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May Made Me (review)

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Changed Their Lives Forever and Almost Changed
France Completely**

Rui Preti

2018, Summer

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a review of

May Made Me: An Oral History of the 1968 Uprising in France by
Mitchell Abidor. AK Press, 2018 **akpress.org**

May Made Me joins thousands of other books published over the past fifty years dealing with the insurrectionary events in France during May and June 1968. Unfortunately, most of them are quite superficial, inaccurate and often highly distorted by authoritarian presuppositions.

Mitchell Abidor's collection of interviews with people active during that tumultuous time offers a relatively broad range of perspectives, most from people on the non-authoritarian Marxist left, as well as some anarchists. It also includes a few interviews with participants friendly to trotskyist or even stalinist ideas.

The author explains in his acknowledgments that although several respondents can converse in English, he conducted most of the

interviews in French in order to allow the participants to express their views with as much complexity and nuance as they wished.

The people Abidor spoke with came from varying backgrounds and described different aspects of the struggle. The book contains interviews with 16 men and nine women. Their ages at the time ranged from 15 to 46 years, with the average in the mid-twenties. The vast majority were politically involved to some extent before the May days. Five identified themselves as anarchists. Seventeen were high school or university students. Eleven of the respondents were working at the time of the events.

A wealth of information is offered about their varying experiences and points of view. But some of Abidor's questions are colored by his belief that the perspectives and activities of the French Communist Party and the party-dominated union confederation, the CGT, did not significantly contribute to the stifling of social possibilities. This, despite what many anarchists and other participants and later analysts contend.

Several of his questions are aimed at eliciting responses confirming that the majority of workers were not generally interested in social revolution, only wanting improvements in working conditions, pay, and other job benefits. While this was generally recognized by most witnesses, it doesn't prove Abidor's contention that the workers were not held back from autonomous action by the party and union bureaucrats.

Several of the anarchists and others said they weren't discouraged by the initial lack of coordination between students and workers, believing that social possibilities develop during insurgencies no matter where the political and social consciousness of anyone (workers or students) might be at the outset

Abidor repeatedly asked if respondents believed that events would amount to anything beyond protests, since the majority of workers did not connect with the radical students. Many responded that they did not think a revolution was underway. Those who held onto the belief that the working class was the

only valid revolutionary agent, especially the stalinists, expected the least of the insurgency.

Nevertheless, most of those interviewed felt their participation in the events had a significant impact on the rest of their lives to some degree. It shaped their ongoing passion for social involvement. The vast majority stayed engaged in some way, including by pursuing academic, media, or cultural occupations. But some participants' choices seem incongruous. A few became union bureaucrats, choosing to work for societal reform through the Communist-dominated unions (without necessarily endorsing all positions), even as the influence of the party drastically shrank.

The respondents all agreed that the '68 insurgency "freed up French life, removed sexual and social constraints, and opened the door to feminism and gay rights."

One of the anarchists interviewed put it this way: "Everyone questioned him or herself, from the far right to the far left; everyone put themselves in question...Though not in the same sense...There are some who changed, some who didn't, but it caused ideas to change...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."

Jean-Pierre Duteuil, an anarchist activist in the May events not interviewed in this book, asserts that despite the return of the repressive order, the experiences of that time should be acknowledged as revolutionary because of the deep egalitarian political critique of authority that was at play in all realms of life.

But for some respondents the return to a semblance of normality proves capital's ability to absorb shocks and to adapt to new situations.

May Made Me does not resolve ongoing questions about how to understand and learn from what happened in France during those months in 1968, but it makes a valuable contribution to the discussion.

Rui Preti is a long-time friend of the *Fifth Estate* and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning.