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May 1968 and Algerian Immigrants
in France: Trajectories of
Mobilization and Encounter*Maud Anne Bracke***I. Introduction**

In a comment that was to become famous, leftist intellectual Henri Lefèbvre stated that the fact that Nanterre students had to travel through one of the country's largest and poorest *bidonvilles* to reach their modernist university campus was a key vector of mobilization in 1968 (Ross 1996). Indeed, 1968 is usually understood as the moment at which French students and leftists 'discovered' the injustices done to immigrants by the French state and society. Yet very different views exist in the literature on the significance of the encounter between the North African immigrants on the one hand and the predominantly white student groups and *gauchistes* on the other. Abdallah (2000) depicts a rather harmonious picture of the relations between workers, students and immigrants, arguing that the events of May 1968 created the basis for new forms of solidarity. By contrast, Gastaut (1994) points out that while slogans such as 'French and foreign workers: all united' were ubiquitous, the reality behind these statements often remained unclear. An often-heard thesis in the literature on 'the 1968 years' in France is that it was characterized by a *prise de conscience* by a number of so-called minority groups, immigrants in the first instance (e.g., Benoit 1980: 177). This is in fact an older argument, articulated in 1978 by Régis Debray, who understood the main feature of '1968' to be the 'recognition of minorities and of the right to be different' (1978: 5). The reality is more complex. '1968' was a moment of formation of an immigrant consciousness, but, I will argue, in a complex way, increasing rather than decreasing tension between immigrant mobilization and other, white groups in French society.

This chapter aims to formulate a number of hypotheses regarding the significance of the 1968 events in the longer-term history of the formation of an Algerian immigrant politics in France. I propose that we can meaningfully identify a perspective on the May 1968 events that is one of Algerian immigrants as a group, despite the socio-economic, gender and cultural differences among them. May 1968 to this group meant the rise of a new form of political subjectivity, the articulation of a problematic regarding the (multiethnic) *condition immigrée*, and the paradoxical discovery of at once belonging and un-belonging to French society. '1968', from the immigrants' perspective, receives its meaning only within a series of moments of increased mobilization, flanked as it was by two episodes that were arguably more important, the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) and the immigrant actions of the early 1970s, which evidenced the emergence of a new political subject. It was through the 1968 strikes that politicized sections of the immigrant workforce became aware of the need to organize on the basis of a *specific* immigrant identity, and that it re-situated this with regard to the organizations and institutions of the traditional and the new left.

The 1968 experience of immigrant workers in France has until recent years received little attention in academic debate, and it continues to be marginalized from commonplace representations of the 1968 years.¹ Yet, a simple indication of the fact that immigrant participation was significant in the strike movement is the fact that it were those plants where foreign workers formed a majority or substantial section of the workforce, where participation in May–June was near-complete and which formed the backbone of the strike movement; for example, in the car factories Renault-Flins and Renault-Billancourt 66 per cent of the unskilled workers originated from the Maghreb countries, and at Citroen-Nanterre 65 per cent of the workers originated from Southern Europe and the Maghreb (Vigna 2007: 45). It is only in recent years that a strand of literature has emerged which looks at the role of immigrant workers and foreign students in the strike and protest movements of 1968 (Gordon 2003; Abdallah 2000; Gastaut 1994). Roughly, these analyses have taken the following approach: first, tracing immigrants' level of participation, hereby attempting to dispel a longstanding belief that their involvement was minimal; second, explaining the reasons why their participation was limited when and where it was, by looking mainly at state repression which specifically targeted foreigners;² and third, looking at the attitudes of various actors of the new left and the radical left groups (*gauchistes*) as well as the student movements

vis-à-vis immigrant workers, and the emergence of the first campaigns of solidarity with them.

However, the perspective taken by most of these analyses is one which is based on a supposedly well-established narrative of the 1968 events, and tries to fit immigrant workers into it.³ Much of the literature continues to be limited by its focus on non-immigrant, white activists and their attitudes with regard to immigrants. I propose to turn the analysis on its head, by focusing on the perspective and experience of immigrants themselves, their organizations and actions. This means investigating what the '1968 years' may have meant to them, how it affected their consciousness and identity, how it can be located in the history of their political and social trajectories, which is a history of staggered immigration, complex relations between generations, and multiple spheres of belonging. In the next section I reconstruct some of the life and work conditions of Algerian immigrants on the eve of the 1968 events.

