

The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?

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Why?

Why discuss the “Cultural Revolution”—which is the official name for a long period of serious disturbances in communist China between 1965 and 1976? For at least three reasons:

1. The Cultural Revolution has been a constant and lively reference of militant activity throughout the world, and particularly in France, at least between 1967 and 1976. It is part of our political history and the basis for the existence of the Maoist current, the only true political creation of the sixties and seventies. I can say “our,” I was part of it, and in a certain sense, to quote Rimbaud, “I am there, I am still there.” In the untiring inventiveness of the Chinese revolutionaries, all sorts of subjective and practical trajectories have found their *name*. Already, to change subjectivity, to live otherwise, to think otherwise: the Chinese—and then we—called that

“revolutionarization.” They said: “To change the human being in what is most profound.” They taught that in political practice, we must be both at once “the arrow and the bull’s eye,” because the old worldview is also still present within us. By the end of the sixties, we went everywhere: to the factories, to the suburbs, to the countryside. Tens of thousands of students became proletarian or went to live among the workers. For this too we had the words of the Cultural Revolution: the “great exchanges of experience,” “to serve the people,” and, always the essential slogan, the “mass alliance.” We fought against the brutal inertia of the PCF [French Communist Party], against its violent conservatism. In China too the party bureaucracy was attacked; that was called “to struggle against revisionism.” Even the splits, the confrontations between revolutionaries from different orientations, were referred to the Chinese way: “To hunt down the black gangsters,” to be finished with those who are “leftist in appearance and rightist in reality.” When we met with a popular political situation, a factory strike or a confrontation with the fascistic landlords, we knew that we had “to excel in the discovery of the proletarian Left, to rally the Center, to isolate and crush the Right.” Mao’s *Little Red Book* has been our guide, not at all, as the dummies say, in the service of dogmatic catechism but, on the contrary, in order for us to clarify and invent new ways in all sorts of disparate situations that were unknown to us. With regard to all this, since I am not one of those who cover their abandonment and their rallying to the established reaction with references to the psychology of illusions or to the morality of blindness, we can only quote our sources and pay homage to the Chinese revolutionaries.

2. The Cultural Revolution is the typical example (yet another notion from Maoism, the typical example: a revolutionary find that must be generalized) of a political experience that saturates the form of the party-state. I use the category of “saturation” in the sense given to it by Sylvain Lazarus:¹ I will attempt to show that the Cultural Revolution is the last significant political sequence that is still internal to the party-state (in this case, the Chinese Communist Party) and fails as such. Already, May ’68 and its aftermath, that is something slightly different. The Polish movement or Chiapas, that is something very different. The Political Organization, that is something absolutely different. But without the saturation of the sixties

and seventies, nothing would as yet be thinkable, outside the specter of the party-state, or the parties-state.²

3. The Cultural Revolution is a great lesson in history and politics, in history as thought from within politics (and not the other way around). Indeed, depending on whether we examine this “revolution” (the word itself lies at the heart of the saturation) according to the dominant historiography or according to a real political question, we arrive at gripping disagreements. What matters is for us to see clearly that the nature of this discord is not of the order of empirical or positivist exactness or lack thereof. We can be in agreement as to the facts and end up with judgments that are perfectly opposed to one another. It is precisely this paradox that will serve us as a point of entry into the subject matter.

Narratives

The dominant historiographical version was compiled by various specialists, especially by sinologists, as early as 1968, and it has not changed since. It was consolidated by the fact that covertly it became the official version of a Chinese state, headed by Deng Xiaoping and dominated after 1976 by people who escaped from and sought revenge for the Cultural Revolution.

What does this version say?³ That in terms of revolution, it was a matter of a power struggle at the top echelons of the bureaucracy of the party-state. That Mao’s economical voluntarism, incarnated in the call for “the Great Leap Forward,” was a complete failure leading to the return of famine to the countryside. That, after this failure, Mao finds himself in the minority among the leading instances of the party and that a “pragmatic” group imposes its law, the dominant personalities of which are Liu Shaoqi (then named president of the republic), Deng Xiaoping (general secretary of the party), and Peng Zhen (mayor of Beijing). That, as early as 1963, Mao attempted to lead some counterattacks, but that he failed among the regular instances of the party. That he then had recourse to forces foreign to the party, be they external (the student Red Guards) or external/internal, particularly the army, over which he took control again after the elimination of Peng Dehuai and his replacement by Lin Biao.⁴ That then, solely because of Mao’s will to regain power, there ensued a bloody and chaotic

situation, which until the death of the culprit (in 1976) never managed to stabilize itself.

It is totally feasible to accept that nothing in this version is, properly speaking, incorrect. But nothing gives it the real meaning that can come only from the political understanding of the episodes, that is, their concentration in a form of thinking still active today.

1. No stabilization? True. But that is because it turned out to be impossible to unfold the political innovation within the framework of the party-state. Neither the most extensive creative freedom of the student and working masses (between 1966 and 1968), nor the ideological and state control of the army (between 1968 and 1971), nor the ad hoc solutions to the problems arranged in a Politburo dominated by the confrontation among antagonistic tendencies (between 1972 and 1976) allowed the revolutionary ideas to take root so that an entirely new political situation, completely detached from the Soviet model, could finally see the light of day on the scale of society as a whole.

2. Recourse to external forces? True. But this was meant, and it actually had the effect, both on a short-term and on a long-term basis, perhaps even until today, of a partial disentanglement of party and state. It was a matter of ruining bureaucratic formalism, at least for the duration of a gigantic movement. The fact that this provoked at the same time the anarchy of factions signals an essential political question for times to come: what gives unity to a politics, if it is not directly guaranteed by the formal unity of the state?

3. A struggle for power? Of course. It is rather ridiculous to oppose “power struggle” and “revolution,” since precisely by “revolution” we can only understand the articulation of antagonistic political forces over the question of power. Besides, the Maoists constantly quoted Lenin for whom explicitly the question of the revolution in the final instance is that of power. The true problem, which is very complex, would rather be to know whether the Cultural Revolution does not precisely put an end to the revolutionary conception of the articulation between politics and the state. In truth this was its great question, its central and violent debate.

4. The “Great Leap Forward,” a cruel failure? Yes, in many respects. But this failure is the result of a critical examination of Stalin’s economi-

cal doctrine. It certainly cannot be attributed to a uniform treatment of questions related to the development of the countryside by “totalitarianism.” Mao severely examined (as witnessed by numerous written notes) the Stalinist conception of collectivization and its bottomless disdain for the peasants. His idea was certainly not to collectivize through force and violence in order to assure accumulation at all costs in the cities. It was, quite the contrary, to industrialize the countryside locally, to give it a relative economical autonomy, in order to avoid the savage proletarianization and urbanization that in the USSR had taken a catastrophic shape. In truth, Mao followed the communist idea of an effective resolution of the contradiction between city and countryside, and not that of a violent erasure of the countryside in favor of the cities. If there is a failure, it is of a political nature, and it is a completely different failure than Stalin’s.

Ultimately, we should affirm that the same abstract description of facts by no means leads to the same mode of thinking, when it operates under different political axioms.

Dates

The quarrel is equally clear when it comes to dates. The dominant point of view, which is also that of the Chinese state, is that the Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years, from 1966 to 1976, from the Red Guards to Mao’s death. Ten years of troubles, ten years lost for a rational development.

