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Hannah Arendt and the May 1968 Events in France

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I. France's May Days and the Prism of Hannah Arendt's Thought

On June 27, 1968 Hannah Arendt wrote 23-year-old Daniel Cohn-Bendit:

> I want to say only two things: First, that I am quite sure that your parents, and especially your father, would be very pleased with you if they were alive now; Second, that should you run into trouble and perhaps need money, then we and Chanan Klenbort will always be ready to help as far as it lies in our power to do so. (Quoted in Young-Bruehl 2004, 412).

Daniel was the son of Erich and Herta Cohn-Bendit, Arendt's friends from her days in Paris in the 1930s. There Hannah and Erich joined the likes of Walter Benjamin, Heinrich Blücher, Chanan Klenbort, and other Berliners-in-exile for discussions "formed in Marxist schools of theory or *praxis*" (Young-Bruehl 2004, 122). Arendt's letter, though never delivered, symbolically brought these discussions full circle (Leggewie and Cohn-Bendit 2018, 6). That spring and summer Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a.k.a. "Danny the Red," *had* turned left-wing theory into praxis, and was expelled from France for his efforts. David Luban speculates that Arendt "probably feared that Cohn-Bendit was on the lam and needed money to escape" (Luban 2008), and a June 13 letter to Mary McCarthy also mentions Arendt's desire to reach Daniel and offer help (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 218). On June 26 Arendt wrote to Karl and Gertrud Jaspers and mentioned Danny:

> It seems to me that children in the next century will learn about the year 1968 the way we learned about the year 1848. I also have a personal interest. "Danny the Red" Cohn-Bendit is the son of very good friends of ours from our Paris days, both of them dead now. I know the boy. He visited us here, and I've seen him in Germany, too. A thoroughly good sort...Things are in an extremely dangerous state here [in the United States], too; but I sometimes think this is the only country where a republic at least still has a chance. (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, 681)

The timing of these letters is important. Arendt wrote them in the wake of French President Charles de Gaulle's May 30 speech calling for National Assembly elections, which followed weeks of student and worker protests (including a general strike beginning on May 13) that had closed French schools, paralyzed France's economy, and threatened to topple de Gaulle's decade-long leadership, if not the French Fifth Republic. "I have considered every possibility," said de Gaulle, and "I shall not step down" (Reader 1993, 18). De Gaulle made no overtures to the striking students or workers. Instead,

invoking a “stark anti-Communism unknown since the early days of the cold war” (Seale and McConville 1968, 213-4), the French President raised the possibility of military intervention and framed the crisis as a clash of French patriotism and civic virtue versus “totalitarian Communism” and dictatorship, warning that “If this situation continues I shall have to…use other methods than immediate national elections” (Reader 1993, 18).

The speech was a triumph. That evening saw “the biggest of all the demonstrations of the events – in support of de Gaulle” (Reader 1993, 19), while Gaullists prepared for the June elections by adopting a new banner—Union for the Defense of the Republic (UDR)—“suggesting that they alone were the custodians of republican freedoms” (Seale and McConville 1968, 221). By the first round of elections on June 23 a Gaullist victory was imminent; and on June 30 the UDR sealed an outright majority of 295 seats (over 197 in the previous Parliament), while “Socialists and Communists together lost 100 seats—the gravest setback suffered by the parliamentary left in its history” (Seale and McConville 1968, 225, 226). When Arendt wrote to McCarthy, Cohn-Bendit, and the Jasperses, the writing was on the wall for the protestors—the revolution was lost.

To judge by her letters, Arendt’s judgment of the May 1968 Events was both supportive and despairing—supportive of Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s actions as de facto leader of the student “22 March Movement” which spurred the May revolt, but despairing at the meaning of the Events themselves. Her implicit comparison of France to the United States betrayed a concern for French republicanism’s future under the weight of Gaullism. And her reference to 1848 made a tragic parallel to the wave of revolutions which had briefly founded liberal republics but later bowed to a “party of order” when working class demands became too scary (Hobsbawm 1996, 9-26).

Arendt’s published writings (most being pre-1968) say little about the French Events. But the global protests of 1968, much like the 1956 Hungarian Revolution a decade earlier, set her thinking. The 1968 generation had “discovered what the eighteenth century had called ‘public happiness,’ which means that when man takes part in public life he opens up for himself a dimension of human experience that otherwise remains closed to him and that in some way constitutes a part of complete ‘happiness’” (Arendt 1972, 203). Meanwhile the varied aims, tactics, and philosophical influences of the global student protests vitalized questions about the meaning of action, the use of violence and nonviolence, and the foundations of political power. Students had exposed a crisis of legitimacy in Western liberal democracies—but what did it mean?

Arendt gathered many of her thoughts in three essays (and one interview) published in *Crises of the Republic* (1972). There, though Arendt sometimes references the May 1968 Events in passing, she directly analyzes them on only one occasion, as follows in the essay “On Violence”:

> Where power has disintegrated, revolutions are possible but not necessary. We know of many instances when utterly impotent regimes were permitted to continue in existence for long periods of time—either because there was no one to test their strength and reveal their weakness or because they were lucky enough not to be engaged in war and suffer defeat. Disintegration often becomes manifest only in direct confrontation; and even then, when power is already in the street,

> some group of men prepared for such an eventuality is needed to pick it up and assume responsibility. We have recently witnessed how it did not take more than the relatively harmless, essentially nonviolent French students' rebellion to reveal the vulnerability of the whole political system, which rapidly disintegrated before the astonished eyes of the young rebels. Unknowingly they had tested it; they intended only to challenge the ossified university system, and down came the system of governmental power, together with that of the huge party bureaucracies…It was a textbook case of a revolutionary situation that did not develop into a revolution because there was nobody, least of all the students, prepared to seize power and the responsibility that goes with it. Nobody except, of course, de Gaulle. (Arendt 1972, 148-9)

"On Violence" stands amongst Arendt's most studied and debated works, but this account of the May 1968 Events has not been thoroughly studied. Deborah Whitehall (2019) is a notable exception, using this passage to highlight the non-revolutionary character of the *soixante-huitards*, their adherence to Arendtian nonviolence over Sartrean violence, and the fleeting character of their "joy in public action" during those heady May days (Whitehall 2019, 1396-1398). But this discussion is brief, and Whitehall's interest lies not in Arendt's analysis of the Events per se, but in her relevance for rethinking how international law and multinational organizations might support humanist revolutionary movements like those in France 1968.

