

Understanding 1968 – The Case of Brest

In September 2006, the then French Interior Minister and future President declared that May 1968 had ‘enterré partout, dans la politique, dans l'éducation, dans la société, une inversion des valeurs et une pensée unique dont les jeunes d'aujourd'hui sont les principales victimes’ (Leparmentier 2006, p. 2.). The idea that the '68 events have had a negative impact on French society is just one of several notions that have become increasingly prominent in the way the events are commonly perceived. Examining the history of May/June 1968, Kristin Ross points to the paradox of an event whose coverage is unprecedented yet which still remains shrouded in obscurity (Ross 2002). Sustained and varied debate has revealed the continued relevance of, and interest in, 1968.¹ However, it has done little to address the lack of detailed historical analysis of many aspects of the events and has thus perpetuated the dominance of what has become a widely-held narrow and stereotypical memory of 1968.

One of the most glaring gaps in what Isabelle Sommier and Ross have described as the ‘official history’ of 1968 is the lack of an adequate view of how the events were experienced in different regional contexts (Sommier 1994, p. 74). Ross comments thus on the lack of regional coverage: ‘By some accounts, provincial France saw more violent and sustained demonstrations than did Paris during May and June, but this is not represented in the official story’ (Ross 2002, p. 9). Sommier points to the dearth of focus beyond the capital as just one of three characteristics that have seen the events stripped of their complexities: ‘68 finit par se décliner en trois mots: mai, Paris, étudiant’ (Sommier 1994, p. 65). Vincent Porhel commented on how the Parisian focus has monopolised representations of May-June 1968: ‘Dans les commémorations on n’a toujours pas bougé, c’était mai 68 à Paris. Ça commencé à la rue Gay Lussac et ça a fini au Ministère du Travail’ (Porhel 2005).

Taking as a case study the events in Brest in 1968, and drawing on interviews with some of the prime movers in this movement, this article will investigate the increasingly prominent idea that to focus exclusively on the events of May 1968 in Paris is to distort and misrepresent what was essentially a national movement. An analysis of the contribution of this regional revolt to the exceptional nature of the general '68 crisis will highlight the significance of what happened beyond the capital. It will question accepted versions of the history of May '68 by contrasting the

conditions that brought about the revolt in Brest and suggest a much more fragmented picture complicated by specific local issues.

The importance of Paris as the spark that would bring about revolts around the country is not in question. As Edmond Monange comments: 'Il n'y aurait pas eu de mai 68 brestois s'il n'y avait pas eu de gauchistes à Nanterre, des échauffourées à la Sorbonne, des barricades sur le boul'Mich' (Monange 1998, p. 21). Nonetheless, Bernard Boudic President of the Association générale des étudiants brestois (AGEB) in 1968, a prominent member of the Brestois branch of the UNEF and a major protagonist in these regional events, fails to recognise his 1968 in the way the events are commonly portrayed, lending weight to the argument that this 'official history' does not tell the whole story. As Boudic commented when asked how he considered the current over-emphasis on Paris: 'C'est historiquement une erreur. C'est une erreur qui rend fausse l'interprétation de ces événements. On ne prend pas tout en compte et donc forcément on a une idée fausse de la chose. C'est étonnant. C'est choquant au point de vue de la raison' (Boudic 2005). An examination of the conditions that led to the Brestois revolt together with an analysis of its nature will help in assessing to what extent Boudic's claim is justified.

Local Circumstances

When describing the inability of the state to come to terms with what was happening in the early weeks of the '68 events, accounts often refer to the surprise element (Le Goff 1998, p. 59). The unexpectedness of the revolt adds to the difficulty commentators have explaining why it took hold. Many analyses set the revolt in the context of the great stability that characterised France in the late 60s.² A common narrative is the following. In the late 1960s, France basked in the comfort of economic wealth and stability. Having embraced the consumer society, Gaullist France was very much in the process of making up lost ground in its bid to again be amongst the most powerful nations of the world. During the decade following General de Gaulle's accession to power, France had experienced a period of political stability it had not known for many years. Having benefited from the advantages of continuous economic expansion and become accustomed to material wealth and comfort, the baby-boom generation revolted against the prevailing social conservatism (Lefebvre 1998, p. 91). De Gaulle personified resistance to change and appeared to prevent socio-political developments evident elsewhere in the world. Inspirational figures such as Castro,

