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Luca Provenzano. "Beyond the Matraque: State Violence and Its Representation during the Parisian 1968 Events." *The Journal of Modern History* 91:3 (2019): 586-624. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/704568>.

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It is notoriously difficult to say anything both new and significant about Mai '68, so voluminous is the literature some fifty years later. The very earliest research on Mai focused on the activities of the police and was undertaken during the protests by scholars who were also activists; only in the last decade or so have historians returned to this first focus to reconsider the activities of *les forces de l'ordre*, a handy term embracing the plurality of policing agencies involved.<sup>1</sup> Luca Provenzano succeeds in making a substantial contribution to this discussion with an article which draws on previously unused material from the archives of *les forces de l'ordre* and his work in the archives of photojournalist Gilles Caron.

Provenzano argues that *les forces de l'ordre* made much more extensive use of "chemical"—that is, gas—and "explosive" (586 and passim) grenades than had previously been recognised; however, the critique of state violence by activists, journalists and commentators fixated instead overwhelmingly on the contact violence of *matraquage* (injuries administered with a variety of wooden or rubber batons—*matraques*—or other makeshift weapons) and, he claims, this skewed emphasis has been replicated in the historical scholarship. He suggests that *grenadage* intensified during Mai as *matraquage* declined, and that the failure of activists and historians to adequately represent the effects of violence by gassing is particularly unfortunate because Mai constituted a decisive development in French riot-control policing technique, namely the transition to, or consolidation of, a model still in place today (589), according to which the administration of "technoscientific violence" from a distance takes priority over the infliction of contact injuries (611). As he develops this main argument, Provenzano makes a number of ancillary claims, including that historians have been insufficiently careful to differentiate between the different branches of *les forces de l'ordre* (591) and voices a criticism of existing scholarship, with which I concur, that "words like 'baton' and 'tear gas' trivialize the equipment deployed by the French state" (592). I shall examine each of these claims in turn, drawing as I do so on my own recent work on the policing of Mai, which also focuses closely on techniques and their significance, and conclude with some reflections on the particular challenges of working with security archives.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that Mai '68 marked a turning point in riot-control policing technique was already a commonplace in studies of French policing: fuller engagement with the history of French policing in general<sup>3</sup> and of French public order policing in

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of activist and historical scholarship on the policing of Mai '68 and how it fits into the wider historiography of Mai see Oliver Davis, "The Anti-Police of Mai '68 Fifty Years on," *Modern & Contemporary France* 26:2 (May 2018): 107-114, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2018.1440198>.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Davis, "Managing (In)Security in Paris in Mai '68," *Modern & Contemporary France* 26:2 (May 2018): 129-143, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2018.1431212>.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Marc Berlière and René Lévy, *Histoire des polices en France. De l'ancien régime à nos jours* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2013); Fabien Jobard and Jacques de Maillard, *Sociologie de la police. Politiques, organisations, réformes* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2015).

particular<sup>4</sup> might have given a firmer foundation to Provenzano's argument that Mai marked a pivotal shift towards more "technoscientific" approaches. More problematic than this absence of general contextualization is the omission of recent essays by historians Daniel Gordon and Gareth Bordelais on state violence in Mai '68,<sup>5</sup> and an essay by Fabien Jobard on how Mai changed French policing, all of which are centrally relevant.<sup>6</sup> Closer attention to this existing body of scholarship suggests that while it is a commonplace that French public order policing was significantly reshaped by Mai, the claim that this was chiefly a matter of the eclipse of *matraquage* by *grenadage* is original but not entirely convincing. Moreover, it is imprecisely articulated in Provenzano's discussion: there is a dissatisfying vacillation over the extent to which Mai inaugurated or merely "consolidated" (587) a new approach to public order policing and relatedly about the timescale over which this new approach came into being. He asserts that during "the 1968 events and the ensuing decade, the French state institutionalized chemical and explosive bombardment as *the main procedure* for the dispersion of allegedly hostile demonstrators." (586, emphases added). This simultaneously makes a very strong claim on behalf of *grenadage*, while also suggesting that its institutionalization took place over a decade; taken in conjunction with his other claim that one branch of *les forces de l'ordre*, the *Compagnies républicaines de sécurité* (CRS), "built its capacity to enact distant violence on demonstrators during the fifties and sixties" (589), this implies a gradual change in approach over a period perhaps as long as thirty years. Although that would align the argument neatly with a recent tendency in the historiography of '68 to speak in terms of "les années 68," it makes the status of Mai in the argument about the development of policing technique much more uncertain and that argument perhaps rather more banal than initially appears to be the case: perhaps the way Mai was policed was more effect, or epiphenomenon, than cause in a far more gradual process of technoscientific modernization affecting all areas of French society during *les Trente Glorieuses* and so perforce policing itself.