An "Arendtian" examination of France's May 1968 Events is due. Arendt once described a "great character" as a "prism" through which "the colorless light of historical time" might be "forced through and refracted" to reveal new insights about life and the world (Arendt 1968, 33). The same is true of specific "great events" to which Arendt repeatedly draws our attention—the 1871 Paris Commune, the 1905 and 1917 Russian *soviets*, Germany's abortive 1918-19 *Räte* revolution, the French Résistance (see Heuer 2011), and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution—whose "twelve days," if the latter is exemplary, "contained more history than the twelve years since the Red Army had 'liberated' the country from Nazi domination" (Arendt 2018, 106). A generation of scholars have subsequently used Arendt's writings to link more recent events in which "Arendtian power" and the "lost treasure of revolution" were renewed—the Solidarity movement in Poland (Canovan 2002) and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia (Isaac 1994), the non-violent Revolutions of 1989 and post-Soviet "color revolutions" (citations at LeJeune 2014, 78-81), the 2011 Arab Spring (citations at LeJeune 2014, 81-2; Lang, Jr. 2019) and 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement (Auer and Chan 2020; Pang 2016), among others. The May 1968 Events in France bear many of the Arendtian hallmarks that inspired these studies.

Via an "Arendtian" analysis of the French May Days, this essay seeks to better understand how Arendt's thought and concepts sharpen our vision of what these events were and what they meant. I also use May 1968 to better understand Arendt as adding facts brings Arendt to life. Read in the context of real events, Arendt's fleeting statements about the actions of French students and workers, the fragility of the French Fifth Republic, the nature of France's "revolutionary situation," and President Charles de

Gaulle's dramatic seizure of power are opportunities to critically reexamine Arendt's practical understanding of concepts like action, freedom, power, legitimacy, and revolution, both in terms of what they mean in her framework, and how (or whether) they help us understand events.

The analysis has three main parts. Section II on "Public Happiness" uses Arendt's normative concepts of freedom, action, and public happiness to examine the lived experience of May 1968. Section III on "Revolutionary Councils" looks at the political organization of May 1968, and specifically the council organization of the protests, via a stylized juxtaposition with Arendt's description of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Section IV on "Revolutionary Situations" engages Arendt on the nature of France's "revolutionary situation" in May 1968 and the preconditions of successful democratic and/or council revolution. This section consolidates what Arendt teaches about May 1968 and vice versa, and shows how all of this helps us better understand the tragedy of recent events like the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.

II. Public Happiness: Freedom and Action

What is freedom? Arendt calls freedom "the *raison d'être*" of politics, whose "field of experience is action" (Arendt 1993, 146). Action in turn is "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter," and which "corresponds to the human condition of plurality" or "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt 1998, 7). More concretely, Arendt writes that "To act…means to take an initiative, to begin…to set something in motion" (Arendt 1998, 177). Political action is dependent on plurality, first, because action only has worldly meaning when performed before a community of peers. A "space of appearances" amongst peers "comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action" (Arendt 1998, 199), and in that space "freedom as virtuosity can appear" (Arendt 1993, 154). Subsequently, where a community of equals is gathered, one can strive through action to inspire others via words and deeds, and to be remembered for doing so.

Inherent in Arendt's concept of action are the properties of spontaneity and natality—the idea that one can act or perform in front of one's peers in a manner not only impressive and meaningful, but also unpredictable and uniquely one's own; i.e. that one can "develop one's own methods of struggle" (cf. Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968, 154). George Kateb (1984, 16) has analogized Arendt's notion of action to "a game that may be played for its own sake," and this is helpful. One can, to roughly illustrate, practice basketball alone and be satisfied by self-improvement. But a different thrill flows from performing virtuosically amongst one's peers, where fluidity on the court allows for spontaneity and creativity, and one's unique style of play draws inspiration, emulation ("Be like Mike!"), and even glory from one's fellow ballers.

In politics the analogy breaks down quickly, but it sheds light on why a plurality of peers and a space of appearances are vital for political action. Political deeds cannot occur in a vacuum, and a political space among peers offers citizens an analogous

opportunity to reveal their virtue through participation in a collective activity of greater stakes and meaning. What Arendt calls the "lost treasure of revolution" is the joy and exhilaration of this participatory activity that is lost in modern representative democracies where political participation has been reduced to the vote.

One benefit of revolutionary moments is to remind citizens of this lost treasure. Freedom, Arendt writes, "only seldom—in times of crisis or revolution—becomes the direct aim of political action" (Arendt 1993, 146). Many times she used the French Resistance to illustrate—the Resistance fighters "had become 'challengers,' had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear" (Arendt 1993, 4). But with tragic irony Arendt also notes how upon liberation from the Nazis the freedom fighters were "thrown back into…the weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs," and so "lost their treasure" (Arendt 1993, 4).