Mao and Guevara provided romantic alternatives to the humdrum and conservative nature of the Gaullist Republic (Dreyfus-Armand et al 2000, p. 27). The stark contrast between the life experiences of those born during or just after the War and their elders led to a generation clash (Le Goff 1998, p. 33). Not having experienced the War, occupation and reconstruction, as their parents and grandparents had, young people did not see the need for a strong leader such as de Gaulle. Furthermore, accustomed to relative comfort, they had no difficulty in rebelling against a system their elders had struggled long and hard to put in place. It should be noted that this narrative is, more often than not, set in the backdrop of the capital, with conditions of young Parisians coming to represent those of the entire nation.

A spoilt generation rebelling at a time of great economic expansion and full employment seems ironic now at a time when such comforts have disappeared. As France struggles with economic and social instability it is very easy to point the finger, as Sarkozy and others have done, at a rebellious generation and its ingratitude during a time that has been portrayed as one that many would long for today. However, the apparent prosperity that preceded and arguably provoked the May '68 outbursts was not present everywhere.

Brittany's isolation, underdevelopment and cultural differences were long a feature of its particular relationship with Paris. Material destruction coupled with the presence of collaborationist elements during the Second World War only served to heighten the region's detachment. Together with an exodus of young people - a problem since the mid 19th century³ -, a severe blow had been dealt to the reputation and morale of all things Breton. Post-war reconstruction and government delocalisation programmes (due in large part to lobbying on behalf of the Comité d'étude et de liaison des intérêts bretons – CELIB) saw the beginning of a turnaround for the region. However, frustration was evident as in the 1950s and 60s Brittany experienced many violent protests by the farming sector over the pricing of produce⁴ and the re-emergence of extremist elements with terrorist groups such as the Front de Libération de la Bretagne (FLB)⁵. Basic amenities were lacking, unemployment was high and, as Jean-Luc Poussier describes, a real gap in prosperity between Brittany and the rest of France was evident with Breton salaries 30% less than the national average: 'Brossé à grands traits, le portrait de cette Bretagne sortant de la guerre est celui d'une région en perte de vitesse. Tous les indicateurs le montrent: forte

émigration, sous-industrialisation, revenue par habitant inférieur de 30% à la moyenne française, productivité moyenne par habitant la plus faible de France [...]’ (Poussier 1997, p. 53).

By the late 1960s, the principal concern was regional unemployment, and it was this issue, more than any other, that would bring about the most important action. This was exemplified by the mass march and meeting on 8 May 1968 under the title ‘L’Ouest veut vivre.’ This rally, supported by all trade unions and attracting participants from across the entire region, had been organised independently of the forthcoming events of May. In fact, the objectives of this day of action were set out in a meeting between representatives of the working-class, farmers and teachers on 13 March 1968, calling for, ‘La défense de l’emploi. La garantie des ressources. L’amélioration du pouvoir d’achat.’⁶ Mass rallies against poor economic prospects hardly tally with the commonly held idea that the 1968 events exploded during a period of widespread economic, political and social stability. Indeed, the element of surprise that is said to have greeted the crisis of 1968 was almost completely absent in Brittany. As Jacqueline Sainclivier argues: ‘[D]ans le cadre de la Bretagne, on peut dire que l’ampleur de ‘mai 1968’ ne devait pas surprendre, les événements de Paris jouent un rôle de résonance mais le ‘mai 68’ breton n’arrive pas comme ‘un coup de tonnerre dans un ciel serein’, des mécontentements de tous ordres et dans de nombreux domaines existent’ (Sainclivier 1989, p. 430).

