

Althusser and Mao: a missed encounter?

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Abstract Modern communism crosses originally philosophy on the ground of dialectics, in particular on the Hegelian concept of the *Aufhebung*, as in the definition of communism in *The German Ideology*: «*welche den jetzigen Zustand aufhebt*». The class party, especially in its Stalinist version, has stabilized the *Aufhebung* and the relationships between politics and philosophy in the 'discourse' of the «world view of the Marxist-Leninist party». The worldwide political configuration of the 60s, has submitted to radical testing the value of the class party, as condition for a rethinking of the philosophical categories of Hegelian dialectics with respect to revolutionary classism. Althusser, around 1963-1964, explores the constitutive instability of the intersection of communism and materialist questioning the postulate of a «simple contradiction upstream of each process» and therefore of a «One» as the origin and the goal of all existence. Aware of those questions posed by Althusser, in the 60s Mao manifested a symptomatic philosophical embarrassment. We can ask if Mao's formula of those years, «one divides into two», though a result of decisive political stubbornness, was also a philosophical thesis capable to prevent the «return to the original One», as expressed in the formula «two combines into one», which in fact Yang Xianzhen intended as complementary to that of Mao.

j'étais au Parti, mais [...] j'avais un très fort penchant pour le maoïsme (Mao m'avait même accordé une entrevue, mais pour des raisons 'politiques françaises', je fis la sottise, la plus grande de ma vie, de ne pas m'y rendre, peur de la réaction politique du Parti contre moi, mais en fait qu'aurait pu faire le Parti à supposer même que la nouvelle d'une rencontre avec Mao eût fait l'objet d'un communiqué public et officiel? Je n'étais pourtant pas un tel 'personnage'!). (Althusser 1992, p. 272)

1 A 'symptomatic reading' and a conceptual adjustment

Was there really a 'missed encounter' between Althusser and Mao?

This passage of Althusser's autobiography needs to be read in a 'symptomatic' way, according to the methodological principle that Althusser

I dedicate this text to Mario Sabattini who first made me read Mao's philosophical texts. Earlier versions of this text were two presentations given at two workshops of the research group *Class, Capital and Culture in Asia* that I co-direct with Tani Barlow, Rosalind Morris and Alessandro Russo (Columbia University, Anthropology Department, May, 2012, and Rice University, Houston, Chao Center for Asian Studies, May, 2013). A third version was presented in September 2013 at a workshop in Seoul, under the auspices of Kyung Hee University, with Alain Badiou, Cecile Winter, Rosalind Morris, Pun Ngai, Alessandro Russo, Taek-Gwang Lee, Wang Hui, Slavoj Žižek and others.

applied in his reading of Marx's *Capital* (Althusser 1965a, pp. 28-31). This *lecture symptomale* is carried out at different levels and requires an adjustment on the very concept of 'symptom'.

At a first level of symptomatic reading, it is possible to state that it was an imaginary construction, the result of an atrocious suffering. But, in this respect Althusser was very close to each one of us, although it only changes the degree of suffering, because as Freud taught us, «each one of us behaves in some respects like the paranoid who corrects some aspects of the world which are unbearable to him by making a wish and introduces this delusion into reality».

However, since it only detects this proximity to each of us, the first level of symptomatic reading tells us very little about a 'missed encounter'. This was what Lacan called the «paranoiac structure of knowledge». However, the *Wunschbildung* concerns the desire of a philosopher, especially the desire of his relationship with politics. It is important to note that the relationships between philosophy and politics are of a profoundly real consistence and are not in any way limited only to the imaginary side. Nevertheless, it proved to be a recurring tendency for the greatest philosophers to develop an imaginary side of their relationship with politics. Great philosophical minds have invented out of whole cloth or have greatly exaggerated the alleged invitation of a 'sovereign' who summons them to have the last word on Justice in the State. Plato goes to Syracuse and Hegel expects to be invited by Napoleon to enlighten him on the Universal Homogeneous State.

