because the feminist cause gained momentum in the 1970s whilst far-left activism became increasingly unpopular. This made it more complicated, for most of the men in the corpus, to create coherence between their current paths and their past commitments. There is no equivalent of the women’s movement, nor its effects, through which they could (re)construct and (re)cast

66 David was born in 1949 into a Jewish family of furriers, who were close to the communist party but not active members.
67 Born in 1949 Annick’s parents were both socialist teachers.
themselves as the inheritors of May ’68. Yet collective identity – the generation in itself – is a necessary component for the feeling of generational belonging.

As a result of this, gender underwrites all the processes at work in the constitution of micro-units of generation ’68 (see Appendix 3 for the detailed summary table of the different micro-units): from primary political socialisation, to the processes of (re)converting dispositions and skills acquired during activism into the private, professional and political spheres, but also in the modalities of participation in the events. Given this, it is useful to examine the classical question of the construction of political generations from the perspective of gender. We will therefore begin the detailed presentation of these micro-generational units with a discussion of the two that are exclusively female.

Feminists from left-wing middle classes, politicised with the Vietnam War

The first generational unit we will discuss (II.3 in Appendix 3) brings together female interviewees born between 1946 and 1948, whose parents, low-level public servants, transmitted their left-wing preferences without being activists. Their politicisation began when they went to university (around 1966) in the context of the demonstrations in response to the war in Vietnam, and within UNEF. These women were heavily involved in May-June ’68, they identified with the anti-authoritarian pole of the student movement of March 22. By the end of the 1970s they were invested in non-institutionalised forms of activism, but it was their commitment to feminism that left a lasting mark on their identity as activists, and indeed on their futures. They were activists with the women’s movement MLF, like Gisèle and Martine who were both students at the Sorbonne (studying sociology and philosophy respectively). Both of these interviewees contributed to various feminist journals created in the early 1970s. Activism within the MLAC, or the MLF or local feminist groups (Noëlle was a member of the women’s group at the EHESS university) was accompanied by a refusal of the patriarchy in their everyday lives, refusal of gendered division of labour, the bourgeois

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68 Three quarters of the interviewees of both sexes declare that they are now feminists, whereas less than one quarter say they are Marxists.

69 In her work on the feminist movements of Columbus, Nancy Whittier shows that collective identity only lasts on the condition that militant memory is transmitted, and that this requires a minimum degree of continuity in militant structures (Whittier, 1997).
institutions of the family and marriage. They experimented with life in
communes, challenged traditional gender and power relations (between
men and women, between parents and children), and contributed to the
creation of many alternative crèches.

For these young women, the events of May-June ’68 played a role in political socialisation by conversion. They were pioneers in making the personal political, and they contributed to the redefinition of women’s roles in the wake of the events. Today, as teachers, research engineers, or social workers, they generally vote for the Greens (or the Socialist Party). Some continue their activism in feminist organisations – like Martine who is involved with the group “Women in Black” – or participate in various feminist intellectual groups. Finally, like Annick, some have managed to make their involvement with feminism into a profession. Annick became a midwife at Les Lilas in Paris, and has taken on various associative responsibilities, particularly within the National Coordination of Midwives, of which she was a spokesperson.

The interviewees in this micro-generational unit are thus marked by the gendered impact of their activist past. The years around 1968 marked a biographical turning point which unavoidably led them towards political, personal and professional futures influenced by feminism. The conditions were clearly met for these women to be durably destabilised by their exposure to the events of 1968 and for us to speak of a female micro-generational unit. In the interviews, each of them expresses this biographical upheaval in their own way. Mathilde even associates the events of 1968 with a rebirth, which recalls the etymology of the word generation (from Latin, generatus, meaning to beget). She says, “I was born in 1968 [...] it’s life, you know, that’s where it started...”

It is important, however, not to fall into a rose-coloured vision that gives women the advantage over men in claiming the heritage of 1968. This ongoing heritage also has costs (symbolic, psychological, and material)

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70 Some also vote for far-left candidates. The greater diversity of electoral practices within a single micro-generational unit is not surprising because the feminist cause has not been monopolized by a particular political party, but covers a broad cross-section of the left of the political spectrum.

71 The group “Women in Black”, created in Israel in 1988 by women protesting against the Israeli occupation, has become an international pacifist organisation, protesting against all forms of oppression.

72 The maternity hospital Les Lilas was one of the first hospitals in France to adopt an alternative approach to labour and the idea that birthing classes, such as those created by Dr Lamaze, could help prepare women for natural childbirth.
that are associated with disengagement from activism long after 1968. For the men interviewed, who had been involved in the far left, it was much easier to simply turn over a new leaf after a few months or even a few years of activism. Indeed, social gender relations were not a key target of these organisations in the early 1970s, so activism did not substantially alter their condition as men. Returning to more traditional forms of conjugal life thus proved to be less costly for them than for the feminists interviewed, whose activism was written on their bodies and in their everyday practices. For the latter, feminist activism had become necessarily central to their justifications for existence. For certain collective profiles of women, the costs of disengagement were such that they severed familial, psychological or social trajectories.

**Depressed and downwardly mobile single women**

Another all-female micro-generational unit (III.5 in Appendix 3) brings together interviewees born between 1946-1950, who share experiences of long-term depression related to relationship breakdowns. This group includes women of different ages, social backgrounds and religions, and this is because their gender is the most significant variable in accounting for their future experiences.

