

Reception and Perception of May 1968 in Greece

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Abstract: How is May '68 received in the public space? How has it been perceived in the collective consciousness in Greece since that day? To investigate the image of May '68 portrayed by the mass media (public space) and the idea that young Greeks have of it today (collective memory), I relied on three categories of sources: i) Analysis of the texts referring to the events; ii) Interviewing former students who participated in the uprising against the Dictatorship at the Polytechnic in 1973; and iii) Discussions with today's students to see whether or not they have an image of May '68, and if so, what it is. This paper is made up of five sections. In the first I provide an overview of the situation in Greece in 1968, in the second I briefly set out the main positions on May '68 of well-known French social scientists, and in the third I discuss how the period was perceived and the weight of its role in the uprising of Greek students at the Polytechnic in 1973. In the fourth section I paint a brief picture of how May '68 has been viewed in Greece from the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 to today. Finally, in the fifth and final section, I summarise how today's students perceive the events.

Keywords: May 68; Greece; Collective Memory; Youth; Perception of the Uprising.

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1. Introduction

When May 1968 erupted in Paris, Greece was under a dictatorship. News and images were censored. The uprising was «officially» presented as an affray caused by the anarcho-communists. Hence, from the very beginning the phantasm of May haunts the collective memory of Greeks. From the uprising of the Greek students against the dictatorship in 1973 at the Polytechnic (Athens), up to the many recent tributes in the media 50 years later.

In this text I attempt to answer two questions. How May of 68 is received in the public space and how it is perceived in the collective consciousness. By public space I mean the image of May in the mass media. By collective memory I mean the picture that young Greeks have of it today. In order to answer the questions, I relied on three sources: on texts, chiefly in the Mass Media, about May. I contacted

former students who participated in the uprising at the Polytechnic in 1973 against the Dictatorship, and finally, I spoke with students to see if they have an image of May, and if so, which.

This paper is made up of five chapters. In the first I give a picture of the situation in Greece in 1968. In the second I briefly set out the chief positions of well-known French social scientists regarding May. In the third I refer to the picture of May and the weight of its role in the uprising of the Greek students in 1973 at the Polytechnic. In the fourth chapter I depict a brief picture of how May was seen in Greece from the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, to today. Finally, in the fifth and final chapter, I talk with students to see if they have a picture in their minds of May, and what that picture is.

2. The Greeks in 1968

When May took place, Greece, like Spain and Portugal, was under a dictatorship. In April 1967, there had been a military coup, led by Colonel George Papadopoulos which lasted 7 years until June 1974.

The coup took place at a time marked by three facts: by the heavy shadow of the Civil War (1946-1949), by the process of the Liberalization of the state and society in the 1960s and by the intense political and partisan conflicts during the same decade, which provided the military with an excuse to intervene and «save the country». The bloody Civil War had multiple consequences on all levels. It marked the banning of the Communist party, the social exclusion of the Left as well as the Liberals, the restriction of freedoms and rights, and it delays the country's economic growth back by at least a decade.

At the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s three new elements appeared which began to transform the country. There was rapid economic growth which approached 6% on annually basis. Essentially during this period of time Greece turned from an agricultural country into an industrial one. This process fueled and was fueled by the relocation of a large part of the population in the country's two major urban centers, Athens and Thessaloniki, while hundreds of thousands (mostly farmers) emigrated abroad, especially to the Federal Republic of Germany.

At the same time, signs of liberalization were noticed in the political field and in a cultural boom in all forms of the arts. This situation led to the emergence of new social groups on the political scene which resulted in the triumphant victory of the liberal party «Centralist Union» in 1963, led by George Papandreou. The political change fed reactions which resulted in political upsets after 1965, which culminated in the coup in 1967 by officers from the Greek army led by Colonel George Papadopoulos.

