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May 1968

# 1968: a “global moment”, the political commitment of a militant generation

- Features -

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**How can we make the decade 1965-1975 come alive again, how can we highlight what was at stake in the world and in France, its scope, our commitment, our activist universe? Through analysis certainly, but reinforced by lived experience, which is necessarily more personal. This is a delicate exercise, with a constant coming and going between general considerations, the transmission of a political history that is sometimes specific (that of my political current) and its individual, daily implications. To this end, I am mobilizing my own memories - and I am wary of memory and especially of mine, which I know is incomplete. I am therefore appealing for a confrontation of recollections (or archives) that could lead me to correct or qualify some of my remarks. [1]**

When and where did May 68 begin? In many places, in many milieus, in the preceding years. We were living through a “global moment”, in the world and in France. The year 1968 is the symbol: in Vietnam, the TÃª offensive; in the United States, the Memphis garbage workers' flagship struggle for civil rights and dignity, the Columbia University occupation, soaring anti-war demonstrations; student radicalization in Warsaw, the Prague Spring; the revolt against Habib Bourguiba's regime in Tunisia; the mobilization of youth in Senegal for democracy and the decolonization of the education system; civic, student and peasant radicalism against the construction of Narita International Airport in Japan; barricades and a general strike in France; a huge protest movement in Pakistan; the fight for freedom by Mexican students...

The year of reference of the “moment” of contestation obviously varies according to the country: 1967 for Guadeloupe, 1970 for the Philippines, both earlier and later in Italy... In fact, the list of the major struggles of the years around 1968 is endless. They did not always acknowledge each other, they were rooted in very different national realities, but they participated in a radical “spirit of the time”: even the movements that were not socialist claimed to be. Vietnam was the epicentre of a worldwide battle between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary dynamics, as well as between the Western and Eastern blocs (two fields of confrontation that affected each other without overlapping).

The US military escalation in Indochina was unprecedented, unmatched, by the scale of the resources mobilized. Vietnam was indeed the focal point of the global moment that we living though all over the world. [2].

## In France too

In France too we were living through a “global moment”. The regime was the result of a coup d'état. [3] The Gaullist party used the famous Civic Action Service (SAC) to do its dirty work. Those seeking to avenge the defeat in the Algerian war were attacking immigrants. In the workplaces the dictatorship of the employers granted no recognition to workers. Youth were faced with a conservative morality with Catholic overtones. The opening of the university to the working classes was still in its infancy, but the student milieu was already being transformed. The whole society was repressive, authoritarian. Even just in order to breathe, it was necessary to blow open this leaden straitjacket. This shared need to exist counted for a lot in the “everyone together” movement of May, over and above the specific demands of each sector.

In the gestation of the French May, there is in particular a moral dimension and a social dimension. The social dimension is now well documented. Peasant resistance to agro-industry was asserting itself. Since the 1950s, the number of wage-earners had grown spectacularly (75 per cent of the population), including notably the industrial

proletariat (50 per cent), but the employers' order did not loosen its grip. Young country people were suddenly subjected to the discipline and rhythms of the workplace. With the social security ordinances, they suffered a new attack, while significant unemployment began to appear. [4] The first battles with the forces of repression, the first barricades, were actions by young people – but working-class youth.

The moral dimension is less often mentioned. The French army had not only conducted two dirty colonial wars (Vietnam and Algeria), but it had practised torture on a massive scale during the battle of Algiers. This systematic resort to torture was government by terror. The French general staff was at that time internationally recognized for its expertise in this domain; it later transmitted its know-how in Latin America and the United States. For my political generation, the moral break with the government parties of left and right that covered up or encouraged this murderous policy was radical. As for the army, it was not cleaned up. Over the decades, it has reinforced many dictatorial regimes in Africa, even protecting those responsible for the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

## A militant generation

Back to May. There was a before, a during and an after. Each stage played a role in the formation of our political generation.