In fact, such dating can be defended, if one reasons from the strict point of view of the history of the Chinese state, with the following criteria: civil stability, production, a certain unity in the administrative top, cohesion in the army, etc. But this is not my axiom and these are not my criteria. If one examines the question of dates from the point of view of politics, of political invention, the principal criteria become the following: when can we say that there is a situation of collective creations of thought of the political type? When does practice with its directives stand in a verifiable excess over the tradition and function of the Chinese party-state? When do statements of universal value emerge? Then, we proceed in a completely different way to determine the boundaries of the process named the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” which we among ourselves called “the GPCR.”

As far as I am concerned, I propose to say that the Cultural Revolution, in this conception, forms a sequence that goes from November 1965 to July 1968. I can even accept (this is a discussion of political technique) a drastic reduction, which would situate the revolutionary moment properly speaking between May 1966 and September 1967. The criterion is the existence of a political activity of the masses, its slogans, its new organizations, its own places. Through all of this an ambivalent but undeniable reference is constituted for all contemporary political thought worthy of the name. In this sense, there is “revolution” because there are the Red Guards, the revolutionary rebel workers, innumerable organizations and “general headquarters,” totally unpredictable situations, new political statements, texts without precedent, etc.

Hypothesis

How to proceed so that this gigantic seism is exposed to thought and makes sense to it today? I will formulate a hypothesis and experiment with it on several levels, both factual and textual, of the sequence I am referring to (i.e., China between November 1965 and July 1968).

The hypothesis is the following: we are in the conditions of an essential division of the party-state (the Chinese Communist Party, in power since 1949). This division is essential in that it entails crucial questions about the future of the country: the economy and the relation between city and countryside; the eventual transformation of the army; the assessment of the Korean War; the intellectuals, universities, art, and literature; and, finally, the value of the Soviet, or Stalinist, model. But it is also and above all essential because the minority trend among the party cadres is at the same time led, or represented, by the person whose historical and popular legitimacy is the greatest, that is, Mao Zedong. There is a formidable phenomenon of noncoincidence between the historicity of the party (the long period of the popular war, first against the Japanese, then against Chiang Kai-shek) and the present state of its activity as the framework of state power. Moreover, the Yan'an period will be constantly invoked during the Cultural Revolution, particularly in the army, as a model of communist political subjectivity.

This phenomenon has the following consequences: the confrontation

between positions does not manage to be ruled by bureaucratic formalism, but neither can it be ruled under the methods of terrorist purging used by Stalin in the thirties. In the space of the party-state, though, there is only formalism or terror. Mao and his group will have to invent a third recourse, the recourse to political mass mobilization, to try to break with the representatives of the majority trend and, in particular, their leaders at the upper echelons of the party and the state. This recourse supposes that one admit uncontrolled forms of revolt and organization. Mao's group, after plenty of hesitation, will in fact impose that these be admitted, first in the universities and then in the factories. But, in a contradictory move, it will also try to bring together all organizational innovations of the revolution in the general space of the party-state.

Here we are at the heart of the hypothesis: the Cultural Revolution is the historical development of a contradiction. On the one hand, the issue is to arouse mass revolutionary action in the margins of the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat, or to acknowledge, in the theoretical jargon of the time, that even though the state is formally a "proletarian" state, the class struggle continues, including in the forms of mass revolt. Mao and his followers will go so far as to say that under socialism, the bourgeoisie reconstitutes itself and organizes itself *within the communist party itself*. On the other hand, with actual civil war still being excluded, the general form of the relation between the party and the state, in particular over the use of repressive forces, must remain unchanged at least insofar as it is not really a question of *destroying* the party. Mao will make this known by noting that "the overwhelming majority of cadres are good."

This contradiction at the same time will produce a succession of overflows of the party's authority by the local revolts, the violent anarchy of these overflows, the inevitability of a call to order of extraordinary brutality, and, in the end, the decisive entrance onto the stage of the popular army.

The successive overflows establish the chronology (the stages) of the Cultural Revolution. The leading revolutionary group will first try to keep the revolt within the context of the educational units. This attempt began to fail in August 1966, when the Red Guards spread out into the cities. Afterward, it will be a question of containing the revolt within the frame of the school and university youth. But from the end of 1966 and particularly from

January 1967 onward, workers become the principal force of the movement. Then the quest is on to keep the party and state administrations at a distance, but they will be in the midst of the turmoil starting in 1967 through the movement of “power seizures.” Finally, the aim will be to keep the army in check at any cost as a power in reserve, a last resource. But this will turn out to be almost impossible with the unleashing of violence in August 1967 in Wuhan and Canton. It is precisely with an eye on the real risk of a scission among the armed forces that the slow movement of repressive inversion will set in, beginning in September 1967.

Let us put it like this: the political inventions, which gave the sequence its unquestionable revolutionary appeal, could not be deployed except as overflows with regard to the aim that was assigned to them by those whom the actors of the revolution themselves (the youth and its innumerable groups, the rebel workers . . .) considered to be their natural leaders: Mao and his minority group. By the same token, these inventions have always been localized and singular; they could not really turn into strategic and reproducible propositions. In the end, the strategic meaning (or the universal range) of these inventions was a negative one. Because what they themselves carried forth, and what they vitally impressed on the militant minds of the entire world, was nothing but the end of the party-state as the central production of revolutionary political activity. More generally, the Cultural Revolution showed that it was no longer possible to assign either the revolutionary mass actions or the organizational phenomena to the strict logic of class representation. That is why it remains a political episode of the highest importance.

Experimental Fields

I would like to experiment with the above hypothesis by putting it to the test of seven chosen referents, taken in chronological order:

- 1 The “Sixteen Points” circular of August 1966, which is perhaps for the most part from the hand of Mao himself, and which in any case is the most innovative central document, the one that breaks the most with the bureaucratic formalism of parties-states.
- 2 The Red Guards and Chinese society (from August 1966 to at least

- August 1967). Without a doubt, this involves an exploration of the limits of the political capacity of high school and university students more or less left to themselves, whatever the circumstances are.
- 3 The “revolutionary rebel workers” and the Shanghai Commune (January–February 1967), a capital and unfinished episode, because it proposes an alternative form of power to the centralism of the party.
 - 4 The “power seizures”: “Great alliance,” “triple combination,” and “revolutionary committees,” from January 1967 to the spring of 1968. Here the question is whether the movement really creates new organizations or whether it amounts only to a regeneration of the party.
 - 5 The Wuhan incident (July 1967). Here we are at the peak of the movement, the army risks division, and the Far Left pushes its advantage, but only to succumb.
 - 6 The workers’ entering the universities (end of July 1968), which is in reality the final episode of the existence of independent student organizations.
 - 7 Mao’s cult of personality. This feature has so often been the object of sarcasms in the West that in the end we have forgotten to ask ourselves what meaning it might well have had and, in particular, what its meaning is within the Cultural Revolution, where the “cult” functioned as a flag, not for the party conservatives but for worker and student rebels.

The Decision in Sixteen Points

This text was adopted at a session of the Central Committee on August 8, 1966. With a certain genius it stages the fundamental contradiction of the endeavor called “Cultural Revolution.” One sign of this staging is, of course, the fact that the text does not explain, or barely explains, the name (“cultural”) of the ongoing political sequence, except for the enigmatic and metaphysical first sentence: “The Cultural Revolution seeks to change people in what is most profound.”⁵ Here, “cultural” is equivalent to “ideological,” in a particularly radical sense.

