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SPRING 1968



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by Eugene Walker
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Masses in Motion -- Ideas in Free Flow

Not since 1956, if then, have the forces of revolutionary change, the students, the workers, swept across Europe, East and West, with such quickness and power as in 1968. Not since 1956, if then, have the forces of counter revolution swept back into the saddle with or without violence as they have in 1968.

And at no time, 1848 to 1968, have there been more analyses, more solutions, more answers thrust upon the revolutionary actions of the Polish, the German, the Czechoslovak and most especially the French masses than what we are witnessing today.

For Sartre, the barricades of France and the general strike had a certain resemblance to the Castro type of insurrection.

For Marcuse, the May revolt was Maoist like, i.e., there were aspects of China's Cultural Revolution.

For the Trotskyists, it was a revolution minus one ingredient—a "real" vanguard party.

For some existentialist-anarchists it was a collective madness which proudly had no goal, no definite aims, no alternative.

But let us begin at the beginning where most analyses never seem to—with the revolutionary actions of France—and ask what were the actions and what perspectives flow from them.

First, we must see the vastness, the expansiveness of the movement.

Where the students of Nanterre and then of the Sorbonne were most certainly the spark that ignited the movement, they were not the center, but a center.

The Sorbonne and the rest of the University of Paris, for all their magnificent meetings, discussions, leaflets, were not the center, but a center.

The workers of Sud-Aviation, who were the first to occupy their factories, were not the center, but a center.

The workers at Renault, 30,000 strong, who rejected the CGT-government agreement and set the stage for turn down of the agreement in plant after plant, were not the center, but a center.

Paris, with its factories closed and occupied, its universities the center of revolutionary debate and action, its transport system shut tight, its electrical power in the hands of the workers, was not the center, but a center.

To it could be added numerous other large cities where the revolt was manifesting itself. In short, no single group of people, no single action, no single locality and we can add, no single ideological expression or slogan, can sum up the French Revolt.

It was the multiplicity of organizations--established ones like the Trotskyists and Anarchists, as well as the spontaneous ones, such as the hundreds of committees of action, the workers' strike committees--which defined the French Revolt. It was the collectivity of actions from the occupation of the factories, through the barricades in the Latin Quarter, to the mass marches of half a million, which was the index of the French Revolt.

Even within a single sphere--the Sorbonne--the multiplicity of ideas and actions was enormous. A dozen organizations hawking their literature, a dozen discussions being held in the middle of the courtyard, a dozen meetings being held in the amphitheatres at the same time. Just reading the walls of the Sorbonne was an education. Slogans like "Do not consume Marx, Live him" and "Don't discuss with the bosses. Eliminate them," as well as full tracts with political positions from organizations and from individuals were painted or hung in the halls.

Even within a certain activity, all the potentialities revealed themselves. Take the worker-student action committees. The idea was to establish contacts in the factory; to join with workers in drafting leaflets for factories; to help distribute them.

It started with a few factories and a few workers. The response was very exciting. Workers came from the factories to find out who was drafting the leaflets. Workers came down to ask help in drafting leaflets. Workers came down to participate in discussions. Here is an extract from one leaflet:

"Up till now we tried to solve our problem through petitions, partial struggles, the election of better leaders. This has led us nowhere. The action of the students has shown us that only rank and file action could compel the authorities to retreat...They want to take the fundamental decisions themselves. So should we. We should decide the purpose of production and at whose cost production will be carried out."

These were the words of workers who had occupied their factory. It was they, not the Communist dominated CGT who spoke of workers' control of production. It was they who showed that if in a technologically advanced country, society was one-dimensional, they, as human beings, were not.

Second, we must see the role of the Communist Party and the role of the critics of the Communist Party. The Communists were counter revolutionary from the beginning to the end. When the students first took to the streets, they were branded "ultra leftists," "provocateurs," "Anarchists," and any other name that the Communists thought was derogatory. They went so far as to place students in the hands of the cops!

