EPILOGUE

From Hope to Threat

In 1959 Charles de Gaulle's new government, the Fifth Republic, published *The Young Face of France*, which highlighted the postwar social policies that had stressed youthfulness and innovation in France's cultural reconstruction in the midst of postwar optimism. According to this publication, France was now "the most dynamic country in the old continent" because it possessed the largest number of young people in Europe. "Self reliant and outgoing," it concluded, "these young people are keenly interested in the problems of their time. The young face of France is turned with confidence toward the future."[1] Fifteen years after the Liberation, adults still classified youth as the social group that would solve problems and improve France. Though Gaullism gloried in France's past heritage and tradition as a "great power," the newly realized Fifth Republic immediately tried to capitalize on the burgeoning presence of a new mass social group and the underlying concept of youthfulness that had dominated the Fourth Republic's rejuvenation.[2]

The Young Face of France was published in English, primarily for an American audience. In 1965 the French consulate in New York published another promotional piece in English, *France and the Rising Generation*, which again celebrated the young of France and emphasized the link between French youth and a vital, modern nation. Both publications featured hundreds of photographs of shiny bright faces, ranging from young schoolchildren in play clothes to twenty-something technocrats in business suits and lab coats, from young athletes at play to hobbyists painting, singing, or performing in plays. The text emphasized the educational expertise, physical fitness, and cultural fluency that young people in France demonstrated, a result of postwar social engineering. For the new government, youth represented France's activity, progress, advancement, vigor, and vitality. Therefore, it sought to associate itself with this social body, at least as an effective promotional strategy.[3]

Because a rejuvenated France fit well into de Gaulle's program for a triumphant return to French grandeur in international relations, de Gaulle's new government mobilized the category of youth as emblematic of France's robust progress. The Fifth Republic appeared eager to exploit the dynamism and liveliness of the young abroad as the new government sought to establish its own legitimacy and distinction. As the 1960s opened, the new government tried to identify itself with the rising tide of the New Wave, the very social body that Fourth Republic society had prioritized through social and political institutions. Youth and youthfulness had indeed become a social model. Yet despite the stability and prosperity of the 1960s, and the more prominent role the young began to play in public life, youth as a social body and cultural concept would profoundly clash with de Gaulle and the Fifth Republic in a very substantial way as the decade closed.

One remarkable element in de Gaulle's return to power—that is, in the collapse of the Fourth Republic's Constitution and system of government—was the equanimity with which most of the French public faced it. There was the notable exception of some young people, who protested the 1958 inauguration of the new Constitution at the Place de la République with placards that equated the new powers of the president to Fascism and that denounced de Gaulle as a dictator. The police charged down the rue Turbigo; the young put up barricades in defense.[4] The moment passed without much more ado, though the protest of youth against de Gaulle and the

Algerian war would escalate and, of course, there would be the events of May a decade later.

The decline of the Fourth Republic had been clear for some time. Its inability to maintain continuity in the highest offices of government, and its inability to effectively control the *colons* and the French military in Algeria had exacerbated the weaknesses of a fragile parliamentary system and rendered it impotent. Yet despite this dramatic shift in power, there was no great rupture. The whole enterprise was marked much more by a resigned continuity than an anxious discontinuity. In fact, the government stability that de Gaulle and the Fifth Republic enjoyed in the 1960s brought to light the remarkable successes of the Fourth Republic's economic, diplomatic, and social policies. Much of what the Fifth Republic claimed as its triumphs it owed to the Fourth Republic, which had effectively steered France through the reconstruction, modernized the country's economy and infrastructure, and established a broad social safety net. De Gaulle inherited a booming economy, an influential position in the United Nations, NATO, and the new European Community, and an expanding population with a rapidly rising standard of living. Despite the crumbling empire, and with the significant exception of the worsening Algerian crisis, France was in fairly good shape.