Brest was, in 1968, a microcosm of the general difficulties of Breton life at the time. The city had been almost entirely destroyed during the Second World War because of its strategic military position. In the immediate aftermath of the War, the rebuilding of the city after its virtual destruction provided employment for the population. However, once the hasty reconstruction programme was completed, unemployment became a permanent feature (Skol Vreizh 1983, p. 184). Geographical isolation made it harder for the region to keep pace with a rapidly modernising France. With Georges Lombard (from the centre-right formation Progrès and Démocratie Moderne) as Mayor since 1959, Brest benefited from some important examples of decentralisation (in particular the establishment of the Compagnie de télégraphie sans fil (CSF) factory). However, despite these improvements, the city remained under-funded, isolated and under-equipped. Emigration was endemic throughout Brittany but was particularly prominent in Brest. In 1968 the population of the Finistère department was 768,929 – 4,000 below the 1901 total of 773,014.⁷

Edmond Monange, whose first year as a university lecturer in Brest happened to coincide with the events, outlines the problem as follows: 'Le désenclavement reste toujours imparfait, la décentralisation, vigoureuse au début de la décennie, s'essouffle et l'emploi paraît beaucoup plus menacé qu'ailleurs, bien des jeunes devant se résoudre à l'exode pour trouver du travail' (Monange 1998, p. 12). The conditions of higher education in Brest were also distinctive.

At this time, Brest lacked a university. It did have a CLU (Collège littéraire universitaire - created in 1960) and a CLS (Collège scientifique universitaire - 1959) both of which were dependent on the University of Rennes. The student corpus was made up mostly by people from relatively modest backgrounds, many of whom were the first from their family to be given the opportunity to go to university. This was critically important in determining their attitudes towards the system and thus influenced their behaviour during the events. As Vincent Porhel puts it: 'Il faut voir ce que c'était l'étudiant breton. Ce n'était pas des étudiants parisiens, l'étudiant breton, il sort du disciplinaire, une éducation catholique, les parents sont ouvriers, agriculteurs. Pour eux l'université ce n'est pas la rigolade. Si jamais ils ratent leurs examens ils n'ont pas droit à un second tour. Pour eux la fac c'est pour trouver du boulot et pour trouver du boulot vite. On n'a pas du tout le même profil que l'étudiant parisien. Ils ne sont pas là pour faire la révolution' (Porhel 2005). While Porhel could be said to be invoking a rather stereotypical view of Parisian students here, his portrait of the Brest student body is telling. This profile together with the relative novelty of the establishment meant that there was little in the way of militant student activity. There were student associations such as, L'Union des Etudiants Communistes (UEC), La Jeunesse Etudiante Bretonne (JEB) or La Jeunesse Etudiante Catholique (JEC). However, such groups had very few members and little influence. The one organisation that seemed to provide a common denominator was L'AGEB. This regional branch of l'UNEF, headed by Bernard Boudic, was the most influential of student organisations and would go on to play a pivotal role in the events of May-June 1968.

The CLU de Brest had distinct difficulties but was also experiencing the effects of the general frustration making itself felt in universities around the country.⁸ Critically understaffed and lacking in facilities, the Brestois CLU – like many higher education establishments elsewhere in France at the time – was struggling to meet the demands of the baby-boom. However, on top of these more general complications, it

was grappling with other difficulties including incomplete courses and the frequent absence of teaching staff – problems that were attributed to the over-dependence on the University of Rennes. As Monange comments: ‘La dimension locale n’est [...] nullement absente: le souci de développer les fonctions universitaires à Brest, de diversifier les formations et d’abolir la tutelle rennaise est permanente’ (Monange 1998, p. 16). The Brest situation is a perfect example of the two-pronged problems that beset Brittany. The coming together of local and national tensions would create a fertile ground for revolt: ‘A la veille des événements, cet état de fait pèse d’un poids très lourd dans le malaise étudiant’ (Porhel 1988, p. 25). Whilst the national problems were unquestionably important, such regional specificities must be taken into account when trying to understand how May-June 1968 was experienced differently there. As Vincent Porhel argues: ‘A Brest comme à Paris, le malaise étudiant existe, mais la poudre et l’étincelle n’étant pas de même nature, l’explosion n’a pas les mêmes effets’ (Porhel 1988, p. 9). As a result of this distinctly different set of circumstances, the events that took place, their mobilising factors and the composition of the movement in Brest were to be very much in contrast to those usually considered today as vital.

