

NOTES ON THE FRENCH LEFT SINCE 1968

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"The same, they say, applies to revolution: first let's become a 'majority'. The true dialectic of revolutions, however, stands this wisdom of parliamentary moles on its head: not through a majority to revolutionary tactics, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority—that is the way the road runs"

Rosa Luxemburg

THE storm over and the rubble cleared, the landscape often shows little trace of the upheaval. But for the police forces permanently parading in the Latin Quarter, a visitor to Paris might be unaware of the upheaval that shook France in 1968. Superficially, the social and political landscape looks unchanged. And this is not surprising. The crisis of 1968 brought nothing tangible. Its lasting impact was on the minds. It reminded Frenchmen, and outsiders, of the political power of the working class. It revealed the depth of popular discontent and the fragility of the modern capitalist state. It revived the issue of revolution. But that was all. On the practical plane, unlike its French predecessor—the general strike of 1936—it brought nothing that could even be described as qualitative change, no equivalent of collective bargaining, two weeks' holiday with pay or the 40-hour week, with which the strikers of 1936 were bribed back to work. To bring the strike to an end in June 1968, the CGT leaders and militants had to dress up in triumphant colours what was no more than a rise in pay packets.

It was an admittedly big rise all round. But it should have been obvious, to anyone who did not have a stake in deception, that the wage increase would in no way alter the basic condition of the workers. The bigger wages were partly a compensation for past delays and partly had to be paid for by higher productivity. That the "workers' victory"—as *l'Humanité* used to call it—was a pyrrhic one, that from their extraordinary position of strength the French workers gained nothing exceptional can now be proved with figures. Taking 1964 as a base, French wages are not even top of the west European league.¹

French capitalism could absorb the temporary concession the more easily, since the social crisis was followed by an impressive spurt in production, actually stimulated by higher wages. In 1968 gross

national product rose by 4.5 per cent, in spite of the losses due to **the** general strike. The following year, industrial production jumped by over 12 per cent. In 1970 industrial output advanced more slowly (+ 6 per cent) on this high plateau. For a time, the government had toyed with the idea of using the crisis to precipitate the pace of concentration. It gave it up, however, from fear of social unrest, and simply pumped credit to stimulate the economy. The big money holders, who no longer viewed General de Gaulle as a rampart against revolution and who could do their sums, shifted their funds abroad through the loose exchange controls. The devaluation was delayed (in November 1968) by the general's pride and was, finally, carried in August 1969. Its rate (12.5 per cent) might have been insufficient but for the revaluation of the German mark which followed. By then, with a more congenial ruler (Pompidou), with immediate prospects in France less dramatic and social unrest spreading throughout western Europe, the funds started coming back.²

Politically, too, the regime gradually recovered some of its poise. The election of 1968, coming as it did immediately after the unsuccessful crisis, provided the government with an unprecedented parliamentary position: the gaullists have control of the Chamber on their own, while the conservative coalition has an overwhelming majority. Historically most instructive, however, was the transfer of power from de Gaulle to Pompidou. For the bourgeoisie, the May crisis over, the General was superfluous. Indeed, he was a nuisance. Yet nothing, on the face of it, compelled him to leave the stage. It was the nature of the system, and of the man, which drove him to seek to recapture his old position through a plebiscite. In vain. The spell was broken and for French capitalism both the neo-bonapartist system and the legendary hero had become obsolete.

It was then possible to imagine that the French bourgeoisie would revert to more classical forms of its rule, with parliamentary and other safety valves, that it would make serious efforts to integrate the working class on the British or the Swedish model. It certainly did move in that direction. M Chaban-Delmas, the new premier, drew the vision of a "new society", speaking of a new deal in tones reminiscent of Mendés-France. The regime can even claim some successes, such as the recent acceptance by the communist-dominated CGT of the so-called "contracts of progress", potential elements of an incomes policy. Yet the pursuit of such a line has never been coherent nor even predominant. The presidential powers have been preserved. The police forces have been strengthened and the arsenal of repressive legislation stocked with new weapons. Despite the economic recovery and its vast parliamentary majority, the regime has no grand design. It tackles events as they come, but does not dare to look ahead. It is

like a man, looking over his shoulder, glancing sideways, not knowing what will hit him next. This anxiety has nothing to do with a revival of the traditional Left. The French bourgeoisie is still haunted by the ghost of May.

Such a brief introduction seemed indispensable to set in perspective our own subject—the evolution of the French Left since the May crisis. The Left is not taken here in the sense of a revolutionary, socialist force, but in its etymological meaning of an opposition sitting on the left of the assembly's chairman. And this is done on purpose, since, in the last three years, the primary purpose of the traditional, the respectful³ Left—in which one must now include the C.P.—has been to stifle the forces of social unrest and then to channel them into electoral politics. The dream is to behave as if May had not happened and to return quietly to the strategy of a popular front.

What was that strategy? It sprang, it may be recalled, from purely electoral calculations. Around 1962, the emergence of the gaullists as a potential majority party had driven the divided sections of the Left to seek an alliance. France was moving towards a system of two coalitions. On the Left, this meant an alliance between the PCF (*Parti Communiste Français*) and the *Fédération de la Gauche*, headed by François Mitterand and regrouping Socialists as well as Radicals. After the parliamentary poll of 1967, it was possible to envisage that next time the popular front coalition might win. Yet what would such a victory have meant to a revolutionary Marxist? The strange working of the electoral law implied that, though the Communists had more votes in the country, the *Fédération* would have more deputies in the Chamber. This was the additional guarantee, if one was needed, that the popular front government would limit its ambitions to the management of capitalist society. The only hope was that, as in 1936, the workers would take the victory seriously and celebrate it by occupying factories. The sudden crisis of May '68 shattered all such speculations. The students set the workers into motion, revealing in the process the empty nature of the popular front.

