

## INTRODUCTION

# The Maoist Temptation

It is true enough: millions of people have jobs which offer no reason for living; neither production nor consumption can provide existence with meaning. . . . If the present phase of history can be defined in terms of ballistic missiles, thermo-nuclear weapons, the moon race and the arms race, should we be surprised that part of the student population wavers between the negation of the hippies, an aspiration towards redemptive violence, and escape towards a new utopia?

—Raymond Aron, *La révolution introuvable*

It is a remarkable fact that some forty years later, the year 1968 remains an obligatory point of reference for contemporary politics. During the 2008 presidential election, one of Barack Obama's campaign pledges was that he would elevate American politics to a plateau of unity beyond the divisiveness of the 1960s. The John McCain campaign, for its part, tried repeatedly to tarnish Obama's luster by dramatizing his association during the early days of his political career with former 1960s radical William Ayers. Similarly, during the 2007 French presidential campaign, both main candidates felt compelled to take a stance on the heritage of May 1968. For the eventual winner, Nicolas Sarkozy, the May events served as a negative touchstone. Playing on the nation's insecurities following a series of riots in immigrant suburbs, Sarkozy labeled May 1968 as a turning point in French history when respect for authority declined and moral anarchy gained the upper hand. Conversely, the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royale made a point of holding her final election rally in the Charléty Stadium, which had been the site for one of the May revolt's largest political rallies.

In Germany, too, the 1960s have served as an important point of reference for making sense of contemporary politics. In 2001 photos surfaced showing Foreign Minister and ex-sixty-eighter Joschka Fischer angrily hurling a brick at a policeman during a 1973 demonstration. Among conservatives the image—depicting a confrontation that had occurred nearly thirty years earlier—provoked a flood of accusations alleging that Fischer was unfit for office. More generally, the episode gave rise to a groundswell of national soul-searching about how to historicize the unsettling political tumult of three decades earlier.

In many respects the year 1968 was an *annus mirabilis* with global political repercussions. The specter of revolution materialized in Peking, Mexico City, New York, Chicago, Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague, where, tragically, hopes for “socialism with a human face” were brutally crushed under the tread of Soviet tanks.

In France, however, events unfolded according to a somewhat different logic. As elsewhere, the revolt was begun by students. But one of the May uprising’s unique aspects was that, within a fortnight, French workers decided to join forces with the student demonstrators. This potent student-worker alliance led to a massive general strike that paralyzed the central government and, at one point, compelled President Charles de Gaulle to flee. When the smoke had cleared, eight to nine million French men and women had joined in the strike. France had experienced its greatest social unrest since the 1930s.

The *Wind from the East* represents a modest contribution to making sense of these challenging and tumultuous events. By focusing on one of May 1968’s neglected backstories—the wave of Sinophilia that crested in France later that decade—it seeks to illuminate the whole.

The story begins with a small group of *gauchistes*—political activists who had positioned themselves to the left of the French Communist Party—who were students of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser at the prestigious *Ecole normale supérieure*. Fascinated and impassioned by political events that were transpiring nearly half a world away, they began to identify profoundly with Mao’s China, which they came to perceive as a panacea for metropolitan France’s own multifarious political ills.

None spoke Chinese, and reliable information about contemporary China was nearly impossible to come by, since Mao had basically forbidden access to outsiders. Little matter. The less these *normaliens* knew about contemporary China, the better it suited their purposes. Cultural Revolutionary China became a projection screen, a Rorschach test, for their innermost radical political hopes and fantasies, which in de Gaulle's France had been deprived of a real-world outlet. China became the embodiment of a "radiant utopian future." By "becoming Chinese," by assuming new identities as French incarnations of China's Red Guards, these dissident Althusserians sought to reinvent themselves wholesale. Thereby, they would rid themselves of their guilt both as the progeny of colonialists and, more generally, as bourgeois.

Increasingly, the "real" China ceased to matter. Instead, at issue were questions of political eschatology. The "successes" of Chinese communism—or its imagined successes—would magically compensate for the abysmal failures of the Communist experience elsewhere. The young gauchistes viewed themselves as *pur et dur*—true believers who refused to compromise with the sordid realities of contemporary France. In their eyes there could be no going back to the faded glories of French republicanism—a tradition that, in their view, had been fatally compromised by the legacies of colonialism and Gaullist authoritarianism. One senses that if the Cultural Revolution did not exist, the gauchistes would have had to invent it. Mao's China offered the students a way to perpetuate the intoxications of the French revolutionary tradition—the glories of the Bastille, of Valmy, and of the Paris Commune—in an era when the oppressive nature of "really existing socialism" had reached undeniably grotesque proportions.