The Dictatorship led to the country's cultural and social stagnation. Previous reforms were rescinded, the climate and legislation of the Civil War returned. Politicians and artists were persecuted by the regime or fled the country, social movements died and so the country was led to political and cultural isolation. Cultural movements that had been born in previous years in the arts and letters died and their place was taken by folklore events and a tasteless cult of the past with the supposed intention of extolling on the one hand ancient Greek glory and heritage and on the other the contemporary traditions of the Greek people and nation.

To accomplish its goals the Dictatorship had two important mainstays. Economic growth continued until the global financial crisis of 1973 and some countries, chiefly the USA, supported the regime, at first rather coolly, and later more enthusiastically. This economic growth allowed it to win over certain economic groups, especially the *nouveau riche*. The tolerance, if not the acceptance of the dictatorship by the USA, which limited its isolation and encouraged Americans and Greek Americans to invest in the country, contributed to this too.

To legitimise itself, the dictatorship invested ideologically in the climate of the Civil War and presented itself as the answer, for both the nation and the country, to the deadly threat of national and global communism. This particular justification was used within and beyond the borders against every kind of reaction and criticism. Opponents and critics were immediately criticized as communists or their sympathisers. This political practice met with some success. Without ever managing to acquire real legitimization and still more, a popular footing, there were no strong reactions to the dictatorship, especially in the first years. This holds true for the period when May of '68 broke out too.

For 7 years the regime censored all the Mass Media. Hence, very little was written about May '68 in the newspapers and magazines of the time. In general terms, May was presented as an uprising of the «anarcho-communists». Indeed, some, such as the newspaper *Eleftheros Kosmos* (Free World) worried about the bad influence that events in the French capital, Paris, could have on Greek students there.

Under these conditions, most articles from that time, and even today, focus on the presence, participation and testimonies of the Greeks, mostly students, intellectuals and artists, who lived then in France, and primarily in Paris. The Greek community was relatively large and was made up of three distinct groups, which represented three generations. The first group became established in France in 1945. Thanks to the Athens French Institute, around 200 young Greek men and women (among them Cornelius Castoriadis, Kostas Axelos and many other intellectuals and artists) settled in various French cities, mainly Paris, in order to avoid the conflicts in Greece (which a short time later culminated in the Civil war) and it gave them the opportunity to study on a scholarship. Secondly, there were students, undergraduates and postgraduates, who went there to study in the 1960s. And thirdly, Greeks, of all ages, Left wingers as well as Liberals, who left the country for political reasons after the coup in 1967.

Regarding the presence of Greeks, let me remind you of two things. Greece traditionally had particularly close diplomatic and economic ties with France. On the other hand, the latter was, from 1900 until World War II the main destination for Greek students, in this way playing a significant role in the formation of the greek elite (Kiprianos, 2006 & 2007).

The Greek presence in France is certainly not multitudinous. In the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Greeks migrated, chiefly to West Germany and in smaller numbers to Belgium, Sweden, the USA and Australia. In France, they are mainly students, scientists and business people. According to data from the French statistical agency, in 1968 there were 11,820 Greeks in France, the majority of whom were in Paris (Sarantidis, 2018. <http://www.efsyn.gr/arthro/ta-eggonia-toy-mataroa>).

A few dozen of them live in the student residence, «La Fondation Hellenique» (the Greek Foundation).

The majority of these young people are active both politically and socially. The political situation in Greece throughout the 1960s and the imposition of the dictatorship in 1967 both contribute significantly to their involvement in political acts via various sectors: the resistance organizations against the dictatorship, the French political movements, mainly the Communist, and the Greek Students Union in Paris (EPES), which was founded in 1884. Beyond their participation in demonstrations in Paris and other activities, Greek students occupied the Greek Foundation, making proclamations supporting May, as well as against the dictatorship in Greece. Beyond their participation in these events, the Greeks in Paris are still today the par excellence transmitters of information on May in Greece, and how it was received.

3. May as an object of analysis

May, as an event and as an uprising constituted, in France and internationally, a central object of analysis and thought. The most important French intellectuals published articles related to it. Having a picture of the relevant literature, I discern three basic points in their analysis. The reasons for the uprising, its content and its consequences.