A whole side of the text is a pure and simple call for free revolt, in the great tradition of revolutionary legitimations.

The text is quite probably illegal, as the composition of the Central Com-

mittee was “corrected” by Mao’s group with the support of the army (or certain units loyal to Lin Biao). Revolutionary militants from the university are present, while conservative bureaucrats have been prevented from coming. In reality, and this is very important, this decision opens a long period of nonexistence both of the Central Committee and of the party’s secretariat. The important central texts from now on will be signed jointly by four institutions: the Central Committee, certainly, but which is now only a phantom; the “Cultural Revolution Group,” a highly restricted ad hoc group,⁶ which nonetheless disposes of the real political power properly speaking insofar as it is recognized by the rebels; the State Council, presided over by Zhou Enlai; and, finally, as the guarantee of a minimum of administrative continuity, the formidable Military Commission of the Central Committee, restructured by Lin Biao.

Certain passages of the circular are particularly virulent, on both the immediate revolutionary requirement and the need to oppose the party with new forms of organization.

On popular mobilization, we will cite in particular points 3 and 4, titled “Put Daring above Everything Else and Boldly Arouse the Masses” and “Let the Masses Educate Themselves in the Movement.” For example:

What the Central Committee of the party demands of the party committees at all levels is that they persevere in giving correct leadership, put daring above everything else, boldly arouse the masses, change the state of weakness and incompetence where it exists, encourage those comrades who have made mistakes but are willing to correct them to cast off their mental burdens and join in the struggle, and dismiss from their leading posts all those in authority who are taking the capitalist road and so make possible the recapture of the leadership for the proletarian revolutionaries.

Or also:

Trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative. Cast out fear. Do not be afraid of disturbances. Chairman Mao has often told us that revolution cannot be so very refined, so gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. Let the masses educate themselves in

this great revolutionary movement and learn to distinguish between right and wrong and between correct and incorrect ways of doing things.

One detail of point 7 is particularly important and will have immense practical consequences. Here it is:

No measure should be taken against students at universities, colleges, middle schools, and primary schools because of problems that arise in the movement.

Everybody in China understands that, at least for the period that is now beginning, the revolutionary youth in the cities is guaranteed a form of impunity. It is evident that this is what will allow the youth to spread through the country while carrying along the revolutionary spirit, in any case until September 1967.

On the forms of organization, point 9, titled “Cultural Revolutionary Groups, Committees, and Congresses,” sanctions the invention, within and by the movement, of multiple political regroupings outside the party:

Many new things have begun to emerge in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The cultural revolutionary groups, committees, and other organizational forms created by the masses in many schools and units are something new and of great historic importance.

These new organizations are not considered temporary, which proves that the Maoist group, in August of 1966, envisions the destruction of the political monopoly of the party:

Therefore, the cultural revolutionary groups, committees and congresses should not be temporary organizations but permanent, standing mass organizations.

In the end, we are clearly dealing with organizations that are subject to mass democracy, and not to party authority, as shown in the reference to the Paris Commune, that is, to a proletarian situation previous to the Leninist theory of the party:

It is necessary to institute a system of general elections, like that of the Paris Commune, for electing the members to the cultural revolutionary

groups and committees and delegates to the cultural revolutionary congresses. The lists of candidates should be put forward by the revolutionary masses after full discussion, and the elections should be held after the masses have discussed the lists over and over again.

If these members or delegates prove incompetent, they can be replaced through election or recalled by the masses after discussion.

However, if we read the text carefully, knowing what it means “to read a text” when it comes from the leadership of a communist party, we observe that, through crucial restrictions on the freedom of criticism, some kind of lock is put on the revolutionary impulse to which the text constantly appeals.

First of all, it is held, as if axiomatically, that in essence the party is good. Point 8 (“The Question of Cadres”) distinguishes four types of cadres, as put to the test of the Cultural Revolution (let us remember that in China, a “cadre” is anyone who dispenses authority, even if minimal): good, comparatively good, those who have made serious mistakes that can be fixed, and lastly “the small number of anti-Party and anti-socialist Rightists.” The thesis is then that “the two first categories (good and comparatively good) are the great majority.” That is, the state apparatus and its internal leadership (the party) are essentially in good hands, which renders paradoxical the recourse to such large-scale revolutionary methods.

Second, even if it is said that the masses must have the initiative, the explicit criticism by name of those responsible for the state or the party is in fact severely controlled “from above.” On this point, the hierarchical structure of the party makes a sudden comeback (point 11, “The Question of Criticizing by Name in the Press”):

Criticism of anyone by name in the press should be decided after discussion by the Party committee at the same level, and in some cases submitted to the Party committee at a higher level for approval.

The result of this directive will be that innumerable cadres of the party, to begin with the president of the republic, Liu Shaoqi, will be violently criticized for months, even years, by mass revolutionary organizations in the “small journals,” cartoons, mural posters, before their names appear in

the central press. But, at the same time, these criticisms will keep a local character, or be open to annulment. They will leave in the air what *decisions* correspond to them.

Point 15, “The Armed Forces,” finally, which is extremely succinct, raises a decisive question as if in a void: who has the authority over the repressive apparatus? Classically, Marxism indicates that a revolution must break down the repressive apparatus of the state it aims to transform from top to bottom. That is certainly not what is understood in this case:

In the armed forces, the Cultural Revolution and the socialist education movement should be carried out in accordance with the instructions of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Party and the General Political Department of the People’s Liberation Army.

Here again, the centralized authority of the party comes back.

Ultimately, the memo in sixteen points combines orientations that are still heterogeneous, and, also because of its warlike appeal, it prepares the successive impasses of the movement in its relation to the party-state. Of course, there is always the question of how to define, on the basis of the mass movement, a political way that would be different from the one imposed over the previous years by the principal current among the party leadership. But two essential questions remain unsolved: who designates the enemies, who sets the targets of revolutionary criticism? And what is, in this somber affair, the role of the considerable repressive apparatus: public security, militias, and army?

Red Guards and Chinese Society

Following on the heels of the August circular, the phenomenon of the “Red Guards,” organizations of the schooled youth, will take on an extraordinary magnitude. We know the gigantic meetings of Tiananmen, which carry on until the end of 1966, where Mao shows himself, mute, to hundreds of thousands of young men and women. But the most important aspect is that revolutionary organizations storm the cities, using trucks lent by the army, and then the rest of the country, taking advantage of the free train transportation under the program of “exchange of experiences.”

It is clear that what we have here is the battle force behind the movement's extension to all of China. Within this movement an absolutely amazing freedom reigns, tendencies openly confront each other, the journals, tracts, banners and never-ending mural posters multiply revelations of all kinds along with the political declarations. Fierce caricatures spare almost no one (in August of 1967, the questioning of Zhou Enlai in one of the great mural posters put up overnight will be one reason for the fall of the so-called ultra-leftist tendency). Processions with gongs, drums, inflamed proclamations go around until late at night.

On the other hand, the tendency toward militarization and the uncontrolled action by shock groups soon make their appearance. The general slogan speaks of a revolutionary fight against old ideas and old customs (that is what gives content to the adjective "cultural," which in Chinese means rather "pertaining to civilization" and, in old Marxist jargon, "belonging to the superstructure"). Many groups gave this slogan a destructive and violent, even persecutory, interpretation. The hunt against women wearing braids, against lettered intellectuals, against hesitant professors, against all the "cadres" who do not practice the same phraseology as such and such splinter group, the raiding of libraries or museums, the unbearable arrogance of small revolutionary chiefs with regard to the mass of the undecided, all that will soon provoke a genuine repulsion among ordinary people against the extremist wing of the Red Guards.

