

Philosophy and Maoism in France: Interview with Alain Badiou

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Q. In *Théorie de la contradiction*, you say that it is necessary to take stock of the philosophical and political debate of recent years in France. The editorial introduction to the “Collection Yenan” series, in which your book was published, emphasizes the existence of deep divisions between very distinct fronts after 1968. Furthermore, in *De l'idéologie*, you and François Balmès undertake a very rigorous critique of Althusser's theoretical positions in recent years. In Italy, however, French intellectual and political debates, although often translated and well known, are rarely read as the result of deep divisions, perhaps because in Italy, only exceptionally, truly opposing intellectual and political fronts are formed. For example, it is currently challenging to form an opinion on Althusser's position, which remains unclear amid the controversies surrounding the PCF. Some in Italy consider him a reference point for radical criticism of revisionism. In contrast, others cite him as an example of the breadth of the PCF's intellectual and political horizon and, for ‘transitivity’, of the PCI.

A. In France, debates are always clearly differentiated, with groups and camps clashing over strongly controversial positions. At every political, social, philosophical, and intellectual conjuncture, camps are formed, structured by significant controversies and precise lines of demarcation. Some of these occupy the scene only for a short time, while others are more long-lasting, but all of them present clear distinctions within themselves. In addition to this first characteristic, it is worth noting that in France, all of this is closely linked to political positions and involves the most prominent intellectuals, who are often connected to the current debate and political situation in some way.

Speaking of Althusser, I think that to understand him clearly, we need to go back to the 1960s, specifically before 1968. Already in the early 1960s, a significant break occurred in the history of French intellectuality, marking a departure from the existentialist and phenomenological currents that had dominated since the end of the war. The central figure of these currents was Sartre, but the general issues addressed by other professional philosophers also revolved around an existential reading of Hegel. It was also true of those who called themselves Marxists, except a small group of intellectuals directly linked to the PCF—but it should be borne in mind that in France, the official intellectuals of the PCF have practically no influence in the cultural debate. It was therefore a Hegelianized Marxism, drawn entirely from Marx's early writings, from *Hegel's*

Critique of the Philosophy of Right and the *1844 Manuscripts*, read decidedly in the sense of humanism and the philosophy of consciousness.

Around 1963-64, a significant break occurred, which I believe was crucial, as it forcefully reintroduced a French tradition that had been somewhat repressed and fought against during the previous period. It was, in general, the positivist tradition of the philosophy of science, with a particular reference to Kantianism seen from this angle, which, as you know, took the form of structuralism. It was a moment of great success for structuralist thought, which had as its central axis the human sciences, including linguistics, a bit of psychoanalysis, and ethnology, among others. In reality, what was gaining ground in the midst of all this was the positivist academic tradition, characteristic of a specific legacy in French philosophy dating back to Comte, via Brunschvicg. In other words, it was a certain idealism built on the philosophy of science—quite different from Anglo-Saxon or American positivism—which ultimately posited that philosophy is epistemology, that philosophy is fundamentally the theory of science.

Now, Althusser's great stroke of genius was to place the reference to Marxism precisely in this field. What made Althusser successful and brought him to the forefront was that he said, precisely in this period, that Marxism too can ultimately be studied from an epistemological point of view, putting in place the idea that it is a science, an "epistemological break" with previous philosophies, with the English economists, etc. In this way, Althusser was able to place the debate on Marxism within this positivist atmosphere, tearing Marxism itself away from the way it had previously functioned, when it was tied entirely to a specific type of existential humanism.

All this is linked to the split in the international communist movement, that is, to the Sino-Soviet controversy of 1963-64. It should be borne in mind that at that time, this controversy was essentially a controversy of principle. If we read the texts of that period, we see that the Chinese communists attacked Khrushchev's revisionism primarily from the perspective of reaffirming Marxist and Leninist principles, their rigor, consistency, and universal validity. Thus, Althusser's battle on issues such as "Marxism is a science," "let us consider it as a science," "let us study the specificity of this science," etc., that is, the whole epistemological side of Althusser, found itself linked to this split in the international communist movement and to the first controversies connected with it.

All this made Althusser and Althusserianism the headquarters of those, particularly among intellectuals, who were breaking with the PCF because it was perceived as thoroughly opportunist, having

betrayed the colonial war in Algeria and increasingly abandoned any theoretical and practical reference to class politics. It is precisely from this point of view that Althusser's philosophical enterprise, especially that of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, between 1963-64 and 1968, organized a small nucleus of young philosophers who, on the one hand, were part of the movement to "epistemologize" philosophy and, on the other, took a stand against revisionism and the PCF. Althusser's importance, therefore, lies precisely in the fact that he found himself, in essence, at the convergence of several phenomena, as is the case with everything important. As I mentioned, there were primarily three phenomena: the revolt of intellectuals against the PCF, the split within the international communist movement, and the shift in the intellectual climate from existentialism and phenomenology to epistemology and the philosophy of science.

At this point, a peculiar phenomenon emerged among intellectuals, namely the emergence of something that could be called "Maoist epistemologists." It was they who founded the first truly Maoist organization, the Union de la Jeunesse Communiste (M-L), which was formed after the split in the PCF student movement. At this point, around 1967, what Althusser had produced was beginning to surpass him. While he never left the PCF and always conceived his logic within this party as a logic of opposition and not of rupture, this group of philosophers, of which I was also a part, began to try to invest all their points of reference in politics and to practice a logic of rupture also on the organizational level.

It was the period when this organization launched the movement to integrate into the reality of the factories (*mouvement d'établissement dans les usines*), and the question of the direct link between revolutionary intellectuals and the working class was raised in a new way. It was also the moment when the struggle to support the Vietnamese people took on entirely new forms, such as the Vietnam Grassroots Committees. On the other hand, the structuralist current continued to flourish independently, in the form of Lacanianism and linguistic studies, among others; it was also a time when everyone was flirting with structuralism.