Activism

Upon hearing news of what had been happening in Paris at the beginning of May, the then generally apolitical Brestois student population followed the AGEB call for a strike on 6 May in protest against police brutality in the capital. To everyone’s surprise, this initiative was strongly supported, with teaching staff particularly active alongside students (Porhel 1988, p. 46). Attention then turned to the mass demonstration organised for 8 May. As headlines in the local press reveal, the success of the demonstration was not limited to Brest: ‘Plus de 100 000 ouvriers, paysans, étudiants ont manifesté pour la survie de leur région’ (*Ouest France* 9 May 1968, p. 6). As explained by Annie Jeffroy, despite the level of frustration, the demonstration was marked in particular by its discipline and lack of violence: ‘A 14h, Brest reprend son aspect normal : les embarras de la circulation recommencent, la journée du 8 mai s’est déroulée de bout en bout dans l’ordre’ (Jeffroy 1987, p. 57). This show of strength hardened the resolve of the Brestois students who continued their strike in support of their Parisian comrades (Monange 1998, p. 15).

However, from 8 May, inspired by the success of the ‘L’Ouest Veut Vivre’ rally, the students in Brest, initially influenced by what was happening in Paris, soon

began to focus on local issues – in particular the predicament of the CLU (Porhel 1988, p. 54). After ‘La nuit des barricades’ in Paris on 10 May, occupations began in Brest with contacts being made between the striking students and university staff as well as with workers and their trade unions. The significance of this is noted by Jeffroy: ‘Dans l’immédiat, le caractère important de ces événements paraît effectivement être l’union qui se développe entre les étudiants et les organisations syndicales ouvrières et d’enseignants’ (Jeffroy 1987, p. 60). As at a national level, the one-day strike on 13 May in protest against police brutality soon took the form in Brest of an all-out general strike (Jeffroy 1987, p. 93). Over the course of the next three weeks, Brest was gradually brought to a standstill with daily rallies, general assemblies and the politicisation of the movement (Monange 1998, p. 18). The ’68 events in Brest also saw the participation of the farming community, a sector of the society that until then had preferred to remain independent and certainly would not have wanted to be aligned with any student movement. However, when the strike began to create major practical difficulties, particularly in terms of food supply, the farming community was on hand to donate some of its produce and to participate in its distribution (Monange 1998, p. 17).

In Brest neither the Grenelle accords nor de Gaulle’s second address reduced the determination of the Bretons to keep their movement alive (Jeffroy 1987, p. 139). Interestingly, as in the capital, a huge pro-Gaullist demonstration took place in Brest following the General’s radio address on 30 May. This demonstration of support of the Gaullist regime took place on 1 June and provided an opportunity, as was the case in the capital, for the ‘silent majority’ to claim back the streets. The fact that it coincided with another demonstration in favour of the movement reveals a further example of the restrained nature of the revolt, from both sides. As Monange describes, meticulous planning allowed the opposing sides to march around the streets of Brest without a hint of trouble: ‘C’est un étonnant chassé-croisé où chaque camp prend soin d’éviter l’adversaire, montrant ainsi que, de part et d’autre, la prudence et la sagesse l’emportent sur le fanatisme et l’exaltation’ (Monange 1998, p. 20). Nonetheless, as a return to work began in Paris and around the country, it was only a matter of time before the movement in Brest followed suit. Slowly but surely, workers began to drift back to their factories. The strike ended when, on 21 June, the workers at the CSF returned to work.

Throughout France, many sectors of society were involved in the '68 events, and in that respect Brest was no different. However, closer examination reveals how local circumstances created a different dynamic in terms of the movement's composition. This stemmed from particular objectives related to the regional context that in turn explains how the forms of action employed were different from those commonly associated with the '68 events. For example, as well as being heavily centred on Paris, the dominant narrative is characterised by several concerns, one of which is the depiction of a lack of student/working-class fraternisation (Johnson 1972). Many analyses refer to the turning away of students at the gates of the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt – the fiefdom of working-class militancy and bastion of the Communist CGT – as indicative of the complete failure of students and workers to unite.⁹ The impression given is one of a highly fragmented movement. The divorce between the student and workers' movements is often explained by the very different motivations that caused opposing sections of the population to take part in the revolt. For example, the student movement is commonly depicted as irresponsible, based on utopian ideals with no serious consideration for an alternative to the system it was opposing (Goetz 1993). The spectacular nights of violence in the Latin Quarter, the hedonistic nature of the occupied Sorbonne and the now iconic slogans such as *Il est interdit d'interdire* or *Sous les pavés la plage*, are amongst the most enduring images of the 1968 events. Furthermore, the actions and declarations of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Jacques Sauvageot and Alain Geismar are portrayed as representative of what was happening on a nationwide basis with the implication that regional movements developed very much in response to events in the capital (Martelli 1988, pp. 62-65).

