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Paris May-June 1968

The Joy of Revolution

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a review of

Freedom in Solidarity: My Experiences in the May 1968 Uprising by Kadour Naimi; Translation and foreword by David Porter. AK Press, 2019 akpress.org

During times of social ferment like the present, there tends to be a reawakening of interest in past insurgencies, such as those of the May-June 1968 French uprising. So David Porter's English translation of Kadour Naimi's memoir of those transformative events is particularly timely.

While there have been several other highly relevant texts in English, this book is an especially welcome contribution because it is written by a person from a somewhat different background than that of most of the other writers on the topic.

The author, Kadour Naimi, is currently an internationally known playwright, screenwriter, and filmmaker. But, during those tumultuous days in France, he was an economically strapped young college student who had immigrated to France a few years earlier from a newly independent Algeria.

Naimi grew up in a working class family. As a teenager he was actively involved in some very dangerous demonstrations

against the French colonial government. He also participated in local community self-defense against the right-wing French settlers intent on terrorizing North Africans.

In 1962, when Algeria gained independence, European owners and managers fled the country, workers initiated self-management involving hundreds of thousands on farms, in factories, workshops and other enterprises throughout the country. Naimi witnessed this firsthand. He was inspired by the workers' creativity and challenges to the established hierarchies when he brought lunch to his father at a shoe factory.

Naimi's desire to become a playwright led him to immigrate to France in 1966 at the age of 21 and enroll in the École Supérieure d'Art Dramatique (the School of Drama) in Strasbourg, 300 miles east of Paris. To his delight Strasbourg turned out to be one of the hotbeds of student radicalism. When the 1968 upheaval broke out, he welcomed it enthusiastically, sensing self-management principles in much of the student movement and hope in the workers' general strike and occupations. He was a participant in radical activities centered at Strasbourg University.

At that time, Naimi knew nothing much about anarchist ideas beyond authoritarian Marxist falsifications of them. He appreciated Marx's early writings concerning social and intellectual liberation, and his writing on the Paris Commune. But Naimi was also taken in by some of the Maoist claims about the benevolence of elite supervision of popular insurgency. Although he didn't think of himself as an anarchist, he nevertheless had strong anti-authoritarian beliefs, and rejected Leninist ideas that put emphasis on leaders presiding over a party that needed to take power to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat.

Naimi's account makes connections between the personal and political in the French movement. He explores the conflict between his sexual desires and the revolutionary abstinence he learned from studying Maoist ideas.

Having learned from his mother to respect women's intellectual capacities, he was concerned about the low numbers of women involved in discussions during the general assemblies at the occupied universities. But, he tells us, he had no real ideas for remedying this situation.

His experiences in his native Algeria led Naimi to search for ways to challenge hierarchies and authoritarian rules, including those inherent in nationalism and capitalism wherever they appeared. He rejected compromise with Algeria's post-independence military dictatorship, while also rejecting the charade of capitalist democracy.

In July 1968, following the defeat of the revolutionary upsurge, Naimi returned to his home town in Algeria where he helped develop a self-managed theatrical company, the Theatre of the Sea: Company of Research and Experimental Theatrical Productions. The audience was primarily workers of town and countryside, as well as high school and university students, and some intellectuals. Audience participation was strongly encouraged.

But after three years, the troupe was shut down by the military in consultation with authoritarian socialists who rejected the libertarian tendencies it represented and encouraged.

At the end of 1973, Naimi returned to Europe and began exploring the anarchist tradition, including both 19th and 20th century individuals and groups as a way of better understanding the failures of socialist revolutions. In the 1980s he resumed his creative activities in theater and film, addressing the concerns of working people and socially aware intellectuals. He moved to Italy, where he founded the Maldoror Film company, as well as a Film School and the Festival Internazionale Cinema Libero (International Free Film Festival).

Kadour Naimi's memoir is particularly relevant because of his inherently anarchistic perspectives along with his introspective self-critical, creative, and observational skills, giving

him the ability to add to previous reports on the 1968 French events in significant ways.

The late David Porter's translation and introduction make this valuable narrative available to English readers.

SK has been interested in anarchist and anti-authoritarian participation in social insurgencies for many years.