**Before.** At that time, a few years of age or experience made a difference. The resistance to the Algerian War served as a matrix for alliances that were being formed: independent PCF members, left-wing Christians, certain Trotskyist and Third-World currents... I myself only became active in 1965, without the experience of my elders, but we prepared May together. The new far left was following closely the resumption of important workers' struggles, but rare were the currents who thought that, in this context, the student movement could play the role of a spark. The Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR), to which I belonged, was one of them. [5] For months we tried to initiate it, without success. It finally burst forth when we no longer hoped for it, on 3 May, while we were occupied with last-minute preparation for our end-of-year. Nor did we foresee the radical nature of the spontaneous dynamics of May or the scale of the general strike – but with others we were pushing in this direction, which explains why we were part of the movement from the moment it emerged. We did not have to “join” it, like the principal Maoist currents (not to mention the Lambertists (a sectarian Trotskyist current), who refused to do so...).

**During,** and the thousand ways of experiencing May. The actors of the far left, meanwhile, could not escape the throbbing question: what to do tomorrow? The mobilization was very spontaneous, but many initiatives were taken which weighed positively or negatively on the course of the struggle. It was impossible to be content with enjoying the happiness of the moment, the exchanges, the debates! We were in the heat of the action and at the same time we were looking at it “from above” in order to analyse the moment and its possibilities. It spoiled the pleasure a bit, but what an extraordinary apprenticeship in concrete political thought! To live through such an experience in the initial phase of our political commitment was a rare opportunity.

**After.** It was not just the slow ebbing of the strike and the June elections. The repression led to several deaths in workplaces that were leading the way. The far-left organizations were dissolved; in the Latin Quarter the police were everywhere, all street demonstrations were banned in Paris. The Minister of the Interior, Marcellin, was paranoid.

In Germany, student leader Rudi Dutschke, after a hysterical campaign by the conservative press, was the victim of an assassination attempt - he survived, but died of its effects in 1979. In Mexico, ten days before the summer Olympic Games, students were massacred on the place of the Three Cultures in Tlatelolco (over 300 were killed). In the USA, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were gunned down one after the other. The tanks of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia. In China, Mao ordered the army to crush any protests. It should be added that a year

previously, on 21 April 1967, the army had taken power in Greece, installing the Dictatorship of the Colonels.

The collective memory has retained the years following May, the extraordinary ideological ferment, the second wave of feminism, the formation of homosexual movements, the taking off of political ecology, new forms of trade unionism, immigrant workers mobilizing around their own demands [6], antimilitarism, Larzac [7], the foundation of the Peasant Confederation. Every aspect of capitalist society was subjected to searching criticism, from the prison system to psychiatry, from the meaning of production to the role of education – sometimes with random or even downright dangerous theorisations. New areas were tackled by the radical left, such as psychoanalysis.

There was another side to this coin, however: organizations like mine were subject to constraints. Reconstituted, we underwent a second dissolution. We could be imprisoned (this happened to me three times). Well-known leaders were forbidden to stay in many countries; we had to cross the borders discreetly. Our comrades on the other side of the Pyrenees were under the heel of Francoism; we had to take account of their security when we contacted them. Many activities required some degree of clandestinity. We were pushing for the creation of soldiers' committees within the conscript army (military service was still obligatory). [8] Networks of activists helped US soldiers based in Germany, when they deserted, to reach Canada ...

And then, the future was uncertain: how far would the repressive escalation of the state go?

## The question of violence

For some analysts, the choice of violence resulted, for organizations like mine, from a general postulate about the deeply violent nature of capitalist society and the state. Our judgment of the prevailing order was well founded and is as true today as yesterday, but we have never founded an orientation or a tactical choice on such abstract premises – as proof, for many decades our activism has been totally non-violent.

We did not “choose” political violence. It pre-existed our involvement. For my elders the Algerian War, a seditious army, the SAC... For me, the fascists... It is true that the National Front did not represent anything on the electoral level; but on the ground, fascist organizations (starting with Occident, which became in 1968 New Order) were very active.

When I became a student and activist in 1965, in the heart of Paris clashes with the fascists were commonplace in the university faculties, in front of university restaurants, in the markets, at night against the teams of flyposters... There were red areas, white areas and disputed areas. I began to study Economics at Assas (an odd choice, since maths are not really my forte) where I was active in student unionism at AGEDSEP (part of UNEF, the main student union). Assas, however, was a disputed area: the Law faculty was dominated by the far right, Economics by the left, which gave rise to recurring clashes on the forecourt, which we ultimately lost. Targeted by Occident, I could not set foot in the faculty or even approach it without being pursued: I ended up by emigrating to the Institute of Geography, then to the Sorbonne, where I met my new teachers with whom I had been campaigning in solidarity with Vietnam for a long time.