Likewise, in terms of youth, the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s was one of tremendous continuity. The Fourth Republic's policies and programs concerning the young were not abandoned, but maintained and expanded. In 1958, in the Fifth Republic, the High Commission for Youth Affairs was made into an autonomous body (adding sports and recreation to its responsibilities); then, in 1963, it became an independent department; and finally, in 1966, it was transformed into the new Ministry for Youth and Sports. The Youth and Culture Houses (MJC) program continued to expand exponentially and came under the purview of municipal government control and state subsidy across France, as did the national network of youth hostels. The moral protectionist impulse continued through the regulation of reading material and film content for young people, though the difficulties of the Mouchot case took some of the heat out of this fire. The *rééducation* program of the juvenile justice system was deemed a great success and given increased funding and resources, even though there remained delinquency alarmists.

Studies of French youth more generally continued to abound in the 1960s, as they had in the 1950s.[5] Their subject matter included, as a contrast to the Gaullist propaganda of triumphant youth (youth as hope), the persistent theme of menacing youth (youth as threat).[6] The plethora of studies reveals that throughout the postwar period the category of youth had served as a matrix for adult France to consider and dwell upon all sorts of topics. Because youth served as a common denominator that crossed boundaries of class, gender, race, and region, it provided a convenient prism through which adult France could think about the past, the present, and the future; about urbanization, modernization, and technocratic progress; about morality, criminality, and virtue; about nationality, cultural identity, and citizenship; and about changing structures of class and gender roles. In short, the category of youth was a point of convergence where adult France could deliberate indirectly on itself and on France more broadly in every way imaginable.

Yet there was great ambivalence in this process of rejuvenation as well. This was because youth was never an "either/or," but always an "as well as": not angel *or* devil, not hope *or* threat, but angel *and* devil, hope *and* threat. The symbolic form of youth was capable of flexibility, compromise, and contradiction, which made it ideally suited for the purpose of cultural rejuvenation after the Second World War. The most potent symbols are by their very nature multivalent and unstable. They are powerful precisely because they can be interpreted in multiple ways. In the case of youth, its power lay in the fact that it attracted to itself both hope and fear, both the dream of regeneration and the fascination of degeneration. The concept of youth was so highly idealized in postwar France that it was equally subject to excesses of condemnation when it failed to live up to grand expectations. The promise and problem of youth created a distinctly interwoven dilemma for adult France, producing a dynamic tension that remained unresolved at the close of the decade.[7]

A wonderful illustration of this tension is found in Raymond Queneau's best-selling novel, *Zazie dans le metro*. The 1959 novel and the subsequent Louis Malle film (1960) are considered classics of New Wave literature and film. Zazie is an impish and foul-mouthed but very likable eleven-year-old visiting her eccentric transvestite uncle Gabriel for a day and a half in Paris, where Zazie desperately desires to ride the Metro, though it is closed due to

a strike. Instead, she seeks out other forms of amusement offered by Paris. Zazie is an androgynous tomboy who likes all things American, drinks only Coca-Cola, and desires nothing more than a pair of blue jeans. Though a precocious troublemaker, she is nonetheless adorable. Zazie is a scoundrel ragamuffin who makes mischief, and in the midst of her absurdist misadventures across Paris, the adult characters banter wittily in the playful argot of the street. Because Zazie is irreverent and cheeky, yet amusing and likable, the adults simply do not know how to handle her or what to make of her, and they spend much of their time reflecting and conferring on this conundrum with one another. The adult gaze is squarely fixed on Zazie, as they try to decide if she is more angel or devil. Zazie, for her part, pays no attention to their concerns, though she remarks candidly on some awkward truths, particularly sexual ones. Interestingly, upon Zazie's return from her day in Paris, her mother asks, "Well, did you enjoy yourself?" "All right," says Zazie. "Did you see the Metro?" "No." "What have you done then?" "I've aged," Zazie responds petulantly.[8] As the center of attention, Zazie harbors a sense of autonomy derived from the scrutiny of adults and the accumulation of experience.