Thus, we arrive at the threshold of 1968 in a very curious philosophical climate. 1968 was supposed to be a great revolutionary storm, a significant ideological revolt among youth, while the dominant ideological references were of a scientific epistemological nature—even those who, at that time, referred to Maoism were still somewhat influenced by this atmosphere. The pamphlets and documents they published in the period leading up to 1968 were still marked by Althusserianism, albeit in a radical and ultra-left version.

In 1968, the cards were reshuffled entirely. On the one hand, there was a great revolt against all forms of academic knowledge,

against all forms of bourgeois organization of knowledge, and in particular against everything that referred more or less to scientism, positivism, and the mentality of the lords of science. On the other hand, 1968 was also a vast anti-revisionist revolt, directed head-on against the PCF, in which most intellectuals also participated, condemning the strategy of entryism and internal opposition from within the PCF.

The result of all this was that Althusserianism was violently attacked and practically disappeared from the scene throughout this period. What emerges instead in Maoism, in continuity and rupture with the previous period, is a fully developed reference to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. From this moment onwards, a relatively short period began, lasting from around 1968 to 1971, in which Maoism achieved ideological hegemony not only over militants and those within the movement but also over the intellectual class as a whole. At this time, even Foucault was linked to Maoist organizations and referred to them not so much in what he wrote, but in the way he took a stand on events. Sartre himself was also linked to Maoism during this period. It was a time when even those at *Tel Quel* became Maoists; in short, everyone declared themselves Maoists.

Q. What were the political organizations to which these intellectuals referred?

A. The organization most closely linked to intellectuals at that time was the Gauche Prolétarienne, which, despite everything, was the one most in continuity with the group of Althusserians who had founded the UJC (ML). The others who referred to China were, as in Italy, the small pro-Chinese parties, which never had any influence among intellectuals. At that time, the Gauche Prolétarienne was also a point of reference for those who were not organized within it and was particularly strong in the intellectual left, as exemplified by figures such as Foucault and Sartre. However, the relationship between the Gauche Prolétarienne and these intellectuals was based on an ideological Maoism that was more akin to Lin Biaoism. The Gauche Prolétarienne had adopted several ideological themes from Maoism, which resonated with both the prevailing climate of the time and the intellectual left's ideas. These were, essentially, all the democratic themes of Maoism: the connection with the masses, the justice of revolt, hostility to revisionism, and a particular kind of justification for violence, among others.

Q. In what sense was Lin Biaoism?

A. In the precise sense that one can distinguish in Lin Biao a tendency to completely isolate Mao's thought from the legacy of Marxism-Leninism and the general history of Marxism, making Maoism a kind of ethics, a morality of revolt, rather than the Marxism of our time, that is, the politics of the proletariat in its actuality. Just look at the texts by Mao that Lin Biao placed in the foreground: the 'three most widely read texts' (*Serving the People*, *In Memory of Norman Bethune*, *How Yu Gong Removed the Mountains*). These are indeed beautiful texts, but they are also texts that belong to the ideological-moral side of organized revolutionary practice, rather than political texts. This aspect was unquestionably present in the Maoism of French intellectuals of that period.

Why, for example, could Sartre have been a Maoist? I, too, was a Sartrean in my youth and therefore still have great respect and admiration for Sartre; however, it is a real problem to consider how Sartre could have been a Maoist. If he could be, it was for two reasons: first, because he understood, towards the end of the 1960s, that this was where the movement was, that this was where the revolt was. Sartre was someone who had always been on the side of revolt rather than on the side of the bourgeoisie. The second reason is that this Maoism was not entirely incompatible with the philosophy of freedom that had always been his own. Sartre could remain faithful to the "cogito," to "self-consciousness," to "freedom," to the themes of commitment and responsibility, and still be a Maoist. He could never have been an Althusserian, due to the latter's philosophy of science, but he could have been a Maoist after 1968 and a Lin Biaoist. He could adopt the kind of morality of revolt that had spread at that time, as exemplified by Maoism.

In France, therefore, this was a period when everyone was a Maoist, but mainly Maoists in the sense I have described. It was inevitable, however, that at a certain point this would split. On the one hand, there were those who continued along this path of moral Maoism, understood as the systematization of revolt at an immediate level and as the morality of revolt. As the mass effects of the 1968 movement faded, they no longer had any material to work with. So, they gradually dissolved, turning in the opposite direction, precisely because they were not Marxist at all; they were not linked to actual political processes of the proletariat, but were simply sensitive to revolt; and, since Maoism was the coloring of all this, these Maoists lasted as long as the post-1968 enthusiasm lasted.

On the other hand, some sought to deepen the question of Maoism from another perspective, aiming to comprehend what the reference to the Cultural Revolution truly meant, what was politically new in Maoism, not only in ideological and moral terms. Our organization, the U.C.F.M.L. (Groupe pour la fondation de l'Union des

Communistes de France Marxistes-Léninistes), was born practically out of this movement, stemming from the split in French Maoism that occurred in the post-1968 era.

Q. Were there specific, organized forms of Maoist political engagement among intellectuals at that time?

A. There are many examples. To provide a platform for all these intellectuals who identified with Maoism, the Gauche Prolétarienne established a democratic sector known as the “Red Aid”. In one way or another, almost all the leading intellectuals – among those who were politicized, not Lacan, for example – found themselves in this organization. They thus participated in anti-repressive initiatives. Sartre, Foucault, Godard, Mauriac, and many other intellectuals, very different from one another, went out to sell *La Cause du Peuple* on the streets when its publication was banned. Then there were those from *Tel Quel* who dedicated their entire journal to China, Mao, contradiction, etc. Similarly, during this period, Foucault was involved in the Prison Action Committee. Even people like Glucksmann, who is now one of the new philosophers, were members of the Gauche Prolétarienne at the time. Many other examples could be given; one need only pick up the journals of those years to realize this hegemony. In any case, it should be noted that this period of hegemony was brief, lasting only three or four years, between 1969 and 1973.

