

**From *mai-juin '68* to *Nuit Debout*:  
Shifting perspectives on France's anti-police**

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**Abstract**

In the great drama that was *mai-juin 1968*, the police were unquestionably a central actor. In particular, they played a pivotal role in transforming what started out as a relatively minor, student-based rebellion into a nationwide movement that brought the Gaullist regime to the brink of collapse. The 2016 *Nuit Debout* protest movement drew strong comparisons to the 1968 events with many wondering if France stood to experience a repeat of those heady days. This article will argue that the inability of *Nuit Debout* to capture the imagination of the general public in a similar fashion to what happened in 1968 is not solely the result of the exceptional and divergent contexts. Instead, it will contend that this failure is also to be understood through an appreciation of shifting perspectives on France's anti-police. Such positive developments, it will be argued, have ironically been shaped as a result of the 1968 events and the manner with which they are most commonly remembered.

La police était un acteur indéniablement principal dans les événements de mai-juin 1968 en France. En particulier, ils ont joué un rôle critique dans la transformation d'une crise étudiante, relativement mineur, en un mouvement national qui a poussé le régime gaulliste jusqu'au bord du gouffre. Le mouvement *Nuit Debout* de 2016 a été très souvent comparé aux événements de 1968 avec beaucoup qui se demandaient si la France risquait une répétition de cette crise phare. Cet article avancera l'argument que l'incapacité de *Nuit Debout* à captiver l'imagination de la population générale de la même façon que *mai-juin 68* n'est pas simplement la conséquence des contextes divergents et exceptionnels des deux mouvements. En fait, un tel échec s'explique aussi à travers une appréciation des attitudes

changeantes en ce qui concerne la perspective *anti-flic* en France. De tels développements sont une conséquence inattendue des événements de '68 et la manière dont ils sont le plus communément souvenus.

**From *mai-juin '68* to *Nuit Debout*:  
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**Introduction**

The most common assessment of the role played by the forces of order during the French events of May-June 1968 is one that posits their performance as yet another in a long line of episodes that have contributed to the creation and consolidation of what is considered to be a very poor reputation amongst public opinion (Le Goff 2008, 103-4). To a certain extent, it is difficult to argue with such an assessment. The very prominent and much criticised role of the French police during the riots and demonstrations of 1968 certainly did little to improve the already sullied reputation of this institution. Their very heavy-handed and often violent approach only served to confirm pre-conceived ideas. As will be argued later, this was certainly very true at the time and, in many respects, such an 'anti-police' sentiment, so evidently present amongst protestors and the general public, played a hugely significant role in helping the spread of the movement from student rebellion to nationwide revolt. However, with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary offering a longer-term view, this article seeks to present an argument to the contrary. That is, instead of presenting 1968 as yet further consolidating the *anti-flic* sentiment so evident at the time, it will be argued that the events of *mai 68* can in fact be considered as a pivotally positive moment in helping the French forces of order improve their performance and thus their reputation amongst the French population.

After outlining how and why the forces of order came to play such a crucial role during the events and how any understanding of what happened is predicated on taking stock of their contribution, the article then examines the *Nuit Debout* protest of 2016 to compare how attitudes towards the police have changed. In order to explain the very different reactions to police heavy-handedness between 1968 and

2016, the article then outlines some of the huge contextual differences at play. It will be argued that these are an important, yet insufficient consideration and that there are other interesting issues at play in relation to how the reputation of the police has evolved over the years. The 1968 events, it will be argued, have been an important part of a rehabilitation process.

### **The pivotal role of the police in 1968**

In the great drama that is the events of May-June 1968 in France, there are a number of key protagonists to bear in mind. Any account of what happened some 50 years ago would be incomplete without mention of the complete cast including: the politicians (normally de Gaulle, Pompidou, Mendes-France, Mitterrand and Waldeck-Rochet); the students (dominated by the usual suspects Cohn-Bendit, Sauvageot and Geismar); the workers (whose involvement is predominantly represented via the actions of the two major trade unions of the time, the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) and the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT)); and finally the forces of order (stereotypically represented by the haunting images of the *Companies Républicaines de Sécurité* (CRS)). Each of these groups of actors played important roles that must be understood to help make sense of these seismic events. The focus here, of course, is on the role played by the police.

It is first of all necessary to be clear about what we mean by the term 'police' in France, and specifically in 1968. Then, this term related to a number of different bodies whose mission was to ensure peace and order in France. With a long and complicated history, the forces of order in France require a more complex definition than simply a single united force (Berlière and Lévy 2013, 35-87; Monjardet and Ocqueteau 2004). Perhaps the most straightforward manner with which to comprehend the structure is to separate *la Gendarmerie Nationale* from *La Police Nationale*. The former, part of the military, was charged with ensuring law and order in provincial France. The latter, taking orders from the *Ministre de l'intérieur*, took responsibility for large cities.<sup>1</sup> Given the focus of trouble in 1968 in large cities, and

in the first instances (but not limited to) Paris, it is without surprise that it was *la Police Nationale* that would be the focus during the events, and in particular one specific branch – the CRS. Set up in 1944, this body, due to its heavy-handed approach to disturbances prior to 1968, had acquired a reputation as a no-nonsense, violent and repressive riot unit.

The dominant narrative of the 1968 events as a small, suburban campus revolt quickly spreading to become a nationwide upheaval that brought the country to a standstill is firmly anchored the national collective memory of this period (Reynolds 2011). Making sense of just how and why France was paralysed in this manner is a complex and well-trodden area of debate (cf. for example, Singer 1970; Martelli 1988; Tarnero 1998; Weber 2008; Fillioud 2016). It is obvious that the social, political and economic context provided the grounds for such an exceptional revolt. However, beyond the context, one must also take stock of what actually happened. What decisions were – and were not – made? Who did what? How did certain actions feed into or exacerbate the tensions that (with hindsight) so evidently lay beneath the veneer of stability? Central to this understanding is a consideration of the reaction of the state and, in particular, President Charles de Gaulle and Prime Minister Georges Pompidou. The underestimation and/or deliberate choice to refuse any credence to the early stages of the movement saw both Prime Minister and President largely absent. The vacuum they left behind was inadequately filled by the ministers charged with overseeing operations in their absence. Instead, the state's reaction was perceived to pass through the police. Right from the outset and until the very end of the revolt, the forces of order were front and centre. When one considers the key moments (3 May, 10 May, 24 May, 10 June, etc.), the key protagonists were not politicians but instead the protestors and the police (Mathieu 2013, 152-166).

