

# More May Made Me: Additional Elements of an Oral History of the 1968 Uprising in France

By Mitchell Abidor

A supplement to *May Made Me*, published in 2018 by Pluto Press and AK Press.

The interviews that follow were done for the book *May Made Me*, published in the UK by Pluto Press and the US and Canada by AK Press, but had to be omitted for space reasons. This in no way diminishes their interest or the importance of the points they raise about the possibilities of revolutionary activity in the West. They also provide us with insights into little-examined aspects of the events, like the complicated fault lines in a hospital, as told by Eric Hazan in his account of what occurred at the hospital where he was a cardiac surgeon, and in a major research institute in Catherine Lévy's discussion of May at the prestigious CNRS, where she was a sociologist.

The interviews with Rémi Drouet and Colette Danappe return us to the central question of May: the role of the working-class in the events. The French Communist Party (PCF) is held responsible by many on the student and intellectual left for acting as a brake on events (for a fuller discussion of this see the introduction to *May Made Me* or the earlier version of it, "May '68 Revisited," in the October 2016 issue of the online review *Insurgent Notes*). This is based on the assumption that the workers, massively out on a general strike from mid-May, were ripe for revolution but were blocked by the reformist PCF. But the accounts of the workers in *May Made Me*, as well as those of Drouet and Danappe here, show that for most workers the strike was embarked upon as a way of improving wages, working conditions, and labor relations, and not to overthrow the capitalist system. Colette's horror of the political is significant in this regard. Rémi's tales of the ways in which working-class solidarity was not universal must also be taken into account in any analysis of May. Eric Hazan's characterization of the actions of the PCF as "treason" might thus require reconsideration. Perhaps they betrayed a certain notion of Marxist theory, but perhaps the PCF truly *did* know the capacities of the French working class. I hope these two collections will lead to reflection and discussion on these matters.

It was my intention when I set out on this book to give voice to those not usually heard. It is a common complaint about books on May '68 in English and particularly in French that they focus primarily – if not solely – on Paris and the students and leaders there. With the exception of Alain Krivine and, to a lesser extent, Jean-Jacques Lebel, the men and women of all age groups around France I interviewed had never spoken about their experience. They were the rank and file militants who actually made the events and, in many cases, were made by them. If the legacy of May is open to debate; if its aims and successes are not always clear, what is clear is that few who lived through them came out of them the same way they went in, that a world where people actually discuss issues instead of celebrity gossip is possible since it once happened. How and if this can be generalized and extended in time is a question that remains unanswered a half-century on. Fifty years after the events, the time is ripe to see May in all its facets.

Mitchell Abidor,  
Brooklyn, NY  
January, 2018

## Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard

Helen Arnold and Daniel Blanchard have both been active for decades on the French left. Helen, born in Brooklyn, moved to France in 1959; Daniel was born in Paris, spent part of his childhood in the countryside, and then returned to Paris. As we'll see, they were active in Socialisme ou Barbarie [SouB], a group led by Cornelius Castoriadis, whose ideas they are still faithful to. Daniel is a poet and writer, Helen a translator, and they've remained political active with a wide circle of friends on the left. Helen was responsible for helping me find many, if not most, of the people I interviewed.

HA: I moved to France in 1958 to spend my junior year in France. I participated in the program because I was disgusted and all I wanted to do was to leave the US. I did the one year but I was certain I was going to stay here. For family reasons I had to go home for a year, then I came back and here I stayed. My political life began in 1959, though it also goes back a little further. When I was 13 and 14 I spent the summers at a Shaker Village work camp, which was a place for an apprenticeship in direct democracy, self-management, and collective labor, both intellectual and manual. This is where my political life began. But this was subterranean, and it would later burst into the open.

In 1959 my friend Richard Greeman <sup>[1]</sup> said to me: "I picked up a leaflet at the Sorbonne from a group called Socialisme ou Barbarie. There's a meeting tomorrow night. I'm going to go. Do you want to come with me?" He gave me the leaflet and I was impressed when I read it, since it seemed to me to be the only group that said things that didn't come out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that didn't use a classist wooden language and spoke of the problems of the day.

DB: I was born in Paris but spent my childhood in the Alps. My political experience began in 1944 when I was ten. My father taught history at the college of Barcelonnette, an out of the way valley closer to Italy than to France. My father was a Communist after the Popular Front, and when he was named to his first post he created a labor school in the spirit of the Popular Front. Of course, this caused the bourgeois of the town to rise up against him and he was sent to Barcelonnette, which certainly saved his life, since there was no occupation there, no Germans, no [French fascist] Milice... There was great solidarity in the valley, and there were no denunciations. There were many Jews who took refuge there and none were denounced. My father was in the Resistance, and in the spring of 1944 orders were received to set up a forward base in preparation for the Allied landing. This, it goes without saying, led to the arrival of a large contingent of German troops. My father left for the Maquis and my mother took me and my siblings, all of us between six and twelve, and a Jewish woman who was hidden with us during the war, and we went to the mountains to a farm, where after a three day walk we were able to find my father. These are memories that have stuck with me, finding my father, the Jewish woman who was crying... Her husband had been deported and her children had been dispersed among various families. We arrived in another village where we told them we were sent by M Lauffret, and the next three months were paradise on earth for me, with my father who had reappeared and told us stories about the combat in the mountains, the fraternization with the Italian partisans on the other side of the border... I was there, all idealistic, impressed by the fraternity, by how they were fighting not against the Germans but against war. The peasants we were with lived almost

completely autonomously, producing their own food, with a carpenter shop... We then went to live in Paris, and my father, as was often the case, became anti-Communist. As for me, I couldn't become Communist because, after all, I knew what the Stalinist regime was, and I was swayed by my father, who had become anti-communist. There were the two blocs and we saw no way out between them. There were the events in East Berlin in 1953, there was Poland, and then there were the workers' councils in Hungary in 1956. I had a friend from the Sorbonne and one day he said to me, "Take a look at this flyer, it's pretty comical." I read it and I found it really terrific and I looked to see where it was from and it was Socialisme ou Barbarie.

HA: We're the only two members of SouB to have been recruited by leaflets!

### **SouB broke up in 1965. Did you remain there till the end?**

DB: I left without breaking with them in '64. There'd already been a spilt in '63 that had been preceded by a long polemic within the group. I stayed with Castoriadis, and the other group put out a journal called *Pouvoir Ouvrier*. It included people like Lyotard and Vega. During this period, the early '60's, around the end of the Algerian War, there was this great, flat calm in French society and Castoriadis was beginning to theorize "privatization," the retreat into private life. It was the beginning of his break with Marxism, and within the group the work had begun to take a theoretical turn. In the end, more for personal reasons than any other, I stopped going to meetings. I continued to read the review and to write for it, but I took my distance from it around then.

HA: I stayed, but the end is kind of cloudy for me... I don't remember exactly when I left or why. But we weren't together, Daniel and I. We met there – it was, after all, a small group – but we weren't yet together.

### **It was such a small group and yet people still talk about it...**

DB: We were completely ignored at the time.

HA: But even so, people like Cohn-Bendit and Jean-Pierre Duteuil <sup>[2]</sup> knew the group.

DB: There was a group of anarchists – who weren't rigidly anarchist – the group Noir et Rouge – who had Marxist tendencies, and we had very good relations with them. Edgar Morin knew SouB, and *Arguments* dedicated an issue to it, but you have to realize what the climate of the era was. It was the dictatorship of the PCF, and in the factories it was the CGT. And then there were the fellow travelers, like Sartre, who engaged in attacks.

### **After SouB, did you feel like there was something bubbling under the surface?**

HA: Duteuil would say that he felt there was something, that there were strikes that overflowed the normal rigidity. And in '68, late April I think, just before the events, a comrade said we have to meet and re-examine the situation and see what's going on in France right now. And Mothé, the Renault worker who was in the group and so had a great deal of prestige, said, "We have to talk about what's happening at Nanterre." – he was taking classes there I think – "There are interesting things going on there."

DB: "They read our review!"

HA: So we said we'll meet again in a month or two to see how things are developing. And then May broke out.

**But before it all happened you didn't see it coming...**

DB: No, at the time, I didn't notice anything. And I have to say that I followed the ideas of Castoriadis, which was that the stakes of strikes to defend wages were no longer the stakes of the revolutionary movement; there's no more class struggle, bureaucracy is the modern form of domination, we're no longer living under the capitalism of Marx... These were my ideas at the time.

HA: I also think that we were disconnected from things from the end of SouB until May '68. We weren't very attentive. We weren't well situated to see that was happening. No one around us saw things differently.

**The events began March 22, the arrests after the anti-Vietnam War demo at American Express...**

DB: There were demos in Paris to defend the students from Nanterre who'd been arrested.

HA: But before that we didn't see anything coming. We went to the demo on May 3 and, this is my memory, [to Daniel:] it might not be yours, but we were in front of the medical school near the Odéon, and people began tearing up paving stones. And Daniel said to me: "I can't see people build barricades without participating in it." And from that point on...

**Did you have 1848 before your eyes? The Commune?**

DB: Even though I'd already taken my distance from politics it remained something absolutely essential. So if I see people confronting the cops I have to join in. I can't simply stroll by, look on from afar, and leave.

HA: And as for me, I knew nothing of those things [when I came to France]. I had an intuitive feeling, but no real knowledge. To show you how strong those intuitions were, before coming to France in '59 I had to write a paper and the subject I chose was Babeuf. Without knowing anything! But I don't know what I had in my mind, I might have had some image. Something I remember from when I first arrived that struck me was that the women wore their hair naturally. They weren't made-up... They were what they were. I was of the generation that rebelled against bras and deodorant, even then. I was way in advance. And to arrive in France and see that the women weren't the like the petit bourgeois Americans was great.

**And after May 3?**

DB: I can't remember all the dates but I remember May 10: that's when we really tore up the paving stones.

HA: But in the meanwhile, the March 22 Movement had arrived in Paris.

DB: There was a group of progressive protestants who'd loaned them an office near Parc Montsouris, and that was their headquarters. So we went there and arrived during a

General Assembly (GA) where they practiced what Castoriadis called the “laconism of revolutionary assemblies,” that is, they spoke for three minutes to say that we have to do this that and the other thing.

HA: And there was analysis.

DB: Of course, there was analysis, but it was done in a way... I was amazed by how sharp they were. They had such rapidity of political judgment and in deciding what could be done... It was all so different from SouB where there was analysis, discussion... There was what they called exemplary action... We do something, and if the people follow that's good, and if not, we'll do something else.

**So it was the lack of theory that attracted you.**

DB: NO!

HA: No, it was the freedom, there was no lack of theory.

DB: There were anarchists, Trotskyists...

HA: There were Maoists. There was no lack of political culture.

DB: But those who were the motor of the movement were the anarchists. Cohn-Bendit, Duteuil and a handful of others.

HA: But it wasn't dry theory. Things evolved quickly.

**During all this did you have a job? Did you cut work?**

HA: Was I at the Union Against Tuberculosis? Wherever I was I never worked the whole day, so I had the time to participate.

DB: I worked at the ORTF [the national radio and television network], where I read and critiqued scripts. The service where I worked went out on strike very quickly, we took part in the occupation of the Maison de la Radio. We were a kind of leftist groupuscule within all this. The CGT had a firm grip on everything, and since we had to belong to some union group we joined the union of script assistants, the left of the CGT. We stayed there but obviously we no longer worked. We occupied, we joined the demos.

HA: But you didn't spend all your time at the ORTF.

DB: I spent little time there, participating in GAs there.

**What was the attitude of the CGT there?**

DB: They weren't for the occupation. It was just like in the factories: you had to protect the work tools. The factories were very quickly occupied, not by the workers but by the local CGT leadership. And this was an essential element in the demobilization of the strikers. But even so, there were places where the occupation was carried out by the strikers. But to go back to the March 22 meeting, when we went there we found the people we wanted to be with. We met with them in various places, like at Censier <sup>[3]</sup> where there was the Worker Student Committee.

HA: We occupied the Ecole des Beaux Arts.

DB: That was later. And we were almost constantly at demonstrations.

HA: We were almost always on the streets.

DB: We printed flyers, we distributed them.

You were there the Night of the Barricades?

HA: They said to us: Women, you get out of here, so my friends and I took refuge and we watched the events from a house on rue Gay Lussac. I don't remember much else, but I think I was afraid.

DB: I remember I was on a barricade that wasn't far from here [in the Latin Quarter]. The police attacked. We were near the Ecole Normale Supérieure and we fled inside it. We were all squeezed into a tiny office in the Normale Sup. There was a guy there who was really sad, a journalist, because his little sports car had been set on fire.

**And were you afraid?**

DB: Of course, you can't but be afraid. Even so, I threw paving stones just like the others. But I was older than the average.

**Were you ever made to feel like you were old?**

Both: No, no, no.

HA: We were older but we weren't old. I was 27

DB: And I was 34.

**Were you able to find each other at the end?**

HA: I don't remember how, but we did.

DB: We stayed there for quite some time because the cops weren't going to invest the ENS.

HA: An amusing anecdote from that night. Someone who's name I won't mention, during that demo, a former comrade from SouB, said "Do you think it's time now to support the student demands?" He felt it was time to re-structure the movement.

**Then came the weekend, did you rest or continue demonstrating?**

HA: We never rested.

DB: We worked round the clock.

**Then there's the general strike. But until May 13, were you wondering where are the workers? Did you think you had to go out and meet with them?**

HA: We were part of the commission of March 22 that went to meet with the radicalized farmers outside Paris who were going to provision the occupied factories.

DB: Then there was a phenomenon in France, that the universities had been opened up to the children of workers and low-level employees, and they were very militant. It's

certain that the myth in France of the working class as the revolutionary class wasn't limited to tiny leftist groupuscules and was widespread, if only through the influence of the PCF, which was very influential, especially after the war. It was the great party of the working people. So the idea of the workers as the revolutionary class was widespread.

HA: As soon as there were large demos in Paris, organized by March 22 to "liberate our comrades" we saw young workers come to them.

DB: And there were strikes before May '68, tough ones in which the young workers played an essential role. It was they who often went far beyond the unions and who confronted the police and the management of the factories. And so there was a real feeling that the young workers were an element...

HA: And in fact, they were there, on the streets of Paris. The factories encircled Paris, but they came and demonstrated, and it was they who brought this wave of protest into the factories. You couldn't possibly not see the connection, which existed objectively. We didn't look for it: it existed objectively.

**Was the huge demo with the workers in May 13 the best moment? Was there a best moment?**

DB: No, towards the end there were the most worst moments... But no, this was all something that took our breath away and we didn't know just how far it was going to go.

**And where did you think it would go?**

DB: There was at the time the idea that we were beginning the revolutionary process, though we didn't think it was the *Grand soir*.<sup>[4]</sup> There were, after all, 10,000,000 strikers, there were huge strikes in the Loire-Atlantique. Suddenly this society, which had seemed to us to be inert for so many years, revealed an internal volcanism that was simply extraordinary.

HA: Everything was possible, but we were aware that in most cases the occupations were being stifled by the CGT. It's true that things were constantly evolving, so we couldn't know what was going to happen, but I never thought that this was it.

DB: We went into it never knowing what we were going to have.

HA: We didn't know, but we said we'll join it and we placed our bets on it every day.

DB: We did everything so that it would go as far as possible.

HA: And that's all we could do, because it didn't depend on us, or only a little. And so we threw ourselves into it.

**And the Grenelle Accords?**

HA: It didn't surprise us at all that the unions would betray the workers with the agreements. We had made this analysis long before.

DB: This is what was expected of the PC and the CGT.

**Let's talk about the Gaullist demo of May 30... Before that, had you thought that France was behind you?**

HA: It wasn't France, but the bourgeoisie that was on the Champs-Élysées.

DB: But yes, there was a period when it seemed it was taking hold everywhere, that there were even farmer movements, movements of the small peasants, not the large landowners, the peasant workers who sent food to the workers, so we really thought it was taking hold throughout the country. And so when there was the enormous Gaullist demo we saw that there were two Frances.

**It must have been an enormous disappointment... Did you detest de Gaulle?**

DB: Yes. Yes yes yes.

HA: Yes.

DB: But retrospectively, since then we've had worse. He had a certain allure; as did Pompidou.

**When did you feel it was beginning to wind down?**

DB: Even before May 30, with the Grenelle Accords... But even so, there was a resistance movement in certain factories that didn't want to end the strike. In particular there was Flins,<sup>[5]</sup> which we went to.

HA: To show them our support.

DB: But we continued to demonstrate and participate on specific issues.