At bottom, the problem had already been raised in the communiqué of May 16, 1966, Mao's first public act of rebellion against the majority of the Central Committee. This communiqué bluntly declares the need to contend that "without destruction, there is no construction." It stigmatizes the conservatives, who preach the "constructive" spirit to oppose any destruction of the basis of their power. But the balance is hard to find between the evidence of destruction and the slow and tortuous character of construction.

The truth is that, armed only with the slogan of "the fight of the new against the old," many Red Guards gave in to a well-known (negative) tendency in revolutions: iconoclasm, the persecution of people for futile motives, a sort of assumed barbarism. This is also a bent of the youth left to its own devices. From this we will draw the conclusion that every political

organization must be transgenerational and that it is a bad idea to organize the political separation of the youth.

To be sure, the Red Guards did not in any way invent the anti-intellectual radicalism of the revolutionary spirit. At the moment of pronouncing the death sentence of the chemist Antoine Lavoisier during the French Revolution, the public accuser Antoine Quentin Fouquier-Tinville had this remarkable line to offer: “The republic has no need for scientists.” What happens is that a true revolution estimates that it itself has created everything it has need for, and we should respect this creative absolutism. In this regard the Cultural Revolution was a true revolution. On the question of science and technology, the fundamental slogan was that what matters is to be “red,” not to be an “expert.” Or, in the “moderate” version, which would become the official one: one must be “red and expert,” but red above all.

However, what made the barbarism of certain revolutionary shock groups considerably worse was the fact that there was never, on the scale of youth action, a global political space for political affirmation, for the positive creation of the new. The tasks of criticism and of destruction had a self-evidence to them that those of invention lacked all the more insofar as they remained tied to the unforgiving struggles going on at the top levels of the state.

The Shanghai Commune

The end of 1966 and the beginning of 1967 represent a strong moment of the Cultural Revolution with the massive and decisive appearance onstage of the factory workers. Shanghai plays a pilot role during this time of strength.

We should consider the paradox inherent in this appearance onstage of those who officially constitute the “leading class” of the Chinese state. This comes about, if I may say so, from the Right. In December 1966, indeed, it is the local bureaucrats, the conservative leadership of the party and the municipality, who use a working-class contingent—most notably the trade unionists—against the Maoist movement of the Red Guards. Not unlike the way, I might add, in which in France, in May 1968 and the years to follow, the PCF attempted to use the old guard of the CGT [Confédération générale du travail] against the revolutionary students who were allied with young workers. Taking advantage

of a changing situation, the bosses of the party and municipality of Shanghai launch the workers on the path of all kinds of sectorial demands of a purely economical nature, and in so doing set them up against any intervention coming from the young revolutionaries in the factories and in the administrations (just as in May 1968, the PCF put up a barricade around the factories with picket lines coming from its payroll and everywhere hunted down the “left-ists”). Carried out with much rudeness, these syndicalized movements become quite sizable, especially the strikes of the transportation and energy sectors, which seek to foster an atmosphere of chaos so that the party bosses can present themselves as the saviors of order. For all these reasons, the revolutionary minority will be forced to intervene against the bureaucratized strikes and to oppose the “economism” and the demand for “material incentives” with an austere campaign in favor of communist work and, above all, for the primacy of global political consciousness over and above particular demands. This will be the terrain for the great slogan supported in particular by Lin Biao: “Fight against egoism and criticize revisionism” (we know that “revisionist” for the Maoists designates the line of abandonment of all revolutionary dynamics followed by the USSR, by the communist parties that depend on it, and by a large number of cadres from the Chinese party).

In the beginning, the Maoist workers’ group is rather weak. There is talk of four thousand workers by the end of 1966. It is true that this group will link itself to the Red Guards and constitute an activist minority. But this does not take away the fact that its field of action in the factories, properly speaking, is not very large, except in certain places such as the factory of machine tools where it will be the glory and serve as an example invoked by revolutionaries for several years. In my eyes, it is indeed because the direct action of the workers in the factories comes up against very lively resistances (the bureaucracy has its stronghold there) that the Maoist activists will begin to deploy themselves on the scale of an urban power. With aid from a segment of the cadres who have been loyal to Mao for a long time, as well from a fraction of the army, they will destitute the municipality and the local party committee. Hence what will be called the “seizure of power,” which under the name of the “Shanghai Commune” will mark a turning point in the Cultural Revolution.

This “seizure of power” is immediately paradoxical. On the one hand,

like the memo of sixteen points before, it finds inspiration in a complete countermodel of the party-state: the coalition of the most variegated organizations that constituted the Paris Commune and whose ineffective anarchy had already been criticized by Marx. On the other hand, this countermodel has no possibility of national development, in the extent to which, on the national level, the figure of the party remains the only one allowed, even if a number of its traditional elements are in crisis. All throughout the tumultuous episodes of the revolution, Zhou Enlai has remained the guarantee of the unity of the state and of a minimum level of functionality of the administration. As far as we know, he was never disavowed by Mao in this task, which forced him to navigate as closely as possible, including as closely as possible to the right-wing elements (it is he who will put back in the saddle Deng Xiaoping, “the second highest in power of those who, despite being in the party, are taking the capitalist road,” to use the phrase of the revolution, and this from the middle of the 1970s onward). Zhou Enlai, though, made it very clear to the Red Guards that if the “exchanges of experience” in the entire country were admissible, no revolutionary organization of national importance could be allowed.

Thus the Shanghai Commune, constituted after endless discussions from local student and worker organizations, can obtain only a fragile unity. Here again, if the gesture is fundamental (the “seizure of power” by the revolutionaries), its political space is too narrow. As a result, the entrance onto the scene of the workers marks both and at the same time a spectacular broadening of the revolutionary mass base, a gigantic and sometimes violent putting to the test of bureaucratized forms of power, and the short-lived outline of a new articulation between the popular political initiative and the power of the state.

The Power Seizures

During the first months of 1967, following the lesson of the events in Shanghai where the revolutionaries have overthrown the anti-Maoist municipality, we will see the “seizures of power” proliferate throughout the country. There is a striking material aspect to this movement: the revolutionaries, organized in small splinter and battle groups essentially made up of students

and workers, invade all kinds of administrative offices, including those of the municipalities or the party, and, generally in a Dionysian confusion that is not without violence and destruction, they install a new “power” in them. Frequently, the old guards who detain the power are “shown to the masses,” which is not a peaceful ceremony. The bureaucrat, or the presumed bureaucrat, wears a donkey’s hat and a sign describing his crimes; he must lower his head, and receive some kicks, or worse. These exorcisms are otherwise well-known revolutionary practices. It is a matter of letting the gathering of ordinary people know that the old untouchables, those whose insolence was silently accepted, from now on are themselves given over to public humiliation. After their victory in 1949, the Chinese communists organized ceremonies of this kind everywhere in the countryside, in order morally to destitute the old large landowners, the “local despots and evil tyrants,” making it known to the smallest Chinese peasants, who for centuries counted for nothing, that the world had “changed its base” and that from now on they were taken to be the true masters of the country.

