

The French Communist Party
versus the Students

Revolutionary Politics in May–June 1968

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f The Apparatchik and the Intellectual

The belief that the working class is the fundamental revolutionary force in modern society is an inextricable element of the Marxist world view. Since the proletariat is exposed to "objective conditions" that become progressively more unpleasant, he develops the "subjective will" to destroy the capitalist system.

Although the working class finds temporary allies in other social classes, in the last analysis it alone accomplishes the revolutionary transformation of society.

* Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.¹

Even though the *Manifesto* is extravagant in its praise of the proletariat, it still contains hints that he will need substantial assistance if he is to accomplish his historical task. For example, in discussing the relationship between Communists and Proletarians, Marx points out that the former have over the "great mass of the proletarians the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march."² Another passage suggests that those blessed with this understanding are frequently of bourgeois origins. As revolutionary conditions develop, Marx says, the proletariat is ultimately joined by a portion of the "bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole."³

One finds a similarly ambiguous attitude toward the proletariat in the writings of Lenin. On the one hand, he unequivocally asserts:

The overthrow of the bourgeoisie can be accomplished only by the proletariat, as the particular class whose economic conditions of existence prepare it for this task and provide it with the possibility and the power to perform it.⁴

While Lenin states that the overthrow of capitalism can be effected only by the proletariat, he also insists that it cannot be accomplished

by the proletariat alone. For, "the history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only trade union consciousness."⁵ In this respect, Lenin follows the teachings of the "renegade Kautsky." To achieve a truly "revolutionary consciousness," the working class needs the assistance of bourgeois ideologues.

The theory of socialism . . . grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. The founders of modern, scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia.⁶

Some argue that this ambiguity in Marxism-Leninism amounts to a paradox. First, we are told that one's state of mind is a reflection of the material conditions in which one lives. "Your very ideas," says Marx to his bourgeois critics, "are but the outgrowth of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property."⁷ "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, on the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness."⁸ But then we are told that the impoverished proletariat can achieve only an inferior level of trade union consciousness, while the relatively prosperous intellectual can achieve "true" or "revolutionary" consciousness.

The ideology of the French Communist party retains a measure of this ambiguity. The PCF insists on the "decisive role of the working class,"⁹ and it emphasizes that this historical mission is the inevitable outgrowth of the "objective situation" in which the proletariat finds itself. "This is not a matter of dogma; it is so because it is the working class which submits most directly to capitalist exploitation."¹⁰

But the Party is equally adamant in asserting that the working class can fulfill its role only if it has the careful tutelage and guidance of the PCF. Waldeck Rochet, the Party's present secretary-general, contends that the Russian revolution demonstrated several "universal lessons." A primary one is "the necessity of a party which is the true, revolutionary vanguard of the working class."¹¹ The French Party, therefore, argues that the proletariat is naturally

revolutionary, while at the same time claiming that the proletariat needs a vanguard to instill in it a revolutionary consciousness.

What equips an organization to fulfill a vanguard role is what Marx calls a "comprehension of history" and a "clear understanding of its processes." Consequently, the French Communist party justifies its leadership of the working class on the grounds that it is thoroughly immersed in the "science" of Marxism-Leninism; as Rochet says:

It is because it is the party of the French working class, inspired by the great principles of Marxism-Leninism, that the French Communist Party is the only revolutionary party in France.¹²

The principles of Marxism-Leninism allow the Party to analyze a given historical situation and, on the basis of its analysis, to provide the proletariat with a proper revolutionary strategy, "The dialectic," says Jacques Duclos, "is not merely a scientific theory, but a method of knowledge and a guide to action."¹³ Likewise, Rochet emphasizes that Marxism-Leninism encompasses not only philosophy and economics but also the "theory and strategy of the international Communist movement."¹⁴

The Party can fulfill its mission as the vanguard of the working class only if it assiduously follows the teachings of Marx and Lenin. But these teachings must be applied in light of the concrete conditions which prevail in particular environments at particular times. In other words, Marxism-Leninism must be carefully interpreted. Rochet reminds us that Lenin stresses that tactics are not deduced from general truths but are always propounded on the basis of theoretical analyses of contemporary events.

