Undoubtedly, the Hungarian Revolution is one of those events carved forever on historical memory. It marks the first great fissure in the totalitarian structure, far different from that created by the East Berlin uprising of June 1953 or, three years later, by the Poznan disturbances and the great Polish rebellion whose outcome was dramatically affected by the defeat of the Budapest rebels. Historians of the future will continue to ponder those days of October and November 1956 which, despite their ill-fated end, "shook the world." And all those who cherish freedom, whose convictions are nourished by the memory of great revolutionary episodes, will do likewise—provided that the desire to know and the desire for freedom are not silenced in future societies.

But historical memory is one thing and collective memory another. The latter is elaborated at the interface of the many groups which retain from the past only that which accommodates their representations of the present. And in our era, collective memory is molded with ever-increasing insistence by small numbers who have at their disposal the means for publicizing these representations: the political leaders whose declarations overflow with reminiscences made to credit a tradition, the intellectuals who recreate the instructive past, and the media manipulators, both large and small, who are skilled in the art of filtering out whatever does not appeal to the current masters. From the perspective of this collective memory, the fate of the Hungarian revolt has been striking. Collective memory has shrouded it. Doubtlessly, the occasion to exhume it does arise this year. The media need and enjoy necrology and anniversaries. Thus a few notices can be expected, but this fact which cannot be erased remains: that the Hungary of 1956 has been the object of oblivion, either deliberately or otherwise. There remains the silence that has fallen upon it.

I am thinking particularly of the Western left. What good is it to deal with the Right? Either it humors the weaknesses of the opposing great power when interest thus commands, or it exploits those weaknesses and contradictions to justify the politics of the current Western administration. How can it be reproached for having crossed out the Hungarian Revolution or for using it every now and then as a pretext to condemn Soviet imperialism? But what about the Left, especially in France, where it is influential, where radio and television air its voices, and where its press reaches a large audience? Why the silence about Hungary, yet so many references to the Chinese Cultural Revolution or the Prague Spring? Is it a matter of these events being more
recent? But there is an abundance of commentaries provoked by Stalinist terrorism, for example. It could be maintained that this has only lately been discovered, thanks to the reports of prison camp escapees and, especially, to Solzhenitsyn. And it is true; the *Gulag Archipelago* exposed in broad daylight, through a collection of confessions and irrefutable information, the character, dimensions and duration of this terror. However, the disclosures made in 1949 to the Social and Economic Council concerning the number of those in prison camps have become common knowledge, stupefying as they did the non-communist intellectual Left in France, and wrenching from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty the condemnation of a regime which, they went so far as to say, was perhaps socialist in name only. Why then are people discovering now what they had learned over twenty-five years ago? The truth is that what previously appeared novel, unheard of, unthinkable, was then hidden away in the shadows of collective memory. The truth is that the information received was well preserved, but excluded from representation. If it is now emerging from oblivion, the reason is that only now is it possible for it to be assimilated. And what is the reason for this change? Is it not that only yesterday this information endangered the Left's faith in socialism, while now it contributes instead to restoring that faith? This danger is conjured up by investing the image of Stalin with all the features of evil, for fear of having to recognize the totalitarianism under the mask of socialism and of having to agree that it subsists in different guises after the death of the supreme master. It is not necessary to examine here how such a change is tied to various historical circumstances. The phenomenon is interesting only because it yields insight into the fate of the memory of the Hungarian Revolution.

Novel, unheard of, unthinkable is how this event also appeared to the majority of the Left in the West. Initially, it was in everyone’s vision. Yet the tumult it created in hearts and minds was brief. Afterward people preferred not to think any longer about the events. Of course, traces of it remained, and for some, painful wounds; but most often these traces were conveniently forgotten. The example provided by some of the best known Communist Party intellectuals at that time illustrates this point. In November, 1956, a meeting of the Association of Intellectuals Against the Algerian War was held in Paris. It included Communists, Trotskyites, progressive Christians, Sartreans, and others, many of whom were not affiliated with any organization. During this meeting, which had an exceptionally large attendance of several hundred persons, a motion was made to condemn simultaneously, in the name of peoples' right to self-government, France's intervention in Algeria and that of the USSR in Hungary. A small group of communists began to yell, calling those who supported the motion “scum” and “dirty rats.” I recall the image of Edgar Morin, sitting on the platform, trying to make himself heard, and squirming under the taunts. In the weeks and months which followed, these raging defenders of the USSR (whose names and faces I have not forgotten) left the Party in spite of a long history of activism. It is true that the disclosures of Krushchev's report had dealt a heavy
blow; and the opportunism of the French Communist Party in the face of the Algerian War put their discipline to a difficult test. But what was their real motive? The Hungarian affair had broken them. To my knowledge, they have never uttered a word about Hungary since then. The subject is taboo. Of course, their confidence vanished and they lost the urge to treat their former adversaries as so much scum. But better yet, they lost faith in the USSR. Nonetheless, the absurd conviction that Hungary had foundered in counter-revolution persisted—absurd, I say, because how can one believe in a counter-revolution when one no longer believes in the revolutionary character of the Hungarian or Soviet regime? Only they know this secret. We'll let them keep it.