The French Communist Party took pleasure in belittling the Maoists, owing to their small numbers, as a *groupuscule*—a little group. Were it not for the political maladroitness of the Pompidou government, which in the spring of 1970 abruptly arrested the Maoist leaders and banned their newspaper, their story, when set against the overall tapestry of the May events, would probably rate a minor footnote. But owing to the authorities' heavy-handedness, overnight the unheralded Maoists became a cause célèbre. None other than Jean-Paul Sartre took over the Maoist newspaper, in bold defiance of the government's

arbitrary and brutal political sweep. At one point the Rolling Stones' frontman, Mick Jagger, interrupted a concert at the Palais des Sports Stadium to plead for the imprisoned Maoists' release. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Maoism had acquired immense cachet as political chic. It began attracting prominent intellectuals—Michel Foucault as well as *Tel Quel* luminaries Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva—who perceived in Maoism a creative solution to France's excruciating political immobilism. After all, the Socialist Party was in total disarray. The Communists had become a "party of order." The Gaullists, with Pompidou now at the helm, pointedly refused to relinquish the reins of power. Yet, here was a left-wing groupuscule active in the Latin Quarter that in many respects had become the heir of May 1968's emancipatory quest.

As a result of the May events and their contact with the Maoists, French intellectuals bade adieu to the Jacobin-Leninist authoritarian political model of which they had formerly been so enamored. They ceased behaving like mandarins and internalized the virtues of democratic humility. In May's aftermath, they attuned themselves to new forms and modes of social struggle. Their post-May awareness concerning the injustices of top-down politics alerted them to the virtues of "society" and political struggle from below. In consequence, French intellectual life was wholly transformed. The Sartrean model of the engaged intellectual was upheld, but its content was totally reconfigured. Insight into the debilities of political vanguardism impelled French writers and thinkers to reevaluate the Dreyfusard legacy of the universal intellectual: the intellectual who shames the holders of power by flaunting timeless moral truths.

The Maoists' story is worth telling insofar as it represents a paradigmatic instance of a *constructive political learning process*. The Maoists started out as political dogmatists and true believers. But they soon found it impossible to reconcile their pro-Chinese ideological blinders with the emancipatory spirit of May. Once they ceased deluding themselves with revolutionary slogans, they began to understand politics in an entirely new light. The idea of cultural revolution was thereby wholly transformed. It ceased to be an exclusively Chinese point of reference. Instead it came to stand for an entirely new approach to thinking about

politics: an approach that abandoned the goal of seizing political power and instead sought to initiate a democratic revolution in mores, habits, sexuality, gender roles, and human sociability in general.

Ultimately, the gauchistes came to realize that human rights and the values of libertarian socialism, rather than operating at cross-purposes, were complementary. It was the French, after all, who back in 1789 had invented the rights of man and citizen. Under the more contemporary guise of human rights, it was to this legacy they would now return.

## AN INTERPRETATION IN SEARCH OF AN EVENT

It has often been said, perhaps only half in jest, that May 1968 in France is an “interpretation” in search of an “event,” so concertedly have historians, pundits, and politicians struggled to impose intellectual sense on a sequence of events that at every turn seemed to defy tidy conceptual coherence.

In both France and the United States, the idea that the 1960s were an unmitigated catastrophe has become a staple of conservative ideology. On this side of the Atlantic, one of the commonplaces of neoconservative history-writing is that the social disequilibrium of the postwar period—urban riots, drug use, accelerated divorce rates, and declining respect for authority—can uniformly be traced to the 1960s, purportedly one of the most disastrous decades in American history. Norman Podhoretz, one of neoconservatism’s founding fathers, believes that the 1960s witnessed a process of irreversible cultural demise: “Auden’s low dishonest decade, of course, was the 1930s; its clever hopes centered on the construction of a workers’ paradise in the Soviet Union. Our counterpart was the 1960s, and its less clever hopes centered not on construction . . . but on destruction—the destruction of the institutions that made up the American way of life.”<sup>1</sup> In the eyes of Newt Gingrich, American history possessed a 350-year narrative coherence until the

<sup>1</sup> Norman Podhoretz, “America at War: ‘The One Thing Needful,’” Francis Boyer Lecture, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, DC, February 13, 2002.

1960s, when, owing to the excesses of liberal elites and counterculture hedonism, everything unraveled.<sup>2</sup> Straussian political philosopher Allan Bloom takes this argument a step further, suggesting that the New Left was, in essence, Hitler Youth *redivivus*. “History always repeats itself,” observes Bloom. “The American university of the 1960s was experiencing the same dismantling of the structure of rational inquiry as had the German university in the 1930s.”<sup>3</sup> Bloom’s account offers us disturbing images of universities besieged by violence-prone African American student groups. Typically, the liberal university administration spinelessly kowtows to their demands. The mass of students, like sheep or lemmings, spurred by irrational partisanship, simply go along for the ride. Meanwhile, the knowledgeable elite—Bloom and his compadres—possessing “right reason,” are marginalized and shunned. Like the protagonist of Plato’s cave allegory, they have seen the sunlight—they alone know where truth really lies—but the hoi polloi, blinded by passion, refuse to heed their counsel. However, when it comes to assessing the violence and depredations of the forces of order, Bloom’s book is curiously silent.