The popular front did not collapse because the Communists had failed to keep their part of the capitalist bargain. On the contrary, they did so beyond the wildest expectations of the bourgeoisie. In the hour of crisis they were the pillars of law and order, which happened to be the law and order of capitalist society. The reason was different. The crisis lifted the electoral veil and revealed the real balance of forces. It showed that French social-democracy had little social weight, whereas the PCF remained a power, even if a negative one. Besides, the crisis revealed the depth of discontent, the explosive potentialities,

raising doubts as to whether the PCF would be able to keep them in check yet again. In short, it has raised the spectre of revolution. The PCF can only revive its strategy by exorcising that famous ghost. The political game of the French Left has reflected the contradiction between the unchanged electoral horizon and the new revolutionary possibilities.

1. *Neo-Radicalism or the New Right*

The electoral alternative to the popular front used to be called the "third force". This was the name given to the coalition, stretching from the conservatives to the so-called Socialists, which ruled the Fourth Republic, fighting on two fronts against Communists and Gaullists. Cemented by the open allegiance of its members to Nato and to Little Europe, the *troisième force* collapsed in 1958 and was really destroyed when the Gaullists began to swallow the traditional Right in the sixties. But among quite a few Socialist and many Radical leaders nostalgia for an open (as opposed to a disguised) share in the management of capitalism is dying hard and the misfortunes of the Left in 1968 gave them new hopes. The latest, though not the last, attempt to revive this third force has been the handiwork of M. Servan-Schreiber.

The antics of this *kenedillon*, as François Mauriac once nicknamed him, his apparent conviction that a clever application of Madison Avenue methods is enough to make a French President, prevent one from taking the man too seriously. Yet, like any good salesman, Servan-Schreiber has a sense of the market, of what is in demand. He often raises the right questions—the American challenge or the overwhelming power of the state—even if he can only suggest false solutions. His successful take-over bid for the Radical Party, in 1969, was no exception to this rule.

Admittedly, the choice of the decrepit Radical Party as the platform for a new movement may seem *strange*. Long gone are the days when this used to be the big party of the middle, particularly the lower middle classes, the instrument for their capitalist integration. The Radical Party, with "its heart on the Left and its wallet on the Right", can no longer fool very many. It is a dying relic of the past, an assembly of local personalities, of *notables*, with a crumbling following in south-western France. The take-over bid only made sense, if its ambition was to transform the party so as to turn it into the political formation of the new middle class.

One of the fascinating features of the May crisis was the hesitant conduct of the so-called *cadres*. Few of them actually joined the revolutionary movement. But neither could the capitalist establishment rely, as in the past, on the allegiance and support of its

managerial, technical and scientific staffs. There were cleavages, divisions, misgivings, uncertain aspirations. After the crisis, a glance at the statistics was enough to show the political potentialities of this development. In France, throughout the postwar period, the number of wage and salary earners has been steadily rising, mainly because of the rapid migration from country to town (the share of farming in total employment dropped from 36 per cent after the last war to about 13 per cent now). But insufficient industrialization meant a faster growth of white than of blue collar workers. For a time, this trend was interpreted as a guarantee of social and political stability. The May upheaval gave food for second thoughts. The discontent amid its professional intelligentsia, among teachers, technicians, researchers was a real threat. What if, attracted by a bold socialist project, a good proportion among them were to join the protest movement.⁴

The important task was to divert this discontent into harmless channels and M. Servan-Schreiber set about it with his crude intellectual arsenal imported from America. The mythology of a post-industrial society, in which property relations no longer matter, since problems of ownership have been replaced by those of management, was designed to conceal the class struggle. Death duties on the Anglo-American model were seriously presented as a magic formula for switching the economy to this managerial rule. To this were added ideas, or rather slogans, pinched from the May Movement about participation or the struggle against the omnipotence of the central power, naturally without a word about the class nature of the centralized state or of the proposed regional substitutes. Still, the demagogic hotch-potch labelled as the most modern dish seemed to serve its purpose for a while, as the new leader of the Radical party took advantage of special circumstances to win a seat in a by-election at Nancy. But the euphoria did not last long. His rather foolish challenge to the Prime Minister in Bordeaux proved a complete flop and, probably, marked the end of that enterprise.

There were three main reasons for his failure. Firstly, in making his bid for the middle class, Servan-Schreiber was venturing into the government's own territory. Gaullism, too, has always tried to parade as the classless champion of modernization. True, in projecting this image, it is hampered by its conservative electoral tail, by the very people it is supposed to eliminate. But then Servan-Schreiber cannot rise above ambiguity either. Indeed, his duel in claret country with Chaban-Delmas was really a duet, each performer singing "anything you can do, I can do better". When it comes to bribing electors, a Prime Minister can outbid even a wealthy and enterprising challenger.⁵

Secondly, the inner struggle of French capitalism, the conflict between the "national" and Atlantic wings, had lost a great deal of its venom with General de Gaulle's departure. The "third force" was really the product of the American lobby, the insurance taken by the French bourgeoisie lest gaullism should go too far in its battle against American hegemony. The risks vanished, or at least diminished, with the advent of Pompidou. De Gaulle had been tolerated as a necessary evil. Pompidou was the man of their choice. An alternative card could always be useful, but this was certainly not the moment to play it.