In contrast with this image, Brestois students were extremely pragmatic and realistic in what they hoped to achieve. When the strike began on 6 May in the CLU, it was very much in line with the nationwide protest concerning Parisian events. However, as the crisis unfolded, the Brestois student movement distanced itself from what was occurring in the capital. In Porhel's words, 'au début ils vont suivre, après ils vont se décaler et ce qui se fait à l'intérieur de l'université va être beaucoup plus particulier' (Porhel 2005). A *commission paritaire* was set up comprising students, teachers and non-teaching staff, with the aim of discussing and putting together suggestions on future reform of the university system. It had specific objectives from the start: 'Les premières discussions s'engagèrent sur des thèmes proprement universitaires: organisation des enseignements, des examens, formation pédagogique

et technologique, débouchés. Puis on en vint aux problèmes de structures de l'université. Deux ou trois projets ont été élaborés et sont entrés en application dès la fin de l'année universitaire' (Le Roux 1968, p. 36). The Brestois proposals were based around three key principles: freedom, autonomy and joint management. Their ideas included the scrapping of end of year examinations, the introduction of continuous assessment, the dismantling of the strict hierarchy that so dominated the archaic system of the time and the adaptation of higher education establishments to the needs of local economies.¹⁰ For Edmond Monange, this added a particular edge to events in Brest: 'Il y a un point beaucoup plus concret, je dirais beaucoup plus réaliste, à la limite beaucoup plus matériel qu'à Paris y compris dans le mouvement étudiant' (Monange 2004). The utopian ideals that are said to have so dominated the atmosphere in the Sorbonne held no sway in Brest. Boudic commented thus on such differences: 'Du genre, la révolution sexuelle, il est interdit d'interdire, la chasse aux flics, de tout ça on était complètement étranger' (Boudic 2005). University occupations only took place during the day, there were no all-night debates and no slogans painted on walls or damage to the university buildings. Boudic offered some explanation for this measured approach: 'Je n'ai jamais vu un graffiti dans ces bâtiments parce qu'il y avait une attitude plus respectueuse des étudiants' (Boudic 2005).

The image of the 'student '68', during which out-of-control elements only interested in having a good time and carrying out hopelessly idealistic discussions in occupied faculties, is certainly not applicable to the situation in Brest. This can perhaps explain the very good relations between students and workers. The significance of the mistrust between the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) and Parisian students was not a significant factor in Brest where the revolt was characterised by the unity of all those involved. A vital element in explaining this factor was the relative dominance of the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT) in the region. It was, in Porhel's words, 'le syndicat de référence' (Porhel 2005). Jean le Roux (General Secretary of the AGEB in 1968) later explained that, due to the flexible attitude of the CFDT regarding the student movement, working class/student relations were generally much more productive: 'Nos relations étaient plus faciles, on était plus en phase avec des gens de la CFDT' (Le Roux 2005). Henri Didou (General secretary of the CFDT in Brest in 1968) highlighted the existence of such close relations: 'Nous, on était ouvert, avec les étudiants de gauche

on travaillait bien [...] Il y avait une bonne entente et même une bonne coordination [...] Il n'y avait pas deux mouvements mais un seul' (Didou 2005). All demonstrations in Brest were conducted on a unified basis, with workers, students, teachers, farmers and trade unions marching together and holding joint meetings. As one tract calling on the Breton population to back the 13 May demonstration indicates: 'Les revendications des travailleurs, leurs luttes, sont celles des Enseignants, des Etudiants et d'autres catégories de la population laborieuse [...] Vive l'union des travailleurs et des étudiants.'¹¹

