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Part 1: Reverberations of May 1968

In the eyes of many intellectuals, the year 1968 was an important and transformative moment in French history. After the Algiers crisis of 1958, the Fourth Republic collapsed, and the government headed by Charles de Gaulle proclaimed the Fifth Republic of France. The establishment of the new government marked an era of peace and prosperity. Amidst these bountiful years, the influence of French artists and intellectuals would inspire others outside the borders of France. Within the borders of France, cultural criticism and social activism became rising movements. Due to the universal nature of France—a quality of the country that has been unquestionably established at this point—the ideologies and principles throughout the world were able to transcend borders. As seen in previous historical events, France is able to become a vessel that takes in new ideas while also distributing its own concepts. These historical factors culminated in the social upheavals found in May 1968 and the months to follow. Within the protests and calls to institutional reform, French society was able to take notice (and more importantly, internalize) of the leftist ideologies that are still found in French politics in the 21st century. The historical context, political ideas, important figures, and presiding effects of May 1968 will be analyzed in order to determine why it was such a seminal moment both nationally and internationally. In this paper, the analyses and illuminations taken from authors such as Tyler

Stovall, Arthur Marwick, and Kristin Ross will be utilized and expanded upon in order to understand why the events of 1968 were culturally, politically, socially, and universally significant in the context of France in the modern era.

The origins of the social upheavals of 1968 can be traced back to the booming economic years in France known as ‘Les Trente Glorieuses’. As stated by the historian Arthur Marwick, “The 1960s had been a decade of rising living standards and enhanced lifestyles, involving a much-remarked-upon growth in “consumerism”—a word widely and loosely used, less often defined” (Marwick 40-41). Within this age of economic boom, one must recognize the post-war population boom as another important factor for France’s growth as a nation. It is then, within this unprecedented amount of growth, comes major instability. As stated by Professor Salar Mohandesi, “Between 1950 and 1964, the student population in France grew more rapidly than any other major European country” (Mohandesi 180). The overcrowded classrooms of France became hubs for outraged students who were dissatisfied with the institution and a society that continues to be unequal for many. One campus in particular, the University of Paris’ branch campus in Nanterre, experienced an unparalleled amount of frustration from students. In the work, *Transnational France* by Tyler Stovall, he writes, “...they critiqued the very idea of the modern university as a cog in the capitalist machine rather than as an institution devoted to education and scholarship” (Stovall 358). Dissatisfaction and resentment from the students fueled the minds of activists, such as the National Union of French Students, who were affiliated with the French Communist Party. These activists named themselves the *enragés*, and they quickly began their protests against one of their first sources of enrage: the Vietnam War. Demonstrations and occupations of areas soon flooded the heart of Paris, and police intervention

led to acts of violence committed against protesters. More importantly, the information and images of police brutality were flooded onto televisions, newspapers, and radios across the world. It is then, within these mediums, that the messages of the youth transcend boundaries.

The new technologies of the 20th century laid the groundwork for a new sense of consciousness in the political sphere of the world. As stated by the Canadian philosopher Herbert Marshall McLuhan, “For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 10). The mediums that broadcasted the atrocities committed by the police were able to showcase the pain and suffering that the students faced during the movements of May 1968. Furthermore, the ideologies and concepts that the activists represented were beginning to reach the world in ways that were never seen before. People were able to sympathize with the young students being gassed by the unruly enforcers of the law. For many individuals, the protests in Paris symbolized the rise of movements against the oppressive authoritarian institutions that bound them to their chains. The protests of Mexico City, Prague, and the United States held similar ideas concerning inequality and social reforms. When writing of the movements stemmed from the youth, Marwick states, “...young people, particularly students, could plausibly argue that they were, as an entire generation, facing up to issues that previous generations had largely avoided” (Marwick 47). The young students of the 1960s concluded that there must be social change for the betterment of the next generations. The protests of 1968 bolstered a new wave of leftism in the world of politics. Anti-colonial and progressive sentiments thrived as the age of broadcasting was born. These notions of equality extend beyond the radicalism of these tumultuous times in French history.

Modern France as it is today stands on a foundation of progressive ideas that were created by the civil unrest of the youth movements in 1968.

In summary, May 1968 was a seminal movement both nationally and internationally, as it cultivated a wave of progressive politics which led to the growing consciousness of the need for social reform and anti-authoritarian policies. In the wake of these protests, the activists found success in building a world culture that went against traditional and conservative ideologies. Even if some movements—such as the Prague Spring—were crushed by their oppressors, their notions were not completely erased. Conversely, movements such as the civil rights movement in the United States proved to be transformative, both instantaneously and in the decades following. In France, amidst the various strikes and demonstrations, Charles de Gaulle threw down the gauntlet. The near-revolution of May 1968 was brought to an end, but its influence did not disappear. Many citizens found personal empowerment and a newfound voice in the social sphere of France. In the years that followed, the demonstrations of '68 would prove to have lasting effects on the consciousness of French society. The need for equality and democracy was a part of the heritage of the universal nation. The voices of former colonies, immigrants, workers, and women were explicitly demonstrated during the 1960s, and their sentiments became concretely positioned within French politics for the betterment of the country's future.

