The Arab Workers' Movement (1970-1976). Sociology of a New Political Generation

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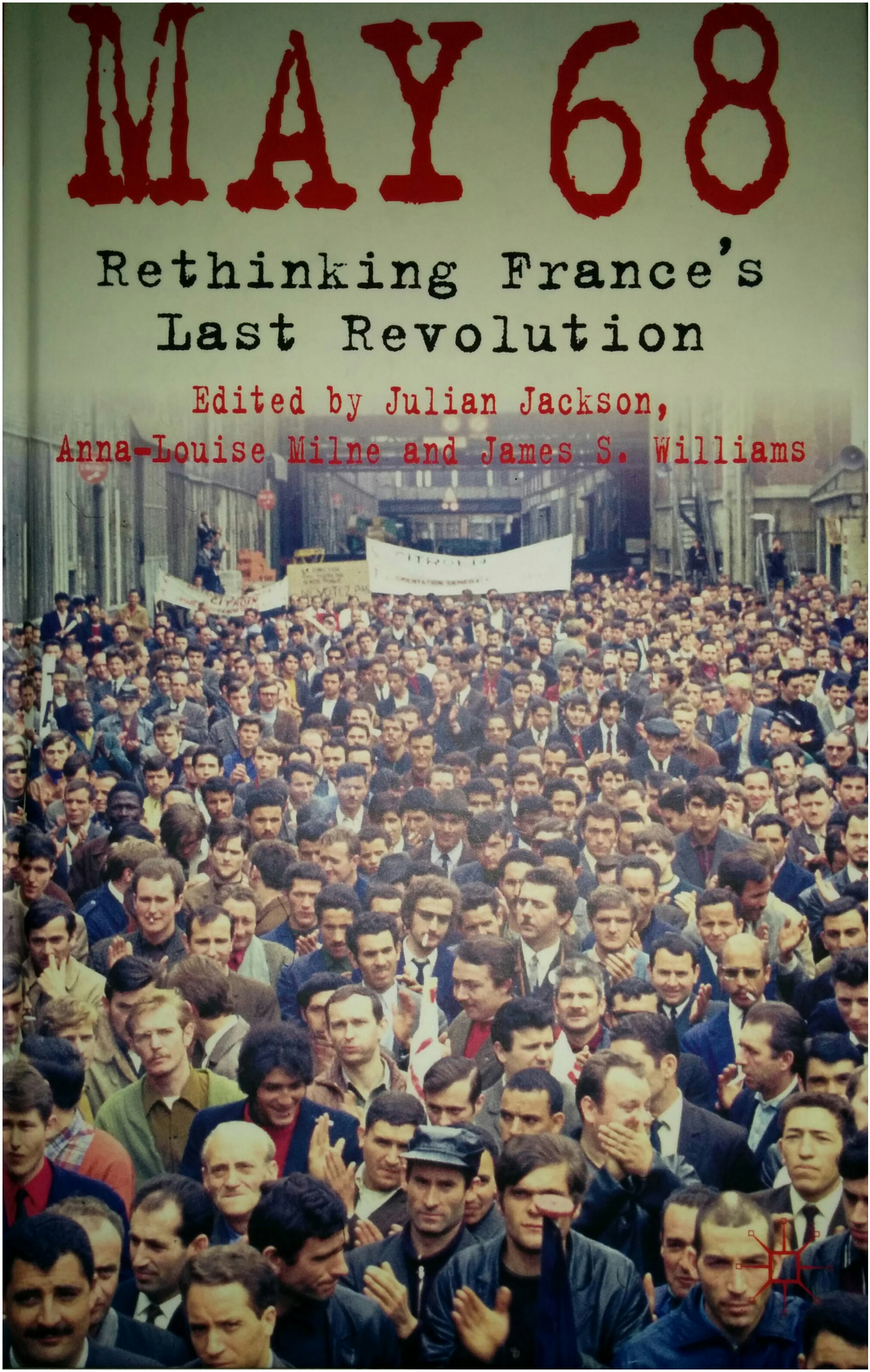

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The Arab Workers' Movement (1970–1976): Sociology of a New Political Generation

Abdellali Hajjat

Following periods like the 1880s and 1930s, when immigration had been an important political issue, the 'May 68 years' saw the 'immigrant question' emerge again in new ways in public debate. Immigration turned political as a result of state initiatives (the development of an administration to monitor immigration and manage social security matters), of the associated 'pro-immigrant' movement which supported immigrant mobilization, and of the actions of immigrants themselves who became political players in their own right. It was politicized in at least two ways: both as a 'problem' that had to be resolved by putting a suitable migration policy into operation, and as a struggle for equal rights between foreigners and nationals.