The young themselves were becoming more vocal and more visible in French public life, predominantly through an emerging youth culture that began to overwhelm French popular culture.[9] In October 1959 two jazz lovers, Daniel Filipacchi and Frank Tenot, launched the weekly program *Salut les copains!* on the commercial radio station Europe No. 1. *Salut les copains!* was crucial in the development of the national (and international) French youth culture of the 1960s by providing a public forum for the young, both to perform and to consume as a mass social body. Initially, *Salut les copains!* featured jazz, but very soon it reverted to the pop standards of rock 'n' roll, a music style that became known in France as *yé-yé*.[10]

The popularity of *Salut les copains!* grew slowly but steadily, and, increasingly, young people in France, Belgium, and Switzerland came to see the program as "their" show, because it was for them, about them, and included them. As the program grew in popularity, it more often featured conversations with and by young people, and based its programming on questionnaires and listener responses to emphasize the participation of its young audience. Request lines were opened, giving voice to youth from across class and geographic barriers, and young listeners were brought into the studio to participate as

members of a live audience. "The important thing," Filipacchi said, "was to demonstrate to those who seemed not to know it, that youth is not an illness and that teenagers are not necessarily mental defectives or hysterics."[11]

The popularity and allure of the *yé-yé* youth culture was publicly verified in the summer of 1963. *Salut les copains!* organized an open-air concert at the Place de La Nation in eastern Paris for the night of June 22. With the pompadoured Johnny Hallyday headlining, concert organizers anticipated a large crowd of about 30,000 young people. Instead, more than 150,000 showed up to listen, dance, sing along, commiserate, mingle, and socialize—a remarkable number for a pop concert in the early 1960s. The young fans climbed trees, scaled lampposts, and clambered atop one another to get a view of the stage and the crowd. One historian has called the *nuit des copains* "a veritable collective baptism of an age class," emphasizing the aggregate whole of youth as a social class and the sense of community and cohesion demonstrated by the young acting as the collective of youth at this mass celebration. The *nuit des copains* sparked excitement in the faraway reaches of provincial France and reverberated even for those young people who had been unable to attend. It sanctified and exalted the new youth pop culture and operated as a reference point for years to come.[12]

The music festival also sparked a flurry of commentary in the French press that continued the good youth/bad youth dichotomy. There was something decidedly troubling about 150,000 young people gathered together without the direct supervision of adults. Most commentators denounced the *nuit des copains* as an improper example of youth gone wild, though it was in fact a joyful party and not an angry riot. As elsewhere, rock music in France was frowned upon by adults as being coarse, vulgar, and substandard. Furthermore, like jazz, it had emerged out of American black culture and was thus seen as threatening to the "Frenchness" of French youth and France more generally. *Paris Presse* wrote, "There are laws, police, and courts. It's time to make use of them before the savages of the Place de la Nation turn the nation's future upside down." *Le Figaro*, concerned by the music's power to elicit a collective response, asked, "What difference is there between the twist . . . and Hitler's speeches in the Reichstag, apart from the music?" However, in a series of articles for *Le Monde*, Edgar Morin, ever the cheerleader for the young, applauded and celebrated the exciting demonstration of youthful enthusiasm and mass identity.[13]

The visibility of a discernible youth culture developed dramatically in the 1960s in tandem with and via the visual media. Of course, many of the popular New Wave films displayed the habits, behaviors, slang, style, and preoccupations of French youth for both young and old audiences. These films revealed, reproduced, and, in some measure, standardized the emerging youth culture. Likewise, and more importantly, the emergence of television as a mass medium in France heightened this visibility on a national scale. In 1950 there had been fewer than 10,000 televisions in French households; by 1960, there were 1,300,000, and by 1970 there were over 11 million. The new sixties telejournalism paid special attention to youth, young people, and youth culture. News magazine shows such as *Cinq colonnes à la une*, *Face à face*, and *Zoom* devoted many segments to young people in France, from exposés on the popularity of stars such as Johnny Hallyday to features detailing the *rééducation* program that was teaching juvenile delinquents vocational trades. By the mid-sixties, some television shows began to focus on youth exclusively, as both subject matter and audience. In 1964 the series *Seize millions de jeunes* featured interviews with young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, seeking their opinions on life, politics, love, and the like. In 1966 *L'Avenir est à vous* sought to understand the complex relationship between children and parents, and, by extension, between youth and adults in France more generally. Later, in 1967, the same producers who had brought France *Seize millions de jeunes* created *Bouton rouge*, another show that targeted a young audience through their popular culture in music, dance, and style. The producers hoped to show young people as they were, not how adults thought they should be. In fact, *Bouton rouge* was inundated with letters from parents and educators scandalized by the appearance of young "long-hairs" on television.[14] The new youth pop culture gave the young a greater sense of agency and collective identity, while aggravating the sense of antagonism with adults.