Scholarship is divided on which elements of Arendt's model deserve priority. Some like Jürgen Habermas (1994, 213) read Arendt through a communicative lens, emphasizing the central role of "illocutionary" deliberation between people gathered in concert that helps create consensus; while others like Dana Villa highlight Arendt's more individualistic stress on "the public realm as a kind of theater, and on the agonistic character of political action as a way of distinguishing or disclosing oneself" (Villa 1992, 279). The former generates legitimate "power" through collective action; the latter a forum for self-realization. In either case, what carries the day when one acts in public, whether in word or deed, are the "principles" manifest in one's actions (see Cane 2015). It is our *principles* when acting which make us leaders who inspire, and which strengthen the political bonds among collective political actors—and which, importantly, are conceptually distinct from motives and goals. Action can pursue goals, but it cannot be determined by them (Knauer 1980, 729). Free action is something akin to Martin Luther's "Here I stand, I can do no other" (Owen and Strong 2004, xlv), whereas the pursuit of goals is a matter of strategy and calculation.

Few events demonstrate the raw substance, joys, and enthusiasm of action, or what Arendt calls "public happiness," as vividly as the French May Days of 1968. To begin, a brief sketch of these events is helpful. As Michael Seidman documents in detail, even before the protests of May 1968 the level and complexity of student engagement in France was exceptional. In France student activism was a fact of life. France's largest student union, the UNEF, had protested the French war in Vietnam as early as 1948, and its "militancy during the Algerian conflict led the government to cut off its subsidy" (Seidman 2004, 33). The UNEF was rivalled by the smaller and more conservative FNEF. In addition, by the mid-1960's these rival student unions were themselves overlapped by a dizzying array of competing and often antagonistic left-wing student organizations like the UEC (the student branch of the French Communist Party, or PCF), JCR (Trotskyists), UJCML (Maoists), the Situationists (left-existential), and the anarchists (including Daniel Cohn-Bendit) (Seidman 1994, 23-35; Seale and McConville 1968, 33-52), among many others.

By 1968 student attention had shifted to the Vietnam War and conditions on campus. In February of that year, a UNEF-led Valentine's Day occupation persuaded authorities to

lift sex-based visitation restrictions in the dorms (Seidman 2004, 67-70). Then on March 21, a left-wing commando attack on the American Express building in Paris led to six arrests, including a student at Nanterre University located on the outskirts of Paris. On March 22 around 150 Nanterre students led by Cohn-Bendit seized an administrative building to protest the arrests. "They sat down," write Seale and McConville (1968, 15), "and formed themselves spontaneously into a sort of students' council, debating with growing excitement and sense of purpose until the early hours of the morning." A vote was taken to approve their actions, and those in favor—a union of JCRs and anarchists (Reader 1993, 8)—became the "22 March Movement."

The next day, the group distributed 5,000 copies of an action statement protesting the arrests and declaring, among other things, that "*We must* stop challenging capitalism by means of *outdated* techniques…We have to thrash out the problems inside the university and act right where we work" (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968, 49). For the next month the 22 March Movement (and various committees) occupied lecture halls and other spaces at Nanterre to facilitate discussion of students' and workers' struggles and debate concrete initiatives at the university, including a boycott of the end-of-year examinations. Also at this time, "From late April or early May a secret high command of the revolution started meeting regularly or stayed in close touch[.]" The group included Cohn-Bendit and leaders of major student left-wing and union organizations, who were "held together by ideology, not by organization or planning"—they collaborated, but were not a "tightly knit revolutionary apparatus" (Seale and McConville 1968, 59).

On May 2 eight members of the 22 March Movement including Cohn-Bendit were summoned to appear on May 6 before a disciplinary committee at the Sorbonne in Paris. A protest meeting subsequently called for on May 3 at the Sorbonne deteriorated into street fighting between students and police after 500 of the initial participants were arrested. In response UNEF, the largest student union, called for a total university strike (which was joined by the teachers' union, SNESup) on May 6. The strike demands included police withdrawal from the Latin Quarter, release of the arrested students, and a reopening of the Sorbonne. Massive demonstrations followed on May 6 where university students, joined by teachers, high schoolers, and militants, clashed with police in "the worst rioting Paris had known since the Algerian disorders" (Seale and McConville 1968, 70). More intense battles in the Latin Quarter would follow, including the May 10-11 "night of the barricades" which made Paris the fiery background to cinematic scenes of guerrilla warfare.

At this time four-fifths of Paris was in favor of the students (Seale and McConville 1968, 76), and on May 11 French Prime Minister Georges Pompidou granted UNEF's three demands. But it was too late. Earlier that day students in Paris and the provinces began occupying university buildings à la the 22 March Movement, and on May 13 France's two largest unions, the CGT and CFDT, called for a general worker strike in solidarity (Seale and McConville 1968, 88). For the next ten-days occupations and strikes spread like wildfire. In the Latin Quarter students occupied the Sorbonne and the Odéon theater; and elsewhere and throughout France, beginning at the Sud-Aviation factory near Nantes, workers spontaneously seized and shut down factories, including the prized Renault car factory in Boulogne-Billancourt near Paris (Reader 1993, 12). The alignment

of student occupations and factory strikes (involving nine million workers) ground the French state and economy to a halt. When on May 24 de Gaulle's televised proposal for a June referendum on university and economic policy failed to help things, France was on a precipice.

In testimonials of this phase of the revolt, the recurrence of what Arendt calls "public happiness" is uncanny. Aristide Zolberg (1972, 183) was among the first to notice the experiential continuities between France in 1968 and other "moments of madness" in French history, when actors thought "all is possible" and lived a politics where "the wall between the instrumental and the expressive collapses." Raymond Aron, among those least sympathetic with the students, called the "deep underlying causes" of May "subjective and emotional," a "colossal release of suppressed feeling," suggesting it is "far more necessary to understand what the actors *feel* rather than to take seriously what they *say*" (Aron 1969, 21). But however one judges it, the "sixty-eighters" spoke a *lot* in public, and this was central to their experience. "Parisian, French students talked and talked and talked for almost five weeks," said Aron, and "These conversations will glow in their memories" (Aron 1969, 19). Seale and McConville (1968, 93) make the same point about May 1968, that "men will look back on that period and remember it with joy," and:

> The most striking feature of those days was the sight of people talking to one another—not only casual exchanges, but long intense conversations between total strangers, clustered at street corners, in cafés, in the Sorbonne, of course. There was an explosion of talk, as if people had been saving up what they had to say for years. And what was impressive was the tolerance with which they listened to one another, as if all those endless dialogues were a form of group therapy. (Ibid.?)

