FRANCE: A JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

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Time and again, the wind of May 1968 wafts through my texts and my imagination, and it is always present in the events of our time—albeit in a different form. One word evokes May 1968 in me: freedom. Freedom is a word that May ’68 gave me as a sign along the path I chose for myself.

Days that are still present for me: the defeat suffered by Arabs in the Six-Day War against Israel in June 1967, the defeat known as Naksa in Arab political and cultural discourse, was my first political and personal shock. I was about to launch into adolescence. The media also informed me daily about the Vietnam War and the vast damage done by American forces to a nation that wanted to be free. Occasional news items depicted the Vietnamese people’s resistance to American colonization.

As a young man in my home country of Morocco, I recalled images of the French colonization throughout the nation, and especially in Fez. Then there was the Algerian liberation struggle. And Latin America was close to me, too, with its poets and Che Guevara. However, Arabs’ Naksa in the 1967 war was something different. It profoundly shook my entire being and completely changed my feelings about the world as the victims of the isolated Palestinians multiplied like their pain and suffering. Then the revolution of May ’68 suddenly occurred, coming from a place I never would have expected.

A cry of revolt from Paris

1968 was the year I graduated with my high school “baccalaureate.” It was also the year I dreamed of leaving Morocco to continue my studies. At the beginning of May, something took place that could not remain hidden from view. I’m talking about the day I first heard of the University of Nanterre. The Sorbonne had been the reigning authority, the French university that had enchanted me, but now Nanterre ruled the streets of Paris, and the name of student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit embodied a cry of revolt. Consequently, the month of May, when I should have devoted all my time to studying, was transformed into a feverish period whose developments reached me by way of French radio. I could tune in without difficulty and
hear of the strikes, demonstrations, occupation of universities, mass meetings. And the heroes were young people—or, more accurately, university students.

Moroccan friends who had already started their studies in Paris also sent me their news and impressions of the student uprising. Directed against the dominant French values at the universities and in family and personal life, the uprising led me to dream of traveling to Paris as soon as my exam results had been announced. My grandmother promised to save a little money for me, and my friends in Paris encouraged the plan.

**Freedom surrounded by tanks**

Early one morning at the beginning of July, I descended from the train that had brought me, via Madrid, to the Gare d’Austerlitz in Paris. I made my way towards 5 rue des Écoles in the Latin Quarter, which housed the “Moroccan House,” just a few steps from the Collège de France and the main entrance to the Sorbonne. This took me past remnants of the May events—proclamations and posters still on the walls. In the Moroccan House, I was welcomed by my friend Ahmad al-Alawi, who was writing his doctoral thesis. We didn’t stay in his room for long since I longed to see the Latin Quarter. In front of the Collège de France, I experienced an everyday life that was unfamiliar to me.

Right in the heart of this area were tanks and soldiers, but to the right stood François Maspero’s bookshop and beyond that the Seine. I felt joy and fury—joy because I was at long last in Paris, and fury over the military presence in the Latin Quarter. The remains of barricades stood in front of me. I wasn’t aware that this was the end of the revolution. Instead, it seemed to me that I’d come to live for a month in two different epochs simultaneously: the time of the May revolution and the time of the “Enlightenment” in Paris, in the France of liberty and the French Revolution, now surrounded by tanks; it perfectly mirrored the style of French colonialism when Moroccans had demanded independence. But where is freedom to be found? And what does it signify?

**Lessons from the French May**

During this brief morning tour, I looked and I listened, making the acquaintance of the epochs Paris had endured: the monarchy, the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, and liberation from German forces. I only needed to take a few steps around the Latin Quarter to
encounter young people from many different nations who had come to Paris to greet the sons and daughters of the May revolution and to learn from them. They dreamed of changing their lives—in the university and beyond. It seemed to be the day of resurrection.