This new youth culture's national scale, visible prevalence, and relative consistency across boundaries of class, gender, and geography helped to solidify a sense of community among the young French. That is not to say that the young and their cultural practices were homogenous or unvarying, but there was a very discernible national trend. In 1967 Edgar Morin published the sociologic study *Commune en France: La Métamorphose de Plodémet*, which traced the transformation of a small community in Brittany over the

decade of the 1960s. In the study, Morin recounted how the rural young of Plodémet had "the same equipment, the same passwords . . . the same antennae, the same culture as the urban young."[15] He expounded on the societal transformation from rural to urban, from old to young, from local to national, that the new youth culture of the 1960s had come to represent for France more generally. According to Morin, popular culture had become the common denominator uniting young people from the Normandy beaches to the Provençal foothills, from the Strasbourg *lycées* to the Auvergne farms, thus creating a national community of youth with its own characteristic rituals and practices distinct from those of adults.

The policies and programs, studies and discussions, and activities and movements for, about, and by the young since 1945 had created the social space for this new youth culture to emerge. The focus and concentration on young people in France's cultural reconstruction—in new programs like the Youth and Culture Houses, in the political rhetoric of Pierre Mendès-France, in the moral protectionist legislation, in the revamped juvenile justice system, and in the vast number of studies contemplating the impact of the baby boom—created a massive public discourse about youth in the 1950s. Moreover, the "existential" young, who stayed out all night jamming and dancing to jazz in the cellars of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the lifestyle and works of Françoise Sagan and Brigitte Bardot, the films about, for, and by the *nouvelle vague*, and the media's preoccupation with the activities and lifestyles of young people opened the door for the prominent role played by youth in the next decade.

The voluminous studies of the young in France had shown that, like any mass social group, youth as an aggregate was comprised of a broad assortment of attitudes, dispositions, beliefs, convictions, activities, habits, and behaviors. Nevertheless, the very inquests that had revealed the diversities continued to interpret and represent French youth as a homogenous whole with common traits and characteristics. Homogeneity, though, is neither a requirement nor a condition for the existence of a social group. The definitions and characteristics attributed to a group—what, ostensibly, gives it distinction in the larger social body—is the result and reification of an ongoing negotiation and struggle about what a group is or should be. A social group is called into being because people believe in its existence. Adults were as responsible as young people, and possibly more so, for setting youth off as

a separate mass social body. Even as adults deliberated, studied, chastised, and celebrated youth, the young themselves were living their lives and producing their own sense of identity. Thus, the identity formation of youth as a social group was a broad, diffuse, and, at times, conflicting process that manifested itself not only culturally, but socially, politically, and legally as well. For the young themselves, this was a social experience of a cultural category. Youth as an idea or cultural category was distinct from the young people who may or may not have identified or been identified as members of the group "youth."

In one sense, what became visible in postwar France was a renewed emphasis on youth as a mass social group. In general, the concept of youth as an intermediary life-stage, the notion of youth as a transition stage of the individual between childhood and adulthood, is largely a modern invention and was firmly in place by the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, over the course of the twentieth century, and most visibly since the Second World War, the idea of youth has been substantially recast to represent a mass social group, rendering its meaning as an individual's life-stage secondary. The concept of youth was consolidated in the postwar period as that of a mass social body participating in and constitutive of larger society politically, economically, and culturally. The notion of youth as intermediary has expanded accordingly beyond the individual's life-stage; now youth functions as an intermediary between social classes, genders, age groups, epochs, and nations.