Surprising as it may seem, in these violent times, we played an essentially moderating role before, during and after May. First of all, because we wanted to avoid seriously hurting anyone. Second because we were thinking politically: any initiatives (not necessarily violent, by the way) of our defence service that went beyond its routine activities had to be justified in a preparatory meeting (with specified reasons and objectives); the balance sheet to be drawn collectively after. Finally, because we relied more on the collective, on collective cohesion, when there were confrontations (whereas the fascists relied more on individual training in martial arts).

We had to guard our premises 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to prevent them from being attacked by the far right. In street clashes with Occident, our “weaponry” sometimes turned out to be much inferior to that of our opponents: light pickaxe handles, for example, while the fascists sported knuckledusters, karate sticks ... and sometimes heavy iron bars (which on one occasion cost me a fractured skull). We increased our means of self-defence a bit with the slogan: “By vanquishing without danger, we avoid a lot of trouble.”

Of course, during the May events, cobblestones and Molotov cocktails were used massively. However, we – and the other actors in May – did not want to encourage an escalation of violence. During one of the monster demonstrations, for example, our defence service “protected” a gun shop that was on the route of the march (and that, moreover, no one was thinking of breaking into).

Despite the large-scale confrontations, there was no death before 24 May. That day, a death was caused by an initiative of young demonstrators in Lyon, that of police commissioner René Lacroix, injured by accident by a freewheeling truck launched by two young protesters [9]. All the others were more or less directly linked to the action of the repressive forces. Also on 24 May, Philippe Matérior died in Paris, hit by a fragment of a teargas grenade. On 10 June, the Maoist high school student Gilles Tautin drowned in the Seine when he jumped in to escape a police charge during violent clashes around the Renault factory in Flins. The next day, the workers Henri Blanchet and Pierre Beylot were killed at Peugeot-Sochaux. In June, in Arras, Marc Lanvin, a PCF flyposter, was shot dead by members of the Committees to Defend the Republic (CDR, Gaullist).

The tension remained high and violent clashes continued during the period following May-June, for example in front of Citroën factories guarded by real employers’ militias. This period closed in two stages. On 25 February, 1972, Pierre Overney, a Maoist activist who had been “sent into” the Renault Billancourt factory, was gunned down by Jean Antoine Tramoni, a company security officer. This was an assassination and Tramoni was convicted for it. The shock was immense; the Proletarian Left (the Maoist organization to which Overney belonged) decided to dissolve. On 21 June 1973, we organized a demonstration to protest against a meeting of New Order in the heart of Paris, considered to be a provocation while immigrants were being victims of fascist groups. There followed a pitched battle with the police. In the face of the repression that followed, we received very broad political support from the forces of the left, but we realized (belatedly) that the period had changed and that the continuation of this type of confrontation prevented us from devoting ourselves fully to other, more important tasks.

Some say that after May-June, we made the “choice” of the armed struggle. With what weapons? Or of violence, but what kind of violence? We thought then that class struggles would intensify and that the action of the state would become more and more repressive. We were not wrong on this last point. We were certainly trying to prepare ourselves for this increased repression, but – and this is the essential point – we still did not want to be at the root of an escalation of violence. If it took place, it would be by the government. For example, the government established a motorized police brigade, the “flying squad”, to intervene more quickly against demonstrations: one policeman drove the motorcycle, another who was on the rear seat dealt blows left and right with a long baton. It was an irresponsible repressive choice, because under such conditions, the force of the blow cannot be controlled. Thus, on 6 December 1986, during high school protests against the Devaquet law, Malik Oussekiné was killed while leaving a jazz club. The brigade was (finally!) dissolved. [10]

For our part, against all “militaristic” logic, we made the decision that the organization’s members should elect the members of the stewarding and defence force and to open it up to women. It seems to me that in the 1970s we were the first far-left organization to do that. We once again focused on collective cohesion – and democratic control. At a time when the question of quotas and parity was not being addressed, it is interesting to note this decision to feminize the stewarding force. As far as I am concerned, since late 1973, I have been involved in the activities of the Fourth International for many years and my French experience is becoming a bit sketchy.