On the fiftieth anniversary of the May Events Michael Abidor gathered testimonials from across the participant spectrum. Summarizing them he writes that in 1968, "People discovered the thrill of speaking in public and inspiring others to action, of sharing ideas on the streets with total strangers…People literally discovered their voices" (Abidor 2018, 6).

A representative example is Daniel Pinos, who in 1968 attended a vocational high school in a suburb of Lyon. Daniel's father and brother worked in factories occupied by their workers, and Daniel's high school joined the strike in solidarity. The striking factories and high schools in Daniel's suburb formed General Assemblies (GAs) where occupants could speak, propose demands, and vote on actions. GA demands at Daniel's school included ending iron discipline and ceasing the exploitation of student workers. He called most impactful "the moment at the GA when I first spoke…you felt free…and it was 'I'm here, I exist!'" (Abidor 2018, 229). Meanwhile in Paris, 24-year-old Suzanne Borde joined a spontaneously formed neighborhood Action Committee (AC) of 40-50 people. Borde was attracted by "the permanent discussions, where everyone expressed their thoughts about what was going on…Until then I had no political consciousness" (Abidor 2018, 78). Her AC met at members' houses, and among other things they created posters, advocated in their neighborhood, and attended larger demos as a group.

In Arendtian terms, May 1968 is properly remembered as a moment of massive "public happiness" in France. As Thierry Porré, who was 19 at the time and would go on to edit the anarchist journal *Le Monde libertaire*, said of the experience, "People say about

me: You're someone who made May, and I answer that it's May made me" (Abidor 2018, 252).

The events are also illuminating of what Arendt means by *action*. "Public happiness" derives not from simply talking to others. As Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, action finds its proper home in a space of appearances amongst one's peers, and it occurs "only where word and deed have not parted company" (Arendt 1998, 200). In other words, action is not reducible to free expression, but is necessarily linked to proposition, if not decision—it is words or acts which, in some way, offer themselves to be followed, joined, or rejected.

On this point and in a telling passage near the end of *On Revolution* where Arendt espouses the virtues of revolutionary political councils (See Section III below), Arendt links participation in these councils to "[t]he joys of public happiness *and* the responsibilities for public business" which would "become the share of those few from all walks of life who have a taste for public freedom and cannot be 'happy' without it" (Arendt 2006, 271, emphasis added). Thus if the explosion of speech during the French Mays was indeed a recovery of "lost treasure," then it was most evidently (though not exclusively) so in the General Assemblies and Action Committees formed in the universities, neighborhoods, and factories throughout France. In these spaces, citizens found themselves speaking amongst peers, contributing to collective decisions, and offering to implement those decisions. This is not to say that action *only* existed in these spaces—all public acts can have consequences—but it was there that one assumed political responsibility.

Second, and more academically, the enthusiastic testimony of actors in the May 1968 Events seems to better align with the "collectivist" rather than "individualist" model of Arendtian action. In other words, the "data" suggest that the joy of 1968 derived less from whatever personal distinction a participant might achieve via their political virtuosity, and more from the collective micro-experiences of speaking, debating, being heard, and shaping one's society (cf. Arendt 1972, 232-3). Thus, if Arendt offers a descriptive (in addition to normative) account of revolutionary action—an explanation of why the "lost treasure" of revolution moves people—then the weight of May 1968 testifies in favor of the political experience of the egalitarian committee, and not the "decisive role…of distinguishing oneself and being conspicuous in the realm of human affairs" (Arendt 1998, 218). Here it is significant that Cohn-Bendit himself, the most influential and remembered of all the May 1968 protestors, repeatedly renounced the title and power of leaders, as if to emphasize that individual glory is not the point (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968).

III. Revolutionary Councils: The Organization of Revolutionary Power

Though Arendt was never a socialist, communist, or liberal (Arendt 2018, 471) she had a political ideal—the federated council system. Scholars disagree over how to treat this model. In oft-quoted passages Margaret Canovan writes that "[Arendt's] descriptions of the council system…strike most readers as utopian in the pejorative sense" (Canovan 1978, 8), as "something of an embarrassment" and "a curiously unrealistic commitment"

(Canovan 1994, 237). Alternatively, James Muldoon calls the council system *the* critical link across Arendt's political writings, "of equal importance to Arendt's theory of action or political freedom, for it is only through their concrete embodiment in the institutions of a council republic that these concepts can be properly understood" (Muldoon 2016, 763).

At the same time, Arendt's councils are notoriously hard to pin down. Brian Smith writes that "Arendt's council system bears striking similarities to the anarchist tradition" that Arendt ignores (Smith 2019, 112), while Muldoon draws biographical links to the "council communist tradition of Rosa Luxemburg" and "[Arendt's] participation in Jewish politics in the 1930s and '40s" (Muldoon 2016, 762, 763). Her theorizing is criticized for its "ahistoricity" (McConkey 1991) and for "distorting" the councils' history (Medearis 2004, 472). Mike McConkey writes that Arendt's "insistence that the councils continually reappeared despite the total absence of any sustaining tradition of revolutionary theory reveals, in fact, an amazing ignorance of precisely that tradition" (McConkey 1991, 22), while John Sitton, in the context of discussing Arendt's rigid separation of "political" from "economic" goals, says that Arendt "does not understand the significance of the fact that most of the examples of council democracy she utilized were attempts at socialist revolutions" (Sitton 1987, 97).