On the other hand, this moral Maoism, contemporary with the revolt and drawing on the effects of the May storm, served as a kind of ideological reference point so broad that it allowed for considerable theoretical eclecticism. At the very moment when they were invoking Maoism and were more or less involved in organizations that declared themselves Maoist, Foucault was writing *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and Sartre his *Flaubert*. These books show that for their authors, there was no profound or radical contradiction between the continuation of their inner quest—albeit somewhat modulated and reformulated—and their ideological affiliation with Maoism. This proves the extent to which this ideological Maoism lived only on the breath of the popular youth revolt, without touching at all the theoretical and ultimately political positions of the intellectuals who adhered to it.

These were, therefore, extremely fragile conditions, which did not withstand the profound changes in the situation. Starting in 1972-73, this ideological Maoism began to crack, disperse, and gradually disappear. The forces that accelerated this process were of different kinds but converged. First, there was the reconstitution of the political counteroffensive of the bourgeoisie, mainly in the

form of a revisionist political counteroffensive. 1972 was the year in which the “Common Program” was signed between the PCF and the PS, in which the revisionists proposed to everyone a deadline, a new political alternative, and a so-called counter-project. In 1968-72, on the other hand, they had been in difficulty and had parried the attacks as best they could, because they were under attack from all sides. That of 1972 was a first bourgeois counteroffensive, in the face of which French intellectuals proved extremely weak. While a few years earlier they had been able to denounce the revisionists as enemies of the mass movement, now, faced with the “Common Program,” they did not know how to respond and even showed a certain willingness, albeit without explicitly adhering to it.

A second factor that undoubtedly accelerated this process was the evolution of the class struggle in China. There, too, the acute phase of the Cultural Revolution had ended, and the political problems that arose were now extremely complex problems of rebuilding the struggle between the two lines within the party. This also had significant repercussions for us, as taking a position on these issues was not as easy as taking a position at the time of the great mass clashes of the Cultural Revolution.

In addition, a third important factor that played a role in this situation was the fact that in France, the mass revolt had slowed down, and there was no longer the formidable deployment of all kinds of mass movements that had been seen in previous years.

Under the pressure of these three factors, purely ideological Maoism revealed its fragility on the political level. Either one was able to push the critique of modern revisionism to its ultimate consequences and give political substance to these critiques, or one decomposed politically. We cannot rely indefinitely on revolt alone. This is therefore the moment when this ideological Maoism disperses and liquidates itself. It takes the exact form of the dissolution of the *Gauche Prolétarienne*, or rather its self-dissolution, since it decides to disband based on the idea that political organization is now useless, that the movement is sufficient unto itself, that we are now in an era of widespread battles: the trade union struggles at LIP on the one hand, the soldiers on the other, the struggles in prisons, women, etc. At this moment, the prevailing theory is that the movement is a result of multiple social forces, from which follows the idea that concerning this same movement, political organization is necessarily bureaucratic, dogmatic, and so on. However, this was only a pretext, because the *Gauche Prolétarienne* was internally decomposing, and its political leaders did nothing but take note of this, deciding to dissolve the organization.

From this moment on, the only Maoists who truly exist are those who seek to equip themselves with the means to reconstruct

the question of Maoism on another basis, that is, by setting these three main objectives. First, to clarify what it means that Maoism is properly the form of Marxism of our time. Second, what the Cultural Revolution really is, beyond the simple fact that it was a mass revolt as such; that is, in what sense the Cultural Revolution is a real stage in world history. Third, what are the objectives and organizational forms appropriate to the political struggle on two fronts, that is, both against the classical bourgeoisie and against the new revisionist bourgeoisie, under the conditions of France? Only those who set themselves the goal of linking these three questions continued to call themselves Maoists. This is our case. The others dispersed and quickly transformed into their opposite. Between 1973 and 1975-76, we have an intermediate period, which I refer to as the politics of dispersed social forces.

Q. In Italy, too, roughly during these years, the beginning of a crisis in the organizations formed by the mass movement of '68 was accompanied by the idea of the spread of the struggle for dispersed social forces. All this was one of the key themes of the 1977 movement, in which Deleuze and Guattari were among the most critical points of reference. What was the most favorable ideological context for these philosophies in France? What role did they play, and how did they develop?

A. In France, just as the hegemonic Maoism I mentioned was beginning to disappear, there was a great success of ideas such as those of Deleuze and Guattari, etc. This can be explained very well: in fact, from the moment you find yourself in a politics of multiplicity and dispersed forces, that is, in short, in an explicitly anti-party and savagely anti-Leninist politics, this type of discourse has a strong hold on movement phenomena. Of course, they derive no benefit from it, but this ideology serves as a kind of veneer, an intellectual façade that allows them to justify what is ultimately their political weakness. In reality, this type of philosophy serves as a mechanism that allows real weakness to be presented as ideological strength. In other words, where there is a powerful but extremely confused and fragmented impulse to revolt, where it is clear that there is no political consistency, where, for any Marxist, it is clearly a temporary situation of weakness that must be overcome, in Deleuzian language it becomes something formidable: it is precisely the political weaknesses of the movement that are transformed into ideological triumph. During this period, a kind of magma formed between Deleuzian and old, purely ideological Maoists. Since they had no central reference point within the working class and the proletariat, they all felt completely at home in this type of language and discourse.