II. Algerian immigrants in France in the 1950s–1960s

Immigration from Algeria between the 1940s and the 1970s was regulated only to a limited degree by the French state, the employers' organizations having a major influence over immigration entry. Up to Algerian independence in 1962, Algerians could officially travel freely between the two countries, though in practice they needed a work permit to be allowed into France. After 1962, Algerian workers had to apply for work and residence permits, which were issued on a temporary basis for usually three years. In the context of debates on the 'uncontrollable' nature of North African immigration, as of 1964, entry from Algeria was gradually restricted. This led to an increasing number of Algerians either living without regular documents or working with a regular contract, but without having obtained state recognition of their status, which placed them in an ambiguous legal position (Granotier 1979: 59). In 1968, about 80 per cent of non-European Economic Community (EEC) immigrants had no legal status other than their work permit (Tripier 1990: 68). The living conditions of Algerian immigrants in France in this phase were characterized by, on the one hand, ghettoization, exclusion and discrimination and, on the other hand, the formation of an immigrant and in some cases ethnicity-based identity and community. According to the census of 1966, 75,346 immigrants lived in 225 *bidonvilles* across France, the regions of Paris, Marseille, Toulon and Lille having the highest concentrations. The major North African *bidonville* was Nanterre near Paris, with, according to the same

census, 9737 inhabitants. A law of 1964 decreed the gradual elimination of the *bidonvilles*, and although a few, much-publicized, actions were taken, these had little impact on actual population numbers as, until the early 1970s, the number of inhabitants in the *bidonvilles* overall increased (Benoit 1980: 196). As of the mid-1960s the material conditions further deteriorated, due mainly to rising unemployment among male adolescents. Ghettoization was, to some extent and implicitly, helped by the attitude of the first waves of Algerian immigrants, the 'zoufris'. As argued by Boubeker (2003: 192–196), they never saw themselves as permanently settled in France and protected themselves from racism by withdrawing from the public sphere.

Between 1945 and 1949, the majority of Algerian immigrants corresponded to the classic immigrant profile of a single, young or middle-aged man from a rural background. In 1954 only 6.5 per cent of Algerian immigrants were women (Tripiet 1990: 58). Those who Sayad (1999: 71–2) identifies as the second wave of immigrants arrived roughly between 1950 and 1962 and already had, to some degree, been 'de-ruralized' in Algeria. They were generally younger and, as such, were more expectant of being considered full members of French society. Although the 'in transit' attitude still prevailed, this second group of immigrants shed the earlier immigrants' reflexes of self-segregation. This phase also saw the start of family migration: women migrated in large numbers during the first years of the Algerian War of Independence, and even more so afterwards. The arrival of families, although still not regarded by immigrants themselves, by French society or by the Algerian state, as a permanent form of settlement, did lead France to relate in a fundamentally new way to the immigrants, who were now required to 'become French'. It was at this stage that the notion of assimilation emerged in French state and public discourses, creating a context where cultural hostility against immigrants was intensified.

To this generation of immigrants, the Algerian War of Independence was of central importance in their socialization in France. It, on the one hand, transformed the way they related to their homeland and politicized them on the issues of national independence, pan-Arabism and anti-imperialism, and, on the other hand, negatively influenced their relation to France. During the war, the French state suspected Algerian workers and students of being a so-called 'fifth column' for the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN).⁴ A first sign of the extent to which Algerian immigrants in France were involved with the war appeared in 1957, when the FLN's call for an eight-day strike in France in favour of independence was widely supported (Benoit 1980: 98–9). Thousands