To be sure, some have defended Arendt's council system as a serious and viable model. Jeffrey Isaac interprets them as "voluntary associations" that supplement liberal democracy (Isaac 1994, 160). Muldoon resists Isaac's attempt to make Arendt's council theory "more palatable to today's liberal readers," then gives theoretical reasons for "taking the political principles behind her council democracy seriously" (Muldoon 2011, 408, 416). Meanwhile Wolfhart Totschnig (2014) argues even further for the feasibility of Arendt's model were it ever tried. The question is why, if the councils have repeatedly risen only to fall, Arendt herself still has the faith?

Arendt's writings on councils offer two distinct visions. The first is Jefferson's local "ward" system considered in the final chapter of *On Revolution*. Jefferson's model is territorial, dividing counties into smaller units of "about a hundred men" (Arendt 2006, 311 nt. 52) with significant local powers. This system allows all citizens to directly and impactfully participate. The second is the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, about which Arendt wrote a lengthy essay in 1958. The Hungarian councils assumed various forms — in neighborhoods, universities, factories, and military barracks — and are more readily comparable to the French Events of May 1968. Hungary 1956 is also, crucially, a case study. Arendt wrote that "Events, past and present…are the true, the only reliable teachers of political scientists" (Arendt 2018, 109). And though Arendt's enthusiasm for political councils is evident prior to 1956 (see Arendt 2007, 400-401), the Hungarian Revolution "marks a turning point in Arendt's conception" and was, for her, a "practical confirmation of the continuing significance of the council form" (Muldoon 2016, 763).

Arendt's "Hungarian" model of council revolution has several distinct elements. The first is *spontaneity*. As discussed in Section II, spontaneity is an inherent characteristic of action, and for two centuries councils have sprung up during revolutionary crises "as the spontaneous organs of the people" (Arendt 2006, 241). As Arendt writes of Hungary 1956:

> If there was ever such a thing as Rosa Luxemburg's 'spontaneous revolution,' this sudden uprising of an entire people for the sake of freedom and nothing else

> —spontaneous, and…without *coup d'état* techniques, without a closely knit apparatus of professional conspirators and revolutionaries, without even the leadership of a party…—it was then we had the privilege of witnessing it. (Arendt 2018, 109)

Arendt's point is not that council participants have no ideology or party affiliation. It is that, ontologically speaking, revolutions are rare moments when, on a mass scale, the significance of party platforms dissolves naturally within such organizations, and freedom itself "becomes the direct aim of political action" (Arendt 1993, 146). This defines revolution. Historically, "professional" revolutionary parties have sought to seize revolutions to implement "'ready-made formulas' which demanded not action but execution" (Arendt 2006, 256). But this is to stifle free action—real revolution happens when a contagion of freedom spontaneously grips a whole people.

A second element is the transformative power inherent in action, especially action whose principle is freedom. To illustrate, Hungary's 1956 revolution was sparked by a students' association, MEFESZ, which formed on October 16, 1956 in the city of Szeged. There students *acted* courageously and audaciously on the principle of freedom by breaking taboo and splitting from the communist-controlled Union of Working Youth. In doing this MEFESZ "went significantly further than even the party's intellectual opposition, which had initiated the country's revolutionary ferment." Their movement spread "throughout the country in a matter of days" and "managed to produce a fundamental change in Hungarian political life" (Békés, Byrne, & Rainer 2002, 188). By October 22, the day its "16 points" of political demands were promulgated, several other universities had formed their own branches of MEFESZ (Békés, Byrne, & Rainer 2002, 13, XXXVI, 188-190). Overnight these "16 points" became a single point of reference for mass protests involving all Hungarians, and it was "the official Hungarian Radio's refusal to broadcast the points – because of their radicalism" that "led to the idea of organizing the critical demonstration on October 23" (Békés, Byrne, & Rainer 2002, 188-190). These large demonstrations led to violent police actions, which in turn triggered Hungary's spontaneous revolutionary movement in earnest. Arendt does not mention MEFESZ directly, but this sequence demonstrates the amazing potential of principled action — especially action whose principle is freedom — to inspire others including strangers to follow one's lead in spontaneous, unpredictable, and potentially transformative ways.

Once freedom is in the streets, and especially if the government's authority has collapsed in the process (withdrawal of military support is the clearest indicator), the critical question is how to give this freedom a permanent home. Thus, amid the crumbling ability of the Hungarian Communist Party to control events on the ground, Arendt describes the situation as follows:

> The question was not how various freedoms should be approached—the freedom of thought and speech; the freedom of assembly; the freedom to act and vote—it was how to stabilize a freedom that was already an accomplished fact, and to find the right political institutions for it. (Arendt 2018, 131)

The Hungarian masses addressed this problem via the creation of democratic councils of various kinds — residential, revolutionary, student, worker, soldier, and others (Arendt 2006, 258-9):

> [T]he outstanding feature of the uprising was that the actions of people with no leader or any previously formulated program did not result in chaos and anarchy...[R]evolutionary councils of workers and soldiers appeared immediately, almost simultaneously with the first armed demonstrations. Over the last hundred years, these organizations have emerged with a historically unparalleled regularity whenever the people have been permitted for a few days, or a few weeks, or months, to follow their own political devices without being spoon-fed by a party or steered by a government. (2018, 133)

The councils originated as a "haphazard coming together of people" (Arendt 2018, 138), but almost immediately Hungary's "disparate groups turned a more or less accidental proximity into a political institution" (Arendt 2006, 259). As Arendt writes, "The council members had been scarcely elected by direct vote when these new councils began freely to coordinate among themselves, and to choose from their own midst representatives for the higher councils, up to the Supreme National Council, the counterpart of a national government" (Arendt 2018, 139).