The only truly scientific way to approach problems is, in fact, to evaluate with precision the existing situation, particularly the relationship of class forces; it is to be able to know how to reveal and to predict the new tendencies in time to be able to determine on this basis the most correct political line.¹⁵

Since the Party can claim to be the true vanguard of the proletariat only by virtue of the fact that its interpretation of Marxism-Leninism is correct, the interpreter performs a key role within the Party. With-

out the theorist the Party could do nothing, it would be like a body without a head. "There is no revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory," Lenin declared; "the theory of Marx is omnipotent because it is true."¹⁶ It is not surprising, then, that the leadership of most Communist parties is careful to claim ideological primacy: the leader is *the* ideologue.

Maurice Thorez, who was the PCF's leader for almost thirty years until his death in 1964, took great pains to stress his ideological expertise. In his autobiography he informs us that he spent his first prison term learning German, so that he could read the works of Marx and Engels in their original form and thus better apply their teachings to his political tasks. He makes it perfectly clear that his own tactical choices were deeply rooted in the classics of Marxism-Leninism.

The analyses of the situation in France given by Marx in the *18th Brumaire* helped me considerably to understand the contemporary situation. . . . In Lenin's writings I discovered not only a striking picture of our own times, but also masterly directives for leading the proletariat to victory.¹⁷

When Marx and Lenin spoke of theorists, they were usually referring to the bourgeois intelligentsia. It seemed natural that the middle-class Communist might be better equipped to carry out theoretical analyses than his proletarian comrade. Having been raised in a more sophisticated cultural milieu and having attained a higher level of education, he would undoubtedly have less difficulty moving from the realm of the concrete to that of the abstract.

The Italian Communist party has been led since its inception by three highly articulate bourgeois—Antonio Gramsci, Umberto Terraccini, and Palmiro Togliatti. However, the French Communist party, which puts particular stress on ideological matters, has recruited almost all its leaders from the ranks of the proletariat. For the last forty years the French Party has been led by Maurice Thorez, the son of a miner; Jacques Duclos, a former chef's assistant; and Waldeck Rochet, a peasant from Burgundy. The French Party has never lacked intellectual militants. Its ranks include many prominent philosophers, economists, and scientists. But few have succeeded in

insinuating themselves into the Party's policy-making inner sanctums.

It is likely that the relatively uneducated working-class leader feels somewhat uncomfortable in the role of theorist. It is also likely that he realizes he is vulnerable to the ideological challenges of his more intellectually oriented, middle-class comrades. The consequent insecurity of the PCF leadership might account for the fact that it has been so eager to defer to the ideological pronouncements of Moscow. It is obvious that the theoretically inept Thorez had a far greater need for a "strong papacy" than did the theoretically agile Togliatti. Since the Communist militants generally recognized the infallible nature of Stalin's and even Khrushchev's statements, the PCF leaders could remain reasonably safe from ideological criticism if they merely restated these pronouncements. It is not surprising, then, that Thorez strongly opposed Togliatti's concept of "polycentrism."¹⁸

Having achieved hegemony within the Party, the working-class leaders of the PCF have consistently discouraged their bourgeois comrades from engaging in "creative theorizing."* If the bourgeois members were allowed to undertake such activity, and if their conclusions differed from those of the leadership, the competence of the latter would automatically be called into question. In a Communist movement, *the legitimacy of authority rests largely on ideological expertise*. Consequently, the intellectuals have been assigned the task of documenting and generally "dressing up" the theoretical pronouncements of their leaders. In short, if the proletarian apparatchik is to feel secure in his position of political authority, *the bourgeois theorist must not be allowed to theorize*.

André Barjonet, a leading PCF economist who resigned his post during the May uprising, has aptly described the tasks of the loyal bourgeois intellectual.

*This is not to suggest that all Communist leaders of bourgeois origin are subtle and creative theorists, or that all working-class Communists are anti-intellectual ideologues. Marshall Tito, who was among the first members of the Communist movement to encourage innovative Marxist thinking, was of proletarian origins, while Molotov, a highly unoriginal Stalinist, was of cultured, bourgeois stock—a nephew of the composer Scriabin.

Economists and Communist sociologists refer to Marxism at every turn—but for no real purpose. They do not analyze the facts, in order to disengage from them general laws, on the basis of which correct political directives can be drawn; instead, they depart from the pre-established political line and justify it by means of concrete examples.¹⁹

The French intellectuals have not, however, always been in positions of subordination to their working-class comrades. This situation has only gradually evolved, largely as a result of the influence which Stalin exercised on the development of the PCF.