Let us rather compare their conduct with that of a Garaudy in the face of the events of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The man who had been for so long the acknowledged theoretician of the French Communist Party announced his solidarity with the Czechs. He publicized their demands, and was indignant at the Russians' pretension to impose their law on Eastern Europe, denouncing their military intervention in violent terms. Nor did his break with the French CP silence him. The Czech brand of socialism became for him the symbol of socialism "with a human face" when confronted by the Russian version of authoritarian socialism. And he is still welcomed by the press or by television to this day—an astounding contrast between Garaudy and his predecessors, which is even more significant if one notes that this champion of liberal and democratic socialism consistently fails to awaken any memories of 1956. He who participated in all of the slander which his dear Party heaped on the Hungarian rebels has no words remaining that would disavow his earlier position. Now he denounces sectarianism, dogmatism, and unconditional support of the USSR, but the memory of Budapest reveals again his Stalinist skin. If one were to believe him, the sun rose in the Prague Spring. As for the Hungarian Revolution, it is thrust into the era of the Shadows.

The experience of the Communists who one by one rejected the mother country over the past twenty years is not of interest only to themselves. The vast majority of the non-Communist Left also forgot Hungary. The socialist leaders—both the so-called right-wing and the so-called left-wing—are careful not to remember Budapest, yet they never miss a chance to recall the Prague Spring. Their political designs matter little. Sometimes they seek to embarrass their Communist allies, to put them in a position to draw out the consequences of their "astonishment" at Soviet interference in the affairs of socialist nations. Sometimes they endeavor to credit the Union de la gauche, in partially drawing upon the French CP's reservations concerning the USSR, in the hope that general opinion will finally be convinced of the existence of a national communism. Whatever the case, for the Left, history's great turning point occurred in 1968. Dubček provided an outline of modern communist leadership: that of an independent and reasonable man whose character must be popularized.
The meaning of my comparison, let me hasten to add, is not to belittle the Czechoslovak reform movement. In a totalitarian society, even limited liberal or democratic reforms are not only beneficial in themselves but eventually make possible transformations whose integrity is above suspicion. Where the authority of State and Party merge and civil society is engulfed by this State which, by means of Party spokesmen, plunges its tentacles into all domains, we cannot underestimate the effects of a process leading to a split between Party and State, thereby creating differentiations within that Party while beginning to break down the combined political, judicial, economic and cultural imperative. That this process was set in motion in Czechoslovakia and that the need for it was publicly recognized, thus resulting in the mobilization of the collective energies of all sectors of society, suffice to justify the hopes attached to the events of Spring '68. Furthermore, the interconnections of the Eastern regimes are so strong that the success of Czech reform would have profoundly affected its neighbors.

It is, however, impossible to overlook the difference between the Hungarian and Czech movements. They resemble each other only in their outcome. Only the former had the character of a revolution; the latter, in spite of the mobilization of the masses that it attained, was essentially a reform movement. Only the former was an uprising from below; the latter was motivated by an enlightened elite. These differences, then, can explain why one was forgotten and repressed, while the memory of the other was so actively cultivated. And on further reflection, it appears that in spite of all the unexpected changes, the mechanisms of the dominant interpretation in progressive leftist circles continue to prevail, with the aid of new devices.

How did these mechanisms function in the past, as early as the decade preceding the Second World War, but especially in that which followed? A major cleavage developed between the socialist and the capitalist worlds. In the latter, exploitation and oppression constituted the structural characteristics so that there remained no alternative but revolution or an accumulation of reforms resulting in a radical transformation of the mode of production—in short, the destruction of the State's power and the abolition of private property. On the other hand, the USSR (and later the countries of Eastern Europe) presented the image of a post-revolutionary society in which agrarian collectivization and state control of the means of production had created the basis for socialism. And many people besides the Trotskyists have talked and talked about this basis. Thus, even to those who were distant from the Soviet model, concerned by what they termed the privileges of the ruling stratum, the variation in income, the stifling of political opposition—in other words, by the use of terrorism as a means of governing—even to them, these vices appeared accidental. Either they were attributable to the fact that Russia had bypassed the bourgeois revolution, that it lacked a democratic tradition, and that it took time to overcome the heritage of semi-asiatic despotism, or else they were seen as a consequence of international power relations. Because it was encircled by capitalist countries, the USSR was
forced to take extraordinary measures in the economic as well as the political
arena, in order to defend the October victory and guarantee its safety.
Although the characteristics of oppression and exploitation in the USSR or
the East in general were recognized, there was no challenge to the claims of
socialism, whose progress was deemed to have been impeded by historical
circumstances.