This presence was an unquestionably key element in fanning the flames of discontent and largely responsible for ensuring the nationwide/ society-wide spread of the revolt (Reynolds 2011, 47-8). This can be explained by two interrelated factors. Firstly, that the state's response seemed to be so focussed on repression and not

discussion only served to validate the demands of the protestors. The '68 events can, in large part, be understood as the expression of a desire amongst the population to have a greater say in how their lives were managed. Sending in the police transmitted a clear message that such a request would not be tolerated and only served to encourage more people to become involved. Secondly, almost immediately, the police response was represented by the CRS and their heavy-handed tactics. The sight of this riot unit (with its accompanying reputation) charging down students did not sit comfortably with the general population and guaranteed their sympathy and support (Seidman, 94-7). Furthermore, the rumour mill was very much in action with stories of death, rape and severe brutality further exacerbating the revulsion amongst protestors and their increasing number of sympathisers (UNEF/ SNE Sup 1968). Discussions over the veracity of such rumours are immaterial. The fact that the government response to the demands of protestors in 1968 was *perceived* as being no more than brutal repression at the hands of the CRS is one of the most significant reasons behind the wildfire propagation of the 1968 events.

The 1968 protests were not about police oppression *per se* but in fact something much broader. Nevertheless, the anti-police sentiment was a catalyst in exposing a deep-seated social malaise and thus crucial to helping understand what happened and why. The next section fast-forwards to the recent *Nuit Debout* protest and, in particular, examines the inability of this movement (so often compared to 1968) to tap into similar anti-police sentiments in order to spread its message and success.

## **Nuit Debout**

*De toute part, des inconnues se parlent, les langues se délient. On discute politique, société, vision du monde; on se critique, on s'engueule, on se met d'accord, on s'organise* (Ngo and Truong 2016, 12).

[...] un rejet des formes classiques d'engagement politique et syndical et du désir d'expérimenter de nouvelles formes d'action et d'organisation [...] (Kokoreff 2016, 163).

The above descriptions could well be mistakenly understood as referring to the events of May-June 1968. They are in fact reflections on a more contemporary moment of protest in France known as *Nuit Debout*. On 31 March 2016, after a long period of tension in opposition to *la Loi Travail*,<sup>2</sup> a group of protestors decided that, contrary to normal practice, they would not disperse following the conclusion of their demonstration and meeting (Ngo and Truong, 19-23). This was not a spontaneous move but one that had been carefully planned in the preceding weeks by a nucleus of activists involved with the satirical journal *Fakir*<sup>3</sup> (Brustier, 2018, 28-29). They had made the decision that following the conclusion of the 31 March action, they would not go home but instead stay up all night and occupy the (hugely symbolic) *Place de la République* (Farbiaz 2016, 16-17). So was born *Nuit Debout*. Over the course of the next three months, the movement grew. An initial agreement enabling the movement to occupy the *place* for three days was transformed into a more difficult arrangement that allowed the demonstrators the right to occupy the square as long as it was cleared by midnight every evening. And so, every day, the movement reconstructed its encampment in order to enable its commissions to work and general assemblies to take place. As the days passed, the numbers swelled, *Nuit Debout* became ever-sophisticated and started to spread to other cities. At its peak, the movement saw the participation of thousands of people, had a prolific output of (online, TV and radio) material and a genuine sense of momentum (Nuit Debout 2016, 42).<sup>4</sup> However, by the time the summer of 2016 arrived, the movement had run out of steam. Its supporters would still argue that the movement is by no means at an end, but there is a feeling that the highpoint has come and gone (Nuit Debout, 31-32).<sup>5</sup>

Such a sense of disappointment is reminiscent of a similar feeling following the events of 1968. However, this is not the only reason for the strong crossover between the two movements so evident in the above quotations. In fact, throughout

*Nuit Debout*, the shadow of *mai 68* loomed large and when one looks closely it is not difficult to see why. Just as had been the case in 1968, there was a strong presence of young people, many of whom were students (Kokoreff 2016, 157). However, the events of 1968 were not (contrary to popular myth) just about students but, instead, should be understood as a movement triggered by young people that would eventually see widespread participation from across French society. Whilst there is some merit in the notion of *Nuit Debout*, inverting the trajectory of *mai 68*, as a youth response to a wider strike movement, the same level of diversity that saw participation from all walks of life was a common feature of both (Ngo and Truong, 30-33; Kokoreff, 163-64; Farbiaz, 18-19). A survey carried out by a team of social science researchers between 8 April and 13 May 2016 revealed how on categories such as age, education, sex and geography, '*Nuit Debout est un rassemblement plus diversifié qu'on ne le dit*' (Collectif, 2016). Another similarity between 2016 and 1968 relates to the objectives of both movements – or lack thereof. Trying to pin down a realistic sense of what the 1968 movement was hoping to achieve is an almost pointless endeavour, such was the extent of changes demanded (Reynolds 2011, 41-2). In fact, one is best understanding '68 as the expression of a broad sense of *ras-le-bol*. It would appear, on the surface, that *Nuit Debout* was focussed on a single issue – *la Loi Travail*. However, this was simply not the case. *La Loi El Khomri* sparked a more general expression of frustration that extended way beyond an attempt to liberalise the world of work in France (*Nuit Debout*, 46-7; Farbiaz, 11-14; Brustier, 26-38).

*Les Nuit-deboutistes sont donc l'expression d'une révolte sociale, générationnelle, politique et idéologique contre le monde qu'on leur promet, celui de l'ubérisation de la société, de la marchandisation des corps et des esprits, du capitalisme du désastre et de la destruction.* (Farbiaz, 28)

Just as was the case back in 1968, *Nuit Debout*, offered everyone (even those on the margins) the opportunity to demand change where they felt it necessary (Cukier and Gallo 2016, 118-37; Kokoreff, 157): '*La force de ce mouvement, c'est peut-être de donner de la légitimité à des paroles qui a priori n'en avaient aucune.*' (Ngo and Truong, 32).