David Caute notes that of the thirty-two members of the executive committee of the First Congress of the PCF, four were workers; the rest were “intellectuals . . . or those generally disposed in their favor.”²⁰ Likewise, the first council of ministers of the Bolshevik government included eleven bourgeois intellectuals and only four proletarians.

During the early twenties the policy-making organs of both the PCF and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were controlled by elements of the bourgeois intelligentsia. But these were also the years when Stalin was busily staffing the administrative apparatus of the Soviet party and government with loyal, working-class subordinates. After the death of Lenin in 1924, Stalin was able to use this bureaucratic power base in his efforts to purge the politburo of its intellectual majority.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the great power struggles of the twenties were essentially battles between the bourgeois intellectual elite and Stalin’s newly recruited army of proletarian functionaries.

As a result of these power struggles, the classic tenets of Marxism-Leninism were subjected to certain “historical determinations.” Marx’s ambiguous attitudes toward the bourgeois intelligentsia were clarified. By the mid-twenties the spokesmen for the bureaucrats began to deemphasize the traditional Marxist view that the intellectual is the guide and tutor of the working class. At the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, Clara Zetkin warned the assembled delegates of the Communist parties that they must not let their organizations become submerged by the intelligentsia, for this stratum tended to produce unreliable Communists.

In the course of the struggle, the proletariat will learn a thousand times that the intellectual is an inconstant ally. We must expect this and not be surprised if, at each perspective of the overthrow of the domination of the bourgeoisie, the intellectuals desert the camp of the revolution.²¹

By 1931 Stalin had carried the denigration of the intellectuals a step further. The intelligentsia, he declared, was totally incapable of understanding the basic policies of the proletariat. Therefore, a new stratum of intellectuals had to be recruited from the “factories, the mines, and the shock brigades.” The “terror” followed, and the remnants of the prerevolutionary Russian middle class were all but eliminated.

During the late twenties the leadership of the PCF responded to Stalin’s policies by purging the Party cadres of their most prominent intellectuals. By 1929, 70 percent of the central committee was of working-class origin. Since numerous members of the Trotskyist opposition were bourgeois intellectuals, the loyal Stalinists had an added incentive to rid the Party of its non-working-class elements.

In 1930 Maurice Thorez was appointed secretary to the PCF central committee. Although he was of impeccably proletarian origin, he seemed to take a somewhat conciliatory attitude toward the intelligentsia. Thorez’s overtures were, however, largely of a tactical nature. He had no desire whatsoever to be guided by the intellectuals, and he continued to exclude them from the Party’s deliberative organs. Instead, Thorez desired to use them, to transform them into political tools. In 1934 the Popular Front was born. The PCF forged a tentative alliance with the Socialist and Radical parties, and it set about to increase its influence among the middle class. Thorez seems to have viewed the intelligentsia as a perfect bridge between the Party and its new allies.

Caute analyzes the attitudes of the Party toward the intellectuals in terms of certain “principles of utility.” The first involves the concept of “pure prestige reflecting favorably upon the Party.” This notion is based upon the belief that the “average Frenchman” holds the intellectual in unusually high esteem. The French supposedly feel that once an individual has attained expertise in science, literature, or philosophy, he can apply it with equal facility to political and social

matters. French political parties therefore assume that it is of particular importance to win the endorsement of prestigious intellectual figures.

In 1945, for example, Roger Garaudy proclaimed at the Tenth Party Congress that the PCF's recent electoral gains in urban, middle-class districts were due largely to its growing influence among the Parisian intelligentsia.²² But while the Party used the intellectual, it continued to exclude him from the decision-making process. From the proletarianization of the Party in the late twenties to its partial liberalization in the late fifties, few intellectuals were chosen to serve on the central committee and none were put on the politburo.

From time to time, Thorez apparently sensed that the Marxist intellectuals aspired to reassume their role as "the brains" of the movement. He made no secret of the fact that he had an extremely low opinion of this prospect. In July 1948 he made a speech in which he asserted that "a certain number of intellectuals" had not yet "caught up with the political and ideological positions of the working-class."²³ He noted with displeasure that the intellectuals had also developed a tendency to try to "teach" Marxism-Leninism to the central committee. Thorez admitted that Marx and Engels were bourgeois intellectuals and that they had taught the principles of scientific socialism to the working class. But he insisted that the PCF had already succeeded in thoroughly internalizing these principles and had, in addition, tested and proved them in combat. He concluded that the working class must now guide the intellectual rather than vice versa. And since the working class and the Party were almost identical, that meant that the intellectual would have to submit without reserve to the political and ideological positions of the Party.