Such a line of argument has yet to be exhausted. In fact, it has just recently
been resumed by French CP theoreticians who, after eliminating all criticism
of the Soviet regime and the policies of its great helmsman—e.g., after
denying, pure and simple, the existence of concentration camps—do not
hesitate (e.g., the historian Elleinstein) to speak from a Trotskyite perspective
of a “Stalinist phenomenon,” or (e.g., the philosopher Althusser) to denounce
a “Stalinist deviation” (social-democratic economism’s posthumous revenge
on Leninism). Nevertheless, outside Party circles, an entire series of events has
little by little undermined the idealization of Soviet socialism: the diffusion of
Krushchev’s report, the widely known fraud of the political trials, the
testimony of those deported long ago, the conflicts which overturned many
popular democracies, the large schism of the communist world causing the
rise of the new pole of Chinese orthodoxy, and finally, on another level, the
emergence since 1968 in countries such as France and Italy, of new methods
and objectives of struggle which elude the initiative and control of union
bureaucracies and traditional politics. Yet, the idea of a division between the
socialist and capitalist worlds continues to be maintained, at least on the level
of the leftist elites who have a monopoly on speech. As for the Maoists, their
positions are well known. The Soviet leaders are, in their eyes, revisionists; a
new bourgeoisie is establishing itself in the USSR. Socialism is embodied in
China. Of course, the new Trotskyist generation seems less rigid than the old:
it is amenable to pushing further its criticism of Soviet imperialism, even if
this is owing more to a lack of theoretical consistency rather than analytical
developments. Neither Maoists nor Trotskyists can conceive of a new system
of domination, possessing its own logic, wherein the bureaucratic class is
welded to the apparatus of the State and the Party, and is guided only by the
imperative of self-preservation. All they can imagine is that the Russian
regime, rather than defending the celebrated socialist basis, is compromising
with the capitalist camp and restoring bourgeois ideology.

How would they decipher, in light of events, the characteristics of a new
social formation and the rise of the bureaucracy as a class, and how would
they understand the meaning of an anti-totalitarian revolution? Some would
be forced to carry over their interrogations to China; others to examine the
role of Trotsky and Lenin in the constitution of a bureaucratic party.
Certainly, their cases must not be confused with regard to the Hungarian
uprising. The Trotskyists, at least, can be credited with defending its cause.
They did so in the conviction that the creation of workers’ councils evinced a
return to the initial conditions of proletarian struggle, and without assessing
what was at stake in this revolution. But the fact remains that they are the
only organized group who cannot be reproached for silence and amnesia, even though they remain prisoners of the idea of a division of the world into potentially good societies and potentially perverse societies. Moreover, since this idea is self-evident, as far as they are concerned, we do not need to refer to the Hungarian Revolution to know their system of thought.

On the other hand, the Hungarian Revolution does shed light on the Maoist mentality. These implacable critics of the Soviet regime (some of whom go so far as to denounce the "red bourgeoisie") do not fail to justify, when provoked, the crushing of the Budapest revolution. Moreover, in this matter they merely present themselves as faithful to the politics of the great helmsman who came down with all his weight in favor of the repression of the insurrection in 1956. Thus, instead of speaking of inconsistencies in the position of unattached communist intellectuals, we have to admit the coherence of their views. After all, as a revolution which mobilized all the popular forces against the State apparatus and the governing party, and which realized democracy in action, the Hungarian Revolution risked ruining the foundations of bureaucratic order (and on this point, Mao was not mistaken), no matter what the location of its implantation and the face that it presents.

But let us now turn away from consideration of small groups, taking note, however, that their beliefs, despite having suffered a resounding ideological defeat, continue to be propagated (notably the myth of the good China) far beyond their narrow frontiers. Let us now focus attention on the official (non-communist) Left, because it is precisely to this case that our thesis applies.

