

Reading Culture in Revolution: Badiou and Macciocchi on Ideology and Hegemony in the Cultural Revolution

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This reshaping of the soul, this alone is what education means.

G. W. F. Hegel

Philosophie des Geistes

Recalling that Marx's "personally significant practical experiences...his direct experience of the earliest struggle organizations of the Paris Proletariat [and] his revolutionary experiences in 1848 *intervened* in his theoretical practice...in the form of new thought objects, 'ideas' and... contributed...to the overthrow of the still ideological theoretical base on which he had lived (i.e., thought) until then" (Althusser et al. 2015, 62), we want to examine and contrast the thought object that is the Cultural Revolution in the theoretical practice of two European communists, Alain Badiou and Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, for whom the Cultural Revolution constitutes both a succession and disruption in the notion and names of Marx and Communism.¹

Given this dislocating intervention of practical experiences on theoretical practices and thinking, we want to foreground that while Macciocchi had what Althusser above calls a 'direct experience' of the Cultural Revolution, Badiou has had what we might call a direct experience of an indirect experience, that is, Maoism in France.² Departing from these differing practical experiences with Mao and Maoism, we will suggest some of the characteristics and effects stemming from Badiou and Macciocchi's readings of the Cultural Revolution. We argue in particular that Badiou's is one that, despite all of his claims to the contrary, forecloses the thinking and theoretical practice by the masses in mass-line organization which Macciocchi identifies as the crucial

¹ On the paradoxical identity of succession and disruption in Marxism, see Hoon Song, "North Korea's 'Succession' of Marxism" *boundary 2* 43, no. 3 (2016): 79-104.

² On the historical contexts and relationships of Alain Badiou, France and Maoism, see, for example, Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

characteristic of this Cultural Revolution. He reinserts in its place an idealistic and historiographical reading of Mao as the philosopher leader of the Chinese Communist party-state, whose name, for Badiou, inscribes "the revenge of singularity on representation" (Badiou 2005a, 506). The primary problem here is therefore not the lack of a 'workerist' politics or standpoint on Badiou's part. The primary problem is that without this mass-line practice of thinking and learning philosophy — what one worker calls "a weapon of revolutionary struggle in a protracted war" (Macciocchi 1972, 144) — Badiou's 'thought object' lacks the fundamental conceptual development of the Cultural Revolution that Macciocchi will call hegemony.

The symptomatic formation in Badiou's reading localizes in the inability to deliver on his own promise to infill the name cultural in Cultural Revolution. For while he says that cultural here means "'ideological' in a particularly radical sense" (Badiou 2005a, 489), and often cites the opening of the Sixteen-Point Decision (August 8, 1966) which states that the Cultural Revolution will "change the human being in what is most profound" (Badiou 2005a, 482), his thought object that is culture lacks a dislocatory, 'direct experience' with the theoretical practices of mass-line organizations which could intervene in and dislocate his thinking. Culture thereby remains a 'practical concept'.³ Badiou thus has not yet located the *necessity* for the cultural in the name Cultural Revolution.⁴ Macciocchi, on the other hand, with her engagement with the practice of philosophy by the masses, elucidates the fundamental and internal relationship of theoretical practice, ideology and cultural revolution that Althusser enciphers in the imago of Marx's 'direct experience'. In doing so, she illuminates why hegemony, as clarified by her readings of Gramsci and Althusser, is the necessary concept for understanding the Cultural Revolution and Mao's thought.

³ Étienne Balibar, "On the Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism" in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (New York and London: Verso, 2015), 363. Balibar writes that "*practical* concepts...still depend in their *formulation* precisely on the problematic which has to be displaced".

⁴ Although this essay uses the vernacular name 'Cultural Revolution', Maria Antonietta Macciocchi notes that the people with whom she spoke "never failed to use the formal expressions (such as 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' instead of 'Cultural Revolution'...this was done because these were clearly defined concepts...and would mean that the discussion would proceed from the *lowest common denominator*". See Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *Daily Life in Revolutionary China*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 41.

