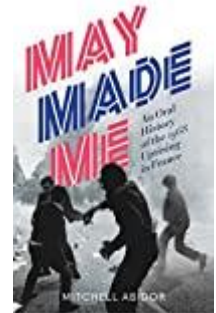


**Mitchell Abidor.** *May Made Me: An Oral History of the 1968 Uprising in France.*  
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## A (Premature?) Postmortem of Revolution by Way of Oral History

For a long time now, oral history and the left have enjoyed a fruitful mutual influence. In particular, oral history has been shown to be uniquely effective in terms of conveying certain aspects of leftists' lived experiences—something we are all being reminded of as Vivian Gornick's newly back-in-print *The Romance of American Communism* (1977) inspires a fresh round of re-appraisals in mainstream publications. But this interinfluence can be seen elsewhere as well. Black-listed author, broadcaster, and actor Studs Terkel, for instance, became one of the key popularizers of both oral history and “history from below” by bringing the voices of everyday people to a wide range of relevant subjects, including labor (*Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do* [1974]), war (Pulitzer Prize-winning *“The Good War”: An Oral History of World War II* [1984]), and racial inequality (*Race: What Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession* [1992]).

Meanwhile, in academia, some preeminent figures came into the field of oral history with serious left commitments, producing landmark scholarship about significant campaigns and struggles. Paul Buhle, for example, was an undergraduate member of the University of Illinois chapter of Students for a Democratic Society before going on, among other things, to found the Oral History of the American Left archive at New York University's Tamiment Library and to co-author (with Patrick McGilligan) the oral history *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (1997). And Alessandro Portelli, whose oral histories of worker movements in his home country (*Biography of an Industrial Town: Terni, Italy, 1831–2014* [2017]) and the United States (*They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* [2010]) have been enormously influential, credits “the effects of 1968” with his decision to pursue oral history.[1]

The epochal global period that was 1968 has of course received attention from others working

at these points of confluence. To commemorate its twentieth anniversary, avowed socialist and oral historian Ronald Fraser—who is perhaps best known for *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War* (1979)—even undertook an ambitious “international oral history” with *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (1988).[2] Similarly, editors Robert Gildea, James Mark, and Anette Warring draw on “the rich oral histories of nearly 500 former activists collected by an international team of historians across fourteen countries” in their *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt* (2013).[3] Other projects, though, have taken comparatively particularist approaches. One of the central methodological essays in Portelli's *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (1997), for example, reflects on interviews with participants in the titular skirmish between Italian students and the police that took place in March 1968. And, as its title also clearly indicates, Margaretta Jolly's recent *Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (2019) considers the development of second-wave feminism in the United Kingdom very much in light of the events of 1968.

Mitchell Abidor's *May Made Me: An Oral History of the 1968 Uprising in France* is a welcome new contribution to this latter kind of work. As important as they were in and of themselves, the demonstrations, occupations, and general strike that occurred between May and June in France also definitely loom large in the collective memory of 1968, making “May '68” an instantly compelling focal point for an oral history. What's more, the author's background as a French-English translator means the book's interviews have not been impeded by the sorts of obstacles and barriers that would likely exist for oral historians working in the English language without comparable professional experience. (Abidor's other efforts include a 2015 English translation of Jean Jaurès's 1911 treatise *A Socialist History of the French Revolution*, as well as the 2019 anthology *Down with the Law: Anarchist Individualist Writings from Early*

*Twentieth-Century France*.) “All of the interviews ... [with one exception] were conducted in French,” he explains in the acknowledgments. “I wanted all of the interviewees to be able to express themselves fully and freely, so even those who spoke English told me of their experiences in French” (p. x). Additionally, given its arrival half a century after the upheaval it recalls, Abidor sees *May Made Me* as providing an occasion for both its narrators and readers to undertake critical, constructive reflection. “One of the great slogans chanted everywhere had been ‘*Ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat*’ (It's only a beginning, continue the fight),” he writes. “In order to continue the fight, the lessons from May had to be drawn. Five decades later, we continue to question May, to try to learn from it” (p. 5).

Chapter 1, “Introduction: May '68 Revisited,” commences with a pithy and accessible chronicle of the events of May and June 1968—a serviceable lead-in for neophytes and a solid refresher for all others. After setting the stage, Abidor launches into a thesis of sorts: that in spite of any good that is understood to have come out of the uprising in terms of social progress, “there is another side to any recounting of May that must be confronted, and that is its failure to overturn the state and establish a new and different order. To make a revolution. To change class relations.” And, in fact, he is equivocal about those aforementioned positives as well: “feminism, prisoner's rights, gay rights ... Everyone I interviewed admitted they might have come about anyway; all insisted that given the sclerotic nature of French society it would have taken much longer to happen without May” (p. 6). Abidor goes on to further explicate other ways in which the interviews demonstrate the veracity of his essential argument, and ultimately concludes on a rather gloomy note: “May serves to prove the flexibility of capital, its ability to absorb shocks, to adapt itself to new situations, and then move on” (p. 19).

