

# Althusser, or Forgetting

*Asad Haider*

## **Abstract:**

This article seeks to understand the political implications of Louis Althusser's thought by emphasizing his early, seemingly "theoreticist" writings. The concepts of the problematic and the break are read not only in terms of the formation of a new theory, but also as a way of understanding the history of Marxist politics, both in terms of revolutionary organization and the construction of socialism. It reviews Althusser's early references to texts drawn from the history of revolutionary Marxism, from Lenin to Mao, and proceeds from there to evaluate how his interpretations lead to his assessments of his own political conjuncture, especially regarding the Cultural Revolution in China, as a symptomatic moment of crisis for the revolutionary problematic centered on the party-state.

**Keywords:** Louis Althusser, Karl Marx, V.I. Lenin, Mao Zedong, Dialectical and Historical Materialism, Communism, Philosophy, Humanism, Ideology

---

I forgot it again. I forget everything... I even forget that I forget.

– Louis Althusser, letter to Franca Madonia, September 1961<sup>1</sup>

The forgetting thus jumps from one name to another, as if to prove the existence of an obstacle which cannot easily be surmounted.

– Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1901<sup>2</sup>

Never forget the class struggle.

– Mao Zedong, Tenth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee,  
September 1962<sup>3</sup>

I would like to approach the challenge of reading Althusser politically through Althusser's relation to communism, which raises questions of method. I have previously written about this relation with attention to Althusser's biography and political engagement, focusing on his explicit commentaries on the crisis of Marxism and the Communist Parties in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> These are texts of remarkable acuity which in many respects remain, despite an almost staggering historical distance disproportionate to mere chronology, uncannily relevant. Nevertheless I am forced to admit that from the perspective of theoretical anti-humanism, such an approach requires justification, and from the perspective of a student of Althusser's work it is impermissible to ignore the classic texts, the so-called "theoreticist" texts, which, despite this usually but not necessarily

---

1 Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, ed. François Matheron and Yann Moulier-Boutang (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1998), 14. I must acknowledge Yoshihiko Ichida for bringing this letter to my attention in his excellent article "Histoire et politique: conjonction et partage originaire chez Althusser (1962-1967)," *Cahiers du GRM* 7 (2015). <https://journals.openedition.org/grm/607>

2 Sigmund Freud, "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. 6 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 42.

3 Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Zedong* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 164.

4 See my "Crisis Theory," *Viewpoint* (December 2017).  
<https://viewpointmag.com/2017/12/14/crisis-theory/>

pejorative appellation, we know not only from biography and history but indeed from the work itself, were also—I say also rather than instead—political interventions. So I would like to speak at the theoretical level, with reference to these classic texts, which show us that to read Althusser is to read someone reading the history of communism —perhaps the first communist to read these *practical* works in such a way as to find the discoveries buried under the crushing weight of ideology.

In “On the Young Marx,” written in 1960 and published the following year, we already encounter a protocol for reading the history of communist politics, not only generally in the concept of the problematic but more specifically in the analysis of the character of the new. The reader finds in this exemplary text of the history of knowledge the constant irruption of politics. Asking why Marx expended such an extraordinary effort in philosophical abstraction, why he worked so meticulously within the existing ideological problematic only in order to exit it, Althusser makes a remarkable reference to the Chinese Revolution: “What did Marx gain by this theoretical ‘Long March’ that was imposed on him by his own beginning?” Marx’s philosophical labors facilitated his acquisition of a “clinical sense,” a term which is not insignificant, which allowed him to detect the struggles between classes and ideologies.<sup>5</sup> But there is more, of course, which is “the necessity and contingency of this beginning.”<sup>6</sup> While a scientific discovery generates new objects and meanings, the inventor must have formed an intelligence *within* the old forms, and is thus in “the paradoxical situation of *having to learn the way of saying what he is going to discover in the very way he must forget.*” In this reading, of course, one sees the affirmation of the scientific discovery, against every attempt to obscure it behind ideological terminology. And yet we are just as much confronted with the necessity of this beginning, the fact that new concepts, objects, and terms are not yet available and the old forms will not simply be

---

5 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2005), 85; *Pour Marx* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 82. Translation modified.

6 Ibid, 64; 60.

abolished in one stroke, which gives us, Althusser writes, “that tragic imminence and permanence, that extreme tension between the beginning and the end, between language and meaning, out of which one could not make a philosophy without forgetting that the destiny they are committed to is itself irreversible.”<sup>7</sup>

I will bring this protocol to the most obvious and yet most exceptional text, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” of 1962, which, with its nominalist study of the Russian Revolution, can scarcely be viewed as “theoreticist.” What is interesting to every reader is that the reformulation of its themes in “On the Materialist Dialectic” a year later takes us towards the peak of theoreticism; yet “Contradiction and Overdetermination” is indeed already a *theoretical* text, permeated with citations and readings, and not only of the conjunctural analysis of Lenin, which, as Warren Montag has brought to our attention, Althusser once again described as “clinical.”<sup>8</sup> There are obviously the allusions made in the title to Hegel and Freud, but there are also gestures at *theoretical* readings of two other figures, who Althusser has decided to read as theorists rather than as political clinicians.

We discover the first figure when we look for the source of what Althusser calls “the Leninist theme of the ‘*weakest link*’” in the “imperialist chain.”<sup>9</sup> The metaphor of the weakest link does appear once in the French translations of Lenin’s work, but in a context which is unrelated to the imperialist chain, and Althusser does not cite it. The texts of Lenin that Althusser does cite, though certainly consistent with his argument, do not use this metaphor. While Althusser presents this as a concrete analysis pieced together from Lenin’s writings in different concrete situations, he also gives us the source in which the metaphor is elaborated at length and presented as nothing less than a *general theory*, indeed in a chapter called

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 85-6; 83. Translation modified.

<sup>8</sup> See Warren Montag, “Althusser’s Lenin,” *diacritics* 43:2 (2015): 48-66. I have drawn on Montag’s important analysis throughout. See Althusser, *Lettres à Franca*, 306.

<sup>9</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 94, 98; 92, 96.

“Theory.” This source is Stalin’s *Foundations of Leninism*, a work which attempts a theoretical distillation of Lenin’s clinical sense and which Althusser describes, as many have noted, with either glee or chagrin, as “excellent in many respects.”<sup>10</sup>

Of course he will then go on, at the end of the text, to refer bluntly to “Stalin’s crimes and repression.” But once again, Stalin appears as an index of theory, because to explain his crimes and repression, says Althusser, there is “*theoretically* much left to do.” In a complicated formulation Althusser writes: “I mean not only historical work, which controls everything: but because it controls everything, I mean what controls even historical work which aspires or claims to be Marxist: *rigor; a rigorous conception of Marxist concepts, their implications and their development.*”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, even alongside the evident clinical emphasis of this text, there is still a production of concepts, and even a history of knowledge. But conspicuously absent from this history of knowledge is Stalin’s *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. This absence is conspicuous because the object of critique in this text is Hegel, rather than any other figure in the Communist movement. We know from his later texts and from posthumous publications that Althusser’s understanding of Hegel, who he knew extremely well, is nuanced and complex, and the proper name Hegel has a particular function in Althusser’s taking up of positions within philosophy. It is quite apparent in the text itself that the critique of Hegel is not simply a critique of 19th century German idealism. The Hegelian dialectic, defined as the teleology of the simple contradiction, is even blamed for the twin deviations of economism and technologism—

---

10 J.V. Stalin, “The Foundations of Leninism” in *Problems of Leninism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 25-30; Althusser, *For Marx*, 97n16; 96n16.