The final reason springs from the other two. The "third force" cannot co-exist with a two-party (or two-coalitions) system. To become a politically dominant force, a "centre" party must gain ground on its right as well as on its left. The unwritten assumption behind the scheme was that gaullism would not survive as a potential majority party, once the General left the stage. But this failed to happen. Pompidou may have lost some of the working class support which General de Gaulle used to hold thanks to his bonapartist appeal. He will probably lose some more. But, if anything, he has widened the coalition of all the Rights, extending it to the fascist fringe (Tixier-Vignancourt) but also to the liberal-atlantic opposition.⁶

All this does not mean that this motley coalition will survive for ever or, should it fail to keep social peace, that French capitalism will not put its money and pin its hopes on another Servan-Schreiber. But, for the time being, there is no need to. The Radical Party, which is essentially an electoral club, has no room for a miracle-maker unable to deliver parliamentary seats. The odds are that it will reluctantly revert to the popular front formula. Provided it can forget the message of May.

2. *Shrinking Social-Democracy*

The Radicals were not the only ones to forsake the popular front strategy after the May crisis. The Socialist Party, their chief partners in the *Fédération* itself collapsed and its bewildered members wandered without a sense of direction. The defeat of General de Gaulle, in April 1969, gave them the opportunity to indulge once again in electoral politics. But there was no question any longer of putting up a single candidate of the United Left, as in 1965 when Mitterrand had challenged the General. The Socialists opted for the "third force" not once but twice. They put up one of their own, **Gaston Defferre** the mayor of Marseilles, who runs his home town in open alliance with true blue conservatives. However, many leaders of the party, like **Guy Mollet**, made no secret that their real candidate was the man picked by the Atlantic opposition, the ephemeral **Alain** Poher.

They thus got the worst of both worlds. On the first ballot Defferre collected a ridiculous five per cent, ruining incidentally the political career of his running-mate, Pierre Mendès-France (but, then, what was he doing in that galley?). On the second, Poher was defeated by Pompidou. The Socialists, so impatient after ten years in opposition, found themselves without any prospect of office. They had to start thinking all over again. They changed the name of the party (from Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière to Parti Socialiste) and, finally, its official leader (replacing Guy Mollet of Suez and Algerian fame by the less compromised Alain Savary and then by François Mitterand. The process of reconstruction is not yet finished, though it is possible to guess the lines on which it will proceed. The refurbished party having absorbed the Convention of small political clubs, headed by François Mitterand should soon resume its movement towards a popular front alliance. There will be a great deal of talk about the need for a strong party, able to balance the power of the PCF, and strenuous efforts will be made to exorcise the memory of May. Since psephology has its laws, however, the PS will negotiate with the PCF in order to patch up an electoral programme.

Unlike their more powerful British and German counterparts, French Socialists have never dropped their Marxist vocabulary altogether. Even when performing for the French bourgeoisie the dirty colonialist job in Algeria, Guy Mollet was ready to defend his action with selective quotations from **Marx**. Hence, verbal proclamations of socialist faith in the common programme will be no serious guarantee. Fortunately, foreign policy provides a more valid test. Like other social-democrats in this respect, French Socialists have been staunch supporters of Nato and most eager advocates of the Common Market, showing thereby that western and capitalist are for them synonymous. Unless they openly break their euratlantic ties—which is most unlikely—no amount of literary embroidery in the programme will conceal the fact that what they are really offering the PCF is a pact for the joint management of capitalist society.

Strange partners for a radical transformation of French society, they may also be of doubtful value on purely electoral lines. The five per cent mustered by Defferre were obviously an exaggerated illustration of the Socialist decline, though they were nevertheless a symptom. Before the war, the Socialists were the main force—or weakness—of the French Left. Electorally, they had more support than their communist rivals. Even after the war the two parties were still comparable. In 1945 the PCF got 26 per cent of the votes cast and the SFIO 23.8 per cent. But the Socialist share of the total poll dropped steadily to half that level in 1962 and is probably lower still now.⁷

Its links with the working class have also loosened. The **trade-union**

with which its ties are closest—Force *Ouvrière* or FO, a product of the cold war set up with financial support from the CIA—is by now the third of the French unions, not only lagging far behind the communist-dominated CGT, but overtaken also by the ex-catholic CFDT. With a few notable exceptions, FO as a whole tends to be an instrument of class collaboration. It mostly refuses unity of action and is more and more confined to white collar workers in the public sector. The other allies of the PS are to be found in the moderate reformist wing of the teachers' unions. The Socialist Party still has working class roots—even if they are in the labour aristocracy—in its traditional fiefs of the Nord and the Pas-de-Calais. But, altogether, it increasingly resembles the Old Radical Party. It has become an electoral machine, with a host of local councillors and a knack for striking alliances right, left and centre. In southern France, in particular, Socialists were often elected by the Right as a protection against the "red peril". It is in the South, the alleged stronghold of the anti-governmental Left, that Gaullists have been making progress recently. Parties depending so much on patronage cannot maintain their hold for very long in opposition.