The oral history interviews begin in chapter 2, “Veterans in the Struggle”—including an interview with Trotskyist leader Alain Krivine, no less. In addition to discussing their political histories and the specifics of their roles in May ’68, he and the other narrators—Jean-Jacques Lebel, Prisca Bachelet, and Henri Simon—help provide additional context for the uprising. Chapter 3, “Students in Paris,” shifts focus from these “old comrades” to a representative group of student protesters: Suzanne Borde, Isabelle Saint-Saëns, Sonia Fayman, Jean-Pierre Fournier, Pauline Steiner, and Pierre Mercier. As one might glean from just the list of names, Abidor has been thoughtful here about including the recollections of women, whose representation in May ’68 has long been obscured by sexist historiographers. Of special note is Borde’s interview, which ranks among the most affecting in the book. In it, she describes her own feminist awakening with many wonderfully detailed flourishes. “May showed me the way I should live,” she tells Abidor. “This was what was true and right for me” (p. 79).

Chapter 4, “May Outside Paris,” wisely spreads out from the City of Light, gathering the voices of some of those who participated beyond Paris: Jacques Wajnsztein in Lyon; Joseph Potiron in La Chapelle-sur-Erdre; Guy Texier, Bernard Vauselle, and Dominique Barbe in Saint-Nazaire; Myriam Chédotal in Saint-Nazaire and Eliane Paul-Di Vincenzo in Nantes; Jean-Michel Rabaté in Bordeaux; and José and Hélène Chatroussat in Rouen. By casting a wide regional net in terms of his narrators, Abidor is able, among other things, to draw our attention to noteworthy activities that in some cases had no Parisian equivalents. Wajnsztein, for instance, recounts a demonstration at the offices of the newspaper *Progrès de Lyon*, which, as Abidor points out, was “something [not] done elsewhere” (p. 121).

Chapter 5, “May and Film,” is made up of only two interviews: one with filmmaker Michel Andrieu and another with both Pascal Aubier (an assistant to Jean-Luc Godard) and film critic Bernard

Eisenschitz. Andrieu goes especially deep on all things political filmmaking: its problems and possibilities, as well as the nitty-gritty of documenting various May ’68 activities. (In this way, the interview is a nice companion to Paul Douglas Grant’s 2016 study *Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking & May 1968*, which includes some discussion of Andrieu’s work.) And as part of their interview, Aubier and Eisenschitz discuss the origins and functions of *Les états généraux du cinéma* (the General Estates of Cinema), an assembly of film professionals that occupied the Ecole de Vaugirard and established commissions that, among other things, “saw to the respecting of the strike” by the creative community and “present[ed] proposals for the functioning of the cinema to be presented to the government that would follow ‘68” (pp. 205, 206).

Chapter 6, “Some Anarchists,” includes interviews with three individuals whose memories shed light on the work of anarchist movements in the uprising. Daniel Pinos and Wally Rossell were both comparatively young students at the time—Pinos, Abidor notes, is in fact the youngest of the book’s interviewees—but also children of veterans of the Spanish Revolution of 1936, hence their political leaning. By contrast, Thierry Porré, whose interview provided the book with its title, was radicalized by the protests, and later went on to “be the editor of the anarchist journal, *Le Monde libertaire*, and head of the historically anarchist union of proofreaders” (p. 243).

The interviews themselves are very well transcribed and edited, and Abidor has struck the difficult balance between maintaining their original conversational tone and rendering them readable in ways that exact transcripts sometimes are not. This probably owes something to the author’s background in translation but also speaks to the narrators’ natural storytelling abilities. In terms of their content, the interviews are by turns edifying and stimulating—just as they should be—and often at their very best when doing both at the same

time. (In one particularly striking example, Aubier and Eisenschitz tell a very funny story about a Rolls Royce adorned with a red flag that is also quite clarifying about the potency of symbols in the midst of the uprising.) It is also worth mentioning that “space constraints forced [Abidor] to omit several [other] interviews,” which have subsequently been collected in an e-book that can be downloaded for free from AK Press’s website (p. ix).[4] Judged solely on their own merits, all of these *May Made Me* interviews absolutely demonstrate what Abidor perceived in person: that “the excitement and hopes of those weeks in May and June fifty years ago are still fresh” in the minds of the narrators (p. 5). As a result, they have much to tell us.