We were slow to find our feet in the after-after May. What is important, however, is to understand why there were no developments in France similar to those in Italy (the Red Brigades) or in Germany (the Red Army Fraction). One of the major reasons is that none of the movements concerned wanted to engage in a “private war” with the state or, more generally, with bourgeois society (Action Directe was formed only a decade after May).

We also avoided the sectarian excesses of the Japanese, where two of the largest organizations of the far left - the Kakumaru (revolutionary Marxists) and Chukaku (Core central) - engaged in a fratricidal war (the uchigeba), resorting even to the use of ice picks. Our comrades of the Japanese section of the Fourth International refused to engage in this adventure, breaking all ties with the belligerents (which did not prevent them from being attacked too).

## Women, active participants in the 1968 years

It is particularly irritating to read or hear that women only handled administrative tasks. They were activists in their own right, even though their activities were not recognized and not appreciated at their just value, even though their interventions were not listened to with the same attention as those of the male cadres – and yes, as far as administrative tasks were concerned, they really did do more than their fair share. Just as happens in the society we live in, in our milieu they had to take on a double working day!

This cliché has been repeated from France to Japan, and it was always wrong. [\[11\]](#) *A posteriori*, it helps to render invisible the real commitment of the women activists and the pioneering work they did: why look for something that is not supposed to exist?

However, they were active everywhere that there were struggles, in student and high school committees, in workplaces, in neighbourhoods and localities, in coordinating committees...

There were some women in the leaderships of organizations (including ours), but they were rare: exceptions due to particular trajectories that confirmed the rule. None of them were among the public “figures” of May 68. No women took part in the Grenelle negotiations between the unions and the government.

It must be difficult today to realize how far we have come from that France, where women remained under the tutelage of their husbands. I can remember when a woman driving a car was rare and the object of sarcastic remarks (“There’s a woman driving, everyone take cover”); then it became commonplace. And it has become completely unimportant, when a couple are in a car, whether it is the woman who is driving, or indeed that she drives a train on the subway or the railways... In 1968, where were we in this long march? Before the female conquest of important posts?

In my distant memories, a woman had to sit upright with her knees bent, her skirt down to her calves (wearing trousers was considered inappropriate). Yet 1967 was the year of the mini-skirt - and the pill – but it was still forbidden to advertise contraception and the decrees implementing the Neuwirth law lifting the ban (which had been passed in 1967...) were only published in 1972.

Why was this increased visibility of women in society not expressed immediately in the social uprising of 1968 as a matter of course? Why did the legacy of women’s commitments in many previous struggles not prepare us better? Why was it necessary to wait for the gestation of a new women’s liberation movement, the second feminist wave of the 1970s (which, as a result, seriously shook us)?



Of course, in the “organized” field, there were still many obstacles to women’s visibility: the weight of conservatism in the trade union movement – of the Catholic (CFDT) or Stalinist (CGT) variety; the warlike “virility cult” of the new far left, the prevailing modes of action, the prevailing machismo, the lack of attention paid by (young) men to gender inequalities in the movement for sexual liberation, the absence of representative structures elected by the rank and file that would have allowed women activists to be recognized... [12]

The weight and the nature of the French Communist Party certainly played a major role, in this domain as in others. It was at once one of the most Stalinist Communist parties in Western Europe and one of the most influential in the working class. Even though it defended the social rights of women workers, it was aggressively anti-feminist. The women activists who at that time began women’s work in the unions, testify extensively to the political-cultural wall that they faced.

In the background, the entire institutional landscape of the Gaullist regime probably made more difficult in France than in other countries the junction between “societal” issues and politics. The well-known leaden straightjacket.

## An internationalist moment

One of the most surprising “obvious facts” hammered home by some commentators is that there was “nothing in common” between what was happening in the West, in the countries of Eastern Europe and in the global South. This is a look back at 1968 and the following years that is both anachronistic and ideologically reactionary.