The convergence with 1968 was equally in evidence in how the movement carried itself. What could be more “68” than the absence of designated leaders and the emphasis on horizontal, organisational structures (Kokoreff, 164; Gerard and Simonpoli 2016, 15-20)?<sup>6</sup> In terms of forms of action and organisation, what could be more “68” than the occupation of symbolic spaces so that people could endlessly debate and talk (Gerard and Simonpoli, 11-15)? *La parole* was as at the core of *Nuit Debout* as it was in 1968. Everything was set up to allow discussion to flow – and it did – revealing the same underpinning desire to participate and have a say that is so fundamental to understanding what happened during the May events (Zéhenne 2016, 145-47; Gerard and Simonpoli, 8-11; *Nuit Debout*, 25). The vocabulary, the tone and even some of the slogans and material were straight out of 1968. This was particularly evident in some of the posters and graffiti that inevitably sprung up as the movement took hold.<sup>7</sup> It is also interesting to note that *Nuit Debout* seemed to be tapping into the international zeitgeist of protest that had seen the emergence of movements such as Occupy or *Los Indignados* (Guichoux 2016, 30-60; Farbiaz, 27; *Nuit Debout*, 25; Brustier, 1821; 97-101). Here too, it is difficult not to see parallels with *les années 68* when a wave of international protest seemingly swept the globe and with what happened in France in 1968 only really understandable via an appreciation of this specific international context. One could also point to interesting convergences regarding the make-up of some of the principal protagonists. For example, *Nuit Debout*, like the 1968 movement, saw the involvement of the full spectrum of the political Left, including the extremes, with all the obvious (and similar) complications and tensions (Cukier and Lassere, 130-31; Gerard and Simonpoli, 20). Equally, the place of Trade Unions within a movement that emerged beyond their own structures certainly reminds one of the predicament of bodies such as the CFDT or the CGT back in 1968 (Kokoreff, 166-67). Importantly, one can also identify a certain degree of similarity between the commonly-held perception of the forces of order and their political allegiances back in 1968 and the dominance of support for Right/ extreme Right movements amongst the modern-day ranks of the

police.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as well as the parallels outlined above, 1968 was directly present as participants, commentators and the media frequently referred back to *mai 68*, in many cases asking whether or not France stood on the brink of a repeat of those heady days (Ngo and Truong, 125-28; Farbiaz, 25-26; Brustier, 90-91).

*Parmi les références importantes (Los Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, place Tahrir) qui flottent dans les esprits et sur la place, il y a aussi celle de Mai 68, fort de son imaginaire générationnelle et politique. On a dit tout et son contraire à ce sujet (Kokoreff, 162).*

Whilst *Nuit Debout* is by no means the first movement since 1968 to ask such a question or draw such comparisons, the very strong parallels outlined above, certainly explain why, on this occasion, such a tendency was more pronounced than is normally the case. Finally, and connectedly, just as *soixantehuitards* had attempted to locate their movement at the time to a longer tradition of revolt, one cannot help but observe a similar desire by *Nuitdeboutists* to tap into the same tradition of revolutionary spirit (via references to 1968) in order to add some credibility to their own struggle (Villechenon 2016).

Despite these undoubted similarities, and even a certain desire on the part of some participants to resurrect the spirit of *mai 68*, *Nuit Debout* quite simply failed to capture the attention and imagination in anything like the way the 1968 events did. The movement was extremely rich and was unquestionably significant for those involved but the fact that it failed to trigger a broader movement will have been a source of great disappointment for those who believed that it was the beginning of something much more important. It is argued here that this failure is in part a result of changing public attitudes to the police. However, before exploring that aspect more closely and how it fits with the way in which the collective memory of 1968 has been constructed, it would be remiss not to set out some other fundamental differences in terms of context between 1960s France and that of 2016.

## Context

Understanding how the May events seemingly struck like a bolt from the blue necessitates a look at the very specific context of mid-to-late 1960s France (cf. for example, Brown 1974; Tarnero 1998; Sirinelli 2008). What we see is the convergence of a number of exceptional circumstances that paved the way for an equally exceptional set of events. France was enjoying the peak of *les trente glorieuses*; the economy was growing like never before (or again for that matter) as the consumer society kicked in and the spectre of unemployment was, by modern standards, extremely low. France was, for the first time in a long time in a very good place.<sup>9</sup> Economic strength met political stability as de Gaulle's 5<sup>th</sup> Republic bedded in, the country was finally at peace with the Algerian question "resolved" and the nightmares of decolonisation and World War II placated with the benefits of the economic boom. It was in such seemingly comfortable circumstances that the space was created for the frustrations bubbling beneath the surface to come to the fore. Socially, France was changing at breakneck pace. Young people were making their presence felt; the working classes were being redefined; the immigrant population was growing; and morally, the ground was shifting. It was the encounter between the stultified, archaic Gaullist France and the 'hungry for change' society that explains why '68 exploded in the way that it did. Early 1968 saw de Gaulle almost gloat at how the wave of protest sweeping the globe had passed France by.<sup>10</sup> By May of the same year he was forced to eat his words, for, inspired by what was happening elsewhere, what started out as a small revolt by a handful of students brought the country to a standstill in a matter of weeks. Paradoxically, it is the stability and comfort that France found itself in that enabled the 1968 events to happen. This is certainly not how one would describe the social, economic and political predicament of 2016 France.

Still reeling from the fallout of the 2008-2010 financial crisis and political/economic collateral damage that ensued, the heady days of *les Trente Glorieuses* were by 2016 but a distant memory. The unemployment rate had become normalised at

around 10%.<sup>11</sup> Politically, the stability of de Gaulle's stint as President could not have been more in contrast to the 2016 situation. François Hollande had taken over from the hugely unpopular and controversial Nicolas Sarkozy in 2012 only for himself to go and break the record for the most unpopular President in the history of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic. The elections scheduled for 2017 appeared destined to confirm the rise of extremism to the detriment of the mainstream political elite. Finally, and crucially, France had fallen victim to a series of atrocious terrorist attacks which had only served to compound the sense of *déclin* that seemed to dominate the national psyche (Hazareesingh 2015, 287-305). The 2016 context was fundamentally different to that of 1968 and it can therefore not at all be that surprising that *Nuit Debout* did not see a repeat of the *mai 68* events.