In terms of the causes, the available measurements of public opinion reveal that there wasn't any recorded dislike of the Gaullist regime (Dobry, 2009). In addition, it doesn't appear that french students were aware of or influenced by the climate of widespread contestation in the western world and on the part of intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse. So, Michel Crozier attributed the uprising to the inflexibility of french society to adapt to the changes and to reform. Hence the title of his book *La société bloquée* (Crozier, 1970). Pierre Bourdieu, for his part, talks about ongoing local crises. The student uprising will lead to the synchronization of these local crises and as a result it will take on huge dimensions and shock the whole of French society (Bourdieu, 1984).

Other writers, such as Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis (1968) as well as Raymond Boudon (1977) focus on the great increase in the number of students at the universities and their consequent difficulties, especially the students in the humanistic and social sciences, in the labour market. Except that the first three go a step further. They believe that with the increase in graduates, two categories are created, the officials who make the decisions and those who end up as instruments of the executive bodies. As a consequence, the student uprising signals their refusal to be transformed into executive instruments.

Alain Touraine reads the uprising somewhat differently. He believes that the student uprising, beyond the quest search on their part for a utopian socialism, signals the end of an age, of the industrial society and the transition to a post-industrial society in which the bearer of historicity is no longer the working class but the new social movements, and in this case the student movement (Touraine, 1968).

Regardless of the cause of the uprising, an important role in the way it was later perceived was its message. Obviously, this was, and still remains, polysemic. Beyond the overthrow of the French government and the establishment of an

egalitarian society without exploitation, it expressed ideas and messages that can be read in a variety of ways: from the need for more freedom and more individual and social rights to the emancipation of the people, men and women, from every kind of power and dependence. Hence, May was read in three ways: as an uprising for a more just society, as an uprising for emancipation from every kind of power, whether this is called state, party or simply individual control, and as an uprising for the expansion of individual and social rights. In this picture, a significant role is played by the developments in French society which, despite the Gaullist party's overwhelming victory in the elections that followed, were marked by the expansion of individual and social rights, in particular greater participation in institutions, such as, indicatively, the universities, as well as organizations and businesses.

4. May of '68 and the uprising at the Polytechnic

May of 68 gradually became known in Greece, mainly after the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. In their few comments up to 1974 the mass media restricted themselves to mentioning it, either neutrally, or mainly negatively, as an «anarcho-communist» affair and as an attempt to overthrow the regime. Of course, there were exceptions, the journalists who managed to overcome the problem of censorship and provide a different picture of the events. So, a well-known weekly magazine, the magazine *Pictures of 17/5/1968* has an analytical report on everything that happened at the Sorbonne and in Paris (Trousas, 2015) (<https://www.lifo.gr/team/Plus/57245>).

Of course, the news arrived in varied ways, either through the Greeks who lived in France and in other countries abroad, or through foreign media. «We didn't just follow May on foreign radio stations», writes the author N. Valavani, known for her activity against the dictatorship. «We read about it and we studied it in foreign language books that we bought by post from book shops in England and France» (Valavani, 1993, p. 19). In any case, information on May was slight and limited to particular circles, especially the more politicised.

The things appear to change somewhat after 1970. The dictatorship became stabilised and established a new kind of normality. Censorship and control didn't cease to exist, nevertheless new material began to circulate and in particular books that were incompatible with the character of the regime. And so the first books about May began to circulate. In 1971, *French Revolution 1968* by P. McConville, M. Seale, *May 1968: First Phase of the French Socialist Revolution* by Pierre Frank, and *Lessons of May* by Ernest Mandel began to circulate in translation. In 1972 *The Society of Spectacle* by Guy Debord and *Obsolete communism: The left wing alternative* by Gabriel and Daniel Cohn-Bendit appeared. Obviously, the circulation of these books provided a picture of May '68 especially to some parts of the Left.