of Algerians participated in the street demonstration in favour of Algerian independence in Paris on 17 October 1961, a date that became fundamental to the collective memory and consciousness of Algerians in France. The massacre of 17 October, as it became known, saw the killing of over 300 Algerians by the Paris police,⁵ and tens of bodies were dumped in the Seine. The march had been a peaceful one, although it had been held in defiance of the curfew imposed specifically on Algerians. In February 1962, another case of extreme police repression occurred, this time following a peaceful but illegal rally in favour of Algerian independence and against the actions of the *Organisation de l'Armée secrète* (OAS), and called for by the communist party, *Parti communiste français* (PCF), and other organizations of the left. The remembering of these events was, as Rioux (1990) and Ross (1996) have suggested, of central importance to the creation of Muslim, Arab and North African identities in France, and served as vehicles of anti-racist mobilization in the 1970s and 1980s. It was thus, crucially, through and with their activism for decolonization that Algerians in France became politicized on issues of discrimination in their everyday lives. A factor of mobilization linked to this, for sections of the Arab communities in France, was the situation in the pan-Arabism, the Palestinian cause and the Six Days War of 1967, as becomes clear from testimonies of activists such as Said Bouziri.⁶ However, this did not yet give rise to a mass immigrant movement, the majority of Algerian immigrants choosing not to expose themselves to state suspicion and police repression (Giudice 1992: 75).

While their housing situation, state repression and international politics were factors of exclusion from French society, their situation in the workplace, although characterized by grim forms of exploitation, was, as argued by Tripier (1990) and Vigna (2007), often a factor of integration with the multinational workforce. Especially before the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence, relatively high degrees of integration existed among workers, particularly in the major industrial plants with a multinational workforce such as Renault-Billancourt. In these workplaces, informal bonds of co-operation and solidarity were established during these years between workers of various national and ethnic backgrounds, which were to be of longer-term significance. The Algerian War generally had a detrimental effect on intra-racial relations in the factories (Tripier 1990: 159), which were further rendered difficult by forms of institutionalized racism. The majority of North African workers had the status of *ouvrier spécialisé* ('OS'), a Fordist category euphemistically denoting unskilled workers. As pointed out by Vigna (2007: 175), North African workers were routinely employed in the lowest category (OS3),

while French workers without experience usually started in the second-lowest category (OS2). Union rights were restricted as, until the early 1970s, non-French workers were not entitled to vote for union delegates or present themselves as candidates. Social rights and benefits were restricted, too: non-French workers could not receive benefits for children not living in France, and could not get medical assistance until they had lived in France for three months. They were entitled to unemployment pay only for the duration of their work permit, which in practice meant they hardly ever benefited from it (Granotier 1979: 130). Thus, in an era where citizenship came to include a set of social and welfare rights, a substantial section of the workforce was effectively excluded from it. The immigrants' situation painfully evidenced the limitations of social citizenship and meritocracy which made up the discursive façade of French modernization during the *trente glorieuses*, and, thus, revealed a wider crisis of this modernization project.⁷ It was this modernization project and its discourses that came under fire in 1968, and the 'immigrant condition' evidenced most clearly its structural limits.

III. Immigrants and the left in 1968

As stated, '1968' as a moment of encounter between immigrant communities and young radicals was largely a problematic one. The key dilemma of the student and leftist movements of solidarity with immigrant workers, I propose, was the question of nationality. In their attempts to improve the socio-economic, legal and political status of immigrant workers, the non-immigrant campaigns suffered from an evident, although not thematized, contradiction between the right to difference on the one hand, often accompanied with Orientalist, romanticized views regarding this difference, and the urgent need for integration on the other, often translated into the equally naive demand for universal French citizenship. The new left and the student movements, while in no way resolving these issues and in fact often adding to the confusion surrounding the immigrants' identities and needs, did at least attempt to engage with questions of cultural difference, where the traditional left had failed to do so.