It is however, a change in how the public reacted to the actions of the police that most interests us here as an important consideration in explaining why *Nuit Debout* did not capture the imagination of the general public, despite seemingly having the ingredients to do so. Just as was the case in 1968, there was a heavy police presence during the *Nuit Debout* movement (Ngo and Troung, 15; 84; Farbiaz, 23-24). One must be careful to underscore the rather specific context that was the state of emergency that France found itself in at this stage. Following the *Charlie Hebdo*, then the November 2015 attacks in Paris, France was heavily securitised and this was the backdrop to how *Nuit Debout* would be policed. As well as maintaining a constant presence in and around *Place de la République*, and in particular enforcing the (increasingly limiting) curfew, the police – and most notably the CRS – made their presence felt during the numerous demonstrations that took place (Kokoreff, 168-70). A heavy police presence followed each *Nuit Debout* demonstration and more often than not resulted in clashes between the riot police and some elements of the movement. There was undoubtedly a heavy-hand in place that saw the use of quite repressive measures (tear-gas, batoning, flashballs, kettling, etc.) and the inevitable injuries that accompany such an approach.<sup>12</sup> The omnipresence of the police and their repressive approach was the focus of much discussion and frustration within

the movement. In fact, participants flooded the various *Nuit Debout* outlets with material backing up their claims of police brutality.<sup>13</sup>

As outlined in the previous section, it was a similar level of police brutality in 1968 that tipped France from a sectoral revolt into one that swept almost the entirety of society. It is argued that *Nuit Debout* shared many of the ingredients that help make sense of how 1968 emerged and unfolded. However, and crucially, somehow police heavy-handedness in 2016 did not bring about the same reaction as it did in 1968 (all the more surprising given the depth of online material that backed-up rumours of brutality). This lies at the crux of what is argued in this piece. It could be assumed that the very specific and different context of 2016 France is all we need to take into consideration to explain how police brutality did not spark a similar spreading of the *Nuit Debout* movement. To a certain extent, this is true. However, and as will be argued in the following two sections, there is something else at stake. The reaction to the police handling of *Nuit Debout* is but evidence of a longer-term development of the reputation of the French police and how their actions are perceived by the general population. Furthermore, and almost paradoxically, May-June 1968 – and in particular the dominant narrative on how the police behaved during these events – has not been without consequence in shaping contemporary attitudes to the French forces of order.

### **The evolving reputation of the French police**

The stereotypical perception regarding the reputation of the police in France is hardly a positive one. It could be argued this is by no means exceptional, but some suggest that there are French specificities to be borne in mind. Berlière and Levy outline how the terminology used to describe the police over the years, their representation in cultural outputs and the general mockery of them all give a strong indication of the poor reputation of this institution.

*Des rapports difficiles, tendus, ambivalents...faits de peur, de répulsion, de haine, de fascination... le tout fondé sur des solides fantasmes et préjugés jamais simples,*

*jamais sains: voilà comment on pourrait caractériser les relations que les Français entretiennent avec leur police (457).*

This reputation is essential in understanding how it was that the police played such a critical role in the propagation of the 1968 events. The fact that – especially in the early stages – the primary response of the state was to send in the much-maligned forces of order only served to heighten tensions. The ensuing violence confirmed and exacerbated the already quite prominent *anti-flic* sentiment and subsequently increased public sympathy in opposition to what was perceived as police brutality. The images, accounts and rumours circulating on the nature of the police response were very much in keeping with what people had come to expect and therefore were inclined to believe. In some respects, the police fell victim to their reputation and as a result fanned the flames of frustration underpinning the 1968 events thus facilitating the spread of the revolt. A brief historical overview provides an insight into how such a negative reputation came to exist at this time.

The period between the creation of the police in 1667 and the French Revolution would see the laying of the foundations of this poor reputation (Guitet-Vauquelin 1928, 607-609). The definition of a broad reach of powers, coupled with the use of questionable methods in their mission to uphold the principles and protect the *Ancien Régime*, effectively pitted the police against the common people (Berlière and Levy, 23-25; Napoli 2003). This morally conservative, emergent institution, where religion carried a certain degree of influence, inevitably suffered greatly during the Revolutionary period, when any structural progress achieved was reversed and its poor reputation further consolidated. The silver-lining was that, henceforth, the role of the police would be to serve all the people (Milliot 2007, 172-73). Napoleon's influence in this domain would be significant, particularly through the creation of the *Préfet de Police* and the subsequent fragmentation of the organisational structures (Rigotard 1990). Efforts were also made during his time to introduce a tighter, centralised system through a program of reform and modernisation aimed at improving the police's poor reputation. Such improvements

continued during the Third Republic with important innovations such as the creation of *une école de police* and increasing use of science (Berlière 2009). However, the societal discontent that would emerge in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the use of the police to violently repress the ensuing protests did little to improve the reputational damage the state was so keen to repair (Aubert 1979, 103-16).<sup>14</sup> The experience of World War 2, when the police unquestionably found themselves in a very difficult predicament, would not help matters (Berlière and Chabrun 2001; Kitson 2002, 371-90). Whilst some important changes, such as the creation of *Les Gardes Mobiles* in 1941 (renamed *Les Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité* (CRS) in December 1944) were made during the Vichy era, it was the wholesale collaboration of this institution that would be most significant from a reputational perspective (Berlière and Levy, 30-32). Despite de Gaulle's post-war efforts to achieve national unity via a degree of selective amnesia, the general population was not ready to forget what role the police had played (Kitson 1998, 637-38). Such delicate circumstances help explain why the police sought to distance itself from the politics of the Fourth Republic. However, the increased criminality and the mounting industrial tension of the time would see the, by then, increasingly common reflex of police repression and violence to break strikes and ensure law and order, with all the obvious consequences for their reputation (Berlière and Peschanski 2000; Vogel and Berlière 1997, 77). The decolonisation process and its collateral damage would not provide the context for any improvement and would be crucial in shaping perceptions on the eve of the 1968 events.

