

The Triumphant Restoration

Alain Badiou

So it is that Deng Xiaoping, this Louis XVIII of all the bureaucrats whom the Cultural Revolution had turned into internal political émigrés, wants to signal his restoration with a great “trial,” where history will be made to appear before a handful of obedient judges.

Like the Moscow trials, of which they represent the farcical imitation that follows in the wake of tragedy, the Peking trials aim to turn a revolution and potent political confrontations into a juridical and police matter that concerns only a few supposed common law “criminals.”

Yet these trials retain from the Maoist heritage the following difference: the accused do not give up. That is the trace, in this miserable rewriting of the storm of the revolution, of the force of the storm itself.

The attempt to judge ten years of upheavals centered on essential questions—truth be told, around *the* question: must we, and can we, march

toward communism?—through a settling of accounts in which the vanquished of politics are captured by the fiction of being mere guilty individuals, this attempt is neither new nor glorious. Did not the official France of the restorations, for at least a century, present Robespierre as a “brigand”? Did it not sum up five years of the Revolution, an unprecedented historical rupture, in the personal “malevolence” of a “guillotiner”?

Of course, like every other revolution, the Cultural Revolution combined the exceptional with the worst; it witnessed dramatic reversals, tortuous maneuvers, obscure confrontations, major repressions. All of this matching the scale of an unprecedented endeavor: to block the process of emergence of a bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the process that has turned the USSR into an aggressive empire managed by state profiteers.

Behind the enormous confusion about its various stages, the lines of force of the Cultural Revolution, the entrance on the stage of tens of millions of actors, and the blockage of its goal, all bear on what is essential: the reduction of the gap between intellectual and manual labor, between town and country; the subordination of the productive impetus to the institution of new social relations; the end of university elitism; the reduction of the insolence of cadres; the end of wage systems of inequality and stratification; the ideological opposition to the degenerate “Marxism” that rules in Moscow and in the “communist” parties pledging allegiance to it, and so on.

The Failure of the Revolutionary Endeavor

The objection according to which the storm of the Cultural Revolution also juxtaposed the persons of different political leaders is extremely meager. Always and everywhere, in the final analysis, major political conflicts are embodied in men and women.

The ones who pretend to see in the Cultural Revolution nothing but a “rivalry of bureaucrats” are the same ones who are most eager to show that what Deng Xiaoping says and does is opposed point by point to the Maoist line. Most often, it is true, it is in order to then rejoice in “demaiozation.” . . .

The politics of Deng, the politics of Coca-Cola, of the omnipotence of factory directors, of productivity incentives, of the reduction of education to exams, and of the suppression of the rights to strike and to post one’s griev-

ances provide the rigorous proof that what the revolt rose up against did indeed exist and that the Cultural Revolution did not err when it came to identifying its adversaries.

The revolutionary endeavor has failed. It has come up against the question of the party, the contradictory place in which the old and the new coexist in an ambiguous relationship to the state, to privileges and to the new bourgeoisies begotten by the so-called socialist societies, societies built on positions of power.

The Thermidor that has followed the death of Mao provides a career opportunity for the avengers of the cultural counterrevolution. The “trials” now taking place indicate what these avengers are capable of, in their zeal to organize the cowardly appeasement of lost epochs and to stage their triumph in the basest forms authorized by the control they exercise over the state apparatus.

For us, the Cultural Revolution remains the obligatory historical reference for whoever holds fast to the communist project, in the conditions offered by our time: conditions that are fixed by the necessary Marxist assessment of this monster that the October revolution—through an inversion whose political laws need to be investigated—ended up engendering.

The tribunal of history is certainly not the tribunal that is currently in session in Peking. They wish to tell us that the Chinese revolution is finally over. It is possible that this is temporarily true. But just as after the Paris Commune, which too was terminated, defeated by the appearance of the trials of Versailles, our heritage consists of the universal that was borne by the Cultural Revolution. Positively, in what concerns the requirements of the march toward communism. Negatively, in what concerns the question, which requires to be rethought and recast, of the type of communist party—a post-Leninist party—that this march demands.

Compared with this, the “trials” of Peking are nothing but the delayed spectacles that those who profit from the temporary arrest of a people give themselves—the simulacra of their appetite for security.

Though it has been deferred, the judgment of history, which bears on these false judges, is nonetheless guaranteed.

Note

This intervention appeared in the “Idées” section of the newspaper *Le Monde* on December 9, 1980. It was flanked by two other articles responding to the notorious trial of the Gang of Four, “Une bombe à retardement” (“A Delayed Explosion”), by Jean-Pierre Leclerc, and “Une appareil judiciaire dépourvu de moyens” (“A Judicial Apparatus Deprived of Means”), an interview with Fang Junyi, a former Peking judge teaching at the time at L’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. The first article is a nuanced assessment of the Cultural Revolution and its demise, which argues for the ultimate inefficacy of its foreclosure by Deng’s “reformists,” seeing it as a kind of ideological “time bomb,” as the title suggests. It concurs with Badiou in regarding the active problematization of the relation between the masses, the bureaucracy, and the party as the irreplaceable aspect of what it depicts as a profoundly complex phenomenon, combining a whole set of profound political innovations with neofeudal and regressive practices. The second piece considers the manner in which the trial of the Gang of Four was used as the occasion for reintroducing into China a legal system and a penal code that had been almost entirely wiped out during the tumult of the Cultural Revolution. It surveys a series of concrete questions, such as the laws on marriage and divorce, and the issue of youth criminality, and concludes by advocating a kind of juridical normalization on the basis of Deng’s reforms.—Trans.