**There was the film *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder* that showed what the return could be like. May is dying in May but dies in June. Did you feel like, well, we knew this was going to end like this, or we had our chance and we blew it?**

DB: We never thought that. We participated in the small anarchist nucleus within March 22 with Duteuil, and the idea was this was a beginning, May was a beginning. Now we have to work in depth so that we can go further. That's when we created a newspaper called *Passer outre* with Duteuil and Jean-Jacques Lebel.<sup>[6]</sup>

HA: And with more or less anarchist workers.

DB: From Saint-Nazaire.

HA: Not only Saint-Nazaire.

DB: This was the hot spot for the working class.

HA: Cohn-Bendit's brother Gaby was a teacher there, and it was through Gaby that Dany come to know about SouB... But to get back to May, we never stopped saying that something like this couldn't disappear; that something would come out of those who lived it.

**And did it?**

HA: No.

DB: No. There are certain traits of it, not the workers' revolt, not the class struggle, but what Certeau calls the *prise de la parole*. There was that. And there was the complete dissolution of barriers, as much of class as of consciousness.

**Was that during or after? Did everything return to normal right away?**

HA: No, not right away.

DB: It's clear that little by little... And the disappointment led many people withdraw within themselves.

HA: But I just thought of something. We're now in the process of launching a little movement, and it's not by chance that the two people who were the first to respond were people active in May '68.

DB: And then there's the movement that was much less strong in France than in the US, and that's the counter-cultural movement. Moving to the country, communes... In this there was a reference, subconscious perhaps, to '68.

HA: It's hard to pick out what was in the air everywhere... This ability to speak and to act, this was in the air everywhere, '68 wasn't limited to France, there was the US, Italy, Germany.

**And the elections after the events... It must have been hard to remain happy and optimistic.**

DB: Even so, May proved there were contradictions in modern society, that the class struggle continued – we could put it like that – and that it was necessary to continue. There were the Maoists, they continued, they thought there was going to be guerrilla war, they went underground, but there are others who went to work in factories, the *établis*. These were people who were truly admirable, since they followed their ideas to their conclusion. Now to be sure, afterwards people caricatured the spirit of '68 that played out in fashion, in journalism, in literature that didn't match up with our ideas at all.

HA: As for me, I was at the showing of a film called *L'an 01* which was made in '69 I think, a film by Doillon, Resnais, and Rouch. The scene I remember is that there was no more money, and the people go around picking up all the money and get rid of it because there's no longer any need for it. When I saw it recently the audience was young, and at the end it got a standing ovation. And this was more than 30 years after.

**Did May change anything in you?**

HA: No, I don't think so.

DB: It changed my way of living.

HA: There's a detail we haven't talked about. We were in Censier, which was occupied, and in the hallway we met two pro-Situs who were accompanying Murray Bookchin<sup>[7]</sup> and were looking for an interpreter. We both proposed ourselves and we ended up becoming good friends with him, though we didn't know who he was before. This changed our lives, since we moved to Vermont to live with Murray. In '72.

DB: Though before this we went to New York several times to visit his group on the Lower East Side.

HA: We met the Motherfuckers.

### **And in France...**

DB: There was the feminist movement, the gay movement, family planning, abortion...

HA: I was very active in the feminist movement, and I brought over from the U.S. things like the *groupes de parole*. But we remained outside of groups like Psych et Po.

DB: Yes, because we refused the institutionalization of feminism. It was a group, largely of lesbians, who were admirers of Lacan who wanted to control the feminist movement.

HA: Now all of this was in the air at the time, and it wasn't May in itself that brought it about.

DB: There was connivance between the Gaullists and the Communists – even if they fought each other politically, in presenting France as a country of resisters.

### **Well, if it wasn't a revolution, what was it?**

HA: A UFO.

DB: Every historical event has its own characteristics. What happened in France in '68 is very different from what happened in Italy, which lasted ten years.

### **But you didn't have the Red Brigades, just the brief and small Action Direct. Why not?**

HA: There was a temptation...

DB: Maybe people were too discreet, they weren't serious enough... There also the fact that the authorities were very intelligent and Pompidou and de Gaulle were very clever, and the prefect of police very moderate... But there was a young man, an anarchist, who planted a small explosive, and at our paper, *Passer Outre*, someone on the staff said, "The first shot has been fired on the Winter Palace."

### **And how did you all react?**

DB: We shrugged our shoulders and laughed.

## **Notes**

1. Preeminent American scholar of Victor Serge.
2. Jean-Pierre Duteuil, Co-founder of the March 22 Movement and still an active anarchist and publisher.
3. University of Paris III.
4. The great, final revolutionary moment.
5. Renault factory where there was important radical activity.

6. Organizer of the occupation of the Odéon theater. See his interview in *May Made Me*.
7. American anarchist (1921-2006) whose ideas influenced the Kurdish PKK.

## Catherine Lévy

Catherine Lévy has been politically active since the war in Algeria, and remains so today. After the Algerians obtained independence she was among the *pieds rouges*, the leftist supporters of the Algerian cause who moved to Algeria to help build the new nation. She stayed there from 1963-1965, working as a teacher. She was later the companion of the anti-Zionist Israeli Ilan Halevy.

My first political engagement was against the war in Algeria. I entered the university at 20 and I'd already participated in demonstrations against the war during my final high school years. I was in agreement with my parents, who were opposed to that colonial war, and so upon arriving in Paris – I'd lived in the provinces - I found myself with students who were active, members of Union Nationale des Etudiants de France and the Union des Etudiants Communistes. So I very quickly found myself involved. Before 1962 we participated in demos that were more or less violent, but near the end of the war it really became tough. I remember demonstrations where the first rows were members of the CGT and the PC who'd be mowed down by the cops and we would flee as best we could. We had no real way of confronting the cops, we didn't have helmets, there'd be comrades who'd be injured, but it wasn't yet too bad yet. We didn't have people killed, like the PCF did at Charonne. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Were you a valise carrier?**

I didn't carry valises for the FLN, but I did things like distribute leaflets, stuffing them into mailboxes. I didn't transport FLN members, even though I had a car. Another thing we did was go to the slums of Nanterre, where we worked as public writers, since the people didn't know how to read or write. But all of this came to an end shortly after 1962.

When the Evian Accords were signed the UEC did many things we didn't approve of. I remember that with a friend we went to the World Youth Festival in 1962, which was held in Helsinki. We held a feminist demonstration, my friend and I, and gave a talk on not becoming pregnant, on birth control. We were beaten up by the PC, which was furious with us. They wanted to know where we came up with foolishness like that, that it was necessary to have children... That was the party line, but it wasn't ours; we had our own.

And then in early 1963 I went to Algeria.

### **What led you to go there?**

It was because it was the revolution and I had to participate in it. I was hired at a college in the Casbah, and I asked to be hired as an Algerian and not as an aid worker, because I thought that working as an aid worker was a betrayal. I taught 40 hours of classes every week, and that was really tough. At the beginning I taught mostly French, and later a little bit of history and math. I quickly rebelled against the [Algerian] Ministry of Education, because the program hadn't changed since the colonial regime. I mean, we still taught the students Sévigné, <sup>[2]</sup> and for kids in the Casbah, I don't know what that could have meant... There was a gap. The minister asked me what I wanted and I told him we could do dictations, but Sévigné, no, not that. What I did was teach a section on

the family, and I found the text by Engels on the family, as well as texts on labor, texts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that could be used, telling the students things had changed some since then, but even so... I completely changed the program.

The kids were mainly from the Casbah and their parents, for the most part, were unemployed and didn't know how to read or write. I remember I had a student who was killed by her brother because she chewed gum with a boy. It was violent, really violent.

One of the most important things was when I took the oldest of my students, there were five of them, to the demonstration for International Women's Day in 1965. It can be said that there were two moments when I was a feminist, one in '62 and the other in '65. This was something both terrific and horrible, because there was this demo in '65, it was magnificent, the Algerian women tossed their stupid headscarves and veils into the Mediterranean as we walked along the shore, and after that we walked from the Champ de Manoeuvres, the building of the UGTA, <sup>[3]</sup> the Algerian union, to the Majestic, a large movie house in Bab-el-Oued, more or less following the Mediterranean coast. All along the march it was pretty violent, there were men who attacked them, saying they should go home and prepare dinner for the kids. When we reached the headquarters of the union, Ben Bella was supposed to speak to us and, of course, he was late, as usual, and the women started smashing everything, it was like Johnny Halliday at the Olympia. Hallucinatory. Ben Bella finally arrived and he gave a speech about our sisters in Angola and the crowd shouted "What about us?" So he started over and then left, making promises he never kept. It ended at 11:00pm because the women stuck around to talk, asking questions. Except the next morning, when I arrived at my school in Bab-el-Oued the principal, who was a *pied noir*, told me there was someone from the UGTA who wanted to see me. I left the classroom and went to a room, where I found fifty women who'd been repudiated because of the demonstration. The very evening of the demo! Repudiation means they no longer existed, they longer had a life, no future, no nothing. Not even where to live, since they'd been thrown out on the street. The people from the UGTA asked what should we do, so it was suggested we go see the women's section of the FLN. But they did nothing, putting everything on our shoulders. So I went with a colleague from the college and we asked for a week off to settle the matter. We went to see several ministers, and if I remember correctly it was Nacache and Assas, who set up clothing workshops especially for these women. They were assured work; it was a shit job, but it was something, and they had salaries. So we succeeded in getting something done.

I returned to the school, and in June 1965 there was Boumedienne's coup, during which I was in Paris taking the oral part of my exams in philosophy, which I passed. Though I did return to Algeria I was told it would be better to go back to Paris, since there was nothing more to be done. And I saw this was true, that there were people like Mohammed Harbi <sup>[4]</sup> who'd already been thrown in jail. So my boyfriend told me it would be better if I just went home, and in early August I returned to France. In late August I got a phone call from a friend I'd met in Algeria, a sociologist, Pierre from the CNRS <sup>[5]</sup> asking me if I wanted to join him, and I did, and spent my entire life as a militant working at the CNRS, concentrating on labor matters.

**After this experience, were you discouraged?**

Not really, because I think that when you're under 30 you're more dynamic than afterwards. It seemed obvious to me there'd be other revolutions elsewhere and that we could then lead them to success; this seemed obvious at the time. In Algeria it was the military that had screwed it all up, so it was always a risk, but there was a chance there'd be something else less military and more political, so we could have hope. After '65 we didn't hear much about Algeria, and after a while for me that was all over. In '67 there was Palestine, and I stopped everything having to do with Algeria and moved on to Palestine.

### **You continued your political life at the CNRS?**

Yes, I was in the Communist Party. Which made my boss furious, since Naville<sup>[6]</sup> was a Trotskyist, so he found it scandalous to be in the PCF.

Through all this I participated in extraordinary moments on French political life. In 1966 I participated in the expulsion of the Maoists, of my friend Robert Linhart, <sup>[7]</sup> from the UEC. I remember in 1966 he was summoned to the PC on the rue Git-le-Coeur. He had a notebook thick as this and he started reading from it at 10:00 and he finished the next evening. It was deadly, but on a political level it was a good thing.

I participated in everything that was going on as a member of the cell of the intellectuals, but I was faithful not to the party, but to my friends. From 1967 I was very close to Maxime Rodinson, <sup>[8]</sup> who was a total autodidact. He taught himself something like 17 languages. And his apartment was amazing: there were books piled up everywhere, even in the bathroom, and he knew every book he had in his library.

### **We've reached '68, and there are the events at Nanterre.**

I was a Communist but I had anarchist friends, and I found the events of March 22 amusing. When there was the strike [in May] we immediately stopped working, and Naville was in total agreement. We had no problems with our managers. Naville was involved in the strike as well. I was in the sociology section, which was in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, and Naville was assistant director - the director was on a trip to the USSR - and he told us to go on strike. I remember it surprised me that a director - even if he was number two - told us to, though I knew he'd been a revolutionary in the past, so it was actually pretty logical. After all, he'd known Breton and Trotsky. So it began like that.

There was a Comité d'Action Révolutionnaire at the sociology center, but to tell you the truth I don't remember all that well what it did. On the other hand, I found myself with friends - I had a Citroen 2 cv at the time - and with people from the school of Agronomy we went to get food for the small factories that were on strike, not the big ones, because those, like Renault, were supplied by the CGT, but the small ones in the suburbs of Paris. They had no money, so we had to help them. We would go out into the countryside to get them food. You had to make sure you ended up in the right countryside, though on a whole the farmers were quite nice. We picked up potatoes, chicken, things like that, which we put in the freezer of the school of Agronomy, which had an enormous freezer, and we distributed the stuff to Gennevilliers, to Aubervilliers... The northern suburbs.

The problems we would eventually have with the CGT was at Renault. Naville had had me work on a project with the unions at Renault, so I knew a certain number of union members, and they weren't all that much in agreement with what we wanted to do. But we nevertheless had the support of the workers, and you shouldn't forget that when Séguy went to tell the workers to return to work he was thrown out by the members of the CGT. But at the time the rank and file militants were in no way hostile to us; the leadership yes.

I made many round trips and I always managed to get gas, and people envied me this. How did I do this? I had friends who were doctors, so they helped me so I could get gas to get food for the workers.

### **What else did you do?**

Aside from the trips to the factories and the distributing of food, there were all the demos. I don't think I missed a single one. The most important one was the one at the Gare de Lyon. It was that one, I think we were on the Pont d'Austerlitz, and a guy from the PCF said to me: "You weren't at the cell meeting last week." I told him no, and he told me, "Well, you were expelled," and I told him, "Well, that's great!" And he didn't tell me anything else. I was expelled because I hadn't been to a single meeting since the beginning of the strike and hadn't sent an excuse note! I think they also thought I was on the wrong side.

### **Did you think it was going to end by overturning the government?**

There was a moment when, yes, we thought that. Around mid-May, around the time of the demo at the Gare de Lyon. After that de Gaulle took things in hand, and there were the rumors of tanks ...

### **Did you believe this?**

No, but there were rumors and people were a bit depressed. It was difficult to start over from zero and we had to continue along our path. Which I did until the end. I also remember that within the center for Sociology there was all this talk about sociology in service to the people. I thought it was silly, but I had to go along with it, since my friends were doing it. We thought that sociology was a form of ideology in service to the bourgeoisie, aimed at keeping the people quiet. But sociology in service to the people? I didn't believe in it very much.

### **Was your building occupied?**

It was, but I was never there because I was busy feeding the proletariat. I went to the Sorbonne a little bit, especially towards the end, when there were the katangais. <sup>[9]</sup> They didn't scare me; that there were men who'd been in prison didn't scare me. There are always men like that. And they were no more katangais than you or I. For me it was all foolishness.

### **And the Night of the Barricades?**

I was there, but the Maoists weren't. I was with my friends on rue Gay Lussac, and all I remember is the paving stones – I had a hard time prying them up, so I carried them, and didn't pry them loose. I participated in the assembly line passing them along. But I

remember the cops tossed things that were really violent, I know this because I saw a guy whose back had been burned and I took him to a friend's place to be taken care of. There were two or three things like that. The deaths came later. The death of Tautin <sup>[10]</sup> has always been a mystery to me. Apparently, it was some cretin of a Maoist who said let's make an about turn to the river, and if you didn't know how to swim that was it. I have many questions about Tautin's death.

But I took part in something that was really fabulous. I was on rue Royer-Collard when there was an attack by the CRS. A man on the fifth floor of a building on that street shouted at them, "You bastards" and tossed his TV onto their heads. And a TV isn't a sardine. I saw this with my own eyes. I stayed there all night, and went home around 6:30 in the morning, maybe 8:00.

I found it terrific and hoped it would last. But it didn't last.

### **Did you feel like you were re-living the Commune?**

No, not at all, because there were only students. The moment when I had the impression that things could move was when the workers went on strike, first in Nantes and Saint-Nazaire and then at Cléon. <sup>[11]</sup> I knew Cléon well since I'd carried out investigations there. When they went out I thought things would happen, but nothing did.

### **Having done these investigations you must have known that the workers' consciousness wasn't revolutionary.**

But it's never revolutionary. It's only when there are collective events that that occurs. It can't be individual, it only becomes revolutionary when its collective. So I thought things were going to move, but they didn't.

### **And on May 13 you marched with the students and workers. You must have felt that unity had been achieved.**

I never really thought it was going to become a workers' revolution. Perhaps there were moments when I did, but that collapsed.