11 Althusser, *For Marx*, 116; 116. It is significant that Althusser’s wording is “*les crimes de la répression stalinienne*,” which departs from both Stalin the individual and “Stalinism” — a distinction he will later insist on in the “Reply to John Lewis”; see *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976); *Réponse à John Lewis* (Paris: Maspero, 1973).

which are then attributed to Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy*, though the text is not named, rather than any contemporary expression.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Althusser's proposed alternatives to Hegel's dialectic involve two dizzying leaps. The first, obviously, is to Freud. I cannot dwell for long on the psychoanalytic relevance of forgetting, which in "Contradiction and Overdetermination" appears in the simultaneous critique of the claim of the Soviet Union to have superseded the survivals of the elements of the old society in the forms of the new superstructures, and the Hegelian philosophy of history for which history is the memory of itself and "the past survives in the form of a memory of what it has been."<sup>13</sup> What we would have to add from Freud is the clinical problematic for which "the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it." The aim of clinical practice is not simply to remember, which has already taken the form of repetition, but for the patient to recognize resistance and "*to work through it*."<sup>14</sup>

But I will move now to the second figure, who is a leap directly over Stalin's head, to Mao Zedong. In this brief reference, confined to a footnote, Althusser invokes "On Contradiction," which Mao wrote in 1937 after the culmination of the actual Long March in Yan'an, on the basis of his study of texts of Soviet philosophy which yielded a series of

---

12 Ibid, 108; 108.

13 Ibid, 115; 115.

14 Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth Press, 1950, 155. To even further elaborate on the psychoanalytic resonance of this question, one might consider the commentary on *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and the exchange between Jacques Lacan and Jean Hyppolite in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan 1: Freud's Papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 192; *Le séminaire 1: Les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). Of particular interest is the striking reference to both Freud and Mao in Jean-Claude Milner, "Le matériel de l'oubli" in *Usages de l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 1988). One might read this text not only as a nuanced and meticulous commentary on psychoanalysis and forgetting, but also perhaps as fixation to trauma, a symptom of of Milner's memory of Althusser and communist politics.

lectures for the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College on dialectical materialism. Even though “On Contradiction” precedes the publication of *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* by a year, it is hard not to see Althusser reading “On Contradiction” as a kind of response to Stalin’s text, which is suggested by another footnote, in “On the Materialist Dialectic,” in which Althusser does finally refer to *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* even though once again the text in question is not named.

Read with sources in hand, these footnotes are astonishing. First of all, there is no question that both of these texts belong to the tradition, initiated by Engels and developed by Kautsky and Plekhanov, of the dialectics of nature and the materialist world outlook, as do indeed the theoretical texts of Lenin. To read Mao’s “On Contradiction” today is to see a text advancing the dialectics of nature and the materialist world outlook, perhaps not dissimilar to way that many contemporary readers of Marx’s *Capital* assume that it is presenting the labor theory of value, rather than a critique of this theory which was the ideological baseline of bourgeois political economy. Without a knowledge of the underlying problematic it is impossible to read the specificity of the text; and yet what this knowledge also shows us is the extent to which a text remains within that problematic.

Mao presents, Althusser writes, a specifically Marxist conception of contradiction, which appears “in a quite un-Hegelian light.” Its “essential concepts” are: “principal and secondary contradiction; principal and secondary aspect of a contradiction; antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction; law of the uneven development of a contradiction.”<sup>15</sup> If we compare Althusser’s list to Mao’s text, we see that he has considerably modified the essential concepts. The first sentence of “On Contradiction” states that “the law of the unity of opposites” is the “basic law of materialist dialectics”—a point which in fact Mao has drawn from Lenin’s

---

15 Ibid, 94n6; 92-3n6.

*Philosophical Notebooks*.<sup>16</sup> But in the very passage to which this footnote is appended Althusser has named the unity of opposites as one of the “*basic structures of the Hegelian dialectic*.”<sup>17</sup> As with many of these themes, he will take a different tack in “On the Materialist Dialectic,” which treats the unity of opposites in terms of the distinction between simple processes which have one pair of opposites and complex processes which have many more. Althusser suggests that despite appearing to allow the possibility of an existing simple process, Mao never actually speaks of one—he only speaks of complex processes, and so the simple process is not the essential contradiction which develops into complexity but merely the result of processes which are constitutively complex.<sup>18</sup>

Mao then goes on to list the philosophical problems arising from the law of the unity of opposites which have to be clarified to understand materialist dialectics. Althusser omits the first three items on Mao’s list. The first is “the two world outlooks”: Althusser has already rejected the orthodox explanation of materialism as an alternative to the idealist world outlook to which the dialectical method is applied. Next we have “the universality of contradiction” and “the particularity of contradiction.” Once again, Althusser later allows these items to scurry in through the back door in “On the Materialist Dialectic,” where he argues, in a reading reminiscent of the one about the unity of opposites, that universality is reducible to particularity—that the universal exists only *in* particularity and as the universal *of* particularity.<sup>19</sup>

The final difference is that Althusser introduces as an item in the series what Mao only mentions within his exposition of the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of the contradiction: unevenness, and it is Althusser who elevates it to the status of a law.

---

16 Mao Tse-Tung, “On Contradiction” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 1 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 311.

17 Ibid, 93; 92.

18 Ibid, 194-5; 199-200.

19 Ibid, 183, 194-5.



In “Contradiction and Overdetermination” Althusser also presents a criticism of Mao’s text, which appears to fade away in “On the Materialist Dialectic.” In the earlier text Althusser says that Mao “remains generally *descriptive*, and in consequence... *abstract*.” Of course, it is not clear how one can be criticized for being descriptive and abstract at the same time. Althusser explains that Mao is descriptive because “his concepts correspond to concrete experiences,” yet abstract because these concepts “are presented as *specifications* of the *dialectic* in general rather than as *necessary implications* of the Marxist conception of society and history.”<sup>20</sup> Why the Marxist conception of society and history is not abstract is not explained, and the oscillation between description and abstraction that Althusser identifies in “On Contradiction” appears just as much to characterize the relation between “Contradiction and Overdetermination” and “On the Materialist Dialectic.” What is striking is that Althusser makes no reference to Mao’s many clinical texts, including those immediately preceding and following “On Contradiction” – for example, “Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War,” written in 1936 and translated into French in 1950.

I will now move from the footnote on Mao to the footnote on Stalin in “On the Materialist Dialectic.” This footnote is appended to a complaint about people who collect and disseminate what we are told are the only two Hegelian sentences in the whole of Marx’s *Capital*, most importantly the “very metaphorical” sentence on the negation of the negation. In the footnote Althusser writes:

One further word on the negation of the negation. Today it is official convention to reproach Stalin with having suppressed the laws of the dialectic, and more generally with having turned away from Hegel, the better to establish his dogmatism. At the same time, it is willingly proposed that a certain return to Hegel would

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 94n6; 93n6.

be salutary. One day perhaps these declarations will become the object of some proof. In the meanwhile, it seems to me that it would be simpler to recognize that the expulsion of the “negation of the negation” from the domain of the Marxist dialectic might be evidence of the real theoretical perspicacity of its author.<sup>21</sup>

Now, one would search in vain for a *refutation* of the category of the negation of the negation by Stalin. What has in fact taken place is that Stalin simply omits it, as he converts Engels’s three laws of the dialectic into four. In Engels the three laws are the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa, the interpenetration of opposites, and the negation of the negation.<sup>22</sup> Stalin’s revised four laws are that nature is connected and determined, nature is a state of continuous motion and change, natural quantitative change leads to qualitative change, and contradictions are inherent in nature.<sup>23</sup> This constant revision of the laws of the dialectic, from Engels to Stalin to Mao, is in some sense a remarkable history of knowledge, representing the constant ossification and subversion of the dialectics of nature and the materialist world outlook. But while both Stalin and Mao omit the negation of the negation, we are justified in asking if Althusser is not ventriloquizing his sources by taking this omission to be a rejection – has it in fact been explicitly rejected and criticized?