In the jargon of the time, we spoke of the convergence of the three sectors of the world revolution: the “proletarian” revolution in the developed capitalist countries, the “permanent” (anti-colonial) revolution in the Third World and the “political” revolution in the Soviet bloc. It was not just a theoretical analysis, it reflected a multitude of concrete movements.

International solidarity with the liberation struggle in Vietnam took a thousand forms, from the sending of medical kits to massive mobilizations. [13] This international solidarity and the development of the anti-war movement in the United States were indeed (and not only in our imagination) factors of victory.

There was a constant to and from, with multiple contacts, between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean and between Europe and Latin America, including receiving of activists - Chilean, Argentinian, Brazilian... who were persecuted by the military dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s. There was a very strong feeling of fraternity and we felt the assassination of Che Guevara as the death of one of our own (in 1967 the JCR organized a meeting in homage to him).

For my part, I went into contact with Asian movements in 1974 (after the fall of the Thai dictatorship). I have not stopped since.

In France there is a strong tradition of anti-imperialist international solidarity, unfortunately discontinuous. In the aftermath of May 1968, the National Vietnam Committee (CVN) and the local Vietnam Committees (CVB) disappeared, the far left having adopted other priorities, and it was necessary to relaunch, against the stream, the Indochina Solidarity Front (FSI), as the escalation of the war by the US was continuing...

In Yugoslavia, an autonomous Marxist current published the influential review *Praxis*. It organized a series of seminars open to the international “new left” in Korcula (I went there one summer and I had the complete collection

of the magazine on my bookshelves).

The Open Letter to the Polish Workers' Party, written in 1965 by Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski was published in French (first in the review *Quatrième Internationale*, then by the Maspéro publishing house), as well as in many other languages: English, German, Italian, Japanese... Solidarity actions were carried out to demand their release when they were again arrested in 1968. [14]

*Le Socialisme emprisonné* was published in 1980 in French by La Brèche. Its author, Petr Uhl, a Czechoslovak, anti-Stalinist Marxist, was later active in Charter 77 and the Committee for the Defence of Unjustly Imprisoned Persons (VONS). He spent a total of eight years in prison.

At that time we shared common hopes. We recognized one another as comrades. We fought in harmony with one another – and in a certain manner we fought in reciprocal solidarity during the 1980s. The exorbitant price of this defeat was the real take-off of capitalist globalization after 1989.

## The big turning point

It was only in the second half of the 1970s that the situation changed in Europe, with the end of the Colonels regime in Greece (1974); in Portugal the wearing out of the 1974 Carnation Revolution; in the Spanish state the control of the post-Franco transition that led to the 1978 Constitution. The perspectives were becoming more distant and we had to learn to campaign with a view to the long term – a wholesale and unexpected change!

We did not realize it yet, but our generation was about to be severely defeated. A very brutal defeat was inflicted in Britain by Thatcher. In France there was a defeat, wrapped in cotton wool but no less real, under Mitterrand. The global retreat was announced by the Sino-Indochinese wars (which began in 1979) and the Washington-Beijing alliance, while the bloodstained reign of the Khmers rouges had a profoundly demoralizing impact on an international scale.

The neoliberal order was not born through May 68, as some have claimed, it was the exorbitant price of this defeat. We thought that individual freedoms would flourish in synergy with the development of collective rights and freedoms. The neoliberal order uses individual liberties to justify the destruction of collective rights. It is an inversion of “value” and not a continuity.

However, the legacy of our militant generation was still felt during the 1990s. It played a direct role in the birth of the so-called new social movements: Right to Housing (DAL), organizations of the unemployed, in the trade-union field the Union syndicale Solidaires... Many of us have maintained our commitments, in many forms. We have entered a different historical period and the wait for the new crisis has been so long that our political organizations have disappeared or become devitalized; but perhaps in the end, those who have remained faithful to their ideas are more numerous than the turncoats.

## A history that is finished?

A lot of water has passed under the bridges in fifty years. No more workers' citadels, bastions of an old-style general strike. Globalization has changed a lot of what we have to deal with. Other modalities of convergences between



struggles were experimented with during the 2000s. The reflection on the "revolutionary subject" was considerably enriched. Much can be learned from a multitude of specific (micro-) initiatives. The territorial framework - including the territorial strike - occupies in my opinion a new (or renewed) strategic importance.