Bloom’s account conveniently abstracts from the excesses of the times: pervasive racism, the unresponsiveness of political elites, urban decay predominantly affecting minorities and the underclass, and, last but not least, an unjust war, fought by palpably immoral means: napalm, indiscriminate aerial bombardments, and ruthless search-and-destroy missions. In the course of the American drive to halt the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, some two million Vietnamese, most of whom were civilians, lost their lives. In neoconservative lore, the Vietnam conflict was ultimately a “good war.” Yet the American will

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in “The Revenge of the Squares: Newt Gingrich and Pals Rewrite the 1960s,” by Fred Barnes, *New Republic*, March 13, 1995, 23: “The Great Society messed everything up: don’t work, don’t eat. . . . From 1965 to 1994, we did strange and weird things as a country. Now we’re done with that and we have to recover.”

<sup>3</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 313. For a more detailed look at the neoconservative view of the 1960s, see Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America’s Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 44–48.

to fight was treacherously undermined by liberals, protesters, and draft dodgers. Ultimately, the generational war at home tragically and ineluctably sabotaged the war effort abroad, depriving America of victory against a godless and noxious geopolitical enemy.

If one seized the neoconservative “conventional wisdom” about the 1960s generation and stood it on its head, one would probably be much closer to the truth. Instead of being the fount of a proliferating immorality, the 1960s generation was in fact singularly moral. For many activists, the imperatives of social justice became an obsession, and “living in truth” a veritable credo. The neocon brotherhood overlooked the fact that it required profound wellsprings of civil courage to become a freedom rider in the Jim Crow South; to risk arrest for the sake of free speech or freedom of assembly; to demonstrate against an immoral war; to burn one’s draft card as an act of conscience; and to voluntarily emigrate rather than kill innocent civilians, as the armed forces often required.

## A BREAKDOWN OF CIVILIZATION?

In France rancor vis-à-vis the 1968 generation and its legacy has been equally widespread. As the May events reached their zenith, President Charles de Gaulle set the tone, lamenting: “Reform, yes; sheer disorder, no!” In the general’s view, the student activists had set forth no discernible political goals. They had provoked an eruption of pure anarchy. The forces of order had completely lost control of the situation, resulting in a “breakdown of civilization” that only a draconian restoration of political authority could remedy. Among Gaullists, the idea of a global “crisis of civilization” gained popularity. In this view, it was not de Gaulle’s trademark autocratic leadership that was to blame. Instead, France was the unfortunate victim of a more general planetary disorder. The rate of technological advance—the pace of “modernization”—had accelerated beyond citizens’ capacities to adjust morally and psychologically. These adaptational difficulties resulted in various forms of anomic behavior: riots, protests, rebellion, and generalized social unrest. De Gaulle rued the unwillingness of French youth

to embrace the blandishments of modern consumer society. But he also harbored fears that a more general “mechanization” of life had taken hold, in which the individual could not escape being crushed.<sup>4</sup>

The most influential conservative interpretation of the May revolt was set forth by the doyen of the French Right, Raymond Aron. In a series of articles written for *Le Figaro* as the events unfolded, Aron, with characteristic insight, depicted the student uprising as a “psychodrama,” a “quasi-revolution.” Aron’s detractors have assumed that he sought to trivialize the May uprising as a rebellion among disaffected and maladjusted youth. Instead of taking the students’ political demands seriously, he purportedly sought to shift the discussion to the “clinical” plane of adolescent social psychology.

Aron’s critique captured something essential about the May movement that few other observers had noted. Although the insurgents repeatedly paid lip service to the ideals of the French revolutionary tradition, these allusions were largely rhetorical. They remained on the plane of citation or pastiche. The sixty-eighters were aping their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century progenitors. The May events were a grandiose instance of revolutionary pantomime. Hence, the chasm between the revolt’s rhetorical dimension and the actors’ real intentions, which were “reformist” rather than “revolutionary.” Aron recognized that the May insurrection represented not the culmination of the French revolutionary tradition but its last dying gasp.

Equally hostile to May’s legacy were the revolt’s republican detractors. Among republicans, the May movement signified the moment when French youth relinquished respect for authority in favor of a self-indulgent hedonism. Heretofore, French society had been structured by venerable social institutions: the university system, the Catholic Church, the army, trade unions, political parties, and so forth. With the triumph of May’s antiauthoritarian credo, these institutions suddenly lost their legitimacy. The May revolt accelerated France’s transformation into a centrifugally fragmented, atomistic society: a polity of self-absorbed, narcissistic individuals. Worse still, it was the moment of France’s permanent and irreversible “Americanization.”