However, we should pay attention to the fact that, from February onward, the “commune” disappears as the term with which to designate the new local powers, only to be replaced by the expression “revolutionary committee.” This change is certainly not insignificant, because “committee” has always been the name for the provincial or municipal party organs. We will thus see a vast movement to install new “revolutionary committees” in all of the provinces. And it is not at all clear if these reduplicate, or else purely and simply replace, the old and dreaded “party committees.”

In fact, the ambiguity of the name designates the committee as the impure product of the political conflict. For the local revolutionaries, it is a matter of substituting a different political power for the party, after the nearly complete elimination of the old leading cadres. For the conservatives, who defend themselves at every step, it is a matter of putting back in place the local cadres after the mere fiction of a critique. They are encouraged along this path by the repeated declarations from the Central Committee about the good nature of the vast majority of party cadres. For the Maoist national leadership, concentrated in the very small “Central Committee’s Cultural Revolution Group,” a dozen persons, it is a matter of defining the stakes for the revolutionary organizations (the “seizing of power”) and to

inspire a lasting fear in their adversaries, all the while preserving the general frame for the exercise of power, which remains in their eyes the party and the party alone.

The formulas that are gradually put forward will privilege unity. There will be talk of “triple combination,” which means: to unify in the committees one-third of newly arrived revolutionaries, one-third of old cadres having accomplished their self-criticism, and one-third of military personnel. There will be talk of “great alliance,” meaning that locally the revolutionary organizations are asked to unite among themselves and to stop the confrontations (sometimes armed ones). This unity in fact implies a growing amount of coercion, including with regard to the content of the discussions, as well as an increasingly severe limitation of the right to organize freely around one initiative or conviction or another. But how could it be otherwise, except by letting the situation drift off into civil war, and by leaving the outcome in the hands of the repressive apparatus? This debate will occupy almost the entire year of 1967, which in all regards is clearly a decisive year.

The Wuhan Incident

This episode from the summer of 1967 is particularly interesting, because it presents all the contradictions of a revolutionary situation at its culminating point, which of course coincides with the moment that announces its involution.

In July 1967, with the support of the conservative military, the counter-revolution of the bureaucrats dominates the enormous industrial city of Wuhan, which counts with no less than 500,000 workers. The effective power is held by an army officer, Chen Zaidao. True, there are still two workers’ organizations who confront each other, causing dozens of casualties during the months of May and June. The first organization, with de facto support from the army, is called the “One Million Heroes” and is tied to the local cadres and to the old syndicalists. The second, a tiny minority, is called “Steel” and embodies the line of Maoism.

The central leadership, worried about the reactionary control over the city, sends its minister for Public Security to go on-site together with a very famous member of the Central Committee’s Cultural Revolution Group

named Wang Li. The latter is extremely popular among the Red Guards, because he is known for his outspoken “leftist” tendencies. He has already claimed that there was a need to purge the army. The envoy carries a message from Zhou Enlai, ordering the support for the Steel rebel group, in conformity with the directive addressed to the cadres in general and to the military in particular: “Excel in discerning and supporting the proletarian Left within the movement.” Let us add in passing that Zhou Enlai has taken on himself the excruciating task of serving as arbiter between the factions, between the dueling revolutionary organizations, and that, in order to do so, he receives day and night the visit of delegates from the province. He is thus largely responsible for the progress made by the “great alliance,” for the unification of the “revolutionary committees,” as well as for the discernment of what constitutes “the proletarian Left” in these concrete situations, which are becoming more and more confused and violent.

The day of their arrival, the delegates from the Center hold a big meeting with the rebel organizations in a city stadium. The revolutionary exaltation is reaching its high point.

We can see how all the actors from the active stage of the revolution are well in place: the conservative cadres and their capacity for mobilization, which is not to be underestimated, first in the countryside (the militias coming from the rural suburbs will participate in the repression against the Red Guards and the rebels after the turning point of 1968), but also among the workers, and of course within the administration; the rebel organizations, formed by students and workers, who count on their activism, their courage, and the support of the central Maoist group in order to gain the upper hand, even though they are often in the minority; the army, forced to choose sides; and the central power, trying hard to adjust its politics to the situations at hand.

In some cities, the situation that binds these actors together is extremely violent. In Canton, in particular, no day goes by without confrontations between the armed shock groups from dueling organizations. The army decides locally to wash its hands in innocence. Hiding behind the pretext that the circular of sixteen points says that one should not intervene in problems that come up during the course of the movement, the local military chief merely demands that before engaging in a street battle, one signs

before him a “declaration of revolutionary brawl.” Only the use of backup troops is prohibited. The result is that, in Canton as well, there are dozens of deaths every day throughout the summer.

In this context, the situation is about to turn sour in Wuhan. On the morning of July 20, the shock troops of One Million Heroes, supported by units from the army, occupy the strategic points and launch a witch hunt for the rebels throughout the city. An attack hits the hotel where the delegates from the central power reside. One military unit catches hold of Wang Li together with a few Red Guards and brutally beats them up. The irony of the situation: now it is the turn of the “leftist” to be “shown to the masses,” with a sign around his neck stigmatizing him as “revisionist,” he who had seen revisionists everywhere! The minister for public security is locked up in his room. The university and the steel foundries, which had been the epicenter of the rebellious tendency, are taken by force by armed groups protected with tanks. However, when the news begins to spread, other units of the army take sides against the conservatives and their leader, Chen Zaidao. The Steel organization mounts a counterattack. The revolutionary committee is put under arrest. A few military units manage to free Wang Li, who will leave the city by running through the woods and wastelands.

We are clearly on the verge of civil war. It will take the cold-bloodedness of the central power, as well as the firm declarations coming from numerous army units in all the provinces, to change the course of events.

Which lessons for the future can we draw from this kind of episode? In a first moment, Wang Li, his face all swollen up, is welcomed as a hero in Beijing. Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife and a great rebel leader, gives him warm accolades. On July 25, 1 million people show him their support in the presence of Lin Biao. The ultraleft tendency, which believes in its good fortune, demands a radical purging of the army. This is also the moment when, in August, posters everywhere denounce Zhou Enlai as rightist.

But all this has only the appearance of an instant. True, in Wuhan, support for the rebel groups becomes mandatory, and Chen Zaidao will be replaced. But, two months later, it is Wang Li who will be brutally eliminated from the leaders’ group, there will be no significant purging of the army, the importance of Zhou Enlai will only continue to grow, and the

return to order will begin to make itself felt against the Red Guards and certain rebellious worker organizations.

What now becomes evident is the fundamental role of the popular army as a pillar in the Chinese party-state. The army has been given a stabilizing role in the revolution, having been asked to support the rebel Left, but there is no expectation or any tolerance for its division, which would open the perspective of civil war on a large scale. Those who desire to go to such end will all little by little be eliminated. And the fact of having made a pact with these elements will cast a stubborn suspicion on Jiang Qing herself, including, it seems, on the part of Mao.