Naturally, it is possible to imagine that the pendulum will swing and that the Socialists, allied to Radicals, will win the general election together with the Communists. But the odds, especially since the May crisis, are against such a result. Nevertheless these are the partners chosen by the PCF to carry France along the road towards an "advanced democracy", the half-way house to socialism.

3. Neither Fish nor *Fowl*

The PCF is still the dominant party of the French Left. It has emerged from the May crisis with its membership undiminished and its electoral strength unaffected. The holes in the ranks left by those who tore their card in disgust over the party's cowardice were filled by newcomers as always drawn into the movement when events are quickening their pace. And various polls, held over the last three years, suggest that the party can still reckon on between a fifth and a quarter of the French electorate. On the face of it, the PCF has emerged from the upheaval unscathed.⁸

And yet, without any doubt, this has been a most awkward period for the party leaders. They had not had time to brighten the party's tarnished image as the "revolutionary vanguard", when Soviet tanks rolling into Prague forced them to question its international allegiance. The Communists could not keep silent over the invasion, if they wanted to preserve their parliamentary strategy. For the first time in their history, they openly dissociated themselves from Soviet action, despite the protests of Stalinist diehards. But they did not draw the

logical conclusions from this dissociation. True, they never went back on their note of disapproval. Yet, they also swallowed the "normalization" in Czechoslovakia without a protest and went on faithfully backing the Soviet position in all inner communist conflicts. Admittedly, the news from the east—such as the revival of class struggle in Poland—have been increasingly awkward for the party propaganda machine, which now prefers to refer as little as possible to the Soviet model. At the same time, as if spurred by conditioned reflexes, the PCF goes on being guided by the unwritten premiss which has inspired communist strategy for the last forty years, namely that the spread of socialism will be a by-product of the consolidation of Soviet power (and we do not mean here the power of the soviets).

Indeed, on the domestic front, the PCF clings desperately to its old strategy. Or, to be more accurate, it is the same only more so. No attempt has been made to study the May movement with an eye to new revolutionary potentialities in advanced capitalist countries. On the contrary, the crisis has driven the PCF to put the accent even more strongly on electoralism, really to a point of obsession. Everything has now to be subordinated, not just to the presidential or parliamentary election, but to any minor local poll. A sit-in strike, a militant demonstration are promptly condemned by *l'Humanité* as an officially inspired plot to frighten potential supporters of the Left. Listening to such an electoral interpretation of history, one often wonders whether the revolution of 1917 had not been precipitated by the Okhrana, the tsarist police, in order to prevent the bolsheviks from gaining a few seats in the Duma.

What is at stake here is not the participation in elections as such. Raised to the status of a categorical imperative, the slogan "*election-trahison*" would also be a form of "parliamentary cretinism". For a socialist, the question is what use is being made of an election for developing the class consciousness of the masses. Even more, the problem is how do elections fit into a broader strategy of social transformation. In theory, one cannot exclude the possibility of an electoral victory precipitating a mass movement, as happened in 1936. In practice, to subordinate all social action to electoral ends is to condemn oneself to inevitable defeat. "Through a majority to revolutionary tactics" is an absurd strategy or rather a *figleaf* for a party which no longer contemplates a revolutionary solution, though it is still ashamed to admit the fact.

The electoralist conception has its tactical counterpart—the line of the united front against the "monopolists". Let us put aside the fact that this vision of a handful of capitalists, faced with the rest of the population, does not correspond to the class reality of modern society. The theory, however, has practical consequences. To unite all the

victims of monopoly capital, it is necessary to add up their disparate discontents. This involves a rearguard struggle in defence of private property of the peasant smallholder and a rather poujadist campaign in favour of the small shopkeeper. It also involves the emphasis on the hierarchical order as well as on wage and salary differentials in the hope of wooing the managerial, technical and scientific staffs, the *cadres* so fashionable since May. Such a juxtaposition of often contradictory grievances and claims may, occasionally, win some votes. To turn such a loose programme into a revolutionary strategy, it is not enough to pin on it the assertion that the working class is the fundamental force of the movement. What is needed in order to forge a revolutionary alliance is to present—in theory and practice—the interests of the working class as "the superior interests of society as a whole". Marx's precept is entirely different from the popular front approach.

The theoretical edifice is crowned with the concept of "advanced democracy" or that is at least the name given to it since the party's central committee meeting, held at Champigny at the end of 1968. The basic difference between the revolutionary and the reformer is not so much concerned with peaceful transitions or the degree of counter-violence that must be applied. The crucial difference is over the state and its fate. The reformer argues that it is possible to build socialism within the existing framework, that one can use the bourgeois state, its institutions, its civil service etc. The revolutionary replies that this is absurd, that the first task is to smash the bourgeois state (Lenin would add: to put another one in its place and start dismantling it at once.) The communist parties have now put off this issue till doomsday. In the meantime, they can collaborate with their Socialist and Radical allies within the framework of "advanced democracy".