Did Althusser also dream of an 'invitation from a sovereign'? In fact, it is not possible to solve the question of the 'missed (?) encounter' between Althusser and Mao. At this point we must leave the land of imagination and navigate in order to discover the real basis of the relationship between philosophy and politics. It was a peculiar circumstance as it was one of the most politically dense moments of the 20th century and one of the highest level of inventiveness of French philosophy.

However we need a conceptual adjustment in order to advance this symptomatic reality or at least a shift in perspective with respect to the methodological principle with which Althusser read Marx «as a philosopher» (Althusser 1965a, p. 10) who was aware of the discoveries of Freud and Lacan. For Althusser 'symptomatic reading' indicates the search for «a concept essential to the thought, but absent in the discourse» (Althusser 1965a, p. 31). This is also a valuable indication that guides the theoretical reading toward the vitality of the points of void in a thought.

For Althusser, the task is to decipher an 'unconscious' parallel discourse that does not surface in the conscious discourse. The unconscious as a mere 'non-conscious' was already known to nineteenth-century psychology before Freud. The Freudian novelty was to consider the unconscious as the combined effect of the repression and the return of the repressed. From this point of view, the symptom deals with the point of reality of a

subjective impasse. This has no place in the structure of a discourse but can only emerge through an often embarrassing and unsettling discontinuity of various levels. Therefore in which direction should we search for the 'symptom' of this 'encounter' between Althusser and Mao? What is the subjective impasse that both share and have to face, although from two different discursive positions (philosophy and revolutionary politics)?

Let us start from the temporal circumstances or rather the political conditions that made Mao's philosophy so essential to Althusser, to the point of declaring his «très fort penchant pour le maoïsme» (Althusser 1992, p. 272). The circumstances were primarily those of the aftermath of the 20th Congress of the CPSU. Althusser stated that he would never have written anything significant if it were not for the 20th Congress and that his philosophy was based on the left criticism of Stalinism. It was clear that this was the point of problematic convergence with Mao. What was the real stake in those political conditions which was not fully in place in the revolutionary political discourse but manifested itself in a largely symptomatic form?

The issue was the political crisis of the communist parties. Far more than Stalin's crimes, the knotty problem after the 20th Congress was the political value of the class party, namely the exam of the «historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat», like the titles of the first editorials of the «People's Daily» which opened the Sino-Soviet dispute in 1956.

A brief explanation is required to explain why the crisis of the class party (which proved to be momentous and the consequences of which come down to our days) occurred largely in a symptomatic form, that is how it emerged as a subjective impasse which could not be fully placed within the revolutionary political discourse. The problem is that the class party was the fulcrum of that discourse, the cornerstone of its not only political but also epistemic consistency. This explains why, if the crisis of the class party had been the real subjective impasse of modern egalitarian politics, it could only have emerged in the political revolutionary discourse in the form of a 'symptomatic' disorder. This was at the root of Althusser's philosophical elaboration as well as the 'excessive' character of political subjectivities of the 1960s and 1970s. For both Althusser and Mao the crisis of the class party was a point of void in the discourse: it is an element of real in the thought which cannot be fully stated. Even Mao fluctuates greatly on the issue who was at that time the most daring and the most experimental on the question of the class party.

Modern communism crosses paths with philosophy on the ground of dialectics and in particular on one of the most dense and arduous concepts of the Hegelian system, the *Aufhebung*, as in the famous definition of communism in *The German ideology*: «the real movement which abolishes the present state of things» (Marx, Engels 1932). The embarrassing polysemy of the *Aufhebung* is well known, 'suppression', 'sublation', 'supersession',

'destruction', 'abolition' or as recently proposed by Žižek, «the survival of the sublated thing in an abridged edition» (Žižek 2012, pp. 319-320). This wide polysemy seems to resonate the paradoxical harmonics of the Freudian *Verneinung*, «negation». The class party, especially in its Stalinist version, stabilized the instability of the *Aufhebung*, and in general the enigma of the relationships between politics and philosophy, in the 'discourse' of the «world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party» (Stalin 1938, p. 1). Dialectical materialism was literally this worldview for Stalin.