Already before 1968, a number of campaigns had been set up by French students and intellectuals attempting to reach out to the often-unknown immigrants. The most successful one was *Droit et Liberté*, which, since the early 1960s, campaigned for the improvement of the legal and political status of immigrant workers. Importantly, it argued in favour of the 'right to be a foreigner' rather than the naturalization of

immigrant workers. Its vision to end marginalization and discrimination rejected notions of integration through assimilation and included advocating for anti-racist legislation. The group presented a series of drafts of anti-racist laws to the National Assembly in 1959, 1963 and again in 1967; however, the government parties as well as the left opposition failed to follow these through (Granotier 1979: 223–4).⁸ During the 1968 protests and strikes there was a proliferation of initiatives in solidarity with immigrants. However, these were often motivated by the wish simply to bring immigrant struggles into the wider mobilization in the streets and factories. Generally, this approach was taken by the *Comité d'action des travailleurs étrangers* (CATE), which aimed to 'educate foreigners to strike', and the *Comité du droit des étrangers*, set up in June 1968 and dedicated to the struggle against what started to be referred to commonly as the 'super exploitation' (*surexploitation*) of immigrant workers. The latter notion was understood as a particular condition of capitalist exploitation, which considered them as the most precarious section of the working class, but was often not, as suggested by Gastaut (1994), cognizant of the immigrants' specific culture or background. Some of these actions were mixed with utopian, universalist visions of a world without frontiers. This was the case for groups such as the *Comité des trois continents*, which aimed to offer practical help to immigrants, but also claimed that 'we are not Africans or Asians; we must overcome all nationalisms' (Abdallah 2000: 21). The *Comité d'action bidonvilles*, set up in June 1968, aimed to end discrimination through granting French citizenship to all immigrants.⁹

It was from the traditional left that these groups inherited the denial of socio-cultural specificity and a naive view that was both Eurocentric and universalist. The traditional left was largely unable to conceive the working class in terms of what it had actually become, a multicultural entity made up of subjects with differing living conditions and needs. The two major parties of the left, PCF and the *Section française de l'Internationale socialiste* (SFIO), up to the 1960s, devoted little attention to the specific needs of immigrant workers or indeed to the phenomenon of immigration generally. In the trade unions – the communist-dominated *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) and the Catholic *Confédération française du travail* (CFDT) – there existed a widespread fear that immigrants would undercut French workers. Moreover, the two major trade unions displayed little initiative in lobbying for the expansion of the union and the social rights of immigrant workers, or even in pursuing recruitment campaigns among those communities. Unionization among Algerian workers never reached

above 7 per cent between 1945 and 1968.¹⁰ The CGT did not display signs of awareness of the issue until 1967, when it started recruiting among foreign OS workers and its programme featured, for the first time, a separate chapter with immigrant-specific demands. The most progressive of the points listed here were, first, the demand that all immigrant workers receive the same social benefits as French workers did, even if their families lived abroad, and second, the abolition of all temporary contracts and the guarantee of permanent work after 15 working days (Tripiet 1990: 173). Nonetheless, most of these immigrant concerns, as formulated by the CGT, were no more than the recognition that immigrants should be treated on a par with French workers and that they currently were not.

On the other hand, and in contrast to the traditional workers' organizations, many of the student and *gauchiste* groups displayed naive admiration for the immigrant workers, projecting onto them images of the *bon sauvage* hero of unorganized social struggles or of the radical fighters in Third World liberation wars. Algerians specifically were loaded with symbolic significance, in memory of the Algerian independence struggle. The students' often-heroic representation of (Algerian) immigrants can be seen as a reaction against the universalism of the traditional left, in that their cultural difference was exalted, as well as reflecting deeply rooted cultural stereotypes which were not yet problematized. The difficulties with which encounters between students and immigrant families were established can be seen from a number of incidents taking place at Nanterre in March–May 1968. As investigated by Lemire (2008), what dominated discussions among the immigrant families of the *bidonville* was not the student uprising, but the fact that a Tunisian worker had died on the building site of the university campus. Tensions were aggravated when a student group offered a load of potatoes for free to the immigrant families. The initiative provoked outright anger among the immigrants who were weary of this type of charity. However, while there was often disinterest for and even resentment against the student actions ('their demonstrations do not help us', as put by one inhabitant of Nanterre; quoted in Lemire 2008: 141), there seems also to have been meaningful encounters on the micro-level, for example, cases of female student activists providing shelter for an Algerian woman escaping a situation of domestic violence (Lemire 2008: 139).