Some of these women are the daughters of army personnel, engineers, or artisans, who were practicing Catholics and conservatives. They went to religious schools, and observed the events of May ’68 from a distance – when they weren’t locked up at home by their fathers. Although they did not have much exposure to the events, they nevertheless discovered the existence of social milieus different to their own; Paulette, for example, discovered the very existence of the left. Frédérique realised that girls her age could participate in political events and that they did not all have an authoritarian and religious upbringing. Blandine saw in May ’68 the justification of her personal rejection of the family order: “May ’68 was a personal awakening for me. Well, I have to say I was coming out of eleven years of religious boarding school! At the time, I had no political awareness, I was only motivated by the violent rejection of the established order...”

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73 The case of Paulette, the daughter of a conservative soldier, also a practicing Catholic, was discussed in Chapter 2.

74 Born in 1950 to a military officer, Frédérique was two years away from completing high school in 1968.

75 Extract from a letter that Blandine attached to her questionnaire. She was born in 1944, to parents who were hotel-keepers, and conservative practicing Catholics.
The opening up of the sphere of possibilities that May ’68 produced takes concrete form here in the encounters between these women and the more politicised men they married in the years after 1968, and at whose side they evolved, in sociocultural environments that were radically different from their own backgrounds. Their families had great difficulty accepting these marriages and they were occasionally the source of family breakdowns. Dominique, for example, lived with a researcher in economics, and together they joined a back-to-the-land experiment in communal living. Paulette married a sociocultural community worker and discovered unionism, anti-nuclear activism, and the demands of feminism. Yvette married a music teacher and discovered the countercultural sphere in Nantes with him. Alongside their husbands, these women challenged all the fundamental teachings of their education. They experienced a genuine resocialisation, and paid the price for it in identity tensions, as Paulette explains regarding the baptism of her daughters: “Patrick did not want to have them baptised, and even though I understood and pretty much agreed with him, it was such an insult to my parents, it was just unimaginable for them, and it was painful for me to subject them to that...”

After breaking away from the social frames, values and visions of the world they had interiorised as children, and having reconstructed their lives around the lives of their companions, these women then saw their husbands leave them in the late 1970s or 1980s. These separations left them doubly alone – separated from the men with whom they had found (new) meaning in their lives, but also cut off from most of their social networks, which were mainly built by and around the male partners. These women suffered long-term depression as a result of the rupture between a primary *habitus* that had been partially repressed in the course of converting to a new lifestyle (conjugal, professional and political), which now rejected them. It must be said that these separations did not have the same psychological and material costs for them as for their ex-partners. The women retained custody of the children and had much greater difficulty re-integrating (see Chapter 4). Their professional trajectories were sometimes disrupted, marked by periods of unemployment. Their downward social mobility, combined with the personal impacts, led to a feeling of withdrawal and disengagement, and even repudiation of the political class. Madeleine’s experience is an example of this, moving between work as a secretary, bank employee, and now unemployment. She says:

I have to find work. I’m 55 years old and I’m not certain I’ll find any. Perhaps I’ll end up on the streets. [...] My life has been a succession of disappointments. A major one is the champagne socialists who gave
us practically nothing, I voted Mitterrand, just to see [...] As long as we have power-hungry charlatans as our government leaders, either left or right, who don't give a damn about the future of French people, we will become more and more underdeveloped. [...] I am both reactionary and an anarchist, depending on what they subject us to.\textsuperscript{76}

We can also quote Blandine, who talks about her years of psychoanalysis and her political re-orientation in the early 1990s, after voting left since 1968:

> In 1981, I started working, after doing secondary refresher classes to get into a social work course, from 1977 to 1978. [...] I remember this was an important period, when there were meetings with Palestinian doctors, members of Fatah, who came to talk to us all the time about the history of their country. Voting left two years after this experience was obvious, we were all waiting for the big day [...] My return to traditional values coincided with the end of a very long psychotherapy that I began in 1981 after my partner left. So, a return to reality, really from 1991, I supported Gaullism, I lost lots of friends and won back my parents’ admiration.

For the women in this profile, marital or conjugal breakdowns later in life were not liberating. On the contrary, they led to disengagement from activism and long periods of depression which disrupted their professional trajectories – sometimes for good. Tania, the daughter of left-wing teachers, a student affairs and guidance counsellor, has suffered from depression since 1990, and wrote: “my exit from activism came from an emotional separation.” Josette, a research engineer at the University of Vincennes, who divorced in 1979 and began psychoanalysis in 1984, had a nervous breakdown, stopped working, and moved home to live with her mother.

The tragic nature of the collective trajectories of these downwardly mobile women, who are alone, depressed and torn between resentment and nostalgia of the period around 1968, must be seen in light of the degree to which their trajectories (and their role as women) were altered after the events. We must also consider the brutal disappearance of the social frames in which they rebuilt their lives. Here we can talk about unfinished conversions (that we can see in the different ways in which they returned to their original socialisation), to the extent that the material, affective and symbolic conditions required to safeguard the conversion were lost after emotional and conjugal separations.