If the crisis of the class party must be considered as the kernel of the 'symptom', it involves a further layer of discontinuity, which concerns the relationship between philosophy and politics in the peculiar circumstances of the Sixties. Let us remember that the 'encounter' was between a philosopher and a revolutionary political leader.

It is essential to recall the caesura of 1966-1968 in Althusser's philosophical itinerary concerning the problem of identity between philosophy and politics. Before that time, Althusser's elaboration had aimed to effectively revitalize the Marxist political theory through the development of philosophical concepts. The well-known anti-humanistic position (Althusser 1964) of Althusser focused on the political nature of the crisis which post-Stalinist humanism denied, reducing it to a moral crisis of Marxism. While affirming Marxism as a scientific invention – the discovery of the continent of history – Althusser emphasized its experimental character in political invention.

The thesis that philosophical elaboration was immediately transitive to revolutionary politics (even with the finesse of postulating a role for philosophy of representing politics in science and science in politics as well as to distinguish between theoretical and political practice) was one of the strong points of Althusser and his school up to the political caesura of 1968. However, it was later transformed into the opposite, i.e. a factor of absolute weakness, to the point of producing the resounding split of his philosophical school.

What had turned the identity between politics and philosophy into a weakness was the radical crisis of the class party. In fact, the party constituted the essential condition of transitivity between Marxist philosophy and politics, between dialectical materialism and revolutionary politics, as Stalin had systematized in *Dialectical materialism and historical materialism* (Stalin 1938, p. 1). In the last analysis Althusser initially radicalized the Stalinist transitivity of politics and philosophy as a critical argument addressed to the de-politicization and de-theorization of the communist parties of the time.

Today we must elaborate a principle of separation between philosophy and politics and reconsider what had once been their alleged identity. Not surprisingly, the main philosophical figure who developed a profound rethinking of the relationship between philosophy and politics was Alain

Badiou, one of Althusser's greatest disciples, who broke away from his teacher on the occasion of that caesura and engaged in politics strongly inspired by Maoism. I mention this to emphasize the entanglement of the dilemmas he had to face. It is a fact that the key step of this rethinking was not to conceive politics as the essence of philosophy but as one of its 'conditions' (Badiou 2005).

2 Althusser reader of Mao

After listing this series of preliminary difficulties, we can examine the problem of the 'missed encounter' between Althusser and Mao on its proper philosophical ground. The key point is the relationship between the philosophical concept of «overdetermination» and the text of Mao *On contradiction* (Mao 1968a), which Althusser cites as the main reference for his theoretical elaboration on this point.

It should be noted that «overdetermination» was the first original philosophical concept developed by Althusser which was formulated in 1962 in his essay *Contradiction and overdetermination* (Althusser 1965b), the third of the essays in *For Marx*. It was also developed the following year in the essay *On the materialist dialectics* (Althusser 1965c). This was the 'second movement' in Althusser's philosophical itinerary. The first two essays in *For Marx* (*Feuerbach's philosophical manifestos* and *On the young Marx*; Althusser 1965a, pp. 20-84) represent the 'first movement' (the one on Feuerbach is somehow an 'overture'), which aims at discussing the fundamental discontinuity between the *Economic-philosophical manuscripts of 1844* (Marx 1961) and *The German ideology* of 1845 (Marx, Engels 1932). The issue concerns 'humanism', in the sense specified above.

Neither an issue of the history of philosophy, nor of history of Marxism were at stake but it concerned the political impasse of the socialist states which the pro-Soviet communist parties tended to reduce in terms of a moral crisis. 'Stalin's crimes' were presented as the result of insufficient 'humanism' and therefore it would have been advisable to search for the authentic roots of a communist political thought in the young Marx. For this reason the *Manuscripts* of 1844 (Marx 1961) were very successful at that time among the philosophical circles of the communist parties.

