In Britain, it is easy to trivialise the sixties. One Nicholas Fearn recently told readers of the *Independent on Sunday* that ‘leading sit-ins at the LSE were [sic!] always, one suspects, a good way of impressing the girls’.¹ In France, things look rather different; 1968 formed a whole generation and initiated irreversible changes in French society. Jean-Pierre Le Goff’s book is a thousand kilometres removed from the ungrammatical inanities of a Fearn. Its 465 pages are closely documented and any reader will learn much from it. And yet Le Goff’s work is striking not so much for what it contains as for what it omits.

Le Goff aims not just to study the events of 1968, but their long-term influence on French politics, society and culture. The most obvious comparison is with Hamon and Rotman’s *Génération*.² The great strength of *Génération* is that it was based on interviews. Le Goff, however, has based himself entirely on published sources. In doing so, he has already operated a major selection. Those who wrote their memoirs were the stars and the renegades. The thousands of rank-and-file activists who continued for many years after 1968 to nourish the same ideas of changing the world, albeit in the narrower framework of a union branch or an environmental campaign, go unrecorded.

In the first part of his book, Le Goff recounts the events of 1968. It is a generally honest account, which recognises that the students had legitimate grievances. Yet, while the student struggle is presented day by day, the thing that made France qualitatively different from every other country – the general strike of ten million workers – gets only a few paragraphs. As for the claim (pp. 113–15) that Maurice Grimaud, the head of the Paris police, was a humane man seeking reconciliation, it

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¹ *Independent on Sunday*, 26 December 1999, cited Flett 2000, p. 2. It does not seem to have occurred to Fearn that some sit-in leaders were, if not ‘girls’, at least women. Or perhaps he assumes they were all lesbians.
² Hamon & Rotman 1987–8.
would be more convincing if the sole source adduced were not . . . Grimaud’s memoirs. The letter that Grimaud sent to all Paris police urging them not to use excessive violence was surely as unconvincing as the message ‘Not to Be Flyposted’ placed in small print at the bottom of a political poster.

The second part traces the development of the revolutionary Left in the years after 1968. The decline of a mass movement breeds ultra-leftism among those who cannot come down with it. Le Goff lovingly catalogues ultra-left lunacy, notably the indiscriminate use of the term ‘fascism’ against political opponents and the way in which the French Left only just avoided the lurch into terrorism which produced Baader-Meinhof and the Red Brigades. But the focus is mainly on the short-lived eruption of French Maoism, and the Trotskyist organisations get little coverage. Many absurdities have been committed in the name of Trotskyism, but the movement’s founding father left some wise words on fascism and individual terror which saved his followers from the worst excesses. Lutte ouvrière (LO), a tendency which shunned the student milieu but has run several impressive election campaigns for the presidency and the European Parliament, is virtually ignored, being dismissed in a few paragraphs (p. 144). (Lutte ouvrière is open to criticism, for its moralising sectarian concept of organisation and its failure to use its election campaigns to build politically. But it has survived, on the fringes of mainstream political life, far longer than the Maoists.)

The third section deals with various political movements that emerged from 1968: ecology, educational reform and feminism. Again, Le Goff recognises the very real abuses that gave rise to these movements. But he focuses on some of the more spectacular absurdities at the expense of the substantial changes that took place. Thus, he describes the ultra-democratic spirit that characterised early feminism – meetings without chairing or agendas, in which only the most ‘articulate’ (big-mouthed, educated, middle-class women) made themselves heard (beautifully embodying the principles of the ‘free market’) (pp. 305–6). He even quotes an horrendous – but highly untypical – story of how a group of women suffocated a Down’s syndrome child, claiming that this shows where defence of the control of reproduction can lead (pp. 333–4).

But such an account is highly superficial. After millennia of oppression, it was hardly to be expected that women would assert their right to equality without a little exaggeration and over-excitement. Nor was it surprising that men, even on the Left, did not respond with immediate acquiescence, but rather reacted fearfully and defensively. In any case, ‘organised’ feminism only touched a tiny minority; the real changes of the period go much deeper. While the post-68 Left debated the abolition of the family, the working class was getting on with the job of abolishing it. Le Goff ends up with the well-worn complaint that feminism marked a reversion to