This chapter will seek not to examine the social construction of the 'immigration problem', but aim instead to explore the notion of *agency*, or rather the capacity of immigrants to operate as political players in the public sphere. It will not analyse the political behaviour of immigrants during the days of May–June 1968, but instead attempt to comprehend how the 'spirit of May' led to a questioning of existing power relations between French nationals and foreigners. The objective is to combine the history of May 68 with the political history of immigrants and so call into question the 'myth of submission'.

The Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes (Arab Workers' Movement) (MTA) is a perfect exemplar of the explosion of political activity that took place during the '1968 years'. It was founded in June 1972 by Arab and French activists close to Maoists of the Gauche Prolétarienne

(GP), and sharing with them a common political experience that developed out of the Palestine committees. These committees were established in September 1970 and, although unorthodox and marginal, they spearheaded support in France for the Palestinian cause, developing an anti-Zionist and radical politics. From the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, a number of key issues emerged out of the political struggles of immigrants: Palestine, racial crime, workers' hostels, squalid living conditions, resident and work permits and other specific issue relating to foreign workers.

The MTA activists had been brought into politics by the Palestinian cause. Their worldview was shaped by Arab nationalism. The Palestine committees were comprised of Arab and French activists who had formed close ties with the Maoists of the GP. The former were students who had recently arrived in Paris, not necessarily having had any previous involvement in political activity in their native country, or workers committed to the Palestinian cause and/or the French far left. They came from Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon and Syria, and firmly believed that the Arab revolution was well underway: in their view this transcended any national allegiances. This display of loyalty to the Palestinian people came to embody the 'Arab Revolution' and fundamentally shaped their political consciousness. Thus the MTA maintained close relations with Palestinian organizations in the Middle East (Lebanon, Palestine) and in France, particularly with the first official representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO): Mahmoud Hamchari and Azzedine Kalak.[1]

None of this necessarily drew immigrants into political activity in France itself. Indeed, they demonstrated an almost exclusive preoccupation with issues concerning their native country; opposition to the Hassan II or Bourguiba regimes often took priority over the struggle to improve the daily lives of North African immigrants in France. Yet activists involved in the Palestine committees were among the first political émigrés – that is to say, those with both an awareness of politics and involved in political activity – to view French territory as a fighting ground for the 'immigrant cause', and not simply for the international cause, as had been the case with the *Fédération de France du Front de Libération Nationale* (French Federation for the National Liberation Front) (FLN) which mobilized the Algerian community in France in the service of Algerian independence.

Figure 5 This photograph is of a demonstration in Paris on 13 May 1968. The banner calls for better 'rights' for students and immigrant workers. Note the range in ages of the demonstrators, particularly the two women marching with a young girl, probably a daughter of one of the two. (Mémoires d'Humanité)

Profiles of political émigrés

It is impossible to understand the MTA's dedication to the Palestinian cause without first examining how its initial activists lived the experience of exile. Their experience could be political or one of anomie depending on whether they had had to leave their country for political reasons (such as the repressive policies of the Tunisian regime) or social ones because they had in some way broken with the social mores of their backgrounds. The profile of MTA activists is analogous to that of the Étoile Nord-Africaine pioneers, analysed by Abdelmalek Sayad through the concept of *jayah*, which in Arabic means one who is lost, astray, no longer on the right path.[2]

While this concept is used pejoratively within Arab families, it is construed differently by Sayad. His aim is to understand the political

outlook and trajectory of activists who were cut off from the rest of the population. He explains their political engagement by their being at odds with – indeed having broken with – the established social order. From this resulted an extreme sensitivity towards power relationships and a corresponding desire to free themselves from the constraints of the existing social order. The various trajectories of MTA activists exemplify a breach with the traditional social values of North African societies at the time. This is why, for example, some workers chose to emigrate while still unmarried, so as to avoid being stigmatized with the label of bachelor. Bachelorhood was condemned because it contradicted the moral codes adhered to by native families and villages. Those who did not marry suffered particularly acutely from these social pressures.