To defuse the possibility of problems between rival trade unions, joint meetings were presided over by a student representative (in particular by Bernard Boudic), highlighting the close student/worker relationship described as absent elsewhere during the crisis. As he later explained: 'Comme les syndicats ouvriers, enseignants et paysans avaient du mal à trouver quelqu'un pour présider les manifestations on a relié ça aux étudiants' (Boudic 2005). Students were made to feel welcome in occupied factories as were workers visiting the CLU. Joint meetings were held, during which everyone was encouraged to have a say as all sides attempted to form a common platform for their demands. The workers managing the strike and occupation in the Breton CSF factory detailed how they considered student/worker contact: 'Avant même qu'E Descamps ne demande une union dans la lutte entre ouvriers et étudiants, cela s'était réalisé à la CSF. Les travailleurs de la CSF ont discuté tant avec des responsables étudiants de l'AGEB qu'avec des étudiants inorganisés. Après qu'ils aient expliqué les motifs et le sens de leur lutte, ils écoutaient le point de vue ouvrier. Chaque fois, on arrivait aux conclusions suivantes : Nous voulons plus être comme les cadres d'aujourd'hui ; Il faut se soutenir mutuellement, en permanence; Il faut multiplier les contacts, les conférences, les explications entre nous' (Syndicat Métaux Brest 1968, p. 3). Overall, the unity that characterised the '68 Brest movement is in stark contrast to the animosity between the Communist-led union (CGT) and some of the extreme left-wing elements in Paris that has come to represent student-worker relations during the events.

Finally, such unity can perhaps explain a further characteristic of the Breton '68 that would appear to set it apart from conventional representations. Despite the great frustration felt by the Breton population and the wholeheartedness with which they embraced the 1968 movement, there was virtually no violence (Monange 1998, p. 21). Daily rallies were conducted with dignity and extremely well marshalled, any

signs of disruptive elements being dealt with swiftly. As Didou remarked: ‘Ce n’était pas l’ambiance, il n’y avait pas besoin de chercher la bagarre’ (Didou 2005). A clear distinction can be drawn when we consider the serious clashes that took place in Paris and other cities that have come to characterise representations of the revolt. In Brest, and in Brittany in general, the movement had unambiguous objectives connected with the region’s own difficulties. Breton participants, recognising what their movement stood for and the strength emanating from their great unity and discipline, had no need for wanton violence. Alain Prigent who, as well as having experienced the events as a student at the *Ecole Normale* in St. Brieuc, has carried out research into the 1968 events there, commented: ‘Des organisations syndicales ont réussi à faire passer le message que ce n’était pas à travers la violence que les choses pourraient se régler’ (Prigent 2005). Furthermore, trade union leaders (such as Henri Didou) who had become accustomed to organising peaceful demonstrations, took the situation in hand: ‘Il y avait une tradition de manifestation et d’organisation des syndicats et d’action commune très forte, ce qui fait que quand il y avait une manifestation ou un mouvement, ils s’organisaient, définissaient un parcours entre tous les syndicats. Après ils allaient négocier avec la préfecture. Donc, il y avait une organisation, ce n’était pas sauvage. Les flics savaient par où ça passait. En même temps on négociait que les flics seraient à l’abri, qu’ils ne venaient pas provoquer des gens pour que ça se passe correctement et ça a existé depuis déjà pas loin de dix ans [...] Pendant le mouvement de 68, les CRS à Brest il n’y en avait pas’ (Le Roux 2005). Both sides wished to avoid the violence that had marked the 50s and 60s in Brittany instigated by frustrated elements within the farming sector and the FLB. Consequently there was an element of coordination between union leaders and the authorities.