It was in this context that Algerian workers became involved in the strikes of May 1968 and were led towards setting up separate initiatives, outwith the trade union structures, and in most cases (though not always) on a multinational basis. Relations between immigrant workers'

organizations and the major trade unions deteriorated throughout May–June 1968, as immigrant workers became acutely aware of the persistence of racist attitudes. Their experience of participation in the strike led them to conclude that their silence had lasted too long, not only *vis-à-vis* the French state and the employers, but also with regard to trade union paternalism. Two important nationwide initiatives in this regard were the *Comité du droit des immigrés* and the *Comité de liaison des organisations de travailleurs immigrés de France* (CLOTIF), an organization set up by Algerians (Granotier 1979: 248). At Renault-Billancourt, immigrants, encountering implicit racism from the CGT, set up their own *Plate-forme de combats des ouvriers immigrés*. The tracts, written by immigrant workers, included demands such as the abolition of temporary contracts, the end of discrimination in the workplace, the granting of full trade union and representative rights to non-French workers, and full social benefits for families living abroad.¹¹ Though relatively small, this was an important initiative as it reflected the emergence of a *multinational* immigrant identity and the discovery of cross-national immigrant concerns, as distinct from French workers' issues. Initiated by Algerians, it brought together African, Portuguese and Italian workers, both unionized and not. While the CGT refused to support the initiative, the CFDT in some instances helped by promoting it among French workers (Pitti, quoted in Zancarini-Fournel 2002: 3).¹² A crucial feature of the immigrants' activism was their denunciation of institutionalized racism in the workplace through which they, more concretely than any other group, challenged hierarchies in the factory, a key theme of the 1968 strikes more generally.

IV. Immigrant actions in the 1970s

The short-term outcome of the general strike of May 1968 was particularly poor for non-French workers. The trade union leaderships did not take the demands of the ad hoc immigrant committees to the negotiating table, and there was no mention of immigrant concerns in the Grenelle agreement.¹³ As a result, Grenelle did not demobilize immigrant workers – quite to the contrary. As analysed by Vigna (2007: 135–6), in most of the major plants that had been on strike in May 1968 – Billancourt, Flins, Citroen-Nanterre, Coder-Marseille and Caterpillar-Grenoble – informal, non-trade union committees of immigrant workers were set up in the following months. They led a number of wildcat actions, often in reaction to the many sackings of activist immigrant workers that occurred in this phase. Immigrant action and

mobilization reflected the need for new forms of mobilization – first, the understanding that there was a need for *autonomous* immigrant organizations, independent from political parties and trade unions and even from non-immigrant social movements; second, new forms of action were tried out, such as the hunger strike, which were not among the traditional methods of the workers' movement; and third, labour issues came to be linked to legal, political and social problems, particularly housing and residence permits. Yet if issues were broadened, the factory and the workplace remained key spaces of mobilization. This can be illustrated, for example, with the strikes at the harbour workshops of La Ciotat near Marseille in 1971. Over 1500 workers went on strike over an issue that was not directly related to working conditions, namely the wave of racist attacks on North African immigrants in the region (Vigna 2007: 128).

One theme that was to become central to immigrant politicization in the 1970s was the problem of rights of immigrants without legal documents, or *sans-papiers*. The many campaigns to obtain residence and work permits took place in a context of tighter immigration legislation. Through a bilateral French-Algerian agreement of December 1968, the number of annual entries into France was limited to 35,000; it was in 1971 further limited to 25,000, and a full stop to non-European immigration was introduced in 1974.¹⁴ In 1972–73 the government seized the occasion of intensified social unrest to initiate a wave of expulsions of North African workers. The Marcellin-Fontanet ministerial letter of 1972 was an attempt to 'regulate' the ambiguous legal situation of non-EEC workers, effectively making 83 per cent of them illegal. It provoked widespread panic among these communities and a wave of spontaneous strikes ensued, among which was a three-day action at Margoline-Nanterre (Vigna 2007: 129). The actions in favour of *sans-papiers* mobilized new groups of immigrant workers and, especially, their families. The introduction of new modes of action such as the hunger strike was initially met with suspicion by the parties and trade unions of the left, but had a much wider impact on the post-1968 'new social movements' (Trappo 1990).