Activists were also at odds with the emerging political situations which had emerged in their country of origin. MTA members were the children of newly independent territories. Some had played an active part, others a more modest one, in the war for freedom, particularly in support of the Algerian cause. However, by the end of the 1960s they had broken with the nationalist ranks for different reasons, depending on the political and national context. For example, Tunisian founders of the MTA were 'Marxist-leaning nationalists', closely associated with the far-left movement *Perspectives tunisiennes*, influential on young Tunisians. However, when the Arab-Israeli war broke out in June 1967 they grew apart. *Perspectives tunisiennes* chose to concentrate less on the Palestinian struggle than on national affairs and the opposition to the Tunisian regime. For certain members of the future MTA, this was unacceptable. Their vision was shaped by a nationalist, pan-Arab and Marxist consciousness, and this forced them into exile for political and personal reasons.

It was therefore not by chance that the MTA's first battleground in France was in aid of the Palestinian cause, especially after the 'Black September' conflict (the massacre of Palestinians perpetrated by the army of King Hussein of Jordan) which marked the foundation of the Palestine committees. Some activists had learned their politics in their native countries (in France these were expressed within the French Federation of the FLN), while others learned as they went along, mainly under the guidance of the GP. In this context it is important to ask why Arab activists had such close ties with the GP. There were two key factors: the first was the sociological proximity between Arab and GP

activists; the second the GP's radical anti-Zionist stance. The first factor accounts for the GP's ability to work together with students from the Palestine committees, and the second explains the rallying of politicized workers to these non-French activists. Unlike the Trotskyists, who called for 'critical support', the GP fully aligned itself with the positions of the PLO, without any caveats. Moreover, the kind of activism that the GP had already displayed (distributing tracts in the street and in markets) helped to win it the respect of these Arab activists in the Palestine committees. These committees gradually adapted themselves to the Maoist idea that it was necessary to 'follow the movement of the masses'. In so doing they strove to give both a voice and a form of political organization to the new figure of the immigrant worker. An important opportunity to do this arose in the so-called Djellali Ben Ali affair.

The Djellali Ben Ali affair

On Wednesday 27 October 1971, 15-year-old Djellali Ben Ali, a teenager of Algerian nationality, was killed in Paris by a bullet to the head. The shooting took place at 53 Rue de la Goutte d'Or (eighteenth arrondissement). The perpetrator was Daniel Pigot, a 29-year-old delivery driver. This incident revealed the racial tensions that existed within this neighbourhood, tensions stoked by far-right militants such as the Ordre Nouveau and the Comités de Défense de la République (Defence Committees of the Republic) (CDR). The murder mobilized local activists from the Palestine committees ('Selin' Najeh, Saïd and Faouzia Bouziri, Mohammed 'Mokhtar' Bachiri, Majid Daboussi, etc.), the *Secours rouge* of the eighteenth,[3] local inhabitants and committed intellectuals (in particular Michel Foucault, Claude Mauriac, Gilles Deleuze, Michèle Manceaux, Jean-Claude Passeron and Jean-Paul Sartre) who established the 'Djellali Committee'. The affair attracted huge media attention thanks to this support from intellectuals and the local clergy (especially the Catholic priest Gallimardet and the Protestant minister Hedrich who allowed the committee to use the premises which became its base of operations), and thanks also to an effective publicity campaign run by the Palestine committees.[4] The mobilization reached its peak on 7 November with a protest involving around a thousand people on the streets of the Barbès quarter.

Political mobilizations of this kind created link, but also tensions, between the immigrant population and Arab activists, French

leftists and French social Catholic activists. Although the 'May 68 years' provided an opportunity for unprecedented political alliances and encounters (some of these quite unthinkable under 'normal' circumstances), they also revealed limits to these kinds of political convergence. It was in this conflictual context that the MTA began to develop its notion of the need for autonomous political action.

Defining political autonomy

The protagonists of this new 'immigrant cause' sought both to stake out their autonomy and to establish alliances with each other. For the Maoists, Arab activists (workers and students) who commanded a high share of social capital within the Arab community were 'border crossers' who could reach out to North African communities that had remained resistant to their political views. Arab activists could therefore offer both their sound knowledge of Arabic and their understanding of the immigrant world. On the other hand, the French activists could also bring them much that they needed: funding for militant activity, experience of political activism, access to the media, mobilization of the law and so on. A relatively solid alliance was formed out of a convergence of interests until a series of events caused it to disintegrate.