1. 'Rebellion can be strengthened by the consciousness of its own reason'

For many late Communists and Marxists, the significance of the Cultural Revolution has been primarily transmitted through the thought and writings of Alain Badiou. Badiou has in many places positioned his reckoning of this event as one that is in opposition to the accounts that he calls variously the dominant ones of historiography as compiled by specialists and sinologists, as well as the official version of the Chinese state from after Mao's death in 1976 (Badiou 2005a, 483). These, he often says, are characterized by the narrative that the Cultural Revolution was a power struggle of elites and within the party. He insists that these accounts give nothing of the 'real meaning' of the events that can "come only from the political understanding of the episodes" (Badiou 2005a, 484).

To understand what this 'political understanding' means for Badiou, we return to one of his earliest formulations regarding Marx and Communism in their relations to Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In his *Théorie de la Contradiction* (1975), Badiou sets out to explicate Mao's statement, "Marxism comprises many principles, but in the final analysis they can all be brought back to a single sentence: it is right to rebel against the reactionaries" (Badiou 2005b, 669). Badiou identifies the foundation of this 'practice theory' in Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Unlike Kant, for whom true knowledge remains a *formal* synthesis of the *a priori* and *a posteriori*, Hegel presents, according to Badiou, a *real* synthesis with: "the absolute idea has turned out to be the identity of the theoretical Idea and the practical Idea" (Ibid, 671; Hegel 2010, 735). The true is thereby a "contradictory unity of theory and practice" (Badiou 2005b, 671). Lenin, while ratifying this notion, brings out another rift within this conception of the true that Hegel does not. Badiou recalls that Lenin paratactically rewrites this line in the *Philosophical Notebooks* as, "the unity of the theoretical idea (of knowledge) *and of practice* - this NB - and this unity *precisely in the theory of knowledge*, for the resulting sum is the 'absolute idea'" (Ibid). In this recasting, knowledge as theory is opposed to practice, but this dialectical unification itself takes place in and as knowledge. Thus, "knowledge is the dialectical process (of) practice/theory" (Ibid). For Badiou, this unquestionably defines the Marxist-Leninist notion of truth such that

practice itself is an essential and irreducible moment within true knowledge.⁵ No one can circumvent this primacy of practice.

This is all recalled by Badiou in order to deliver the following: "it is not just any practice that internally anchors theory, it is the rebellion against the reactionaries. Theory, in turn, does not externally legislate on practice, on rebellion: it incorporates itself in the rebellion by the mediating release of its reason" (Ibid, 672). Three points will indicate this 'mediating release' of 'it is right to rebel against reactionaries'. First, it is a fact. "Rebellion does not wait for its reason...rebellion is reason, rebellion is subject" (Ibid, 673). This means that the problem of cause is not primary. Badiou notes that Lenin strongly condemns the privileging of causality by Kant. Hegel, Lenin writes, does not dwell on this beloved category of the Kantians because "for him causality is only *one* of the determinations of universal connection" (Ibid, 677). Second, it is true at the 'tribunal of history'. There, the exploitation and oppression of the reactionaries will be exposed, and the obstinate rebellion 'will be right'. Thus, "rebellion legislates about the future" (Ibid, 674).

Third, and crucial for the argument here, is that "rebellion can be strengthened by the consciousness of its own reason" (Ibid, 675). This third point reconciles the first two in a classical expression of Hegelian logic that is at once closure and opening: "the development of the kernels of knowledge internal to the rebellion itself and the return into rebellion of this development... break with the still repetitive rule" (Ibid, 675). This breaking that is 'development' is what Badiou calls the 'concentration' of reason.⁶ "[Rebellion] concentrates its rational quality... Knowing that one is right to rebel against the reactionaries, by delivering the theoretical reason of this practical reason, allows one to make the subjective (organization, the project) equal to the objective (class struggle, rebellion)... 'Reason', which initially voiced revolutionary legitimacy and optimism, now speaks of the consciousness of history" (Ibid, 675-6). For Badiou at this moment, the *subjective* dimensions and practices of the

⁵ Mao's formulation of this problem emphasizes the qualitative chasm separating theoretical and practical ideas: "to learn is no easy matter and to apply what one has learned is even harder". See Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung Volume I* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965a), 186.