What happens is that, at this stage of the Cultural Revolution, Mao wishes that unity prevail among the ranks of the rebels, particularly among the workers, and he begins to fear the enormous damage done by the spirit of factionalism and arrogance among the Red Guards. In September 1967, after a tour in the province, he launches the slogan “nothing essential divides the working class,” which, for those who know how to read, means first of all that there are violent troubles between the rebellious and conservative organizations, and, second, that it is imperative to put an end to these disturbances, to disarm the organizations, and to return the legal monopoly of violence, as well as its political stability, to the repressive apparatus. Starting in July, all the while giving proof of his usual fighter’s spirit and rebelliousness (he still says, with visible delight, that “the whole country is up in riots” and that “to fight, even violently, is a good thing; once the contradictions appear in plain daylight, it is easier to solve them”), Mao worries about the war of factions and declares that “when the revolutionary committees are formed, the petit bourgeois revolutionaries must be given the correct leadership”; he stigmatizes leftism, which “in fact is a form of rightism”; and, above all, he shows his impatience for the fact that, since January with the takeover of power in Shanghai, “the bourgeois and petit bourgeois ideology that was rampant among the intellectuals and the young students has ruined the situation.”

The Workers Enter the Universities

By February 1968, after the movement’s involution at the end of the summer of 1967, the conservatives think that their time for revenge has come. Mao

and his gang, however, are still on alert. They launch a campaign stigmatizing the “February countercurrent,” and they renew their support for the revolutionary groups and the construction of new organs of power.

In the meantime, the universities can no longer be kept under the yoke of dueling splinter groups, given the general logic of a return to order and the perspective of an upcoming party congress charged with drawing up a balance sheet of the revolution (in fact, this congress will be held in the beginning of 1969, confirming the power of Lin Biao and the military). An example must be set, all the while avoiding the crushing pure and simple of the last Red Guards, concentrated in the buildings of the University of Beijing. The adopted solution is totally extraordinary: thousands of organized workers are called on in order without any weapons to occupy the university, to disarm the factions, and directly to assure their authority. As the leaders’ group would say later on: “The working class must lead in every aspect,” and “the workers will stay for a long time, and even forever, in the universities.” This episode is one of the most astonishing ones of the entire period, because it renders visible the need for the violent and anarchic youth force to recognize a “mass-based” authority higher than itself and not only, nor even principally, the institutional authority of the recognized leaders. The moment is all the more surprising and dramatic insofar as certain students open fire against the workers, there will be deaths, and in the end Mao and all the leaders of the Maoist group will gather with the best-known student leaders, most notably Kuai Dafu, the venerated head of the Red Guards in the university of Beijing, and renowned nationwide. There exists a retranscription of this head-to-head meeting between the stubborn revolutionary youths and the old guard.⁷ We can see Mao express his profound disappointment caused by the spirit of factionalism among the youth, together with a remnant of political friendship for them, and the will to find a way out. We can clearly see that Mao, by bringing in the workers, wanted to avoid the situation turning into one of “military control.” He wanted to protect those who had been his initial allies and had been the carriers of enthusiasm and political innovation. But Mao is also a man of the party-state. He wants its renovation, even a violent one, but not its destruction. He knows full well in the end that by subjecting the last outpost of young revolting “leftists,” he liquidates the last margin left to anything that is not in line (in 1968) with

the recognized leadership of the Cultural Revolution: a line of party reconstruction. He knows it, but he is resigned. Because he holds no alternative hypothesis—nobody does—as to the existence of the state, and because the large majority of people, after two exalted but very trying years, want the state to exist and to make its existence known, if needed with rude force.

The Cult of Personality

We know that the cult of Mao has taken truly extraordinary forms during the Cultural Revolution. There were not only the giant statues, *The Little Red Book*, the constant invocation, in any circumstance, of the Chairman, the hymns for the “Great Helmsman,” but there was also a widespread and unprecedented one-sidedness to the references, as though Mao’s writings and speeches could suffice for all occasions, even when it is a question of growing tomatoes or deciding the use (or not) of a piano in symphonic orchestras.⁸ It is striking to see that the most violent rebel groups, those who break the most with the bureaucratic order, are also the ones who push this aspect of the situation the furthest. In particular, they are the ones who launched the formula of “the absolute authority of Mao Zedong thought” and who declared the need to submit oneself to this thought even without understanding it. Such statements, we must confess, are purely and simply obscurantist.

We should add that, since all the factions and organizations that are at loggerheads with each other claim Mao’s thought for them, the expression, which is capable of designating orientations that are totally contradictory, ends up losing all meaningfulness, except for an overly abundant use of citations of which the exegesis is in a state of constant flux.

I would nonetheless like to make a few remarks in passing. On the one hand, this kind of devotion, as well as the conflict of interpretations, are totally commonplace in established religions, including among us, without their being considered a pathology, quite the contrary—the great monotheisms remain sacred cows in this regard. In comparison with the services rendered to our countries by any of the characters, whether fictive or ecclesiastical, in the recent history of these monotheisms, though, Mao has certainly been of an infinitely greater service to his people, whom he liberated

simultaneously from the Japanese invasion, from the rampant colonialism of “Western” powers, from the feudalism in the countryside, and from pre-capitalist looting. On the other hand, the sacralization, even in terms of the biography, of great artists is also a recurring feature of our “cultural” practice. We give importance to the dry-cleaning bills of this or that poet. If politics is, as I think, a procedure of truth, just as poetry indeed can be one, then it is neither more nor less inept to sacralize political creators than it is to sacralize artistic creators. Perhaps less so, all things considered, because political creation is probably rarer, certainly more risky, and it is more immediately addressed to all, and in a singular way to all those—like the Chinese peasants and workers before 1949—whom the powers that be generally consider to be nonexistent.

All this by no means frees us from the obligation to illuminate the peculiar phenomenon of the political cult, which is an invariant feature of communist states and parties, brought to the point of paroxysm in the Cultural Revolution.

From a general point of view, the “cult of personality” is tied to the thesis according to which the party, as representative of the working class, is the hegemonic source of politics, the mandatory guardian of the correct line. As it was said in the thirties, “the party is always right.” The problem is that nothing can come and guarantee such a representation, nor such a hyperbolic certainty as to the source of rationality. By way of a substitute for such a guarantee, it thus becomes crucial for there to be a *representation of the representation*, one that would be a singularity, legitimated precisely by its singularity alone. Finally, one person, a single body, comes to stand for this superior guarantee, in the classical aesthetic form of genius. It is also curious, by the way, to see that, trained as we are in the theory of genius in the realm of art, we should take such strong offense at it when it emerges in the order of politics. For the communist parties, between the twenties and sixties, personal genius is only the incarnation, the fixed point, of the doubtful representative capacity of the party. It is easier to believe in the rectitude and the intellectual force of a distant and solitary man than in the truth and purity of an apparatus whose local petty chiefs are well known.

In China the question is even more complicated. Indeed, during the Cultural Revolution, Mao incarnates not so much the party’s representa-

tive capacity as that which discerns and struggles against the threatening “revisionism” within the party itself. He is the one who says, or lets it be said in his name, that the bourgeoisie is politically active within the Communist Party. He is also the one who encourages the rebels, who spreads the slogan “it is just to revolt” and encourages troubles, at the very moment when he is being canonized as the party’s chairman. In this regard, there are moments when for the revolutionary masses he is less the guarantee of the really existing party than the incarnation, all by himself, of a proletarian party that is still to come. He is somewhat like a revenge of singularity on representation.