At the same time, the MTA sought to rectify the existing exclusion of immigrants from trade union structures. The fact that their claims were barely considered, even openly rejected, by the union apparatus helps to explain their ties to Maoist *établis*. The denial of immigrant workers' rights stemmed primarily from their status as foreigners. Their exclusion from the political spectrum and trade unions was sealed by legislation which discriminated between French citizens and foreigners. Yet this exclusion was also due to union practices which were blind towards the realities faced by immigrant workers. They recognized the workers' struggles only within the factory setting: for them class struggle did not exist outside the factory gates. Since Arab workers were also concerned with housing problems and racism, they extended the sphere of class struggle. They experienced oppression simultaneously in the workplace, cafés, hostels and on the street, while trade unions failed to grasp this new phenomenon.

As a result, the very existence of an Arab workers' organization radically subverted both national politics – since it broke with the idea that foreigners were expected to show 'courtesy' to the French – and

trade union politics which had remained oblivious to the particular claims of immigrants. The mythical idea of a 'return to the homeland' associated with Arab workers had allowed the unions to prioritize the defence of the rights and freedoms of national workers under attack from employers.[5] The Arab workers' organization in France can therefore be viewed as one of the earliest signs of the desire of Arab immigrants to remain permanently in France; it was one of the first cracks in the myth of the 'return'.

Moreover, the existence of the MTA clearly highlighted the weaknesses in immigration control by the consular officials of the countries of origin. This meant that the power of the fraternal cultural associations, or Amicales, was directly contested, upsetting relations between the immigrant communities in France and the states they originated from.[6] The MTA radically challenged the strictly state-controlled methods of the immigration process. Arab workers were no longer 'objects of exchange' between states, but now spoke out to claim their independence in the face of the institutions that attempted to control them: the French state, French unions, Arab states and Arab political parties.

The question of autonomy had already been a central concern for the Palestine committees. However, at the MTA's founding assembly in June 1972, Arab activists argued that they were not sufficiently independent and were being manipulated by French intellectuals. The records of the Palestine committees, as well as those of the MTA, reveal that the term 'autonomy' was rarely defined with precision. There was a kind of implicit agreement as to its meaning which nevertheless remained vague for those on the outside. It became important, therefore, to clarify the concept.

During the MTA's founding congress, Arab workers who were engaged in political struggles testified that the success of factory strikes was hampered by their lack of autonomy. They singled out issues of decision-making, political control and the power enjoyed by Arab workers. Their demand was therefore for *political and organizational autonomy*, and in effect this meant asserting the principle of self-determination. Decisions had to be taken by those primarily concerned, the Arab workers of the MTA being all too familiar with the monopoly of power exerted by the trade union bosses. The problem was particularly acute in factories with an overwhelming majority of highly trained North African workers, which was true for

almost all those gathered at the congress. For MTA activists, political autonomy did not signify political separatism. They did not aspire to bring an end to the shop-floor action committees which included both French and foreign workers, but rather to create a political space for Arab workers to voice their demands regarding work permits, resident visas, conditions of contract and so forth. In other words, being self-organized would allow them to increase their political influence and advance their interests in areas neglected by the French unions. Their claim for political and organizational autonomy was thus simply a consequence of their exclusion from politics and the trade unions – an exclusion made possible by French law and union working practices. Had the unions been more responsive to their needs the Arab workers would undoubtedly have integrated themselves into trade union structures, something which did, in fact, occasionally happen.

This situation bore a marked resemblance to the Arab nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s and harked back to the relationship between communism and nationalism. The political leaders of the 1920s usually concluded that the two ideologies were incompatible, without considering how they might complement each other. At a deeper level, nationalism and communism both represented an interpretative grid and form of resistance to two types of power: colonization and capitalism. Yet, as Abdelmalek Sayad observes: 'it is difficult to distinguish, in this situation where the former colonized have now become immigrants, between the political fact of colonization (and the nationalism which is both a product of it and response to it) and the social experience of the working-class whose most recent members are made up of immigrants'.[7] What was really at stake for the unions and left-wing political parties from the 1920s and 1930s right through to the 1970s was the capacity of the workers' movement to incorporate an awareness of the colonial dimension – the issue of cultural imperialism – within its politics. Yet neither the French Communist Party (PCF), faced with the Étoile Nord-Africaine,[8] nor the post-May 68 French left (bar a few activists on the extreme left), faced with the MTA, were able fully to take on board that new historical actor: the immigrant worker.