\textsuperscript{76} Extracts from comments written by Madeleine in the margins of the questionnaire. Born in 1950, Madeleine is the daughter of an engineer and a housewife, both right-wing and Catholic.
What became of the ’68ers: a range of futures

Having examined the different aspects of ’68ers’ itineraries, and having demonstrated the influence of multiple factors, it is now time to put the puzzle together for the period before, during and after May ’68, in order to reveal a small number of micro-units of generation ’68. In order to link together trajectories marked by common experiences, the questionnaires were examined again, in light of the results obtained up until this point. For each interviewee, a number of indicators were selected – age, sex, matrix of politicisation, activist trajectory prior to May ’68, the register of participation in the events, occupation at the time, the type of subsequent activism, the kinds of professional and personal impact of the events, and finally voting behaviour in 2002. Only a limited number of configurations are responsible for similar impacts, distinct families of experiences and collective political identities – in the sense of the redefinition of oneself due to being immersed in a social movement (Whittier, 1997).

The analysis reveals three groups of micro-generational units – broadly divided by the period during which they were politicised (the Algerian War, between 1962 and 1968, or with May ’68). Each is then subdivided into micro-units, and then (for some) into sub-profiles (see the summary table in Appendix 3 for full details of the micro-units in these groups). As we have already discussed two of these micro-units above, those two that are exclusively female, we will now look in detail at the other 11. In presenting these micro-units briefly here we will be able to emphasise certain social conditions for the persistence of political opinions and engagements and identify the relative importance of the events of May ’68 in the overall progression of these trajectories.

First generational unit: The importance of the Algerian War among the eldest interviewees

The first generational unit is made up of interviewees born between 1938 and 1944 (aged 16-22 in 1960) who were politicised in a context that was extremely polarized due to the opposition to the Algerian War (Bantigny, 2007). This shared context would leave a lasting biographical imprint, shaped

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77 Certain lines of the table will not be discussed, particularly those concerning the workers and employees who did not play an active role in May ’68 at their place of work, and for whom this small engagement had no notable effects on their futures (see for example section III.4 of the table in the appendix). To the extent that the event did not have a genuine destabilising effect, this group of actors do not constitute a “generational unit” according to the definition applied here.
by social origin, parents’ political and religious orientation and the age of the protagonists. In this unit, we can thus identify three micro-generational units made up of interviewees from working-class backgrounds, and two of future ’68ers from more privileged backgrounds.

I.1 First-generation intellectuals from right-wing Catholic families
This first micro-unit (section I.1 of the table in Appendix 3) primarily brings together men whose parents were workers, farmers or small businessmen, and conservative Catholics. These interviewees come from large sibling groups and were educated in Catholic schools – some even attended seminary. They were good students and were the first in their families to gain access to higher education. They joined the Catholic youth action groups, the JAC, the JEC or the JOC, in the 1950s and were progressively politicised through their participation in the religious sphere, around the late ’50s and early ’60s. The emergence of dispositions for activism is also linked to their trajectories as class migrants who moved into the student milieu at a time of intense politisation linked to the Algerian War. They were then often active within the student union UNEF.

Two sub-profiles emerge in this micro-unit, which we can distinguish according to their political affiliations – the first covers those close to the then Unified Socialist Party (the PSU), whilst the second covers those who leant towards the far left (Trotskyist in particular) during the Vietnam War.78

The first sub-group temporarily ceased their activism when they ended their university studies, but remained close to the PSU. They were workers in 1968, and were mainly involved in the events in their workplaces. The events of May-June ’68 played a role of political socialisation by maintenance here. Most of them continued their association with the PSU (only a minority were activists however) and joined the CFDT trade union. There were no remarkable family repercussions due to their participation in May ’68, but there was a certain openness to feminism (through the PSU or left-wing Catholic organisations). Today most of them vote for the PS; some remained union activists up until their retirement, whilst others left their activism behind when they moved into management positions.

The second sub-profile in this micro-unit covers interviewees who were activists with the JCR or the Maoist Rank-and-File Vietnam Committees (CVB), on the eve of May ’68, and who participated actively in the events beyond their workplaces (many of them were teachers). For them, the event

78 This was the case for Jean and Christiane, whose trajectories prior to May 68 were analysed in Chapter 1.
constituted *political socialisation by radicalisation*. Immediately after the events they became activists in far-left groups, union members (particularly in association with the Emancipated School movement),\(^{79}\) and soon became involved in burgeoning feminist movements (for the women among them). Although they had by then been employees and parents for several years, their intense exposure to May ’68 and the political movements in the years that followed led to relatively significant family impact (participation in feminist movements, experiences of “sexual liberation,” challenges to authoritarian education, separations, etc.).

I.2 **Upwardly mobile children of (Jewish) Communists**

The second micro-generational unit can be distinguished from the first by the political and religious orientation of the interviewees’ parents. It brings together respondents who grew up in communist working-class families, who were Jewish or who participated in the Resistance during the Second World War. Here, the matrix of family transmission of dispositions for activism can be seen in early politicisation. Born between 1938 and 1942, these interviewees became activists during the Algerian War, within the JC, anti-fascist groups or – for those who were then at university – with the Antifascist University Front (FUA) or the student union UNEF. Critical of the PCF line (particularly because of its position rejecting Algerian independence), they were among the dissidents of the UEC (Matonti and Pudal, 2008) who joined the UJCml (or the JCR) at its creation in 1967. In 1968 they were employed, most often as teachers (or researchers), and were very active in the events, taking on positions of leadership in their organisations(s).\(^{80}\)

For these interviewees, the political crisis constituted *political socialisation by radicalisation*, reinforcing their revolutionary beliefs, that they then put into practice in the years that followed within far-left organisations (particularly the Maoïst GP). Their participation in May ’68 had a range of professional impacts such as becoming an *établî* (Paul), refusing to become a manager (Claude, an engineer thus turned towards journalism), and for some, temporary professional disengagement (which was easier in the public sector).