As things stand now, the majority of the representatives of this position are careful not to praise the Soviet model uncritically, as they previously did, but only by accompanying such praise with a critique of its "faults." They can be heard affirming that socialism is inseparable from respect for human rights, that planning cannot be just and effective if it remains authoritarian, that it is advisable to decentralize, and recently they have even discovered the virtues of the word "self-government." Briefly, everything happens as if there were no reference at all to an historically instituted positive pole: as though socialism remains to be constructed with nothing to start from except the historically instituted negative pole of capitalism and allied bourgeois regimes. However, their silence on Hungary is one of the most prominent signs of the survival of their way of thinking. In the face of revolutionary events which shook or could shake the world here and there, the traditional dichotomy between East and West is restored, with these events implicitly categorized according to whether they occur or are likely to occur in the West or the East (concepts which are not, it should be pointed out, geographic but symbolic: Japan is in the West, China in the East). In the West, the revolution is necessary, legitimate, and desirable. In the second case, however, one could not even say that the revolution is unnecessary, illegitimate, or undesirable: it has no status whatsoever. It cannot be arbitrarily summoned, nor can one even be delighted that it breaks out. It is undesirable in the sense that it is
incongruous, that this is not its proper place. Thus, the official Left’s erasure of the positive pole (socialism in the USSR) must not deceive us. It is in appearance only that the official Left claims to reinvent socialism. The official Left remains tied to the Soviet regime, even when it has become powerless to mention the regime by name or to justify it.

The Prague Spring arouses official Left enthusiasm because it has seen only the blossoming of a desire for change, for reforms. In the East, only reforms are good, while the revolution is consigned to the West. It is useless to state that this distinction is highly instructive, because what our Left dreams about, under the name of revolution, is only the establishment of a good bureaucracy, effective, flexible, which would yield a little room for self-management supervised by the experts and the police. In this sense, the Hungarian Revolution constitutes a touchstone for contemporary political thought.

The objection may be raised that twenty years ago, in a period when the Soviet Union was still idealized, the Hungarian rebels’ cause nonetheless aroused feelings of solidarity among important factions of the non-communist Left, while the USSR’s military intervention was the object of widespread reprobation. This is true. Still, it must be remembered that this resulted from a misunderstanding—a misunderstanding which prepared the way for oblivion. In the first place, the first Russian intervention was much more overtly condemned than the second. The latter was often deemed necessary, though deplorable. But after the emotion of the first days had abated, the well-intentioned souls regained their self-control. The news that presented the rebirth of right-wing forces was blown out of all proportion; anxiety was built up concerning the possible restoration of capitalism; the news bulletins were skillfully manipulated to create the impression of a drift toward chaos. Of course, no proof of the real significance of any drift toward the right was offered. There probably were a few individuals who hoped for a return to the Horthy regime and who exploited the disorder, or who simply desired the establishment of a Western-type democracy. Any revolution allows for even the most retrograde sort of demands to come to light. And for centuries reactions following revolutions find a pretext for their existence in such demands, which are not unlike mercenaries and looters who manage to discredit all that has been done.

In Hungary, right-wing individuals or small groups did not have an audience and had no means at their disposal to bring anything to bear upon the course of events. None of the reconstituted parties’ programs advocated measures aiming to return landed property to the large landowners or to put the factories back into the hands of private capital. The mobilization of the workers, the rise of factory and regional councils, rendered impossible not only the realization but even the formulation of such a program.

As for the imminence of chaos, what could have indicated this? The hasty executions of political policemen which received ample publicity were localized and rare. In a period when government is powerless to demand
obedience, when there are general strikes and confrontations, what should have struck public opinion was the workers' promptness and effectiveness in taking responsibility for the needs of the population as well as for armed resistance on the local level. The country's large factories had elected councils and, at the time of the cease fire, October 29 and 30, numerous central councils were already representing workers of an entire city or region. They became prominent, notably at Miskolc, Győr, Magyarovár, Pécs, and in certain outlying areas of Budapest. These bodies, thanks to the provincial radio stations, publicized their demands, attesting to their socialist aspirations and to an astonishing convergence of perspectives. Finally, the Nagy government's public declarations and even those of Kádár after the second Soviet intervention left no doubt as to the scope and significance of the workers' uprising.