The second aspect of autonomy was *cultural*. Opposing the ideology of integration and assimilation, Arab workers called for cultural autonomy. While some of their early demands in 1970 and 1971 may

seem trivial, such as the organization of the Muslim Festival of Sacrifice (Aïd El Kebir) or the learning of Arabic, these radically undermined the republican notion of immigration according to which immigrants would integrate willingly within the national community. From the point of view of the French state, if a foreigner intended to settle on French soil, he was required to assimilate into the culture of the dominant community according to the principle that cultural homogeneity is essential to social cohesion. To pursue cultural claims was therefore directly to challenge the so-called French model of integration and defy the injunction to assimilate. For MTA activists, the sense of belonging to an Arab nation was perceived as a means of cultural unification and went hand in hand with political unity. To achieve this, it was necessary to combat the risks of 'cultural extinction' by teaching Arabic and the history of the Arab world. At stake in this combat was the ability of immigrants to define themselves in terms of culture, a task compromised by the doctrine of assimilation. The drive for cultural autonomy represented a refusal of official state categories whereby an 'immigrant' was always synonymous with 'worker'. By using the adjective 'Arab', the MTA challenged the conception of immigration as the clinical management of migratory flows based on nationality. However, it is important to note that cultural autonomy was not formulated as a demand for separatism from the rest of the community, as was the case of the Nation of Islam which developed in the United States during the same period.

The third major issue regarding the autonomy of Arab workers in France was the problem of double – that is to say, political and social – isolation. As had been true of the Étoile Nord-Africaine, the activists of the Palestine committees attempted to skirt this problem by taking advantage of links to the GP and building on the solidarity existing within the North African immigrant community in France. Yet the experience of the Palestine committees revealed that such solidarities were not as automatic as first thought, and heavily compromised by the pressure exerted by the Amicales. MTA activists were faced with the challenge of overcoming their isolation from the North African immigrant community and of creating a feeling of belonging to the Arab nation. This required the creation of an organization institutionalizing cultural ties with the 'Arab masses'.

At the same time, the MTA suffered from political isolation from French organizations. This was exacerbated by the fact that the GP

was disintegrating and less and less useful. Yet isolation was not total owing to the support of French members of the GP with whom Arab activists had maintained a positive relationship, and also to progressive Christian networks which were to play a fundamental role in supporting illegal immigrants who lacked any official papers. In the end the breakup of the GP, precipitated by divisions about how it should respond to the deaths of the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in September 1972, played an important part in the MTA's move towards autonomy. With the GP losing much of its attraction, the way was open to the MTA to go further down this road.[9]

Repression

It was a 'general strike' against racism in September 1973 that crystallized the demand for autonomy. For almost the first time in the history of the workers' movement in France, Arab workers called for a strike to denounce the racist crimes perpetrated against them outside the factory gates. The aim was to highlight racism and demonstrate how dependent the French economy was on its immigrant workforce.[10] Launched in the Marseilles area, this strike movement swept through the entire country with varying degrees of success depending on the specific factories and cities involved. It starkly laid bare the effectiveness of the government's apparatus of repression which existed to prevent any expression of autonomy by the Arab workers, particularly in the Paris region. While during the same period the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the American Indian Movement (AIM) were savagely repressed by the FBI, and their leaders assassinated or imprisoned, dissident movements in France were kept under close scrutiny and infiltrated. The policy of the French authorities was to *contain* protest by expelling or imprisoning MTA leaders and neutralizing their power to mobilize. Ultimately the aim was to force them to re-integrate within the embrace of the state.

The strike against racism in Paris in September 1973 enjoyed only limited success in quantitative terms – the total level of participation was poor even if the impact in some factories and districts was quite considerable – but symbolically it was a triumph. It also provided a good example of the containment strategy employed by the authorities. The *Renseignements Généraux* (General Intelligence Service) (RG) and the Prefecture in Paris were well informed of the slightest political

activity in the region and kept abreast of what went on in meetings preceding the strike. In addition, the *Services d'assistance technique* (SAT), originally created in the battle against the 'nationalist subversion' of Algerian independence fighters, was now drafted into action. Led by former soldiers of the army in Africa, the SAT illustrated the complicity between state bureaucracy and political control. To obtain the papers necessary to circulate freely, the 'Muslim French of Algeria' had to contend with this organization which also gathered information on potential subversive elements. The SAT had not disbanded after 1962 and its agents continued their work of containing the flow of post-colonial immigration, particularly from Africa and North Africa. Their knowledge of immigrant communities served the government well against the MTA.

