

The Beginning of a Long Friendship: The 1978 Interview with Alain Badiou

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The 1978 interview with Alain Badiou on ‘Philosophy and Maoism in France’, published here for the first time in almost fifty years, releases such *esprit de clarté* that there is little to add, except for some contextual information.

Claudia Pozzana recounts, in her text published in this same issue of *Crisis & Critique*, the circumstances in which we encountered Badiou’s philosophy together, and with what enthusiasm, when we were students at Peking University (Beida) in 1975. Two years later, Valerio Romitelli and I translated *Théorie de la contradiction* into Italian and went to Paris to meet the author for an interview to be published in the volume. The Italian translation was not published at the time¹, for reasons that reflected a moment of transition that is no exaggeration to call epochal.

We were supposed to publish *Théorie de la contradiction*, along with other texts from the ‘Collection Yenan’, with Bertani, a counter-current publisher of the 1970s. But in those very months, Bertani was overwhelmed by the general crisis of the Italian political movements that emerged from 1968, compounded by a commercial crisis that blocked all initiatives. At the time, Badiou was known in Italy only for translations of his writings on logic². Very little was known about the Maoist Badiou. After all, 1978 in China was the twilight of Maoism and the dawn of the ‘integral negation’ of the Cultural Revolution, with global consequences inversely proportional to its previous fortune. ‘Everything turns into its opposite,’ Mao said. In short, we were unable to find another publisher for a text by a French Maoist philosopher.

Valerio and I came from an Italy where, exactly one month earlier, the first act of a coup d’état had taken place, closing the accounts with 1968: the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro. The second act would take place a year later, on 7 April 1979, with the completely arbitrary arrest of Antonio Negri and the entire Institute of State Doctrine at the University of Padua, on the absurd charge of having organised the Moro murder.

I noticed with some surprise, rereading the interview, that there is no mention of the Moro kidnapping and murder, which had crucial political consequences in Italy. In fact, at that time we both dismissed the episode as the result of internal vendettas among the powerful, even though Moro was, as Pasolini had said, ‘the least involved of all’. Personally, I considered the Red Brigades not so much militarists as small-time conspirators caught up in a criminal vision of politics, utterly devoid of theory, except for empty formulas on class antagonism. They were, however, the result of the crisis of the political organisations that emerged from 1968, which had already become apparent in 1972. The fact that the Red Brigades were involved in what we considered a bloody internal settling of scores within the Italian state made that affair even more distant from our horizon.

We did not even mention the Moro murder in passing – and we certainly underestimated its long-term consequences at the time – because we almost spontaneously kept our distance from all the highly

ambiguous government propaganda that this criminal affair had produced, and above all because we were focused on seeking a political and philosophical path that looked beyond the impasse of the entire Long Sixties season that was taking shape confusingly before our eyes.

I had just completed a period of study at the Department of Philosophy at Beida during the last two years of the Cultural Revolution, which, among the many things it had taught me, had also somehow ‘vaccinated’ me against the likelihood of a large-scale defeat, not only of the Chinese revolutionary decade, but more generally of the entire experience of state communism in the 20th century. Mao’s latest theoretical theses, published between 1974 and 1976, argued for a fundamental clarification of the nature of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, as it was no longer clear what it was. Failure to clarify this, Mao said, would make restoration possible. Given the structural conditions of Chinese socialism, it would be ‘very easy to establish capitalism in China’.

At the time I took those theses as an essential warning to rethink the history of revolutionary politics, but a somewhat excessive prediction. How could anyone think that capitalism could really be established in China? As we shall see in this *interview* with Badiou, the question was still unresolved in mid-1978. At that time, I had recently joined the editorial staff of *Vento dell’Est*, a magazine run by a small collective of experts in Chinese language and politics, which, from the outset, had meticulously documented developments in the Cultural Revolution through translations and field research. In 1978, the magazine was also experiencing significant disorientation, unable to take a clear position on the situation. I proposed publishing the interview with Badiou, but they failed to appreciate its importance and, in any case, the magazine ceased publication at the end of that year.

The feeling that a large-scale counter-revolution was looming on the horizon, one that ultimately affected the entire modern political history, was still vague but very present throughout the interview. However, the issues we discussed looked beyond that probable imminent restoration. Or rather, Badiou examined it from the perspective of developments in the rich philosophical and political situation in France, whose dense fabric he illustrated with the clarity and systematicity that anyone who has attended one of his seminars has always admired.

We had the privilege of a private seminar on the philosophy and politics of the last two decades in France, which can still be read today as a primary source for understanding that intellectual season in France and worldwide. The significant issues are examined through the concrete analysis of that concrete situation by one of its leading protagonists.

What were, in the affirmation of the Althusserian school, both the role of a long French epistemological tradition dating back to Comte and the specific circumstances of the crisis of Soviet communism and the

controversy with the Chinese Communist Party? How did May 1968 undermine Althusserian influence? How was it possible that Sartre had been a 'Maoist', and that other great French thinkers had also been so for a short period? How did that singular and temporary Maoist hegemony turn into its opposite, and even into an openly counter-revolutionary attitude? What roles did Deleuze and Foucault play during that revolutionary decade? How was it possible that the leaders of the Gauche Prolétarienne, the leading and most extremist Maoist organisation to emerge from 1968, had become 'nouveaux philosophes' who propagated the virtues of capitalism and launched anathemas against the 'barbarism of communism'?

Badiou examined these and other crucial issues of that conjuncture in the context of a review of two decades of intellectual history, accurately and subtly identifying the novelties, weaknesses, and paradoxes. The result is an incredibly multifaceted picture, but one from which Badiou draws a political and philosophical assessment that allows him, in a sense, to put that situation behind him and look to new political and philosophical tasks.

As for political tasks, the continuation of the UCF(ML) experiment was fundamental at that time, as it was in fact the only organisation that had resisted the drift towards self-dissolution of the political organisations that emerged from 1968, Gauche Prolétarienne in particular. This was a challenging and decidedly counter-current task in the climate of the imminent end of the 1960s. 'We don't have many close neighbours,' Badiou admitted.

As for philosophical tasks, the passage in which the 1978 interview is set is encapsulated in that intense laboratory that was his teaching in those years, the seminar that began in 1975 and culminated in *Théorie du sujet*. The interview, therefore, takes place in the transition from the political trespassing in the philosophy of the 'Collection Yenan' to a return to a philosophical project tout court. In the Interview, Badiou speaks little and cautiously about this. He hints at new questions that need to be asked about the problem of the subject, beyond what had been the organised political subject in the Marxist vision. Still, he leaves open the question of whether psychoanalysis is a resource to be explored. Many former leaders of the Gauche Prolétarienne in crisis had gone to the psychoanalyst's couch as a ritual of renouncing their previous political commitment. However, Badiou concludes, is there not perhaps in Freud (and Lacan) a Hegel in whom it is necessary to separate the rational core from the mystical gangue? This will be the question from which *Théorie du sujet* will start.

Enjoy reading the interview.

1. Another Italian translation was published only recently, ed. Mimesis, 2022, edited by G. Clemente and S. Pippa.

2. Two of his essays published in *Cahiers pour l'analyse* were included in a collection of texts from the journal published by Boringhieri, while his lectures on *Le concept de modèle* at Althusser's *Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques* were published by Jaca Book.