In fact, in lecture notes called “Dialectical Materialism” written at the same time as “On Contradiction” Mao repeats exactly Engels’s three laws, including the negation of the negation, and in the original text of “On Contradiction” he refers to it in a critique of formal logic. On the republication of this text after the 1949 liberation of China, Mao excises this reference to the negation of the negation. Yet he continues to mention it from time to time thereafter, even invoking it when he says in 1957:

---

21 Ibid, 200; 205.

22 Frederick Engels, “Dialectics of Nature” in *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), 356.

23 J.V. Stalin, “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” in *Problems of Leninism*, 837-41.

“Stalin made mistakes in dialectics.”<sup>24</sup> In the speech to the Tenth Plenum in September 1962 when he advances the momentous slogan “never forget the class struggle,” Mao invokes the negation of the negation in a context which will prove to be of considerable importance:

Now then, do classes exist in socialist countries? Does class struggle exist? We can now affirm that classes do exist in socialist countries and that class struggle undoubtedly exists... In our country we must come to grasp, understand and study this problem really thoroughly. We must acknowledge that classes will continue to exist for a long time. We must also acknowledge the existence of a struggle of class against class, and admit the possibility of the restoration of reactionary classes. We must raise our vigilance and properly educate our youth... Otherwise a country like ours can still move towards its opposite. Even to move towards its opposite would not matter too much because there would still be the negation of the negation, and afterwards we might move towards our opposite yet again. If our children’s generation go in for revisionism and move towards their opposite, so that although they still nominally have socialism it is in fact capitalism, then our grandsons will certainly rise up in revolt and overthrow their fathers, because the masses will not be satisfied. Therefore, from now on we must talk about this every year, every month, every day. We will talk about it at congresses, at Party delegate conferences, at

---

24 See Nick Knight, “Introduction: Soviet Marxism and the Development of Mao Zedong’s Philosophical Thought” in *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, ed. Nick Knight (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), 20, and in the same volume Mao’s “Lectures on Dialectical Materialism,” 123, and the original 1937 text of “On Contradiction,” 161. Note that in his extremely useful and detailed account, Knight dismisses the idea that Mao was serious in rejecting the negation of the negation. This appears to be based on Knight’s commitment to defending Mao against charges of departing from Marxism, a position attributed here to Stuart Schram. If one lets go of the insistence that the negation of the negation is a necessary component of Marxist thought, perhaps it becomes easier to accept that when Mao rejects the negation of the negation, he really means it.

plenums, at every meeting we hold, so that we have a more enlightened Marxist-Leninist line on the problem.<sup>25</sup>

This reference to class struggle is by no means obvious: we might say that up to this point Mao himself had “forgotten” the class struggle, conceiving of the problems of the socialist transition in terms of “contradictions among the people” rather than class categories. But two years later we find Mao addressing the problems of socialist transition and capitalist restoration, with a dramatic shift in philosophical language. Note that the August 1964 “Talk on Questions of Philosophy,” an informal discussion with old comrades, comes exactly one year after the publication of Althusser’s “On the Materialist Dialectic.” Claudia Pozzana suggests that we can conceive of a group within the Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party assigned to translating *La Pensée*, the philosophical journal of the French Communist Party (PCF) where both “Contradiction and Overdetermination” and “On the Materialist Dialectic” were originally published.<sup>26</sup> Since these texts discuss Mao, she speculates, it is possible that a summary, if not a complete translation, came at some point to Mao’s attention. Mao’s awareness of these texts is possibly attested to by Althusser’s claim that Mao had, at some unspecified point, granted him an interview, which due to PCF politics he declined, to his later regret.<sup>27</sup>

---

25 Mao Tse-Tung, “Speech at the Tenth Plenum of the Eight Central Committee” in *Chairman Mao Talks to the People*, ed. Stuart Schram and trans. John Chinnery and Tieyun (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 189-90.

26 Claudia Pozzana, “Althusser and Mao: A Missed Encounter?” in *Il lutto e i libri: Studi in onore di Mario Sabattini*, ed. Magda Abbiati and Federico Greselin (Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2014); an earlier version appears as “Althusser and Mao: A Political Test for Dialectics” in *The Idea of Communism* 3, ed. Alex Taek-Gwang Lee and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2016). I converge in several respects with Pozzana’s analysis, especially the way she situates the concept of overdetermination in the relation between the problems of dialectics and political organization.

27 Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang and trans. Richard Veasey (New York: New Press, 1993), 234; *L’Avenir dure longtemps*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1992), 268.

We must admit that the evidence for this fascinating possibility is at best circumstantial, and the notoriously unreliable narration of Althusser's memoirs cannot be taken as a corroboration of anything at all. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the philosophical interventions of Mao and Althusser in this theoretical conjuncture is striking. Mao retains, at every level, the dialectics of nature, speaking of the splitting of atoms and the combination of hydrogen and oxygen. I wish to emphasize that this should not be mistaken for some kind of eccentric and presumably spiritually "Chinese" cosmology, as it simply repeats the scientism that can already be found in Engels.<sup>28</sup> But Mao also presents a new revision of the laws of the dialectic:

Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don't believe in two of those categories... The most basic thing is the unity of opposites. The transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity. There is no such thing as the negation of the negation. Affirmation, negation, affirmation, negation... in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly Mao had vacillated on the negation of the negation since 1937, but part of the changed theoretical conjuncture of this talk is the emergence

---

28 This is the interpretation of Slavoj Žižek in his sensationalistic introduction to the Verso collection which includes both "On Contradiction" and the "Talk on Questions of Philosophy"; see his "Introduction: Mao Tse-tung, the Marxist Lord of Misrule," in *Mao on Practice and Contradiction* (New York: Verso, 2007). Žižek takes Mao to task precisely for his rejection of the negation of the negation, and associates this with what he characterizes as a "cosmic perspective," as a result of which Mao "regresses... to primitive pagan 'wisdoms.'" This exoticizing interpretation is completely unhelpful for any rational assessment. Alain Badiou's response, "Letter from Alain Badiou to Slavoj Žižek: On the Work of Mao Zedong," included as an appendix to *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steven Corcoran (New York: Verso, 2010), while not without interest, concedes far too much to Žižek on the question of the negation of the negation, and is marred by certain obsolete historical interpretations, which also appear in his otherwise quite insightful essay on the Cultural Revolution collected in the same volume. Rather than Žižek's introduction, one is better off reading Althusser's footnotes.

29 Mao Tse-Tung, "Talk on Questions of Philosophy" in *Chairman Mao Talks to the People*, 226.

of the “one divides into two” controversy, and Mao explicitly mentions a dossier he has been given on this famous debate over the nature of contradictions: does a contradiction mean that “one divides into two” or that “two unite into one”? The position that “one divides into two” had already been advanced in 1963, in the publication of a speech by Zhou Yang called “The Fighting Task Confronting Workers in Philosophy and the Social Sciences,” which criticized one of the very Soviet philosophers that Mao had drawn on in his 1937 research on dialectical materialism. The paragraph introducing the principle that “one divides into two” was written by Mao himself.<sup>30</sup> But just as with Mao’s 1962 reference to the negation of the negation, this philosophical shift was grounded in the problems of socialist transition and capitalist restoration:

Let them go in for capitalism. Society is very complex. If one only goes in for socialism and not for capitalism, isn’t that too simple? Wouldn’t we then lack the unity of opposites, and be merely one-sided? Let them do it. Let them attack us madly, demonstrate in the streets, take up arms to rebel—I approve all of these things. Society is very complex, there is not a single commune, a single *hsien*, a single department of the Central Committee, in which one cannot divide into two.<sup>31</sup>