This sub-group, which was less susceptible to the propositions of the counterculture,\(^{81}\) ceased their activism with the decline of far-left groups.

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\(^{79}\) The Emancipated School (*l’Ecole emancipée*) movement was a current within the FEN that attracted revolutionary unionists who had broken away from the PCF, including Trotskyists, but also anti-authoritarian activists.

\(^{80}\) Like Paul, see Chapter 2.

\(^{81}\) This can be explained by their age, and the fact that they were working in 1968, as well as by the fundamental role that “political leftism” played for these actors, and to which they dedicated
(from 1972). They were then sporadically involved in various national social movements (particularly those in 1995) or others at the local level (involvement in workplace conflicts for example). Today they are still at the far left of the political scale (although some also vote for the PS).

I.3 Unionist workers in May ’68

The third micro-generational unit brings together interviewees from working-class backgrounds, who are slightly older than the previous groups (born between 1930 and 1942). They did not graduate from high school and were working in 1968. Their politicisation is linked to the workplace rather than to the Algerian War. This profile can be clearly distinguished from the two previous ones in terms of educational and professional trajectories (in 1968 they were workers or employees who had not graduated from high school). For most of them, the biographical impact of participation in May ’68 was minimal (1st sub-profile), with the exception of certain cases in which social barriers were genuinely broken down (2nd sub-profile).

The first sub-profile is made up of male respondents who are slightly older than the rest of the corpus (1935-1939). They are the children of artisans, or low-level public servants, and they entered the labour force as apprentices when they were young – particularly in printmaking and publishing – and became politicised in these spheres via unionism (in particular the printworkers’ CGT). Their participation in the events of May-June 1968 was exclusively as unionists and limited to their workplaces. For them, the political crisis represented political socialisation by maintenance. Indeed, they continued their union activism (some joined political parties, the PSU or the PCF), but they did not experience any professional or personal destabilisation. They currently participate in political associations such as Attac, or environmental protection groups and vote for the PCF or the PS.

The second sub-profile here covers children of workers (or farmers) who did not graduate from high school, and who were employed and unionists (CGT) in 1968, but for whom participation in the events led to socially many years of their lives. There is a younger sub-profile (1942-1945), however, that is slightly more susceptible to the countercultural offer (critical renewal of everyday life, Larzac, critique of pedagogical relations). Agnès and André (see Chapter 2) are representative of this sub-group; they converted their dispositions for protest into the critique of the education institutions, within movements and journals attacking traditional pedagogy.

82 This is the sub-group situated on the lower left-hand side of the factorial plane presented in Figure 7, in Chapter 3.
improbable encounters that led to genuine social shifts (via far-left activism and/or further education at the University of Vincennes, as was the case for Gilles, discussed in Chapter 4).

I.4 Politicisation of students from well-off backgrounds

The interviewees in this fourth micro-generational unit were born between 1936 and 1942, and come from upper-class (generally left-wing) backgrounds. They became politicised as part of the student movements against the Algerian War (UNEF in particular).

Those whose parents were members of a religious minority (Jewish or Protestant) had trajectories that were similar to those of the interviewees in profile I.2 (see Appendix 3), but they were not as severely affected by the effects of downward mobility provoked among first-generation intellectuals by far-left activism in the years after May ’68.

Those who came from left-wing Catholic backgrounds became activists with UNEF or the Union of Grandes Ecoles (UGE), but not at the UEC as was the case for the previous profiles. They supported the ideas of the PSU in the years that followed. As they were sensitive to themes connected with decolonisation, they became involved in literacy activities. They were not heavily involved during May ’68, and the events provided political socialisation by maintenance, without altering their professional trajectories (which were already well established), nor their political (perpetuation of their unionism, and possible activism with the PSU) or familial ones.

I.5 From contesting authority to activism

The final micro-generational unit in this first group of trajectories covers interviewees who were politicised in the early 1960s, who came from upper-class backgrounds and who shared an early opposition to family and school authority, which led to educational trajectories that were prematurely interrupted.

This collective profile covers firstly male respondents born between 1938 and 1944, sons of Catholic military personnel, who defied parental and school authority even as children. They often describe themselves as the “black sheep” of the family, as “misunderstood,” and as rejecting (and rejected by) their parents and the school system at an early age. Marc, whose father and grandfather both attended elite engineering schools, was the only one of seven children to repeat several classes and to be expelled.

83 We can see here the affinities between Catholic education and third-world activism analysed in Chapter 1.
from numerous establishments for lack of discipline. Alexandre, whose father was in the military, left school before the baccalaureat to escape from the authority of his parents (he became a construction technician). The discrepancy between their aspirations and their (lower) social situation, as well as their working conditions (for example they speak of being “humiliated by my bosses as an apprentice,” and “bored by my work as a technician”) led to involvement in union activism (CGT or CFDT) and a political awakening.

The rare women in this micro-generational unit are younger (born between 1943 and 1945) and they speak of their experiences as young women, humiliated and subject to injustice due to their sex. Unequal treatment compared to their brothers, particularly in access to education (but also in social restrictions), was the source of their dispositions for protest.