Part 2: Collective Memory — 1789 to Present

There are certain qualities of French society that are paramount for an individual to understand in order to thoroughly comprehend the nature of France. When remembering the age of feudalism and the estates, the notions of collective memory can be seen within the citizens of *l'hexagone* going into the age of the Jacobins and Saint-Simonianism. It was then, during the

French Revolution of 1789, the sentiments of universalism started to arise in the minds of many individuals. Going further, the era of Napoleon Bonaparte extrapolated the ideas of both universalism and collective memory in his conquests of distant lands and his social reforms. Beyond these events, the history of France is engulfed in its transnational and universal nature which coincides with the idea of collective memory. In this paper, the major transformative events of France such as the rule of Napoleon III, the Algerian crisis, and May 1968 will be analyzed in order to understand why it is impossible to understand modern French history and the current Republic of France without understanding the sentiments of collective memory and universalism.

The transnational and universal nature of France is unequivocally paramount to comprehend when understanding the politics and identity of its citizens. More specifically, France as a colonial nation is paradoxically those two qualities. For example, the reign of Napoleon III proved to be a sufficient example of a transnational France. For instance, the regime of Louis-Napoléon began with major economic growth, leading to many French citizens going abroad, which increased France's status as a universal nation, as Tyler Stovall stated, “...the increase in French wealth made the nation a major international exporter of capital” (Stovall 92). With the growth of France, comes the growth of French influence. Furthermore, the ideologies that French citizens hold are able to transcend borders. The transnational element of French universalism can be seen in how it interacts with its colonies. For instance, Stovall writes, “...the emperor granted all Algerians French nationality but not citizenship, which they could only acquire by renouncing Muslim law...this underscored the idea of French law, and Frenchness in general, as universal, something that other peoples must embrace to be civilized”

(Stovall 101). It is thus paradoxical to claim that France is universal—as it serves as an unequal government to many under its rule. Resentment from the Algerians under colonial rule would later turn into violence and bloodshed, as seen later on in its history. The reign of Napoleon III allowed French society to reach other nations in a manner like never before. His overseas diplomacy bolstered the idea of French transnationalism, and a relationship between France and the rest of the world like never before. Within its universalism and transnational notions, France spreads its political theology and cultural values to others, but it also takes in the various values of the people it influences. As seen in the Algerian crisis, French society continues to question the institution that prides itself on universalism.

Algeria was under colonial rule by the French for a substantial amount of time. The people of Algeria were integrated into French society with the idea that they too, were indeed French. At the same time, they faced oppression, racism, and social inequality. Furthermore, the French-European settlers in Algeria became integrated into Algerian society in a way that was seldom seen in other areas of the world. In his letter, “The Nobel Prize Press Conference Incident”, Albert Camus writes, “...in regard to the young Algerian who questioned me, that I feel closer to him than to many French people who speak on Algeria without knowing it. He knew what he was talking about, and his face reflected not hatred but despair and unhappiness. His face is the face of my country” (Camus 216). The Algerian fight for independence proved to be an important event in French history. The collective memory of the atrocities committed against Algerians continues to hover over the consciousness of many in French society. For instance, the film *Caché* by Michael Haneke intends to be a commentary on the memory of the

suffering of Algerians during the war and thereafter. In critiquing the universality of French society, the movement for social change arises.

The protests of May 1968 were one of the most important politically transformative times in modern French history. Furthermore, the notions of universalism and collective memory were extrapolated even further. The Parisian students protesting the institutions called for social reform and fought against the Vietnam War. The collective memory of the Algerian War was still in the consciousness of many. Furthermore, the institutions of French society were questioned by the activists who took to the streets to broadcast their ideologies. These progressive ideologies were broadcast to the world, thus bolstering the identity of a universal and transnational France. Specifically, the notions of the French Communist Party were able to reach the minds of a multitude of oppressed peoples who sympathized with the young protestors.

In conclusion, France is a universal and transnational nation that continues to add to its collective memory. This collective memory allows its citizens to understand that they have the empowerment and ability to go against their authoritarian and oppressive institutions. The regimes and republics of France's history serve as reminders for French citizens to continue their fight for equality. Furthermore, the universalist and transnational nature of France allows the country to intake political ideologies and attitudes from outside its borders. In doing so, French intellectuals are able to influence their nation, as well as other nations, leading to a society that allows itself to constantly question authority. The paradoxical nature of France's universalism is found within its attitudes to its own citizens. When leading into the modern era, French citizens—specifically Muslims—are still fighting for equality. It is within collective memory that

France allows itself to take a look back and understand the measures it must take to build a better society for all.

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