⁶ For an exemplary analysis of this process, see Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (London: Routledge, 2005), 143-154.

masses in rebellion are the very subject-substance of reason. It will be crucial to recall this formulation later.

2. 'To change the human being in what is most profound'

We can now turn to a perhaps Thermidorian text composed by Badiou almost 30 years later, in 2002, entitled "The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?", in order to indicate a capital inversion in the signification imputed to this event by Badiou.

While professing his fidelity to the Cultural Revolution (referencing Rimbaud, he says, "I am there, I am still there" (Badiou 2005a, 481)), Badiou clearly states: "the Cultural Revolution is the last political sequence that is still internal to the party-state...and fails as such" (Ibid, 482). The subsequent sequences of politics – Solidarity in Poland and Chiapas are his two preferred examples – only come about because of this "saturation...of the party-state" (Ibid, 483). Rather than disputing the historical or logical veracity of such a 'failure', we want instead to locate the political dimensions and protagonicity as it were of this 'failure'.

In 2002, Badiou identifies the cause (NB: not reason) for the Cultural Revolution as follows: the socialist economic revolution, the so-called Great Leap Forward, carried out by a communist party state, does not eradicate the cause of capitalist class struggle. Given this situation, Macciocchi shows that Mao acutely ascertains the primacy of ideology over 'structures'. She writes, "for Mao, the assumption of power cannot be called a definitive success if it is limited to structures: 'the assumption of power by ideological means is absolutely necessary if consolidation of the working classes' power and hegemony is the goal'" (Macciocchi 1972, 436). Badiou, on the other hand, turns his analysis to the 'structure' of the party-state. He writes that faced with this 'impasse', the party-state sought to "arouse mass revolutionary action in the *margins* of the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat...[while] the relation between the party and the state...must remain unchanged insofar as it is not really a question of destroying the party" (Badiou 2005a, 487, emphasis added). Badiou places the revolutionary mass actions of the Cultural Revolution in the 'margins' of the party-state. But this emplacement of these massive revolutionary actions 'in' the margin, in contrast to the party as the putative center, implicitly ratifies the topology of the Stalinist party-state, and expresses

what in the language of the Cultural Revolution is a revisionism. For the masses, on the contrary, are not only central but moreover *internal* to the party in the Cultural Revolution. As Macciocchi argues, "recourse to the masses is the vital contribution made by the Cultural Revolution to [Marxist] theory and practice" (Macciocchi 1972, 437).

These mass revolutionary actions are practical, 'political' experiments that aim to transform the very way that the masses and party-state transform one another. To give a brief but nonetheless representative list of these mass-line organizations: the Red Guards of Beijing in 1966; the Revolutionary Committees, (the first is at the Textile Factory no. 17 in Shanghai in 1966, which invented the three-in-one form of revolutionary leadership comprised of masses, cadres and the army); the Barefoot Doctors (which Badiou, to my knowledge, never mentions, which may explain part of his inability or resistance to digest the place of the masses in the party⁷); big-character posters (*dazibao*) (that Mao calls the 'trenchant arm of the revolution' and whose notional addressee is the command to 'bombards the headquarters'); and struggle-criticism-transformation sessions. These forms of mass-line organization are not 'marginal' or 'counter-powers' of the state, but are rather experiments in forging a circuit of political leadership from the masses to the masses.⁸

Whereas Badiou in 1975 situates the realm of the event of the Cultural Revolution in the reason of the masses in rebellion, by 2002, he