But of course these voices have not arrived to us in a vacuum, and Abidor’s perspective on May ’68 seems to have limited the potential for greater depth and breadth in this oral history. While he is not alone in the belief that “in the end [the uprising] paradoxically served to strengthen capitalism,” this is by no means the only way of looking at it—and that feels like something for the book to have acknowledged more fully. Such an emphatically expressed point of view, combined with a dearth of instances in which narrators (indirectly or directly) challenge this line of thought, raise concerns for me about confirmation bias in the interview process. (Even in the group interview with Texier, Vauselle, and Barbe, when they are asked if May ’68 “forever [changed] something in France,” each of their responses more or less comports with the author’s outlook (p. 54).) “Indeed, Abidor has described May ’68 itself as ‘the end of a revolutionary illusion,’” writes Asad Haider, a founding editor of *Viewpoint Magazine*, in his response to a recent *New York Times* opinion piece by Abidor. “It’s what NYU professor Kristin Ross, drawing on another ’68-er, Jacques Rancière, calls ‘the police conception of history’: Move along, folks, there’s nothing to see here!”[5]

Ross’s book *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (2002), which pushes back on attempts at historical revisionism vis-à-vis the uprising, is instructive in another way as well: as she explains, her scholarly research required making “a special effort to locate memories [of the events] that do not conform to the predispositions of the present, that do not serve to legitimate contemporary configurations of power.”[6] *May Made Me* might have benefited from a similar intentionality about including interviews with participants whose conclusions about May ’68 depart much more sharply from the author’s. (Perhaps somewhat tellingly, there is also nothing in the way of a conclusion here, which could have provided Abidor with an opportunity to reflect on what surprised him or even troubled his preexisting notions in the course of the interviews that he did do.) For example, he writes dismissively of the organizing models preferred by many twenty-first activists—“today’s frenzy for horizontality, where the notions of majority rule and representation are anathema”—and asserts that because of its vertical leadership “May was able to leave the Sorbonne, the Latin Quarter, and Nanterre and insert itself into every sector of French life” (pp. 18, 19). That may be, but even so: is there no room for any critique whatsoever of the leadership structure of May ’68? Does every veteran of the uprising share his opinion to the letter? Is there no one struck by any of the ideas and innovations of later generations? If part of the book’s purpose was to “continue to question May, to try to learn from it,” then it seems like it would have been worthwhile for Abidor to ask these and other questions.

Along these lines, insights from the field of oral history might have usefully informed *May Made Me*—specifically, an understanding of the “dialogic nature” of the methodology. To quote Portelli: “As opposed to the majority of historical documents ... oral sources are not *found*, but *co-created* by the historian. They would not exist in [their] form without the presence, and stimulation, the active role of the historian in the field in-

interview.”[7] It is imperative that oral historians reckon seriously with their processes, biases, and positionality, not to mention the possible consequences of their products. Though parts of Abidor’s introduction could certainly be used to develop one, he stops well short of this sort of self-reflexive approach to oral history. As it stands, then, *May Made Me* is a consistently engrossing and informative selection of interviews, hindered only by the author’s myopic interpretation of events. Nonetheless, it still represents an invaluable set of additions to the ever-growing collection of oral histories centered on a crucial era for the left. Perhaps that’s accomplishment enough. But a much more comprehensive, expansive, and robust edition of the book might very well be possible with the careful work of interviewer self-assessment to which Portelli and other theorists allude.

#### Notes

[1]. Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 186.

[2]. Ronald Fraser, ed., *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), front cover.

[3]. Robert Gildea, James Mark, and Anette Warring, eds., *Europe’s 1968: Voices of Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), back cover.

[4]. This e-book, titled *More “May Made Me”: Additional Elements of an Oral History of the 1968 Uprising in France* (2018), can be downloaded for free from AK Press’s website at: <https://www.akpress.org/more-may-made-me.html>.

[5]. Asad Haider, “Will the Millennial Left Make Peace with the ‘Lesser Evil’ of Joe Biden? It’s Complicated,” *Salon*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/05/20/will-the-millennial-left-make-peace-with-the-lesser-evil-of-joe-biden-its-complicated/>.

[6]. Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 21.

[7]. Alessandro Portelli, “A Dialogical Relationship: An Approach to Oral History,” *Expressions Annual* (2005), 6, 1, [http://swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions\\_portelli.pdf](http://swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions_portelli.pdf).

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