This opening movement of Althusser's thought, although manifesting an extraordinary philosophical acuity, did not actually contain original concepts directly elaborated by him but he made his point by explicitly borrowing the concept of «*coupure épistémologique*» by Gaston Bachelard (1938), and the concept of *problématique* by Jacques Martin. The goal was to refute the view of the continuity of Marx's intellectual itinerary, which was a key argument for the 'humanism' of the Communist philosophers of the moment, and to stress the importance of Marx's theoretical break-

through. *The German ideology* (Marx 1932) and *The manifesto of Communist Party* (Marx, Engels 1848), Althusser argued, marked a «coupure épistémologique» through which Marx developed his own original theoretical «problématique», very different to that of the early texts, and basically similar to Hegel's and Feuerbach's conceptual systems.

The first movement of Althusser's itinerary aimed at clearing the obstacle that blurred the novelty of Marx's theoretical invention and more essentially hindered the understanding of the political nature of the crucial issue at stake in that very moment. However, only the 'second movement' of Althusser's itinerary tackled the crux of the situation, the value of the class category for thinking politics. With the concept of «overdetermination», Althusser scrutinizes the concept of contradiction in the materialist dialectics under the philosophical lens, namely the whole conceptual device which in Marxism-Leninism debated political antagonism on philosophical ground.

In short, the fundamental issue irreversibly opened by the political configuration of the sixties which Althusser let emerge philosophically in a radical way, was: how the philosophical concept of contradiction could be used to argue the crucial political tasks of the communist revolutionary organization.

The main objective of the concept of «overdetermination» was to establish the discontinuity of materialist dialectics with respect to the Hegelian dialectics, a novelty that for Althusser remained insufficiently theorized in the Marxist tradition.

He considered Mao Zedong the theorist who argued the strongest discontinuity with the Hegelian dialectics, through the development of three original philosophical concepts in his text *On contradiction* (Mao 1968a). With the added complication, however, that the 'deep theoretical reason' of those concepts was, for Althusser, still to be grasped.

The philosophical stakes were to prove that Marxist philosophy was an invention in no way indebted to the Hegelian problematic. The three fundamental concepts of Mao highlighted by Althusser are: the concept of the main contradiction, the main aspect of contradiction and above all the unevenness of development of contradictions in any real process.

Althusser affirmed that, on the one hand, Mao's philosophical concepts cannot have originated from the Hegelian matrix, but on the other hand Mao had not yet formulated theoretically the point of discontinuity from Hegel. Althusser seriously doubted that the discontinuity of Marxist dialectics with Hegel could be assured by simply isolating the 'rational kernel' already present in Hegel, and freeing it from the 'mystical shell' of 'speculative philosophy' and all its conceptual apparatus.

Althusser remarked that the Hegelian model had a highly rigorous and systematic structure which was based on the principle of 'a simple process with two opposites', namely an original unity that splits into two. In actual

fact, Mao, Lenin and Marx rejected this model of simple original unity since they dealt exclusively with complex processes in which there was always 'not secondarily, but primitively, a structure of multiple and uneven contradictions' (cfr. Althusser 1965a, chapter 4: *Un tout complexe structuré 'déjà donné'*, pp. 173-178). However the problem was that Mao, Lenin and Marx did not clearly exclude the existence of a 'simple process with two opposites' conceived as «the essential original process of which the other complex processes would be only the complications» (Althusser 1965a, p. 174).

In other words, for Althusser, Marxists have ended up giving credit, or at least not explicitly excluding, the Hegelian dialectics of the 'splitting the original unit' (Althusser 1965a, pp. 173-178) upstream of each process, while rejecting it in both theoretical and political practices. They did so, Althusser says, in order to simplify, 'to cut short' or 'inadvertently', but at the expense of a rigorous theoretical demarcation which resulted in putting at stake the value and the logical operation of the Hegelian model.