The snag is that, however "advanced", the democracy remains true to its bourgeois pattern. There is no question of evolving new institutions, of setting up soviets, of inventing new forms of worker control and of industrial democracy. It is simply a left-wing government working within the established parliamentary system. Hence, it is perfectly natural for their social-democratic partners or their gaullist rivals to ask the Communists whether the opposition would be allowed to return to office by electoral means? For the communist leadership to admit this publicly is still rather difficult, because it would confirm that they have now abandoned completely their doctrine of "proletarian dictatorship". And so, they waffle about the need to carry out the electoral programme, which will guarantee the continued confidence of the masses. But this won't do and it would not be surprising if, in the next few months, Georges Marchais and his colleagues were

forced to sacrifice this illogical remnant of their past doctrine on the altar of popular front unity.

With its partners weak and its own sights lowered, could not the PCF fill the gap in the structure of French capitalism, could it not replace the shrinking social-democracy? The prospect is most unlikely. Despite the apparent changes, the PCF is basically the same. True, great efforts have been made to modernize the *façade*, particularly since Georges Marchais effectively took over the leadership. *L'Humanité-Dimanche* now tries to look like its commercial competitors. Open meetings have been staged, modelled on TV shows, in which leaders can be quizzed by the public.⁹ Dissenters in many cells are no longer excommunicated with anathemas, but advised to leave on tiptoe to avoid scandals.

Beneath the facade, however, the true nature of the party is unchanged. Before his exclusion, Roger Garaudy was allowed to state his case in front of the party's central committee, but not a single other speaker in that debate departed an inch from the party line. Admittedly, there was more dissension in the party cells, but it was not reflected higher up and this is the essential point. In the allegedly "democratic centralism", orders, decisions and everything else flows from above. The PCF has managed to remain monolithic, while ceasing to be revolutionary.¹⁰

There are three closely inter-connected reasons why the social-democratic solution, or rather substitute solution, seems an unlikely development in France. Firstly, French capitalism has too little to offer to the workers to facilitate their integration. Its projected industrialization drive, designed to meet increased competition on a larger European and world scale, leaves relatively little scope for social concessions, while the workers' appetite, whetted by the vague prospect of a different fare during the May crisis, will no longer be so easily satisfied with just wage increases. The second reason is linked with the very image of the PCF, its origins, its vocabulary. Its spokesmen have to proclaim that their party is "truly revolutionary" and, in the same breath, that it is the pillar of "law and order". Claiming to be the heirs of the October revolution, paying lip service to bolshevik theory, French Communists have contributed, however ambiguously, to preserve the belief in the revolutionary role of the working class and now they have to reckon with a new mood. Their vituperations against the *gauchistes*, against the ultra-Left bring us to the third reason—to the fear of being overtaken on their Left, should they compromise too openly.

The PCF remains the principal force of the French Left. It is a fact ignored and neglected by many ultra-left groups. They underestimate its influence, the hold it still has on large sections of the working

class. They, therefore, tend to act forgetting the crucial truth, namely that, without the support of broad masses still swayed by the PCF, the radical transformation of French society is impossible. On the other hand, it is true that the supremacy of the PCF was shaken in May and is still threatened. To preserve its position and its popular front strategy, the PCF must perform a counter-revolutionary function in the literal sense of the term: it must confine popular discontent to electoral channels and keep the class struggle within norms tolerated by the capitalist system. How long can the PCF achieve this—with its present structure—will, therefore, depend on the course of events, on the pressure from below, on the balance of social forces. But the days of its hegemony will also depend on the strength of the movement gathering momentum on its left.

IN SEARCH OF A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

In looking at the political forces appearing on the Left of the PCF, a place apart must be set for a small but dynamic left-wing socialist party, which is still seeking its identity. The *Parti Socialiste Unifié*, or PSU, was itself originally the product of mergers between various groups of the New Left and dissidents from the orthodox SFIO, who could not stomach its Algerian policy and, then in 1958, its surrender to de Gaulle. The PSU itself underwent many metamorphoses and its public image used to be distorted by association with its then most prominent member, Pierre Mendès-France. His presence exaggerated the party's reputation for radical reformism, a temptation which did genuinely exist within it, but which was not the only one. When the May crisis occurred, the PSU plunged wholeheartedly into the movement and changed its own nature in the process. The majority of its present members have joined the party since May, 1968. This swelling of the ranks could not continue uninterrupted. The last year or so witnessed a stagnation in membership or even a certain setback. Old members, recruited in a quieter climate, were frightened out by slogans of workers' power, by joint action with the *gauchistes* rather than joint voting with the Communists. At the same time, however, the PSU seems to have made steady progress among workers (particularly through the ex-catholic CFDT) and even among the radicalized peasants of western France.¹¹

Judgment on the PSU must be suspended because, reflecting in its own ranks the dissensions of the New Left, it is still seeking its road. It has not quite made up its mind on parliamentary and direct action, on its relationship with the PCF and the revolutionary groups. It has not yet taken any definite decisions about its own organizational structure, the role to be played by general assemblies of workers, peasants

and others, including members and non-members. The PSU is in the process of transition, yet such as it is to-day, it already performs a useful function in revealing the real state of affairs on the French Left. In pre-electoral deals, in preparations for demonstrations, in compilations of programmes, the presence of the PSU compels the PCF to show its preference for arrangements at the top, for alliances to its right, for the tacit acceptance of the existing capitalist framework.¹²

The small revolutionary groups, which were suddenly thrust into the centre of the stage in May 1968, are even more difficult to describe. Swallowed but not digested by the movement, they have reappeared more numerous than ever. Banned in June, 1968, resurrected under various disguises, changing names, shifting and splitting—they defy a static analysis.¹³ To list a catalogue of groups and their specific features would take too much space and miss the purpose. It might be better, though somewhat unfair, to regroup them under the following headings: those trying to rebuild the old bolshevik party (essentially the trotskyst *Ligue Communiste* and *Lutte Ouvrière*); those attempting to revive, under the Maoist banner, a Stalinist party (a diminishing band, illustrated by the example of *l'Humanité Rouge*); more spontaneous groups, yet trying to revive the party as it was in the resistance movement e.g. *Gauche Prolétarienne*; and, finally, those breaking with Leninism altogether and even with the very conception of the party. In this category one would include not only the anarchists, but such groups as the former *Viue La Revolution* (VLR). It is they who have brought into the more political French movement, which thinks in terms of changing society, some of the features of the American movement, with its emphasis on changing one's life.