In November 1973 Greece was shocked by the student uprising in Athens, at the Polytechnic, as well as in the bigger cities where there were universities. In conversations that I had with students from that time who took part in the uprising they told me that they themselves as much as other students knew about May. This knowledge was not of course always clear, often it was vague in terms of what had unfolded and mainly in terms of what its stakes were. Did this knowledge play any role in the uprising of the Greek students? The answer is most likely negative.

The understanding of the French May doesn't seem to play, directly at least, any meaningful role.

In his book on the student uprising at the University of Patras, Giannis Pountourakis, one of the protagonists, referring to the developments in the period between 1971 and 1972 writes:

From one day to the next you saw a growing intensity of activity and study. We stayed up all night to finish reading a book, to give it someone else the next morning. Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Roza Luxembourg, Bakunin, political and social analyses, anti-war texts on the war in Vietnam and so on. Discussions in little groups and meetings at various houses came and went. (...) Together with all of this came the messages from the French May, a bit late of course, but at the right time, so that some of them could be assimilated (Pountourakis, 2012, pp. 30-31).

Maria Damanaki, who participated in the Polytechnic uprising and was a leading member of the Left for two decades, before she distanced herself from it in the mid-1990s, expresses a similar position in 2008, «Many refer to the Polytechnic of 1973 as the Greek May of 1968. Certainly, there was an influence. It was the seed of doubt and opposition to the authoritarianism of power. In addition, there was the same animosity by the party establishment towards an uprising they could not control» (Damanaki, 2008).

The picture of May is present but, if I judge from the testimonies it is not very strong yet and among the protagonists in the uprising it differs depending on age, since we have to do with young people from the age of 17 up to at least 23, and probably also to do with their degree of involvement. «We were aware of something», notes Dimitris Papachristos, one of the protagonists in the uprising of 1973, towards the end of '69, to do with the «May» of '68, about the hippy movement in America, to do with the autumn May in Italy and to do with Jan Palach who had set fire to himself (Papachristos, 1993, pp. 137-38).

In any case, the uprising at the Polytechnic doesn't appear to have a direct, causal relationship with May of 68. It is indicative that in a number of texts on the Polytechnic no allusion is made to May, even by writers who were leading actors in it, like Nikos Sideris and Christos Lazos (Sideris, 2012; Lazos, 1987).

The two uprisings certainly have similarities, but also differences. The similarities have to do more with the way in which the uprisings manifest themselves. They appear to be spontaneous but emerge under conditions of multiple local crises. In addition, in the Greek case we have local demonstrations of opposition to the regime which didn't necessarily lead to a generalized uprising but functioned like small sparks. This surely has to do with the huge difference between the two uprisings. In Greece, it took place under a dictatorship and not a parliamentary system, something which is reflected in its legitimization and as a result the legitimization of the acts of opposition to it. For the same reason the way the regime dealt with it is different. It is suppressed by the army and the police which resulted in at least 24 deaths (Dafermos, 2018).

5. Changing perception of May

The picture changes after 1974 with the collapse of the dictatorship, its discrediting and the return of a parliamentary system. In the country a new air of optimism blows, especially amongst the young, which is linked to a belief in the possibility of building a new society, less authoritarian, more open. This is depicted on many levels, from culture to politics. For the first time, so many books on anti-authoritarian education circulated. All of this was reflected, seven years later in the electoral triumph of the socialists of PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement).

The new wind of freedom and optimism as well as the reaction to every kind of authoritarianism could be read as a delayed reflection of the movements of the 1960s, including the French May. This reading is perhaps baseless. After 1974 in Greece the climate I mentioned before was in line with the strengthening of political parties and the mass integration into them of people of all ages. Under these conditions, the references in the public space to May are there, but the debate on this is limited and fragmented. The relevant texts are rare and even these pass unnoticed.

May began to be more extensively and systematically discussed many years later, essentially after 2000 when the political parties in Greece began to be questioned, especially the two dominant parties that had alternated in government until then. Under these conditions, in 2008 and 2018, 40 and 50 years respectively after 1968, almost all the Greek mass media, electronic and conventional, published articles on May, and many extensive features, written by two categories of people. Protagonists in the Polytechnic, most of whom had since become public figures, and social scientists, historians and sociologists mostly, a number of whom studied in France, who attempt to analyse the «content» and the «messages» of May.