However, this is a transitional phase. Starting in 1975-76, in addition to all this, a countercurrent of “nouveaux philosophes” emerged in France, generally originating from former Maoists of the early period. This countercurrent was clearly reactionary. For the first time, at least since the end of World War II, anti-Marxist intellectuals in the strict sense appeared in France: not false Marxism, not idealistic Marxism, not eclectic Marxism, nor neutrality towards Marxism, but explicitly and fiercely anti-Marxism, which designates Marxism as the main enemy, based on the assessment that ideological Maoists make of their defeat. They realize, from their point of view, that they were wrong and begin to think that their previous political positions were an aberration, etc. The problem for them then becomes to liquidate Marxism and treat it as the main barbarism of our century.

This is a current which, as is well known, draws on dissent in the Eastern European countries. At the same time, they take it as their main concrete reference point and become its ideological organizers in France. They thus give the impression of closing a circle, the circle of an evolution. They started in 1968 with the theme of revolt, on the positions of ideological Maoism. From the moment when mass revolts could no longer serve as a backdrop for all this, they moved on to Deleuzian theory, to the theory of the dispersion of the informal movement, and ultimately to the apotheosis of the individual. Continuing along this path, they now find themselves in counter-revolutionary positions that have been developed and deployed in a way not seen in France for a long time.

It must be borne in mind that they are not only anti-Marxist and anti-Maoist philosophers, but also counter-revolutionary philosophers, i.e., they attack the very idea of revolution as the supreme form of state oppression. They transform the old Leninist dialectic between state and revolution into a unity, as if revolution were the worst form of state. They are people who side with the liberal parliamentarism of classical imperialism.

All this is truly spectacular. To illustrate Lenin’s thesis on the oscillations of the intellectual petty bourgeoisie, contemporary France presents a truly formidable field of experience. Until six years ago, these people were rabid Maoists, Maoists whom we criticized at the time for their ultra-left tendencies. This is also a real lesson in how the ultra-left can turn into its opposite! I knew Glucksmann at the University of Vincennes when he joined the Gauche Prolétarienne, and I remember that he did so with incredible sectarianism and verbal violence. It can thus be seen that at that time, for some, there was also an element of fanaticism in this Maoist hegemony, which has been completely reversed: reversed, I mean, into anti-communist fanaticism and anti-Maoist fanaticism.

I mentioned earlier that these individuals close a circle because, in a certain sense, they return, but have entirely shifted to the right, embracing the existentialist humanism that was typical of the previous period. Now, in fact, their theme is that of defending individual freedom, a philosophy that emphasizes the individual, where everything is traced back to the contradiction between the individual and the state. The only statement acceptable to them is the defense of the individual against the state. On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, there is a current—certainly a minority and countercurrent one—that has sought to utilize Maoism and Maoist politics as a platform for advancing theory and philosophy. We are its representatives, even if we do not have many close neighbors today. These are, in a way, the two extremes of the situation: on the one hand, those who seek to show that there is something like a new Marxist philosophy contained in Maoism and, on the other hand, the “renegades,” the renegades of Maoism, that is, those who have turned into their opposites and become staunch defenders of Western parliamentarianism.

Q. How do you think this situation will evolve?

A. Between these two extremes, there is currently a confused situation in France from a philosophical point of view. In this situation, many are searching for what could be called a kind of intermediate rationalism, something that can ultimately reconstitute a stable and somewhat peaceful terrain for bourgeois philosophy. Many people dislike the new philosophers because they are extremists in their political commitment. Many people dislike Maoist philosophy because it implies exact positions and requires a certain level of loyalty to the history since 1968. Most of these people try to cling to a sphere of rationalism that would allow them to avoid taking a definite position in the ideological and political conflicts of the moment.

Thus, for example, we are witnessing a revival of Lacanianism and references to psychoanalysis in a climate of political neutrality, despite everything, or a resurgence of references to epistemologists of the old tradition, such as Desanti, among others. These are generally anti-political but not aggressive positions. My impression is that this tendency is prevalent among young people who did not experience either 1968 or the years that followed, and are seeking a path of waiting, an intermediate path. On the other hand, this is not crystallized; it lacks its own figure, its own philosopher. This is the picture of the situation.

If I had to make a prediction, I would say that the “nouveaux philosophes” movement will weaken because it has no real political

outlet and will not withstand the emergence of mass revolt, which will sweep it away. It was important for a while, before the March elections, when the two bourgeois cliques clashed and the debate was framed in terms of whether to go with the PCF or not. The bourgeois rivalry was a structuring element of the new philosophers; it was within this context that they defined their role, as they were orchestrating a comprehensive philosophical argument against the PCF. We predict that very significant class tensions will soon reappear in France, given the collapse of parliamentary illusions. Even the small workers' movements that are reappearing right now, such as at Renault in Flins and in other factories, are a sign of a changing situation. It should be remembered that there have been no strikes in large factories for three years. I think that the development of all this will make the position of the new philosophers untenable, because once again intellectuals will have to take a stand on all this, on the working class, on the mass movement, etc. This is certain.

There will therefore be a new form of expression of political extremism among intellectuals. I do not know what form it will take; perhaps it will be sought out from you in Italy. After all, even people like Deleuze and Guattari, or even our autonomists—who, incidentally, are not that brilliant—are looking to you a little. I am not sure what they will come up with, but they are leaning in that direction. They have read and translated some Negri and Tronti, among others. I'm not sure, but perhaps a trend will emerge around these themes.

Q. By the way, today in Italy, part of the workerist current seems to be finding a new lease of life through new historical research on the so-called “other workers’ movement,” that is, the workers’ movement that never formed an organized political force, even though it was always the driving force of the class struggle. This is a historiographical trend also present in other countries, such as the US and Germany. In France, there is a journal called *Les révoltes logiques* that is moving in this direction. How does the work of this journal fit into the French situation you have just described?

A. *Les révoltes logiques* is a journal that was formed around a former Althusserian, Jacques Rancière, who later became a fellow traveler of the Gauche Prolétarienne, while maintaining various reservations about it. During the 1972-73 crisis, he adopted an intermediate stance, being part of the anti-Leninist current while maintaining a steadfast position on one key point: the reference to the working class. It should be noted that in the early days of ideological Maoism, there was also workerism, i.e., the fetishization

of the working class. Rancière remained faithful to this reference to the working class and the people, preserving this element of early ideological Maoism. He therefore dissociated himself from those who pushed the matter to the point of complete liquidation and to completely reactionary bourgeois positions. In the intellectual climate I was talking about, he represents a centrist current. Rancière does not take a strong position on the phenomenon of movement, on what needs to be done today, but ultimately takes refuge in rewriting the history of the working class since the 19th century. He intends to show that the authentic working class never actually appeared; that the political apparatuses representing the class were alien to it; that the class had a kind of internal historical and ideological existence that was immanent, which never really appeared on the political scene.

This is ultimately a weak position compared to the new philosophers, despite its vehement attack on them. The fact is that between the idea that they have of the working class and the idea that Glucksmann has of the “plebs,” i.e., the totality of those who are contradictory to the state, there is no fundamental difference. The idea, in fact, of this class that is almost eternally silent, whose depths must be explored to bring it back to the surface, is very close to the way Glucksmann presents the “plebs.” It is essentially the idea that the state sphere has always monopolized speech, leaving others speechless.

It is practically the same thing, except that Rancière maintains the idea of class despite everything; in short, he maintains elementary Marxism. It is a form of anarchist workerism grounded in rigorous historical research. This current also has a slight echo here, because it is less reactionary than the other, insofar as it retains explicit references to the working class and revolts. However, it is a current that is also influenced by the general ideological climate, which is anti-party, anti-Leninist, and ultimately anti-political.

Q. Returning to Althusser and seeing his position in the climate you are talking about, we would like to ask you another question. Recently, a major weekly magazine in Italy translated Althusser’s summary of his comments in *Le Monde* on the current situation of the PCF. On the same subject, *Il Manifesto* published an interview with Althusser. The controversy arose in such harsh and decisive tones that it raised the old question, which has always remained unresolved in Italy, of the peculiar relationship between Althusser and the PCF. There are even those who saw this relationship as so contradictory that they spoke of the possibility of Althusser’s expulsion. In any case, a series of expressions of sympathy for him have been renewed, especially among those who criticize Western

communist parties, focusing above all on their concessions and inconsistencies. What do you think?

A. As I said before, Althusser always had a logic of opposition rather than rupture with the PCF. Today, he believes the situation is favorable because the logic of opposition can be both aggressive and appealing to a specific audience. He thinks that the moment is favorable because of the defeat of the Union de la gauche. The PCF's political strategy has suffered a setback because of this defeat.

Starting from these assumptions, the idea that Althusser could be expelled from the PCF is entirely false. In fact, the balance of power is not such that the party leadership could immediately repress this dissident without any restraint. On the other hand, Althusser's position only serves to maintain illusions about the true nature of the PCF. Without certainly realizing it, Althusser is doing the PCF an excellent service for two reasons. First, through this story of protest, the PCF continues to occupy center stage in politics and ultimately to appear as the central issue in the political debate. In fact, there is a whole faction of intellectuals who are passionate about the Althusser-Marchais match. There is a side to this story that presents itself as the formidable struggle of the critical intellectual against the bureaucratic monster, which greatly excites a section of intellectuals. In any case, this benefits the PCF, because what matters to it is that a certain number of intellectuals continue to think that it is the key to the situation. Even if they consider it needs to be wholly transformed and its direction changed, etc., the important thing is that they think it. Moreover, this is the fundamental reason why the PCF has made it known that it will not expel Althusser. You want to talk about us? says the PCF. Fine, talk about us. Thus, the newspapers are full of pages, and all they talk about is the PCF; it is fantastic. That is the first reason.

The second reason is obviously that there is no fundamental political criticism. Althusser says: our leadership is a bunch of idiots who only do stupid things, that there is no democracy, etc. However, on decisive questions such as: what proposals should be supported today? What should be done? What should the strategy and tactics be? Althusser does not take a position on any of these questions. What is most important, the fundamental question of whether the PCF is a proletarian party or a bourgeois party, is absent from his entire argument, or, instead, has already been implicitly resolved. Suppose one thinks, as Althusser does, that all energies must be mobilized to transform the PCF. In that case, this implies that one implicitly believes, in essence, that the PCF is the party of the class, indeed a party of old opportunists, but still the party of the class. All

this, curiously enough, makes Althusser's position, in my opinion, a Trotskyist position. Such has been the position of the Trotskyists for forty years: the party is no good, it is bureaucratic, it is not democratic, give us the right to form a faction, etc., but it is still the big party.

Q. You spoke about the French situation regarding international events such as the Sino-Soviet controversy, the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biaoism, etc. How do you think the latest events in China will influence the situation in France?

A. These events dealt the final blow to anything that might have remained linked to pure ideological Maoism. They also served as support to those who were formerly Maoists to move to anti-Marxism. What they say today is that we believed the Cultural Revolution was new, that it was not a repeat of Russia, and so on. No, in reality, it is precisely like Russia; look at what happened after Mao's death, the Gang of Four, etc. In short, nothing new under the sun. On the one hand, this put an end to everything related to the Cultural Revolution: a reference that was essentially anarchist rather than Marxist, focusing exclusively on mass movement rather than class. On the other hand, the new situation in China led to the overthrow of a certain number of former Maoists.