The mood of protest among these young men and women, which developed in the private sphere, then became politicised through protests against the Algerian War and then the Vietnam War. These interviewees were particularly drawn to anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieux and were heavily involved in the events of May ’68, as “free electrons,” not associated with any particular movement, but ready and willing to fight against the police (for the men). The experience of the conjuncture of crisis operated as a catalyst for their aspirations to change their lives, which were the source of genuine biographical breaches (political socialisation by awareness raising, or even by conversion). The professional and personal impacts of such involvement were significant. After several months – or even years – of life on the margins or in utopian communes, their social reintegration took place through artistic spheres or alternative pedagogies, thus perpetuating the refusal of social finitude by adopting relatively open-ended positions that allowed them to reintegrate whilst still enabling them to maintain a militant role in their profession.

Second-generational unit: Earning their stripes against the Vietnam War

Younger than the previous group (born between 1944 and 1949) the interviewees in this second generational unit joined the militant sphere after the end of the Algerian War but before 1968. Although certain profiles are relatively close to the collective profiles presented above, the French political context between 1963 and 1967 left specific imprints. Here we primarily see the opposition to the Vietnam War, which operated as a catalyst for the shift to militant action, with once again substantial differences depending on the social, religious and political origins of these future ’68ers.
II.1 Students from right-wing Catholic families against the Vietnam War
The first micro-generational unit in this group covers interviewees born between 1945 and 1948 in right-wing, provincial, upper-class and middle-class families. They had a Catholic education (some were Scouts), went to university between 1964 and 1966, and were relatively uninterested in politics at the time. They had their first contact with activism through the student unions (UNEF) and some went on to become involved in the JEC (such as Marie-Madeleine), and entered a student milieu that was heavily mobilised against the Vietnam War.

In 1968 they were students at provincial universities and participated in the events of May-June alongside the PSU, without being party members. The crisis provided them with political socialisation by awareness raising, resulting in significant political, professional, and personal effects. Politically, their participation in May ’68 established a lasting affiliation with the left, and most were union activists (CFDT) throughout their career. The women in this micro-unit participated actively in the feminist movement from the beginning of the 1970s. Marie-Madeleine for example set up the MLAC in Dijon with a friend, and helped perform clandestine abortions until they were legalised. Members of this group also participated in the protests on the Larzac plateau, as well as in the anti-nuclear struggles.

On a professional level, some turned towards teaching (appreciated for its altruistic dimension and opposed to the much decried position of manager). Others became community or youth educators, working with marginalised populations, as a way of perpetuating their “activism through their profession.” The relative exposure of feminism led to impacts in the private sphere (challenges to the gendered division of labour in the family environment), but these remained moderate. They did not, for instance, lead to radical rejection of the family institution, and only rarely to experiences in communal living. Most of these interviewees now vote Green, and are members of environmental associations.

II.2 Students from left-wing bourgeois backgrounds who became political organisers
Born between 1948 and 1950, this micro-generational unit brings together interviewees from Jewish (or Protestant) families and/or communists, from upper-class backgrounds, who inherited a feeling of belonging to a

84 Born in 1946 in a middle-class Catholic family from the Jura region in France, her father was an engineer and her mother was a housewife.
persecuted minority as part of their family heritage. This feeling took on a
political dimension as early as the lycée where they became student activists
against the Vietnam War. For Johanna, who grew up in the United States,
it was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)\footnote{85} that was
the site of her politicisation, before protesting against the Vietnam War. As
soon as she arrived in Paris in 1966 she joined a Trotskyist inspired National
Vietnam Committee (CVN).

These interviewees joined the JCR shortly after its creation in 1967
and were active militants at the time of the events of May ’68. They were
then young students, in a phase of indetermination (social, professional,
matrimonial); the full range of possibilities were thus open to them. The
political crisis thus led to a political socialisation by conversion. They dropped
their studies (or continued intermittently) in order to dedicate themselves
exclusively to far-left activism. Johanna thus became a paid staff member
at Rouge (the LCR newspaper) from 1970 to 1975, whilst also an activist
with MLAC. Gérard became a party organiser for the LCR between 1969
and 1984 (see Chapter 2).

The impacts of this involvement on the family are significant. Feminist
commitments, as well as the repercussions of activist involvement on the
private sphere led to many relationship breakdowns. On a long-term profes-
sional level, downward mobility was a consequence of this extreme form
of engagement on the far left. After he left his paid position at the LCR,
Gérard managed to become a (casual) teacher at an architecture school, but
not without some difficulty. Johanna went through a series of causal jobs
(as a secretary, as an English teacher) whilst still an activist with the LCR
from 1975 to 1979, before becoming a party organiser at the International
Communist Organisation (OCI) between 1979 and 1985. After spending
two years in Brazil, and working as an activist with the Brazilian Worker’s
Party, Johanna stopped her full-time activism at the end of the 1980s: “I had
no money and two small children.”

