

MASSES, SPONTANEITY, PARTY

J.-P. Sartre

Manifesto : During the May events in France, and in the course of the working class struggle of 1968 generally, movements at the base attacked the Communist parties not only for their bureaucratic degeneration or for their reformist options; they also criticized the very notion of the *party* as the political, structured organization of the class. When these movements suffered setbacks, a number of "leftist" groups came to emphasise organization against spontaneity, and advocated a return to "pure" Leninism. Neither of these attitudes seems to us satisfactory. It seems to us that one can only properly criticize spontaneity—and this was the lesson of 1968—if it is realized that the subjective maturity of the working class requires today a new form of organization, adapted to the conditions of struggle in the societies of advanced capitalism.

We should like to focus this conversation on the theoretical bases of this problem. You have been concerned with this ever since the now classic discussion of 1952 (*Communists and Peace*) and the polemic which followed with Lefort and Merleau-Ponty, by way of *The Ghost of Stalin* of 1956 to the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. In 1952, you were charged with hyper-subjectivism and you were reproached with a failure to recognize any existence of the working class other than in the party. In 1956, it was the reverse accusation that was directed at you, namely that you were guilty of **an** objectivism which tended to explain Stalinism as the inevitable product of a particular historical situation. In actual fact, it seems to us that both positions had a common basis in the concept of "scarcity", in the structural backwardness of the country in which the October Revolution occurred, in the "necessities" imposed by the fact that the revolution was not "ripe" and that socialism had to be built in a context of primitive accumulation. In this specific situation, you considered that the party was bound to superimpose itself upon a mass which had not reached the required level of consciousness. Do you believe that this image of the party—which we shared with you in the fifties—must be revised because the situation has changed; or, on the contrary, that it must be revised because the earlier formulations were vitiated by theoretical inadequacies which have since then been more clearly revealed?

Sartre : There was certainly inadequacy. But this must be situated historically. In 1952, when I wrote *Communists and Peace*, the essential political choice was the defence of the French Communist Party,

and particularly of the Soviet Union, accused as it was of imperialism. It was essential to reject this accusation if one did not wish to find oneself on the side of the Americans. Afterwards, it was shown that the U.S.S.R., by behaving in Budapest as Stalin (whether because of political intelligence or for other reasons) did not behave in 1948 in relation to Yugoslavia, and then by repeating the operation in Czechoslovakia, was acting in the manner of an imperialist power. In saying this, I do not intend to express a moral judgment. I am only stating that the external policy of the U.S.S.R. seems essentially inspired by its antagonistic relations with the United States, and not by a principle of respect, of equality, *vis-à-vis* other socialist states. I tried to explain the point in the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*. This of course was still an attempt at a formal solution, which should have been followed by an historical analysis of the U.S.S.R. in Stalin's time—an analysis which I have already sketched out and which forms part of a second volume of the *Critique*, but which will probably never appear.

In short, what I tried to show in relation to concepts like mass, party, spontaneity, seriality, channels, groups, represents the embryo of an answer to this problem. In effect, I tried to show that the party, in relation to the mass, is a necessary reality because the mass, by itself, does not possess spontaneity. By itself, the mass remains serialized. But conversely, as soon as the party becomes an institution, so does it also—save in exceptional circumstances—become reactionary in relation to what it has itself brought into being, namely the fused group. In other words, the dilemma *spontaneity/party* is a false problem. In terms of its self-consciousness, the class does not appear homogeneous; but rather as an ensemble of elements, of groups, which I define as "fused". Among the workers, we always find fused groups in this or that factory where a struggle occurs, in the course of which individuals establish relations of reciprocity, enjoy in regard to the totality of groups what I have called a "wild freedom", and acquire a definite consciousness of their class position.

But besides these fused groups, there are other workers who are not united by struggle, who remain serialized, and who are therefore incapable of spontaneity because they are not linked to the rest, except in a reified relation, in a serialized connection. Even a fused group—for instance a factory which is on strike—is continually subjected to and weighed down by serialized relations (massification, etc). The same worker who finds himself in a fused group at his place of work may be completely serialized when he is at home or at other moments of his life. We are therefore in the presence of very different forms of class consciousness: on the one hand, an advanced consciousness, on the other an almost non-existent consciousness, with a series of mediations in between. This is why it does not seem to me that one can

speak of class spontaneity; it is only appropriate to speak of groups, produced by circumstances, and which create themselves in the course of particular situations; in thus creating themselves, they do not rediscover some kind of underlying spontaneity, but rather experience a specific condition on the basis of specific situations of exploitation and of particular demands; and it is in the course of their experience that they achieve a more or less accurate consciousness of themselves.