Q. Regarding the current situation in China, Bettelheim's essay ("The End of the Cultural Revolution," in *Monthly Review*, Italian edition, May-June 1978) has also recently been published in Italian. While, on the one hand, it appears, like all of Bettelheim's works, to be thoroughly documented and rigorously argued, on the other hand, it demonstrates the persistence of some elements of Althusserianism, never criticized by Bettelheim himself, which leads his analysis towards a particular formalism. A clear sign of this can be found in the thesis of bourgeois restoration that allegedly took place immediately after the fall of the so-called "Gang of Four."

A. Bettelheim is, in my opinion, somewhere between fully embracing Maoism in its active and revolutionary political dimension and considering it simply as a method of investigation, without really breaking with several themes, concepts, and approaches drawn from Althusser. In a way, Bettelheim tends towards a specific type of Maoist academicism. This seems very clear to me if we look at the book *Class Struggles in the USSR*. It is certainly interesting from the perspective of the material collected, but from a methodological standpoint, it is not a complete break with Althusser's legacy. He continues to consider that Marxism is the method of investigating

social formations. Bettelheim has a rigid stance on the achievements and transformations of the Cultural Revolution, considering its results in terms of social organization and program rather than as an exceptional period in the class struggle. Moreover, I think that the thesis he currently holds, according to which there is indeed a bourgeois restoration, was formulated prematurely.

It is a thesis linked to the fact that he sets a certain number of criteria relating to the transformations of society that emerged from the Cultural Revolution, including the organization of factories and education. He says, since this is being called into question, there is a bourgeois restoration. This is a structural conception of the Cultural Revolution itself, which is not grasped in the actual dynamics of the class struggle. Our position is that there are currently countercurrents of the right in China; this is indisputable. We have no problem in saying so. Even before Mao's death, extremely powerful right-wing countercurrents existed in China; however, we are not convinced that one can speak of a bourgeois restoration. I believe that Bettelheim's assessments are also somewhat the result of a certain lack of confidence in the historical dynamics of the working class, the proletariat, and the Chinese masses. Furthermore, I find that there is an underestimation of the fact that the Cultural Revolution achieved a series of fundamental objectives, even if not all of those that had been set. After all, Mao himself argued that there would have to be other Cultural Revolutions, that it was impossible to deal decisive blows or achieve final victories against bourgeois tendencies in the party and the state.

On the other hand, the Cultural Revolution created entirely new and unyielding political rear guards, such that one cannot hastily speak of the restoration of capitalism in China at the first alarm and the first bourgeois counteroffensive, without even having time to observe the stabilization and persistence of the relations of force. All this while keeping as a fundamental point of reference the question that it is the imperialist nature that ultimately decides, irreversibly, on internal social processes. In our opinion, even on the question of the Soviet Union, it is from the invasion of Czechoslovakia and its imperialist deployment throughout the world that the Soviet Union can be decisively and definitively defined as a bourgeois state.

Bettelheim's problem is that, lacking a concrete political commitment in France, he is not at the forefront of applying Maoism creatively in the conditions of the revolution; he tends to take somewhat static positions, including those regarding the very categories of Maoism to which he refers.

Q. Recently, in a debate with Robert Linhart on Marxism and Leninism that appeared in the journal *Communisme* (no. 27-28, 1976), Bettelheim made a distinction between “essential Marxism” and “historically determined Marxism.” In the second volume of *Class Struggles in the USSR*, he contrasts “revolutionary Marxism” with “Bolshevik ideological formation,” which he claims is contaminated by non-Marxist concepts.

A. Our position does not even coincide with the position expressed by Linhart, since he advocates a relativization of a very radical empiricism. Our position differs significantly from both. We do not believe that there is an essential body of Marxism alongside historical Marxism, but that Marxism, like all historical phenomena, is subject to a periodized development in stages. As for Maoism, for us it is not simply a matter of addressing the problems of the revolution in China—which would be Linhart’s version—nor of purely developing the historical forms of primitive Marxist statements in a given conjuncture. Our problem is entirely different: namely, that on the foundations laid above by the Cultural Revolution, we are currently at the beginning of a new stage in the development of Marxism, the previous stage of which was Leninism. Of course, we historicize Marxism and believe that it has a history. As always in the Marxist method, the important thing is to identify the key points of this history, that is, to understand the principle of periodization that operates within it. For us, this is a fundamental question: The question of the reference to Mao will not be resolved, the experience of the Cultural Revolution, etc., without placing it in a historical context. For us, it is Marxism itself that develops in a periodized movement, rather than Marxism developing purely and simply in successive ideological formations. We believe that one should be neither empiricist nor relativist in this regard, but rather that one must find the law of historical movement in the stages of Marxism itself. This is a point on which we have worked extensively and will continue to work, on which we are determined to wage a crucial ideological struggle to understand what it means to be Marxists, since Marxism is ultimately what is at stake—the center of a political battle.

Q. In *Théorie de la Contradiction*, you argue that there is an uneven development of the materialist thesis and the dialectical thesis in the history of Marxism, that is, that at each stage one or the other prevails, as a consequence of the main opposition within the workers’ movement.

A. Of course, within each stage, there are unequal developments linked to the dominant forms of class struggle and therefore of ideological struggle. In short, this means considering that Marxism itself is subject to the general principles of historical materialism, that Marxism has a historicity, but that the laws of historical development govern this historicity. Therefore, in the development by stages, it is necessary to identify the inequalities of development, their assignment in the conjuncture, etc. This is consequently a very vast task, from which an essential regeneration can come.

Q. In this perspective, how do you see the question raised by many parts of the so-called crisis of Marxism?

A. The question of the eternal debate on the crisis of Marxism concerns two things. First, the question of whether it is strong or weak in a given conjuncture, whether it exists or does not exist. For us, Marxism ultimately has as its core the actuality of the revolutionary politics of the proletariat. Marxism does not exist outside this relevance. It is an effect of it; it is consubstantial with it. Only in an academic conception of Marxism can one think that it exists in the air, as a doctrinal body of statements to which everyone can freely refer, saying they are for or against it, declaring it in crisis, saying whether they like it or not. Marxism exists in its movement, in its internal transformation, in proportion to the very existence of the revolutionary proletariat.