Arendt elsewhere theorizes such council nationalization in an ideal-type manner. Once grassroots councils are formed, she anticipates a "process of coordination and integration through the formation of higher councils of a regional or provincial character, from which finally the delegates to an assembly representing the whole country could be chosen" (Arendt 2006, 259). In this system "power" is "constituted horizontally and not vertically" (Arendt 1972, 233)—that is, by individuals cooperating in each council; and the authority of higher councils is traceable to the processes of democratic selection in the lower ones. The revolutionary councils, in other words, are "organs of order as much as organs of action," the "germs of a new state" (2006, 255, 254), the foundation of a "new concept of the state" or "council-state" (1972, 233). They form a "pyramid" whereby the direct participation of citizens at the lowest levels lays the foundations of authority at the higher ones. Without lower-level participation, the edifice collapses.

Judging by this example, the May 1968 Events bear many Arendtian hallmarks. First, at the core of 1968 was a repressed desire to *act*. As Seale and McConville write: "The explosion was a reaction to the way power has been exercised in France...and at every level. More than most countries...France is burdened with a centralized, profoundly hierarchical government bureaucracy. All decisions, even footling ones, are made in Paris" (Seale and McConville 1968, 93). "The law which the *enragés* challenged was the iron law of oligarchy," writes Aron (1969, 97). The ad hoc organizations, meetings, and "apparent freedom of open-ended random discussion together with directed movements of the masses...were a symbolic rejection of the apparatus, of general staffs and of bureaucracy" (Aron 1969, 97). They manifest "the urge to run one's own affairs, which lay at the root of the revolt" (Seale and McConville 1968, 95). And where "Western capitalism and Eastern bureaucracy" (Cohn-Bendit and Cohn-Bendit 1968, 28) bear a striking likeness where party machines and bureaucracies monopolize decision-making, Arendt highlights the "astounding will to action" propelling the global student movement (Arendt 1972, 118).

Second, and despite the prominent role of left-wing student groups, rebel actions in May 1968 were "spontaneous" as a rule. Daniel Singer (Singer 2002, 16, 314-15) writes

that "Spontaneity and improvisation were probably the main features of the May Movement," for "Spontaneous is the recurring adjective in all the descriptions of the movement." Alaine Krivine, founder and leader of the Trotskyist JCRs at the time, later remarked that (even where against his own inclinations) "every movement that came out of May had a spontaneous character" (Abidor 2018, 39). And "What was so remarkable about the events of 3 May," writes Daniel Cohn-Bendit of the first day of street fighting, "was the spontaneity of the resistance – a clear sign that our movement does not need leaders to direct it; that it can perfectly well express itself without the help of a 'vanguard'" (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn Bendit 1968, 58).

Most significantly, France in May 1968 (like Hungary in 1956) witnessed the spontaneous emergence of democratic councils throughout the country, most spectacularly between May 11 (preceding the general strike) and May 30 (de Gaulle's decisive speech). Action Committees (ACs)—or "basic self-governing units diametrically opposed to the topheavy bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state" (Seale and McConville 1968, 120), which Singer (2002, 169) calls "one of the original contributions to the May Movement"—were the most flexible and widespread. French citizens in neighborhoods, universities, schools, and professional groups throughout France were initiated into direct participation and "public happiness" via local ACs. Seale and McConville (1968, 121) estimate that 450 ACs of between ten and fifty people existed in Paris alone by the last week of May, most of these unaffiliated with any political parties or organizations.

The ACs assumed responsibility for a range of local functions. They "usually met once a day at a fixed hour and place, and its deliberations were open to all. Each local Action Committee was in contact with the wider *Arrondissement* Committee, which in turn was in contact with the Paris Action Committee. However, the local Action Committees consistently refused to allow this coordination to degenerate into a kind of political direction" (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968, 81). Among other things, the ACs "helped to tend the wounded, collected funds, and above all saw to the provisioning of the stay-in strikers" (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968, 81); they cleared streets, provided transportation during the strike, made posters and flyers, showed films, and at times "acted like a new sort of municipal authority" (Seale and McConville 1968, 122).

Local Action Committees in Paris were coordinated (somewhat) via a "Coordinating Committee" of "revolutionary leaders" which "met daily for two weeks in the Sorbonne after its occupation, then moved to the Institute of Psychology in the Rue Serpente" (Seale and McConville 1968, 121-122). But power in this system was always bottom-up. As the Cohn-Bendits (1968, 82) summarize using Arendtian language, "The supple structure of the Action Committees favoured the formation of horizontal relationships, whose power of united action was in no way diminished by the absence of leaders at the top" (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968, 82).

The university occupations introduced a second and parallel council model. Most notably, "[F]rom May 13 to June 16, 1968, the Sorbonne was the central fortress of the Student Soviet" (Seale and McConville 1968, 99). In the Sorbonne, "Half a dozen leaders met daily to decide what to do next, what slogans and directives to issue, what structure to give their Tower of Babel" (Seale and McConville, 101). The Soviet assumed university

functions and established a haphazard structure of university subcommittees and executive committees which submitted proposals for popular vote in a "sovereign" General Assembly that met nightly in the *Grand Amphithéâtre*. Directives flowed through "parallel 'lines of power,'" including laboratory committees, "general student committees charged with carrying out decisions taken by a general assembly…and answerable to the assembly," staff and strike committees, and student-teacher committees, alongside "regular school authorities" (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968, 65). The Sorbonne was hardly alone, as occupied universities throughout France adopted some version of this model.

However, if the story of French labor in May 1968 aligns with Arendt's theories of revolution, it is for different reasons. Arendt is oft-maligned for her rigid distinction "between political and economic demands" which, when applied in labor contexts, means a "distinction between political organizations and trade unions," the latter "defending and fighting for the interests of the working class," the former exploring "the possibilities of democratic government under modern conditions" (Arendt 1998, 215, 216). But the situation in France illustrates her concern, for it was just this distinction which divided the student and worker elements of the revolt.