Today, the members of this micro-unit regularly attend demonstrations,
vote for far-left candidates, and remain involved in various social movements.
Some are still card-carrying members at the LCR. These trajectories are
extreme cases that shed light on the social conditions for the perpetuation of
radical political involvement. Professional political activism proved to be a
(temporary) solution that preserved these actors from the inevitable tensions

\footnote{85} Johanna was born in 1950 to a university lecturer and an American actor, both Jewish and
Communists. Doug McAdam sets out the history and role of the SNCC in the engagement of
young students in the civil rights movement in America (Mc Adam 1988).
between the expectations of the professional sphere and the activist sphere (which was often the source of disengagement from activism). Johanna's trajectory, however, reminds us just how much the scarcity of financial reward from far-left activism in the 1980s, and the domestic constraints linked to caring for young children, throw into question the perpetuation of revolutionary projects. 86

II.4 Teachers from working-class backgrounds who never stopped being activists

The last micro-unit 87 in this group covers first-generation intellectuals, born between 1944 and 1948 in left-wing (or apolitical) working-class families. They became activists during the student movements against the Vietnam War whilst they were at university, within UNEF or in Vietnam Committees (primarily the Trotskyist CVN). The state of the political conjuncture in 1966-1967 led to many of them joining the JCR. All participated actively in the events of May-Jun '68, which produced political socialisation by reinforcement for them, to the extent that the political effects were accompanied by professional effects (and sometimes also familial effects). Politically, most of these activists were members of the LCR (or the PSU) in the wake of May '68, whilst still remaining active in the union (generally the teachers' unions).

This micro-generational unit, characterised by its far-left activism (political leftism) remained relatively immune to the various effects of the counterculture in the years after the events. We can attribute this to the strong union involvement that provided a channel for their activism which did not run dry after 1972, unlike involvement in the far left. This group of trajectories, of these militant teachers, is primarily characterised by the remarkable continuity of their activism. Indeed, beyond the teachers' unions that they remained active in (some participated in the creation of the union Sud, others joined it later), they also joined organisations like Attac, Palestine support networks, or committees advocating for the “No” vote in the 2005 referendum on the European constitution. Today they continue to vote for far-left (or PCF) candidates.

These trajectories are thus heuristic in grasping the conditions that are required to perpetuate activism (and far-left political preferences). In fact,

86 She wrote: “I would love to be an active militant, but the need to earn money, the lack of a retirement, and the fact that I still have school-aged children, all prevent me.”

87 Micro-unit II.3, which concerns women from middle-class backgrounds who became feminists and activists against the Vietnam War, was presented above.
because they spent their careers entirely in the public sector (teaching or research) these activists never had to confront the management positions encountered by those in the private sector. They were thus relatively well protected against the contradictions that other interviewees experienced between their convictions and the everyday realities of the professional environment. Moreover, their professional trajectories were all the more compatible with the perpetuation of militant activities in that they had a significant amount of free time.

Third generational unit: Interviewees politicised with May ’68

The three micro-units in this last generational ensemble concern interviewees who had no experiences of activism prior to May ’68. In these profiles, the religious and political orientation of one’s parents, as well as one’s own gender appear even more decisive than for the previous profiles. Indeed, most of the micro-units described here encountered the political event at a particularly impressionable age, when everything seemed possible (at least subjectively), where no political, professional or long-term matrimonial experience had served to stabilise the interviewees on their paths to their probable destinies. As a result, the destabilising effect of the political crisis was amplified.

III.1 Feminism and communitarian utopias among the middle classes

Born between 1947 and 1952, the interviewees brought together in this micro-unit come from middle (and sometimes upper) classes. They have left-wing or apolitical parents. In the 1970s, all of them participated in the critical renewal of everyday life and experimented with various communitarian utopias. However, for some this communal experience was political and was accompanied by standpoints in the 1970s protest space (1\textsuperscript{st} sub-profile), whereas others cultivated a much greater distance from politics (2\textsuperscript{nd} sub-profile).

From the refusal of parental authority to the politicisation of everyday life

Sons and daughters of small business owners, teachers, unionists, telephone company employees, communist sympathisers, writers etc.; these first interviewees were primarily high school students or in the first year of university in 1968. Women are over-represented in this group, most of them suffering from the tension between the political progressiveness of their parents and their conservative education.
Roberte, for example, wrote: “I’d been waiting for just that, for 1968.” In just a few words she summarised the encounter between the collective crisis of 1968 and the individual trajectories of these women who broke away from their families, and increasingly couldn’t cope with the models of femininity which they were assigned. For these young women challenging authority in the family or in school, May ’68 was the opportunity to politicise their taste for protest, according to the *matrix of statutory incoherencies*. Active during May ’68, these women became close to far-left factions or anarchist movements, which were the only ones with a political programme that enabled them to oppose their parents (often specifically the father figure). Anne emphasises that: “In all these groups, I immediately felt closest to the Maos [...] I have to say that I chose a political group that my father was deeply allergic to.”

For these respondents, the political crisis was responsible for a *political socialisation by conversion* to the extent that it permanently altered their political, professional and private trajectories. Indeed, many of them abandoned their studies shortly after the events, thus rejecting the school institution along with the professional expectations awaiting them, in order to put their dispositions for protest at the disposal of various communitarian utopias. These young adults sought to establish “emancipated spaces,” utopian micro-societies in which countercultural norms could be experimented with (norms to do with gender, conjugal relations, education, consumerism etc.). Politically, they became involved in feminist and environmental movements in the early 1970s.

After many years of unemployment, communal living and countercultural activism, some of these respondents returned to university, others joined professional spaces that were as then still unregulated and non-institutionalised (as youth workers or trainers with the employment services, as puppeteers, or running bookshops or alternative restaurants). They were active in support networks for undocumented immigrants and for other vulnerable populations more generally – indeed their chaotic professional trajectory brought them close to these people in many ways – but they were also involved in demonstrations against nuclear energy, or in defence of organic agriculture. Like many of the interviewees who were students with no prior activist experience in May ’68, they participated in less institutionalised forms of activism in the 1970s, and now regularly vote for the Greens candidates.