It was true that for all of them in their practice, the 'simple contradiction', far from being an original universal, was the result of a long process produced under exceptional conditions. However, the great Marxists have formulated ('to cut short') the essence of dialectics essentially in the Hegelian terms, as in Lenin's formula 'splitting of one' (which Althusser affirmed), or in the Mao's formula (which he did not cite) 'one divides into two'. Althusser remarked that, although effective in polemical terms, those formulations were extraneous to the actual revolutionary practice and they finally led to unreserved credit of the Hegelian model.

In fact, the Hegelian dialectics was supported by the radical assumption of a simple unity that splits and 'evolves within itself by virtue of negativity' but whose essential purpose, in all its development, was to restore its original unity and simplicity, albeit in a higher form. The philosophical concepts that describe this process of splitting and restoration of original unity, such as the concepts of 'alienation' and 'negation of the negation', as well as the famous *Aufhebung* (the synthesis that exceeds and at the same time preserves the original terms) are not, according to Althusser, merely part of a 'mystical shell' that could be detached from the rational kernel via a 'reversal', as in the famous metaphor of an upside down dialectic. They are operational concepts intimately related to the basic principle of a 'simple process with two opposites'. Althusser stated that each time the structural discontinuity between the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics is not clearly formulated, those concepts return operative.

The elaboration of the concept of «overdetermination» aims to bring about theoretical clarification on that discontinuity. For Althusser «overdetermination» was a deeper connotation of Marxist dialectics. It fully discloses the theoretical value of the concept of an 'uneven development of each process', which Mao Zedong established systematically and which

all the great Marxists have always 'practiced'. The concept of «uneven development» according to Althusser, can be reformulated as the concept of «structure in dominance» of the «whole complex». Marxist dialectics considers the complexity of a process as never derived from an original contradiction, but structured around a dominant, which is determined, or rather 'overdetermined', by the subjective and objective circumstances, in national and international forms, in the cultural, economic, environmental elements of a historic-social world.

The concept of «overdetermination» expressly refers to Mao's idea that any revolutionary politics should tackle processes that always develop unevenly. Unevenness means that at different times multiple circumstances determine the primacy of a contradiction on the other (main contradiction) and an aspect of the contradiction on the other, namely the transformation of the main aspect into the secondary and vice versa. In this sense, the concept of «overdetermination» was strongly indebted to Mao's dialectical conception and fully intended to shorten the distance from the Hegelian model. On the other hand, the fact that the rejection of the simple process with two opposites was not set out formally was a weak point for Althusser which can lead back to the Hegelian matrix of the recomposition of the One.

3 Mao's philosophical predicament

After briefly outlining the intensity of the issues that Althusser attributed to Marxist philosophy and in particular to Mao's conceptual device, let us rediscuss the original question about the 'encounter' between Mao and Althusser. Although we have no evidence of Mao's alleged invitation to Althusser, it is clear that Althusser himself invited Mao to a philosophical dialogue, addressing him with the utmost respect of a communist toward a great revolutionary leader. We lack philological evidence that Mao 'actually' received this invitation, meaning that he did not necessarily read Althusser's text. However there are some philosophical traces which show exactly how at that time Mao was restlessly grappling with the same philosophical problem posed by Althusser, which was how to deal with the tendency to restore the Hegelian matrix. Althusser maintained that without an explicit rejection of the 'simple contradiction' it was inevitable to reactivate all the basic concepts of the Hegelian dialectic. In fact all of those concepts focus on ensuring the glorious return of the original One, which in the Hegelian perspective becomes even more 'concrete' after going through all the phenomenal vicissitudes of the dialectical processes.