When the workers joined the students by occupying the factories, the Communist Party, through the CGT, did everything possible to control from above the spontaneously organized strike committees. They made it their first order of business to separate the students from the workers. Students were not allowed into factories, workers were prevented from going to meet with students in the Latin Quarter. As the workers constantly strove to break open new possibilities the Communist Party constantly tried to close all possibilities but that of following the Party.

Where the workers were beginning to put social control of production on their agenda, the Communists put a 40 hour week and a 10% pay raise on theirs.

Where workers and students were trying to put forth revolution from the street as their program, the Communists were putting forth "Popular Government" as theirs. The deepest concern of the Communist Party and the CGT was to contain the movement, prevent revolution, stop transformation.

But all this was obvious. It was obvious to De Gaulle as he mobilized his forces, knowing full well that he could appeal to the right, the OAS, and never fear from his other face, the Communist Party.

It was obvious to the Trotskyists who have exposed, time after time, the betrayal and class collaboration of the Communists.

It was obvious to those around Sartre who saw the Communist Party working to suppress the chance for a social revolution.

But what does not seem obvious to the Trotskyists and to those around Sartre is that the Communists were not just counter revolutionary in action, but were, and were before the French events, and are now, counter revolutionary in thought.

It is this failure to grasp the counter revolutionary nature of the Communists in thought, in philosophy, which allows the Trotskyists to pose everything as a question of tactics, a question of the proper "vanguard party to lead" the struggle.

It is this refusal to look at the thought behind the action which allows Sartre, after exposing the action of the Communists, to proclaim that nothing is possible without them and they must be changed under the revolutionary pressure of the rank and file and of events.

How many more missed revolutionary events and missed revolutions will be needed to change the Communists? The number is endless because all are looking to change the actions of the Communists; none are looking to see what, philosophically, must be changed, abolished, that is to say, what all the world events, from 1953 to 1968, cry out for.

But let us move away from the Communist Party. The question is what do you replace it with--another vanguard party who are revolutionary, a Communist Party somehow transformed by pressure from the rank and file? Or do we somehow break through these concepts to ask what new form of organization is needed.

In the process of the French Revolt many slogans

came forth which caught, at least partially, the spirit of the moment. And one which arose in the middle of the revolt, and which I believe told a great deal about where the struggle was in terms of activity and in terms of philosophy, was one which said "tout est possible," all is possible. It came when the students saw that they were not alone in wanting to change the world, but now labor was with them and they suddenly realized that with labor they could change the world.

There was a feeling that new ground had been broken, that all these new possibilities were there. It was not one more demonstration, one more action-- but the potentiality for all, for a revolution. Ten million on strike, the youth in the streets--you felt that it was within your grasp. It is really exhilarating to be at that stage and I hope that we will be there in the U.S. soon.

But what we must grasp is that this is where the work first begins. Getting to "all is possible" does not have to take a vanguard guiding and organizing, or "stages of consciousness". The students of Paris, the workers of France, moved there in days. A certain action occurs, the students respond, the barricades are in the streets, the cobblestones are in the air, the factories are occupied and "tout est possible."

But from all is possible must come the probable, and from the probable, the concrete, the actual. It is precisely this movement from the possible to the actual where we have to concern ourselves. How does one get there?

The possibilities of France did not remain as possibilities. They became the actualities of the Trotskyists and Maoists proclaiming the necessity of a vanguard party, the Communist Party stifling the pos-

sibility for social revolution and finally in the end it was De Gaulle who determined the actuality. And it will continue to be so unless the movement from the possible to the actual has as its driving force a developing Marxist-Humanist philosophy which unites the theory and practice in the very movement from the possible to the actual.

Some recognized the need for a new form of organization. Sartre, although he ends by saying that the new organization must somehow come out of the Communist Party, does try and break with old concepts.