### **But if it wasn't going to result in a revolution why even be there?**

Because I thought it would be a chance for the working class to win a certain number of things in the fight against bourgeois oppression. You have to fight to win, and there were a certain number of victories. I remember though, that in the small factories there were women working at presses who lost their fingers because if they wore protective gloves they couldn't keep up with the pace. I found this absolutely horrible and I thought that this was something the movement could win. In fact, no.

### **And the leaders?**

I liked Cohn-Bendit because he was funny. The others, like Geismar and Sauvageot I thought were bureaucratic assholes. I had no respect for them because they were bureaucrats who knew nothing about the workers. Prisca [Bachelet] <sup>[12]</sup> was friends with Geismar and I don't think she had any illusions about what he was capable of doing. Which was nothing. Sauvageot as well. They were nice people but incompetent in the job they had. But leaders are a product of their organization, and if they were leaders it was

because they came from the organizations, which were what they were. If they elected you and were happy with you as leader, then things won't go very far. They corresponded perfectly well to the political situation of the unions they were supposed to represent.

### **Did you attend GAs?**

I went, but I thought they were something of a circus. There was the Odéon, which was pretty funny. I enjoyed that you could say there what you ordinarily couldn't say in public. Jean-Jacques Lebel, I found him funny and *sympa*. The same goes for Duteuil and Cohn-Bendit, they were men with a sense of humor. They had a free way of speaking that was fresh and new. We weren't used to people like them.

### **Did women speak?**

Oh yes, at my work and elsewhere. No working-class women. At meetings in factories they didn't speak much, and they also thought they spoke poorly, so they didn't much want to talk. I had a friend who I knew from the War in Algeria who did a lot of things at the Renault factory, because there were many Algerians there, and she organized the secretarial pool.

### **At the CNRS were you optimistic up till the end?**

Not at all, because aside from all the rest, there was the entire hierarchy of researchers and technicians, and they wanted to form one group that I didn't think would work. But to tell you the truth I have more memories of the streets than of the CNRS, because to put it bluntly, I found the CNRS boring. I went a few times and then I left and never went back. I preferred the demos.

### **Were the Grenelle Accords a great disappointment?**

Oh yes, and a great joy when the Renault workers blew it all up. But even though they were happy with only wage raises, it has to be recognized that there were many strikes between 1965 and 1968 for salary demands simply because people didn't earn enough to live on. It's complicated... It seemed obvious to me. So even though they didn't want to make socialist revolution it was a good thing. For them. And the demo on May 30 on the Champs Elysées, with Malraux and all that, it didn't disappoint me. There were fewer of them than we'd had and, well, it was the bourgeoisie; it was logical they be there.

### **And what were your thoughts about de Gaulle's departure for Germany?**

I had the impression there was a lot of rumors, that there were many things being hidden. Things were going on behind our backs. I've always had this feeling when it comes to politics, even now.

### **What did you feel when the workers finally returned to their factories?**

I have a distinct memory of it because I was at the Wonder factory the day the film was shot. I don't remember why I was there and I'm in the film, though my face is different – it was a long time ago – and I was told, "Watch out, we're filming." I remember that girl and it was absolutely hallucinatory. I had been there during the strike to bring food, so that's probably why I was there. The girl in the film was hysterical, mad, because she

worked at a shitty job that ruined their hands, gave them skin diseases... And the girl in question disappeared and she was never found again.

### **Afterwards what was your dominant sentiment?**

We were all a bit depressed and not in the least happy, but what happened was there was the vacation, and even more importantly, gas was made available for the Pentecost weekend, so people could get out of town. But in October Félix Guattari wanted to start it up again, but we told him it wouldn't work, and it didn't. Félix played an important role, he was a motor who participated in many debates.

### **I have the feeling that you have a disillusioned point of view towards the events.**

Let's say that I never thought it would work. But that's how I function. I think it's because of Algeria. When I went there I believed, but then I quickly saw it wasn't worth it, that we had to save what we could, but that it wouldn't work. Since then I've always said to myself, "Watch out, my beauty, it's going to go wrong," and every time it's gone wrong. Deep down I felt that it has to work someday, but... But now all I hope is that we liquidate this shitty government we have in France <sup>[13]</sup> and have... I don't know what, and I'm looking for a country I can settle in. I love China, even though people tell me it's terrible. But for ten years I've travelled regularly to China and I've seen nothing horrible, but it's only what I've seen. I don't speak a word of Chinese, which handicaps me; I can more or less read. but at least the people in China are nice, while in France they're disagreeable. They're assholes, while there...

### **Did May change France?**

I wonder if it isn't the colonial wars that changed things. I think they were more important than '68 – Indochina in '54 and Algeria, and then the victory of Vietnam in 1975. But in the lives of people.... Not a blessed thing. But it changed much on the level of the imaginary. But in all the Commune was more important than May, and the end of the colonies as well.

### **And did it change you?**

A little, first because I was kicked out of the PCF and I saw it was no use getting involved in that kind of thing. And afterwards I tried to work with workers outside of the CNRS and the unions and parties. I worked in Longwy, the mining town, where I carried out investigations. The workers were mistreated in unimaginable ways, promises were made, and they were treated like shit. It's an immigrant town, full of Italians, and there's still an Italian film festival there. I worked with them on many issues. Also on immigration, and I edited a review called *Travail*. May didn't change me or my ideas, it was more the 70s. For me '68 was a revolt, not a revolution, against a backward state of mind, against backward France. In the '70s there was the newspaper *Libération* in 1973, and the editor Serge July asked me and Marc Kravetz to go attend the trial of Pierre Goldman. We went, and in Sept '73 there was Chile and the Yom Kippur War, for me all this was more interesting than '68, though they were its continuation. But I was more interested in those things than the ideas that came out of '68. Aside from erasing the old world, that was as shitty as possible, and making a more interesting world, that was all I

saw in '68. But now we were trying to understand what was happening, to analyze. Afterwards I left for Palestine with Ilan Halevy, and while I was there I was arrested by the Israelis and locked up with the whores. It was great, their families were Moroccan, they all spoke French, and they came to the prison and brought us stuff to eat. It was better than the food in the prison.

## Notes

1. Metro station Charonne, where nine demonstrators were killed at a Communist demonstration against the Algerian War on February 8, 1962.
2. Madame de Sévigné (1626-1696). French aristocrat whose letters to her daughter are a classic and have long been a part of French education.
3. Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens.
4. FLN militant, historian of the Algerian independence movement, and an opponent from the left of the ruling FLN.
5. Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique.
6. Former Surrealist and an early Trotskyist.
7. Leader of the Maoist Union de la Jeunesse Communiste Marxiste Léniniste, which opposed participation in the events of May '68 as petit -bourgeois.
8. Maxime Rodinson (1915-2004). Influential Marxist historian of Islam and the Middle East.
9. Street toughs who participated in the events on the students' side.
10. Gilles Tautin, a young Maoist, who died drowned fleeing the police at the Renault Flins factory on June 10, 1968.
11. Site of a Renault factory.
12. See her interview in *May Made Me*.
13. At the time of this interview François Hollande was president.

## Eric Hazan

Born in 1936 and the son of an important publisher, Eric Hazan was a surgeon for twenty-five years before returning to the family trade. He is now the director of the publishing house La Fabrique.

I'd say that my political life is a long line, dating back to high school. I had a lengthy trajectory as a fellow traveler of the PC back in the '50s; I had comrades in the Communist Youth, comrades in high school, at the beginning of my university studies. There was a friendship, a joy, an enthusiasm that were remarkable. Obviously, the leadership of the party was what we know. People like Thorez and Duclos, they were the dregs, but we didn't feel it, they were something in the distance, something far, far away, so we didn't really give a damn. The group of young people I was part of was at bottom a group of friends, with our shared readings, our meetings... So I think today, in subsuming all this under the grand heading of Stalinism we fail to understand something that happened, but it's something I think that many of those of my generation who were in this milieu are capable of restoring.

### **Were you taken up in the myth of the “party of the executed?”** <sup>[22]</sup>

It seems to me, with a certain distance, that it was that, but it was something that had more to do with the atmosphere of enthusiasm. I was stunned to see the Communist Party in '56 voting to authorize sending the army to Algeria... There was a certain logic to this: the elections in '56 were elections of the Front Républicain for the War in Algeria, which the PC was part of. And then in the beginning of the 1960s, I'd say it must have been in '61 or '62, there were a number of networks supporting the FLN in France, which I took part in.

### **Were you a “valise carrier?”**

There were people who came to my house with valises, we counted the bills, they left the valise. The next morning someone else came, we re-counted the bills, and he left with the valise. So I was valise depot.

### **How did you enter the network? Were you still a member of the party?**

No. I'd left the party in '56 after the vote granting the government full powers: that was simply not acceptable. And in '58 they were pathetic, with the Gaullist coup d'état. They were beneath contempt. They didn't even issue a call for a general strike.

### **What was your political activity after you left the party?**

Essentially anti-colonialist things. That is, mainly against the War in Algeria. It was as important as the War in Vietnam was in the US for those who were there. There were support networks, notably the one headed by Francis Jeanson, Sartre's secretary, whose members were arrested. Among them were people who were in the party, against the party's directives, which were not to be involved in this. Not only were the Communists who were in the network not defended, but they were expelled from the party while they were in prison. Now we know they didn't really run any risk, but at the time, we couldn't know that. Not that they were going to be executed, but you couldn't know what would

happen in such a situation. And far from offering solidarity, they expelled them. During the War in Algeria the PCF was abject.

**Did you have any difficulty finding a clandestine network to assist?**

No. I don't remember who did it, but it was simple.

**You must have been afraid.**

Not at all. No. I'm someone who's not fearful. It was something that had to be done. You couldn't stand by and do nothing.

**And professionally what were you doing at the time?**

I was a surgeon. I must have finished my military service in '60 or '61, and I was an intern at the time War in Algeria ended.

**And despite being a resident you had the time to be active against the war?**

It wasn't a problem; we had the time.

**Your father was a publisher... Did your parents know about your political activities?**

No. I just didn't tell them anything. They wouldn't have been very happy with it.

Were you tempted after Algeria won its independence to go there as a *piéd rouge*?

I went there at the moment of independence, staying a few weeks in a village, Marengo, and it was tempting to stay on. Had I finished my internship I would perhaps have stayed. People there told me, "There's plenty of people like you in Paris, but the work you do here, you're the only one to do it," and it was true: all the French doctors had left, and there were no Algerian doctors, none had been trained. So it was a real temptation.

**Many who did do it were disappointed.**

Right, but it was impossible to predict what was going to happen. Things were still fluid. This was even before Ben Bella.

**OK, so now you're a surgeon, the War in Algeria is over, do you do anything political?**

Between '62 and '68... I have the impression I did nothing. I was very active surgically: finishing my internship, clinic director: this is when you really learn the profession. I was too focused on my professional life to miss politics.

**So in '68, where were you in your professional life?**

I had been clinic director for three years, and at the time May '68 breaks out I was in America, since cardiac surgery was an American discipline. They were the ones who invented and developed it, who invented the machines. It was completely American, so at the time you had to go there often in order to progress, to see how things were advancing. I was in Texas and learned of May while I was there, working with Denton Cooley. It was like a factory; it was colorful, a strange thing to see. And Denton Cooley

was a colorful character, a kind of Gary Cooper. So I heard about May while I was there and I didn't delay in returning. I arrived about a week after rue Gay-Lussac, so I missed the beginning.

**When you arrived, what did you have in your mind? What idea had you formed while you were in the US?**

I had no idea. But I have to say that the red flags I saw everywhere were simply amazing. Red flags over the Sorbonne... Red flags everywhere. And the people talking amongst themselves on the street; you could feel that something extraordinary had happened. Something unprecedented.

**You came back after the workers had already gone out. Did you think this was going to arrive at something major?**

It took me time to understand what was happening, since I wasn't able to figure anything out while I was in the US. The American newspapers almost never spoke of it and I didn't watch TV, so I didn't know what was going on. It took me a few days to understand what was happening. To simply understand. To find my comrades. But one thing that was clear was that it was joyous.

**And the friends, the comrades you met up with, were they involved in any groups or parties?**

They were more or less like me, the unorganized. My friends told me I had to go here or there, attend this meeting or that, and after two or three days I'd figured things out. The most interesting memories I have of May '68, outside the Sorbonne and the Odéon, were at the hospital. I saw that a cleavage was occurring - a slightly unexpected one - no, a completely unexpected one - between on one side the students and nurses who were all, or a great majority, in support of what was going on. And on the other side of this frontier was the alliance between the medical leadership and the support staff, a large group of whom were in the CGT, people in housekeeping, plant maintenance, things like that. They were CGT and there was explicit alliance of the CGT with the hospital's bosses against the movement. And this was manifested at meetings, at GAs.

**What were the demands made at the hospital?**

We demanded the opening of the hospital to the neighborhood, a chic neighborhood in the 7<sup>th</sup>, that it open onto the quarter. That the hierarchy, the crushing hierarchy especially among the nurses, be done away with. And the students wanted an end put to the mandarins. And the others, the bosses, the CGT, they said you have to be realistic. We're willing to admit there are things that need to be changed, but from that to turning everything upside down... That was the split.

**Did you speak up?**

Oh yes. I spoke in support of the students and nurses, but there weren't many of us among the medical staff to do so. Very few. We weren't on strike, but things weren't as usual. We didn't function as usual. We dealt only with emergencies.

**Did you go see what was happening at places like the Sorbonne? Did that encourage you? Did you think it was a mess?**

No it was joyous. A Communist couldn't speak in public. He'd be booed and thrown out. It was impossible for a known Communist... No one who was a known Communist could take the floor. He was booed... Not brutally, because there was no brutality. Someone who'd have begun a speech with "comrade..." The word "comrade" was tainted by the Communists, it was outlawed. As organized groups there were the Trotskyists of the JCR, who were quite nice. They didn't say "comrade." The Trotskyists of the JCR were bearable. There were other Trotskyists, the Fédération des Etudiants Révolutionnaires, they were assholes. Dogmatic, decrying the movement, saying they'd join in when we had cannons. They were real asses. The anarchists I didn't see, at least I don't remember any, nor the Situationists.

**Did you see the leaders?**

No, and I wasn't interested in them. I was impressed by Cohn-Bendit's gift of gab. He was funny, pleasant...

**Did you go to the Odéon?**

It was little different there, the discussions and the people who were there were more intellectual. But I preferred the chaos of the Sorbonne to the intellectuals of the Odéon. First off, there was everything at the Sorbonne, including workers. Young workers. The fact that there was people of all social categories attracted me, that there were people of all sorts around barricades in flames. It was truly something extraordinary. The Odéon was more peaceful. I went there often.

**And during the discussions, did people talk about immediate issues or was it about remaking the world? And for you, what was going to happen?**

It seems to me that between the moment I returned and the moment we saw that politically things were going to go badly, not much time passed. We saw that the movement had reached a point where it was going to decline. There was perhaps a week, between the moment I arrived and when it was fading. So if I arrived about a week after the beginning, after May 10, maybe the 20<sup>th</sup> and the march on the Champs Elysées was May 31, I could see that something important had happened that was going to leave traces, but in the immediate, no... We wouldn't succeed. And in reality, the most striking thing is that there was never a question of seizing power. The sole attempt was Charléty, with Mitterrand, Mendès France, I saw where that was headed...

**Did you already have your sense of history at the time?**

I didn't have the knowledge I now have of the working-class movement and of history. After '68, the '70s and '80s were the great era of [the] Maspero [publishing house], and that was colossal. I'm often asked if I was inspired to form La Fabrique by Maspero, but there's no common measure between what he did and what we do. Even if he was nice enough to call to see if he could help us... The books he put out, it was like a political university.

**Did you demonstrate or were you there as a tourist?**

No, no. There were assemblies pretty regularly at the hospital; we stopped everything and held the assemblies. At noon, or 1:00. They were stormy. I remember there was

pulmonologist, a former member of the PC, an Italian Jew, and we insulted each other. I was very much involved there. We were all marching straight ahead, not knowing where we were going. There was a *joie de vivre* that was extraordinary.

**When you marched with the workers, did you have any contact with them?**

There was little interaction with the workers, who were very much controlled by the CGT, very restricted. There were a few places where you could talk to them, there was a bus depot in the 13<sup>th</sup>, but as a whole, the working class was very much under the charge of the CGT.

**Did you go visit factories?**

Oh no, I didn't know anyone in the factories. And you know, I really feel like it lasted so short a time.