Setting aside uncertainty about the timeframe, the emphasis placed on the primacy of grenades in public-order policing after Mai strikes me as an exaggeration – an overcorrection of their neglect in existing scholarly and activist representation. Provenzano's original and meticulous archival research on the chemical composition of the gas grenades in use by *les forces de l'ordre* constitutes an important discovery in its own right: he identifies "no fewer than five types of chemical grenades containing four different active chemicals" (599). While it is indeed vital to understand the techniques and technologies deployed by the police, it is also vital not to restrict understanding of technique, as I feel Provenzano's article tends to do, to the arsenal of equipment, the kit of offensive weaponry, at the disposal of officers, still less to any one single item. Even in a narrowly strategic sense, in any public-order policing operation each item of equipment is only effective in relation to an array of other techniques, which include the tactics, training, and defensive armour of the officers, but also the communications strategy used by the state to manage the sympathies of the wider population and the tension with the counter-kit, counter-tactics, and counter-communication deployed by protestors. Given the emphasis placed by Provenzano

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<sup>4</sup> Dominique Monjardet, "La Manifestation du côté du maintien de l'ordre," in Pierre Favre, ed. *La Manifestation* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1990), 207-244; Olivier Fillieule, *Stratégies de la rue. Les manifestations en France* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1997); Olivier Fillieule, "Du pouvoir d'injonction au pouvoir d'influence? Les limites de l'institutionnalisation," in Olivier Fillieule and Donatella Della Porta, eds., *Police et manifestants: maintien de l'ordre et gestion des conflits* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2006): 85-112.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Gordon, "Controlling the Streets in May 1968," in Jessica Wardhaugh, ed., *Paris and the Right in the Twentieth Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007): 104-121; Gareth Bordelais, "Les gardiens de la paix parisiens confrontés aux "événements," in by Bruno Benoit, Chrisian Chevandier, Gilles Morin, Gilles Richard and Gilles Vergnon, eds., *À chacun son Mai? Le tour de France de mai-juin 1968* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011) : 155-161.

<sup>6</sup> Fabien Jobard, "Ce que Mai fit à la police," in Philippe Artières and Michelle Zanarini-Fournel, eds., *68: une histoire collective, 1962-1981* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008): 577-582. The omission of this essay is all the more surprising given that Jobard's other essay on the policing of Mai from the same volume is referenced (586-587, n. 2).

on the effectiveness of gas grenades it is surprising not to see discussion of the anti-police techniques that were developed by protestors for minimizing their effects and were disseminated in tracts as early as 7 May.<sup>7</sup>

The intensive use of grenades by police in Paris during Mai has also to be understood in the context of the overriding tactical orders of the operational commander, Paris's police chief, Maurice Grimaud: officers were to be amassed into large units before charging protestors. As Provenzano is aware (603), this was intended by Grimaud to avoid the scenario in which isolated officers would draw their firearms and shoot demonstrators in panicked self-defence. This tactic was informed in turn by Grimaud's acute historical and political awareness of the symbolic victory which the police killing a demonstrator would hand to the protestors and can be understood in conservative as well as humanitarian terms: as Grimaud noted in his memoir, the fall of Louis-Philippe's regime in 1848, or Daladier's government in 1934, had both been precipitated by the killing of demonstrators.<sup>8</sup> Because the police were massively outnumbered by demonstrators in Paris and movement around the city was slow, Grimaud's tactic of accumulation often meant hours of waiting around for reinforcements before officers could charge demonstrators. As they waited, officers were taunted by demonstrators and had to watch numerous other acts of petty illegality, including the building of barricades and the ferrying of projectiles up staircases.

I have argued elsewhere that during these periods of waiting the police themselves underwent an acute experience of insecurity and responded with manifold acts of insubordination both trivial and violent, which for reasons I shall return to later have not found their way into the official archives.<sup>9</sup> In relation to Provenzano's claim about the primacy of *grenadage*, the launching of grenades over longer ranges with launcher rifles was one riposte officers could legitimately make while waiting without defying Grimaud's overriding tactical injunction. It is certainly true, as Provenzano claims, that 'Grenades helped to negate distant harassment by mobile rebels and allowed the security forces to fight protestors and overcome barricades while sustaining fewer injuries and conserving energy' (603), yet this functional explanation is only part of the picture: the police used grenades so extensively because they were the only weapons they were able to deploy over a distance within the tactical limits set by Grimaud while they waited, often for many hours, often while being taunted by demonstrators, for the order to charge. The intensive use by police of grenades must thus be understood as one element in a constellation of techniques and practices.

Ultimately, it is impossible to substantiate the claim which Provenzano makes for the primacy of *grenadage* without also considering other candidates for the top technique that emerged during Mai—the deployment of effective police bulldozers, or mobile snatch squads, in the last third of the month—or the development in the following decade of improvements to defensive body armour and tactical training, or the simple fact that while physical contact may have been postponed after long periods of gassing, it eventually came nonetheless. Provenzano acknowledges that the *matraque* and similar contact weapons remained in active use by the police throughout Mai while also seeking to marginalize their prevalence and efficacy as the events unfolded: “direct physical assault declined as an actual tactic for confronting the rebels but persisted as a typical dimension of reprisals against bystanders, injured demonstrators, and detainees” (602). In my view, the available evidence does not support such a claim for the progressive marginalisation of *matraquage*, though it is certainly true that it was used against bystanders, the injured, and detainees throughout Mai. Confronting demonstrators, the police may indeed have developed a pattern of deploying grenades first and *matraques* second, but this temporal sequence does not imply, in any other sense, the primacy of the former over the latter.