In May 1968 in France "the unions fully played the role of keeping things in check," meaning, "there were no Action Committees inside the factories, they were only outside the factories" (Abidor 2018, 74). The French Communist Party (PCF) and its union the CGT, in attempting to leverage the revolt for wage gains and other worker rights, actively shielded its workers from the students throughout the revolt, and eventually acquiesced to a return to work (and Gaullism) once significant benefits were secured. The report of one Citroen Worker-Student Action Committee member who tried to connect workers and students is indicative:

> Although students and revolutionary workers are the dynamic forces behind the occupation of the factories, once all the workers have been convinced to move inside the factory and "occupy" it, union officials close the factory gates on the students standing outside, and they isolate the revolutionary workers on the inside. [. . .]
>
> [A]fter the factory is occupied by all its workers, the union becomes the only spokesman for the workers. In other words, while the workers as a whole have decided to take over their own factories and to expropriate the owners, the workers have not yet developed political forms through which to discuss and execute their subsequent decisions. In this vacuum, the union makes the decisions instead of the workers, and broadcasts its decisions to the workers through loudspeakers. (May 20, 1968) (Gregoire and Perlman 1969)

By steering workers into economic "strike committees" and blocking access to political "action committees," the PCF and CGT depoliticized their workers and removed spontaneous *action* from their lived experience.

Both of these processes—the conscious depoliticization of the French workers by the PCF/CGT, and the disconnection of those same workers from the French students—bore major consequences for the outcome of the French May Days (see Section IV below). Some, including Arendt, have characterized May 1968 as a genuine "revolutionary

situation" where regime (or constitutional) change was possible. But revolutionary situations do not become revolutions of themselves. This requires *concerted* action among powerful groups like the striking French students and French workers in the direction of regime change. And where revolutions historically have succeeded, this concerted action in turn has been facilitated by determined and responsible revolutionary leadership.

IV. Revolutionary Situations and Picking up Power

Arendt called the French May Days "a textbook case of a revolutionary situation that did not develop into a revolution because there was nobody, least of all the students, prepared to seize power and the responsibility that goes with it. Nobody except, of course, de Gaulle" (Arendt 1972, 148-9). What did she mean by this? How did she *judge* the French May Days? What new insights do the answers reveal about Arendt and May 1968? In what follows I offer two broad answers to these questions, taking Arendt's assumptions as a baseline.

First, to call France a "revolutionary situation" is to suggest that the power of the French Fifth Republic had disintegrated and that it was, for a brief period, in danger of collapsing. This is striking in itself. By all accounts it was "the greatest general strike in European history, involving nine million workers and losing 15,000,000 working days. It is the junction of student and worker protest that marks France's 1968 as distinctive" (Reader 1993, 1; Singer 2002, xv). "The main message of the May crisis is unmistakable," writes Singer, "A revolutionary situation can occur in an advanced capitalist country" (Singer 2002, 4), for May 1968 exposed "the unsuspected fragility of the seemingly mighty modern industrial state" (Singer 2002, 193). It was "a revolt against ruling bureaucracies, administrative machines, professional apparatuses" (Seale and McConville 1968, 231). Aron agrees that the lesson of 1968 was "the fragility of the modern order" (Aron 1969, 5).

One legacy of the May 1968 protests was to reveal this shocking truth about modern liberal democracies, and Arendt's political theory helps us understand why this should be so. "All political institutions," Arendt writes, "are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them" (Arendt 1972, 140). Such decay was obvious in Soviet satellites like Hungary, but is no less relevant in modern representative democracies. "The dissenters and resisters in the East demand free speech and thought as the preliminary conditions for political action; the rebels in the West live under conditions where these preliminaries no longer open the channels for action, for the meaningful exercise of freedom" (Arendt 1972, 178). Arendt attributes this to the monopolization of political action and decisions by party machines and centralized bureaucracies, which comes at the expense of meaningful political participation for most citizens, and "causes the drying up or oozing away of all authentic power sources in the country" (Arendt 1972, 182). If "*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (Arendt 1972, 143), French centralism deprived French citizens of both. And though the May 1968 rebels were not particularly violent, Arendt is generally "inclined to think that much of the present glorification of

violence is caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world" (Arendt 1972, 180).

Second, Arendt's political theory helps us understand why France's council revolution did not transform French politics — i.e. why the political revolution failed, irrespective of broader social and cultural impacts (see e.g. Porter 2016). As I have argued elsewhere (LeJeune 2013), while Arendt's revolutionary theory is profoundly inspired by the spontaneity in Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary thought (see also Blättler & Marti 2005), it is equally informed by the leadership theory of Lenin, whose language Arendt occasionally mimics. Most notably, Lenin identified three "objective" symptoms of a "revolutionary situation" — (1) a "crisis in the ruling class's policy" to handle mass discontent; (2) a "more than normal aggravation of the want and tribulations of the oppressed classes," and (3) "a considerable rise, for the aforementioned reasons, in the level of activity of the masses" (Lenin 1975, 275). But crucially, "a revolution comes not out of every revolutionary situation," but only when these "objective changes are accompanied by a subjective one, namely: the capacity of the revolutionary *class* to take mass revolutionary actions that are *strong enough* to smash (or break up) the old government" (Lenin 1975, 276).

Arendt's analysis of revolutions implicitly adopts Lenin's general framework of "objective" and "subjective" conditions, but with crucial differences. First, unlike Lenin, her language is not infused with class, and her revolutionary model does not turn on class action; second, and also unlike Lenin, Arendt does not believe extraordinary crises (like catastrophic wars) are necessary to "aggravate" the oppressed or destabilize a decayed regime. Indeed, as we have seen, her critique of modern representative democracy is more insidious, and the triggers of revolution more open and spontaneous. In lieu of such crises, and where legitimacy has decayed, *action* itself can generate power, create new spaces of appearances, and expose regime weakness. In this respect, the leadership of Cohn-Bendit and the 22 March Movement in France is analogous to that of MEFESZ in Hungary—their actions alone were sufficient to expose a crippling lack of power in the political system, and to inspire others to generate new spaces of power at the universities, in their neighborhoods, and on the streets. World Wars or catastrophes are not needed to expose dramatic political decay or trigger revolutionary situations (though they can)—sometimes one courageous and principled act is enough.