**What did you think about the Grenelle Accords?**

Treason. Normal. A normal treason. The Communists and the CGT were the ones who really maintained order, more than the Gaullists. On their own the Gaullists would have been swept aside. They weren't strong. People talk about the Champs Elysées, but who was there? It was nothing. But it was unthinkable that the Communists act differently. It wasn't possible, not possible. It wasn't in their nature. The return to order. For one simple reason: they didn't control the movement and they were forbidden to speak; they were cast outside the movement. But in places like Saint-Nazaire it was different; the relation of force was different, there weren't nearly as many students.

**So if the Communists couldn't act differently, it was inevitable that things end the way they did.**

Yes. In order for things to end differently it would have been necessary that within the CGT there be a fissure. If there'd been even a minority that would have said we won't give in, we won't return for nothing, everything would have changed. But the CGT was monolithic.

**And the elections...**

It was a complete fool's game. It was obvious the elections would be a disaster.

**At the hospital, did the actions change anything?**

No.

**Did you think anything changed?**

Did something change? No.

**Could something have changed in a bastion of hierarchy that is a hospital? Was it even possible?**

The old all-powerful mandarins were weakened, old men who had such power that no one pissed without asking their permission. That was done for. May broke that. Those omnipotent mandarins were done away with by May. But not for good. Medical power was reconstituted in a new form afterwards.

### **A bit like everything else in France.**

Yes. That's it. I think the most shocking archaisms were eliminated during the events, and they weren't reconstituted, but real power stayed in the same hands. Less visible, more modern...

### **So really all they had to do was hold out a few weeks and everything go on as before.**

Yes. Yes. Yes.

### **Was this an enormous disappointment?**

Since May I've never found the air we breathed on the streets during that brief moment. The fact that people talked on the street, that they formed circles so they could discuss issues. They spoke to each other! I never found that again.

### **Do you think things could have been like that anywhere other than in Paris?**

No, only Paris. But today Paris no longer has the same meaning. At the time Paris was only the Left Bank: nothing happened on the Right Bank in May. Nothing. Today the Left Bank is dead. No one that I know lives there, not a single friend. But at that time, everything happened on the Left Bank. The student part, not the worker side, of course.

So the events in May were truly a student event. When you read about the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it's always demos and fights on the Left Bank, in the Latin Quarter, during the Dreyfus Affair.

Today we no longer remember what the Latin Quarter was at the time: all the students were there. Today the students live in St Denis, Nanterre, dispersed all over France, but at that time there was the Sorbonne – both the schools of letters and the sciences, and the law school, the two medical schools, the pharmacy school, plus the Polytechnique and the Ecole Normale. All of it within a circle that was a kilometer and a half. The entire student world was there. There was a gaiety, a beauty, a youthfulness that was truly impressive in the Latin Quarter. It was a truly impressive place. Not the Boulevard St Michel, which was always a torrent of vulgarity, ugliness, and noise. The Latin Quarter of the '60s, aside from boulevard St Michel was amazing. After May '68 Edgar Faure, the Minister of Education, gave the order for the dispersion of the students. Like Haussmann. And like Haussmann, not everything was bad: things needed to be decongested. That all of the students of letters and science be in a space of 150 meters long couldn't go on. It's true, but it's also true things were now conceived so that the students could be controlled police-wise. This is really obvious at Nanterre. You come out of the RER <sup>[23]</sup> and cross the footbridge and there are two cops there to block access to the university. There was an effort to decongest, which was inevitable, like Haussmann. There were the military ulterior motives, through in some cases it wasn't just an ulterior motive. Something like place de la République was established near a barracks from which the cavalry could be sent out down the new streets, like rue Turbigo... That whole star of streets around the place that allows troops to be sent throughout the Right Bank. There was this concern to adapt the medieval city to the industrial age.

**Afterwards, in your medical life, did you try to do things differently?**

Yes. Yes. Yes. Perhaps even before, but afterwards I made an effort not to treat the nurses and students like the representatives of an inferior race. Which was the normal practice.

**Did you shout at people in the operating room?**

Never. I tried to have my conduct be in agreement with my ideas. It's certain that May '68 accentuated this, but I think I already tried before to do this.

**If we compare May to what happened in Italy or Germany or even in the US, there was little violence. No slide into violence. Only a small number of deaths during the events, and that at the end. Why?**

Because the movement didn't envisage the attack on the Winter Palace. Not in the least. I remember a demo when we passed before the National Assembly, which was virtually unguarded, and no one said "Let's go occupy the National Assembly." We passed in front of it without seeing it. The goal of the movement wasn't the seizing of power. In that sense it was modern.

**What was the goal then?**

It was more a cultural revolution than a seizure of power. It was diffused. I think that if some guys had arrived and said we're going to arm ourselves and take the Elysée Palace, something de Gaulle was convinced that the Communists wanted, people would have thought they were crazy.... There are later documents, which aren't negligible, which say that he was certain the Communists were going to seize power. A dual absurdity. First, it ignores the fact that that the Communists had such need to take things in hand that they were his allies, and secondly, that if anyone had gone around saying, "Let's go take up the gun and take the Elysée," people would have said, "What planet are you from?" There are those who say the prefect Grimaud was terrific, that he mastered the situation. It's possible he had enough influence over his troops so there wasn't too much damage. I think above all that the goal wasn't political power, but a cultural revolution, to change life.

**So if it was a cultural revolution it was a success.**

Yes. And if today, 50 years later, it still attracts so much hatred it's not for nothing.

**What did it change in you?**

I think it's from that moment that my real historical and political life began, that I began to read, to discuss. Thanks to Maspero. I'm not kidding. I went twice a week to his bookstore, La Joie de Lire; it was open until midnight every day except Sunday, and I went twice a week to meet people, it was incredible.

**It's hard to imagine a surgeon finding the time to do all this.**

Unfortunately, I wasted a lot of time. I think I could very well have known Deleuze, Vernant, Foucault - I was an intern with his brother. I didn't know them because being a surgeon turns you into a cretin, or rather it so totally takes up your mind. It's a

profession where it's very difficult to have an open mind. May opened mine a little bit. But not enough to get me to meet Deleuze at Vincennes. Did I even know about him? I can't say. It was in '83 that I dropped surgery and was forced to become less uncultured and entered publishing, taking on my father's publishing house. I had spent 25 years as a surgeon.

**What's your role as a publisher? There a wide variety, from Blanqui to Badiou.**

Variety? It all tends in the same direction. There aren't too many speculative books. We try for our books to be offensive to the established order. We want all our books to deliver blows.

## Notes

22. For its many martyrs who fought the Nazis in the Resistance the PCF called itself the "parti des fusillés."

23. The suburban rail line.

## Scylla

A student of science and 21 years old in 1968, Scylla – a pseudonym - went on to pursue the career in the sciences he began as a student at Jussieu and remains an active anarchist, member of the Organisation Communiste Libertaire. He now lives in Lyon.

I was a student at the time, studying science, mainly a lot of geology, and I went into paleontology only after a certain number of years. I wasn't a militant, and had nothing to do with politics before May. I had a sensibility, I was inspired by the hippies, by the Provos in Holland, whom I'd read about... I was receptive to that kind of thing, but no, I wasn't a militant. I didn't feel that life at the university was repressive, particularly if I compare it to the high school where I was a boarder. That was really repressive. But as for France, I didn't find it either repressive or backward. I wasn't unhappy, though there were injustices that I found unbearable, like racism, but things would have had to be much worse for me to find things repressive.... I was totally imbued with the dominant ideology and I was completely programmed by my parents.

### **How did you hear about what was happening at Nanterre and then the Sorbonne?**

We knew things were happening at Nanterre and echoes of it had reached us...When the cops entered the Sorbonne (May 3), well, then the news spread quickly. There were tracts distributed, professors who denounced what was happening, so we know what was happening almost immediately. And we were all shocked, since by entering the Sorbonne the cops had violated the right to asylum in the universities. And then, I was in the middle of an exam, and they announced that we were going on strike. We were right in the middle, and from the time that was announced we didn't do anything else...It was May 6. I remember a professor came in and he said, you can do what you like; finish the exam and then do whatever you want. I remember I stayed another hour, I finished the exam and then I went right out onto the streets and didn't go back to take a test until the next school year.

The events that happened before May, at the Cinemathèque in February, I'd read about it but that wasn't really my thing. And Nanterre in March, I knew about it from the press.

### **What led you to become political, then?**

It was a moment of rupture...But why that day? I couldn't say. All I can say is that the events resonated in me. And so, as soon as the exam was over I went out onto the street, I saw the banners at Maubert, the groups that passed.... I was more or less a spectator, but I ended up following the march, and my politicization would happen little by little as a result of the social movements that started then, during the events.

I occupied Jussieu. There were general assemblies, but I was pretty *localiste* and I stayed in my corner. We occupied the building, we took in the sun on the roof, we hung out, we cooked, we watched the children in the nursery, we did guard duty at night...But I didn't go outside that very much, though I did go to see what was happening at the Odéon, at the Sorbonne. I participated in events, but my activity was pretty restricted, since we had to occupy the terrain... There were activities right where we were:

conferences, discussions, workgroups.... There were moments during the occupation that were really relaxed, when we sunbathed on the roof, and there were more tense moments, at night we could hear the noises in the courtyard, there was the attack of the fascists...It was really variable, it depended on whether there was a demo or not... But on the whole, it was pretty cool. Though when it came to finding cigarettes you had to cover half of Paris to find any.

### **Did theory play any part in what you did?**

It played absolutely no role in my activity... Theory...I wasn't politicized, but now that I think about it, I had met up with a comrade from boarding school who was one grade ahead of me and who was political. I saw him in Paris and he was Maoist and he recommended I read the *Communist Manifesto*...So I read it and I think that's about all I'd read when the events occurred.

### **Do you remember what you thought of the leaders of the events?**

The leaders served as a kind of reference for me... But they served as a kind of loudspeaker more than leaders...And you know, they were the ones you saw, they were on the TV. They talked back to the people in power: they mattered. I liked that.

### **Were you there on May 10, on the Night of the Barricades?**

I took part in some demos but no, not the Night of the Barricades, though I was there earlier in the day, in the demo that led up to it, that went from Denfert to the Latin Quarter. But it went on for a long time, and we had no idea what was going to happen. I lived in the suburbs and I had to get home. If I'd have had a room in Paris I would have stayed, but after a certain time I had to leave.

### **Was there any one event that really stood out for you?**

If there was an event that really struck me, that astounded me, it was the great demo of May 13, the people with their red and black flags. It was during that period that others defined me. They said, "You're an anarchist." Why? Something I'd proposed, I don't remember what, was rejected because it was considered anarchist. I had no idea what an anarchist was. I decided I had to learn about it. I went to the Sorbonne and there was a table from the Fédération Anarchiste, a special issue of their paper defending the syndicalism of Force Ouvrière [FO]... It struck me as funny, anarchists and FO. It was funny because FO wasn't a very combative union, it was really a reformist union, but even so, there were Trotskyists in it and anarchists, who were there because they were sure that at least in that union there'd be no Communists. I even saw anarchists toss aside newspapers like *L'Aurore*, which they knew were printed by Communist workers. So even though it wasn't a pro-boss union, but it wasn't a class struggle union either, so that's why it made me laugh when I saw they had a table. And there are still *anars* in FO.

I really began to reflect in July and August. I ran into a childhood friend in Bordeaux and he asked me what I had lived through in Paris and he was just as enthused as I was. We tried to find books on anarchism and we found Daniel Guérin, his book *L'Anarchisme*, and it wasn't easy to find. This book was really important because it was pretty much the only one you could find. At the time there was a great shortage of

anarchist literature in regular bookstores. You could find it at the bookstore of the FA, Publico, but if you went into a regular bookstore because you wanted to learn about anarchism, and even more so in the provinces, and you asked what they had they'd say "nothing." So you'd hunt around and you'd find Guérin. When I read it I discovered that there were, in fact, many ideas that corresponded to mine. But that all happened after. At the time I was...What was the word? We had a term... "Unorganized," those who weren't in any party. At the tribune they always tried to allow everyone to have equal time, the Trotskyists, the Maoists, and there was always someone to represent the unorganized. I thought that was funny...How can you have someone represent the unorganized, but, well... They tried to cover the full palette. I quickly came to understand things after May, and at the time of the new school year '68-'69 (we returned late that year) I was already a militant. I joined a Comité de Base, we were there with Maoists... It was a committee aimed at acting right where we were, for example, access to the university restaurant for the building workers on campus.

### **How did May change your life? Did it?**

It changed my life, but I never took the time to reflect on it...I never stopped, it was a given moment and I continued. I knew it had changed my life and I wanted it to change my life. I made every effort to find a community where I could live differently. I knew people went in for illegalism, but not me...I very quickly learned I could only count on myself to survive, I saw it was necessary to work... So I went into education.

More than anything May was a detonator. How did it change my life? It completely changed my life. I'm still a militant, still an anarchist, currently in a small organization, the OCL. I went back university with the new school year. I was active in rank and file committees, but I wanted to change my life and so I prepared to live on a commune. I can't really say exactly why I made that choice over other possibilities, but I met some people who were involved in it and I liked the idea. We weren't inspired by hippie communes in America, since there were anarchist ones in France. We joined one and then we were thrown out a month later. It was in Normandy, in Louviers. Why? There were four of us and we joined a commune that was purring along, and our arrival brought out all the contradictions within the commune. It became unbearable and the leader threw us out.

### **A leader? On a commune?**

We can call him that, there was no official leader, but it was clear that he was... So we were thrown out, I lived with my girlfriend for a year, and then we moved onto a commune.

### **How about France? Did it change France in any way?**

I think that in France everyone was touched by '68, everyone questioned him or herself, from the far right to the far left everyone put themselves in question...Though not in the same sense. It was quite exceptional that people question themselves. There are some who changed, some who didn't, but it caused ideas to change... And all of this happened in a relatively short amount of time, it couldn't have been predicted and we never thought things would happen like this. It gave us a lot of hope, and if it happened then it could happen again...

## **Do you have any regrets?**

Regrets? Regret what? Maybe I regret not having done enough, but no... We carry on. In the end, things returned to normal and maybe even got worse, but the things that made us move in '68 are still there and there's no reason not to do the same now.

## Colette Danappe

Colette was born in 1927 and was not involved in politics before May 1968, though she would have a brief period of far-left militancy later on. Indeed, as this interview shows, she did not view May '68 as a time of politics at all. The working-class widow of a worker, in her apartment in the Paris suburbs, over sparkling water, she recounted her experiences in May at her factory in the suburban town of Massy, where she did precision mechanical work.

I was 40 in 1968 and had no political life but was very involved in my union. But even if I had no political life I had my political ideas. My husband, who worked at Renault, was in the CGT, as was I.

### **Do you have any memories of how things began for you in May?**

It was on May 13....

### **What about the events before?**

We stopped work on May 13, and immediately cleaned our machines. It started at Renault, and as people said, if Renault sneezes everyone else catches a cold. We stopped, cleaned our machines – because we were conscientious – and we swept the floors.

The CGT gave us the word to stop work, and we prevented the bosses from entering the factory. One of them wanted to come in and pee and we wouldn't even let him do that. We had a team of students who came to the factory, and they were carrying red flags. We were unhappy about this, because we were on strike and didn't want to mix politics in with our work issues.

### **Why?**

It was our delegates who insisted the two not be mixed together. The students were looking for a fight and we didn't want that: we wanted to go on strike.

### **And on May 13...**

We occupied, and after our cleanup everything was impeccable, im-pec-ca- ble.

### **Why?**

So that no one could complain that the machines were damaged. We greased the machines. All so there'd be no complaints about us. And the only thing that we stole was gas from the trucks. People needed gas to get around, so we stole gas. Otherwise, everything went well, we demonstrated on the streets, and when it was all over we ended up getting paid for the time we were out on strike.

### **Did you stay at the factory during the occupation?**

Oh yes, every day. I lived in Paris at that time, and the factory was in Passy, so to get there I had to walk to place d'Italie, where there was a pickup truck from work that took me to Passy, and in the evening I had to find someone to take me back home. I walked kilometers and kilometers, every day.... Later on there were military trucks that picked us up.

### **Military trucks?**

Sure, in order for people to get around, since the mass transit system wasn't functioning. They picked us up – they didn't know if we were strikers or what – and that was also how I got to the factory. There were plenty of army trucks replacing the buses and subways.

I remember once I was at place d'Italie and there was a police wagon that passed and people asked if they'd take us where we wanted to go. They offered to take us to the commissariat so I said, "In that case, I'll walk."

### **You went to the factory in the morning?**

I went at the time we were supposed to be at work. We woke up early and got home late. It was the same for my husband at Renault.