Laurent Casanova was given the task of expanding upon these themes in a book entitled *Le Parti communiste, les intellectuels et la nation* (1949). To illustrate his themes he employs a Socratic rather than a Marxian dialectic.* He has a hypothetical comrade

*During the Stalinist era, the Socratic dialectic we invariably used to refute theoretical criticisms of the Party leadership. The Stalinist ideologue would

put forth the following thesis: "there can be no revolutionary transformation of society without the active intervention of the intellectuals." He responds by outlining the consequences and implications of this demand that "the working class and its Party should share with the intellectuals the leadership of the revolutionary movement, for reasons which deal directly with the revolutionary content of the tasks which have been set by the proletariat."²⁴ According to Casanova this would be a blatant contradiction of the basic Leninist tenet that the proletariat is the only true revolutionary class. The idea that the intellectual should share in the direction of the Communist movement is said to be "an unsupportable proposition from the moment that it is stated in all clarity."²⁵

Casanova's book makes it clear that although the ideology of the PCF reproduces Marx's ambiguous attitude toward the working class, it suppresses the corresponding ambiguity toward the intelligentsia. To thwart the challenges periodically posed by the Party intellectuals, the proletarian leadership unequivocally rejects the original Marxist notion that the intellectual guides the working class.

Casanova explains that the proper task of the intellectuals is to fulfill secondary, service functions. First, they must support the Party line among their colleagues. "It is in this way that the Communist intellectuals actively militate in unions or groups of writers, artists, scholars, doctors, lawyers—and often in positions of authority."²⁶ Second, the intellectuals serve the Party by periodically assuming the task of the political journalists. "They contribute to periodicals edited by the Party in order to treat questions of interest to the intelligentsia or to debate certain important ideological problems."²⁷ Finally, they help the Party spread its doctrine, and they assist it in its efforts to raise the level of mass consciousness and win the ideological struggle with the bourgeoisie.

Casanova fails, however, to mention the two specific functions that he, as an intellectual, is performing by writing *Le Parti com-*

extract a proposition from the position of his opponent and would then list its logical consequences. The proposition was "disproved" if it could be shown that any of these consequences "contradicted" any of the "unquestionable" postulates of Stalinist theory.

muniste. The first entails translating the ex cathedra pronouncements of the Party leadership into somewhat subtler and more sophisticated terms. Casanova tries to transform Thorez's demand that the intellectuals "stay in their place" into an acceptable theoretical statement—a thesis that appears to be in accord with the basic principles of Leninism. The second function involves polemicizing against those who would challenge the ideological supremacy of the Party leadership. His own book, for example, bitterly denounces the theoretical pretensions of Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism, Casanova asserts, "in its present form appeared alongside the decomposition of the bourgeoisie, and its origins are bourgeois."²⁸

Casanova's offensive against the existentialists was in part a response to Soviet prompting. In the late forties Stalin's trusted aid, Andrey Zhdanov, had begun an intensive campaign against all "non-Communist ideological influences." The movement had entered a period of harsh, theoretical sectarianism. But the polemics against Sartre also represent a long-established element of French Communist tradition. They provide an ideal example of the proletarian leadership's ritualistic reaction to bourgeois intellectuals who refuse to fulfill their assigned roles and who, instead, insist upon engaging in "creative theorizing."

personal worth in a
purposeless universe.

2 Existentialism and the Dilemmas of the Intellectual

The PCF mobilized its most prominent intellectuals in an effort to discredit Sartre. Henri Lefebvre, dean of the French academic Marxists, noted that Sartre had been "a disciple of the Nazi Heidegger."¹ Jean Kanapa, editor of *La Nouvelle Critique* and a former student of Sartre, referred to him as a "Fascist abscess" and a "cop-intellectual." Roger Garaudy expressed his disgust over the "intellectual fornications" of the existentialists.² In 1947 *Pravda* accused Sartre of being "a servile executor of a mission entrusted to him by Wall Street." Not to be outdone, *l'Humanité* darkly hinted that he was in the pay of the American ambassador.³ (The insults of the Communists were almost indistinguishable from those of the extreme right; pro-Gaullist Claude Mauriac characterized Sartre as an "excrementalist.")⁴

The Party occasionally halted the polemics and cautiously extended an olive branch. It welcomed Sartre's participation in the World Peace Movement, for example, and at the time of the Vienna Conference, *l'Humanité* forgot its former rancor and noted approvingly that the congress had given him a standing ovation.⁵ At one point, Kanapa was prevailed upon to apologize for the excesses of his previous insults; and at one of the first mass rallies for disarmament and peace, Sartre was given a place of honor on the speaker's platform, next to Jacques Duclos.⁶

The PCF's treatment of Sartre followed a long-established pattern. When he agreed to fulfill what it considered to be the proper functions of the bourgeois intellectual, it patted him approvingly on the head; but when he tried to fulfill the role of the creative Marxist theorist, it reacted with insults and vicious innuendo.