<sup>4</sup>Boisseau, *Pour servir le générale*, 89.

In this view, in May's aftermath, it became impossible to form meaningful and lasting attachments. Social solidarity had been permanently eroded, sacrificed on the altar of American-style possessive individualism.<sup>5</sup>

The republican execration of May enjoyed a resurgence during the 1990s, in part owing to the popularity of novelists such as Michel Houellebecq and Michel Le Dantec. Houellebecq's novels are inhabited by a rogue's gallery of dysfunctional personality types. They wander desultorily from mind-numbing jobs—often in the high-tech sector or sex tourism industry—to dispassionate, unfeeling relationships suffused with anonymous, mechanical sex. Unable to emote or to connect, Houellebecq's protagonists lead lives of quiet desperation, which the novelist depicts with eloquent candor:

Your tax papers are up to date. Your bills are paid on time. You never go out without your identity card. Yet you haven't any friends. . . . The fact is that nothing can halt the ever-increasing recurrence of those moments where your total isolation, the sensation of an all-consuming emptiness, the foreboding that your existence is nearing a painful and definitive end, all combine to lunge you into a state of real suffering. . . . You have had a life. There have been moments when you were having a life. Of course you don't remember too much about it; but there are photographs to prove it.<sup>6</sup>

Although Houellebecq's characters are too young to have been sixty-eighters, their psychological and emotional failings are meant to reflect the era's disastrous political and cultural legacy.

Undoubtedly, one of the May revolt's immediate repercussions was to significantly raise the bar of utopian political expectations. Leftists

<sup>5</sup> For the predominant representatives of this perspective, see the works by Debray, *Le pouvoir intellectuel en France*; Ferry and Renault, 68–86; Le Goff, *Mai '68*; and Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide*. For a good account of the generalized animus against the 1960s, see Lindenberg, *Le rappel à l'ordre*.

<sup>6</sup> Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine*, 8.

were convinced that a “radiant utopian future” was only months away and that the lifespan of de Gaulle’s imperious Fifth Republic was distinctly limited. Soon, the imagination would accede to power, as the well-known May slogan, “L’imagination au pouvoir!” had prophesied.

French society *did* change radically in the May uprising’s aftermath, although undoubtedly the transformation was not as far-reaching or thoroughgoing as many former sixty-eighters had hoped. The changes were more subtle and long term, more *evolutionary* than *revolutionary*. For the most part they transpired in the more indeterminate realm of cultural politics, which helps to account for the significance that the Chinese Cultural Revolution assumed in the eyes of various leftist student groups. The transformation in question pertained to modes of sociability and the perception of social roles, to questions of sexuality, claims to authority, and the status of heretofore underrepresented or marginalized social groups—women, immigrants, gays, and the unemployed.

At base, the May revolt effectuated a sweeping and dramatic transformation of everyday life. The politics of everyday life functioned as an exit strategy, allowing French youth to escape from the dogmas of orthodox Marxism as well as the ideological straitjacket the French Communist Party imposed. It enabled the activists to address a variety of prepolitical, “existential” concerns: issues pertaining to psychology, sexuality, family life, urbanism, and basic human intimacy. Via the discourse of everyday life the student militants were able to renew the lexicon of contemporary social criticism, making it relevant for the peculiar challenges of the modern world.<sup>7</sup> One of the activists’ central problems was that under conditions of late capitalism, domination was no longer confined to the wage labor–capital dyad that had been central for Marx. Instead, in advanced industrial society the logic of commodification—the process whereby relations among persons become quantifiable, opaque, and thinglike—had surpassed the workplace, penetrating and suffusing social life in its totality.

<sup>7</sup> For two classic texts on the politics of everyday life, see Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, and Vaneigem, *Treatise on Living*. For the intellectual background of the May uprising, see the indispensable contribution by Epistémon, *Ces idées*.

## THE OTHER HALF OF THE SKY

During the 1960s Maoism's popularity went hand in hand with the intoxications of third worldism. After all, China—the “other half of the sky”—was the world's most populous nation. In 1949, following two decades of protracted struggle, Mao successfully expelled Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists from the mainland. Thereby, he succeeded in providing the world with a new model of revolution based on the central role of the peasantry, a model that seemed well suited to an era of global anticolonial struggle. Soon, the attractions of Chinese “peasant communism” were amplified through Castro's seizure of power in Cuba and Vietnam's heroic efforts to throw off the yoke of American imperialism.