Missing from this talk is any discussion of principal and secondary contradictions, principal and secondary aspects of contradictions, or even their uneven development. What appears to be the pure intensity of one dividing into two obliterates any such schema. But the question of one dividing into two, as Pozzana demonstrates, encounters a profound dilemma, which is that if there is an *original* “one” which subsequently divides into two, we return to the Hegelian dialectic and its “radical

---

30 Zhou Yang, *The Fighting Task Confronting Workers in Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), 8.

31 Mao, “Talk on Questions of Philosophy,” 216.

assumption of a simple unity,” which splits and evolves through negativity, but only in order “to restore its original unity and simplicity, albeit in a higher form.”<sup>32</sup> Both the slogan “one divides into two” and the concept of “overdetermination” pointed to this problem, but neither Mao nor Althusser, Pozzana argues, met the challenge of building “a philosophical perspective capable of excluding the original One.”<sup>33</sup>

It is rather “in the practical state,” in the problems of the socialist transition, that we can locate the conceptual development. “Lenin said that all things can be divided,” Mao notes, and there is no last instance when such division would come to an end, not even socialism:

Socialism, too, will be eliminated, it wouldn't do if it were not eliminated, for then there would be no communism. Communism will last for thousands and thousands of years. I don't believe that there will be no qualitative changes under communism, that it will not be divided into stages by qualitative changes! I don't believe it! Quantity changes into quality, and quality changes into quantity. I don't believe that it can remain qualitatively exactly the same, unchanging for millions of years! This is unthinkable in the light of dialectics.<sup>34</sup>

This vision of the future builds to an extraordinary statement which one should not be too hasty in interpreting. I remind you this comes two months after the publication of Althusser's “Marxism and Humanism” and two years before Foucault would announce the death of man:

The life of dialectics is the continuous movement toward opposites. Mankind will also finally meet its doom. When the theologians talk about doomsday, they are pessimistic and terrify people. We say the

---

<sup>32</sup> Pozzana, “Althusser and Mao,” 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 228, 227.

end of mankind is something which will produce something more advanced than mankind.<sup>35</sup>

Once again, this provocative statement should neither be exoticized nor waved away as some kind of Nietzschean delirium.<sup>36</sup> While we also cannot simply conflate it with theoretical anti-humanism, we have to be attentive to the explicitly stated political stakes regarding the global situation of actually existing socialism. Mao's statement takes up themes that were already part of political discourse, as in the 1963 polemic of the Chinese Communist Party with the Soviet Union, which charged that the program adopted under Khrushchev at the 22nd Congress, by adopting the "fallacies" of a "state of the whole people" and a "party of the entire people," had substituted "humanism for the Marxist-Leninist theory of class struggle."<sup>37</sup>

It is this idea of the "state of the whole people," already criticized by the Chinese Communist Party as humanist, that frames Althusser's theoretical critique in "Marxism and Humanism." Humanism, as Althusser defines it there, is the ideology which says that "history is the alienation and production of reason in unreason, of the true man in the alienated man."<sup>38</sup> The theory of ideology presented in this text, of course, says that ideology is not simply false, but the imaginary relation in which people live their relation to their real conditions of existence. But even if ideology is not false, even if it is a permanent feature of every society, it is not knowledge, and therefore "it is impossible to *know* anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes."<sup>39</sup>

---

35 Ibid, 228.

36 This is once again the interpretation of Žižek's "Introduction."

37 Communist Party of China, *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 92.

38 Althusser, *For Marx*, 226; 232.

39 Ibid, 229; 236.



Such points are familiar. But I propose that, in a reversal of the temptation to shed historical and political baggage in favor of a pure theory of ideology, we should view the commentary on the Soviet Union in “Marxism and Humanism” as central to its theoretical work. Of course, this commentary is esoteric, leading for example E.P. Thompson to mistake passages paraphrasing the Soviet Union’s representation of itself for earnest praise, and to ignore Althusser’s explicit references to the “terror, repression and dogmatism” which belied the Soviet Union’s claim to have superseded the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>40</sup> Of course, anyone who has read “Contradiction and Overdetermination” will know that Althusser cannot possibly be endorsing this claim, since he stated there explicitly that if we are to explain “Stalin’s crimes and repression,” then “the whole logic of ‘supersession’ must be rejected.”<sup>41</sup> But it is already clear, if one makes any attempt to follow the argument of “Marxism and Humanism,” that Althusser is criticizing the way that humanist ideology displaces the “problems of the forms of economic, political and cultural *organization*” which must be addressed in order to achieve “the transition to communism, the end of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the withering-away of the State apparatus,” and arrive at “a new period of history in which the State will no longer take charge, *coercively*, of the leadership or control of the destiny of each individual.”<sup>42</sup>

My intention here, however, is not to defend Althusser against misreadings, but to show that there appeared to be something almost unthinkable in his presentation of anti-humanism, which is that just as much as it was a particular reading of Marx and a theory of ideology, it was also an attempt to think through the problem of socialist transition. It is significant, in this sense, that Mao’s discourse on the end of mankind is also situated within a theory of transition, of the end of socialism and

---

40 E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London: Merlin Press, 1995), 164-7; Althusser, *For Marx*, 237; 244.

41 Althusser, *For Marx*, 116; 116.

42 Ibid, 238, 245.

the transition to communism which is not the end of history. Mao does not present a theory of knowledge, but another theory of history: it is history not as the realization of man but as the movement of contradictions which never cease, in which the negation of man is not in turn negated but opens thousands or even millions of years of further contradictions. We might ask whether this theory of history remains an altered teleology, by forecasting the advent of “something more advanced.” However, since the negation of the negation is no longer available to us, it becomes difficult to picture this historical trajectory: what comes after mankind that is more advanced than mankind—that is, not a more advanced mankind, which would be the comfort provided by the negation of the negation, but something *other* than mankind? Is the end of mankind the end of communism, the origin of communism, communism itself? Nothing suggests that there is an answer to this question: the end of mankind is simply one outcome of the perpetual unity and struggle of opposites. Mao does not indicate that there is any meaning or direction to the historical process, any subject or goal, but rather that there will continue to be contradictions, and there will be stages of history not because they will progress towards the highest and final stage but simply because all things can be divided.

Does Mao nonetheless present us with an eschatology, latent in any apocalyptic vision? Note that he is at pains to distinguish this vision from that of the theologians, whose pessimism terrifies people. Yet soon enough a distinct pessimism emerges. Alessandro Russo has pointed to a theme in Mao’s thought which surfaces in a meeting with delegates of the Albanian Labor Party two years after the talk on philosophy:

Things develop independently of man’s will... When those of our generation die, it is very likely that revisionism will come about. In short, we should have in mind two possibilities: the first is that there is a counterrevolutionary dictatorship, a counterrevolutionary

restoration. Putting this probability as the first to take place, we are a bit worried. I too am sometimes distressed.<sup>43</sup>

We appear to be dealing with a far more ordinary, mundane category than the end of mankind, the restoration of capitalism, and yet it is now that there appears to be a direction to history, but a bad direction, which is the probable defeat. Note that it is the opposite of the apocalyptic vision typical in the history of Marxism, the eschatology of the capitalist collapse. What is distressing is the prospect that socialism will be little more than the momentary interruption of barbarism.

What is the relationship between the optimistic vision of the end of mankind, and the pessimistic prediction of the restoration of capitalism? I do not think it is possible to answer this question, at least not directly, in part because during these years Mao produced barely any texts, clinical or theoretical, but intervened in politics by writing posters, letters, and telegrams, editing and revising newspaper articles, and making laconic and often enigmatic statements in meetings and discussions which were reported to the public.