Thus, in France the journal Socialisme ou barbarie was able to gather immediately enough information (drawn exclusively from press and radio sources) to publish a brochure on the Hungarian insurrection which conveyed an image of the workers' organization and its objectives. It matters little that this image calls for a number of additions and slight alterations with the passage of time. It has been confirmed and in certain respects considerably enriched by the work of historians, notably by those who are Hungarian exiles. Yet the Left, although it was in a position to fully appreciate the role of the councils, preferred to let itself be confused by the reconstitution or creation of many political parties and by the resurrection of the ghost of reaction. Its audacity culminated in its refutation of the French CP's version of the facts—i.e., in drawing attention to workers' participation in the insurrection and their desire to demolish the Stalinists' power or to prevent its return. At first, the Left heroically denied that what had occurred in Hungary was a counter-revolution, but it was still unable to conceive of the phenomenon as revolutionary. And even when the idea was mentioned, it remained empty, since it was impossible for the Left to name the regime that the revolution was to destroy. From this it followed that, without ever having recognized the revolution, in the final analysis people came to speak of the development of a counter-revolutionary current that menaced it (according to some) or that submerged it (according to others). Thus, in the end, the second Soviet intervention was deemed necessary, because it had not been understood that the defense of the bureaucracy was the sole motive of the first intervention.

In effect, the Left's ambivalence was in evidence from the very start of the insurrection. The October 28 uprising failed to arouse any enthusiasm. The indignation provoked by the news of repression was accompanied by a feeling of consternation over what appeared to be a tragedy. True, the aspirations of the demonstrators could seem legitimate, and the violence which oppressed them condemnable. But why? Because the revolt seemed a product of errors, of blunders, even of crimes of bad leaders, that is, of a team who undeservedly continued in their posts after the death of Stalin, even though they were
compromised by his politics; or else because the revolt seemed a product of an economic crisis ascribable to the errors, blunders, indeed, inequities of Soviet leaders who subordinated the interests of Eastern countries to those of the pioneering State, alone capable in their eyes of guaranteeing the cohesion of the socialist bloc. In short, the event was attributed to peculiar, contingent, avoidable causes, according to an interpretive scheme which left the traditional representation of the nature of the USSR intact.

A tragedy, I say; this is how the Hungarian Revolution presented itself, a modern tragedy, in the ancient sense of the term, in which the law of socialism in human hearts confronted the law of socialism in institutions. Thus, our leftist thinkers, with Sartre in the lead, hoped to beg the people to put down their arms, the Russians to return to their borders, and Nagy to simultaneously save the Party, respect the Warsaw Pact and initiate reforms. But the truth is that they suddenly saw the myth of the proletarian State explode, with, on the one hand, the Hungarian State in pieces, its power reduced to that of Soviet armoured cars, and on the other, the people armed. The tragedy was played out only on the stage of their fantasies. The event as such could not touch them because they were incapable of reflecting upon this fact which they themselves rendered unthinkable: an anti-bureaucratic revolution.

I have just referred to Sartre. Few men have, as he has, embodied the spirit of a certain Western Left during this last quarter of a century. At the beginning of the fifties he was the intransigent theoretician of Stalinism, while taking care not to declare his membership in the Communist Party. Then he was the censor of USSR politics in popular democracies, soon becoming an advocate of Krushchev's reformism, a partisan of Fanon and a spokesman for Third World revolutions. After all this, he became the protector of young Maoists, and now defies all categorization (and with each change, he finds a platform in the progressive press). Sartre has glided from one position to another without ever disavowing any of the theses he was abandoning. Legend has it that he sided with the Budapest rebels. But in reality, he only acquiesced to their demands in order to guide them back within the limits of a will for reform, and he presented the revolution as merely an unfortunate consequence of Gerö's obstinacy in barring Nagy's return (to whom historical reason prescribed the role of Gomulka). A derailing of history—such was his vision of the facts at the time. And if, according to him, the fault lay with the train's conductor or the railway linesmen, necessity dictated that socialism be set back on its tracks, even at the painful price of crushing the workers' councils.

Whether the course of history is attributed to Stalin, Krushchev or Brezhnev, to Mao, Liu Shao-chi, or Lin Piao, to Dubček or Husak, to Gerö, Rákosi, Nagy, or Kádár, it is always the seat of power that fascinates so-called Marxists. It is from this seat that they see the fate of socialism decided.

Stalinism, revisionism, deviationism, liberalization, democratization, socialism with a human face—these are the categories of the Left's discourse.
However, should a revolution arise unexpectedly, the discourse risks collapse. To return to the Hungarian Revolution, though, it is primarily its novelty that must be praised and examined—a novelty which did not fade with its failure, with the reconstitution in Hungary of the bureaucratic regime aided by unprecedented artifices; a novelty whose meaning is not behind us, but still before us.