The 1960s were a time of acute disenchantment with Western modernity. Denizens of advanced industrial society discovered that not only did affluence fail to coincide with happiness, but that the two often seemed to operate at cross-purposes. A dizzying array of consumer choices led to a heightened anxiety about status. By defining themselves through their purchasing capacity, Westerners had lost sight of human essentials: family, friendship, and an ability to enjoy oneself apart from the prefabricated amusements of the so-called culture industry.<sup>8</sup> In a 1968 speech, presidential candidate Robert Kennedy eloquently encapsulated the widespread and deep-seated generational discontent:

We will find neither national purpose nor personal satisfaction in a mere continuation of economic progress, in an endless amassing of worldly goods. We cannot measure national spirit by the Dow Jones Average, nor national achievement by the Gross National Product. For the Gross National Product includes air pollution, and ambulances to clear our highways from carnage. . . . The Gross National Product includes the destruction of the redwoods and the death of Lake Superior. It grows with the production of napalm and missiles and nuclear warheads. . . . It includes . . . the

<sup>8</sup> See Horkheimer and Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 120–67.

broadcasting of television programs which glorify violence to sell goods to our children. . . . It does not allow for the health of our families, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It is indifferent to the decency of our factories and the safety of our streets alike. . . . It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.<sup>9</sup>

Journalists, scholars, and intellectuals wondered aloud whether the Chinese approach to industrialization might be a viable path to modernization, one that might circumvent the upsets and dislocations of the predominant Western models. Chinese socialism thus doubled as a projection screen for disillusioned Westerners of all political persuasions and inclinations.

Beginning with the Sino-Soviet rift in the early 1960s, Mao tried to wrest the banner of revolutionism from Russia. The Soviets were derided as “social imperialists” and “revisionists”—a regime more interested in furthering its own geopolitical aims than in advancing the ends of world revolution. Mao’s doctrine of New Democratic Revolution sought to transpose China’s model of revolutionary struggle to other developing nations suffering from the injustices of Western imperialism. His theory proposed a two-stage process that harmonized well with the anticolonialist zeitgeist. The first stage was defined by struggles of national liberation against colonial oppression. The second stage would undertake the political and economic transition to socialist rule.

Among left-wing sympathizers, China’s star rose as the Soviet Union’s fell. Revelations concerning forced labor camps, the cruel suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, as well as Khrushchev’s flirtations with the heresies of “peaceful coexistence” combined to discredit the Soviet experiment in “really existing socialism.” It became increasingly clear that Soviet Marxism had forfeited all progressive claims. It had degenerated into a repellent, authoritarian “science of legitimation” (Rudolf Bahro). Conversely, the repute of Communist China benefited from

<sup>9</sup>Robert Kennedy, speech at the University of Kansas, March 18, 1968, in *RFK: Collected Speeches*, ed. Edwin O. Guthmann and Jeffrey Shulman (New York: Viking, 1993) 330.

misleading images of a simple but joyous people working shoulder to shoulder to construct a genuinely humane version of socialism.

Maoism's global prestige was further enhanced when, in 1966, the Great Helmsman launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. To outsiders, the Cultural Revolution seemed like a laudable effort to reactivate Chinese communism's original revolutionary élan, thereby avoiding the bureaucratic ossification afflicting Soviet communism. The fact that reliable information concerning the Cultural Revolution's manifold sanguinary excesses was hard to come by worked distinctly to China's advantage. Western journalists' celebratory accounts depicting the glories of the Chinese road to socialism helped to reinforce existing pro-Chinese predispositions and convictions.

Unlike the Soviets, China never sought to orchestrate an international Communist movement. With the experience of the Comintern (dissolved in 1943), the Russians had too much of a head start. Moreover, the volatility of China's domestic politics, as illustrated by the abrupt alternation of policy declarations—from the “Let 100 Flowers Bloom” campaign (1956–57) to the “Great Leap Forward” (1959) to the “Cultural Revolution” (1966)—with the accompanying social turmoil, made China seem like a less-than-desirable political model.

Maoism was nevertheless able to gain favor among many advocates of third world revolution, especially in South America and Asia. Convinced that Mao's notion of peasant communism could be fruitfully transposed to Latin America, the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, invoked a Maoist pedigree. In Nepal, Maoist guerrillas are still active in antiroyalist struggles.<sup>10</sup> During the 1960s, Maoism also made tangible inroads among Western leftist circles. In Germany a dogmatic, Stalinized version of Maoism took root among the numerous so-called K groups (K = Kommunist) that mushroomed during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>11</sup> In Italy, too, certain Italian Communist Party dissidents evinced an attraction to Mao's populism.