The Brestois Contribution

While the specificities of the Brest situation might suggest an isolated set of events, the Brestois 68 did not go unnoticed and was not without consequence on a national scale. The CSF factory in Brest had the longest-running strike of the city, concluding on 21 June. However, as Le Roux pointed out, it was not just the duration but the nature of the strike and occupation which was important: ‘Il y avait des occupations d’usines, moins sans doute que dans d’autres régions, mais il y a eu des occupations particulières comme à Brest à la Thomson-CSF’ (Le Roux 2005). Upon seizing control of their factory on 20 May, the CSF workers were not content simply to down

tools and bring all activity to a halt. Determined to maintain the factory in pristine condition, they organised it along democratic lines, set up commissions and produced the results of their deliberations in a journal, *Notre combat*. As Monange told me, they established links with farmers and students, holding joint meetings during which they discussed future plans and action: 'Il y a même eu une réunion commune entre des étudiants littéraires et des représentants syndicaux de la Thomson (CSF) qui était l'entreprise la plus importante de Brest à l'époque' (Monange 2004). This meeting took place on Wednesday 22 May, and discussed at length the themes of 'démocratisation – réformes – formation professionnelle – place du cadre' (Syndicat Métaux Brest 1968, p. 3).

The striking CSF workers focused on the issues of control and participation, demanding a greater say in the overall running and management of the factory. During the occupation, strikers set up workshops and commissions on a wide range of subjects and published their findings and conclusions in *Notre Combat*. The second issue of this journal would see the *raison d'être* of these commissions explained and was responsible for this factory becoming the focus of much attention: 'La création des commissions ouvrières n'est qu'une première étape. Elle doit permettre aux travailleurs de vouloir aller plus loin dans la perspective de l'autogestion' (Centre CSF 1968, p. 2). One of the workers' major concerns was to demonstrate that they were capable of running the factory themselves and at one stage they were close to re-opening it under their control (Delale et al 1978, p. 94). Although this failed to happen, their strike was of particular significance as one of the first examples of 'autogestion'. In the years following the 1968 events, this became a buzzword and formed the bedrock of the CFDT's policy. Ten years later, the Brestois CSF factory was still a reference point for the CFDT as regards 'autogestion' (Syndicalisme 1978, p. 16). It became an example, for those promoting this notion, of a factory that put it into practice. Despite recent questions surrounding just what those concerned actually understood by the concept of 'autogestion' (Porhel 2000, pp. 379-97), the Brestois factory set an example that many workplaces and trade unions would follow during the crisis and in the ensuing years (e.g., Lip (Besançon) in 1973 (Dreyfus-Armand et al 2000, pp.405-407)).

The significance of the Brest movement can also be measured in other ways. The prudent and purposeful attitude of students, teaching staff and service personnel in the CLU de Brest as regards university reform was not without significance. From

the outset, there was a determination on the part of the *Commission paritaire* to come up with what Porhel describes as ‘un projet de réforme credible’ (Porhel 1988, p. 64) – this, arguably, was what it achieved. As well as proving to be a success in harnessing the energy of participants in Brest, the influence of the Brestois *Commission paritaire* was not limited to the local perspective. On 17-19 June 1968, the various student-teacher commissions that had been established around the country during the crisis organised a meeting in Clermont-Ferrand during which they compared each set of proposals in order to determine which could best serve the cause of the university reform movement. A team of Brestois representatives was present and among its members was Fanch Broudig who was not only an extremely important member of the Brest student movement, but has also gone on to become a highly respected and famous member of the Breton language movement, most notably known for his regular news programmes in Breton on France 2 (Broudig 2004). Amongst the wide-ranging proposed reforms, it was the one from the CLU de Brest that received most plaudits and was unanimously accepted as the most appropriate. For Monange, ‘Les représentants des différentes facs à ces assises avaient décidé de retenir comme projet de réflexion pour les assises ultérieures à Grenoble le projet brestois. Donc ça prouve que le travail qui avait été fait à Brest était quand même un travail sérieux’ (Monange 2004).

Despite the success of this meeting and that of the Brestois proposals, two factors beyond the control of those involved doomed such proposals to failure. Firstly, during a second meeting held by the various *commissions paritaires* in Grenoble, extreme left wing elements and the more pragmatic reformist movement clashed over the way forward. In the meantime, Edgar Faure, the newly appointed Minister for Education, was steadfast in his drive to complete the *loi d’orientation*. Whilst taking ideas from student groups on board – such as greater student participation and the reduced importance of examinations – and listening to what students thought,¹² Faure was determined to retain control of the reform and, given the huge Gaullist majority in the Assembly, the Brestois proposals stood little chance. Nationally, the importance of the reformist element of the university movement – often overshadowed by the actions and ideas of *gauchiste* elements – was significant in prolonging the crisis and influential in the ensuing Faure reform. The work of the Brestois *commission paritaire* was clearly an important feature of this reformist drive.