We cannot reproduce May, that is understood.

Nor do we need to revive the cult of virility and the machismo of yesteryear.

Do not look for ready-made answers in our theorizations of the time. They are obviously dated. They must, as always, be read “in context” and be confronted with a practice that was complex. In particular, our conceptions evolved in the course of decades; that is what is most important. [15]

Some people, however, consign 1968 to a bygone past, because it was a “political” period (which is true), unlike today. Is not the depoliticization of the world a victory of the neoliberal order? Should we not change the system even more than yesterday, at a time of widespread social and ecological crisis? Can we really tackle the system without political ideas (which does not mean electoral projects or electoralism), without strategic thinking? I am afraid that the denigration of politics may simply be a cover for a renunciation, especially on the part of those who can afford it because of their social status, or a disorientation due to the defeat of our generation.

Our militant commitment was total and was often considered as old-fashioned by the political generation of the 1980s. Under certain conditions, however, this type of commitment allowed us not to stop learning, not to stop acting - and to remain (a bit) useful. Frankly speaking, it is rather the mode of French political activity of the 1980s which seems to me out of kilter with the present social realities, marked by the rise of precariousness and discriminations, an endless succession of humanitarian crises, obscurantisms of all types, the dictatorship of capital...

The 1968 period may not be as old-fashioned as they say.

PS:

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[1] Many additions or clarifications have already been made since the first version was published in French.

[2] Pierre Rousset “[The Tet Offensive, international solidarity and radicalism](#)”.

[3] In 1958 General De Gaulle was brought to power following a military rebellion in Algeria. He presided over end of the Fourth Republic and the birth of the Fifth, of which he became the first president, with wide powers

[4] The ordinances reduced workers’ representation in the ruling councils of the social security system and increased the amount user had to pay for prescriptions and other medical acts.

[5] The JCR was formed in April 1966 by members of the Union of Communist Students (UEC, student organisation of the French Communist Party) who had been expelled for refusing to support the candidacy of François Mitterrand in the 1965 presidential election and others who followed them. The student wing of the PSU (Unified Socialist Party) also came in. Some leaders and members of the JCR were already members

of the Fourth International, others had a more Guevarist orientation.

[6] Daniel Gordon and Selim Nadi, Viewpoint Magazine [Daniel Gordon and Selim Nadi, ESSF (article 44286), [article 44286](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44286) : <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44286>] Benjamin Stora, ESSF (article 44373), Comment les immigrés ont eux aussi incarné le « Mai 68 » – Avant, pendant, après 1968 : <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44373>.

[7] From 1971 the Larzac Plateau in south-western France was the scene of a strong movement of peasant resistance against the extension of a military base. It attracted broad support in France and many activists installed themselves on the plateau. The movement was finally victorious in 1981 when the newly-elected President François Mitterrand cancelled the project.

[8] Robert Pelletier, Revue L'Anticapitaliste N° 56, Summer 2014, [“France 1974 – mobilisation antimilitariste au sein des casernes. Un témoignage : de l'Appel des Cent à la manifestation et au procès de Draguignan”](#).

[9] They were accused of voluntary homicide and jailed, but they were totally cleared by the justice two years later

[10] Named after the minister for Higher Education this hotly-contested and finally abandoned law sought to introduce selection in university entrance.

[11] To take one example, the women members of the Revolutionary Communist League-FI (RCL- Japanese section of the Fourth International) published from 1970 to 1990 a monthly review : *Fujin Tsushin* (“Women’s Correspondence”). It became the periodical of the Socialist Women’s Alliance that the comrades organized. This activity was obviously the result of a political commitment that had begun several years before.

[12] Jostte Trat, ESSF [“Mai 68 est les mouvements femmes des années 1970 en France”](#).

[13] Pierre Rousset, ESSF [“La solidarité envers les luttes indochinoises dans la « France de 68 » : les années 1960-1970”](#).

[14] An English translation of the Open Letter was published by Pluto Press, London 1969.

[15] See the 2008 introduction by Daniel Bensaïd to a contribution on the party that he wrote in 1968 with Sami Naïr, [“A propos de la question de l'organisation : Lénine et Rosa Luxemburg”](#).