<sup>10</sup> See Somini Sengupta, “Where Maoists Still Matter,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 30, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of these groups and their activities, see Kühn, *Stalins Enkel*. It is worth noting that the founding document of the German Red Army Faction—colloquially known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang—“The Concept of the Urban Guerrilla”

In the United States, Maoism enjoyed cachet among the Black Panthers, who, during the 1960s, financed firearm purchases by selling the Little Red Book at Berkeley's Sproul Plaza. The militants' daily, *The Black Panther*, was suffused with Maoist slogans. The Panthers believed that Mao's strategic elevation of the downtrodden masses to a position of revolutionary centrality had important parallels with the lot of oppressed African Americans. Yet, a good part of Maoism's attraction had less to do with strictly doctrinal matters than with the aesthetics of political militancy. Charismatic Panther leaders like Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver were enamored of Maoist slogans such as "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" and "A revolution is not a dinner party."

In France, disillusionment with the Soviet Union and with the French Communist Party (PCF) caused Maoism's stock to rise. The PCF had a heroic political past as resistance fighters during the Nazi occupation. In France's first nationwide elections following the Liberation, the Communists were the leading vote-getters. The PCF enjoyed a comfortable niche in the French political system, habitually accruing some 20 percent of the vote. Yet, in the eyes of many on the Left, the Communists had become excessively complacent. Conventional electoral success seemed to trump its commitment to radical political change. Moreover, the PCF enjoyed the dubious distinction of being the most resolutely Stalinist among the European Communist parties. Its servility to Moscow was notorious. The 1950s and 1960s were a time of legendary cultural ferment—the era of the new novel and the New Wave cinema. In Left Bank circles, existentialists and structuralists waged a storied battle for intellectual predominance. The PCF, for its part, seemed mired in anachronistic debates dating from the 1930s. The party's intellectual stagnation was palpable and

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(1971), bore as its motto the following citation from Mao's Little Red Book: "It is good if we are attacked by the enemy, since it proves that we have drawn a clear line of demarcation between the enemy and ourselves. It is still better if the enemy attacks us wildly and paints us as utterly black and without a single virtue; it demonstrates that we have not only drawn a clear line of demarcation between the enemy and ourselves but achieved a great deal in our work"; Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 15.

undeniable. More worrisome still was the fact that its leadership was encountering great difficulties in recruiting new members, especially among French youth.

Hence, when the Sino-Soviet dispute erupted in the early 1960s, in the eyes of many, the Chinese Communists' efforts to equate Soviet Marxism with a lackluster "revisionism" seemed persuasive. In 1964 a number of ex-Communists formed their own breakaway pro-Chinese cell, the *Fédération des cercles marxistes-léninistes*. In 1966, as Mao inaugurated the Cultural Revolution, the same group, with Beijing's official blessing, rebaptized itself the *Mouvement communiste français marxiste-léniniste* (MCF-ML) and transformed itself into a veritable party. However, it would not get far in its rearguard effort to revivify Marxist orthodoxy—in the eyes of the MCF-ML stalwarts, the French Communist Party's major sin was that it had remained *insufficiently Stalinist*. The MCF-ML never succeeded in attracting much of a following. It was feted in Beijing and by China's lone European ally, Enver Hoxa's Albania, but it was destined to remain an insignificant blip on the French political landscape.

It is estimated that in 1968, France had approximately fifteen hundred Maoists. About thirty-five of them were concentrated on the rue d'Ulm, the seat of France's most prestigious university, l'Ecole normale supérieure. Among French students, the normaliens were la crème de la crème; yet, by and large, they were alienated from the Fifth Republic's lethargic political institutions and radicalized by the neocolonial horrors of the Vietnam War. In their eyes, the United States had merely picked up in Indochina where France had left off in 1954. The normaliens' pro-Chinese delusions were immortalized in an idiosyncratic agitational film directed by the wunderkind of New Wave cinema Jean-Luc Godard: *La Chinoise*. Today, many ex-Maoists, having undergone the "long march through the institutions," have become luminaries of French cultural and political life: philosophers, architects, scholars, and advisers to the Socialist Party.

Curiously, in the spring of 1968, as the May events unfolded, the Maoists were nowhere to be found. Prisoners of their own ideological dogmatism, they had difficulty fathoming the idea that what had begun

as a student revolt might become a catalyst for a general political uprising. Their misjudgment of May's political import would haunt many of them for years to come. Were the narrative of French student Maoism to break off in 1968, the story would constitute little more than a curious political footnote to a more general social upheaval.

The Maoists would not hit their political stride until the post-May period. Their support of a desultory coalition of marginal groups—immigrants, the unemployed, prisoners, gays—gained them considerable publicity and admiration. The French government, with de Gaulle's successor, Georges Pompidou, now at the helm, felt that they could be effectively neutralized were their leaders arrested and their publications impounded. Yet, by proceeding thus, the French authorities succeeded only in turning them into martyrs.

