

Mathieu Dubois, Les conséquences économiques de Mai 68. Du désordre social français à l'ordre monétaire européen, Bruxelles, Bern, Berlin et al. (Peter Lang) 2018, 326 p., 21 fig. (L'Allemagne dans les relations internationales/Deutschland in den internationalen Beziehungen, 14), ISBN 978-2-8076-0873-3, EUR 61,95.

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Six years ago, Mathieu Dubois published a remarkable and intelligent first monograph, his transnational study of Franco-German youth radicalisation in the world of party politics on both sides of the Rhine. In his 2014 published »Génération politique«¹ the author provides impressive evidence that youth radicalisation went far beyond the usual suspects from the social democratic Young Socialists leftwards and likewise affected liberal, Gaullist and Christian Democratic youth milieus just as much. In his second monograph, the author once again showcases his penchant for stimulating and unusual subjects, from which much can be learned even by experts in the field.

One comment up front: The title of this study, in conjunction with the subtitle, creates the impression that May 1968 was a crucial factor in subsequent moves towards European monetary union. Though 1968 played repeatedly a crucial role in some areas of French government policy, the direct link between May 1968 and Maastricht belongs rather to the realm of fiction than reality. In fact, much of Mathieu Dubois' book under review contradicts the wrong message suggested by the title. The choice of title and subtitle reminds this reader of a similar exaggeration in the case of another excellent recent study on another topic by another gifted author, a title claiming to explain »Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism«.

This critique, however, pretty much exhausts my virtually non-existent list of negative comments on Mathieu Dubois' recent monograph. In effect, this study makes a major contribution to the history of complicated moves towards European unity, but even more so to the history of Franco-German rivalries and, last but not least, to the role actually existing powerful social movements, such as the strike wave of May/June 1968 or the 1969 West German rush of wildcat strikes (the *Septemberstreiks*), effected on public policy and the political economies of two of the most important states and economies of the then-emerging European Union. For, this much can be said with certainty, May 1968 did affect French politics, including international economic and financial diplomacy,



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¹ See my review in [Histoire@Politique](https://www.histoire-politique.fr/), 14 January 2016.

all the way up to 1983 – but not always in the direction of greater European unity.

The urge for French political leaders of all stripes to harp on the supposed need for the French economy to outpace its most dynamic European competitor, West Germany, has been a French national obsession for some time, efforts moreover rarely crowned by any measurable success. The first third of Dubois' important book leaves little doubt about the worsening of France's position vis-à-vis its powerful neighbour who had been twice defeated in world wars. It may suffice to point to the cruel statistical fact that French GNP, in 1958 still 7% higher than Germany's, by 1965 registered no less than 8% below West Germany's GNP. Thus, the competitive position of France had considerably worsened in the run-up to the magic year of 1968.

Both German and French state authorities, for various reasons, had pressured trade unions to moderate their demands in the second half of the 1960s. One of the rationales was the due date of 1 July 1968, when all remaining customs barriers within the EEC were scheduled to be removed. Each country was, amongst other things, attempting to maintain or improve their international competitiveness. These pressures for wage restraint were one – though by far not the only or even main – reason for the social explosion of May 1968 or the West German wildcat strike wave of 1969–1973. At any rate, what no one had foreseen is that, literally on the eve of the removal of the last customs barriers within the CEE, the most spectacular social explosion to ever hit a major industrialized country under peacetime conditions in a period of generalized economic growth hit France, then still the fifth-largest industrial power on this planet.

To pre-empt widely feared more far-reaching, potentially system-challenging demands by France's rebellious labour force, employers and the state made unprecedented major concessions following their not entirely unjustified belief that it is better to temporarily cut back on profit levels than to lose the entire shebang. Much has been made of the hefty sudden wage hikes in the wake of May/June 1968 being responsible for the continuing worsening of France's international competitive position. Dubois effectively refutes such siren songs of May/June 1968 as the cause of France's ongoing relative decline in the decades after 1968. Within one year of the indeed significant wage hikes, inflation had literally cancelled out the gains in purchasing power of French blue- and white-collar workers. Moreover, other European countries, notably West Germany, also witnessed unprecedented qualitative wage gains, rendering French advances on the salary front far less unusual than is sometimes asserted.

How did May 1968 thus potentially favour moves towards European unity? Dubois prominently places a citation by Jean Monnet as frontispiece of his fifth chapter, the latter entitled »Towards Economic and Monetary Union«: »Our countries, operating in isolation from each other, were henceforth shown to be vulnerable to outbreaks of violence which swept across the world, and from which no country could protect itself all by itself« (p. 227). And, indeed, major new initiatives in the direction of monetary and fiscal unity and solidarity did emerge from top-level



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French political personalities precisely in the wake of May/June 1968. Yet two additional considerations should now be highlighted which relativize the supposed trigger effect of May 1968 regarding the reinforcement of pro-European sentiments.

French moves towards European unity go back a long way. And one key motivation had often been the desire to strengthen European cooperation as a counterforce to US-American domination of the European (and world) economy. By the late 1960s, however, a second factor played an increasingly prominent role. West Germany then became increasingly reticent to follow American (or European) directives on fiscal and monetary policy. The gradually emerging *Ostpolitik* further symbolized the strivings for greater decision-making autonomy for Western Europe's most dynamic economy. France now hoped to restrain and thus to retain Germany as an ally by including it in a common European project. French initiatives towards economic and monetary solidarity were thus even in the conjuncture of the years 1968–1971 primarily fuelled by diplomatic and foreign policy considerations, rather than by fear of social explosions.

For some months, French initiatives towards economic and monetary unification were responded to by West German politicians in a supportive and affirmative manner. But when the international monetary balance of power dissolved in the wake of the August 1971 uncoupling of the dollar from the gold standard, and the subsequent 7,9% devaluation of the dollar in December 1971, the European advocates of economic and monetary unity began to divide into two hostile camps. One, Germany the chief spokesperson, pushed for monetary and fiscal stability above all else; the other camp, notably including France, pushed above all for political solidarity and Keynesian measures. Advocates of neoliberal and monetarist solutions (Germany et al.) engaged in a standoff with Keynesians (France et al.). For much of the 1970s, the dream of European unity was thus distinctly pushed to the sidelines.

And it is within this stand-off, Mathieu Dubois asserts, where May 1968 appears to have played a crucial role. Having experienced the social crisis of May/June 1968 up close, France was unwilling to forego potential recourse to purposeful national government intervention to avoid a repeat of the 1968 crisis in the immediate future. Retaining control over economic and political decisions, including eventual »Keynesian« concessions to powerful social movements lurking with intent, was something Georges Pompidou and his successors were unwilling to forego. Thus, for much of the 1970s, »May 1968 constituted one of the fundamental reasons for the prevention of further moves towards monetary and economic unity« – in the words of Mathieu Dubois on page 259 of his book – by the French state. Only with the turn towards liberalism by François Mitterrand in March 1983 did France throw in the towel and henceforth conform to the increasingly neoliberal outlook of European unity. May 1968, thus, for much of the 1970s hindered rather than promoted the supposedly ineluctable move towards European unity supposedly propelled by fear of a second May 1968.



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Much more could be said about Dubois' second path-breaking monograph. May the readers of his book discover the wealth of information and statistics for themselves. Despite a more than questionable title, this book belongs into the library of anyone interested in the social movements of the Long Sixties, Franco-German relations in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the history of the European Community in the second half of the twentieth century.



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