Ultimately, we should maintain that “Mao” is a name that is intrinsically contradictory in the field of revolutionary politics. On the one hand, it is the supreme name of the party-state, its undeniable chairman, he who, as military leader and founder of the regime, holds the historical legitimacy of the Communist Party. On the other hand, “Mao” is the name of that which, in the party, cannot be reduced to the state’s bureaucracy. This is obviously the case in terms of the calls to revolt sent out to the youth and the workers. But it is also true within the structure of legitimacy of the party itself. Indeed, it is often by way of decisions that temporarily are minoritarian, or even dissident, that Mao has assured the continuation of this utterly unique political experience of the Chinese communists between 1920 and the moment of victory in the forties (suspicion with regard to the Soviet counselors, abandonment of the model of insurrection, “encirclement of the cities by the countryside,” absolute priority to the mass line, etc.). In all aspects, “Mao” is the name of a paradox: the rebel in power, the dialectician put to the test by the continuing needs of “development,” the emblem of the party-state in search of its overcoming, the military chief preaching disobedience to the authorities. . . .⁹ This is what has given to his “cult” a frenetic appearance, because subjectively he accumulated the accord given to the stately pomp of the Stalinist type, together with the enthusiasm of the entire revolutionary youth for the old rebel who cannot be satisfied by the existing state of affairs and who wants to move on in the march to real communism. “Mao” was the name for the “construction of socialism” but also for its destruction.

In the end, the Cultural Revolution, even in its very impasse, bears witness to the impossibility truly and globally to free politics from the framework

of the party-state that imprisons it. It marks an irreplaceable experience of saturation, because a violent will to find a new political path, to relaunch the revolution, and to find new forms of the workers' struggle under the formal conditions of socialism ended in failure when confronted with the necessary maintenance, for reasons of public order and the refusal of civil war, of the general frame of the party-state.

We know today that all emancipatory politics must put an end to the model of the party, or of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics "without party," and yet at the same time without lapsing in the figure of anarchism, which has never been anything else than the vain critique, or the double, or the shadow, of the communist parties, just as the black flag is only the double or the shadow of the red flag.

However, our debt to the Cultural Revolution remains enormous. Because, tied to this grandiose and courageous saturation of the motif of the party, as the contemporary of what clearly appears today as the last revolution that was still attached to the motif of classes and of the class struggle, our Maoism will have been the experience and the name of a capital transition. And without this transition, or there where nobody is loyal to it, there is nothing.

A Brief Chronology of the Cultural Revolution

1. Recent Prehistory (from "One Hundred Flowers" to "the Black Gang")

- a. Campaign "Let a hundred flowers blossom" (1956). In June 1957 the campaign becomes a violent denunciation and persecution of "rightist intellectuals," often qualified later on as "evil geniuses." The launching of the "Great Leap Forward" in May 1958, and in August 1958, of the "popular communes." In August 1959, destitution of Peng Dehuai (defense minister) who criticizes the movement of collectivization. Lin Biao succeeds him.
- b. Starting in 1961, the recognition of a disastrous outcome of economical voluntarism. The Central Committee decides to "readjust" the objectives. Liu Shaoqi replaces Mao Zedong as president of the republic. Between 1962 and 1966, 15 million copies are sold in China of Liu's works, against 6 million of Mao's. Publication of the historical piece by Wu Han (vice mayor of

Peking), *The Destitution of Hai Rui* (an indirect criticism of the destitution of Peng Dehuai). In September 1965, at a conference of the Politburo, Mao demands but does not obtain the condemnation of Wu Han. He retires to Shanghai.

2. The Opening (from the article by Yao Wenyan to the Decision in Sixteen Points)

a. In collaboration with Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, Yao Wenyan publishes a violent article in Shanghai against Wu Han. Aim is taken against the mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen, held to be the chief of the "black gang." In January and February 1966, a first "Group of the Central Committee for the Cultural Revolution" is formed to judge the case, paradoxically put under the authority of Peng Zhen. This group (called "the Group of Five") disseminates the "February Theses," which are quite insignificant and which tend to limit criticism.

b. Meanwhile, another group is constituted in Shanghai, under the aegis of Lin Biao and Jiang Qing, which holds a "discussion on the literary and artistic activities in the army." The texts are transmitted to the Military Commission of the Central Committee (organ of the highest importance). The division of the party seems consummated.

c. In May 1966, "enlarged" meeting of the Politburo. Nomination of a new Central Committee's Cultural Revolution Group, and vehement condemnation of the group of Peng Zhen in a fundamental document for all subsequent events, known as the "May 16 Circular." It is necessary, the text says, "to criticize the representatives of the bourgeoisie infiltrated in the party, the government, the army and the cultural milieus." By May 25, seven students of Beida University attack the president of the university in a large-character poster. True beginning of the student mobilization.

d. Mao leaves Beijing. The authorities send "work groups" to the universities in order to control the movement. Between the end of May and the end of July, the so-called fifty days period, in which the brutal containment by these "work groups" is predominant.

e. On July 18 Mao returns to Beijing. Abolition of the work groups. From August 1 until August 12, a session of the "enlarged" Central Committee

is held. It is not according to the rules. Lin Biao uses the army to prohibit the presence of regular members and to allow the presence of revolutionaries who come from the student world. The Maoist line in these conditions obtains a brief majority. Mao publicly supports the poster of Beida University. He appears before the crowd on July 9. Political charter of the revolution: the “decision in sixteen points.” It reads in particular: “In the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the only method is for the masses to liberate themselves, and any method of doing things in their stead must not be used.” That is, there will be no repression of the initiatives coming from the student groups.

3. The “Red Guards” Period

- a. By August 20, arriving from high school and university institutions, activist groups of “Red Guards” spread out in the city, in order to “destroy completely the old thought, culture, customs and habits.” In particular, a very harsh persecution of intellectuals and professors, once more considered, including coming from Mao’s own mouth, as “evil geniuses.” Succession of immense gatherings of Red Guards in Beijing, following in particular the right given to them to circulate freely in the trains, for the sake of “large exchanges of experience.” Criticism of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping in posters, tracts, cartoons, small newspapers . . .
- b. Starting in November, first political incidents tied to the intervention of the Red Guards in the places of production. The anti-Maoists use the official unions and certain peasant militias against the revolutionaries, who themselves begin to be divided into splinter groups (“factionalism”). Violence here and there.

4. The Entry of the Workers and the “Power Seizures”

- a. The authorities in place in Shanghai provoke disturbances by encouraging all kinds of “economist” demands in the workers’ milieu. Particularly acute problem: the salary of temporary peasants-workers, and the question of bonuses. Transportation strike, and hunt against the student groups. In January 1967, a set of Red Guards and of “rebel revolutionaries,” who have

formed “factory committees” by occupying the administrative offices, the means of communication, etc. They overthrow the party committee and decide to form the “Shanghai Commune.” Endless negotiations among the groups. Domination of the workers’ groups and still a very limited presence of the old cadres of the army and state.

b. The “power seizures” become generalized in the entire country starting in February 1967. Great disorder in the state and the economy. The very unequal politicization explains why the putting into place of new organs of power is anarchic and precarious. Tendency to destitute and “judge” all the old cadres, or conversely, manipulation by the cadres of “revolutionary” groups that are more or less fake. Settling of accounts mixed in with revolutionary zeal.

c. The central authority is then concentrated in the group of the Central Committee’s Cultural Revolution Group, on the one hand, the State Council, led by Zhou Enlai, on the other, and finally the Military Commission, controlled by Lin Biao. It is this authority that decides on a formula for the new powers, called “triple combination”: one-third of representatives from the “revolutionary masses,” one-third of party cadres who have withstood the test or corrected themselves, and one-third of military personnel. The revolutionary “mass” organization must first unite among them (the “great alliance”). The name of the new organ is: “Revolutionary Three-in-One Combination Committee.” The first provincial committee of this kind is formed on February 13 (in the province of Kweichow).