Of course, the Hungarians do not alone possess the privilege of revolting. The uprising of East Berlin had already brought to light the existence of mass opposition in a popular democracy, an opposition ordinarily masked by ideology and in fact paralyzed by the police apparatus. It had also revealed the weakness of the leadership cadres, from which a faction of political and union officials had suddenly broken away to join the side of the insurgents. The power of a collective movement mobilized around national and democratic protest was manifested to different degrees in Poland as well as Czechoslovakia twelve years later. Furthermore, as Solzhenitsyn recently informed us in the last section of his Gulag Archipelago, in 1962, the entire population of Novotcherkaask, an industrial village in the USSR (situated in the basin of the Don) began a riot which lasted three days. One finds at the source of the workers' protest incidents analogous to those which provoked workers' unrest in East Berlin. And, following the same scenario as in Hungary, the unrest was precipitated by army intervention, thereby creating near unanimity among the population and the upsetting of the local Party apparatus, and forcing the Soviet leaders to make apparent concessions before they mounted a second offensive of repression with the aid of new troops. All this is one more sign of the profound kinship among the East European revolts.

The case of Hungary is different, however, on account of the broad scope of the uprising, its duration, the radicalism of the demands, the sense of organization which the revolutionaries demonstrated, and parallel with this, the collapse of the State and Party apparatus. Here the contradiction of totalitarianism appears fully for the first time. Here the State tends to engulf civil society, to impose the same norms, the same rules, the same representations on the population, no matter what the sector of activity, and to render its operation visible in some sense. At the same time, owing to the denial of internal division within classes and the reabsorption of differences in the unity of the popular democracy or of the proletarian State, power becomes detached and the means of domination are concentrated in the hands of a small number of leaders. In such a way, with the aid of historically determined conditions and a weakening of authority, seeds of conflict are paradoxically sewn through the entire spectrum of society. The vast majority of the population similarly experiences the oppression, though to different degrees, and is united in opposition to this power.

This was the first consequence of the Hungarian crisis: all the hierarchies which seemed firmly established on the eve of the revolution, all the divisions issuing from the new system of domination, were suddenly secondary to the
cleavage between the State-Party apparatus and the society as a whole. The power which was previously omnipresent and invisible suddenly re-emerged as the foreign organ of coercion and of lies. The game of identification, whereby each petty bureaucrat was invested with the power of the rulers, was broken up. In large part, the bureaucratic stratum dissolved and a faction of it, liberated from the phantasm of its function, sided with the population in revolt.

To reiterate: the failure of the revolution could not efface the truth—a truth that some theoreticians could well have conceived but which has become concrete and visible for millions, inscribed upon them through experience—that totalitarianism constitutes the most efficient system of domination, but also the most vulnerable. After such an event, it is conceivable that if a crisis were to reach the heart of the totalitarian structure, the Soviet Union, a generalized, uncontrollable revolt would break out which would strip it of power as never before elsewhere.

However, we could not limit novelty only to the Eastern regimes, since the rise of totalitarianism is not foreign to the history of the Western world. In part, totalitarianism emerged from the West, having been established in the wake of a proletarian revolution in the USSR (whose conditions resulted from the westernization of the country) and under the sign of a socialist ideology, born of the critique of the capitalist mode of production and of bourgeois democracies. In fact, the Hungarian Revolution acquires universal significance because it tried to assume the task of destroying totalitarianism and State ownership of the means of production, without wishing to restore bourgeois democracy and private property. All the propositions formulated by the workers' councils, and the embryonic programs elaborated during the course of the revolution which obtained the support of numerous organizations, students, intellectuals, writers, and journalists (principally the program of Bibo, who was one of the Petőfi Party officials, and a minister under Nagy as a populist socialist peasant) attest to an historically unprecedented project: an anticapitalist and antibureaucratic project. This project, although the product of specific conditions different from those obtaining in the West, is nonetheless not, in its final inspiration, Hungarian (nor even a revolutionary project peculiar to the East). It condenses the lessons of an historical experience which is also ours; it thereby challenges a particular mode of domination, the basis of all modern systems of domination.

What now demands our utmost attention, and what I did not sufficiently appreciate twenty years ago, is the originality of the research that mobilized the Hungarian revolutionaries. It is not enough, in effect, to emphasize that in the face of the bureaucracy, the proletariat spontaneously rediscovered methods of struggle (the general strike) and forms of organization (the councils) created in past revolutionary struggles against capital and the bourgeois State. Nor is it enough to affirm the legitimacy of national and liberal-democratic demands in a country which, economically and culturally, suffers from imperialist oppression and where the suppression of freedom of
organization, of expression, of information, and of the circulation of ideas and people serves the all-powerful State. In adopting this language, one could still allow part of the novelty to escape. The Hungarian revolutionaries and above all the workers organized in councils not only had the notion, as did a small number of the predecessors in 1917 or in the following years, but also the representation of the danger that was posed by a power (even if it be in "good hands," i.e., those of the Nagy government), that concentrated all the decisions affecting the fate of society. What is more, in the period of their most intense creativity—i.e., after the second Soviet intervention—they showed new insight into the danger which issued from the development of their own power.