### **What did you do during the day?**

We had meetings, a lot of meetings. We demonstrated on the streets, but it was only about work, never politics. And we played cards. And we danced; there were people who played the accordion and we danced. There was also a record player, so we danced, but we were always correct. Always.

### **At meetings, what did you discuss?**

Work and our position at work. There were constant discussions. When it came to salaries we demanded that the salaries for the men and the women be the same. I did the same job as men but I wasn't paid the same, so I would grumble about it. There was no reason for this, and I did the job better, since I had thin hands and it's very detailed work. So I always demanded equal pay. And I got it. Not all the women, since not all of them did work like mine, on a machine. I was versatile, so I could do many tasks. The bosses would say Mme. Danappe, today you go over there and I'd do it. I said that if you're versatile you need to be paid for it. I never allowed myself to be taken advantage of.

### **At the meetings you spoke of your demands?**

Like in all the factories of France we demanded many things, but mainly salary issues.

### **Among yourselves, did you ever discuss politics?**

Never.

### **Did students come to the factory gates?**

Oh yes, but our unions didn't accept this, because they came with red flags that they put up around the factory. The students were more interested in fighting, they were interested in politics and that wasn't for us.

### **Were there young workers among you who wanted to address these issues?**

Yes, but it was outside, not inside the factory. We defended the positions of the CGT in this way.

### **And with all the outside events in Paris, Nantes, the uprising of the students...?**

We spoke of this, but that was as far as it went. We talked about it together, but if there was someone who wasn't happy with the discussion we stopped talking about it.

### **Did you see further than the bread and butter demands?**

No, the workers in the factory didn't and I followed along. Even so, my husband and I demonstrated outside our workplaces. We had many friends who were doctors and nurses, and we went with them to march on Saturdays and Sundays. But during the week, it was strictly work.

I remember we were once out, my husband and I, with our friends Roland and Denise, and we were driving, and all of a sudden our car was surrounded and we had to turn around and head in the opposite direction. It was the students, and they had paving stones in their hands and everything. I had the scare of my life. It was place Voltaire, and we'd been on our way to join the demo. Throwing stones, breaking things: that wasn't my thing. You can demonstrate without breaking, without destroying. When I saw cars that had been set aflame that caused me pain. I'd say to myself: you save all your life to buy something and then someone destroys it... It's possible to defend your interests without breaking everything, burning them. No, it's not my thing. I'm against violence.

### **Were you happy to participate in the occupation of your factory?**

The atmosphere was wonderful, it was really joyful. There were always plenty of people around, and everyone arrived on time. But this was only during the day. At night the women went home and there were only men there. As far as I'm concerned, May '68 was a good thing. We'll never have another '68.

### **At Renault, where your husband worked, there were a lot of students.**

A lot of students! And because of them my husband went to prison. He was in a car and some students put some weapons in the car, and he didn't know. My husband was in the car and it was stopped and he was taken in along with two others. I had no idea where he was. It was only through a doctor friend that I was able to find out what had happened to him, and they were about to take him to the prison in Nanterre. It was thanks to the doctor friend that he was let go, but I didn't know where he was for days. My husband was against violence, against weapons! They also had truncheons! I couldn't accept this way of demonstrating violently.

There were odd things that happened in '68.

### **Did you speak up at meetings?**

Oh no. Because there were others who were older than I, stronger than I, more competent than I who could do it. But even so, I was there all the time. In general, women didn't speak up at the assemblies. It was rather the men. It didn't bother us, given that we were well defended, things were going well, and we got along well. We let things go on as they were. And the day they told us to go back to work we went back to work.

**What was the food situation like? What happened at the factory and how did you manage at home?**

During the strike when we arrived we cooked – the men and women together - but one night the men left string beans overnight in the cooking-pot, and when we came in in the morning they'd overflowed. That was a crisis! For the most part we ate what was at the canteen, since there were stocks that lasted the three weeks we were out.

As for at home, since I got home late there was usually no food left in the grocer's when I tried to shop on the way home. But there was a grocer, a Moroccan, he called me The Princess, I have no idea why – and he put stuff aside for me.

**Did people drink at the factory when you were out?**

No. Not at all. There was no wine, nothing. At Bosch there was none of that.

It was the CGT that ran the stewards, and even though there was also people in FO and the CFDT there were never any disagreements. The only disagreement was when two or three guys went back to work, and we weren't happy. They'd found work elsewhere during the strike, and we put them in quarantine when we went back. It just wasn't right. They'd worked during the strike and gotten paid for that, and then they got their strike days paid for as well. This wasn't logical and there was a bit of a discussion. It's not like they were in need or had big families... No, it wasn't logical.

**Weren't there those who said this has gone on long enough, let's go back to work?**

No, when Renault returned everyone returned.

**Did the Grenelle Accords make you happy?**

Yes, because there was an agreement and because we got something. We got almost everything we wanted and almost everyone voted to return. At the time of the return there were no problems between the workers and the executives, and they even congratulated us on how well kept everything was, how clean the factory was. Everything was im-pec-ca-ble.

**And the boss you didn't allow to pee, he wasn't angry with you?**

Not in the least. Not at all. He didn't hold a grudge. It was only much later, around '74, that things got ugly. But in '68, not at all. There were no problems. None at all.

**Did May change you?**

A little. But I can say that I was made angry by those who didn't go out on strike but said "We'll get what you get anyway." I had a brother-in-law who did that. This disgusted me, and I never spoke to him again. Even now. It made me angry that he felt like everyone was acting for him. Even now I don't like it when people don't take a union card for that same reason. You shouldn't take advantage of people.

**Did it change France?**

No things continued like before, we continued to work, and maybe we were a little happier, because we had more money. We were able to travel afterwards.

May '68 was really something. When I talk to people who weren't happy about it, about the damage it caused to Paris, I tell them, even so, we got something out of it.

## Joël Quélard

Joël was a high school student at the time of the events and, like many other young people in Saint-Nazaire, he was very much influenced by Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, Daniel's older brother, who taught in the high school there. Joël would later teach at Gaby's free school.

In 1968 I was 15½ and was in my third year of high school, at the technical high school in Saint-Nazaire, pursuing studies that would permit me to be an engineer. I wasn't a militant but I was in a class where I had several friends who had a militant approach. But I was bathed in all the struggles of the working class, because my father was a worker. He ended as a manager, but he began as a worker.

### **Had you heard about Nanterre?**

Yes, we had no television, but I heard all about it on the radio. I kept abreast of what was going on at Nanterre, I discussed it with people in my class, a few of them, anyway, a small nucleus, and very quickly a group of high school students in Saint-Nazaire went out on strike.

### **Before May?**

Oh, yes, before May. There was an anarchist current among the students, and there were also teachers who were involved. We had Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, remember, who was not only involved, but had many ideas about education. Society was cracking, and so were the schools. If things began on March 22 then we went out shortly afterwards, sometime during April.

### **What was it you wanted?**

We quickly set up meetings. I didn't dare go on strike, because the pressure from the school was strong. My father was the head of the parents' group at the school, and when the strike started there were discussions between the parents and the teachers. And then there was something that had never happened before: a meeting between the parents and the *students*. This was extraordinary: that the parents accept to enter into discussion with the students, trying to find out why they went out on strike.

But to be honest with you, I simply followed the movement: I had no demands. I was just angered by the idiocy of the system. Not so much the classes, but everything around them. Now the high school was enormous, there were 2,000 or 3,000 students, and to give you an example of the idiocy, a friend and I left an exam and wanted to go get something to eat, but we were forced to wait. I wondered, what do they take us for?

### **Did the strike go on for a while?**

It was amazing: thanks to Gaby we managed to organize over the course of a week a commission of students and faculty where almost 1000 students showed up! I'll never forget the effervescence of these gatherings of 1000 students. Gatherings where people discussed, wrote texts, and what was more, it was a mix of technical students and the literary, who were considered the cream of the students. It was a vast encounter of different social classes that lasted a week.

Groups were formed. There was a group of anarchists from the classical high school Aristide Bruand, which was mixed, and us from the technical school, which was mainly boys, and the two groups had different approaches. But even if I was tempted by the anarchists, I chose to remain with my pals.

**May arrives in Paris. Did you have word of what was happening?**

Absolutely. And we followed what was happening in Nantes as well. Things arrived quickly there, and we even had groups of students and teachers – I wasn't one of them because I was too young – who drove to the coordinating committee in Nantes. We followed everything, we were glued to our radios.

And then we went on strike and occupied the high school. Immediately. The entire month of May we occupied the school. We invaded a building, the boarding part of the school, where there was a telephone, which enabled us to call different high schools to see what they were doing, to coordinate, to share information. We had a kind of power. My group, there were between 40 and 80 of us, and the anarchists, they were around 100, and we also had inter-group relations, and we totally occupied the school. My father got up in the morning to occupy the naval shipyard and I occupied the school.

**So your father knew and approved of what you were up to.**

Oh yes. And he was on strike even though in April-May 1967 they'd had the longest strike in their history: 61 days on strike, and he had barely recovered financially, and he went back on strike. So like I said, in Saint Nazaire we were bathed in strong struggles.

**You're saying you occupied during the day, but did someone stay there all night?**

Did someone stay there at night...?

**If not, why didn't the school administration just close and lock the doors and not allow you back in in the morning?**

There was a phenomenon that was quite astounding. During the struggle the two, three rooms we occupied had been ransacked by the far right, slogans painted on the walls and all. And the next morning we ran into the principal and we told him what had happened and asked if there was some way to clean the rooms, to repaint them. What he did was go into his pocket, take out his wallet, and give us the money to buy paint. For me this was the symbol that the system had no idea what to do, and he just gave us the money we needed for the paint. During that period there was such disorganization that they didn't close the school.

Now I know that the anarchists slept there, but as for us... maybe a couple of us did.

**What role did Gaby play in all this?**

In the beginning he played a role in having the students and teachers meet. He was essential in this liaison. The teachers were on strike, but it's not as if the students were considered interlocutors. So he played a role in setting up inter-generational relations, in smashing the image of what schooling was. At that time there were still lecterns, which placed the teachers above the students; after '68 there were no longer any

lecterns. They had desks, but they were raised. Something like this was symbolically important. The lectern was a space reserved for the teacher, he climbed up to it and he was above us.

### **Did Gaby inspire you? Were you friends with him?**

Yes, he inspired us, and afterwards I continued to see him at demos, and we'd sometimes go to Nantes together.

We experienced a joy in occupying our own space, a redoubt. I was perhaps too young to fully participate in this connection between the students and the teachers. And it was a period when there were countless demos. And the times were rough.

### **In what sense?**

In the sense that we occupied the streets and there were confrontations. Being young we wanted to smash things. And we knew there was tension. That the workers were strong. And there were encounters with the world of unions. It was a time of encounters, of students with teachers, of students with parents, and an attempt at having students meet with the unions. I have to admit that last was tough: "What can these young people possibly have to say about society?"

### **Did you think this connection with the workers had to be made or were you primarily concerned with your student demands?**

I was more with the latter. Though I remember when we had our first encounter with the world of the farmers. What I was struck by was that, though from my mother I come from the peasant class, the working class distrusted the peasantry. Things had started to evolve during the strike in '67, when the farmers and fishermen came with food for them, but even so the workers were mistrustful of the farmers, the classic idea that "they have their land so they can always get by, while we have to survive on unemployment benefits when things go bad." As interested as I was in the workers, I was even more interested in this opening onto the world of the farmers.

### **What did you do to meet farmers?**

Thanks to Gaby, who had friends in that world, I was able to meet with them. This was enormously important, given the significance of farming in Loire-Atlantique. These farmers I met would play a huge role a few years later in the battle of Larzac. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Did you know Joseph Potiron? <sup>[2]</sup>**

We crossed paths at the time and would fight side-by-side later.

### **What were your demands? And were there GAs?**

GAs? Absolutely. And as for our demands, there were a few that were pedagogical, about school life. We were against the way we were infantilized, feeling that here we were, 17 years old or so, beginning to experience autonomy, and we were being treated like kids. Our demands had an anti-prison tinge. This happened a couple of years earlier, but to show you the absurdity of the French system, I was designated the head of my class, and one day we arrived in a classroom and the teacher was late. It was my job

to report his absence to the school administration, and when the principal came in and saw the teacher wasn't there I was punished – the student! – for failing to inform him that the teacher was late. We the class leaders – and I know I'm exaggerating here, but even so -we were like kapos!

### **At the GAs did the girls speak up?**

Yes, but much less than the boys, that's certain. There weren't many girls, since it was a technical high school, though there was one mixed class, the year after mine. But as for attendance at the GAs... Anyway, the weather was beautiful that year and a high schooler who's 15 or 16 would much rather be at the beach than at a GA. There's no denying though that in '68 it was a period of sexual liberation, of living your life, but it was also one of a strong machismo.

### **Were there far left groupuscules?**

There were a couple from the JCR, so they were Trots, but I didn't sense any kind of infiltration. We were all friends above all. Of the 17 in my class there were five of us who were busy with the strike every day. Whenever there were votes on anything we stuck together, and we were able to sway the vote in our direction in almost every case. All of this had great importance the following year. Students, as a result of what had happened in '68, were ready to say no to things they didn't consider reasonable. In '69 there was a kind of replay, and when it happened the system attempted to punish us?. In fact, there were many small strikes that lasted into December across France.

### **Was there a demo that stands out?**

There was going to be a demo one evening, so we spent the whole day trying to find rubber to make slingshots. We spent a day cutting wood to make slingshots, and afterwards we went to see workers to give us iron marbles for us to shoot. Things were really tense. There could have been a lot more damage than there was. My father was at the demo where this happened, and he was not at all in favor of confronting the CRS, and he told me I had to be home by midnight. The demo got ugly, with tear gas launched and the workers fighting back, and it was here I saw the workers driving back the CRS. We later learned they were panicked because they were out of ammunition.

We did like in Paris. We were playacting: we were young and we were play-acting. I have no doubt that for our own internal demands, we acted on our own; for the demos, we felt like it had to be like in Paris and that things heat up.

### **Did you see beyond the daily events?**

Behind it, for me, was a dream of overthrowing the system, which led me not to vote until 1981. For me elections were a fool's game. This was the birth of my anarcho-syndicalist spirit.

I already had a great distrust for Stalinism. And we hated American imperialism. And the Gaullist system.

**But the dream was that society crumble.**

What would replace it wasn't important. I'd been marked by the strike my father was involved in the previous year, a strike of white collar workers that they won so that they'd be paid by the month and not by the hour. And the strike at the shipyards ...

Now, for the first time it wasn't the money that mattered in a strike.

**Did you feel a split between the workers and students at the level of demands?**

Yes. We felt it, and it was made clear when the delegates came back to Saint-Nazaire from Nantes, when they heard the Communists and the CGT say that we weren't there to overturn the regime. But this was what we dreamed of, so when people said we had to go to the workers we knew that there were differences. We'd heard it hadn't gone well when students went to talk to the workers at Renault. But there were so many things in Nantes, there was all the talk of the commune of Nantes that I'd have loved to see.

**And you didn't?**

No. I didn't have the right. I was too young. Being 16 then and 16 now are completely different.

**Were you there when Gaby's brother came to Saint-Nazaire?**

Yes. At La Briandais.

**Was there a big crowd?**

The hall was full, and there were even people standing outside. I don't remember what was said or anything, but I remember that seeing Dany the Red was really something.

**Was there a moment when you realized it was over?**

Yeah, it was clear that as it went by things were fizzling out. Less people came to our assemblies, and we fell into a routine. We were in a state of expectation. Plus, we were high school students, and we wanted to do other things. The workers, while they were out, were happy playing cards and boules, but us... We'd escaped from our daily lives, and we were beginning to feel we'd done all we were capable of doing, that the real things were happening in Nantes and Paris, not in Saint Nazaire. We'd played our role and all that was left was to hold out until it was all over. As long as it's still going on anywhere, we'll be here.

**And you, how long did you hold out?**

Until the very end. There were still 40 or 50 of us who did. And until the end we continued to discuss issues. Not that I can remember what they were. And there was a French teacher who'd left our school to teach abroad and we'd use the school phone to share ideas with him for an hour.

**What about the pro-de Gaulle demo?**

Even though I knew from my father that things were running out of steam, I was still surprised that the right could gather so many people.

There was disappointment, but even so, something happened in the relationships between people that would last. There was a change. I was a little young to think we could make the revolution, and later on I realized that it was through collective action that we could arrive at something. That's why I never took out a party card. But what remains with me from then was that we could take power. If we dare. That image of the principal who two days before scared us to death and who gave us money out of his own pocket, that showed that a boss is nothing but a boss and we can say no. That and the encounters with other people. The lesson is that you shouldn't bow down in front of power.