This said, what does the party represent in relation to the series? Surely a positive factor, since it prevents a collapse into complete seriality. The members of a Communist Party would themselves remain isolated and serialized individuals if the party did not turn them into a group through an organic link which enables a Communist in Milan to communicate with another Communist worker from any other region. Moreover, it is thanks to the party that many groups are formed in the course of struggle, because the party makes communication easier. However, the party finds itself as a general rule compelled either to absorb or to reject the fused group which it has itself helped to create. In comparison with the group, whose organization never goes beyond a kind of reciprocal pact, the party is much more strongly structured. A group forms itself under stress, for instance to achieve some goal ("We must take the Bastille"); as soon as the action is over, the individuals who compose the group anxiously face each other and try to establish a link which might replace the link forged in action, a kind of pact or oath, which in turn tends to constitute the beginning of a series and to establish between them a relationship of reified contiguity. This is what I have called "Fraternity-terror". The party, on the contrary, develops as an ensemble of institutions, and therefore as a closed, static system, which has a tendency to sclerosis. This is why the party is always behind in relation to the fused mass, even when it tries to guide that mass: this is so because it tries to weaken it, to subordinate it, and may even reject it and deny any solidarity with it.

The thought and action of each group necessarily reflect its structure. What occurs is therefore the following: the thought of a fused group—by virtue of the fact that it is born in the stress of a particular situation and not because of some kind of "spontaneity"—has a stronger, fresher, more critical charge than that of a structured group. As an institution, a party has an institutionalized mode of thought—meaning something which deviates from reality—and comes essentially to reflect no more than its own organization, in effect ideological thought. It is upon its own schema that is modelled, and deformed, the experience of the struggle itself; while the fused group thinks its experience as it presents itself, without institutional mediation. This is why the thought of a group may be vague, incapable of being theorized, awkward—as were the ideas of the students in May, 1968—but nevertheless represents a

truer kind of thought because no institution is interposed between experience and the reflection upon experience.

No doubt, we are dealing here with a contradiction which is inherent in the very function of the party. The latter comes into being to liberate the working class from seriality; but at the same time, it is a reflection—a reflection of a certain type, since the party is intended to abolish that condition—of the seriality and massification of the masses upon which it operates. This seriality of the masses finds expression in the party's institutional character. Compelled as it is to deal with what is serialized, it is itself partly inert and serialized. In order to protect itself, it thus ends up by opposing the fused groups, even though these groups are an aspect of a working class which it wants to represent and which it has itself very often brought into movement.

Here is the underlying contradiction of the party, which has emerged to liberate the masses from seriality and which has itself become an institution. As such, it harbours so many negative features (I don't mean here bureaucracy or other forms of degeneration, but rather the institutional structure itself, which is not necessarily bureaucratic) that it finds itself compelled, fundamentally and in all cases, to oppose all the new forces, whether it tries to use them or whether it rejects them. We have seen these two different attitudes adopted by the French and the Italian Communist parties vis-à-vis the students: the French party rejected them; more subtly, the P.C.I. tried to attract them and to direct their experience by means of contact and discussion. A party can only choose between these two attitudes: this is its underlying limitation.

Let me give you another classic example, namely the question of democratic centralism. As long as democratic centralism operated in a dynamic situation, for instance during clandestinity and the organization of the struggle in Russia, that is precisely at the time when Lenin elaborated its theory, it remained a living thing. There was a moment of centralism, because it was necessary, and a moment of real democracy, because people could argue and decisions were taken in common. As soon as it was institutionalized, as was the case in all Communist countries, centralism took precedence over democracy, and democracy itself became an "institution", subjected to its own inertia: there exists, for instance, a right to speak, but the fact alone that it should be a right—and only that—empties it so much of its substance that, in reality, it becomes a non-right. The real question is therefore to know how to overcome the contradiction which is inherent in the very nature of the party, so that (not only in its relations with opponents and in its tasks as a fighting organization, but also in relation to the class which it represents) the party may constitute an active mediation between serialized and massified elements for the purpose of their

unification; in other words, how the party may be able to receive the impulses which emanate from movements and, rather than claim to direct them, may be able to generalize experience for the movement and for itself.