The history of the formation of the Budapest Central Council as Balázs Nagy has described it is, in this respect, exemplary. The first sign of a common will not to permit an executive organ to splinter the working class can be seen in the way delegates were assigned to the first coordinating meeting called at the behest of the Council of Ujpest (one of the most important workers' areas of Budapest). These delegates, according to the available information, were elected by all the workers in the factories involved, not just by their respective councils. This phenomenon indicates the resolve to maintain revolutionary leadership within the framework of a participatory democracy. As a general rule, "the Hungarian workers and their delegates from the working class saw democratism as the greatest value of the Councils. They saw it in the relation that closely linked the delegates to the entire working class and in which these delegates were only the envoys and executors of the workers' will. It should be noted that in this Council movement, the workers often removed those delegates from office who deviated from their mandates." A second sign should be pointed out: during the meeting at the Egyesült Izzo factory, November 14, from which the Central Council would emerge, the participants seem haunted by the problem of their representativity and, according to Balázs Nagy's remark, were solidly attached to a "democratic protocol" as rigorous as that of court ceremonies at Versailles. This problem acquired such a significance that they renounced the creation of a National Workers' Council. Although such a body might have been useful, the majority of the delegates decided that their mandate had been limited to the establishment of the Budapest Council and that they could not adopt decisions involving the provincial councils, whose representatives were absent. It is noteworthy that in the discussion which opposed the criterion of efficacy to that of democracy the latter prevailed—a fortunate choice, moreover, because it would later influence a number of provincial councils to join ranks with the new central body in the days that were to follow. Once again, this is but one episode in the fundamental debate which questioned the function of councils in a new regime.

2. Ibid., p. 51.
At the same time, the desire to create a workers' power is affirmed and partly as a result of Kadar's intransigence (with whom the workers negotiated but whose legitimacy they denied), this desire becomes real: the Central Council defined itself as the authentic political power. Still, the idea of a new revolutionary power totally in the workers' hands was condemned because it would have had a totalitarian bent. Clearly, this was a contradiction, but nonetheless a fruitful one which, as Balázs Nagy suggests, cannot be described in terms of an opposition between practical and theoretical imperatives. In demanding that the councils direct the future economy, the delegates claimed political power. The ability not only to determine production norms, distribution of salaries, local working conditions, but also to decide investment on a national level and to direct the country's economic affairs implied a governmental responsibility. It was thus not in the present or in self-defense that the delegates accepted political responsibility. They were already confronting a future contradiction in desiring to obtain this responsibility and at the same time desiring that it be limited. What they were outlining was the model for a new division of power—unknown in the bourgeois democratic system and what alone would make socialism possible—between, if one can say it, the politico-governmental and the politico-economic bodies: a division instituted according to law.

Granted, this model was not sufficiently elaborated for us to judge it viable or not. But it is impossible to misconstrue its impulse. The idea is to combine authorities whose sources are openly recognized as dissimilar. This may be seen emerging in the association of three demands put forward by the Central Council and noticeable in the programs of many provincial councils: the organization of workers' councils; a multi-party system, assuring through the mechanism of elections to a Parliament, the representativity of governmental proceedings; and the reconstruction from the bottom up of unions defending workers' interests and their right to strike. In one sense, the last demand increases the contradiction because it implies that the councils themselves do not constitute the entire working class. But the contradiction still remains fruitful. The desire for true unions presupposes that there cannot exist a society in accord with itself, delivered once and for all from internal antagonisms, and that precisely where democracy functions best, in the framework of production, there may occur a split, for example between the councils and the ensemble of workers who are only represented there, or for example between certain disadvantaged workers and the majority, or even conflicts arising from unequal development among certain sectors of production or certain regions. Implicitly, the model recognizes that the worker is caught in at least three different webs of socialization and that the fiction of unity must be realized and the social differences that the worker harbors be conceded: that of worker-citizen, of worker-producer, and of worker-unionist-potential striker. Thus there is a difference at the heart of the same individual between the movement which implicates him in a general collective decision and the movement that cuts him off from it by associating
him with a particular collective act.