### **What did it change in France?**

That despite it all we can't go back to the way things were before. And it brought about all the subsequent struggles for abortion and against imperialism, that would meet and join together. It awakened France to other things, to other battlegrounds. But history doesn't advance in one great bound. There are ruptures, there are things gained, then a retreat... Things are complicated. The great upheavals aren't always miraculous.

### **Did you feel like you were making history or that you were following in history's footsteps?**

No. Saint-Nazaire was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a platform to counter-balance the royalist towns, so the history of the city and its working class is one of distrust towards the rural world, which is more to the right and Catholic and traditional. It's a city that's solidly republican.

### **What word do you use to describe it?**

Events.

### **And at the time, did you call it a revolution?**

I can't say I remember. We hoped things would fall, and we still had the dreams of our parents, that the left would take power. And they were too stupid to do it.

### **They could have?**

At the time yes, we thought they could.

## **Notes**

1. A fight that lasted from 1971-1981 carried out largely by farmers to block the extension of a military base.
2. Potiron is a farmer-activist who organized supplies for striking workers in the region. See interview with Rémi Drouet below, in which he participated, and the interview with Joseph Potiron in *May Made Me*.

## Yves Coleman

Yves Coleman, born to an African-American father living in self-imposed exile in Paris and a Portuguese mother, was active in the Far Left between 1967 and 1981. After a long break, he is once more active, publishing the magazine "Ni Patrie Ni Frontières" since 2002, which translates and republishes texts from various revolutionary tendencies around a common topic. He participates together with two others journals to the website [mondialisme.org](http://mondialisme.org) and is involved in a network supporting « illegal » workers rights.

My political commitment has always been progressive. When I was 15 years old, in 1965, I got involved in an antiracist movement controlled by the French CP and called the MRAP (Mouvement contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et pour la paix). Basically, our activity was to sell a monthly journal, show movies or documentaries about racism and to organize meetings with specialists on racism and things like that.

### **Did the fact that your father was Black and American have any impact on your political commitment?**

The fact that my father was a Black American didn't have much to do with my commitment. My mother had Portuguese nationality and a Swiss mother.

In French we use the word "métis" (in English it would be "mixed race" which is a rather racist expression) to define the children of such mixed unions. It's always had a positive image in the French Republican assimilationist (or even colonial) culture. Identity politics has penetrated French popular culture on one side through the rap, hip hop, R&B influence among African and North-African youth, and on the other side through a confused Franco-French academic and leftist "culture."

I know very little about my father. After his death, I discovered he was court martialed during WW2 because he did not want to fight Nazi Germany, a state he considered racist in the same way as Roosevelt's America (he wrote a 15-page defense speech about it!). For some strange reason he won his case, wasn't punished, and never carried a weapon during the war. When he'd pass another Black on the street in Paris he wouldn't say "hello" to him, telling me he did not believe in the reality of race, only in shared universal values he could share with friends, whatever their origins. I suffered twice from racism at school, a couple of stupid guys bothering me, but as I was the only non-white in my high school, one of France's privileged high schools, I was treated like a "métis", i.e. a non-threatening exotic bird.

Then in 1966 I got involved in the anti-Vietnam war movement (there were three movements in France: one controlled by the CP; one controlled by the Fourth International Trotskyists – the followers of Ernest Mandel –, and one controlled by the Maoists – I was in the last one) in my high school. Louis-le-Grand high school was highly politicized (it was and is even more today an "élite" high school where many famous intellectuals studied, and I got to know some of those at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (another "élite" institution where the Stalinist-structuralist Louis Althusser was teaching and therefore with a strong Maoist influence), who later became rightwing "new philosophers" or writers.

We organized a lot of demonstrations and our Maoist-led group tried to prove it was more radical than the others. The Maoists were the only ones who sold and distributed newspapers printed by the North Vietnamese and the NLF in South Vietnam. We thought we were the only “true defenders” of what was, in fact, Vietnamese Stalinism and state capitalism. I was arrested and detained a few hours for the first time when I was 16 for trying to throw eggs at Vice President Humphrey. We also physically fought against the fascists in the Latin Quarter, a traditional battleground between the left and the far right. The cops were actually quite nice: they pushed us gently, didn't have big clubs, didn't use water cannons, etc. Their attitude was very far from the tough CRS used in May 1968 against the same students...

And we even made one temporary “military” alliance with a Jewish right wing organization (Beitar) to attack fascist meetings through two different doors, something impossible today, given the transformation of left antizionism into a very dubious ideology. Back then almost all of my friends were Jews but they did not treat me at all as a “Gentile” or a “goy.” I don't like the term “self-hating Jews,” and they weren't. They identified with a radical humanist tradition, with Spinoza, Freud, Marx, Marcuse...

Everything went OK with the Maoists (I was in charge of finances and membership cards for the local anti-Vietnam war committee) in my high school until the Six Day War in 1967. As most of my close friends were Jewish, I had started going to meetings organized by Hashomer Hatzair, where some Jews on the far left got their start, and of the Jewish Student Union about the Judeocide. You have to remember that the Shoah was not at the center of political debates at that time, including on the revolutionary Left, which had an antifascist culture but was not interested in the specifics of the Holocaust and of antisemitism – and still keeps this dangerous attitude. So thanks to my Jewish friends I knew much more about antisemitism and Nazism than the average young leftist in France.

So when the Six Day war started my Jewish friend and I distributed a leaflet at the gates of the high school defending Israel – you must remember Jean-Paul Sartre and many left intellectuals opposed to the Algerian war defended the same position at that time, so we felt we were in the right “camp.”

From one day to the next the local Maoists started to call us “cops” and we had a hard time inside the school.

At the same period a Trotskyist militant contacted me through a mutual friend. He belonged to a little group called Voix ouvrière (today Lutte ouvrière, a much bigger and better known group thanks to its participation to all sorts of elections after 1973) and I was impressed by their critique of Stalinism, Maoism and Castroism, although at that time I was a kind of left Christian third worldist! He made me read a lot of books, books by Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky, but also many history books. We met every week to discuss, he organized a weekly training about the history of the workers movement from the 1789 French Revolution to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and I convinced other friends from my school to come and listen to these courses. I soon started to sell the organization's paper inside the school, which obviously was not happily accepted by the dominant Maoists.

I had a friend in another Trotskyist group, the JCR, close to the Mandel/Frank Fourth International, and I told him in February 1968 that there wouldn't be a general strike in France for ten years at least. I felt very sure about it because my group was the only organization at that time doing systematic political and trade union work in the main factories - around 50 units spread over France - and because the JCR was - for me - just a bunch of "petty bourgeois Guevarists".

### **So your theoretical base as classically Marxist?**

My theoretical base? No, it wasn't Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky. My stepfather was a fellow traveler of the CP, although he was anti-Stalinist, but we did not have any political books at home. My mother had a subscription to Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* because she had worked for them in the 1950s, and this was probably the only political journal in my parents' home. My mother was close to Camus, Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, but much more Camus than the other two, after the war. She worked for them as a secretary, rewriting texts, translating, etc.... You know the old division of labor men/women which, of course - wink, wink - does not affect the left.

I was impressed by Gorky's novels, Malcom X's *Autobiography*, which was published in French in 1966, booklets by Vietnamese Stalinists like Ho Chi Minh, Giap and Le Duan, some texts of Mao's (which my Maoist friends advised me to read) and most important... Althusser (*Pour Marx*) because I had an Althusserian teacher in my philosophy class... I also read Raymond Aron's book *La lutte des classes* (The class struggle) and a very long book by a Jesuit philosopher *La pensée de Karl Marx* (Karl Marx's thought) because its author, Jean-Yves Calvez, was close to liberation theology and I was a left-wing Christian at that time. I loved *Le Dieu caché* by the Marxist sociologist Lucien Goldman, a book our philosophy teacher advised us to read and which I used to present a Marxist analysis of Pascal for my baccalauréat in June 1968 !

It's only when I got in contact with Lutte ouvrière around September 1967 that they explained me I was all wrong and should start with Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky and read many novels dealing with the working class from Zola to Steinbeck. Obviously they despised Althusser - and they were right - but they were intelligent enough not to confront me about my strange mixture of left Catholicism and enthusiastic Althusserianism (don't forget I was in contact with Althusser's Maoist disciples, members of the UJCml, who were studying at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, organized meetings inside my high school and led the pro-Vietnamese and antifascist movement in the Latin Quarter). *Voix ouvrière* militants just told me: "You should read Marx and only afterwards read his critics," and it looked very logical and sensible to me. So I obeyed them... more or less.

### **What was your direct experience of the working-class?**

The French working class was totally unknown to me and I discovered it with my comrades in *Voix ouvrière* because we were writing factory bulletins with workers, leafletting in front of their factory every week, knocking at the doors of their buildings in the housing projects every Sunday morning in the suburbs of Paris and "selling" usually one or two copies of our newspaper three times a week in working class neighborhoods outside Paris or in front of railway stations or metro stations near factories. So my approach to the French working class movement was not literary or intellectual at all,

but “physical” and direct. In some cases, nice and friendly conversations with workers surprised to see a student in front of their factory, in their local suburban market, or on their doorstep; in others the indifference of the majority and the violent hostility of the Stalinist workers, who insulted or threatened me, and sometimes beat me up.

### **What happened when the student demos started up in May? Were you part of it all?**

When the student movement started at the beginning of May I went to all the demonstrations, but as my organization’s line was only directed towards factories I was a bit isolated. I sold the paper everywhere in Paris and in its suburbs, I leafleted several times a week in front of all sorts of factories and in the student district, but I didn’t participate in my high school occupation. I had little or no contacts with workers in working class districts – except with Stalinist militants who wanted to stop us from distributing our leaflets or putting posters on the walls and used their fists to convince us to go away. In fact, the PCF was generally pretty violent. They fought us with their fists, but also with clubs and bolts before 1968. As the comrades of Voix ouvrière refused to use any weapon to defend themselves, several militants remained badly injured for the rest of their life.

I spent a lot of time in the Sorbonne in May/June 68, which was across the way from my high school and discussed issues with all sorts of people, defending my organization’s line. All sorts of non-militant ordinary people, and many young workers came to talk, to tell about their life experience, etc., and as the leftists (including me) were a very small minority, we had to listen to them, we couldn’t just try to indoctrinate them.

Apart from the huge demonstrations in which I participated and where my group was unable to have any significant influence, given its size and its politics, what struck me most was the number of spontaneous local meetings I participated in. For example, you could stick a handwritten poster on a wall anywhere, on any square, close to any metro station, and instantaneously you had 10, 20, 30 people gathering and discussing not only with you but mainly between themselves. You could leave the place and come back four hours later and you would still find the same number of people (although not the same ones) discussing.

At these meetings, and at the Sorbonne in the lecture halls or in its famous courtyard where all the groups had stands, it was a huge and delightful mess. There were so many people talking, saying interesting but also crazy things. And it wasn’t a matter of Trotskyists, Stalinists, Maoists or anarchists, it was just individuals endlessly speaking as if they had kept these words and thoughts inside themselves for years without being able to express them. The groups, like mine, didn’t have enough experience to be able to control and manipulate general assemblies. They knew how to manipulate student groups (the Trotskyists, Maoists and even the Situationists had started inside the left student trade union, UNEF), but they had no experience in manipulating mass meetings.

### **What did you think of the leaders of the events?**

The so-called leaders of ‘68 were never elected by any democratic procedure. Cohn-Bendit was a leader chosen by the media because he was exciting and funny. Krivine,

Geismar, and Cohn-Bendit just jumped to the front of the scene because there was no candidate for leading such a heterogeneous and confused movement. They were known in a tiny student milieu, but totally unknown to the mass of the students (like me) or the mass of the population before '68.

Most of the people discussing in the streets did not belong to any party, many voted for the left, but you had also a lot of right-wing people who came to express their ideas, disagreements, frustrations about the strike and barricades. That was for me the only moment in my political life when I saw so many diverse people remembering their good old days (1936 and the Popular Front, the French Resistance during World War Two, strikes, etc.), or just telling their personal individual work experiences. It's probably the only time in my life during which I talked with so many reactionary people...

I did not participate in any "action committees" in 1968, which were a very interesting aspect of these events. And I was totally unaware of the so called "sexual revolution" which was and continues to be much hailed by the mainstream media. I remember, years later, having seen a film supposedly reconstituting what happened in my high school and showing an image of May '68 that did not correspond with what I saw and experienced. But I suppose that happens to many people who have only a personal, isolated, or limited experience of a big historical event. You don't really understand what's happening and it takes time to realize all the aspects of what you lived. All things being equal, I was a bit like Fabrice in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* at Waterloo: I'd participated in an historic event and I didn't even know it.

**Is there any particular moment that has marked you and that you'll carry with you to the end of your days?**

I can't think of any one moment I'd like to remember forever. The only thing I can say is that having seen and participated to such a historical moment definitely convinced me that important social change is possible (even if no workers' revolution happened in 1968), that people can modify their conservative attitudes and start thinking by themselves and questioning what the media or the politicians say. I know I'd like to forget when the cops beat me and I ended up in the hospital, but there's nothing precise I'd like to remember. It was a time of confusion, but a very nice and exhilarating confusion.

**So when it all ended and you hadn't won, were you depressed about it?**

My group was pretty pessimistic on the immediate perspectives, so I wasn't depressed afterwards that we hadn't "won". I didn't think we would. And as I was able to sell 200 party papers in two hours when I used to sell one or two before, it was a positive moment. We made new contacts and had new opportunities. It was a terrific opportunity for recruitment and discussion. But we were critical of May '68, especially in comparison with May '36. In May '36 when the workers went on strike they occupied the factories, and they were places of joy, dancing, etc. Women would come to the factories and be involved in the struggle. In May '68 there weren't many lively and mass occupations. Only a few were democratically organized. Generally, the Stalinist trade unionists and some of their followers kept an eye on an empty factory. The young, revolted workers did not want to stay closed in in the factory with their serious and

boring elders, they wanted to fight the cops with the most radical students, to demonstrate, to discover new ideas...and probably to try and meet some student girls.

For me and my group, there was no reason to be depressed between 1968 and 1973. That came later, in '74, '75, and '76, with the multiplication of splits, with the fragmentation of the left, with the decrease in the number of strikes, and with the revolutionary blah-blah which was shown to be more and more disconnected from reality.

### **What do you think was the lasting effect on France? Was there any?**

A lasting legacy? I have my doubts. Many things the right says about May '68 are partially true; not about what we fought for, but the way May was re-used by capitalism, as well as our terrible flaws. I'll just take an example: after '68 I remember I could hold a spontaneous meeting in the university hall and confront a Stalinist, a Maoist or a Trotskyist of another group on any subject... Tens of students would gather and listen to us but no one would intervene and say what they thought. The same in the classrooms: we used to interrupt the teachers, to confront them, but we did not care to involve the mass of the students in the discussion. We held the Truth and wanted to impose it on our audience.

The right calls that "intellectual terrorism." The expression is certainly exaggerated, but you can see the huge generation gap today (in a positive way), with the invention of far more democratic practices by the feminist, autonomous antifascist or anti-globalist movements. I don't support many aspects of the ideology of these movements, but I must recognize they at least tried to break the bad sectarian, undemocratic, sexist habits imposed by the '68 generation on post-'68 social movements...

It's very easy to recognize a former '68 leftist "cadre" on TV: he talks a lot, interrupts everybody, is just focused on himself, even if today he's a neoconservative of the worst kind.

Many anti-working class and anti-revolutionary ideas came after May '68... Partially through the very influence of '68 or post-'68 ideologies (apolitical feminism, identity politics, postmodernism, etc.). In that sense May '68 ended in a tremendous defeat. Capitalism began a major restructuring and many elements of working-class life, like union organization as well as local solidarity networks, were destroyed. It wasn't May's fault, but it happened.

What demoralized me most was the discovery of the sectarian, self-destructive, internal mores of the "revolutionary" groups. Ideologically and materially May '68 was followed by a tremendous defeat.

I hope this book will be useful to the new generation of militants...if they want to learn from our mistakes and not repeat them.

## Rémi Drouet

Rémi was 31 in 1968, working in the naval arsenal near Nantes in a commune called Indre. We met in the backyard of Joseph Potiron, who joined in the discussion, as did Remi's partner, Isabelle. He was wonderfully modest and insightful.