Manifesto: The real location of revolutionary consciousness is therefore neither in the immediate class, nor in the party, but in the struggle. On this view, the party remains alive as long as it is an instrument of struggle, but exchanges the end for the means as soon as it becomes an institution, and becomes its own end. The contradiction which is inherent in the party, and which you emphasize, can perhaps be resolved to the extent that one tries to approach the problem of the political organization of the class not in general terms, but in the immediacy of specific situations. What seems impossible is a meta-historical solution. It therefore seems necessary to envisage the objective conditions in which this dilemma can be resolved on each occasion. In our view, this implies two conditions: first of all that the class should transcend the level of seriality to become effectively and totally the subject of collective action.

Sartre: This is an impossible condition; the working class can never express itself completely as an active political subject: there will always be zones or regions or sectors which, because of historical reasons of development, will remain serialized, massified, alien to the achievement of consciousness. There is always a residue. There is a strong tendency today to generalize the concept of *class consciousness* and of *class struggle* as pre-existing elements antecedent to the struggle. The only *a priori* is the objective situation of class exploitation. Consciousness is only born in struggle: the class struggle only exists insofar as there exist places where an actual struggle is going on. It is true that the proletariat carries within itself the death of the bourgeoisie; it is equally true that the capitalist system is mined by structural contradictions. But this does not necessarily imply the existence of class consciousness or of class struggle. In order that there should be *consciousness* and *struggle*, it is necessary that somebody should be fighting.

In other words, the class struggle is virtually possible everywhere in the capitalist system, but really exists only where the struggle is actually being carried on. On the other hand, the struggle, even while it is being carried on, differs in terms of each situation. In France, for instance, the conditions and forms of struggle are extremely diverse: in Saint-Nazaire, the workers' struggles, which are very violent, retain the characteristics of the last century; in other, more "advanced", capitalist zones, they assume a different character, with an articulation of demands which may be greater, but in a more moderate context. This is why it is impossible, even for that part of the working class which is actually struggling, to speak of *unification*, save theoretically. *The*

twenty-four hour general strikes organized by the C.G.T. are no more, at best, than the symbol of a unified struggle.

Manifesto : But are we not in a phase of capitalist unification of society, as much in terms of the infrastructure as of the superstructures (types of consumption and styles of life, language, massification)? Is it not true that the fragmentation of individual situations is accompanied by the ever more obvious "totalization" of the system? And should not this have as its consequence the formation of an objective material base for the growing unification of the class and of its class consciousness?

Sartre : In actual fact, the structure remains extremely diversified and unstable.

Manifesto : But is there a tendency towards unification or not?

Sartre : Yes and no. In France, for instance, capitalism artificially maintains alive thousands of small enterprises, for whose existence there is no reason from the point of view of economic rationality; but they are useful to capitalism, either because they represent a conservative political sector (these are the social strata which vote for de Gaulle or Pompidou), or because they provide a norm for capitalist costs of production, despite the increase in productivity. In effect, the tendencies to integration do not cancel out the profound diversities of structural situations.

Add to this that advanced capitalism, in relation to its awareness of its own condition, and despite the enormous disparities in the distribution of income, manages to satisfy the elementary needs of the majority of the working class—there remain of course the marginal zones, 15 per cent of workers in the United States, the blacks and the immigrants; there remain the elderly; there remains, on a global scale, the third world. But capitalism satisfies certain primary needs, and also satisfies certain needs which it has artificially created : for instance the need of a car. It is this situation which has caused me to revise my "theory of needs", since these needs are no longer, in a situation of advanced capitalism, in systematic opposition to the system. On the contrary, they partly become, under the control of that system, an instrument of integration of the proletariat into certain processes engendered and directed by profit. The worker exhausts himself in producing a car and in earning enough to buy one; this acquisition gives him the impression of having satisfied a "need". The system which exploits him provides him simultaneously with a goal and with the possibility of reaching it. The consciousness of the intolerable character of the system must therefore no longer be sought in the impossibility of satisfying elementary needs but, above all else, in the consciousness of alienation—in other words, in the fact that this life is not worth living and has no meaning, that this mechanism is a deceptive mechanism,

that these needs are artificially created, that they are false, that they are exhausting and only serve profit. But to unite the class on this basis is even more difficult. This is why I do not agree with any of the optimistic visions presented by Communist parties or by left movements, who seem to believe that capitalism is henceforth at bay. Capitalism's means of control over classes are still powerful; and it is far from being on the defensive. As for bringing about a revolutionary élan, this requires a long and patient labour in the construction of consciousness.