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<sup>7</sup> A UNEF tract dated 7 May and reported by Agence France Presse was entitled “Quelques trucs contre les grenades: Avaler deux comprimés de rumicine, un avant et un pendant les jets de gaz, le citron ou le bicarbonate sont paraît-il très efficaces et il est important d'en avoir sur soi. En imbiber son mouchoir ou s'en frotter le tour des yeux. Méthode plus classique: les lunettes de moto ou aquatiques.” Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris FB 35.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Grimaud, *En Mai fais ce qu'il te plaît* (Paris: Stock, 1977), 177-180.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, “Managing (in)security,” 134-136.

Provenzano is right to signal the imbalance in visual representations of the two forms of violence and no doubt, as he suggests, this has primarily to do with the constraints and affordances of the media—still photography and the poster: “photographs of the employment of the *matraque* or other rough handling had an affective and moral-political charge that photographs of chemical gas or expended grenades could not: perpetrator, means, and victim, dominator, dominated, and domination all could be brought together in a single frame” (610). Nevertheless, as he indicates, concerted efforts were made to gather and disseminate information about the effects of gas grenades in written form. Provenzano mentions (605) Kristin Ross’s discussion of the metaphorization of *matraquage* by the protestors to figure the daily “assault” by advertising and by state-controlled television and radio.<sup>10</sup> In a different context, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has suggested that the atmospheric violence of gas warfare figures the effects of the mass media, and his discussion of gas warfare in the twentieth century has been taken up by political geographer Marijn Nieuwenhuis in ways which resonate with Provenzano’s approach.<sup>11</sup>

Provenzano insists on the plurality of *les forces de l'ordre* which were involved in the policing of Mai: there were, he says, “three distinct organizations,” which he itemizes somewhat misleadingly as “the Parisian Prefecture of Police; the CRS, a specialized force within the French National Police; and the *Gendarmerie nationale*, a branch of the French military” (588). He insists that “each of these forces had unique operational cultures and material” (588), “distinct operational styles” (591) and their own “institutional habitus” (591). Yet he omits the fact that all of the state forces served under the single operational command of the Préfet of the Paris police and, as Lilian Mathieu has noted, the *Compagnies d'intervention* of the Paris police were, for public order policing purposes, usually combined with a detachment of CRS or *Gendarmerie Mobile* (GM).<sup>12</sup> If respecting the individual identities of the forces in question is important, it would have been more precise to refer consistently to the *Gendarmerie Mobile*, a specialised branch of the *Gendarmerie* created in 1921 for public order policing. Provenzano asserts that “historians have tended to use the terms ‘police’ and ‘CRS’ in a generic, homogenizing fashion” (591) whereas, in my view, historians have tended to differentiate between the different units with a somewhat otiose precision that betrays their tacit alignment with the units in question and more generally with the state perspective: from the perspective of the protestors how important were such nice distinctions? Provenzano makes his case for differentiating between the plural branches of *les forces de l'ordre* by referring to the testimony of “informed contemporaries” (588), but by this he means experts in policing whose stock-in-trade are differentiations of this kind. He also tends to accept at face value claims by CRS commanders to their own superior technoscientific expertise in managing demonstrations, in contrast with the brutality of the Paris police *Compagnies*, yet these claims should be understood in the context of historic rivalries between *les forces de l'ordre* and, to some extent, as triumphalist self-validation on the part of the CRS.

Provenzano does indeed draw on research in “unutilized archives” (587 n.2), including archives of the *Police Nationale*, CRS, and GM, but does not discuss the manifold complexities that security archives present to the researcher. They are among the most selectively filled, scrupulously purged, comprehensively vetted, and cautiously opened of all archives. Official archives of Mai contain next to no trace of what we know from other sources to be extensive acts of police insubordination—including insubordination which took the form of unauthorized use of force against protestors, as well as numerous more trivial infringements of professional discipline. Any understanding of the policing of Mai that aspires to completeness must seek to take account of the role played by this crucial element which is almost entirely missing from the official records. To have made a formal record of police insubordination would have called for subsequent investigative and disciplinary action, which was politically out of the question during Raymond Marcellin’s tenure as Interior Minister (1968-1974). Relying primarily on state archives sidesteps one of the key questions about the policing of Mai 68: *who were les forces*

<sup>10</sup> Kristin Ross, *May 68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres v. 3, Foams*, tr. by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena: Semiotexte, 2016), 176; Marijn Nieuwenhuis, “Breathing materiality: aerial violence at a time of atmospheric politics,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9:3 (2016): 499-521.

<sup>12</sup> Lilian Mathieu, “L’autre côté de la barricade: perceptions et pratiques policières en mai et juin 1968,” *Revue historique* 665 (2013): 145-172.

*de l'ordre*? As I have argued elsewhere, the policing of Mai can only be understood by also taking into account the role of *le Service d'Action Civique* and *le service d'ordre* of the unions as functional auxiliaries of the official state police.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Davis, "Managing (in)security."