If the Party manifested a definite ambivalence in its treatment of Sartre, he manifested a similar ambivalence in his treatment of the Party. Early in 1956 he defended the PCF from the criticisms of Pierre Hervé, a former Communist journalist. While he noted his disagreement with certain aspects of its doctrine, Sartre pointed out that the Party, as a political entity, displayed an extraordinary intelligence and realism. Its tactical decisions, he asserted, were rarely mistaken.⁷ Yet six months later, after the Hungarian invasion, he

provided by the commitment to common strategic goals and shared ideological beliefs.

Yet, one of the reasons that the PCF's reaction to the events of May seemed unimaginative and ineffective was that its decisions were often shaped by its organizational doctrine. While the need for unity necessitates the strengthening of doctrinal commitment, the need for flexible, creative behavior seems to demand that the decision maker free himself from the confining bonds of ideology.

If the Communists are to respond effectively to new challenges, they must set aside the rigid schemas of *doctrine* and utilize instead the more subtle insights of Marxist *theory*. In short, the theorist—the petit-bourgeois intellectual—must assume a new and expanded role. The specialists in economics and sociology should be encouraged to carry out in-depth studies of particular social problems, and on the basis of these studies, they should be permitted to present proposals for strategic and tactical policy to the central committee.

However, any subordination of doctrine to theory tends to undermine the authority of the present Party elite. The formal legitimacy of the apparatchiki's power rests on their supposed mastery of Marxist-Leninist ideology—on their roles as the guardians of the Party's traditional organizational doctrine.

In the last analysis, the PCF's dilemmas express themselves in this conflict: on the one hand, the Party wishes to expand and diversify itself; on the other hand, it wishes to preserve its unity—and also the hegemony within this unity of the proletarian apparatchik.

As Lenin said: "The theory of Marx is all-powerful because it is true." But its truth assumes a different form in different settings and situations. Whose task is it to pursue these separate truths? Must the same individuals who determine the truth also lead the activities that translate it into power? Or conversely, must the specialists in "power" also be specialists in "truth"? Finally, who synthesizes these partial truths into the one, indivisible Truth, which gives the movement its resolve and its will to proceed—and which cements its unity?

Notes

CHAPTER 1

- 1 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York, 1966), p. 19.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 4 V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York, 1956), p. 76.
- 5 V. I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (New York, 1965), p. 33.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, p. 26.
- 8 Karl Marx, Preface to the *Critique de l'économie politique* (Paris, 1957), p. 4.
- 9 Waldeck Rochet, *Les Événements de mai-juin* (Paris, 1968), p. 29; all translations from French texts are my own unless otherwise noted.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Waldeck Rochet, *Qu'est-ce qu'un révolutionnaire dans la France de notre temps?* (Paris, 1968), pp. 20-21.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 13 Waldeck Rochet, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie marxiste?* (Paris, 1966), p. 8.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
- 15 Rochet, *Qu'est-ce qu'un révolutionnaire*, p. 17.
- 16 V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (New York, 1967), p. 41.
- 17 Maurice Thorez, *Son of the People*, trans. Douglas Garmian (New York, 1938), p. 63.
- 18 The PCF's and the PCI's divergent attitudes toward polycentrism were obviously determined by a wide variety of factors, of which the problem of ideological orthodoxy was only one; see Donald Blackmer, *Unity in Diversity: Italian Communism and the International Communist Movement* (Cambridge, 1968).
- 19 André Barjonet, *La Révolution trahie de 1968* (Paris, 1968).
- 20 David Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals* (New York, 1964), p. 25.
- 21 Gérard Walter, *L'Histoire du Parti communiste français* (Paris, 1948), p. 378.
- 22 Cauter, *Communism*, p. 28.
- 23 Laurent Casanova, *Le Parti communiste, les intellectuels et la nation* (Paris, 1949), p. 69.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 12.