Manifesto : Even so, this unification appeared immediate and obvious in May 1968.

Sartre : Absolutely obvious. It is one of the rare instances where everyone saw in the struggles of the local factory a model of his own struggles. A phenomenon of the same order, but of far greater dimension, occurred in 1936. But at that time the working class institutions played a determinant role. The movement started when socialists and communists were already in power, and offering, up to a certain point, a model which allowed the class a rapid achievement of consciousness, the fusion of groups, and unification.

In May, not only were parties and unions not in power, but they were also a long way from playing a comparable role. The element which unified the struggle was something which, in my opinion, came from afar; it was an idea which came to us from Vietnam and which the students expressed in the formula: "*L'imagination au pouvoir.*" In other words, the area of the possible is much more vast than the dominant classes have accustomed us to believe. Who would have thought that fourteen million peasants would be able to resist the greatest industrial and military power in the world? And yet, this is what happened. Vietnam taught us that the area of the possible is immense, and that one need not be resigned. It is this which was the lever of the students' revolt, and the workers understood it. In the united demonstration of the 13th of May, this idea suddenly became dominant. "If a few thousand youngsters can occupy the universities and defy the government, why should we not be able to do the same?" Thus it was that from the 13th of May onwards, and following a model which at that moment came to them from outside, the workers went on strike and occupied the factories. The element which mobilized and united them was not a programme of demands: this came later, to justify the strike, and of course there was no lack of motives for strike action. But it is interesting to note that the demands came later, after the factories had already been occupied.

Manifesto : It would therefore seem that, at the origin of May, there was no immediately material element, no particularly explosive structural contradiction?

Sartre : The preceding autumn, something had provoked a generalized discontent among the workers, namely the reactionary measures of the government in the field of social security. These measures had hit the whole working population, whatever their occupation. The unions, either because they were taken by surprise or because they did not want to expose themselves too much, did not manage to offer adequate opposition to the measures. There was, if my memory serves, a day of general strike, but that is as far as it went. However, a deep and unexpressed discontent endured; and it broke out again in strength in the May demonstrations. There is today a possible new element of unification : this is the absolutely futile character which the rise in prices, and then devaluation, have given to the increases in wages which were obtained at the time. But it is not easy to know in advance whether these unifying elements of discontent will lead to a united revolt. In May, on the other hand, this revolt occurred and in my opinion, the detonator was not so much that the workers became conscious of exploitation but that they became conscious of their own strength and of their own possibilities.

Manifesto : Yet, this revolt of May was a failure and was followed by a victory of reaction. Is that because it did not contain the elements capable of pushing the revolution to a conclusion or because it lacked political direction?

Sartre : It lacked political direction, of a kind capable of giving it the political and theoretical dimension without which the movement could not but subside, as indeed happened. It lacked a party capable of taking up completely the movement and its potentialities. As a matter of fact, how could an institutionalized structure, as in the case of the Communist parties, place itself in the service of something which took it by surprise? How could it be sufficiently receptive to react, not by saying "Let us see what we can get out of this?" or "Let us try to attract the movement to ourselves so that it does not escape from us", but by saying "Here is reality and we must serve it by trying to give it theoretical and practical generality so that it may grow and be further advanced?" Furthermore, a Communist Party which is unable to adopt this attitude becomes what the French Communist Party has been in practice for twenty-five years : a brake on any revolutionary movement in France. Everything which does not emanate from it alone the party either rejects or suppresses.

Manifesto : In fact, while you criticize the communist parties as they are, you affirm the need for a moment of unification and of organization of the movement?

Sartre : Certainly, and this is where the problem lies. We are confronted with reaction, with strong and complex capitalist rule, which has an ample capacity of repression and integration. This demands a

counter-organization of the class. The problem is to know how to prevent that counter-organization from deteriorating by becoming an "institution".