To pour scorn over the new revolutionary movement, to show its weaknesses and vices is quite an easy matter. In nineteenth century Russia, the absence of a working class forced the nascent revolutionary movement to seek occasionally strange by-passes. In France to-day, the sterilization of the working class by the PCF leads sometimes to similar symptoms: the romantic "going to the people" (workers this time rather than peasants), adventurism, illusions about the impact of "active minorities", about the mood of the masses and about what can be achieved in one "hot summer". It is easy to emphasise the quarrels among sects, the ritual repetition of obsolete formulae or the artificial attempts to revive the sequel of events of May. It is not too difficult to show the impatience, the recklessness or even the incoherence of much of the writing and some of the acts or to prove that the ultra-Left has more impact on the Marcusean "outcasts and outsiders" than on the hard core of the working class. Worse still, it is very often unable to justify, explain, propagate its most valid

actions, having in this respect declined from the pedagogic levels of, say, the 22nd of March Movement.

All this may be true, but it only shows the seamy side, of the picture. The sects may have returned to their sectarian habits, but they are big sects now. In 1967, all of them together could not fill the large hall of the *Mutualité* (the traditional place for left-wing meetings, which can accommodate up to 5,000 people). Now, each one is apparently able to pack it. Together with the PSU, the *gauchistes* can now bring quite a crowd into the streets, having thus broken the communist monopoly of mass demonstrations.¹⁴ What is more, all the new issues raised in France in the last three years—the plight of immigrant labour, the state and cost of transport, the housing scandal and so on—have been raised by these dissidents and only then picked up, and watered down, by the respectful opposition. If the repressive nature of schools and universities, if the class bias of the judicial system, if the repression in the factories are no longer nicely concealed, if the ruling ideology is now often on the defensive, France owes it to these dreadful *gauchistes*, insulted by the Communists, bashed by the police, always threatened in their jobs and their freedom. For *l'Humanité* they are the agents of M. Marcellin. But the French Minister of the Interior is treating his "agents" much worse than his communist "enemies".

It may even be hoped that the worst of sectarian squabbling is over. In 1969/70 it was useless to put the various revolutionary groups in the same hall. At best, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao was chanted to drown Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Rosa. This was the substitute for debate. (How long will the socialist movement go on paying for its Stalinist sins?). Yet, when the movement seemed at its lowest level, hit by repression, by trials, by stiff sentences and disappointments, things started picking up. In the last few months, the *Secours Rouge*, a collective body against repression, has for instance been able to sponsor joint actions over the Basque trials, the fate of political prisoners, and to stage a counter-trial over accidents in the mines. For the first time since the action committees vanished, militants from various groups and from no groups at all have been able to work together at all levels, including the local one. This is already quite a progress, though hopes of moving in this way beyond defensive action should not be exaggerated.¹⁵

What is still lacking in France is an experiment like that of *II Manifesto* in Italy, an attempt to act as a centre of attraction not just for the revolutionary groups, but for the potential left of the PCF, for the PSU, for the radical elements in the trade-unions and outside. What is missing is the search for a coherent strategy, linking day-to-day practice with a revolutionary project, in which the working

class would not be at the centre of things just as a fetish, but which would show peasants and technicians, students and scientists that the solution to their problems lies in a radical transformation of society, involving as its mainspring the "emancipation of the working class". The supremacy of the PCF will not be really destroyed until such a force makes its bid for the historic succession.

THE BATTLEFIELD

We have purposely devoted most space to parliamentary, popular front illusions, because increased efforts will be made in the next couple of years—as the general election of 1973 looms larger on the horizon—to persuade the masses that this is where the socialist solution lies. For the leaders of the respectful Left this ideology has the double advantage of justifying their line, while diverting attention from the class struggle. In a sense, they have already been fairly successful. Measured in terms of strikes, the last two years have not been very remarkable. In 1969 2.2 million working days were lost through strikes and in 1970 only 1.7 million. This was much less than in 1967 (4.2 million) and below the average for the last decade.

Such a development was quite likely after the climax of May-June 1968. With no immediate prospect of a more radical confrontation, the workers had to digest their gains which, for the lowest paid, were pretty substantial. Then, as production and productivity rose very fast, private industry was in a position to distribute some of its profits in higher wages. The gap between the minimum wage and the average, which was narrowed for a time, is now widening again, while wages and salaries in the public sector are, once again, lagging behind the private one. The tensions are building up and the social climate could rapidly become much stormier, if the government applied the squeeze as part of its anti-inflationary policy.