That is not to say, however, that youth as a concept is a uniquely French phenomenon. What I have traced here is the development, in the French context, of a process that is identifiable in the postwar West generally. Yes, some of what was driving this preoccupation with youth as a source of revitalization and as a source of worry was happening for broad reasons—demographic baby booms, the expansion of education, technocratic modernization, the emergence of new forms of popular culture and media—but the particular inflection these processes took in France had its roots in longer-term French developments, such as the preoccupation with pronatalism or concern for the loss of grandeur and national identity, but especially in the experience of defeat, war, and the Occupation.

In France, the concept and social category of youth, which was so much discussed and debated in the immediate postwar years, actually anticipated the demographic dominance of the young as a social group at the end of the

1950s and into the 1960s. That is, the revitalizationist discourse that predominated in France's project of rejuvenation, and the centrality of youth to this process, preceded and precipitated the formation of the social body of youth by preparing the young to take on the mantle of youth. In fact, this rhetorical conceptualization had been building since the turn of the century.[16] The discourse itself functioned as an anticipation that helped youth become a mass social group once the demographic bump of the baby boom came into effect at the end of the Fourth Republic.

By the 1960s, youth in France was represented as a mass social group with particular political, social, and cultural characteristics. While youth was not an entirely homogenous social body, this age category became an organizing principle for a social body's aggregate identity as it was defined dialogically by old and young France. Social groups tend to reflect hierarchies, such as old and young, rich and poor, male and female, rulers and ruled. Like other groups defined by race, class, or gender, those defined by age are based upon the distribution and division of power. In short, the age categories of "adult" and "youth" impose limits and produce an order for one another. Therefore, it should not be surprising that, at times, these mass social groups based on hierarchies of power will come into conflict with one another. This conflict is not simply the result of a "generation gap," but of the production of social groups and the distribution of power.

In part, the events of 1968 were about this young/old, youth/adult conflict. Charles de Gaulle and his government were the absolute epitome of stiff, intransigent, withered, and stubborn old age. De Gaulle—a grayed, wrinkled nationalist and authoritarian veteran of World War II—was the supreme symbol of the past in the present. The students in the Latin Quarter played off this in their posters, banners, and slogans, mocking de Gaulle's age and his absolutist dictatorial manner by repeatedly comparing him to Louis XIV, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler. In his defense, de Gaulle famously retorted that these young people were simply ungrateful "bed-shitters" incapable of appreciating how good they had it thanks to him, which was satirized in the poster "Be young and shut up" (see Figure 23).

In *The Young Face of France* and *France and the Rising Generation*, de Gaulle's own government had trumpeted the dynamic power of young France in remaking old France. The idea of youth as the harbinger of change, radical or not, had permeated the postwar period, from the rhetoric of the recon-

Figure 23. In this poster from 1968, de Gaulle muzzles a protester and commands, "Be young and shut up." Anonymous.

struction in the 1940s, through the public concern for the *mal du siècle* in the 1950s, to the protests and radicalization of the 1960s. The cantankerous Fifth Republic tended to respond unsympathetically to the proposals and concerns raised by young people themselves.[17] If the 1950s were characterized by the young's sullen passivity in politics and civic life, then over the course of the 1960s, with the Algerian war as a turning point, we can see an increased mindfulness of politics and political activity culminating in the rebellions of 1968.[18] Perhaps this was in part the result of French society using the category of youth for the project of rejuvenation, which encouraged the young to participate in civil society at the same time that it intentionally excluded them due to their age. Notably, one 1968 poster is a picture of a paving stone, the projectile of choice for protestors, with the caption, "Under 21 here is your voting ballot."