The widening of issues was accompanied by a preference for immigrant-specific action. Immigrant-specific strikes took place at the Pennaroya mines near Lyon in January 1972, in an action that was to become emblematic. Algerian and Moroccan OS workers were on strike for over a month, following a workplace accident in which one of their workmates had died. While the factory management attempted to cover up the circumstances of the accident, ad hoc collectives of

immigrant-dominated workers publically denounced the fact that the accident was caused by poor safety standards (Benoit 1980: 238–9). The action was supported by sections of the radical and intellectual left, such as the *Cahiers de mai* journal and the Maoist *gauche prolétarienne*. At the end of the strike, nearly all demands were met by the employers (Artières 2008; Zancarini-Fournel 2002). Immigrant-specific mobilization continued, in many cases, to be multinational and multiethnic, thus giving rise to a discourse on the ‘condition d’immigrée’ (Tripier 1990: 189).

Another action that provoked mobilization across the country was a non-union strike at the Girosteel factory in Bourget, where the majority of the 150 workers on strike were immigrants. The flyers reflected the predominance of immigrant-specific issues (‘An immigrant worker will never become a skilled worker, while for the same work a French worker will be in the P1/2 category’) as well as calling for unity of all workers (‘the bosses give more benefits to the French workers to undermine our unity’).¹⁵ Apart from the revision of the system of labour qualifications, demands included basic health and safety issues and the abolition of six-month contracts. These actions were responses not only to racism in the wider society, but also to racism in the workplace. In the context of an economic crisis, rising unemployment and reflecting the anti-immigration policies of the state, working-class racism increasingly became a problem. North Africans, especially, were victims of racism among workers; some of the radical leftist groups active in the factories, such as the Maoist ones and increasingly also the CFDT, denounced this.

Anti-racism continued to be closely linked to international issues, and Arab identity became a source of mobilization, as was reflected in the *Mouvement des travailleurs arabes* (MTA), active as of 1972. Its founding members were politicized crucially on the issues of Palestine and anti-imperialism, and many of them were former activists of the *Comités palestiniennes*. A core of the older generation of anti-imperialist activists allied themselves in the 1970s with younger immigrant students and workers.¹⁶ MTA’s membership was made up mostly of Arab workers and students, although also non-Arab immigrant workers, students and intellectuals adhered to the loosely organized movement. Its aims included fighting racism and inequality at work as well as building a ‘national Arab consciousness’. Whether a degree of tension existed between the emphasis on Arab identity of organizations such as MTA and the multiethnic character of other immigrant campaigns remains disputed in the literature. What seems clear, as argued also by Tripier (1990: 190–2), is that the emphasis on specific

ethnicities did not undermine the by now well-established pockets of multinational immigrant activism in the factories. In fact, the rise of Arab consciousness may have helped the emergence of a pan-immigrant political identity and subjectivity. This can be seen from the mobilization at Renault-Billancourt in January–February 1972 following the sacking of the activist Saddok Ben Mabrouk, who proclaimed, ‘Je suis licencié parce que je suis combatif et arabe’.¹⁷ Wildcat actions and additional sackings of militants ensued, following which Ben Mabrouk and others initiated a hunger strike. One month into their action, activists from MTA and other immigrant organizations called for a major demonstration at Charonne tube station, in solidarity with Mabrouk and to commemorate the 1962 repression. In what was the start of an escalation of violence, Renault worker and *Gauche prolétarienne* activist Pierre Overney was killed by a member of the security personnel at Renault. His funeral became a political event, attended by over 200,000 people. New organizations emerged in the wake of the Overney killing at Renault and elsewhere in the Paris area. Strikes were organized by ad hoc committees throughout 1972–73, in a distinctly anti-hierarchical sphere, once more evidencing the emergence of the political subjectivity of the immigrant workers beyond national lines, as well as solidarity with them among small groups of the radical left (Abdallah 2000: 23–6).