Reading the texts in the Greek mass media I'd say that they reproduce to a great extent the discussions that took place in France, and secondly in other countries, in previous decades, particularly right after 1968. I say to a great extent since there are few, even minimal references to the gaullist government and the French political system or even to the rapid increase in the number of French students and the problems that this gave rise to as much in the operation of the universities as in the graduates' prospects in the labour market.

The whole discussion could be separated into three questions:

The first refers, especially in material from the communist party of Greece, to the presence of the workers in the uprising and the role of the Communist Party of France. It is the classic debate in France and elsewhere during May and immediately afterwards on the role of the «working class» in the uprising. It is obvious that in contrast with all those who talk about the decrease in the working class as a central subject of history, parts of the Left and especially the Communist party of Greece highlight the role of the labour unions in the uprising, particularly after the first two weeks, reducing the corresponding weight of the students in the whole process.

A second part, perhaps the most fundamental, of the discussions concerns the objectives of the uprising and the vision for the establishment of a new society. This issue is central in Greece in the discussions of the extra-parliamentary Left as well as for all those who evangelize and dream of a new society. May, in this problematic, which is intensely present in public discourse, is useful as a tangible example that

an uprising is always possible even in today's complex societies, and as a source of inspiration for alternative forms of uprising and organization of society.

Finally, in recent years a third problematic, which is more pronounced amongst liberal intellectuals as well as those who criticize the Greek political parties, is continually gaining ground. This focuses less on the causes and the May uprising and more on its legacy at the level of rights, both individual and social. In this problematic May represents a crack in the dominance of the political parties, an attempt to escape their control, and at the same time a cry in favour of an open society.

Through these three perspectives, we could locate certain fundamental changes that have taken place in Greek society. The shift from the second attitude to the third is of particular significance because it echoes the change that has taken place in Greek society at the level of ideas and beliefs. The reception of May as a generalised uprising against capitalist society, at least by the young and not by the proletariat, essentially meant two things. Firstly, the perpetuation of the belief in the possibility, on the one hand that an uprising, or better, revolution, is possible even in an economically advanced capitalist country. And secondly, that this uprising could lead to a society and a model of government different to the soviet model. This dual belief allowed the stalwarts to distance themselves from the soviet model of socialism and even more from Stalinism but to continue to envision a different society.

The strengthening of the third belief is testimony to the fact that the second is losing ground. On the contrary, the belief that focuses more on social and individual rights and freedoms is gaining ground. I would say that a reforming attitude that focuses more on changes and less on revolutionary rupture tends to predominate. Of course, this last belief has supporters in liberal and reforming powers a fact which may distort the picture of the shift I described. Still, however, even like this, we can conclude that the picture of May is positive in Greek society. In other words, it is hard to find texts that refer negatively to it, even in conservative political spaces.

6. Faint image of May in the collective memory

To what extent is the increased number of texts, commentaries even television documentaries on May in recent years imprinted in the collective memory of the Greeks? Based on the published publications we would expect that a significant part of the Greeks is aware of and has a picture of May. As far as I know, there is no systematic study of its reception. According to public opinion research conducted in 2012, «25% of Greeks knows from a little to a lot about May of 68. These are presumably mostly young people» (Vernardakis, 2012).

25% is clearly not a negligible percentage. Much more so when it is mainly young people since this means that the memory of May is being maintained by those who didn't live through the events, who hadn't even been born. However, what is this picture of May? To answer this question, I thought of raising the issue in my lessons at the University of Patras. I wanted to see if the 18-22 years old students knew anything about May of '68. For this I was inspired by the concept of «zone of proximal development» (ZPD) developed by Soviet psychologist L. S. Vygotsky. According to him: «It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development

as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers» (Vygotsky, 1979, p. 86). From this perspective, I attempted, with the help of their fellow students, to urge the students on the one hand to speak and on the other, to think and reconstruct all the information they had on the event with the ultimate objective of composing a picture of May of '68 together.