In the sixties Mao did not process systematic philosophical texts comparable to those of 1937, *On practice* (Mao 1968b) and *On contradiction* (Mao 1968a). The most relevant intervention on the topic was actually the famous *Speech on philosophical problems* made on 18 August 1964

(Mao 1969), one year after Althusser's texts. Although we do not know if Mao had read them, it is likely that at the Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP there was a specific group assigned to translate «La Pensée», the philosophical journal of the PCF in which the essays by Althusser were published. The tense controversy with the pro-Soviet European parties made these translations essential for the central apparatus of the CCP. This is probable as Althusser's essays discussed Mao's philosophy and evaluated them highly. We can therefore assume that at least a summary had passed through Mao's secretariat, if not the full translation. Therefore it is possible that he was more or less directly aware of the existence of these texts.

The traces that we find in the *Speech on philosophical problems* are indirect but significant. The *Speech* focused on the same issues raised by Althusser. Firstly Mao showed an obvious predicament concerning the philosophical issue of whether the Marxist dialectics was compatible with the Hegelian. It was symptomatic how stubbornly Mao affirms the discontinuity of the Marxist dialectic, aiming at rejecting the Hegelian conceptual devices, in particular the concept of 'negation of negation' and that of *Aufhebung*, the synthesis that reconstructs the original unit.

Even more significant was the *vis polemica* against Yang Xianzhen 杨献珍, the head of the philosophical school of the CCP, who in 1967 formulated the thesis *he er er yi* 合二而一 «the Two combines into One» (Yang 1984), whereas Mao in those years, had summed up the core of Marxist dialectics in the thesis *yi fen wei er* 一分为二 «One divides into Two». We could say that he did so in order 'to cut short' to paraphrase Althusser. He was also in good company, as he repeated the synthetic formula of Lenin in *Philosophical notebooks* (Lenin 1895-1916). However, Yang Xianzhen did not actually oppose his thesis to Mao's thesis but argued that it was compatible and even 'complementary' to it and ultimately its logical conclusion.

Mao associated Yang Xianzhen with Hegel 'to cut short' and concluded that in both cases it was 'the position of the bourgeoisie on the issue of the synthesis of opposites' (cfr. Mao 1969, pp. 548-561). However, if Yang Xianzhen 'represented' the interests of the German philosopher, he was able to do so because in the formula 'one divides into two' the problem that remained unsolved was the issue of the 'simple contradiction', in other words the splitting of the original unit upstream of each process. It was this unsolved problem that ultimately allowed Yang to bring Mao back to Hegel.

Mao resisted vigorously, emphasizing the crucial thesis of the unevenness in the development of contradictions. He stressed the idea that the simple contradiction is always the result of infinitely prolonged multiple processes. Even the 'unity of opposites' of hydrogen and oxygen, said Mao 'flirting' with *Dialectics of Nature* (Engels 1883), creates water only after millions of years of reiterated contradictory processes in the physical world.

In other words, Mao pointed out the perspective of an unlimited multiplicity of contradictions, the ceaseless transformation of the opposites, but since he did systematically confute the 'original unit', it became difficult for him to reject the key points of the Hegelian conceptual device. It is true that he categorically excluded them, but he did so with conspicuously hasty and indecisive statements. It is not enough to declare that «the negation of the negation does not exist» to justify taking it apart conceptually.

Similarly, Mao's rejection of the *Aufhebung* as the 'synthesis into the One' remained an aspiration which was not supported by strong philosophical arguments. For example, to show that this 'synthesis' involves the destruction of one of the opposites by the other, Mao used a metaphor that creates more issues than it solves. He says that one of the opposites not only destroys the other, but 'eats' it: «As occurred in the *Aufhebung* with the Guomindang army? We ate it morsel by morsel» (Mao 1969, p. 557). However, according to the metaphorical dimension, in this example we know that in the totemic meal 'sons', after 'devouring the father', 'internalize his authority' (perhaps in an 'abridged form'?).