Manifesto : Agreed. But it is interesting to note that the need for a political organization of the class seems to contradict a forecast of Marx, according to which the proletariat, with the growth of capitalism, would express itself immediately in a revolutionary movement, without the help of political mediation. At the origin of this thesis, there was the conviction that the crisis of capitalism would occur fairly early, and that there were growing within capitalism strains which the system could not absorb—for instance, the development of productive forces would enter into contradiction with the mechanism of capitalist development. Later on, Lenin saw in the socialization of productive forces a factor capable, up to a certain point of laying the ground for the socialist organization of the economy, once the political apparatus of the bourgeois state had been smashed. We are forced today to recognize the inadequacy of such theses. In the first place, the productive forces do not enter directly into contradiction with the system, because they do not represent something neutral and objective, but are the product of the system and are subjected to its priorities and are affected by it. . . .

Sartre : Yes, these forces are not necessarily fated to come into conflict; they are produced by this type of development as is shown—for instance—by the choosing of space development in the scientific field. As for the socialization of productive forces, even though it is incorrect to speak here of a "class", one must recognize that the development of these forces has brought into being a bureaucracy and a certain technocracy which have acquired a dangerous power of control over the masses and the means of integrating them into an authoritarian society.

Manifesto : In effect, the passage of capitalism into socialism does not have the same characteristics as the passage of feudalism into capitalism. Capitalist relations of production developed progressively inside feudal society, so much so that when the latter collapsed, it had become no more than the shell of a different structural reality, which had already ripened within it. This is what cannot happen with the proletariat; it cannot, inside capitalism, express itself through embryonic forms of socialist organization.

Sartre : The processes are indeed different, whether from the angle of structures, or of relations of production, or of ideas. From the Renaissance onwards, culture was no longer feudal but bourgeois; new social groups, such as the noblesse de robe, were bourgeois. This process preceded and accompanied the establishment of capitalist relations of production. The gestation of the bourgeoisie lasted for centuries and

expressed itself in an alternative that was *present* in existing society. This cannot happen in relation to the proletariat—not even from the point of view of culture. For the proletariat does not possess a culture which is autonomous: it either uses elements of bourgeois culture, or it expresses a total refusal of any culture, which is a way of affirming the lack of existence of its own culture. It may be objected that the proletariat nevertheless possesses a "scale of values" which is proper to it. Of course, by wanting a revolution, it wants something different from what now exists. But I am suspicious of expressions such as "scale of values" which can easily be turned into their opposite. The revolt of the students was a typical expression of the problem of a counter culture: it was a refusal which, because it lacked its own elaboration, ended up by borrowing, even though it gave them a contrary meaning, a series of ideological trappings from their opponents (conceptual simplification, schematism, violence, etc).

Manifesto: The anti-capitalist revolution is, therefore, both ripe and not ripe. Class antagonism produces the contradiction, but is not, by itself, capable of producing the alternative. Yet, if one is not to reduce the revolution to a pure voluntarism and a pure subjectivity, or, conversely, if one is not to fall back into evolutionism, on what precise bases can one prepare a revolutionary alternative?

Sartre: I repeat, more on the basis of "alienation" than on "needs". In short, on the reconstruction of the individual and of freedom—the need for which is so pressing that even the most refined techniques of integration cannot afford to discount it. This is why these techniques try to satisfy that need in imaginary form. All of "human engineering" is based on the idea that the employer must behave towards his subordinate *as if* the latter was his equal, because—this is implicit—no man can renounce this right to equality. And the worker who falls into the trap of the "human relations" of paternalism becomes its victim, to the very degree that he wants effective equality.

Manifesto: This is true, but then how is one to demonstrate that this need is produced by advanced capitalism and that it is not simply the residue of a "humanism" which antedates capitalism? It may be that the answer will have to be sought precisely in the contradictions inherent in the development of capital: for instance, in the fragmentation of work as opposed to a level of education much higher than is required by the role which the worker is called upon to assume; in the quantitative and qualitative development of education paralleled by inadequate job opportunities; in an increase of demands and in the obstacles to their satisfaction—in short, in a constant frustration of that productive force which is man.

Sartre: The fact is that the development of capital increases proletarianization—not in the sense of absolute pauperization, but by the

steady worsening in the relation between new needs and the role played by the workers, a worsening provoked not by slump but by development.

Manifesto : The revolutionary political organization of the class therefore requires the elaboration of an alternative. It seems to us that this problem was under-estimated during May. Those who took up positions of Marcusean inspiration or of a spontaneist kind in the fashion of Cohn-Bendit relied exclusively on negation; in so doing, they were not even able to ensure that the struggle would be continued, because in complex and advanced societies the majority of people want to know what is being proposed. Even though it is oppressed and alienated, the working class does have access to means of subsistence, and is bound to ask what will replace what is to be destroyed.

On the other hand, those who assumed positions opposed to those of Cohn-Bendit—for instance Alain Touraine and Serge Mallet—did not see the necessity of proposing an alternative because, according to them, the development of productive forces and the subjective maturation of the masses would make immediately possible the self-government of society. This too seems to us mistaken: for while it is true that the development of capitalism ripens the possibility of revolution by creating new needs and new forces, it is also true that these reflect the system which produces them. This is why the sudden breakdown of the system necessarily leads to a fall in production: it is an illusion to believe that socialism is the productive system inherited from capitalism with self-government added to it. What is involved is a system of an altogether different kind, in a national and international context which acts and reacts upon it. This suggests the need for a transitional model, for the construction of an alternative, for a revolutionary *project* which constitutes the idea of the new society. One is thus driven back to the problem of unification, of political preparation, of the party.

Sartre : It is undoubtedly true that a theory of the passage to socialism is necessary. Suppose that the situation quickens in France or in **Italy** and leads to the achievement of power. What ideas do we have as to how a highly industrialized country can reconstruct itself on a socialist basis, while it is subjected to foreign boycott, to the devaluation of its currency and to the blockade of its exports? The U.S.S.R. found itself in such a situation after the revolution. Despite the terrible sacrifices and the enormous losses inflicted upon it by civil war, despite the political and economic encirclement which was stifling it, the problems which the U.S.S.R. had to resolve were less complex than those which would today be confronted by an advanced society. From this point of view, none of us—and no Communist party—are prepared. You speak of the necessity of a political perspective of transition. So

be it. But what Communist party has elaborated a theory of revolutionary transition in a country of advanced and non-autarchic capitalism?

Manifesto : Since the twenties, the problem of the passage to socialism has never been placed on the agenda by Communist parties in regard to advanced capitalist countries.

Sartre : Exactly. Especially not since the war and the Yalta agreements. There has therefore been no real thinking devoted to alternatives. And this is not a secondary matter if one wishes to understand what Communist parties have become. In the book of Annie Kriegel, *Les Communistes Français*, the judgment passed on the French Communist Party is on the whole a severe one; but what remains implicit is that, despite all the errors and failings which Annie Kriegel enumerates, the party, as far as she is concerned, constitutes a given alternative, notwithstanding its actual policies. Indeed, it constitutes the proletarian alternative to capitalist society in France. This reasoning makes no sense. At the point where we reach agreement in insisting on the need for the political organization of the class, we must also realize that the "historical" institutions of the Communist Party are completely inadequate for the achievement of the tasks which we try to assign to them. We were saying just now that, without a moment of unification of the struggle, without a cultural mediation and a positive response, it is impossible to go beyond revolt; and revolt is always defeated politically. We agree on that. But this does not change in any way the fact that an institutionalized party is not capable of acting as a mediator between culture and struggles: the reason being that what is still confused and non-systematized thought in the masses (though *true* as a reflection of experience), is completely deformed once it has been translated by the ideological mechanisms of the party, and presents a totally different relation to what we call culture. In order that the schema which you propose may operate, it would be necessary that the party should continually be able to struggle against its own institutionalization. Without this, the whole schema is falsified. If the cultural apparatus of the Communist parties is practically null, the reason is not that they lack good intellectuals, but that the mode of existence of the parties paralyses their collective effort of thought. Action and thought are not separable from the organization. One thinks as one is structured. One acts as one is organized. This is why the thought of Communist parties has come to be progressively ossified.

Manifesto : Historically, Communist parties assumed their particular character in the context of the Third International and of political and ideological events in the Soviet Union and in the socialist camp. These parties constitute a reality which has influenced the configuration of the class and which has produced certain forms of action, certain

ideologies, certain changes in existing forces. Today, however, we are witnessing a class movement which, for the first time in Europe, tends to situate itself in a dialectical relation with the Communist parties, and to identify itself with them only in part. This movement weighs upon the parties, which must either reject it or be modified by it. (The hypothesis that the movement can simply be absorbed by the party does not seem realistic to us, as is shown by the students). In either case, the problem which is posed is that of a new manner of being of the party, either through crisis and the renewal of existing parties, or through a new construction of the unitary political expression of the class. Is such a new manner of being possible? Is a party fated to become progressively institutionalized and to detach itself from the movement which gave birth to it, as you suggested at the beginning, or can one conceive of an organization which would be capable of fighting continually against the limitations, the sclerosis and the institutionalization which threatens it from within?

Sartre : While I recognize the need of an organization, I must confess that I don't see how the problems which confront any stabilized structure could be resolved.

Manifesto : To summarize what you have just said, the political party would need to ensure the growth and the autonomy of mass struggles instead of restraining them; it should also ensure the development of a counter-culture; and it should finally know how to oppose a global, total response to the type of rationality and to the social relations upon which society rests. These are, it seems, specific tasks of the party, insofar as their global character transcends the problems which the specific moment of struggle and the fused group can resolve.

Sartre : Yes, but these cannot be resolved without the party either.

Manifesto : Agreed. In order to get out of this, one may advance some hypotheses. Before all else, the revolutionary party must, so that it may escape institutionalization, consider itself as permanently *in the service* of a struggle which has its *own* dimensions, its own autonomous political levels. This implies the transcendence of the Leninist or Bolshevik model of the party—from its origins to the Popular Fronts—according to which there is supposed to exist a constant separation between the moment of a mass struggle purely concerned with specific demands and the political moment, which is specific to the party. In history, this transcendence has only been sketched out in the “soviets”. It corresponds to a model of a *social* revolution rather than a purely *political* one, a revolution where power is taken by the soviets and not by the party. Moreover, the revolutionary movement must transcend an inadequacy of Leninism: the theory of revolution has until now been a “theory of the seizure of power” much more than a “theory of society”. The result has been an inability of Communist

parties to analyse advanced capitalist societies and to foreshadow the goals which the revolution must reach; in other words, an inability to understand the new needs expressed by the movement and to say how they are to be satisfied. (This is what happened with the students: there was neither understanding nor solution of the problems which they posed on the role of education, its relation to society, the modes and content of a non-authoritarian type of education). Thirdly, there is need of permanent probing so that theory should be able to encompass all features of the movement. A political organization of the class which claims to be Marxist does not merely think *a posteriori*; it interprets experience through a methodology, a grid—in regard to such categories as "capital", "class", "imperialism", etc. Thus, insofar as the relation between party and class remains open—and this alone is capable of preventing both the particularism of a fragmented experience and the institutionalization of the unifying political moment—one needs to find a solution to these three problems.

Sartre : I agree, on condition that this dialectic manifests itself as a dual power, and that one does not claim to solve it within a purely political schema. Even then, there are many problems which remain. You speak of a methodological or a theoretical "grid", provided as it were in advance and through which experience may be interpreted. But is it not the case that the concept of *capital* remains a thin and abstract notion if one does not constantly elaborate anew the analysis of modern capitalism by research and by the permanent critique of the results of research and of struggle? *True* thought is certainly *one* : but its unity is dialectical—it is a living reality in the process of formation. What is required is the construction of a relationship between men which guarantees not only freedom, but *revolutionary* freedom of thought—a relationship which enables men to appropriate knowledge completely and to criticize it. This, in any case, is how knowledge has always proceeded, but it is never how the "Marxism" of Communist parties has proceeded. So that the creative culture of its members may grow and in order to enable them to acquire a maximum of true knowledge, the party—the political organization of the class—must make it possible for them to innovate and to engage in mutual argument, instead of presenting itself as the administrator of acquired knowledge. If one looks outside the party, the debate on Marxism has never been richer than it is now because, particularly since the break-up of monolithism and the posing of the problem of the diversity of socialism, there exists a plurality of Marxist inquiries and open disagreements between them.

Manifesto : But these are disagreements on the exegesis of sacred texts, quarrels of interpretation, rather than a renewal of inventiveness and of a creative interpretation of reality.

Sartre : That is not altogether true. Of course, the discussion on the texts predominates. But take the example of Althusser : he is not simply involved in exegesis. One finds in him a theory of the concept, of autonomous theoretical knowledge, of the study of contradictions from the angle of the dominant contradiction, or "over-determination". These are original inquiries, which cannot be criticized without a new theoretical elaboration. Personally, I have been compelled, in order to criticize Althusser, to look again at the idea of "notion" and to draw a series of conclusions in the process. The same may be said about the concept of "structure" introduced by Lévi-Strauss which some Marxists, whether fruitfully or not, have tried to use. In other words, a real discussion always demands an effort and leads to new theoretical results. If what is wanted is genuine inquiry, one must therefore set up a structure which guarantees discussion; without this, even the theoretical model which the political organization would wish to place before the experience of the class remains inoperative. This is a permanent contradiction in the party : in fact, it is a limitation of all Communist parties.

Just as complex is the hypothesis of an "open" relation between a unifying political organization of the class, i.e. the party, and the self-government of the masses in councils or soviets. We must not forget that when this was attempted, in post-revolutionary Russia, the unitary organizations of the masses rapidly disappeared, and only the party remained. Thus a dialectically necessary process resulted, in the U.S.S.R., in the party taking the power which should have been taken and kept by the soviets. It may be that it could be otherwise today but in the years of encirclement of the U.S.S.R. by capitalist countries, in conditions of civil war and dreadful internal shortages, it is not too difficult to understand the process whereby the soviets completely disappeared. This is the reason why I have occasionally written that in the U.S.S.R., it is of a dictatorship for the proletariat rather than of the proletariat that one should speak, in the sense that the party assumed the task of destroying the bourgeoisie on behalf of the proletariat. It was, moreover, unavoidable that, in order that the U.S.S.R. should survive, the proletariat, as has happened wherever there has been a revolution, should find itself asked to renounce what were, before the revolution, the most specific objectives of its struggle, namely an increase in its wages and the reduction in the hours of work. It could not have been otherwise, for it would have been difficult for the workers themselves to give up these objectives, even if they had experienced self-government at their place of work. Finally, to speak of what is relevant today, it seems to me difficult for an organization of soviets or councils to be created when there exists a strong "historical" articulation of the working class, in the form of trade unions or the

party. In France, we have had the experience of committees of action. But these were quickly dissolved, not because they were prohibited but because the trade unions soon resumed control of the situation.

Manifesto: This last contradiction does not seem insurmountable. Every trade union struggle which involves not only negotiations about wages but also about rhythms of work, hours, the organization of work and its control, shows the need for *direct* forms of organization of the workers. Without a unitary assembly at the base, possessed of an autonomous character and a high political level, negotiations on this scale cannot be undertaken. It is in this sense the trade union struggle which compels the rediscovery of the problem of the direct institutions of the class. This is a matter of experience, not an intellectual invention. Of course, these new forms come up against conservatism and bureaucracy. But one must also take into account certain limitations which are part of their being. From this point of view, the Italian experience is interesting: between the party or the union on the one hand and the movement on the other, the alternative is not always, as you were suggesting, either rejection or reduction to the role of a transmission belt. We are here confronted with a social tension, which assumes its own forms and which, at the same time, weighs upon the traditional institutions of the class, without finding a point of equilibrium either in the first or in the second. In fact, while the limitations of the union exist and are known, the institutions of direct democracy also have their limitations: though they do, in general, function perfectly well during a period of agitation, as happened at Fiat during the recent struggles, they run the risk of subsequently becoming, unconsciously, the instruments of a separation between one group and another, one enterprise and another, and therefore of being useful to the management. And does not the union, at that point and despite all its limitations, constitute a defence against the fragility of the new institutions? In effect, the movement appears today richer and more complex than its political expression.

Sartre: At any rate, what seems to me interesting in your schema is the duality of power which it foreshadows. This means an open and irreducible relation between the *unitary* moment, which falls to the political organization of the class, and the moments of self-government, the councils, the fused groups. I insist on that word "irreducible" because there can only be a permanent tension between the two moments. The party will always try, to the degree that it wants to see itself as "in the service" of the movement, to reduce it to its own schema of interpretation and development; while the moments of self-government will always try to project their living partiality upon the contradictory complex of the social tissue. It is in this struggle, maybe, that can be expressed the beginning of a reciprocal transformation;

however, that transformation—if it is to remain revolutionary—cannot but go in the direction of a progressive dissolution of the political element in a society which not only tends towards unification but also towards self-government, that is to say, which seeks to accomplish a social revolution that abolishes, together with the state, all other specifically *political* moments. In short, this is a dialectic so oriented as to bring us back to the schema of development of Marx. Up to now, it has not happened; but it may be that the conditions for it are beginning to exist in the societies of advanced capitalism. This is in any case a hypothesis on which to work.

(This conversation was recorded on August 27, 1969, in Rome)