The SAT mobilized its officers to curb the general strike. The head of the SAT in Paris and his agents met the president of the *Amicale des Algériens en Europe*, as well as Arab community leaders from the districts of Belleville and Barbès, heads of associations and community centres, managers of immigrant workers' hostels and so on, pressurizing them into persuading the Arab population not to participate in the strike. Following a rally in front of the Paris Mosque on 14 September, its rector, Si Hamza Boubeker, sent a letter to the Prefecture dissociating himself from the MTA's action and swearing allegiance to the Republic. In this way the Mosque sought to situate itself as a 'pacifier' within the Muslim communities.

Dissolution

The MTA had to contend, therefore, with numerous obstacles that greatly complicated its task and led to its effective dissolution in 1976. A broad coalition between the *Amicales* (Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian), trade unions (excluding some sections of the CFDT), religious Muslim institutions and the Ministry of the Interior conspired to reduce the MTA's sphere of influence over Arab immigrants. They aimed to imprison and expel the most active militants: Hamza and Saïd Bouziri, Vascan Dadayan, Maurice Courbage, and so forth. The MTA was further weakened by the arrival of Michel Poniatowski as Interior Minister in 1974 when, following a strike by illegal immigrants in the South, the leadership of the MTA in that region was decimated.

The other key factor in the disbanding of the MTA was the breakaway of the Assifa drama troupe which had been formed in 1973 by a number of MTA activists who wanted to create a new 'propaganda tool' to convey the movement's political message. But Assifa quickly opened up the thorny question of the relationship between art and politics. The MTA was torn between those who wanted to harness this artistic organization to political ends and those who defended the troupe's autonomy. This conflict progressively undermined the MTA as Assifa gradually became a professional company virtually independent of it, ultimately provoking an internal crisis in the MTA's Paris base.

By the end of the 1970s, increased political repression, the decline of the extreme Left and waning enthusiasm for the Arab revolution created an extremely precarious political situation for the activists. The closing off of political opportunities forced MTA members to redeploy themselves in other areas such as the promotion of immigrant culture. Some founded the review *Sans frontierès* in 1979, others *Radio Beur* in Paris and *Radio Gazelle* in Marseilles. Some devoted themselves to 'universalist' associations defending human rights (the League of Human Rights), or entered social work, or in some instances abandoned politics altogether. During Giscard d'Estaing's presidency (1974–1981), others allowed themselves to be integrated into state organisms. This period saw the creation of new structures for dealing with immigration, like the Agency for the Development of Intercultural Relations, for example, or the revitalization of those already in existence, like the Social Action Fund. The state's capacity to integrate dissent thus undermined any transmission of the MTA's legacy to that next generation of activists who in the 1980s were to organize marches for equality. These new Activists knew little of their political forebears.

Notes

1 Hamchari was the son of farmers, and arrived in Paris in 1969. He was assassinated on 9 January 1973. This followed an attack likely to have been carried out by Israeli Secret Services on 8 December 1972. Kalak was also killed during an attack in Paris on 3 August 1978.

2 See A. Sayad (1999), *La Double absence* (Paris: Seuil 'Liber'), pp. 133–59.

3 *Secours Rouge* (literally 'Red Aid') was established in 1922 by the *Communist International* as a kind of international politial Red Cross, providing

material and moral aid to radical 'class war' political prisoners around the world. The French national branch reconstituted itself in 1999 as *Secours Rouge France*.

4 See, for example, the debate between Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Genet and Michel Drach in *Le Monde*, 17 November 1971.

5 The myth of 'the return to the homeland' was a widely shared illusion fostered by immigrants as well as by emigration and immigration societies, according to which the presence of the former on French soil was only temporary.

6 These cultural associations were sponsored by the governments of the newly independent countries of origin with the aim of controlling immigrant workers' loyalty to the nationalist project.

7 Sayad (1999): p. 144.

8 The Étoile Nord-Africaine was an early Algerian nationalist organization founded in 1920.

9 GP party executives condemned the hostage-taking while the majority of the MTA supported the Palestinians.

10 The 'strikes' led by Latinos in the USA in April 2006 sprang from the same logic: by deserting their work-place, shops and businesses, protesters highlighted the extent to which the country relied on its immigrant population, thus further legitimizing the move to legalize several million illegal immigrants.