In fact, things have not been as quiet as the global figures for days lost would suggest. Quite a lot of strikes reflected the new mood born in May. Many were wildcat strikes, taken over by the unions at a later stage. They often involved the seizing of the factory and sometimes the sequestration of the managers. And they were not all just about wages. The quickened pace of assembly lines, arbitrary job evaluation, decisions imposed from the top—these were the grievances which often provoked a spontaneous reaction. It was the job of the unions to keep this new mood, if not in check, then under control. This was always the task of the biggest among them, the *Confédération Generale du Travail*.

The CGT now plays an increasingly important part in communist strategy.¹⁶ When the political situation is strained and the prospects

of a popular front are receding, it is up to the CGT to promote unity of action at the trade-union level. When, on the contrary, the chances of an electoral alliance are brighter, it is the duty of the CGT, while backing this development in factories, to prevent this movement from reaching "dangerous" proportions, thus frightening the potential partners of the PCF. The CGT, under Georges Seguy's leadership, is fairly well equipped for its job. It was momentarily shaken by the May crisis, but its heavy machine soon reasserted its weight. In various factory elections that followed, there was a clear swing towards the CFDT which, for reasons of its own, had been more open to the ideas of the May movement. Once the situation returned, at least outwardly, back to normal, the CGT recovered some of its losses and its poise.

After all, the CGT is perfectly suited for what Lenin used to call the "trade-unionist" activity, for the daily, routine class struggle. Without this ability, and the disciplined devotion of its *militants*, it could not have preserved its strength and reputation. Now, however, it must keep the working class movement within its routine. In factories, it must beware of workers' democracy, of general assemblies, of broad attempts to question the pace of work, the hierarchy (through uniform wage increases), the very rule of the boss. On a national scale, it must confine the movements of protest within the traditional forms of, say, the 24-hour strike plus a parade. At both factory and national level, it is its task to prevent the skirmishes of class war from growing into a frontal battle with the capitalist system. To put it plainly, the CGT and the PCF, with which it is linked, have the unenviable task of taming the ghost of May, of proving that revolution is impossible.

The necessity to adapt itself to the new mood of the workers and to divert it has speeded up the integration of the CGT into the system. In the early sixties, it was the CFDT, still believing in "democratic planning" which sat assiduously in all the state planning committees, while the CGT was contemptuously aloof. Now, it was the CFDT which led the way out of the commissions preparing the sixth Plan. Similarly, the CGT used to reject **long-term** wage contracts as an example of class collaboration. Now, it has signed such "contracts of progress" in public services, a procedure which, if extended, could mark the beginning of an "incomes policy".

The scope for such an integration should not, however, be exaggerated. The state, we saw, cannot offer much that is tempting and the workers can no longer be bribed in the same way. The *patronat* (i.e. the employers' federation) and the state, on one side, and the CGT, on the other, can afford some implicit cooperation. It is not worth their while to take the risk of open collaboration for the sake of a highly doubtful deal: one side cannot pay an interesting price,

the other—in the present mood of the workers—cannot be sure of delivering the goods. And so they are likely to continue their ambiguous confrontation.

In another field, there is little ambiguity left. The University proved the weakest link in May and so the rulers, at once, set out to reforge it. General de Gaulle gave his then Minister of Education, the clever Edgar Faure, wide powers to reform it, to break up the old structures, to decentralize and even to give the students the semblance of a share in management. The reform was actually presented as a response to May, as a model of participation for society as a whole. It was rejected as a sham and a trap by all sections of the revolutionary student movement. It was endorsed enthusiastically by the PCF. Within the University, and also within allied sectors (in schools, technical colleges, national research etc.), the division is now plain: on the right, you have the diehards, the old-fashioned mandarins, resenting any interference with their privileges. In the centre stand the reformers, with the Communist party-liners most prominent. On the left, there are all sorts of disorganized groups, united only by their rejection of the myth of a progressive university in today's capitalist society and their refusal to take part in propping up the system.¹⁷

It cannot be said that, even with massive communist support, the educational reform has been a tremendous success for the government. The test is easy. The reform provided for the election of management councils in all colleges, in which students were also to take part. In the first election, held in 1968/9, illusions, propaganda and statistical had gone to the polls. When the councils were renewed in 1970/71, the combined efforts of the government and the PCF could not keep up student participation above a third. Experience turned out to be even more effective than propaganda for a boycott carried out by the revolutionary groups. It may be ventured that French universities—and the higher forms of the lycées and the technical colleges—are potentially no less explosive than they were in the spring of 1968 and probably more so. Only another explosion would not necessarily have the same consequences.

History, it is by now a cliché, does not repeat itself. If revolutionary students took to the streets again, they might be shot at, since the rulers know now how such a rising could spread. On the other hand, it is not certain that students would once again trigger off the workers. The inability of the revolutionary groups to project their ideas, combined with years of official and communist propaganda, may well have set a temporary barrier. The movement, however, can also start spontaneously in the factories, begin with one strike and then sweep the devices allowed the authorities to claim that 52 per cent of the students

country. It even can, it was suggested earlier, be precipitated by an electoral victory. The admission must be qualified at once: in that case, it can only develop against the wishes and the active opposition of the very sponsors of that electoral alliance. This point cannot be repeated too often, since we are only at the beginning of a west European campaign of mass demobilization with electoral prospects as an excuse and the Chilean example as an alibi.