On another decisive point, however, Arendt agrees with Lenin—namely, that converting revolutionary situations into successful revolutions requires a subjective capacity among the protestors to do so, one propagated and exemplified by what Arendt called "real revolutionaries" who are "prepared to seize power and the responsibility that goes with it" when such power is "lying in the streets":

> At the moment, one prerequisite for a coming revolution is lacking: a group of real revolutionaries. Just what the students on the left would most like to be—revolutionaries—that is just what they are not. Nor are they organized as revolutionaries: they have no inkling of what power means, and if power were lying in the street and they knew it was lying there, they are certainly the last to be ready to stoop down and pick it up. That is precisely what revolutionaries do.

> Revolutionaries do not make revolutions! The revolutionaries are those who know when power is lying in the street and when they can pick it up. (Arendt 1972, 206)

If a true revolutionary situation existed in France in 1968, most place it between May 27-May 30. On May 27 the worker rank-and-file rejected a labor agreement (the Grenelle Accords) negotiated by Prime Minister Georges Pompidou and France's major unions; and with de Gaulle's regime seemingly out of options, "For the next four days, France effectively had no national government," with large cities like Nantes "run for the last week in May by strike committees rather than by regional and municipal authorities" (Reader 1993, 14). Now and for the first time, massive worker and student demonstrations were accompanied by anticipatory political maneuvers by left-wing politicians. On May 28 Socialist leader Françios Mitterand, anticipating de Gaulle's resignation, announced plans to form a ten-man leftist "provisional government" (Seale and McConcille 1968, 203). Then PCF leader Waldeck Rochet "called for Communist participation in any such government," and "The régime's survival now seemed all but inconceivable" (Reader 1993, 15). But ultimately none seemed credibly positioned to represent the protestors or councils.

De Gaulle had other plans. On May 29 he secretly flew to the French army headquarters in Baden-Baden, West Germany to meet with General Jacques Massu. After confirming Massu's loyalty and that of the French military, and having seen the French Communist Party openly acquiesce to Mitterand's extraordinary proposal, de Gaulle returned to France and on May 30 delivered his decisive speech dissolving the National Assembly, framing the June elections as a referendum on republicanism vs. Communism, and threatening military intervention if necessary.

Given the overwhelming public response to de Gaulle's May 30 speech, one surely cannot know whether a more strategic and far-sighted revolutionary leadership would have brought a revolutionary outcome to France, nor for that matter whether France's germinal council system would have survived in any event. What one can say is that the May 1968 revolution in practice—among both students and workers—precluded these outcomes from the start. On one hand, the PCF and CGT, which wielded the heaviest influence over the workers, "were not daring enough to exploit an exceptional situation" (Singer 2002, 15), and their insistence on depoliticizing the workers and the general strike mangled the broader social coalition necessary to legitimize revolutionary change.

On the other hand, the students were equally ill-prepared to assume responsibility for the transformation they sought. "The spontaneous forces carried the movement as far as they could…There was, however, no party, no body, no organization to take over and carry the movement to its logical conclusion—that is, the seizure of power" (Singer 2002, 9). Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the most visible and influential of the student leaders—and arguably the person best-positioned to assume this role—repeatedly characterized the movement as "opposed to all leaders," committed to a "non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical socialist society," and "without a 'vanguard' or a party," etc. (Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit 1968, 11, 16, 87). The March 22 Movement generally "denied the need for leaders and considered its more prominent members as simply spokesmen for the rank and file, and interchangeable ones at that" (Singer 2002, 17). And as we have seen, even the Action Committees were not obliged to mutually cooperate. But crucially, the absence of such

leadership and coordination—formalized, credible, predictable, institutional—left the revolution with no political center of gravity, and no solid popular anchor.

On this point Arendt does not criticize Cohn-Bendit directly, but her comment that in France "there was nobody, least of all the students, prepared to seize power and the responsibility that goes with it" aligns with her general concern that the 1968 student movement lacked "real revolutionaries." "Real revolutionaries" position themselves to "pick up power" after freedom has made its appearance in the street—they take responsibility for freedom while freedom seeks a firm footing. The "professional revolutionaries" of Lenin's model—and with them the "vanguard" parties that both Arendt and Cohn-Bendit reject—are different. Their revolution is not one of free association, spontaneous participation, and openness to political possibilities; instead, their revolution is an event "planned, prepared, and executed almost to cold scientific exactness," based on pre-fabricated ideological models (Arendt 2006, 256). And embracing this distinction is critical.

Russia's Bolshevik Revolution was led by "professional revolutionaries" who were prepared to pick up power but, because their end goal was ideologically predetermined, were also uninterested in preserving spontaneous political action. Thus, while their political revolution was successful, their democratic revolution was deformed. Arendt recognizes this and cautions against it. But her comments on 1968 suggest that a noble aversion to becoming a "professional revolutionary" should not deter one from being a "real revolutionary," because a willingness to "pick up power" on behalf of a revolutionary coalition is not in itself synonymous with depriving people of freedom and spontaneity—in fact it may be one way to secure these things. This point is salient today, as the tacit conflation of "professional revolutionaries" with "real revolutionaries" has hamstrung recent democratic revolutions committed to a "leaderless" model (Ghonim 2012; LeJeune 2017). But as Arendt frequently reminds us, the meaning of political acts is derived largely from their principles. And the act of leading—including picking up power when it is lying in the street—is equally consistent with a principle of freedom as it is a principle of dictatorship.

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