Insofar as we can identify a philosophy that exists “in the practical state,” to use the persistent formulation of “On the Materialist Dialectic,” it is that of contradiction, but of contradiction as a category of the transition, which will bring Mao to follow through on his approval of rebellion. I am referring, of course, to the Cultural Revolution, a period which for many reasons resists theoretical interpretation. Given the salience of this connection I will make one exception to my theoreticist constraint, though not departing from it by too many years, by referring to Althusser’s text on the Cultural Revolution, an episode in the history of communist politics which he obviously did not participate in and indeed knew next to nothing about. In observing this I do not mean to

---

43 Alessandro Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 92-3.

simply repeat the common criticism of the credulity of Western leftists whose enthusiasm was predicated on their ignorance of the violent disasters of the Cultural Revolution, a criticism which is made most vehemently by those who would like us to forget that they once shared this enthusiasm. But neither do I deny the reality of these disasters. I would propose that this relationship between enthusiasm and disaster is a matter for theoretical analysis, rather than moral judgment, because enthusiasm was based not simply on some romanticized image of China but on the conceptual problems which were raised by the thinking through of Marxist theory in the global context of actually existing socialism. The disasters of actually existing socialism, on the other hand, should not be projected into the sublime memory of incomprehensible trauma but rationally understood in terms of their historical causes and political consequences.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, Althusser clearly indicates that his analysis is situated within conceptual problems from the history of Marxism and the problems of socialist transition. The Cultural Revolution, says Althusser, “presents an intense *theoretical* interest.” But his analysis must be read symptomatically: it is a highly schematic, even formulaic account of what is nevertheless described as an “*exceptional* historical fact” which “has no historical precedent.”<sup>45</sup>

The visible theoretical language of Althusser’s analysis is that of levels – the economic, political, and ideological levels and their correspondences and discrepancies:

Marx, Engels and Lenin always proclaimed it was absolutely necessary to give the socialist infrastructure, established by a *political*

---

44 I have previously written about the Cultural Revolution in “Dismissal,” *The Point* 23 (October 2020). For an assessment specifically related to Althusser’s theoretical and political conjuncture see Étienne Balibar, “Mao: Critique interne du stalinisme?,” *Actuel Marx* 3 (1988): 145-54.

45 Louis Althusser, “On the Cultural Revolution,” trans. Jason Smith, *décalages* 1:1 (2010): 2; “Sur la révolution culturelle,” *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes* 14 (1966): 5.

revolution, a corresponding—that is, socialist—*ideological* superstructure. For this to occur, an ideological revolution is necessary, a revolution *in the ideology of the masses*. This thesis expresses a fundamental principle of Marxist theory.<sup>46</sup>

He is very clear, then, that this is not some kind of quintessentially “Chinese” phenomenon but the result of a conjuncture which is “internal to socialism” and related to the problems of development in all socialist countries. Althusser defines a “socialist country” according to the schema of levels. First, a political revolution has taken place, which means “seizing power in historically different conditions, but leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat.” It is followed by an economic revolution, which means the “socialization of the means of production” and the “establishment of socialist relations of production.” These are the initial conditions, and “a socialist country thus constituted ‘builds socialism’ under the dictatorship of the proletariat and, when the moment comes, prepares for the transition to communism. It is a long, drawn-out process.”<sup>47</sup>

But this process of socialist construction and transition raises an important risk, which is part of the novelty of the theory of the Cultural Revolution: the “objective risk of ‘regression’” which results from “the *politics* pursued by the revolutionary party” – that is, the risk that the politics of the revolutionary party will result in the regression of a socialist country back to capitalism.<sup>48</sup> According to Althusser, the Cultural Revolution demonstrates that to prevent regression the political and economic revolutions must be followed by “*a mass ideological revolution*,” which aims to “transform the ideology of the masses, to replace the feudal, bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideology that still permeates the masses of Chinese society with a new ideology of the masses, proletarian and

---

46 Ibid

47 Ibid, 4; 7.

48 Ibid, 5; 7.

socialist – and in this way to give the socialist economic infrastructure and political superstructure a corresponding *ideological superstructure*.”<sup>49</sup>

The thesis of regression, Althusser says, is the “central thesis” of the Cultural Revolution, and “poses the most important theoretical problems.” It refutes the “ideological interpretations of Marxism,” the “religious, evolutionist, economistic interpretations” that view Marxism as “an essentially religious philosophy of history that *guarantees* socialism by presenting it as *the goal* toward which human history has always worked.” Against such conceptions Althusser argues, and the thesis of regression of the Cultural Revolution demonstrates, that “Marxism is not a philosophy of history, and socialism is not the ‘end’ of history.”<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, the notion that there are different levels which must be brought into *correspondence* poses problems. The fact that they do not correspond indicates a lag or discrepancy which characterizes historical time. But with the general and predetermined succession of revolutions from level to level and the notion that the levels must be brought into correspondence we appear to be operating according to what *Reading Capital* criticizes as a linear time, since it is unclear how to measure this correspondence unless the temporality of one level functions as the reference or each level is measured against an unspecified reference time.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, it appears that there is a predetermined order of operations which culminates in the ideological revolution. Althusser says that the thesis of regression means that “in a certain conjuncture in the history of socialist countries, the *ideological* can become the strategic point at which everything gets decided,” and therefore “the future depends on the ideological.” Whether this future is one of “progress or regression” is decided in the “*ideological class struggle*.”<sup>52</sup> But what kind of conjuncture is

---

49 Ibid, 6; 8.

50 Ibid, 11; 11.

51 See Louis Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2015), 251-4; *Lire le Capital* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 289-93.

52 Althusser, “On the Cultural Revolution,” 12; 12.

this, if it has already been determined to be the final stage to which one ascends after completing the political and economic levels?

Note that the term “overdetermination” does not appear in this article. What does appear is the phrase “*determination in the last instance of the economic*”—the moment which, of course, “Contradiction and Overdetermination” tells us never arrives. As I have read “Contradiction and Overdetermination” over and over since I first discovered Althusser’s work (and it was the first of his texts that I read), and as I have tried to discuss and untangle it with new readers, it has only become more and more clear that the phrase “determination in the last instance” is conceptually vacuous, its content already ruthlessly destroyed by the concept of overdetermination and immediately undermined by the beautiful and mystifying formulation of the lonely hour which never comes.<sup>53</sup> But the evocative paradox of “Contradiction and Overdetermination” passes in “On the Cultural Revolution” into an attempt at reconciliation. Althusser still positions himself in opposition to “economistic, evolutionist and mechanistic ‘Marxists’... who know nothing about the Marxist dialectic.” In order to do this he draws on a familiar conception of the Marxist dialectic: “the principal and secondary contradiction, the principal and secondary aspect of a contradiction, the exchange of places of contradictions and their aspects, etc.”<sup>54</sup>

---

53 Ibid. Montag suggests that this is a kind of “point of heresy”—the formulation of Foucault which Balibar has developed into a powerful protocol of reading—which is followed by the shift from the paradox of the last instance to that of structural causality, which is not a structuralist concept of another kind of totality but a concept of the absent cause, the cause which exists only in its effects—and which is the absent concept of “Contradiction and Overdetermination.” See Warren Montag, “The Last Instance: Resnick and Wolff at the Point of Heresy” in *Knowledge, Class, and Economics*, ed. Theodore Burczak, Robert Garnett, and Richard McIntyre (New York: Routledge, 2018). On structural causality see also Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013, chapter 5; and Balibar, “Structural Causality, Overdetermination and Antagonism” in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, ed. Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996). On the “point of heresy” see Balibar, “Foucault’s Point of Heresy: ‘Quasi-Transcendentals’ and the Transdisciplinary Function of the Episteme,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32:5–6 (2015): 64–6.