He speaks about an organization which

"If it had had existed and if it had had influence over the local strike committees and action committees, could have set up centers of worker and popular power everywhere before the State was ready to react; it could have smashed the basis of production, distribution and administration and stimulated where ever the workers were prepared to try it, the movement from occupying stopped factories to the re-opening and reorganization of the occupied companies based on workers' control."

Sartre further speaks of "the self-organization of free public transport, the organization to bring foodstuffs and supplies to the cities through the strike committees working with peasant cooperatives and local committees which would have prefigured the elimination of commercial speculation and the socialization of distribution."

For the factories, he says, "The sit-in strike could have been accompanied every-

where by a reorganization of work and of the shops, by a setting of new production rates and rhythms, by an abolition of hierarchical relations, by a transformation of the relations between manual and non-manual workers..."

To Sartre, "The new type of revolutionary party will not be based on disciplined militants acting under orders of a central apparatus in their daily activity, but on local agitators who will judge and take initiative independently in relation to local conditions, who can guide and stimulate the discussion of free assemblies, the self-organization and self-determination of organized citizens, and their taking over and control of their own collective conditions of existence."

Here is Sartre, much of what he speaks of sounding like Marxist-Humanism, and yet the conclusion is that we must unite with the Communist Party, the very organization he just proved had arrested the revolution!

Why?

The answer is, first, that he is unwilling to do what must be done—lay down the theoretical basis, the philosophy, whereby the building of such an organization is possible. An organization which would be recognized by the workers and students, by the masses in motion, as theirs, because it had emerged from them and expressed their aspirations at that very moment, as the organization in which they could participate.

And second, Sartre himself has not made up his mind that this type of organization is really what he

wants. For he still reserves to the central party apparatus "the working out of general perspectives and specific proposals in every institutional area, especially in relation to socialist economic planning; aid in the formation of teams able to establish and run the central institutions of the revolutionary society."

Either one is for all power to the people; workers' power to working people, or one is not. And Sartre still is stuck on the concept of working people needing a vanguard that would "plan" for them.

I think we are all quite clear in our opposition to "vanguardism". But that is not enough. Cohn-Bendit is right when he says that the movement was beyond all the small parties which wanted to lead. But at the same time it is not enough for him to speak about the movement opening up new possibilities which he hopes the workers will fill. We have all seen that the transition point reached with "all is possible," became the concrete actual of a De Gaulle victory! We should not be afraid of an organization of workers and intellectuals, of a philosophic action group, just because vanguardism is wrong. Just going around as Cohn-Bendit wants to, to plant the seeds of revolution, will end only in an aborted revolution if the intellectuals feel any less responsibility than the workers for carrying it through to the end.

He and others must see that their role does not end with "planting seeds". A philosophy of freedom is a catalyst. And it is "vanguard", but only in the sense that it is open to all the creativity implicit in the actions of the students, of the workers. Making explicit that which is implicit in action must not be left in the hands of "the Party."

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Going from the possible to the actual is not only a task of the workers. It is a task for the theoreticians. The action must have purpose, must be guided by the idea of freedom. Only when the action and the idea coalesce can the possibility of freedom become the actuality of freedom. Marxist-Humanism is what gives action its direction.


--Eugene Walker

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With this report we inaugurate a new series of pamphlets: NEWS & LETTERS YOUTH PAMPHLETS. The sixties have demonstrated to all that even though the youth are not directly involved in production, they are the ones whose idealism, in the finest sense of the word, combines with opposition to existing adult society in so unique a way that it literally brings them alongside the workers as builders of the new society.

As our organization as grown older, it has grown younger. Many of our new members and close friends are high school and university students; young factory workers. The youth pamphlets are theirs; to write for, to distribute, to use as they see fit. We invite students and young workers, black and white, to participate in the writing and discussion of those ideas which they feel important in their lives and in transforming this society, Capitalist or Communist, to a new one.

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