Let us repeat: this representation emerged from the critique of totalitarianism, which does not appear simply as a regime to be destroyed, like the external adversary whose face is visible under the traits of an existing State and Party, but as the internal possibility of socialism. Nothing is more instructive in this sense than the remarks of Sandor Bali in the November 14 debates, who seems to have expressed faithfully the sentiments of the assembly. After affirming that the workers' councils exercise a political and economic function while waiting for the creation of new parties and new unions, he stated: "We know that the workers' councils will become the managing organs of the country's economy and this is exactly what we wish them to be. We don't want to commit the same error as the Party did, in that it was at the same time master of the country and factories and also the only organization representing the workers' interests. If we commit this error, we will always be at a standstill. We want the councils to direct the country's economic affairs and the unions to have the right to strike and to direct all matters related to the protection of workers' interests." 3

This is not merely a collection of small facts illuminating only a part of the Hungarian Revolution. In my eyes, this shows quite well what was at stake. Certainly, this revolution cannot by any means be reduced to an uprising of the working class. The role the students and intellectuals played at its outset is well known. The former were mobilized first in Szeged, then in Budapest, and their action precipitated and radicalized the process of confrontation begun by the intellectuals of the Petőfi circle. Enthused by the events in Poland, determined to demand a review of all political trials after the rehabilitation of Rajk as well as an investigation of those responsible for the terror, and attracted by Titoism, which seemed to them to couple the merits of a national socialism with those of a socialism founded on industrial self-management, it was to the intellectuals that the initiative returned for the great assembly of October 22 (a sort of pre-revolutionary parliament, as Miklos Molnar described it), 4 and for the demonstration of the 23rd which was transformed into an insurrection. It is already remarkable that the demands raised during this assembly—even prior to the workers' intervention—evidenced the desire for democracy which was subsequently realized. In the "Fourteen Points of Poly," not only is the immediate convocation of the Party demanded with the return of Imre Nagy to the government, but also notably: "new general elections founded in equality, secret ballot, the participation of several parties and of new candidates for the national assembly; the revision in industry of the norms imposed upon workers and the creation of workers' autonomy in the factories; total freedom of opinion and freedom of the press guaranteed by the founding of several newspapers."

In the course of the revolutionary period, an extraordinary effervescence seized the population outside the working class and was translated into the creation of many committees. The demand for autonomy grew, activated by the example of the councils. The University, the communication organs, the large public services, and the associations of intellectuals and writers are the theatre for continuous discussion concerning the institution of socialism, which meant in the spirit of the protagonists, cutting the roots of totalitarianism. While the Western observer's vision is clouded by the problem of property, the Hungarian revolutionaries manifestly did not think in terms of property, but in terms of rights. Certainly, they explicitly rejected the idea of a restoration of private property in the means of production. But what they sought to establish were the rights that would guarantee freedom and security, i.e., the right to the truth: rights which need not be formal, but which presuppose that collectives and individuals are no longer in the grip of State-Party power, a power which has made itself the sole possessor of all knowledge and law.

Liberty and truth: this means concretely the establishment in each domain—education, information, intellectual and artistic creation—new institutions, in which there is collective self-organization and simultaneously a recognized plurality of representations, legitimacy of differences and conflicts. Security: that means concretely the abolition of police arbitrariness and legal guarantees according to which judges must publicly give reasons for their sentences and by which the accused may be defended. Thus, one sees a democratic will affirmed very deliberately according to two poles which could not, in effect, be disassociated without being annihilated; the pole of collective organization, which presupposes the implication of agents in the institution (by which must be understood not only a system of delegation of authority from bottom to top, but the obligation of those who are delegated with such authority to be held accountable for their actions, and of opponents to assert themselves, and the free circulation of information) and the pole of social differentiation which presupposes the recognition of the specificity of the domain of politics, economics, law, pedagogy, science, esthetics, etc.

What a mistake it is to find here a conflict between the model of socialism and that of bourgeois democracy or, in the best of cases, to believe that the rights feverishly affirmed by the Hungarian revolutionaries only had a provisional meaning, at the end of a totalitarian experience. This was not the announcement of a transition toward the good society, communism. Socialism simply began to live at the moment when it became recognized that socialism alone could offer the maximum life to civil society while it could prevent power from being solidified, law from decaying to the ground of the dominant interest, and knowledge from dissolving into ideology.

Marx said of the Commune that it was the form of socialism discovered at long last. We won't fall into the error of pretending that the Hungarian Revolution yielded us a solution: it rather gave meaning to the question of socialism not only owing to the existence of the councils, but also owing to the
discovery of the limits of power, especially of their own power; not only owing to the mobilization and the near-fusion of collective energies, but also owing to a new experience and an authentic desire for difference.

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