54 Althusser, “On the Cultural Revolution,” 12; 12. Translation modified.

But there is a massive absence in this text, even in this invocation of “On Contradiction,” which is unevenness – the “law” which Althusser so radically affirmed in “On the Materialist Dialectic” that it seems almost as though he felt compelled to periodically pause to comfort the reader with unsupported structuralist assertions of determination in the last instance. “We know very well that it is not politics but the economy that is determinant in the last instance,” Althusser wrote there in a blatant inversion of the entire surrounding argument, in which he had just equated class struggle with political struggle and then went on to draw on the pyrotechnic language of “fusion” and “explosion” to explain “political action.”<sup>55</sup>

But in “On the Cultural Revolution,” the temporal language of the last instance is combined with the architectural language of levels, which Althusser will later deploy in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” against the Hegelian totality. Here it is modified by a different metaphor of construction, drawn from Gramsci, for which ideology is “cement” rather than a floor, which seeps into every room.<sup>56</sup> This fascinating image is used to advance the idea that ideology is made up of objective social relations, but poses even more problems. How can cement be a level, and how can the primacy of the level of cement follow in chronological succession the primacy of the two previous levels it has already seeped into? Needless to say one would not want to spend much time in this building.

---

55 Althusser, *For Marx*, 178-9, 210-1, 216-7; 181, 216-7, 222-3. The language of “explosion” was also drawn from “On Contradiction,” 344.

56 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 328; *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 1, ed.

Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 1380. Interestingly, Althusser had cited this very passage in a footnote to *Reading Capital*, commenting that it was “very close to the Hegelian conception” (278; 322). Later he would explicitly reject this image in “Marx in His Limits” in *Philosophy of the Encounter*, trans. G. M. Gosgharian and ed. François Matheron and Olivier Corpet (New York: Verso, 2006), 136, 149; “Marx dans ses limites” in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques 1*, ed. François Matheron (Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1997), 497, 510.



Such equivocations are symptomatic, and the theory of ideology itself is a symptom, constantly filling in the empty space that is left by an unformulated question. Let us try to track down this question. Althusser says that the Cultural Revolution is “not simply a question of transforming the ideology or reforming the understanding of some intellectuals or a few leaders,” or even of the Communist Party. It is instead “a matter of transforming the ideas, the ways of thinking, the ways of acting, the customs [*mœurs*] of *the masses of the entire country*.” But, and this is the key point, “such a transformation of the ideology of the masses can *only be the work of the masses themselves*, acting in and through *organizations* that are *mass organizations*.” What is “most original and innovative” about the Cultural Revolution is “the emergence of organizations...distinct from other organizations of the class struggle (union and party).”<sup>57</sup> This is the case, says Althusser, because these organizations “are organizations *of ideological class struggle*,” and consequently they are assigned to their level and do not compete with the other forms of organization. The Communist Party, he says, “is very careful to link these new organizations to older ones” and the Cultural Revolution “is carried out under the direction of the Party,” which “remains the key, central and leading organization of the Chinese Revolution.”<sup>58</sup>

There are two lapses here in the text. First, the proposition of mass self-organization is simply cancelled by the assertion of the leadership of the party. Second, the proposition of mass self-organization is *constantly referred to the level of ideology*. But this proposition presents a far more fundamental challenge, as Althusser acknowledges: “what clearly poses a problem, for many communists, is the existence of...new organizations that are distinct from the Party.” Audaciously, he goes on to say that this

---

57 Althusser, “On the Cultural Revolution,” 7-8; 9. Though I do not have the space to do this here, one should compare this usage of “*mœurs*”—“customs,” or “manners and morals”—to Althusser’s elaboration on this term in his first, proto-classical book on Montesquieu. See *Politics and History*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1972); *Montesquieu: La politique et l’histoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959).

58 Ibid, 9-10; 10.

question of the organization of class struggle was “an old question of the workers’ movement” which had already been “settled by Marx, Engels and Lenin.” What was their solution? Simple: the function of the economic class struggle was taken up by the union, which had the form of a mass organization, and the function of political and ideological class struggle was taken up by the party, which had the form of a vanguard organization. Each level corresponded to a different function, and “this functional distinction corresponded to a distinction in terms of form.” But the actual history of debates over organization in the workers’ movement makes a kind of return of the repressed. The Cultural Revolution, Althusser says, has added an “astonishing innovation” by “creating a new, *third type of organization*: an organization specific to the ideological mass struggle.” This third type of organization separates the political from the ideological class struggle, and, unlike the party, because it is specific to the ideological level the third kind of organization is a mass organization.<sup>59</sup>

But behind the correspondence of level, function, and form there is the absence of an unformulated question which is nothing less than disturbing for the existing revolutionary problematic: what is communist *politics* in the context of mass organizations *which are not the party*? As if to neutralize this question, Althusser converts it into the correspondence of level, function, and form, thereby restricting the new form of organization to the ideological level and asserting the political primacy of the party. But at the same time, he quite clearly describes why this question is disturbing, because he has to explain why this new type of organization emerged if the question of organization had already been settled by Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

This is precisely because the necessity of the third type of organization is the result of the existence of socialist states; it results from “the change in position of both the party and union with regard to the State in a socialist regime.” In other words, “after the first revolutionary

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 16; 15.

seizure of power, during the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Party must assume leadership of the State, State power and the State apparatus,” and consequently “a partial but inevitable fusion will occur between the Party and the State apparatus.” And in fact, Lenin *did* anticipate this problem at the end of his life, without knowing how to solve it. He posed the question: “*how do we regulate the relations between the Party and the State in order to avoid the pitfalls of bureaucracy and technocracy as well as their serious political effects?*”<sup>60</sup> The Cultural Revolution, however, “adds a completely new solution to the problem posed by Lenin,” by proposing that the third type of organization “must be distinct from the Party (in both its existence and its organizational form) in order to oblige the Party to *distinguish itself* from the State, in a period during which it is in part forced, and in part tempted, to *merge with* the State.”<sup>61</sup>

What is remarkable is that despite beginning by equating the political struggle with the seizure of state power, affirming the leadership of the party, and reducing the problem of organization to the expression of the level, Althusser is able to identify the fusion of the party and the state as the fundamental political contradiction of state socialism, and understand that the socialist transition has given rise to the question of the formation of mass organizations outside the party.

How do we understand these equivocations? Interestingly, Althusser gives a hint in his elaboration of the character of the mass organizations. He notes that the mass organizations of the Cultural Revolution are primarily youth organizations, and that this may lead to complications, because “the youth is not revolutionary solely by the fact of being born in a socialist country.” If the youth “finds itself, due to political failings, abandoned to an ideological disarray or ‘void,’ it is then given over to ‘spontaneous’ ideological forms that ceaselessly fill in this ‘void.’” Althusser’s conclusion is that by assigning the youth the task of

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 17; 16.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 18; 16. Translation modified.

engaging in the mass ideological revolution, the Cultural Revolution compels the youth to “educate itself and transform its own ideology.”<sup>62</sup> But the significance of this passage lies more in the way that it illuminates, insofar as it is not just about the youth of China but ideology itself, Althusser’s own implication in ideology. Clearly this recalls the presentation of “symptomatic reading” in *Reading Capital*, which deals with the “places of the void” in a text—the places where the text “simultaneously points outside of itself to a real but absent problem, a real but but absent question, and within itself to the correlative conceptual void, or equivocation, the *absence of a concept behind a word*.”<sup>63</sup> If one were to take these *words* for knowledge, this would be to “remain in the epistemological void,” which, “ideology abhorring a void,” means remaining “in ideological fullness.”<sup>64</sup>

Now, in this analysis it is the language of ideology itself which constitutes the ideological plenitude that obscures the absence of concepts. There is no doubt that the Cultural Revolution was concerned with ideology: to anticipate Althusser’s later language, as his text on the Cultural Revolution does very noticeably, it began with conflicts within the ideological state apparatus of the universities. Nevertheless, this cannot be purely understood as an ideological struggle. While an original interpretation of the relation between base and superstructure had previously facilitated the invention of the concept of overdetermination, here the schema of the economic, political, and ideological levels has become an epistemological obstacle. Rossana Rossanda, later Althusser’s interlocutor on the crisis of Marxism, very sharply perceived this problem in an article rejecting the interpretation of the Cultural Revolution as an ideological struggle. In a previous discussion of these texts, I too quickly attempted to reconcile them by pointing out that Rossanda retained a view of ideology as consciousness, while Althusser’s analysis was predicated on

---

62 Ibid, 9; 10.

63 Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 21; 16. Translation modified.