5. Disturbances, Violence, and Splits of All Kinds

a. At the same time that the critique of Liu Shaoqi begins in the official press (still without mentioning his name), disorder spreads everywhere. Numerous incidents of violence, including armed ones, oppose either the Maoists to the conservatives, the security and armed forces alternately to the former and to the latter, or else, finally, the Maoist groups among themselves. The mass organizations split up very frequently. The revolutionary leadership also divides itself. One tendency aims to unify the revolutionary organizations as quickly as possible, and everywhere to put into place committees that would give due space to the old cadres. In fact, this tendency quickly

seeks to reconstruct the party. Zhou Enlai, who, it is true, is in charge of the maintenance of the elementary functions of the state, is the most active figure in this direction. Another tendency wants to eliminate a very large number of cadres and to expand the purge to the administration, including the army. Its best-known representatives are Wang Li and Qi Benyu.

b. In July the Wuhan incident puts the region and, finally, the whole country, in a climate of civil war. The army in this city openly protects the traditional cadres and the workers' organizations that are tied to them. Wang Li, sent on an envoy by the central authority, which seeks to support the "rebels," is locked up and beaten. It is necessary for external military forces to intervene. The unity of the army is thus threatened.

c. Appearance of the posters against Zhou Enlai. During all of August, moments of anarchic violence, particularly in Canton. Weapon depots are sacked. Dozens of people die every day. The British Embassy is set on fire in Beijing.

6. The Beginning of the Return to Order and the End of the Revolution, Properly Speaking

a. In September 1967 Mao, after a tour in the provinces, decides in favor of the "reconstructive" line. Fundamentally, he supports Zhou Enlai and gives the army an extended role (there where the factions do not manage to reach an agreement, there will be "military control"). The extreme-Left group (Wang Li) is eliminated from the central organs of power. "Study sessions of Mao Zedong thought" are organized for everyone, often under the aegis of the military. Slogans: "Support the Left, and not the factions," based on a statement included in Mao's report: "Nothing essential divides the working class."

b. In many places, this rectification is practiced by way of a violent repression of the Red Guards, and even of the rebel workers, and as an occasion for political revenge (this is the February countercurrent). As a result, Mao calls once again for action by the end of March 1968: it is necessary to defend the revolutionary committees and to fear neither disturbances nor factionalism.

c. However, this is the last "mass" brawl. The central authority decides to put an end to the last bastions of the student revolt, which are abandoned to

the often bloody wars among splinter groups, all the while avoiding, at least in Beijing, direct military control. Detachments of workers are sent into the universities. The central group of the Cultural Revolution receives the most famous “leftist” students, who have physically resisted the entry of these workers. It turns out to be a dialogue of the deaf (the most notorious “rebel” student, Kuai Dafu, will be arrested).

d. The directive “the working class must be in command in everything” seals the end of the Red Guards and of the revolutionary rebels and, in the name of “struggle, criticism, reform,” opens a phase devoted to the reconstruction of the party. A huge number of young revolutionaries are sent to the countryside or to faraway camps.

7. Marking the Aftermath

a. The Ninth Congress of the party, in April 1969, ratifies an authoritarian return to order, largely structured by the army (45 percent of the members of the Central Committee) under the direction of Lin Biao.

b. This militarist period, which is terribly oppressive, leads to new violent confrontations in the midst of the party. Lin Biao is eliminated (probably assassinated) in 1971.

c. Until Mao’s death, a long and complex period, marked by the endless conflict between Deng Xiaoping and many old cadres who have returned to business under the protection of Zhou Enlai, on the one hand, and, on the other, the “Gang of Four,” which embodies the memory of the Cultural Revolution (Yao Wenyuan, Zhang Chunqiao, Jiang Qing, and Wang Hongwen).

d. Right after the death of Mao, in 1976, the four are arrested. Deng takes over power for a long period, which is indeed largely defined by the implantation of capitalist methods (during the Cultural Revolution, he was called “the second highest among the officials who, despite being of the party, have taken the capitalist road”), with the maintenance of the party-state.

Translated by Bruno Bosteels

Notes

Presentation by Alain Badiou, the second one in the series of Rouge-Gorge, in February 2002, at the Maison des Ecrivains in Paris. The blurb for this series, printed in the back of each booklet, reads as follows: “This cycle of lectures, proposed by the Political Organization, is meant to clarify the links between history and politics at the moment when a new century begins. Here, in light of this question, a variety of fundamental episodes in the historicity of politics will be examined. For example, the Russian Revolution, the Resistance, the Cultural Revolution, May 1968. . . . In each case it will be a matter of doing justice to the singularity of the events, all the while retaining, in thought, whatever light they shed on politics, on the history of its forms, its creations, and thus on what it is that we have to do and think, now.”—Trans.

- 1 Sylvain Lazarus, *Anthropologie du nom* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 37.
- 2 On the party-state or parties-state as central figures of politics in the twentieth century, one should read the previous conference in the series of Rouge-Gorge, *Les régimes du siècle*, presented by Sylvain Lazarus (2001).
- 3 The book that gives an idea of the general style of the official or “critical” versions (for once, these strangely agree) of the Cultural Revolution is the one by Simon Leys, *The Chairman’s New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, trans. Carol Appleyard and Patrick Goode (London: Allison and Busby, 1981).
- 4 With regard to these episodes, and more generally the principal facts of the period, see the chronology included at the end of this essay.
- 5 Badiou, as is often the case, does not give textual references here but they appear elsewhere in his work; when dealing with the Cultural Revolution, he tends to quote from the French translations included in *La grande révolution culturelle prolétarienne: Recueil de documents importants* (Beijing: Editions en langues étrangères, 1970). In English, the first sentence of the sixteen points reads: “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution now unfolding is a great revolution that touches people to their very souls and constitutes a new stage in the development of the socialist revolution in our country, a stage which is both broader and deeper” (*The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, ed. K. H. Fan [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968], 162). All subsequent quotations in the text are from Fan’s English-language edition.—Trans.
- 6 Until September 1967, the leading Maoist group was composed of a dozen persons: Mao, Lin Biao, Chen Boda, Jiang Qing, Yao Wenyuan, Zhou Enlai, Kang Sheng, Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Li, Guan Feng, Lin Jie, Qi Benyu. Chen Yi, an old Center-Right veteran and courageous humorist, is said to have asked: “That’s it, the great Chinese Communist Party? Twelve persons?” We could nonetheless observe that the leading group of the Committee of Public Safety between 1792 and 1794 was even far more restricted. Revolutions combine gigantic mass phenomena with an often very restricted political leadership.

- 7 The account has been translated and amply commented on (in Italian) by Sandro Russo, without a doubt the most competent and loyal analyst today of all things regarding the Cultural Revolution.
- 8 The examples are real and have given way to articles translated into French in the magazine *Pékin Informations*. There we learn how the Maoist dialectic allows one to grow tomatoes, or how to find the right line in terms of the use of the piano in symphonic music in China. Besides, these texts are totally interesting, and even convincing, not because of their explicit content but in terms of what it means to attempt to create an other thinking entirely.
- 9 About Mao as paradox, one should read the very beautiful book by Henry Bauchau, *Essai sur la vie de Mao Tsé-toung* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982).