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88 Born in 1948, her father was a diplomat and her mother a teacher. Roberte always felt out of step with and “cast off by her parents”. As a child and adolescent, she suffered from the fact that they were unconcerned about her future at school, by contrast with her brothers.

89 Extract from an interview with Anne (see Chapter 5).
Utopian communities and distance from the political sphere
Slightly younger than those above, the “apolitical” interviewees in this second sub-profile were still high school students in 1968, and broke away from their families, or from the school system early on. Many of them were opposed to their parents on political grounds, and some (notably the children of Communist activists) seem to have been immersed in politics throughout their childhoods, such that by 1968 they were all quite fed up with it and now removed from the political sphere. Yet, although they were not active in the events, the political crisis had significant biographical impacts on them in the years that followed.

Several of them abandoned their studies to move to the countryside and experiment with communal living. Yet here their utopian aspirations were not politically founded, and many of them did not vote (at least up until the 1980s). Although they were sociologically similar to the population in the previous sub-profile, it seems that they encountered May ’68 with relatively fewer political, social and academic resources, and that the political crisis was not so much a collective opportunity to politicise situations of imbalance, as an individual opportunity for resolving identity crises. As Françoise says, “political discourse took hold of May ’68 to make it into something political. But May ’68 was in fact something else, which was never said, which can’t be said. Everyone found their own personal stories in it, their own remedies and their way of living, of being.”

May ’68 was also the opportunity to change one’s life, without necessarily aiming to change the world. After several years of living on the margins of society, these interviewees managed to reintegrate through manual labour for the men (refrigeration mechanic, construction work, works director) and through education and care professions for the women (youth and cultural workers, psychological nurses etc.). Today most of them vote for the PS, but they maintain a significant distance from the political sphere. Yet they continue to stand out in their specific cultural habits, even their eating habits – practicing yoga, vegetarianism, everyday environmentalism and a certain taste for the esoteric (attraction to Buddhism and various spiritual gurus such as Jiddu Krishnamurti).

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90 Françoise was born in 1947. She is the daughter of a left-wing hotel-keeper and a right-wing bank employee, both atheists.

91 Some were even involved in spiritual communities, such as Marinette who was a member of the Universal White Federation (recognised as a cult) from the late 1970s to today.

92 The initiation proposed by Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986), an Indian philosopher who called for a radical transformation of the individual resonated particularly strongly with these interviewees’ expectations.
III.2 Trotskism and counterculture among the youngest participants

The second micro-unit that was politicised with May ’68 brings together interviewees of both sexes, born between 1949 and 1954, who were thus generally still at high school in 1968 and who became activists after the events in far-left and predominantly Trotskyist organisations.93

The children of left-wing workers, telecommunications employees and Communist Jews who ran small businesses, these interviewees inherited a left-leaning political conscience in the family environment, along with dispositions for action that they put into practice during May ’68, essentially within the high school action committees (Comité d’Action Lycéen – CAL). Depending on the local political context in their high school, these students joined either the Communist youth JC or the Trotskyist youth JCR, and actively participated in the occupation of their school buildings. The CAL also played a central role in the political socialisation of these interviewees and in the forms of activism that they took up after the events (the “Red Circles”94 and the JCR). Their appreciation of Marxist discourse and the experience of active militancy during the events of May-June ’68 constituted resources that enabled them to collectively join an organisation like the LCR – especially given that it was newly formed which meant they would have greater control over its future.

In the years that followed, these young revolutionary activists participated in the movements associated with the critical renovation of everyday life: feminism, environmentalism and so forth. Some even left the LCR to go “back-to-the-land” or to try communal living in the early 1970s, whilst others continued their activism there whilst also becoming involved in feminist and women’s rights movements (particularly with the MLAC) and in unionism.

May ’68 also caused significant upheaval in their professional trajectories, given that in the years after the events, revolutionary activism was their primary concern. Some dropped out of school or university early, others changed to more politicised courses or universities. They became teachers, youth workers, journalists or artists in the 1970s. David studied humanities in Montpellier and was an activist with the OCI between 1971 and 1973, before becoming an actor “to be free in [his] choices and lifestyle.” He

93 Only the sub-profile from the working class is presented here (they represent the majority), but there is a smaller secondary sub-profile that draws on children from more affluent, Catholic and right-wing backgrounds who, for those interviewed here, were more drawn to the organisation “Revolution!” (a far-left Mao-spontex organisation).

94 After the JCR was disbanded in 1968, the sympathisers and activists came together in these “Red Circles” which were often held in senior schools with the objective of politicising young students.
experimented with life in a commune for several years, participated in the demonstrations in Larzac, and has been sporadically involved in artistic circles ever since. Those who became teachers were involved in the union throughout their careers, but most left the LCR in the second half of the 1970s. They were involved with the union Sud, the support networks for undocumented immigrants, and several are still members of the network Education Without Borders (Réseau éducation sans frontières – RESF). Today most vote for far-left parties.

For this “leftist” micro-generational unit, the events of May-June ’68 thus provided political socialisation by conversion, radically altering their political (they joined the protest space with May ’68), professional (dropping out of studies early, converting dispositions for protest into the professional sphere) and personal (redefinition of male/female roles, parenting norms, communal life etc.) trajectories.