64 Ibid, 255; 294. Translation modified.

repudiating this view. I therefore argued that when Althusser talked about ideology, he meant material and objective conditions, and thus they were talking about the same things. This argument, while accurate regarding the theory of ideology, nevertheless missed the more radical implications of Rossanda's argument regarding the political and economic "levels," and to understand this we have to engage in a broader interpretation of Althusser's categories.

First of all, Rossanda argues against the view that the socialist transition is characterized by "the superstructure lagging behind the structure." The notion of the lag appears to be consistent with Althusser's critique of linear historical time. But Rossanda points out that this was simply the orthodox interpretation of the Communist movement since the 20th Congress: the lag is not constitutive, but an error; it must be corrected, as Althusser simply repeats in the text on the Cultural Revolution, by making the superstructure correspond to the base. Rossanda points out, in language reminiscent of Althusser's analysis in "Contradiction and Overdetermination," that in the socialist transition, "a great deal of the capitalist mode of production survives, *not as a vestige of the past but as an intrinsic form of the present.*"<sup>65</sup> Rossanda makes this point regarding survivals of the economic base, while Althusser spoke of survivals within the superstructure. But the argument of "Contradiction and Overdetermination" is irreducible to the theory of correspondence. The discussion of the causal relations between base and superstructure was situated in an argument against *the logic of supersession – that is, the negation of the negation*, by which "the survival of the past as the '*superseded*' (*aufgehoben*) is simply reduced to the modality of a *memory*," which the present projects onto its future as "the destiny of all Human Becoming."<sup>66</sup> When the concept of overdetermination gives way to the succession of revolutions through levels and the aim of bringing them into

---

65 Rossana Rossanda, "Mao's Marxism," *Socialist Register* (1971): 56, 62.

66 Althusser, *For Marx*, 115; 115. Translation modified.

correspondence, which finally becomes possible with the arrival at the last level, the ideological level, where the party-state's negation of mass organization can itself be negated, the logic of supersession fills the conceptual void.

Hence the importance of Rossanda's argument that the goal of the Cultural Revolution was "to bring about a revolution *of the structure and in the structure*," which meant changes in social relations that went beyond property ownership, showing that the lag, discrepancy, and unevenness are operative *within the economic itself*. This should not be taken as an economistic argument, but in fact one which opens to the logic of overdetermination, because this ongoing revolution in the economic base puts "politics in command," to use the phrase Mao drew from Lenin – there is a "priority of politics," which "is not a matter of consciousness."<sup>67</sup>

The Cultural Revolution, then, was not a shift to the ideological level but challenged the existing conceptions of the political and economic revolutions. The seizure of state power was not sufficient for the political revolution, and the abolition of private property was not sufficient for the economic revolution. What was at stake now was the masses in their "role as political subject."<sup>68</sup> Politics in command, Rossanda wrote, meant "denying the independent existence and alleged objectivity of a meta-historical economics, separated from the social context, and restoring to politics its nature as the agent transforming the structure."<sup>69</sup>

A study of the Cultural Revolution confirms that the struggle against revisionism was not only an ideological struggle against bourgeois ideas and customs, and accordingly the struggle within the ideological state apparatus was not only, or even primarily, a question of ideology, but of the concrete processes by which classes would be abolished.<sup>70</sup> Althusser's argument in "On the Cultural Revolution" was that social class is

---

<sup>67</sup> Rossanda, "Mao's Marxism," 63, 70.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>70</sup> See Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

determined not only by the relations of production, but also by ideological relations that persist into socialism, and that the economic and political class struggle does not obviate the need for an ideological class struggle. But starting from 1949, complex and uneven processes directed towards the abolition of classes had to deal with universities not because of problems of ideas and customs, but because the monopoly of intellectuals on knowledge and expertise was the basis for the division of labor in production, a problem which in fact had also been at the center of the development of the Soviet Union. Althusser's notion that there was a lag or discrepancy between the economic and the ideological levels, with bourgeois ideology persisting past the abolition of classes, holds back in following through on the logic of overdetermination, which does not produce a more elaborate combinatory of levels but undermines the entire premise of levels and establishes points of intervention.

This is in fact apparent in an ambivalence in Althusser's conception of class. His argument is that a class is not defined "solely by the positions of its members in the relations of production" but also "by their position in political and ideological relations." In this sense by separating class from the economic, Althusser allows the possibility of class struggle which is not exclusively economic but also political and ideological, and opens to the possibility that the economic does not determine the political and ideological struggle. The language of class struggle occupies the space that Rossanda characterizes as the political subject. It is a language of political and ideological struggle which does not have to be referred to a foundation in the economic. In this context, however, "class" is an equivocal term. The opening to the political subject is closed not only by the reassertion of the economic as the last instance, but also the claim that political and ideological relations "*remain class relations* long after the socialist transformation of the relations of production."<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Althusser, "On the Cultural Revolution," 11-2; 12.

In reality the Cultural Revolution demonstrates, perhaps more than any other historical episode, that the scrambling of class categories under the socialist transition *actually threw the very category of class struggle into question*: the persistence of the language of class struggle could not grasp what was actually at stake in the emergence of new organizational forms independent of the party-state, and the relation of the party-state to processes of egalitarian and self-authorizing political invention.<sup>72</sup> Political conflicts did not simply express a class basis: there were factional divisions *within* the working class and the role of the party-state was not reducible to its class character, even if we come up with theories of a “new class” to try to hold on to this problematic, because what was really at stake was whether politics could be identified with the party-state, and underlying this, whether the working class was identical to the party – once again a basic problem, and maybe the most fundamental problem, established by the Russian Revolution and the transition that followed. This is a symptomatic theme of Althusser’s text on the Cultural Revolution, and it is equally a symptom in the very name of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” in the identification of revisionism with a bourgeoisie inside the Communist Party, and in Mao’s widely repeated injunction to “never forget the class struggle.”

To return to Althusser in “On the Young Marx,” what is at stake in the Cultural Revolution is precisely the articulation of the new within the old forms, and the necessity of new concepts that had still not been invented. What we see in Althusser’s text on the Cultural Revolution, after these whirlwind years of theoretical invention, is a working through, within the old language, of the limits of state socialism and the capacity of Marxist theory to understand it and make political propositions about it.

In his study of the Cultural Revolution, Russo emphasizes this theme of the old and the new—but not in the sense of the spectacular

---

<sup>72</sup> See Alessandro Russo, “Class Struggle” in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, ed. Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (New York: Verso, 2019).



campaigns of the Red Guards against old things, which in fact became an obstacle to the real political innovation: the new political forms which confronted the old forms of the party-state. The tragedy of the Cultural Revolution is precisely its suspension between the old and the new, the proposition of inventing a communist politics *outside and beyond* the party-state which nevertheless remained within its limits.