As a young man I didn't want to work in a factory, but wanted to be a farmer. My father said to me when I was 14, "You can see farmers are quickly disappearing, so you should go work at the naval arsenal," which is on the Loire about 20 km from Nantes. So that's where I went and had a career.

### **Were you in a union?**

RD: At first I was in the Catholic union, the CFTC, and when there was the split, I continued in the CFDT. I stayed there till the end of my working life and even now, retired, I continue to pay my union dues [he shows me his dues book]. And in politics, I was a member of the Socialist Party, but that was later, not till the '70s, so in the period of May I wasn't in any political party, though like I said, it wasn't long after that I joined the PS. But I've always been a man of the left, a man of the left who's suffered many disappointments. So to make a long story short, in May I was just a member and a militant of the CFDT. Militant in the sense that I was the union's dues collector at the factory. Let's say I was small scale militant.

### **And so when the events start in Paris with the students...?**

RD: We started talking about it immediately at the Arsenal, but we really didn't know much. Even so, I felt that it was a contestation of capitalism, that that was its meaning. Contestation of consumer society issued from capitalist society; I found that good as a basis for struggle, putting capitalism in question. I have to say that not all my fellow-workers saw it as I did, but there were many who did. But for some it was just a bunch of petit-bourgeois who were making trouble. Not me. No, not as far as I was concerned.

### **There were already strike activities in the region by May 8. Did your place go out then?**

RD: I can't remember exactly, but it was sometime during the week that everyone else went out.

JP: It was like a wildfire spreading across the whole country, with everyone stopping almost all at once.

### **When you went out on strike at the Arsenal, what was it for?**

RD: To be part of the movement, and of course there were the demands. Things were a little different for us, since we worked for the government and had salaries that weren't bad at all. But the others, in private industry working for the minimum wage, they were starving to death. In '68, no matter what else can be said about it, it gave workers on the minimum wage a 25% increase.

JP: I think the average was more than 30%

RD: This didn't impact me, since I was metal worker at the time, a professional, but the *ouvriers spécialisés*, [1] (OS) the guys who cleaned up, swept the floors, this was a big thing for them.

JP: I remember during the *trente glorieuses*, [2] which was the era when agriculture was destroyed, the peasant world paid for it dearly. And the OS paid for it as well, since they were poorly paid, too. The *trente glorieuses* were paid for with the poverty of all those people. And nobody talks about this.

**Was there any dissension among the members of the three big unions, CFDT, FO, and CGT?**

RD: No, we all got along very well and worked well together. There was only the CFTC that didn't agree with everything; they were against blocking entry to the factory, but we blocked the gates. We welded them shut.

**So you occupied the factory**

RD: Yup, it was occupied.

**And how did that take place?**

RD: In fact, we weren't inside the factory. The gates were locked, the picket line was in front of them, but at night we went home and came back early the next morning to make sure no one got in.

**It was different because you were civil servants**

RD: No, we were "agents of the state," please. There's a difference.

**Were your demands quantitative or qualitative?**

RD: We had both. There were demands on working conditions, qualitative, and quantitative when it came to salaries. Especially the OS.

What we particularly wanted was more dialogue with the bosses.

**That didn't exist already?**

RD: Very little, and we made much progress on this because of May '68. Not that there was none before, but this was an area where we felt there was more needed. We wanted things to be more humane, less tense... And also the physical working conditions. Things like asbestos, though I think it was mainly later that this problem came up. It was only when the left came to power in 1981 that it was really addressed, but it was already an issue for the unions. We also asked for the reduction of working hours. After the war we had a 48-hour work week! So we wanted a 40-hour week, which was something that had been granted in '36 by the Popular Front. Now we had recognized after the war that with all the losses, material and human, that we had to work longer, that it was necessary to reconstruct the country...

**There was a big unitary demo here on May 8. Were you there?**

RD: Place de la Duchesse Anne with the students. Absolutely. And the student leaders were there, Sauvageot and Geismar. I remember what they said. They said: workers, we students stand alongside you, but later, we will no longer be alongside you.

### **Really?**

RD: Sure, they said: “We’re going to become managers.” Students are made to become managers. “The system will condition us and we’ll doubtless be against you. We could be against you.” This is what they said, among other things, of course. This is what I remember.

JP: That was on May 8?

RD: I think so. Were you there?

JP: May 8 was the farmer demo, and I was there. On May 8 we demonstrated in Cours Saint-Pierre and the prefecture, but it wasn’t May 8.

RD: We knew that what the students said was true. But they were with us, and well with us.

### **At work, with your comrades, what did they say about the students?**

RD: We thought they had good ideas in all they said.

Did any ever go to your factory?

JP: Your case was a special one, since you were part of the military.

RD: Absolutely. And we didn’t occupy, while other factories did and received assistance from the farmers, their solidarity, bringing milk, vegetables...

Isabelle: You were the working-class aristocracy... A construction worker who worked the same years as Rémi would retire on half the pension he receives.

JP: What you just said is of great importance. There was occasionally scorn on the part of the workers for the farmers, but even among the workers there was often contempt of those in one profession against those in others. I think this is very important.

RD: But we were called working-class peasants, since we all came from the land.

### **So the picket line was every day?**

RD: Every single day.

### **How was the atmosphere?**

RD: We were optimistic. It was festive. We sang, we danced, and there was a lot of wine. That gave it a certain atmosphere.

Isabelle: Everyone had wine in their cellar and brought it to the factory.

RD: The atmosphere was especially good in the evening, since we had all we needed. There was food and drink. It was really festive.

JP: We farmers brought produce to Batignolles, but I don't think they occupied the factory. On the contrary, they *protected* the factory. They didn't want people to enter the factory. They didn't want there to be any damage done.

RD: That's true. We had to respect our work tools. The machines shouldn't be broken.

**Were there people who wanted to go inside?**

RD: Oh yes, there were people who wanted to enter and work. There was real friction. Not that there was anything physical; it was more verbal.

**And did the rancor continue after the strike?**

RD: Oh la la... In my family, my brother and I were opposed to each other. He was in the CFTC and he wanted to work. He said you have the right to go on strike, but you don't have the right to prevent the others from working. So there was tension.

**Did the unions have stewards to prevent people from going in?**

RD: Oh yes, there were the union leaders who made sure they didn't get in. And in the evening things got a little, you know... since people had been drinking all day. Of course, there were people who drank too much: there was practically nothing to do all day.

So we ate, we drank, and we also remade the world. There'd be a more just world, less wage hierarchy. And less social hierarchy. We sought both. And all the unions stood together.

JP: There are two things I want to say. In that regard the students were mainly gauchistes who the union leaders, particularly the CGT and the PC, couldn't stand, the students who were more extremist than they. They'd written on the walls: Dare to Say no!" Can you imagine the CGT saying that?

**What did you and your fellow workers see the strike ending with?**

RD: We wanted fewer people living in poverty. Even among the small farmers, since there were farmers dying of hunger.

JP: They left, that's why there are no more of them. Because they were dying of hunger.

RD: We were concerned that there be less social injustice in society in the world. We didn't put the system in question globally, but it was principally the social injustices that were our concern.

**So yours wasn't just a selfish struggle?**

RD: No! No no no. Though at the end of the strike there was a good deal of selfishness. We weren't in agreement about going back to work. We voted for the return, but there were those of us who wanted to continue. We had our advantages and there were those who said it was over, so the selfishness was there.

**When you got wind of the Grenelle Accords with its rise in the minimum wage and all the rest? You voted at the Arsenal.**

RD: We voted to return because we considered our demands to have been met. The unions pushed us to return. But not all of us did, since in construction work there were workers for whom it wasn't over.

JP: So it was solidarity...

RD: Exactly. And we were only a small minority who wanted to stay out.

### **Were people sick of the whole thing?**

RD: There was that too, people were up to here with the strike. And there were so many families with members in opposition to each other. Even the wives of the strikers. This happened at the home of a friend who was a union member. He'd been drinking and when he got home his wife took all the wine bottles from the cellar and tossed them all on the street. "I'm sick of your drinking!" Just an anecdote.

Isabelle: And remember there was no money coming in, and people were paid by the week...

### **You weren't paid half wage?**

RD: Afterwards we received a portion of our normal pay for the strike.

### **How long was the atmosphere a good one?**

RD: At the end, given that there was already tension... And even within all three unions, FO, CFDT, CGT there were those who had had enough and wanted to go back to work. There were those who needed the money, others who thought it'd become too political, that the unions were too politicized.... Yes, things deteriorated a bit at the end.

### **So it didn't last as long as all that.**

RD: No.

JP: And on May 13 there was the big farmer demo which was joined by the workers. [I show him a picture] There you go, that banner there wasn't made the way we said it should be made. I was at the meeting where it was decided on and I even know who decided it, it was Joseph Chevalier. The "a" was supposed to be written so that it would be read Place du Peuple [People's square] instead of Place au Peuple [Make Way for the People]. But that was May 13, when they were joined by the workers who were waiting for the farmers coming from all directions, along with students who were all part of the demo. They formed an imposing mass.

### **There was another big demo on May 31. Did you leave the factory to join demonstrations?**

RD: Not everyone went.

JP: I was there and I remember it because a grenade blew up in my hand there. We were near the bridge and I saw a cop who fired a grenade and it didn't explode right away. I picked it up and before I could take a couple of steps it blew up in my hand. I was injured but that's about all. I still have my fingers, though I'm lacking one here, but that was from something else.

**So there was no violence?**

RD: I didn't personally see any at any demos.

JP: Right. Compared to Paris, where the cops caught a couple of stones, ours weren't all that nasty.

**Before the events, what were your thoughts about Gaullist power?**

RD: Bah, I thought he had something of a dictator about him. Between quotation marks, of course. Any way, he was in Bulgaria when it all broke out and called it a "horrible mess" and said he had to come back.

JP: when he disappeared to Baden Baden people wondered what was going on. Because we thought that Mendès France was going to seize power.

**What did you think about the big Gaullist demo here on June 1?**

RD: We were impressed because there was quite a crowd.

JP: The cops, when there's a left wing demo the cops count and divide the number, when it was the Gaullists, the multiplied it. But yes, there was a big crowd.

**Until then, Rémi, did you think you had the support of France?**

RD: No no. Not of everyone. I knew France was divided. I saw it at the factory: not everyone at the factory was on the picket lines.

Were there people who refused to do it?

RD: Oh yes. There were people who were on strike but didn't think it right to block the gates.

Isabelle: People were really fed up, and there was no more gas...

RD: Right, there was no more gas.

Isabelle: It was turning into an absolute mess.

**What was the mess that people hated?**

RD: People were afraid. Of what was going to happen. Fear of the future.

**Did you have any contact with students?**

RD: No, I had no occasion to speak with students.

**When the time to vote on the agreement came, did the union leaders push you to vote yes?**

RD: Yes, for sure.

**Were the union people disciplined?**

RD: Oh yes, and the CGT has changed much since then. Now it's really reformist.

**Do you remember when you returned to work?**

RD: It was the end of May, that's all I can remember. No, early June.

**Did you think it was worth the lost wages?**

RD: Oh, it was absolutely worth it. Especially insofar as it had to do with a struggle for people who had little. It was a question of solidarity. And the guys around me understood this pretty well, the injustice in wages. A 30% rise in the minimum wage was truly something for them.

**When you returned to work, were you down in the dumps?**

RD: I thought we should have stayed out, there were things we still needed to deal with, like the construction workers.

JP: I don't remember that, but what you said there is really important, the solidarity of workers among each other. I think that solidarity is something absolutely essential.

RD: Absolutely.

JP: And this solidarity, people like you saying we should continue because others don't have enough is something that needs to be stressed.

RD: We said it wasn't right that we should go back to work under those conditions. But I have to say it again: we weren't the majority.

**Aside from the raises, what else did you win?**

RD: We did end up getting increased dialogue. It lasted and things changed. We gained the right to union representation.

**Were the people around you satisfied with the results?**

RD: There were some who were for solidarity and others not. They were happy as long as we got what we wanted. And there were conflicts within families, with wives... My brother and I didn't come to blows, but even so... It marked us for a long time.

Isabelle: What did your brother call you when you argued over this?

Remi: That we were extremists.

**And what did you say to him?**

RD: That there were people who didn't have enough and the strike had to continue.

**That's a hard idea to sell.**

RD: It was.

**When things were at their worst, what did you call each other?**

RD: He never insulted me; we were just mad at each other. It was really tough on families. It was fine if everyone thought the same way, but... And this lasted a very long time. We knew when there were family gatherings there were subjects you didn't touch on.

It was something that lasted only a few weeks but had decades of consequences.

RD: Oh yes. Now not so much, especially now that my brother's dead.

**What was the lasting effect of the events on you?**

RD: We thought we were going to get closer to socialism. That we'd abandon capitalism: we thought this. It wasn't a majority that thought that way. That we'd go to a collective management of production.

**Did things regress, as far as you can say?**

RD: No, I always thought the struggle had to continue.

**But in France?**

JP: After May '68 there were many joint actions, where the farmers came out in support of the workers. There were certain actions that continued even as late as 1975.

RD: And for me that was terrific, our relations with the farmers.

Isabelle: I moved to this region as a female plumber, and the fight against nuclear power was strong and my activities, even in 1979, was a continuation of what began in '68.

**So it was a catalyst.**

Isabelle: Yes.

JP: Exactly.

Isabelle: Even if it took a while for it to set things off. It was an important utopia.

JP: There are very concrete things born of 1968. That's clear. Just from the fierceness with which May is attacked you can see how useful it was. You don't spit on something that never existed.

RC: And now with the movement against the airport at Notre Dame des Landes... [3]

JP: It's really important, because people again find themselves together, with thoughts in their heads, not like sheep following any old ideology or stupidity. What's happening there is very interesting, and however it might end that at least will have been won. There is no struggle that is a loss.

RD: there's always something positive that remains.

JP: I've had far more apparent failures in the fights I've engaged in than victories. But I don't give a damn about that. We're nothing in space.

RD: All these ideas that have been transmitted, what will become of them?

Isabelle: Struggles continue in other forms.

RD: It's the same struggle: Notre Dame des Landes is the struggle against capitalism.

**Did you have other strikes after May?**

RD: Indeed we did.

**And was the atmosphere the same as in May?**

RD: Not in the least. They were strikes within the national navy and we didn't see any further than that. Like in May, we discussed self-management, how the workers were capable of running the enterprise. Even today there are workers who purchase their enterprises and self-manage them. This exists. We spoke about this.

JP: there was something I saw on the walls in May that I thought was essential: "Dare to Say No. Dare to Struggle." When I was in the army we'd say "Seeking to understand is the first step towards disobeying." I love formulas like that, and it's extremely important to disobey, and in order to do so you have to understand. If you don't understand you follow like the herd.

### **Looking back now to you see things more clearly?**

RD: Well, we were disappointed, of course. Things degraded badly. The values remained, but even so... In '68 the CFDT put out a pamphlet called *Democratic Socialism*, and now, well...

### **Do you see now things you could have done differently then?**

RD: We didn't do all we could have done, but you don't change society with a wave of a magic wand. That doesn't exist.

But we have to talk about the negative things of '68. Like when the students said it is forbidden to forbid.

### **Why's that negative?**

RD: That goes in the direction of capitalism. That's all the capitalists wanted, was that it be forbidden to forbid. Oh yes. That was all they asked for. There used to be a kind of prohibition of pornography, there used to be a kind of ethics around violence in films, and now... This is a way for capitalism to rule through this degraded culture. It's not through sex and violence that we make a civilization. My grandchildren play paintball, and it's through things like that that they learn to fight each other, to destroy each other. They no longer have the consciousness we had. It is forbidden to forbid? But to forbid what? It's like the law of the jungle.

JP: Not at all, since the law of the jungle is respectful of nature. I'm not pessimistic. I know I'll never live to see what I hoped to see, the revolution, but we're a link in the chain of generations, a relay. I think that the workers don't have the means to know where to carry the relay, while the capitalists have the means to pay psychologists and all the rest to tell them which way to go. Every generation starts anew by taking up the baton. There are huge numbers of people who go to the polls and vote against their own interests, thinking they defend themselves.

RD: When the war ended I fought against the crisis of capitalism. I continue the struggle in the self-management movement, in the distributive movement, which thinks men shouldn't serve money but money serve men.

JP: In the hierarchy of values it's money first and humans come in last. Humans should be first and money just a tool.

### **Who did you vote for '68 in the elections after the events?**

RD: The PS. But I should have voted PSU.

**So if there was a time machine here you'd go back and change your vote.**

RD: No question.