Thus, both in terms of the working-class and the university revolt, the movement in Brest provided an important model for activists elsewhere. Furthermore, as Le Roux notes, the convergence of workers and students revealed their common objectives: '[L]e travailleur demandant le droit à participer (non pas seulement à donner son avis) à l'organisation du travail et à la gestion des entreprises, l'étudiant ayant les mêmes revendications pour ce qui est de l'Université' (Le Roux 1968, p. 36). The lack of coverage or attention paid to the events in Brittany has obscured these facts. While this relative lack of interest is perhaps due to the absence of both violence and utopian politics in the Breton case, the importance of the reformist '68 and of Brest's contribution to it should not be ignored.

Conclusion

While studies of regional movements are not completely absent (Chaffard 1968; Le Madec 1988) and many of the more complete analyses of the events highlight some important regional developments,¹³ the quasi-monopolisation of the history of the 1968 events by the capital has led to an assumption that what happened in Paris was typical of what happened elsewhere. The revolt in Brest stemmed from a wholly different set of circumstances and motivations and hence the nature of the events there was particular to that region. It would seem increasingly obvious that the very selective memory of a Parisian '68 does not do justice to a highly diverse, nationwide revolt. Indeed there is growing evidence that historians are now taking this on board. Considerations of regional 1968 movements are in demand, with conferences and study groups turning their attention to how the crisis was experienced in provincial France.¹⁴ The evidence from Brest suggests that this will prove a fertile area of enquiry for our understanding of the May movement as a whole. Such developments should thus go some way to addressing the situation lamented by Monange, who continues to regret that 'les gens ont plus tendance à regarder l'écume de mai 68 plutôt que le fond de ce qui se produisait à cette époque-là, les embruns plus que les vagues' (Monange 2004).

Notes

¹ Cf, for example, Lindenberg 2002; Joffrin 2002, pp. 12-36; Frédéric 2000; Combaz 2002; Guimier and Charbonneau 2005; Gordon 2005, pp. 229-33.

² See, for example, Tarnero 1998, Martelli 1988, Weber 1988, Brown 1974, and Singer 1970).

³ Favereau, 1993, p. 55.

⁴ For example, the famous occupation of the sous-préfecture in Morlaix in 1961, cf.,Poisson and le Matt 2000, pp. 478-9.

⁵ For an analysis of the escalating violence in Brittany at this time see Brunel 1968, pp. 84-89.

⁶ Taken from a CGT-CFDT tract calling on support for the 8 May ‘Ouest Veut Vivre’ day of action.

⁷ For a more in-depth analysis of the demographic situation of the region see Quintin 1998.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the 68 events in the CLU de Brest see Porhel 1988.

⁹ For example, see Hamon and Rotman 1987, pp. 514-515 or Singer 1970, pp. 152-155.

¹⁰ For more details see Porhel 1988, pp 63-85.

¹¹ Taken from a tract produced by the CGT, the CFDT, the FEN (Fédération de l’Education Nationale) and the AGEB and distributed prior to 13 May demonstration.

¹² M. Ilari – a student in 1968 at the University of Dijon where he participated in the events – described to me how, as a student, he was contacted by Edgar Faure enquiring about how he felt the university system should be reformed in the aftermath of the events: ‘Il m’a posé des questions pendant une demi-heure par rapport à ce que je pensais de tout ça. C’est la preuve qu’il a cherché des contacts directs’ (Ilari 2004). Reference ? (not in bibliography)

¹³ C.f., Joffrin 1988, Martelli 1988, Tartakowsky1998.

¹⁴ The call for papers for the ‘May 68: Forty Years On’ conference to be held at the University of London in Paris features requests for studies of May ’68 outside the capital. Also, the research group *GERME (Groupe d’études et de recherches des mouvements étudiants)* is participating in a study programme featuring analyses of 1968 in Dijon, Lyon and Amiens.

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