Accordingly Russo invokes the necessity of Althusser's "symptomatic reading" to interpret the persistence of old languages and forms within a new political conjuncture for which they were no longer operative. Concretely his account refers to the moment initiated by the Shanghai "January Storm" in 1967, when divisions within the working class were short-circuited by the call to seize power, resulting in the drastic acceleration of factional violence that weakened the political inventions that had preceded it, nourishing "a destructive and self-destructive narcissism, devoid in reality of any political idea, which led some organizations to affirm their own bureaucratic supremacy over other organizations."<sup>73</sup> In this context terms like "class struggle" and "seizure of power" marked absences which corresponded to "new though not yet formulated concepts," concepts which were "necessary for the new theoretical formulation but still beyond the available discursive resources." Such absences ended up being filled in with old terms that "came from a previous theoretical horizon" and played a "substitute role in a completely new framework of thought." These substitutes had a retroactive function of bringing "the political innovations in progress back within the conceptual framework with respect to which those innovations had appeared in excess." In the Cultural Revolution, a "radical rift in the party-working class relationship" had undermined "the unifying principle of the ideological and organizational framework of twentieth-century communism": the principle of the seizure of state power.<sup>74</sup> This principle

---

<sup>73</sup> Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, 202.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 201.

then “took on the exorbitant value of a completely imaginary name endowed with the virtue of recomposing the lost unity of that space of knowledge,” and “brought the current political invention back to the preceding condition of its existence.”<sup>75</sup>

*Reading Capital* established that it was only by reading Marx the way that *he* read that this mode of symptomatic reading could be observed. But it is already in “On the Young Marx” that we are presented with a Marx who is far from simply a text, a Marx who lived within the history he sought *through* his texts to grasp, a Marx who sought to touch real history—but why? For the Althusser of 1960, Marx’s discovery of history is the “retreat to reality”—a formulation which will lead him to qualify the essay’s publication in *For Marx* with the acknowledgment that it remains “trapped in the myth of an evanescent critical philosophy.” But this retreat from ideology to reality was also “the discovery of a *radically new reality*” which could be found nowhere in philosophy—it was “the discovery of the class struggle, of flesh and blood capitalism, and of the organized proletariat.”<sup>76</sup>

I will not now suggest, in my own myth of evanescence, that in the retreat to reality we discover the flesh and blood of the class struggle, as the unity of history and politics, but rather that for Althusser class struggle *appears as a symptom*, invoked to solve an absent question in the places where his theoretical work appears to preclude the possibility of resistance, and therefore of politics, and thus, perhaps, of communism. But it is Althusser, too, who had to learn to say what he was going to discover in the way he had to forget. What he had to say about communist politics, he *had to say* within the language of Marxism and the historical world which for every communist was defined by the successes and failures of the great revolutions, and in which what was politically novel, what we could know or say about politics in the empty conceptual space

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>76</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 23, 81; 31, 78.

opened up by the transition, had to be stated in the very language that obscured its novelty. Perhaps when we read the history of communism our task is to *learn how to forget it*—to break through the layer of ideology history has deposited over us, in order to be able to think it, to think communism in its emergence in the present, to invent communism for a future which may otherwise not last a long time.

## Bibliography

Althusser, Louis et al. *Lire le Capital*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996

Althusser, Louis et al. *Reading Capital*. Translated by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach. New York: Verso, 2015

Althusser, Louis. “Marx dans ses limites.” In *Écrits philosophiques et politiques 1*, edited by François Matheron. Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1997.

Althusser, Louis. “Marx in His Limits.” In *Philosophy of the Encounter*, edited by François Matheron and Olivier Corpet. Translated by G. M. Gosgharian. New York: Verso, 2006

Althusser, Louis. “On the Cultural Revolution.” Translated by Jason Smith, *décalages* 1:1 (2010).

Althusser, Louis. *Pour Marx*. Paris: La Découverte, 2005.

Althusser, Louis. “Sur la révolution culturelle.” *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*, no. 14 (1966): 1-19.

Althusser, Louis. *Essays in Self-Criticism*. Translated by Grahame Lock. London: New Left Books, 1976.

Althusser, Louis. *For Marx*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Verso, 2005.

Althusser, Louis. *L'Avenir dure longtemps*, edited by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang. Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1992.

Althusser, Louis. *Lettres à Franca*. Edited by François Matheron and Yann Moulier-Boutang. Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1998.

Althusser, Louis. *Montesquieu: La politique et l'histoire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959.

Althusser, Louis. *Politics and History*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1972.

Althusser, Louis. *Réponse à John Lewis*. Paris: Maspero, 1973.

Althusser, Louis. *The Future Lasts Forever*, edited by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang. Translated by Richard Veasey. New York: New Press, 1993.

Andreas, Joel. *Rise of the Red Engineers*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Badiou, Alain. *The Communist Hypothesis*. Translated by David Macey and Steven Corcoran. New York: Verso, 2010.

Balibar, Étienne. "Foucault's Point of Heresy: 'Quasi-Transcendentals' and the Transdisciplinary Function of the Episteme." *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, nos. 5–6 (2015): 45–77.

Balibar, Étienne. "Mao: Critique interne du stalinisme?" *Actuel Marx*, no. 3 (1988): 145–54.

Balibar, Étienne. "Structural Causality, Overdetermination and Antagonism." In *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, edited by Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

Communist Party of China. *The Polemic on the General Line of the International Communist Movement*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.

Engels, Frederick. "Dialectics of Nature." In *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 25. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 6. Edited by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Translated by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

Freud, Sigmund. "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 12. Edited by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Translated by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1964.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 1. Edited by Valentino Gerratana. Turin: Einaudi, 1975.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1992.

Haider, Asad. "Crisis Theory." *Viewpoint* (December 2017). <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/12/14/crisis-theory/>

Haider, Asad. "Dismissal." *The Point*, no. 23 (October 2020). <https://thepointmag.com/politics/dismissal/>.

Ichida, Yoshihiko. "Histoire et politique: conjonction et partage originaire chez Althusser (1962-1967)." *Cahiers du GRM*, no 7 (2015). <https://journals.openedition.org/grm/607>

- Knight, Nick. "Introduction: Soviet Marxism and the Development of Mao Zedong's Philosophical Thought." In *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, edited by Nick Knight. London: M.E. Sharpe, 1990.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Le séminaire 1: Les écrits techniques de Freud*. Paris: Seuil, 1975.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan 1: Freud's Papers on Technique*. Translated by John Forrester. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Mao Tse-Tung, "On Contradiction." In *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, vol. 1. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.
- Mao Tse-Tung, "Speech at the Tenth Plenum of the Eight Central Committee." In *Chairman Mao Talks to the People*, ed. Stuart Schram and trans. John Chinnery and Tieyun. New York: Pantheon, 1974.
- Milner, Jean-Claude. "Le matériel de l'oubli." In *Usages de l'oubli*. Paris: Seuil, 1988.
- Montag, Warren. "Althusser's Lenin." *diacritics* 43, no. 2 (2015): 48-66.
- Montag, Warren. "The Last Instance: Resnick and Wolff at the Point of Heresy." In *Knowledge, Class, and Economics*, edited by Theodore Burczak, Robert Garnett, and Richard McIntyre. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Montag, Warren. *Althusser and His Contemporaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Pozzana, Claudia. "Althusser and Mao: A Missed Encounter?" In *Il linto e i libri: Studi in onore di Mario Sabattini*, edited by Magda Abbiati and Federico Greselin. Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2014.

Pozzana, Claudia. "Althusser and Mao: A Political Test for Dialectics." In *The Idea of Communism 3*, edited by Alex Taek-Gwang Lee and Slavoj Žizek. New York: Verso, 2016.

Rossanda, Rossana. "Mao's Marxism." *Socialist Register* (1971): 53-80.

Russo, Alessandro. "Class Struggle." In *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere. New York: Verso, 2019.

Russo, Alessandro. *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Schram, Stuart. *The Thought of Mao Zedong*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Stalin, J.V. "The Foundations of Leninism" in *Problems of Leninism*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976.

Thompson, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory*. London: Merlin Press, 1995.

Zhou Yang, *The Fighting Task Confronting Workers in Philosophy and the Social Sciences*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Introduction: Mao Tse-tung, the Marxist Lord of Misrule." In *Mao on Practice and Contradiction*. New York: Verso, 2007.