The repeated use of brute police force to deal with disgruntled students and striking workers throughout the 1960s, and especially in 1968, brought unavoidable comparisons to Fascism, Nazis, and the Vichy collaborators. As was the case throughout Europe, it was the police and not the protesting

students who instigated violence throughout the 1960s. In scenes reminiscent of the troubled past, the state, through its police forces, violently repressed its own citizenry. The young protesters of 1968 repeatedly brought these continuities to light, which they said showed that despite the booming economy and social policies of the welfare state, not so much had changed. After all, the power structure, from government to big business, was still dominated by the very same people that had been running the country at the time of the Liberation in 1944: de Gaulle and his cronies.

In a sense, young people in 1968 were demanding the future that had been promised to youth in 1948. After Liberation and at the founding of the Fourth Republic, France had been optimistically enamored of the opportunity of starting over. The thrust of the Resistance charter and the goals of the leftist Tripartite Coalition had been to create a more socially just and equitable society that truly exemplified fraternity, equality, and liberty. A motivating spirit behind the reconstruction was the messianic belief that France could surmount material and structural limitations if it only exercised the vision and will to imagine and realize a better society. This reformist impulse idealized the future and placed France's youth at its center. Yet by the 1960s the idealistic optimism of the Liberation had dissipated, the reconstruction had been completed, and youth had become more of a threat than a hope, as it wielded the potential to disrupt the social order rather than rejuvenate it.

The Fourth and Fifth Republics had fought bloody wars to subjugate colonial subjects, and had employed brutal police force to subdue its own citizens. Gaullism was a political philosophy of order and tradition as opposed to reform and change. And because it based its vision of France on the grandeur of the past, Gaullism refused to explore France's complicity with Vichy Fascism or the Holocaust.[19] Young protesters in 1968 called attention to this disparity between the postwar vision and the Gaullist reality. They demanded the changes and reforms they had been taught to expect and to initiate as a social body.

In the library of works about the events of 1968, the explanations for its causes remain inadequate. Almost all the literature expounds on the effects and consequences of the rebellion, which are vast and significant, to be sure. In part, this is because the explosion of 1968 is so difficult to explain. Although there had been active student unrest throughout the 1960s, as late

as the end of April 1968 no one was able to foresee what was to come in a couple of weeks. Times were good; France was stable and prosperous. In fact, *L'Express* ran a feature article that expounded on the growing youth unrest in other countries and commented on the relative tranquility of France.[20] While explaining 1968, or even the role of youth in it, is beyond the scope of this book, the implications of my larger conclusions for those events merit comment.

Most often, May '68 is simply chalked up to a generational conflict. The term "1968 generation" is bandied about as being self-explanatory, and the May conflict is viewed as a struggle between young and old generations, between children and parents. But the self-congratulatory generational interpretations overemphasize the role of a narrowly defined age cohort, almost to the point of implying a predestined fate.[21] The generation of 1968 needs to be seen as the result of a specific identity construction for the larger social group of youth—which, in 1968, this "generation" constituted. True, the twenty-year-old in 1948 was not the twenty-year-old in 1958, nor the twenty-year-old in 1968. Yet it is imperative to recognize the long-term conceptualizations of age-based social groups, even as the exact individuals, or generations, associated with that social group were in perpetual flux. The category of youth as a social body, and its meaning and role in society, maintained a continuity even as its membership changed. Therefore, another way to view the events of 1968 is to see them as having roots in the postwar cultural reconstruction that promoted and emphasized the rejuvenation of France via youth. Hence, the "generation of '68" (or, more accurately, those protestors claiming youth as a form of political legitimacy), whether New Wave or baby-boomer, can be seen as a product of this identity formation as it inherited and advanced through all the programs, policies, and social discourses for and about the young during the Fourth Republic and continuing into the Fifth.