I focused on two lessons. The lesson is entitled «Modern Greek History». It is addressed to first year students in the Sciences of Education, and to second year students from the Department of Literature and Philosophy, in other words to young men and women aged 18-20 years old. In the classroom there were almost 170 students, amongst them 3 who were somewhat older. Of course, neither the number nor the particular group of students can be considered representative of all the young people of Greece. It is however not an insignificant number of young students of humanistic and social sciences in an important university, as much by Greek as by international standards, and its students come from all areas of the country. In this sense the opinions of the students in question provide a picture of the representations of young Greeks on the issue.

After a brief introduction to the concept of collective memory and its importance for the picture we have of the past as well as the present I asked the students what they think when they hear the phrase May '68. Two hands were raised. A female literature student told me that it was an uprising of students and workers in Germany with the aim of better rights and wages. An older student of the Sciences of Education immediately asked to speak and she claimed that it was a feminist uprising aimed at the expansion of women's rights. I then addressed the student who had initially asked to speak but he told me that he didn't have anything to say.

There followed some awkwardness in the room after the disagreement over what May of '68 was. Then an older student asked to speak, a physicist by profession and student of philosophy. He referred analytically to May of '68 and its purposes, showing good knowledge of the issue. The certainty in his voice encouraged the student who had first asked to speak and then not spoken to ask to speak once again. He referred then to May '68 saying that he knew there were films about it and he himself had seen *The Dreamers* by Bernardo Bertolucci.

In order for the content of May of '68 to be more easily comprehensible I asked the last student to talk about Bertolucci's film. As he hesitated and found it difficult to describe the film the older student took over telling the story of the film. I attempted to shift the discussion to the causes of the uprising and its consequences. Not one student wanted to say something. It became clear from this discussion that further investigation of the matter was impossible since the students' relevant information and knowledge was very elementary.

In order to move the conversation along I asked if we had a similar phenomenon outside Europe. To urge them to speak I mentioned the Vietnam War in well-known films like *The Deerhunter*, and *Woodstock*. We had a discussion similar to the previous one, at some points more lively as some students, about ten of them, knew singers and bands who had participated in *Woodstock*. However, we didn't manage finally to see if these events, the protests over Vietnam, or the general air of doubt in the USA bore any relationship with May of '68.

I tried to conduct the same discussion with another 50 4th year students in the Sciences of Education. The discussion was similar to the previous one. 2 students knew something about May. With the blurry picture they had we couldn't continue the discussion. So, after a few minutes we returned to the content of the lesson.

We could surely wonder why the students do not have information or a picture of May of 1968. There is no meaning to the question set out in this way. It is preferable to ask ourselves why they do not have a picture, since May is in the Greek media often enough, especially this year, 2018, 50 years on. The answer is uneasy given the unfortunate lack of specific facts. We could think that a significant portion of young people do not have much to do with the media, especially the written media. We could perhaps again suppose that uprisings, like that of May, are not amongst the cares and worries of young Greeks. We could also suppose that the great narratives do not interest them and that they are content to live their own daily life. All of these are however only suppositions in a complex daily life where studies demand hard work and tomorrow is uncertain.

7. Conclusions

Judging from the mass of publications in the mass media in recent decades on May of '68, we could claim that its memory is alive in Greece. Based again on the content of the publications I would say that there is a shift as far as the meaning of May is concerned. From a political uprising it is perceived more and more as a social one. By this I want to say that it is seen less as a movement to overturn the regime in France and more as a movement to overturn values and attitudes and introduce new ones. This shift reflects to a great extent the changes that have occurred in Greece in recent years as far as the understanding of politics and political parties is concerned. On the other hand, however, the mass of publications on May doesn't seem to reflect the collective memory of the Greeks, at least not the young Greeks. If I judge from the aforementioned discussions with students, May of '68 is seen not only as a distinctive subversive event but just as an event and it doesn't have a meaningful place in their collective memory.

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