Therefore, the real question to which the problem of the existence of Marxism must always be referred is that of the state of existence of the proletariat as a political class at the national and international level. That is, not as a social class, as a group of exploited workers, but as a class understood from the point of view of its strategic and political project, of the struggle for communism. Marxism is either strong or weak, presenting new or academic characteristics that are exclusively concerned with this process. If Marxism is ultimately the ideology and theory of the fighting proletariat, its power in terms of relevance and existence is dialectically linked to the power of this fighting proletariat itself.

We have no difficulty in saying that in specific conjunctures, Marxism has the kind of existence that is ultimately permitted to it by the relations of class forces. Marxism is not above these relations: the idea that Marxism can develop majestically in conditions where the proletariat is politically weak is an utterly idealistic idea that ultimately harks back to the “theory of genius.” It is an idea of linear development of Marxism, detached from its original basis. This is not the case. Marxism develops through periods of strength and weakness, as well as through crises. We have no problem

saying this. Indeed, today, the question of how the proletariat in an imperialist country constitutes itself as a political class autonomous from all bourgeoisies remains an important question that has yet to be resolved. Marxism exists concerning this question. Therefore, it is clear that there are many problems today for which there are no established answers, leaving us open to attacks from our opponents. Additionally, it is clear that several issues need to be transformed, but the specifics of how to do so are unclear.

If this is the first set of issues related to the crisis of Marxism, the second, in our opinion, depends on the fact that we are in a time when Marxism is effectively transitioning from one stage to another. This is what we ultimately refer to as Maoism: Maoism is certainly not uniquely Chinese. The crux of the matter is the question of the new stage of Marxism. From this perspective, there is a crisis of Leninism. We are deeply committed to Leninism, but we recognize that there is a crisis of Leninism from this perspective. In other words, while accumulating the universal achievements of Leninism, it is clear that we must produce and think of new things to bring Marxism, despite everything, to a different stage of development, linked to the fundamental transformations of the world situation after Lenin, and linked to the phenomenon of the restoration of capitalism in the USSR and therefore to the defeat of the first attempt at a proletarian dictatorship. Considering all this, we have no difficulty in saying that Marxism is in crisis, because Marxism proceeds through crises.

On the other hand, regarding what anti-Marxist currents call the “crisis of Marxism,” these are old arguments that have never been renewed since the end of the last century: Marxism is said to be totalitarian, economicist, and not to take individuals into account, etc.

Q. Among these criticisms levelled at Marxism, one that has had a great resonance in the mass movement in Italy is based on the contradiction between the personal and the political, which has found support both in some themes of Foucault and others drawn from psychoanalysis, mixing everything up a bit.

A. Here, this issue arose in almost the same terms and took the form of criticism of militancy, based on the assumption that militancy crushes the individual and, in particular, does not take into account desire, etc. All this took place in the context of the debate on the question of power, namely that all institutions, including political and revolutionary parties, are places of power and that these places of power exclude and discard, for their own benefit, the fundamental sources of desire and personal liberation.

As you mentioned, here too, the main cultural reference point is psychoanalysis, since it is the place where issues of desire, the unconscious, personality, and so on are addressed and discussed. All this in the belief that somewhere we need to find the link between what is found in psychoanalysis and what is found in revolutionary politics, in the belief that we should psychoanalyze the organizational phenomenon itself. Another essential reference, as you mentioned, was Foucault, insofar as the focus of his work is the question of power: reflecting on the mechanisms of power as such, present in ideological configurations and social practices.

I do not find this debate particularly interesting, for several reasons. The first is, if you like, a little trivial. In fact, it seems to me that these stories all end up rediscovering that there is somewhere an effective contradiction in the face of which we cannot find any remedy, any adjustment; that is, that there is no possible accommodation between individualism and revolutionary politics. This is the crux of the problem. In other words, there is an effective contradiction between the values that dominate among intellectuals in a normal period and the requirements of revolutionary politics. The Maoist themes—albeit treated in a predominantly ideological manner during the Cultural Revolution—of the struggle against egoism and the revolutionization of the world's conception are truths. We certainly cannot go and tell people that the general system of their social life, their self-image, their ideas about art, culture, sexuality, personal life, vacations and travel, can be completely homogeneous with organized politics.

In short, we have no problem saying that there is a contradiction between the representation that intellectuals have of their subjectivity, their desire, the reasons why they ultimately want to live, discuss, take an interest in things, etc., and the internal law of a revolutionary political organization, even if it is of a new type, even if it is something different from the bureaucracy of the PCF and the trade unions. This is a contradiction that exists in fact, a contradiction that will be reduced only to the extent that society itself is transformed. The first aspect of the question is therefore this.

Secondly, there is a real problem surrounding these issues. It is that of the capacity of the revolutionary organization, whatever it may be, to mobilize in the best and most correct way the actual subjective resources of each individual. This is the only real problem, in the sense that the process of mutilation of personal life by political life exists only to the extent that it means that the political organization, in its very nature, represses what could actually be helpful to it, namely, the energies of each individual, the variety of their abilities, their knowledge, etc. Of course, this problem exists, and it must be said that it has, to some extent, an anti-revisionist

dimension. It is also in this sense that we speak of the need for a new type of party. But to do this, the battle must be fought within the political project and not in the obtuse opposition between personal life and political life, because when put in these terms, the problem is metaphysical.