I had a midday meal with my Moroccan friends at a restaurant in the university quarter of Sentier. The district bore the scent of revolutionary days. Posters. Slogans about freedom. Words and phrases nourishing my wish to write about the revolution with similar enthusiasm. In the restaurant, students' clothes testified to the rebellion against Parisian elegance despite the absence of any signs of chaos. My friends and I briefly discussed these traces of the May events and students' thirst for action, but these friends lacked clarity about what had happened or what was in front of them. They were still in shock. They could not understand why the French military and police had not shot at the demonstrators, as the Moroccan government would have done if people (or students) had openly rejected the state of things.

On the streets, I saw the Parisian world and listened to the revolutionary thoughts that dominated the city. Sometimes I looked around and saw the remains of slogans about dreams, poetry, reality, desire, and hope. On these streets—and especially in the Latin Quarter—while I was looking at how the students had shaken the image of Gaullist France in May, I imagined that the surrealists had achieved their aims in that moment. Some of the slogans remain in my memory: “The dream is reality.” “Ban prohibitions.” “Anything is possible.” “Poetry is in the streets.” More than once, I stood before slogans calling for sexual freedom, which attracted me just...
as much as attacks on the state and family, or the anthem of praise for workers. There was also criticism of God.

**Freedom of the body**

I strolled under the sycamore trees along the Seine. I allowed my eyes to look and look. Beneath the bridges, I saw men and women embracing, which I found provocative. Embraces and long kisses and half-naked bodies stretched out on the grass. Soft skin almost touching. In these moments, I discovered physical freedom for the first time. Everywhere the body chose liberation from the constraints of decorum. The ecstasy of touch and the passion of love-making. Laughter or song. The body reveals pleasure without regard for what is forbidden. I watched from a distance and had no intention of disturbing these lovers—these disciples of psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich, who had promoted adolescent sexuality—writing new hymns of praise to love as if it were the very thing that the authorities did not dare understand, whose future they did not even want to imagine.

I usually went past the Place de la Bastille to a simple bar to drink to the health of the French Revolution. The days of that July I spent wandering the streets, nourished by proclamations of freedom and guided by the sight of other youth, were poems written deep within me. A month that quickly passed, and I could no longer imagine being separated from Paris. My memory and my imagination preserved it all. For me, Paris, with the different periods of its history, embodies the extended space of freedom I gained there.

**Worlds of rebellion, desire, and craziness**

I still remember the evening I left Paris. Around 10 p.m., I boarded a train that would take me toward Morocco via Madrid. I was fascinated by what I had seen, read, and heard. My innermost being was filled with worlds or rebellion, desire, and craziness. I left the Gare d'Austerlitz for the South. My South. Tangier, then Fez. I don’t remember saying anything during this journey. I felt like a stranger to myself. Images of the city and of May mingled with images of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, and with the names of poets and writers and artists and philosophers—or they mingled with the names of Arab and Moroccan writers and artists who were absolutely determined to learn the alphabet of modernity in Paris.
When I disembarked from the boat, moored in Tangier, I felt I was no longer the same person who had set off a month before. I had left something of myself in Paris and the May uprising. And something of Paris had become part of my feelings and thoughts. Those scenes simultaneously vanished and surrounded me on the way from Tangier to Fez. I yearned to return to Paris where the freedom of the body, of culture, of writing had broken through university walls and out onto the streets.

**Liberated from any dogmatism**

The revolution of May ’68 was the rebirth of a critical attitude toward life and death. It was this critical attitude that I made my own when I adopted a leftist view of politics. My critical stand and freedom of expression carved out a gulf between me and any rigid adherence to norms or submission to trends that claimed to have a monopoly on the truth. Marxism led me to sympathize with the parties of the Palestinian and Moroccan Left, but it was the practical application to reality and new critical, philosophical texts that liberated me from any dogmatism.

Today, more than forty years after May ’68, when I observe cultural or political life, I see that the feeling that predominates about what happened is regret. Many intellectuals (and politicians) in Morocco and the Arab world, just like many former May ’68 activists in France (and other countries), regret what they once were. I, on the other hand, learned from May ’68 that freedom is constantly in motion.

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