Immigrant workers often bypassed the established system of elected union representatives as they were often unable to vote or stand for such elections, but also because generally they preferred a situation where decisions were taken in a plenary assembly of all workers, unionized and not. The CFDT accepted this in some cases; the CGT never did (Zancarini-Fournel 2002: 6). The right of non-French workers to become trade union representatives was extended to immigrants from Algeria and some African countries in December 1968, and in 1972 to all foreigners. It was evident that the trade unions were willing to grant these rights only in response to continued and widespread grass-roots pressure, both from the de facto immigrant organizations and from the *gauchiste* groups.¹⁸ It was also clear that the approach taken by especially the CGT continued to be one that aimed to integrate immigrants and their concerns into overall trade union strategy, without however understanding that this would necessitate a major transformation of the trade union itself, either with regard to strategy, matters of internal democracy, or with regard to the active promotion of non-French workers to leadership positions.

Frustration over the unions’ dealings with immigrant problems was exacerbated in the debates surrounding the first general strike against

racism in September 1973. The strike was called for by a platform of immigrant organizations in response to the escalation of racially motivated violence against especially North African immigrants, and to the acute rise of racist discourse in the context of the economic crisis (Zancarini-Fournel 2008: 269). It was supported by leftist groups such as *Gauche prolétarienne* and renowned intellectuals such as Michel Foucault. A number of assaults and killings occurred, first in Marseille and then spreading to other parts of the country, and were in most cases carried out by members of far right organizations such as *Ordre nouveau*.¹⁹ The two events that sparked immediate mobilization were the killing of Djalili Ben Ali in October 1971 by a French citizen and the killing of Behar Tehala by the police in November of that year. The marches held in Marseille and elsewhere throughout 1972 amounted to the largest mobilization of immigrants since the police repression of 1961–62. The general strike of 1973 involved up to 30,000 workers in the Marseille area alone. The movement grew nationwide: in Paris gatherings were held in front of mosques, where thousands of North Africans and other immigrants were joined by students and French sympathizers. The CGT remained sceptical of the actions, declaring that it was not ‘a true strike’ because of its ‘non-conventional’ character and demands (Abdallah 2000: 30).

Around 1976, following the demise of most of the *gauchiste* organizations and a new wave of police repression, most of the militants of MTA and other radical immigrant organizations dispersed, choosing various forms of cultural activism such as local radio stations and theatre, instead of trying to influence ‘high politics’ via more traditional channels. This change of strategy was a wider phenomenon of the late 1970s, and general disillusionment, specifically with the parties of the left and the trade unions, can be seen as an important cause behind it. It would, however, be a mistake to understand this as a long-term move away from politics: as analysed by Boubeker (2003: 207–8), it were these *milieux* of grass-roots cultural-political activism which preserved the degree of consciousness and collective identity that had been achieved through the social struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and which lay at the basis of the, apparently sudden, emergence of the *Beur* movement in the late 1970s.²⁰

V. Concluding remarks

While research on ‘1968’ from the perspective of immigrant communities has barely made a start, I have attempted in this chapter to present

some provisional findings with regard to how '1968' can be situated in a longer-term narrative of Algerian immigrant politicization in France. The 1968 events were only one moment of increased political awareness; the Algerian War of Independence was at least as important. '1968' was an ambivalent moment in the development of a form of immigrant collective subjectivity. While, on the one hand, the factory strikes of 1968–73 helped create both a pan-immigrant and a more specific North African/Arab political identity, on the other hand, immigrant activists and workers had to deal with various forms of prejudice and incomprehension, the sometimes naive universalism and *tiersmondisme* of the students, and above all the unwillingness of the traditional left to come to terms with cultural difference within the working class. This led the more radical sections of the Algerian and North African immigrant communities, in the wake of 1968, to focus on immigrant-specific actions and goals. This mobilization took on highly original and innovative shapes, particularly in the systematic linking of workplace activism on labour issues with broader, non-work-related questions such as racism, housing and legal status.

'1968,' thus, meant France's definite shift to postcoloniality. While de-colonization had started earlier, it was only in 1968 and its aftermath that French society became aware of the *permanent* presence of postcolonial immigrants. '1968' was the opening of the Pandora's box that contained the complex, explosive cluster of problems related to multicultural society. With their problematic and contradictory attitudes, the new left and the student movements in 1968 prefigured the failure of French society and the state in the decades to come, to engage with postcolonial immigrants as at once full and equal members of society and communities with distinct cultures and identities.