## THE HOUR OF THE INTELLECTUALS

During the early 1970s major intellectuals such as Sartre, Foucault, and the *Tel Quel* group gravitated toward Maoism as the most effective way of realizing the values of "engagement." Following the spring 1970 arrest of leading Maoist militants, Sartre would become the titular head of several Maoist newspapers. He would accompany the Maoists during a number of their protests and "actions." Publicly flaunting his Maoist political allegiances, Sartre hawked copies of one banned Maoist newspaper on the boulevards of Paris, all but daring the French authorities to arrest him. Sartre wrote the preface to an anthology of Maoist autobiographical writings and published an extended volume of political conversations, *On a raison de se revolter* (It's Right to Rebel), with Maoist student leader Pierre Victor. He would also open the pages of his prestigious intellectual-political monthly *Les Temps Modernes* to his Maoist *confrères*. Along with Maoist Serge July, he cofounded a left-wing press agency, Libération. Within a few years, this modest journalistic undertaking blossomed into one of France's largest mass circulation dailies.<sup>12</sup> For the aging philosopher, the marriage of convenience with

<sup>12</sup> See Lallemond, *Libé*.

the “pro-Chinese” leftists represented a political rebirth following an epoch in which the structuralists had openly proclaimed him to be a “dead dog.”

During May 1968 Foucault was teaching in Tunisia. His partner, Daniel Defert, kept him apprised of the developing situation in Paris by phone. Upon returning to Paris, he became chair of the philosophy faculty of the new “experimental” University of Vincennes, where Foucault eagerly staffed the department with Maoist militants: Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, André Glucksmann, and Jacques-Alain Miller. For a time Foucault was shadowed by police agents, who assumed he must be the leader of a Vincennes-based Maoist sect.<sup>13</sup>

Foucault would extract a seminal political lesson from the May events. He understood that the boundaries of “the political” had permanently expanded. Politics could be reduced neither to “class struggle” nor to bourgeois ideals of negative freedom and civil liberty. Instead, the new political stakes pertained to the way in which regimes of knowledge translated into specific institutional practices: techniques of incarceration, population control, and purportedly neutral scientific methods of classification—normal versus abnormal, deviance versus conformity, and so forth.

Foucault’s tenure at Vincennes was short-lived. In 1970 he was accorded France’s highest academic accolade: a professorship at the Collège de France, where the only requirement was that he lecture every two weeks on his current research. Ironically, at the precise moment of his intellectual canonization, Foucault committed himself wholeheartedly to political activism with the Maoist Groupe d’information sur les prisons (GIP). GIP began as a support group for imprisoned Maoist militants, many of whom were actively engaged in hunger strikes across France. But soon this loose confederation of intellectuals and Maoist activists burgeoned into a nationwide prisoners’ advocacy group.

Although GIP was founded by intellectuals, its inspiration largely derived from the libertarian Maoist group *Vive la révolution!* GIP’s

<sup>13</sup> See Macey, *Lives of Michel Foucault*, 228. As Macey attests, “Foucault’s thought naturally gravitated toward the Maoists.”

infrastructure and organizational praxis were thoroughly Maoist. It was Maoists who provided the mimeograph machines, the equipment, and meeting halls. Its method of gathering information on French prison conditions was based on the favored Maoist tactic of the *enquête* (investigation): immersing oneself among the masses—“going to the people”—in order to allow the oppressed to describe their predicament in their own language, a practice that was in keeping with the Maoist maxim, “One must descend from the horse in order to smell the flowers.”

Foucault’s period of Maoist-inspired political militancy has been little scrutinized. However, if one seeks to gain insight into the gestation of Foucaultian concepts such as “genealogy,” “biopower,” and the “disciplinary society,” an understanding of this period is crucial, for it was as a result of his work with the Maoists that Foucault arrived at the notion of “microphysics of power,” which would become the hallmark of his later work. Thereafter, Foucault no longer conceived “power” according to the juridical model, as the capacity to repress, deny, or refuse. Instead, he viewed power as productive, a mechanism of social control that leaves a discernible, positive imprint on bodies, mores, and patterns of thought.

Under the stewardship of Philippe Sollers, *Tel Quel* began as a literary challenge to Sartre’s notion of *engagement*. In *Tel Quel*’s view, by seeking to subordinate art to politics, Sartre risked bypassing or distorting art’s genuine specificity, which had less to do with “changing the world” than with advancing certain intrinsic formal features and traits. *Tel Quel* began by celebrating the *nouveau roman* as exemplified by the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute. Thereafter, it caught the structuralist wave, opening its pages to the likes of Foucault, Derrida, and others. However, as the Left Bank began to erupt with anti-Vietnam War protests, Marxism came back into fashion. From this new political vantage point, Sartre’s ideal of “commitment” seemed to merit a fresh look.