Notably, the students in the Latin Quarter were using the idea of youth, as it had unfolded in the postwar period, to their advantage. "Professors, you make us grow old" was one such graffiti indictment. The government and the public were very receptive to the discourse of youth as revolution. Adult France had indoctrinated itself to think of young people as actors and to see historical progress in terms of generational renewal—notions they had been instrumental in developing since 1945. In effect, they had been taken

prisoner by their own revitalizationist rhetorics. This might explain, in some measure, the belated response of the government and the bemused fascination of the public throughout May. In a 1968 political cartoon, established politicians are portrayed as jumping on the youth bandwagon, as François Mitterand has declared himself a "nouveau jeune" (see Figure 24).

Nor was the 1968 protester necessarily twenty years old. The events of 1968 demonstrated that youth could be an ideological foundation for political identity and political protest because of the variability of its definition. Perhaps this elasticity even strengthened youth's base. The youth of 1968 were not just university students, but *lycée* and vocational students, faculty, professionals, and workers whose ages ranged from the early teens to the late thirties. In May 1968, the very act of violent protest made one a part of the collectivity of youth because the rebellion itself was being defined as young, whether that was an accurate description or not. The "youth" movement was not a single, unified social group acting in concert during

Figure 24. In this political cartoon from *Paris-Presse*, October 8, 1968, established politicians are shown jumping on the youth bandwagon as François Mitterand declares himself "nouveau jeune" with his shirt.

the events of May. Among the student protesters themselves, chaos reigned. There was no programmatic revolutionary consensus among them, an actuality that anarchists like Daniel Cohn-Bendit gleefully encouraged.[22] Likewise, many young people sat out the whole thing, preferring to watch the bedlam on television from the safety of their own homes, while others even organized in opposition. Nevertheless, this act of revolution confirmed the cultural concept as social identity. "For the first time youth really existed," proclaimed the Situationists, whose ideas repackaged those of the Uprising Youth of the 1950s.[23]

This is not to deny the very real political grievances of 1968 and the significance of historical circumstance: 1968 was neither an inevitable nor an exclusive uprising of youth. In mid-May, ten million workers went on strike and occupied factories across the country. This represented over one-third of the entire French labor force. Led by enthusiastic young workers, and in spite of disapproval from the older union bosses, the labor strikes were far larger and broader in scope than those of 1936 or 1947, and they were exercised without the organizational support of the official unions controlled by the Communist Party. Yet the enormity of this worker unrest has often fallen out of the basic narrative of 1968. The rebellion of 1968 happened without the leadership, machinations, or assistance of organized political parties or labor unions. It was truly a popular uprising, of massive proportions, expressing deep discontent. In fact, during the conflict five workers were killed in police actions, whereas only two students were. And yet, focus and historical attention has steadfastly been placed on the rioting students.[24]

Because of the unique and consequential participation of the young in this uprising, 1968 has been easily dismissed as lacking real political significance. By emphasizing the rebelling students from middle-class backgrounds and by characterizing May 1968 as a callow adolescent rebellion, the government and others, most famously Raymond Aron, were able to effectively depoliticize it.[25] Because the idea of youth is socially produced and given significance (usually) by adults, it can equally be rendered insignificant by adults.[26] Nevertheless, it is true that one thing that makes the events of May 1968 so unique historically is the authoritative role played by youth in such a broad and grand uprising. Thus, at the same time that the idea of youth was used by some to depoliticize 1968, 1968 also helped to repoliticize the concept of youth as revolutionary.[27]

The cultural reconstruction of France after the Second World War placed the idea of youth at the center of its social rejuvenation. Youth had become an ideology, one way of looking at the world. As an object of public and private policies and social discourses, young people were educated, directed, shaped, and molded within this ideology to constitute the ideal citizenry of a reformed France. Young people were empowered to believe that they were responsible for and capable of initiating change within and for French society. In part, 1968 was a spontaneous expression of this empowered identity. Tired of waiting for reform, youth attempted revolution, albeit without a coherent ideology, direction, plan, or leadership, and with very mixed results. French youth fought against the state and the society it was supposed to constitute. As it turned out, the social category of youth did represent both a hope and a threat for French society.