Notes

1. Partly, this is to do with the fact that in France and elsewhere the workers' strikes have received relatively little attention when compared to the student uprising. This should be understood in the context of hegemonic interpretations of '1968' which favours a cultural over a political analysis of the events (Zancarini-Fournel 2008: 84–91).
2. On 20 June 1968, *Le Monde* reported that 161 foreign workers and students had been expelled since the start of May (Abdallah 2000: 14).
3. Abdallah (2000) and Pitti (1994, 2006) are useful exceptions. There is also a strand of sociological literature focusing on the rise of immigrant, anti-racist activism (e.g., Boubeker 2003), which, however, remains partly disconnected from the historiographic debates on 1968.

4. In fact, the situation was far more complex. Divergent loyalties existed within the Algerian community, a majority actively or passively supporting the *Fédération de France* of the FLN, and a minority supporting the *Mouvement national Algérien* (MNA), which was to some degree manipulated by the French state in order to divide Algerians. MNA and FLN fought each other both in Algeria and France.
5. The Prefect of the Paris Police at the time was Maurice Papon, much hated among Algerians for his involvement in the repression in Algeria during the war of independence.
6. Interview with Bouziri in Trappo (1990). Bouziri was one of the leading figures of the hunger strikes of the early 1970s (on which more is discussed in the chapter) and later on was a founding member of the Paris-based immigration studies research institute *Génériques*. On the importance of the Palestinian question, see also Mamarbachi (2008).
7. In a similar vein, Prevost and Kadri (2008: 426) have argued that the emergence of a broad and radical immigrant movement in the 1980s testified to the failure of the system of nationally based welfare.
8. Further, there was the Gisti (*Groupe d'information*), which focused on gathering and promoting information on the immigrants' conditions; in 1962 the first ASTI (*Association de solidarité avec les travailleurs immigrés*) was set up, which was to become part of an important network in the 1970s (Abdallah 2000: 16).
9. 'Comité d'action bidonvilles', various tracts, May 1968, reproduced in Granotier (1979: 134).
10. This against a general figure of up to 25 per cent of industrial workers unionized in the same period (Granotier 1979: 250).
11. 'Voeux immigrés Renault' (tract), quoted in Vigna (2007: 46).
12. On the other hand, there were factories where specific groups worked on a national basis and found themselves more isolated from both French workers and other immigrants. This was the case, for example, for the Portuguese workers at the Perrier factory in Paris (Zancarini-Fournel 2002: 12).
13. This agreement was signed by the representatives from the government, the employers' organizations and the major trade unions on 27 May 1968 and was meant to end the strike movement. It stipulated an overall wage increase and the legal anchoring of the major unions in the factories. Despite pressure from CGT leaders, workers at Renault-Billancourt rejected the agreement.
14. Algeria had already in 1973 suspended all migration to France, in the context of escalating violence against Algerians in France. In addition, restrictions were introduced in these years on the issuing of residence permits to families (Benoit 1980: 100).
15. 'Texte collectif des travailleurs en grève de Girosteel Le Bourget', 14 February 1971, [translation by the author], quoted in Vigna (2007: 123).
16. Said Bouziri, for example, has testified to the importance of the Palestinian question to the general mobilization of North African workers and students during the early 1970s (Trappo 1990). See also Hajjat (2006a: 76–85, 2006b: 74–92).
17. 'I have been fired because I am an activist and an Arab'.
18. This new trade union approach was linked to an implicit agreement between them and the state, as in the context of the Marcellin-Fontanet circular

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trade unions obtained a say in the regulation of immigrant entry into France (Abdallah 2002: 27–8).

19. Between June 1973, the start of *Ordre nouveau's* public calls to 'Stop uncontrolled immigration', and September 1973, 11 North Africans had been killed in Marseille. For an extensive list of assaults against North Africans in the 1970s, see (Giudice 1992).
20. This movement of second-generation North African youngsters was involved in mass mobilization against racism in France in the 1980s.