At first, *Tel Quel* sought to join forces with the French Communist Party—an alliance that, in light of the PCF’s disparagement of the May events, proved to be a tactical blunder. In the post-May period Sollers and others sought to atone for their misdeeds by aligning the

journal with Maoism. *Tel Quel's* pro-Chinese phase was *sui generis*. The group scorned the Maoist student organizations with which Sartre and Foucault had cast their lot. Instead, it wanted its Maoist commitment to remain as pure and uncompromising as its earlier alliance with Soviet communism had been. *Tel Quel* began publishing special issues on the Cultural Revolution. Sollers and Julia Kristeva learned enough Chinese to translate Chairman Mao's poetry into French. In 1974, accompanied by Roland Barthes, the group made a pilgrimage to Communist China, although by then it had become clear that China's experiment in political utopianism had soured.

## THE INTELLECTUALS REPENT

Since the eighteenth century French writers and intellectuals have enjoyed the status of a lay aristocracy. In republican France they functioned as arbiters of the true, the right, and the good. The high-water mark of this trend occurred during the Dreyfus Affair, when, under Emile Zola's tutelage, intellectuals helped to reverse the miscarriage of justice that had victimized the unjustly imprisoned colonel.

The May insurrection provided French intellectuals with a lesson in humility. None had anticipated it. The structuralists had famously proclaimed that historical change was illusory. "Events," they declared, were a thing of the past. The mainstream Left looked to the French working class to play its assigned historical role as capitalism's gravedigger. But in truth French workers were quite content to enjoy the fruits of postwar affluence: *les trente glorieuses*, or the thirty glorious years. Hence, when the May revolt erupted, intellectuals were relegated to playing a series of bit parts and supporting roles—menial tasks to which this proud guild was largely unaccustomed. The *marxisant* bias of postwar French political culture was still predominantly focused on the workplace. Yet, the revolt had broken out elsewhere: Nanterre, the Sorbonne, and the oblique byways of the Latin Quarter. The only intellectuals who had accurately foreseen the transformed parameters of revolt were those located to the "left of the Left": the *gauchistes* who were associated with innovative avant-garde organs such as the

Situationist International, Arguments, and Socialism or Barbarism. One of the hallmarks of the May revolt was that ideals of direct democracy and worker control migrated from the periphery to the center.

Looking back, it is easy to mock French intellectuals' overly credulous Maoist political indulgences. Today the excesses and brutalities of the Cultural Revolution have been well documented. China itself has long departed from the revolutionary course charted by the Great Helmsman. Mao may have been a gifted military strategist, but once in power, his policies were capricious, self-serving, and propelled by an ideological fervor that precipitated widespread chaos and ruined millions of lives.

Were the story of French intellectuals and Maoism purely a tale of political folly, it would hardly be worth recounting. In retrospect, the Maoist intoxication that gripped France during the early 1970s stands out as a generational rite of passage. Among students and intellectuals, the identification with Cultural Revolutionary China became an exit strategy to escape from the straitjacket of orthodox Marxism. Early on, revolutionary China ceased being an empirical point of reference. Instead, it became a trope: a projection of the gauchiste political imaginary. As the Maoists themselves later explained, the issue became the "China in our heads." The figure of Cultural Revolution was detached from its Asian geopolitical moorings. In a textbook case of unintended consequences, it fused unexpectedly with the "critique of everyday life" as elaborated by the 1960s French cultural avant-garde.

The May movement signaled the twilight of the "prophetic intellectual": the celebrity writer or thinker who claimed to possess privileged insight into the course of history and who prescribes the line of march for the benighted masses. The student activists helped to reinvent the lexicon of political radicalism. By virulently opposing the idea of a revolutionary vanguard, they took an important step in consigning the Leninist model to the dustbin of history.

The new spirit of humility would find expression in Foucault's conception of the "specific intellectual" who undertakes acts of "contestation" in concrete, local struggles. Foucault and his allies thereby jettisoned the traditional revolutionary expectation of a radiant utopian future in favor of "resistance" that was always situated and site-specific.

Yet, Foucault's endorsement of the specific intellectual would not be the last word. The sixty-eighters realized that they could not entirely dispense with the Dreyfusard ideal of the universal intellectual who morally shames the powers-that-be by confronting them with higher ideals of justice and truth. Solzhenitsyn's devastating exposé of the Soviet Gulag, which was first published in France in 1974, along with macabre revelations about the Killing Fields in Cambodia—another experiment in cultural revolution that drastically miscarried—helped convince French intellectuals that the idea of human rights merited renewed attention. Few believed that human rights represented a political panacea. Yet most conceded that the rule of law acted as a “magic wall”—a juridical-political stopgap—that kept despotism in check and thereby helped to avoid the worst. In this way, the May movement's antiauthoritarian spirit nourished the development of a thoughtful and sustained antitotalitarian political credo.