It was, in particular, the Algerian war that would be the source of most problems, as opposition to French Algeria saw the state come under immense pressure and even become the target for terrorist attacks. As well as having to maintain law and order under such difficult circumstances, the police (as representatives of the state) themselves became legitimate targets for groups such as the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) (Blanchard 2006, 61-72; Berlière 2015, 523-41). Once again, they found themselves in a very difficult position that forced them to

turn against the state and even protest about their predicament (Blanchard 2011, 55-73). This was just one (albeit very important) element in the demise of the IV Republic and the preparation of the ground for the return of General de Gaulle in 1958. The latter's return would see a certain leeway afforded the forces of order in terms of just how far repression could go and this was the context for yet more dark days, and in particular 17 October 1961 and the events of Charonne on 8 February 1962 (Dewerpe 2006; Brunet 2003; Ross 2002, 41). In both instances, demonstrations opposing *l'Algérie Française* met with a violently repressive response by the police of Maurice Papon, resulting in multiple deaths. The sheer brutality of this response and the fact that it went unpunished shocked many and are crucial factors in understanding the heightened *anti-flic* attitude that would prove so vital just a few years later (Mathieu, 151; Hamon and Rotman 1987, 95-97).

Whilst the subsequent police role in the kidnapping of Ben Barka in 1965 marked the end of police involvement in the decolonisation process and the 1966 Frey law ending the *Préfecture de Paris* opened up a new era, the violence of the early 1960s had left a durable mark (Berlière and Levy, 318-19). As evidenced in the testimonies below, the police conduct of this time would be vitally important in the politicisation of the generation that would feature so prominently during the 1968 events. For example, in a 2008 interview, Anne Querrien (member of the *Mouvement du 22 mars* in 1968) explicitly identified Charonne as pivotal in defining her political activism:

*Le tournant militant pour moi est situé en '62. Il y a eu donc Charonne [...] je trouvais qu'on étouffait pas des gens avec qui on était d'accord, et que donc ça suffisait comme ça. Le lendemain de Charonne j'ai adhéré au comité antifasciste du lycée (Querrien 2008).*

In a 2007 interview, reflecting on the violence in and around his experiences of *les années 68*, Alain Geismar drew a direct line to police actions of the early 1960s:

*Tout ça faisait penser à ce qui s'était passé pendant la fin de la guerre d'Algérie, au moment des grandes manifestations du FLN où il y avait eu des Algériens jetés dans la Seine, l'époque où Papon était préfet de police. Pour nous il y avait une espèce de*



*continuité de la démarche policière là-dedans, donc on appelait à une manifestation dont on pensait qu'elle serait violente puisque c'était la police qui était mise en cause dans des meurtres* (Gesimar 2007).

On the eve of the 1968 events, whilst France was, for the first time in a very long time, at peace, new challenges were on the horizon for the state and its institutions. The police would once again have a pivotal role to play and, as the above historical overview highlights, would carry, particularly as a result of episodes such as Charonne, significant reputational baggage. It was in such a context that the events of 1968 exploded, thus explaining the high level of anti-police sentiment that would prove so critical in what happened.

As outlined above, the *Nuit Debout* movement is indicative of just how far things have come in the period between 1968 and today. Police brutality, heavy-handedness and violence were all very much in place in and around this important contemporary protest movement. However, and despite the prominence of this issue amongst participants and their efforts to publicise and expose such excesses, there was no repeat of 1968. The public revulsion with the police as a catalyst for the generalisation of the struggle was not there to the same extent in 2016. As if to underscore just how different things had become, there was even at one stage some contact between protesting police and the *Nuit Debout* movement itself (L-A 2016; Massemin 2016). Even more revelatory are the results of an opinion poll carried out on 16-17 June 2016 at the height of tensions concerning *la Loi Travail* entitled 'La Police et les Français'.<sup>15</sup> The overall impression was very positive. 86% of respondents declared that they have a positive image of the police. 43% said that police measures during the demonstrations against *la Loi Travail* were appropriate with only 21% considering the use of force excessive. There was also a ringing endorsement of the police with over three-quarters of respondents declaring their confidence in the ability of the police in maintaining security at the forthcoming Euro football tournament. A study by Catherine Gorgeon from 1994 highlights that

this level of positivity was not something entirely new but had been building for some time (245-273). She even goes as far as to argue that '*L'ensemble des sondages le montre, l'image de la police est plutôt bonne dans l'opinion publique et de manière générale les Français font confiance aux différents responsables de la sécurité [...]*' (247). Such positivity regarding the police would have been unthinkable at the time of the 1968 events. Just how can such a radical turnaround in fortunes be explained?

It must first of all be noted that the results of the 2016 survey should not be taken as evidence that there are no longer any problems in terms of the reputation of the police in France. Problematic relations, often sparked by claims of police brutality, mishandling of demonstrations and continued tensions, have remained a staple feature of the landscape since 1968 (Belière and Levy, 496-509). For example, as recently as March 2017, there were demonstrations against police brutality related to suspicious, police-custody deaths (Pinault 2017). On the other hand, the police themselves continue to lament how they are portrayed and perceived, as was evidenced in the 18 May 2016 nationwide demonstrations against *la haine anti-flic*, organised by the police trade union *Alliance Police Nationale*<sup>16</sup> and the December 2016-January 2017 demonstrations in protest against attacks on police (Caillé and Gandini 2017). The context behind these opinion polls must also be borne in mind. The survey was carried out not just at the height of the protests against *La Loi Travail* but also against the backdrop of the terrorist attacks on France and the threat/ fear of more to come. In a perverse way, the police benefitted from these atrocities. The bravery of some officers, particularly those who lost their lives or were seriously injured were strongly appreciated by the general public, obviously enhancing the public's impressions more generally (Miller 2015). Furthermore, the ongoing threat of more attacks would see an evident rapprochement as the public effectively relied on the (heavily enhanced) police presence to be able to go about their daily lives. However, whilst problems remain and today's context is very specific, there are other factors at play that can enhance our understanding of the contemporary situation.