**Let's go.**

## Notes

1. Unskilled workers.
2. "The glorious thirty," the thirty years of post-World War II prosperity
3. A town near Nantes where there were years of protests against the construction of an airport. A struggle that gained victory in 2018.

## Frank Cassenti

Frank Cassenti brought to May the perspective of a *pied noir* from France's former colonies in North Africa, having been born in Morocco in 1945 and lived in Algeria up till its gaining independence from France. After the events of May '68 Cassenti would go on to be a filmmaker, directing the critically acclaimed *L'Affiche Rouge*, about the foreign (largely Jewish) Communists of the Groupe Manouchian. His love for these Resistance fighters led his to a brief and controversial membership in the PCF. His love for American culture has led him to a life as a jazz aficionado, impresario, and musician.

I came to France when I was 17. I was born in Morocco but I'd passed through Algeria, where I arrived in 1958, and that was really something incredible. You crossed the border from Morocco to Algeria and it as if you were entering another world. It was the middle of the war, and living through it was something incredible. For example, I lived on the same floor as a militant of the OAS who went out and planted bombs every night. Every night I'd hear the door slam and I'd say, "Bernard's going out to plant a bomb," and then an hour later I'd hear a boom. Afterwards there were events that were truly dramatic. We lived in Algiers but I went to high school in Kabylie, by the seashore, and the neighbor I mention, the one who planted bombs, was a teacher there. One evening he said to me, "Frank, don't go near the chemistry lab, because tonight I'm blowing up the school." And he blew up the school. We were sleeping in the dorm when we heard the explosion and the army came and evacuated us. That was when I returned to Algiers, and it was 1962, when the war was really intense, when the OAS was planting bombs, committing murders, things like that. We didn't live in a Jewish neighborhood, but in a neighborhood that bordered on a poor Arab one, where I was with my mother and her second husband, a Swiss-German whom I didn't like at all, because he had a way of thinking that wasn't mine.

That said, at that time I had no political awareness, by which I mean that my understanding of the situation was under the influence of colonialist representations where the white is good and that's all there is to say. The FLN represented evil, the enemy that kills and murders. The Algerians were perceived as terrorists and the ideological conditioning of the population was complete. 95% of the *pieds noirs* supported Algérie Française, and when I reached France I felt like de Gaulle had betrayed, without knowing precisely what. I had no means of understanding the situation, and it was only when I entered into contact with the student world in France and my encounters thanks to music that I discovered another facet of the world. We left Algeria in 1962 when it got its independence and that's when I reached France, first in Marseille, then Nice, then Paris, then Lille, where I did my studies, and then afterwards the Paris region.

I was in Lille in 1968, and it's there that I lived the events. I arrived in France and I really didn't know the country, the political stakes involved, and I didn't really have a political consciousness. I was bound by the dominant ideology, and it was in Lille that I discovered anarchist circles. There was a libertarian circle that was quite important – and I say libertarian, not anarchist, because it was a really open group, it didn't have a specifically anarchist coloration like *Noir et Rouge*, and we were particularly close with Spanish anarchists who had fled Francoism. I remember that one of them gave me his

library of anarchist pamphlets, works by Kropotkin, Voline, Bakunin, and this was how I discovered the anarchist movement. This was around 1967. So the basis for my ideas came from all these anarchist theoreticians. With this came knowledge of Leninist and Stalinist repression, so my ideas were impregnated with a profound rejection of communism.

At that time, to earn a living I sold books door to door, particularly in working-class households, and this is how I came to discover the mines, the lives of miners, and the working class. I discovered so many things, and in fact I pretty much stopped selling books, spending my time discussing things with the workers. In this case, the miners were a largely immigrant population, Poles and Arabs, with very few French properly speaking, since French industry had called for workers from other countries to come work in the mines. It was in this way that I came to know the working-class, and you might say the lumpenproletariat, even if that word had no real meaning. I would sell books to these people, and their houses were full of books, but I'd say to them, "Don't buy my books, they're costing you a fortune." And some of them would answer me, "Don't worry, they're not for me, since I don't know how to read; they're for my children." The books were there to decorate the house; I mean, they had bookshelves full of books but they didn't know how to read. The company I was working for sold books either door to door or by subscription, and among the authors we sold were Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet, books on the revolution, so when they saw me come they assumed I was a comrade from the [Communist] party. Now in fact the party also sold books, though my company wasn't part of that, but the job was great.

And then May came, but just before then I met Joris Ivens [1] at a mine in the north, where there'd been an accident and the workers had gone out on strike. I started to make a short film about the strike and I remember that I ran out of film and couldn't continue. Joris Ivens was filming as well and at the time I didn't know him at all, but I asked him can you let me have some film? And Marceline Loridan – his wife – said to me, "No comrade, we're not going to give you any, since we need it, too."

What pushed me to make films, and this was just before '68, was that I was in charge of the ciné-club at the university and it was there that I met Chris Marker. I had already made a short fiction film and somehow he had seen it and liked it a lot and wanted to meet me. Let me jump ahead a little bit. I made a film about Pierre Goldman and I received a letter from Marker telling me that I wasn't the one who should make that film, but him, and this was our definitive break. It was really strange, because we had been good friends, he had been set photographer for a film by Costa Gavras that I was assistant director on, but... All that said, I think it was Chris Marker who gave birth to my desire to be a filmmaker after I saw his film *La Jetée*, and I wasn't the only one: many filmmakers were inspired by the film.

### **Did being a Jew play any part in your political commitment?**

First I have to say that I never had a political commitment, but rather a human commitment, because in my anarchist circle we didn't talk about politics, but about man, about society. Now, just before May there was an anarchist conference in Paris, and it was there that I discovered all those companions, all those comrades. During this conference I had no idea where I was going to sleep in Paris, and I told a friend about

this, so he announced, “We have a comrade here who doesn’t know where he’s going to sleep tonight, is there anyone who can put him up?” And there was one guy who raised his hand and said, “Sure, come to my house,” and the guy was Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

I can’t say that the fact that I was a Jew from Algeria played any part in my political activity. It was a something I didn’t really think about at the time, and I really only discovered any interest in Jewish aspects by studying the Russian Revolution and the combat of Jewish intellectuals, and as I studied the Revolution I discovered the repression of Jews by Stalin and all that. But in anarchist circles the whole question of Christianity or Jewishness was completely swept to the side. It was an obstacle to emancipation. But if I did many things with Jewish themes after May it was because of my discovery of the Jews in the Resistance, the fighters on “L’Affiche Rouge” [the Red Poster]. It was when I learned about these things that I gained consciousness of Jewish matters.

### **Were you surprised by May?**

Was I surprised by May? What do we mean by surprised? It was an agreeable surprise to see that anarchist ideas suddenly became... that people became anarchists. When you questioned people about the content you could see that deep down they were anarchists, so on the ideological level it didn’t surprise me at all. But I would say, like Pierre Goldman, who around that time had gone to fight in the maquis in Latin America, that it was a petit-bourgeois revolution, and we felt this very clearly.

### **You even felt that at the time?**

Well, not as strongly at the time as afterwards, but I was in a closed universe of students, I ran the ciné-club, I played jazz, so I don’t mean the bourgeoisie as a class, as a social structure. I saw it as a student movement, as students carrying on. It was afterwards that I realized that it was structured, that it was built around anarchist ideas that were pushed forward. But it’s true, it was a movement of petit-bourgeois intellectuals.

### **Did you go to factories to meet with workers?**

I didn’t go into the factories to mingle with workers because the anarchist circle I was part of was one where there were students and workers, and the students were from lower-class backgrounds; they weren’t the children of bourgeois, of lawyers or doctors. Take me. My mother was a maid and I come from a poor background; in fact, it’s why my mother married a Swiss, so she could get out of that.

### **What’s stuck with you from May?**

What struck me, what has remained with me, was the fact that people spoke, they talked to each other. Suddenly people came out of their normal life, and people who ordinarily wore suits stopped wearing suits and wore jackets. That really struck me, that people finally understood our way of seeing things. That society the way it existed in their heads, as something unlivable... Well suddenly you could talk back to your boss or your supervisor when before you just bowed your head. I always knew that a boss was a boss, and May didn’t teach me that. I always knew what capitalism was, and May didn’t teach me that. I knew exactly what exploitation was. But before May ‘68 people found all this normal, aside from the people who were politically armed, the Communists and the

Socialists, particularly the Communists. So May '68 wasn't a revelation for me. For others it was a revelation ... But as for me, it didn't surprise me.

**Was there something that happened that really stood out for you? Some event? Some feeling?**

Coming from the Maghreb I had the feeling I was a tourist, because everything, absolutely everything amazed me. The way people acted... When you lived in Morocco in that period human relations were completely different. Even more, I came from a Jewish family and though I wasn't a practicing Jew, others in my family were, and I had the feeling of being in another world. I saw so many things that just kept astounding me. Just being in a great city... For so long I had the feeling I was a tourist, even well after '68. Everything astounded me, the landscape... Just the fact of being in Lille, in the north, where it rained all the time, the people working in mines. And that's what amazed me the most, that people accepted dying for their jobs. Social cohesion was based on work, something you felt in the mines. They knew they were going to die, they knew that when they went to see the doctor they were sclerotic, they had silicosis, they were totally sick, but they accepted being sick and they knew the doctor would tell them, no you're not sick, you can go back to work. At most they would be given a short amount of time to rest or receive medical care. They had this pride in working. Now most of them weren't French, but they were more French than the French, and we saw this in the Resistance too. There were foreigners and they sang the Marseillaise and they cried "Vive la France!" when they were executed. The workers had this pride, this pride in dying for the bosses, for the picking up of bits of coal, and for me this was a total enigma. So there wasn't one moment that counted more than any others. It was a whole. When I saw these workers go on strike in May I said finally, they see there's another way, that there's a solution. They continued to fight even after May, but what's sad now is that these villages that were all Communist then vote in the majority for the far right. This is another of the mysteries of France.

**There were confrontations between Communists and leftists of various stripes. Were you involved in any?**

Did I ever participate in confrontations with the Communists? Not at all. I'm not someone who looks for trouble or was going to serve as a marshal, and if there was a brawl I beat it. I wasn't someone like Pierre Goldman, who was a real brawler. It's said there were things like that between anarchists and communists. Maybe in Paris, but in Lille I never felt that. But it has to be remembered that there was a non-violent side to the libertarian movement that was very important. Anyway, we were a small group, unlike in Paris where it would have been easy to bring together 5,000 anarchists.

But something that had a really important impact on me, speaking of anarchists, was the Living Theater. It was artists like them, like Leo Ferré, who were fantastic creators: there were the models for me, along with films like *The Connection* by Shirley Clarke.

**It seems America, or at least a certain idea of America, must have had a tremendous influence on you.**

I had always been influenced by America. I chose the name Frank when I was nine or ten, and in Morocco, where the American presence was very strong, my mother – who

was widowed when I was one – lived with an American who worked on a military base. I dressed like an American kid, adored American B-films, and at the PX I discovered goods totally unknown in Morocco.

Before 1968 and through the '70s I listened to a lot of jazz – Armstrong and Coltrane – and of course the blues, which are all still important to me, and later the hippie movement. When I arrived in France I found the people uptight, as if it was another world, and that's why I had the feeling of being a tourist I mentioned to you before. Of course, I'm far from the American way of life, and what I like about America is everything that has to do with its musical culture, and in particular, what saves the country, is everything having to do with its Afro-American musical culture, which influenced every type of 20<sup>th</sup> century music. It's undeniable that jazz is a culture that has been determinant in the history of humanity. It's not by chance that I created the Porquerolles Jazz Festival.

### **Did you have any feelings about the leaders of May?**

The leaders of May didn't count for me at all. But maybe it's because I was with a group of artists in Lille, surrealists, painters... These were the people I was with, a group called the Atelier de la Monnaie. This group –which was more or less informal - they were the ones who inspired me, their songs, their paintings, this was anarchism for me, this was what resonated with me, even if I didn't know I was destined to make films and work in the theater.

I was already making films by the time of May, and during the events I shot the strikes I mentioned and we'd send them to Paris where there was a group that put together ciné-tracts, and I also saw to it that they were distributed from my post at the ciné-club.

### **Despite all you've said about them, you eventually joined the PCF.**

It's true, and it's interesting, because it's when I learned of the role of immigrants in the Resistance. I even remember when and where. It was in 1974 at Aubervilliers and I was with Jack Ralite, a great Communist intellectual, and we were visiting an exhibition of posters, an esthetic one, Polish posters and all that, and he said there's one that should be here, and that's L'Affiche Rouge. I said L'Affiche Rouge? What's that?" and he started telling me about the immigrant resistance, and I got interested in the movement, and I discovered the Resistance from the point of view of these foreigners, these Jewish foreigners. It led me to read about them and even explore my own Jewishness, and I decided to make what started as a short on them, we formed a collective to do it, gathering bits of film here and there... I met Melinée Manouchian, the widow of the leader, Missak Manouchian, as well as the brother of the great fighter Marcel Rayman, and I fell in love with this ideal, with this sacrifice. And it wasn't something at all political, it was something emotional. At the time I was making educational films, and it was great, because they were aimed at workers so it gave me the chance to go into factories and meet the workers. But I'd also made a short film *L'Aggression* about an immigrant, that was banned by the censor.

I also met Pascal Aubier, [2] who was a Communist, who impressed me as well, this grand bourgeois with his Rolls with a red flag on it. So I met these people and, as a filmmaker, I felt like I needed a family, a family to help me make films, since I'd come to

Paris from Lille. And most of them were Communists, members of the only cell that was that wasn't geographically based, but was built around filmmakers. So there I was in a nice family made up of nice people. I entered the party not having read its rules or Karl Marx, but because there was an intellectual protest movement within the party, people like Bernard Eisenschitz, [3] and they used *L'Affiche Rouge*, which I don't think is a political film but rather a poetic film. But I only stayed there a short time, three or four years. I quickly realized it wasn't for me, plus Georges Marchais [4] was the gravedigger of the party and he started doing away with the intellectuals in the party, shutting down or changing all its intellectual organs. I wasn't the only one to leave.

### **Did May have a lasting effect on you? On France?**

May had no lasting effect because the lasting effect came earlier, I mean intellectually. The anarchist ideas I had before May '68, I still have them. They haven't changed at all. Humans first, ideas of self-management, I think these ideas are still relevant. We see movements now that call for laziness, for less work... These things existed before May '68.

And in France? I think it changed peoples' mentality. And there were examples in factories of workers taking power. Not far from here, in La Ciotat, there was a tea manufacturer that went into bankruptcy and the workers took it over and managed it. This is the May '68 model. It allowed ideas of rage to be realized: psychoanalysis benefited a great deal from May 68, people like Marcuse, they entered people's mentality. Even if people don't realize it, this is part of the ideas of today.

There are people who say that May '68 was the great break in contemporary French history. Others say it was the independence of Algeria. Since you lived both in your flesh, which do you think it was?

Of the two great breaks in French post-war history, Algeria and May, Algeria was far more important. I saw what was happening, that Algeria was going to be independent and I thought it was great, though in the end it wasn't all that great. May, though, I lived like a festival that came to an abrupt end, while Algeria radically changed things.

But for France I think it was May, because for France Algeria isn't over, the country still suffers from a total amnesia about it. For example, in France we're about to commemorate Oradour-sur-Glane, the village destroyed by the SS, who gathered the whole village in a church and set it on fire. It was completely destroyed, and today it's visited by thousands and thousands of people. But France organized several Oradour-sur-Glanes in Algeria. In 1954, when it all began, there were 40,000 killed, entire villages were wiped out, and no one knows about it in France. Torture is still talked about because people say that Le Pen was a torturer, but those questions haven't been resolved. TV, movies – there are almost no films about it, it's taboo. And when there are films about the Resistance they're like westerns, like *The Army of Crime*. The real questions, the history, are never addressed. Even May '68, there are very few films about it, while in America there'd have been tons of them. Not that I think that this is unique to France. People don't want to remember the genocide of the Indians, slavery, they want to think about the latest brand of refrigerator or washing machine. They don't want to think about thing ten years ago, or five years ago, or even two.

## Notes

1. Dutch documentarian (1898-1989), for much of his career aligned with the Communists.
2. See the interview with Aubier in *May Made Me*. The red flag on the Rolls is explained there.
3. See the interview with Eisenschitz in *May Made Me*.
4. Georges Marchais (1920-1997) was Secretary General of the PCF from 1970-1994. He was the PCF leader misquoted in the famous May 68 chant "We Are All German Jews."