Metaphors aside, to build a philosophical perspective capable of excluding the original One (in order to prevent the return to the Hegelian matrix) was in those circumstances a huge philosophical problem that Mao was unable to resolve. As mentioned above, from the Sixties onwards Mao did not write any systematic philosophical texts and the formula 'one divides into two' was mostly a shortcut which Mao finally used as a proverbial motto and never really formalized theoretically.

On the other hand, even Althusser failed to solve for ever the problem of how to exclude 'the original One'. The concept of «overdetermination» was in a sense a powerful 'signal' of the radical nature of the problem but did not build an ontological perspective able to answer to it. It is important to note that Alain Badiou, not surprisingly a Maoist, created an 'ontology of the multiple without One', which takes into account the warning of his philosophical master Althusser while following a completely different path deriving from ontological consequences by the inventions of the twentieth-century mathematicians and not primarily by Marxist politics.

4 A dual heritage

In order to begin the inevitably provisional conclusions I would argue that Althusser's intellectual legacy involves at least two levels: one is a crucial issue of contemporary philosophical research. Let us mention only the most obvious case, when Badiou calls the general horizon of his philosophical research 'materialist dialectics' (Badiou 2006), he reproduces verbatim the formula of his master Althusser, albeit in a completely different key. On a political level, it is more complicated to divide Althusser's legacy. I

personally agree with Althusser's idea that egalitarian politics is certainly strongly theoretically consistent and that political errors are also theoretical errors. The question is therefore whether these theoretical errors are also philosophical errors (regardless of whether or not one can say that philosophers commit 'errors'). Everything that comes from that intellectual and political conjuncture of the Sixties converges into the exhaustion of the previous bridges that claimed to channel philosophical questions into political questions and vice versa.

The basic structure of this transitivity was the 'class party' and it was precisely this point which showed the greatest difference between Althusser and Mao. In the presence of the events that began in 1966-68, Althusser met a radical political obstacle when he attempted to read the Chinese events theoretically in a famous essay of 1967 («Sur la Révolution Culturelle» 2013), published anonymously in *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* on transcriptions by several of his students. Anonymity was not only due to his membership of the PCF, at that time fiercely anti-Maoist, but also due to a deep political impasse. On the one hand, he enthusiastically praised this political event which he declared «unprecedented» and that «all French communists» were to examine carefully. On the other hand, the specific novelty of the events was described with such symmetrical device which was unable to grasp their stormy and unpredictable character. The novelty of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was seen correctly in the new mass organizations but in order to theorize this innovation Althusser made use of a vaguely sociological typology which was as elegant as formalistic. The analysis took place around a «triptych» in which the «party» guaranteed that «political revolution», «trade unions», the «economic revolution» and the «new organizations» would have guaranteed the ideological mass revolution. This was the point he considered absolutely unprecedented. When only a year later in mid-'68, the new mass organizations in China revealed a radical political exhaustion that lead to self-destruction, there was nothing left standing of this tripartite typology. At this point Althusser went fully back into the PCF.

Mao's path was much more complex and enigmatic. As it is well known, the current unanimity of the 'radical negation' does everything it can to prevent any free reflection on the topic. Mao's attitude in those years illustrated the gap between philosophy and politics, because it refrained from systematic philosophical interventions during the Cultural revolution. On the other hand, at the political level Mao manifested a restless experimental activism. The core of political experimentation was the question of the political value of the class party. This was the point that he and Althusser had in common. However, Mao did not retreat in the face of this immense difficulty and if in '68 he fully realized the political exhaustion of the Red Guards, he continued to do everything he could to maintain the prospects of experimental egalitarian inventions. From this point of view,

Mao's legacy is completely different to Althusser's. Mao fully realized and openly declared that the main experimental result of the GPRC was that the class party was basically impervious to political experimentation, i.e. it was the maximum factor of de-politicization. A final remark: this was an experimental result (Russo 2006) which had never been heard of before and it would never have been known without the prolonged mass political laboratory of that decade in China and around the world.

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