This micro-unit shares many traits with the interviewees in I.2 above (upward social mobility, active political leftism). But unlike this first group, these interviewees also participated in countercultural leftist and in the feminist and environmental struggles of the 1970s. In this instance, their age and where they were in their careers as activists when they encountered May ’68 were decisive factors in this difference. May ’68 and the political leftism of the years that followed (up to 1972) concluded a cycle of activism for the older group. But for this micro-unit, who were slightly younger, May ’68 marked the beginning of their activist career, at a point when anything was biographically possible.

III.3 “First-generation graduates” activists through their professions95

Born between 1947 and 1954, this profile only covers interviewees from Nantes,96 who are children of railway workers, or low-level public servants, and whose parents were Catholic and left-wing. They had a religious upbringing and a minority became members of the JOC. They were the first in their families to obtain a high school qualification, but did not continue their studies any further (unlike the first-generation intellectuals we have seen up until now). In 1968, they were at high school or in their first year of university. They participated in the events of May-June ’68 in association with the PSU in Nantes.

95 Micro-unit III.5 has already been discussed in the section on feminism, and micro-unit III.4 will not be presented here because there were no lasting impacts on the trajectories of its members. As such it does not constitute a micro-generational unit in the sense that we have outlined here. See the table in the appendix for details.
96 These are the interviewees who enrolled their children in the Freinet school in Nantes.
For this sub-profile, May '68 played a role of political socialisation by awareness raising, radically altering their political and professional trajectories (and for some also their familial trajectories). Indeed, having become politicised with May '68, they had to choose their professional orientation in the wake of the events. For these first-generation graduates, who had just pushed open the doors to higher education, political aspirations would play a decisive role in their professional orientation. They thus imported their dispositions for activism into areas like sociocultural community work, and work with disadvantaged groups (specialist teachers). Alongside this, they were active in neighbourhood organisations, in organisations supporting immigrant workers (such as GASPRON), in anti-nuclear struggles, and were also involved in unionism (CGT/CFDT) like Louis, whose trajectory was discussed in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

How did participation in a political crisis like May '68 influence individual trajectories and lead to the formation of “political generations?” This question has been the guiding theme of the reflections and analysis developed up until this point. Certain responses may be put forward here by way of conclusion.

We cannot understand what produces activism without also analysing what this activism is the product of, and tracing this back to the roots of this engagement. This is the first finding of our analysis. Conceptualisation in terms of generation – which associates a founding event with a socialising effect which would provoke similar disruptions in the trajectories of all those who participated in it, conceals what happens prior to, during, and after this event. In other words, the notion of generation does not help us to understand how the political event acts on individual trajectories. The trajectories of the interviewees who participated in the events of May-June '68, but who were not durably influenced by it serve to remind us that participation alone cannot be held responsible for the long-term establishment of political opinions and behaviour.

It is therefore not only the short term of the event itself that leads to the destabilising effect described by Karl Mannheim, but perhaps especially its effects in terms of shifts in social and friendship networks, openings into new political, professional, amical or romantic connections. These results

GASPROM was a group to welcome and assist immigrant workers and was a local branch of the Association for Solidarity with Immigrant Workers (ASTI).
advocate for a non-mechanical interpretation of the role of the political event in the formation of generational units. The micro-units of generation laid out in this chapter are therefore not the result of participation in May ’68 alone. Indeed, this participation is itself engendered by prior history – both individual and collective – which is expressed in the short term of the event, and which depends on biographical availability, place, sex, the degree of exposure, meetings in the context of the crisis etc.

Finally, the study allows us to understand how an event can destabilise (or not) certain trajectories. Suspending routine social relations in a context of crisis creates a situation where the realm of biographical possibilities becomes radically opened, which in turns leads to the various socialisation effects that we have seen over the chapters. We can hypothesise that they are the result of the experience of social deregulation specific to these critical moments, which leads to upheavals in the sense of limits and to the emergence of new aspirations. These new expectations however run up against the objective (im)possibilities of satisfying them. With the few exceptions that we have seen in the previous chapters, the event thus produces disappointed aspirations; it increases the hiatus between expectations and satisfactions. Various individual and collective responses are thus developed to face up to these imbalances and to maintain personal integrity. These results encourage us to return to the question of “relative deprivation,” which has been rightly criticised from a new perspective by various authors in the sociology of social movements.98 Indeed, the studies that draw on the notion of frustration due to relative deprivation often explain it by downward social mobility, and all-to-quickly consider it a determining factor in activism. Yet activism in May ’68 led to a range of different forms of unease and distress, associated with downward mobility. Downward mobility, along with relative deprivation, therefore become consequences of activism in May ’68 and not causes (Siméant, 1998, p. 421). This, in turn, confirms the importance of investigating the question of disappointed hopes99 without miserabilism, as a source of the multiple forms of mobilisation (individual and collective) that emerged to confront it.

98 Which emphasised, through the work of numerous researchers, that there were always sufficient frustrations to explain mobilisation, and condemned the miserabilism often associated with theories of downward mobility and relative frustration.

99 This is also defended by Christophe Traïni, for whom “it is important to protect oneself from miserabilist implications that are often associated with theories of downward mobility or relative frustration. Individuals affected by a pragmatic paradoxical situation are not necessarily invalids, indigents or afflicted by a social trajectory that resembles a descent into hell” (Traïni, 2009, p. 106).