## **Memories of May '68 and the rehabilitation of the police**

Since 1968, significant changes, developments and reforms have been put in place that have impacted on just how the police are currently perceived (Monjardet 1996, 230-70). As Mathieu details, there was a strong desire from within the institution to learn the lessons of the experience of the 1968 events. As a result, in the immediate aftermath, rapid, effective action was taken in terms of organisation, equipment and use of intelligence to address the problems exposed (166-170). The events of 1968 were immediately followed by what has become known as the *système Marcellin*, named after the new Interior Minister (Sarazin 1974; Artières and Zanarini-Fournel 2008, 578-79). The Minister believed a heavy-hand was required in order to suppress the extremist, left-wing and irresponsible tendencies that, in his view, had brought France to the brink in May-June 1968. This repressive approach dominated the post-68 period. On the positive side this meant a huge surge in investment in the police with a marked increase in financial support and recruitment. From a tactical and material point of view, lessons were learned during the events and more training was instituted in order to ensure that these lessons were put into practice in the now obsessive drive to maintain order (Liaisons 2008, 101-106). It could therefore be argued that the events forced immediate changes that would help the police carry out their missions more effectively. Therefore, despite the subsequent heavy-handedness, the role of the police in 1968 was largely seen as positive. Such an interpretation was in evidence in a 2008 documentary on the 1968 events that contained a section on the role of the police.<sup>17</sup> It's title, '*CRS, Stars de 68*', and its overall sympathetic analysis of the police, speak volumes about the increasingly positive perspective focussed on the forces of order in 1968 narratives. In addition, this particular section concludes thus on how the events were indeed a positive moment for this institution: *Si la Révolution des étudiants n'a pas abouti, celle des professionnelles du maintien de l'ordre a bien eu lieu.*<sup>18</sup>

However, this focus on maintaining order in the face of a political threat meant that France somewhat took its eye off the ball in terms of new developments in criminality taking root during the 1970s. Drug trafficking, bank robberies, and international gangs characterised this shift, eventually forcing Marcellin out and triggering a much overdue reconfiguration of what mattered in terms of modern day policing. This reflective period came to a head with the arrival of the Left to power in 1981 and signalled the next period of sustained change and development (Artières and Zancarini-Fournel, 580-81). Mitterrand's historic victory would inevitably see a focus on making significant changes to an institution that historically was not considered positively by the Left (Body-Gendrot and Duprez 2001, 377-402). Many changes were introduced aimed at reconciling the police with the general population. The desire to bring the French police up to the required standards would see an emphasis on training, modernisation, science and intelligence. The need for improvement was increased by the onset of terrorism, tensions over immigration as well as the widening optic of Europeanisation and globalisation during the 1980s. The issue of security soon emerged as a central political question and the desire for a rapprochement in order to respond to the desire for greater security lead to the notion of *police de proximité* (Monjardet 1999). As the *alternance* of the 1990s and 2000s set in, the issue of security only seemed to gain greater prominence (Mucchielli 2008). As a result, the police would once again find itself front and centre in the difficult position that history has forced them to become accustomed to (Mouhanna 2011).

Mounting concerns over domestic and international terrorism and the enduring threat of street politics have meant that it would be inaccurate to suggest that the challenges facing the police today are in some ways less significant than was the case in 1968 or even beforehand. In fact, particularly noteworthy in this respect were the *banlieue* disturbances of 2005 (c.f. for example, Moran 2012; le Goaziou and Mucchielli 2006). Following the death of two teenagers, electrocuted as they fled the police, a sustained period of violence saw the conduct of the forces of order once

again put under the microscope with their reputation, particularly amongst young people, considerably damaged. Just as had been the case prior to 1968 with the episodes of 17 October 1961 and Charonne, the events of 2005 must be borne in mind when contextualising and making sense of recent attitudes to the police. Whilst such a similarity could perhaps lend extra weight to the comparisons between 1968 and 2016, the fact that (despite the reputational damage caused by the 2005 riots and other ongoing tensions) the *anti-flic* sentiment was so less potent during the *Nuit Debout* protests only goes to further consolidate the argument that times have indeed changed.

Taking the long-term view then, and very much in keeping with developments elsewhere as a result of this period of protest, 1968 unquestionably signalled a watershed moment that led to considerable and durable improvements across the board for the French police (Jobard 2008, 577-583; della Porta, Peter and Reiter 2006, 3-4; Fillieule 1997, 243-304). Bruneteaux's detailed analysis of the '*grand mouvement de réformes*' (197-244) as a result of 1968 underscores the extent to which the 1968 events should be considered as an important, and positive, turning point for this institution: '*Mai 1968 inaugure une phase de sophistication qui oriente la gendarmerie mobile et les CRS vers une formation permanente aux techniques de contrôle de soi*' (27). Short term and durable improvements have clearly been made in terms of reform and investment and valuable lessons were taken on board as a result of the 1968 events leading to a significant change in how the police have been organised, financed and supported. However, this is not the only reason why 1968 should be considered as a positive moment for the police in France.

Over the course of the past five decades, a certain dominant narrative of the 1968 events has become anchored in the French collective memory. This 'convenient consensus' is characterised by a number of traits that have ultimately led to a very limited perspective monopolising popular perceptions of these seminal events (Reynolds 2011). Briefly, the over-emphasis on radical, Paris-based students during

the more spectacular moments of May 1968 has essentially minimised the importance of what happened and what potential it had. Central to this *doxa* is the portrayal of the role played by the forces of order that has come to dominate over the years. Whilst there is, broadly speaking, a general consensus surrounding the centrality of the role played by the police in ensuring the spread of the 1968 revolt, just how this role has been interpreted over the years has undergone some interesting changes (Mathieu 2013, 145; Reynolds 2011, 47-8; 128-29). This became particularly evident in and around the time of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events that in many respects can be viewed as the culmination of a process that has seen the role of the police forces in 1968 being considered more positively (cf. for example Collectif 2008; Grimaud 2007).<sup>19</sup> This '*pacification mémorielle*' (Mathieu, 146) has been strikingly apparent through the case of Maurice Grimaud. The 'mythologizing' of the then *Préfet de Police* had by 2008 seen him acquire the position of hero of the 1968 events in France (Ross, 48). From an early stage, Grimaud was held up as the epitome of common sense, someone who understood what was happening and responsible for ensuring that the police avoided any excesses, despite great provocation. This positive spin of the early days has progressively become anchored in the dominant narrative of the events. Grimaud's peaceful approach has come to represent what was overall a very measured and professional approach by the police whose *sang-froid* ensured that "no-one died".<sup>20</sup> As if to exemplify the extent to which the positive narrative on the police focussed around the actions and approach of Grimaud has become anchored in the way the 1968 events are remembered, let us again turn to *Nuit Debout*.