Thirdly, it must be said that this problem, as it is posed, is so metaphysical that it is politically completely sterile, that is, it is incapable of producing anything other than a parasitic contestation of what exists politically. This problem exists solely to create noise, not to make anything effective, because to produce something, it must itself agree to be part of a positive, organized political process. Otherwise, in fact, we remain in a mythological debate between organized politics on the one hand, and politics conceived, so to speak, as the art of living of this or that individual on the other. This, if you like, has its charm, but it serves no purpose. It is for these reasons, as I said at the beginning, that these issues do not interest me very much.

Q. And returning to the two cultural references of this debate – psychoanalysis and Foucault?

A. Yes, of course, even here psychoanalysis has been, as I said, at the center of this question. Psychoanalysis, as well as its criticism, which was a Deleuzian critique, reproached it for being itself a political apparatus that repressed desire within the family institution. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that a considerable number of former Maoists ended up on the psychoanalysts' couches, thus helping to bring them back to the surface. These former Maoists told psychoanalysts about their suffering as militants. This suffering was partly meaningful in retrospect and was also linked to real problems.

Their conception of politics was closely tied to the dynamics of the mass movement. As the movement declined, real suffering arose from questions such as: why must we be organized, and why does activism become unbearable? Not only did the old Maoists talk about all this with psychoanalysts, but in many cases, they became psychoanalysts themselves—because in our country, when you do psychoanalysis, you become a psychoanalyst; psychoanalysis in our country is an organizational apparatus that recruits and reproduces itself from within. This led to a series of speculations that attempted to think about politics in terms of desire, but I believe that, in any case, nothing truly interesting emerged from it, only speculation.

The case of Foucault is different. He is a highly astute and active character who consistently maintained a position that allowed him to avoid taking irreversible stances in the most significant

philosophical and political divisions. He always limited himself to purely circumstantial positions. For a specific period, he found himself alongside the Maoists of the Gauche Prolétarienne, and for a brief time, he flirted with Deleuze and the philosophers of desire, while maintaining a certain distance despite everything.

At present, he is comfortable with the new philosophers, although he is careful not to sing their song in such explicitly anti-Marxist terms. Although he is respected by everyone, without being compromised by any ideologically committed group involved in conflicts, he is somewhat in the middle of things. However, I would say that at the moment, he is leaning slightly to the right, in the sense that he runs the risk of tipping the balance in favor of the traditional bourgeoisie, given all the talk about human rights. All his work consistently navigates the concept of the fetish of power, attempting to provide a historical logic for this notion. Ultimately, the only clear thing that can be said about his idea is that the totality of the social fabric is organized by the effects of power, without it being representable in a center.

In this regard, there is a difference between the new philosophers and the philosophers of desire, in that Foucault does not assign the same importance to the state as they do. The question of power in Foucault is at once more abstract and more empirical; it is not centered on the concept of the state. I'm not sure if Foucault holds the same importance for you as he does for us.

Q. Yes, Foucault is even more important to us than the “nouveaux philosophes,” who have had only limited success. In fact, in our country, if you declare yourself explicitly anti-Marxist, you risk falling straight into the arms of the Church, which has a monopoly on anti-Marxism.

A. Well, of course, I understand, in Italy there is a firmly established monopoly of anti-Marxism. Foucault, on the other hand, maintains an element of caution that allows him, in some way, to have the same content without, however, taking a frontal position on the question of Marxism.

Q. Returning to psychoanalysis, we would like to ask you one last question. Your argument about its use today within the so-called distinction between personal life and political life is clear. But do you think that, in general, psychoanalysis as a theory can actually be reduced to all the different uses to which it has been put and that it has no other content?

A. No, no. I don't feel comfortable taking an exact position on psychoanalysis, because it would require a lot of work. What is clear is that psychoanalysis is today the dominant, almost exclusive ideological form among intellectuals, that is, the only theory of the individual that one still has the right to cite. In the 19th century, a romantic psychology emerged, characterized by introspection and a tradition that bridged philosophy and literature, centered on the question of the individual's secrets and the organization of their constitutive unity. Today, this place is occupied by psychoanalysis; there is no doubt about that. If one really wants to be accused of dogmatism and simplism, one could say that, on a social level, psychoanalysis plays a role as a substitute ideology for bourgeois individualism in the age of imperialism. However, when put in these terms, it may sound striking, but there is no doubt that this social aspect exists.

On the other hand, does psychoanalysis offer something worthy of attention, something that constitutes a kernel of truth wrapped in gangue, like a precious metal? Is Freud the Hegel of something? Is there a rational core to psychoanalysis? All this constitutes a real problem.

I don't have a definitive stance on this issue. It's a question that hasn't been fully explored. However, the theme of the unconscious has the advantage of breaking with the idea that the subject is self-conscious. If only for this reason, it is more materialistic than the old psychology of consciousness, than the old idealisms of the "cogito." This introduces an element of decentralization concerning the idea that the subject is traversed by forces of which he is the center. This is undoubtedly a step forward in the theory of the subject. In any case, the rational core should be freed from all this, from the simplistic and ultimately anti-political way in which it functions today at the level of mass ideology.

This does not exclude the possibility that psychoanalysis contains a rational core in its own movement, which raises several questions. All this refers back to the question of whether there is a place in Marxism for the general problem of the subject. What is the subject, what is the subjective? The subject does not mean the individual. Marxism has always acknowledged the subjective element. There is a well-known one: in politics, the subjective element is the organized element.

This category of subjectivity and the dialectic of the subjective and the objective are completely exhausted in the simple recognition of the organized phenomenon, that is, in politics? Or is it instead a broader dialectic, which would eventually allow us to know, to have an approach, to have methods of investigation into the question

of the effects of the subject in general, including the effect of the subject at an infra-level concerning class subjects, the major actors in historical development? Is there not somewhere in Freudianism and its developments a rational core that has not yet been grasped? All these are questions that we have the right to ask ourselves.

Translated by A. Russo