This is not the place (nor do I claim the knowledge) to assess the chances of Dr. Allende's experiment. Will the Chilean mass movement keep its momentum and allow a piecemeal destruction of capitalism? Will the clash come at a favourable moment? Or will it go the way of all previous popular fronts, with the movement subsiding and leaving the foundations of capitalism intact? Only time can answer these questions. Here it is enough to show the differences with Chile and, why, therefore, the answer to all such questions is obvious in France.

Firstly, the popular front partners in France cannot even produce a programme capable of seriously threatening the vital interests of capitalism, for reasons linked with the second point. The Chilean Communist Party is in a coalition with at least some more radical elements (a substantial part of Dr Allende's Socialist Party). The PCF picked its allies safely on its right, among avowed defenders of the capitalist system. Its current violent campaign against the PSU is due to the **latter's** reminder that there are other issues, other methods and, potentially, other social partners. Thirdly, the electoral front **is** not presented as just a sector of the revolutionary struggle, but as an alternative solution. Last but not least, this strategy is resumed after the May crisis and, in France, the real division on the Left is between those who see May as a beginning, as an opening of new prospects for revolution, and those who want to reduce it, at all costs, to an accident, to a historical aberration.

France, it must be remembered, is still recovering from its traumatic shock. True, the bourgeoisie has taken better advantage of the interlude. It has reestablished its power over the factories and the machinery of the state, diverted attention to electoral conflicts, widened its repressive arsenal and strengthened its police forces with new riot squads. Yet, even the bourgeoisie feels that its hold is precarious, that seeds sown in May grow, however haphazardly, throughout French society. And because its hold is precarious, it badly needs the conscious or unwitting support of a "truly revolutionary party" ready to play the game within the system and according to its electoral rules.

In April 1968, the great strategists of the Left were studying their electoral maps. The gaullists were getting ready to celebrate their tenth anniversary in power. The storm took almost everybody by

surprise. Though nobody can predict the length of the interlude, it is quite safe to forecast another upheaval. What the revolutionary groups have not yet ensured is that history will not repeat itself. There are still no political forces on the horizon capable of carrying the movement to its logical conclusion, of turning a rebellion, a rising, into a revolution.

NOTES

In April 1970 (taking April 1964 as base) gross weekly earnings had risen faster in Holland in nominal terms and faster in Germany in real terms. See office Statistique des Communéautes Européennes, Nr. 5, 1970. Figures reflecting the rise of Italy's "hot autumn" had not yet been registered.

2. By the end of 1970, the net gold and dollar reserves reached \$4,236 million, compared with \$7,036 million at the end of 1967 and barely \$1,292 million in August 1969.
3. The term was originally used by *Les Temps Modernes*. It played on the analogy with Sartre's play, *La Putain Respectueuse* (The Respectful Whore)
4. The victory in the by-election of the Yvelines of the left-wing socialist Rocard over Couve de Murville, the ex-Premier, while not surrounded with the same publicity as Servan-Schreiber's efforts, strengthened such fears.
5. There was a comic note as the allegedly gaullist Prime Minister was promising his electors an American investment—a Ford factory.
6. The rallying of such former figures of the "euratlantic" lobby as Jacques Duhamel or Renk Pleven were symptoms of change.
7. In 1967 and 1968 there were no separate figures for different candidates of the *Fédération*.
8. To conclude from this that its action during the crisis corresponded to the mood of the workers is to assume that a party's activity has no bearing on the course of events. Once the PCF succeeded in arresting the movement, its task was, obviously, much easier. It can cope with the daily class struggle on the "trade-unionist" level. The real test will have to be faced again, should a new major crisis occur. Alternatively, the power of the party may be measured by its ability to prevent another upheaval.
9. One series was called Dites-Moi Monsieur Marchais (Tell me Mr. Marchais) and the next will be nicknamed Comment s'en sortir (How to get out of it, implicitly out of the mess).
10. This has not happened at once. But such assessments could be dismissed as guesses. The May crisis provided a test and the behaviour of the Party ever since merely confirms the verdict every day.
11. On possible peasant-worker links see Bernard Lambert: *Les Paysans dans la lutte des classes*, Seuil 1970.
12. The municipal elections of April, 1971 are a good illustration. Negotiations between the PCF and the PSU finally collapsed over the participation of revolutionary groups. But, previously, there were serious difficulties as the PSU suggested that the platform should have a socialist content and merely promise a better management.

13. Shortly before these **lines** were written the Maoist Mouvement du 27 Mai decided to wind up, so did the Vive La Revolution group, while a splinter from the Ligue Communiste formed a new group called Revolution.
14. On May 1st 1971 the communist refusal to include the revolutionary groups in the march led to **two** separate demonstrations. In the morning, the PSU and the revolutionary groups brought out some **25,000** predominantly young demonstrators. In the afternoon, the communist parade contained roughly double that number. The appearance of such a new force was a shock for the Communists who immediately launched a campaign in pure **stalinist** style against the "**gauchistes-fascistes**".
15. Barely were these lines written than the *Ligue Communiste* left the *Secours Rouge* on the ground that it was simply acting as a cover for Maoist groups.
16. The bulk of the members of the CGT do not belong to the PCF. But the communists control the leadership and their lines never clash. It is fair to speak of the communist-dominated CGT.
17. The Communists did not join the *conseils* to carry on the struggle, revealing contradictions from inside. They joined to make them and the system work.