Of all the measures carried out by Grimaud, his famous letter to his troops calling for cool heads on 29 May is that most frequently referred to and seen to typify his exemplary approach.<sup>21</sup> When in 2016, the police held their march against '*la haine anti-flic*', one of the responses of *Nuit Debout* activists was to distribute to the police copies of Grimaud's famous letter from 1968. Back then, the anti-flic sentiment was writ large in posters, slogans, cries of *CRS-SS* and even "*Grimaud assassin*". By

2016, protestors' narratives had moved on considerably, reflecting just how perceptions have changed and how perspectives on the 1968 events have moved away from the anti-police sentiments of the time to something much more positive. Such a sympathetic interpretation is often linked to the suggestion that the police found themselves in an unenviable situation and that under such circumstances did an admirable job. The upshot of this is that we have moved on considerably from the *anti-flic* sentiment that was so important during the 1968 events. Back then, it was revulsion at how the police handled themselves that swelled public support, triggered the greatest strike in French history and brought France to the brink of a political crisis. However, the construction of an altogether different narrative that presents the police as no longer the villains but in fact the heroes of 1968 has helped shape a completely different perspective, and one whose impact has affected understandings of 1968 specifically but also cannot have been without significance for the general reputation of the French police, as evidenced below.

During the period 2002-2003, a survey was carried out amongst French University students with the aim of ascertaining a general sense of how the events of May-June 1968 were perceived and understood by young French people.<sup>22</sup> There was a particular focus on taking stock of the extent to which the, by then firmly established, dominant narrative had shaped or inflected such impressions. The survey covered a wide range of issues, one of which focussed on understandings of the role played by the police and the impact of these events on how they are publicly viewed in France.<sup>23</sup> When asked to reflect on how certain sectors were impacted by the 1968 events, a strong percentage (37.6%) of respondents agreed that the police were indeed implicated and affected. Respondents were also asked their opinion on the extent to which they felt the behaviour and attitude of the police in 1968 had changed how they were perceived in France. A majority of respondents (42.2%) were in agreement that 1968 had indeed shaped such perceptions. The combination of an awareness of the important role played by the police in 1968 and a recognition that

such an involvement had been important in shaping public attitudes towards this institution begs the question of just how this role should be understood.

Table 1

Les phrases suivantes décrivent bien l'attitude de la police pendant les événements de mai 1968	FED	ED	N	EA	FEA <sup>24</sup>
Scandaleuse	3	14.1	38.8	29.7	9.9
La Police a été provoquée	5	15	35.6	36.2	4.2
Opportuniste	3.6	14.3	57	18.2	1
Fasciste	13.7	26.1	41.6	12.3	1
Pas assez dure	21.6	33.5	35	2.6	1.2
La police faisait simplement son travail	4.8	19.2	34.7	29.7	6.3

As Table 1 demonstrates, perceptions of the police approach in 1968 have certainly come a long way. Of the possible negative assessments, despite a strong percentage agreeing that their behaviour was scandalous, only small numbers were in agreement with the idea that their behaviour should be understood as fascistic or opportunist. It is in fact the strong percentages on positive assessments that are most striking. Over 40% agreed that the police had been provoked and over 35% agreed that they were simply doing their job. Aligned with the overwhelming majority that rejected the belief that the Police were not hard enough, it would be a reasonable assessment that the overriding impression amongst respondents was one that fitted with dominant, and largely positive, narrative of the how the police conducted itself in 1968.

The results of this survey, conducted some 35 years after the 1968 events reveal much about how the dominant narrative on *mai 68* has shaped perceptions. Specifically regarding the debate on police conduct, it is clear that a recognition of the importance of their role is in place as well as an understanding that these events have been important in shaping public perceptions. The generally positive perspective amongst respondents concerning how the role played by the police should be understood as evidence of how the dominant narrative had taken effect amongst younger people's perceptions and understandings. Instead of the *anti-flic* sentiment, so prominent in ensuring the spread of the events back in 1968, growing



consensus has formed around a much more positive reading. The idea that the police, forced to take the lead in a very difficult set of circumstances, should be credited and not criticised for an excellent job carried out in a firm but fair manner has taken root. As mentioned previously, by the time of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, such an assessment was further consolidated and one can foresee the continuation of this trend during the 2018 commemoration period.

## **Conclusion**

One must be careful not to overplay the idea that the French forces of order have been completely rehabilitated in the eyes of the population – this is quite simply not the case. Many problems continue to surface on a regular basis and the French police still have some way to go before one can genuinely talk of a reversal of the reputational damage that has been forged through its long, complex and difficult history. Furthermore, in a nation with ongoing social tensions, the threat of terrorism and where protest is part and parcel of how things actually function, it is clear that the police will continue to find itself caught in difficult predicaments, such as was the case during *Nuit Debout*, where the anti-flic sentiment raises its head. However, and as argued above, the same movement demonstrated how times have changed. The striking similarities between 1968 and *Nuit Debout* left many to ask whether or not France stood on the brink of another *mai 68*. The level of police brutality was unquestionably one of the stand-out, shared characteristics and therefore convinced many that this movement, like the May events, could catch fire and spread across society. That this did not happen, it has been argued, is partly due to shifting perspectives regarding the place, the reputation and the behaviour of the police. The stark differences in context should not be forgotten but in addition to that one must look to 1968 as a crucial moment that has helped reduce the *anti-flic* sentiment that had been so pivotal during the events. Firstly, *mai 68* forced the authorities to reconsider how the police were organised, trained and supported. This has led to obvious improvements over the years that cannot have been without significance on

how the police have performed and are thus perceived. In addition, the manner in which the dominant narrative surrounding *mai 68* has been constructed and forged over the years has seen the police pass from being the pariah of the barricades to the heroes of the peace. The events of 1968 that so emphatically demonstrated the existence and potency of an *anti-flic* sentiment within French society paradoxically triggered the beginning of a process that would help strongly rehabilitate the poor reputation they had suffered from for so long. There will be no repeat of the 1968 events in France and there are many reasons to explain why. One of the most significant of those reasons is the fundamentally different attitude the public has regarding the forces of order in France and, ironically, the 1968 events have been part of bringing about this positive change.

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- [http://www.lemonde.fr/le-monde-2/article/2008/05/16/la-lettre-de-maurice-grimaud-aux-policiers\\_1046120\\_1004868.html#4CMfM8oTrMZOMlkG.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/le-monde-2/article/2008/05/16/la-lettre-de-maurice-grimaud-aux-policiers_1046120_1004868.html#4CMfM8oTrMZOMlkG.99)

## Other

- *Droit d'Inventaire: MAI 68*, Presented by Marie Drucker, France 3, 23 January 2008

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that a law bringing both bodies together under the control of the Interior Minister was passed on 3 August 2009. Despite this merger, the long-held characteristics outlined above generally remain in place today.

<sup>2</sup> *La Loi Travail*, presented to parliament by Myriam El Khomri in February 2016, proposed an overhaul of France's labour code. It aimed to tackle the economic and unemployment woes of France by, amongst other measures, increasing flexibility, attacking the 35-hour week and facilitating the hiring and firing of employees.

<sup>3</sup> An independent publication from *la Gauche de la Gauche* founded by reputed filmmaker Francois Ruffin in 1999.

<sup>4</sup> As evidence of the movement's multi-faceted and broad output see their very sophisticated and copiously populated website: <https://nuitdebout.fr/>

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the *Nuit Debout* movement, see *Nuit Debout et Notre Monde*, 'Les Temps Modernes', November-December 2016, No. 691. For a detailed breakdown of the organisation of *Nuit Debout* and a large sample of its diverse output see Farbiaz 2016.

<sup>6</sup> As in 1968, the media sought to identify certain figures as the "leaders" of the *Nuit Debout* movement. Activists such as Frédéric Lordon or François Ruffin were often singled out. However, again reflecting the spirit of 1968, such a position of leadership was rejected by those identified. C.f. for example, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2016/04/30/nuit-debout-les-tetes-mouvement-sans-chef\\_n\\_9805764.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2016/04/30/nuit-debout-les-tetes-mouvement-sans-chef_n_9805764.html)



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<sup>7</sup> For examples of slogans and graffiti see appendix of *Nuit Debout et Notre Monde*, 'Les Temps Modernes'; appendix of Ngo and Truong.

<sup>8</sup> A December 2015 CEVIPOF study revealed how over 50% of police and military personnel voted Front national. [http://www.enef.fr/app/download/12770267725/LA\\_NOTE\\_%233\\_vague1.pdf?t=1449846295](http://www.enef.fr/app/download/12770267725/LA_NOTE_%233_vague1.pdf?t=1449846295)

<sup>9</sup> Whilst such an interpretation remains largely consensual, there has been some research calling into question such a positive reading of this period (Pessis, Topçu and Bonneuil 2013).

<sup>10</sup> See his New Year address for 1968: <http://www.ina.fr/video/I00012330>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2011465>

<sup>12</sup> The three articles below give some indication of the intensity of the encounter between *Nuit Debout* protestors and the police:

<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/reforme-code-travail-el-khomri/20160430.OBS9588/nuit-debout-des-images-montrent-la-police-frapper-des-manifestants-menottes.html>;

[http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/04/29/loi-travail-un-manifestant-eborgne-par-un-tir-de-flash-ball-a-rennes\\_1449427](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/04/29/loi-travail-un-manifestant-eborgne-par-un-tir-de-flash-ball-a-rennes_1449427);

[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/04/12/nuit-debout-du-discours-a-l-action-la-difficile-question-de-la-securite\\_4900207\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/04/12/nuit-debout-du-discours-a-l-action-la-difficile-question-de-la-securite_4900207_3224.html)

<sup>13</sup> The following article entitled '#Manif14juin: violence démesurée de la part des forces de l'ordre, délibérément planifiée' and published on the *Nuit Debout* website is just one example of many such articles: <https://nuitdebout.fr/blog/2016/06/17/manif14juin-violence-demesuree-de-la-part-des-forces-de-lordre-deliberement-planifiee/>

<sup>14</sup> For example, the period between 1906-1910 witnessed a wave of significant strike movements by miners, teachers, metalworkers, vineyard owners and rail workers that were frequently met by repressive and violent state response (Sowerwine 2009, 81-83)

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.bva.fr/fr/sondages/les\\_francais\\_et\\_la\\_police.html](http://www.bva.fr/fr/sondages/les_francais_et_la_police.html)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.alliancepn.fr/media/le-magazine-293-14984>

<sup>17</sup> *Droit d'Inventaire* : MAI 68, Presented by Marie Drucker, France 3, 23 January 2008

<sup>18</sup> *Droit d'Inventaire* 2008.

<sup>19</sup> The positive interpretation and tone of the 2008 *Droit d'Inventaire* is further evidence of this.

<sup>20</sup> This is of course not the case. There were up to six deaths directly related to the events of 1968. However, the dominant narrative tends to focus on the success of Grimaud and his police in keeping this to such a low level (cf. for example le Goff, 103-23).

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/le-monde-2/article/2008/05/16/la-lettre-de-maurice-grimaud-aux-policiers\\_1046120\\_1004868.html#4CMfM8oTrMZOMIkG.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/le-monde-2/article/2008/05/16/la-lettre-de-maurice-grimaud-aux-policiers_1046120_1004868.html#4CMfM8oTrMZOMIkG.99)

<sup>22</sup> 505 questionnaires were completed by students of different levels and a range of departments from the following higher education establishments: Université Rennes 2/ Université de Haute Alsace/ Université de Poitiers/ Université Paris 12/ Université de Corse, Pasquale Paoli/ Université March Bloch – Strasbourg/ Université de Pau et des Pays de L'Adour/ ENITIAA – Nantes/ Université François Rabelais – Tours/ Université de Bretagne Occidentale – Brest/ Université de Reims – Champagne-Ardenne/ Université de Provence Aix-Marseille 1/ Université Blaise-Pascal – Clermont-Ferrand/ Université d'Angers/ Université du Sud – Toulon-Var/ Université Jean Moulin – Lyon 3.

<sup>23</sup> For a breakdown and analysis of complete survey results see Reynolds, 53-78.

<sup>24</sup> All results in %. FED = Fortement en désaccord. ED = En désaccord. N = Neutre. EA = En accord. FEA = Fortement en accord.