⁷ Regarding the dislocation in the notion of health in the Cultural Revolution, Macciocchi writes, "In 1965, Mao violently attacked the Ministry of Health, calling it the 'Ministry of the Health of the City-Dweller'. 'What does health protection mean?' asked the Chairman. 'The expression becomes jibberish if it leaves 350 million peasants aside'...Mao's directives were severe: 'center medical and health work in the rural regions; move its center out of the cities.'" (Macciocchi 1972, 268). This generated a "revolutionary transformation of the medical profession" with a "medical mass movement...training thousands of barefoot doctors' to deliver care to millions 'in the countryside and in the mountains'" (Ibid). A doctor in Shanghai explained to Macciocchi the medicative conditions generated through this transference and counter-transference of doctors and peasants: "I cured twenty patients who had been considered 'incurable'. *In truth, I believe it was the poor peasants who cured me of my ideological sickness, and not I who cured the peasants.* If intellectuals do not pay attention to their own conceptions of the world, and seek to change them, they may possess a very high scientific level, but they are not in a position to serve the people" (Macciocchi 1972, 274; emphasis added).

⁸ While Hardt and Negri note that these experiments in the institutionalization and leadership of power were "antagonistic formations within and against the state", the concept of 'counterpower' still retains the notion that the Chinese state at this moment is a 'regular' state bureaucracy seeking order rather than revolution itself. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 254.

has relocated the primacy of this realm to the party-state. And because the Cultural Revolution does not bring about the hegemony of the dictatorship of the proletariat, it fails according to this later logic. But the *realm* of this imputed failure is the party-state. The *subjective* dimensions generated in the direct experience of concentrating reason and the consequences of a rebellion that is strengthened by the consciousness of its own reason are not present at *this* tribunal. Without the concentration of the reason of the masses and the 'breaking of the still repetitive rule', the Cultural Revolution becomes an episode in an idealistic historiography of the state and not the development and advancement of Lenin's thought.⁹

We want to suggest that the reason for this shift can be understood by considering a symptomatic 'absent presence' of the name cultural in Cultural Revolution for Badiou, for it is at once absolutely foregrounded and yet remains bereft of its anticipated imputation.

Culture and cultural has, especially in the phrase cultural difference, become one of the most vilified concepts in a certain formalist line of contemporary thought. Alain Badiou himself has contributed substantially to such a development.¹⁰ But while this line of thinking claims an inheritance of its own potentiality from Jacques Lacan, what Lacan says about culture in *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge (Seminar XX)* does not only not comport with this latter day vilification, it might even seek to cure it. After acknowledging the immediately banal sense of culture in its putative reference to ancient culture, Lacan says that "culture is the fact that it has a hold on us (*ça nous tient*). We no longer have it on our backs, except in the form of vermin, because we don't know what to do with it, except to get ourselves deloused. I recommend you keep it, because it tickles you and wakes you up" (Lacan 1998, 53-4). Culture as what tickles and wakes you up provides a penetrating conceptualization of the name cultural in Cultural Revolution. For in Macciocchi's reading, the Cultural Revolution seeks to change the human being in what is most fundamental by generating a hold

⁹ Macciocchi concludes her work by saying that "Mao's thought is to *be Leninist elsewhere* (than in the USSR)...everything he represents is summarized in this burning question: *How is one to be a Leninist today elsewhere* (than in the USSR)? Needless to say, when one is able to *be a Leninist elsewhere*...rather than merely *copying Lenin* one is working toward the *advancement* of his ideas" (Macciocchi 1972, 500).

¹⁰ See Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (New York: Continuum, 2009), esp. "Preface".

on human beings with a satisfaction that does not seek to delouse vermin from our backs.

What does Badiou himself say about the cultural of the Cultural Revolution? He repeatedly refers to the aforementioned opening sentence in the Sixteen-Point Decision, that the Cultural Revolution seeks "to change the human being in what is most profound"¹¹, to which he adds his own gloss that 'cultural' in Cultural Revolution is "equivalent to 'ideological' in a particularly radical sense" (Badiou 2005a, 489). But what is this particularly radical sense? When he turns to infill this characterization, he refers to the well-known actions in the Cultural Revolution of fighting against "old ideas and customs (that is what gives content to the adjective 'cultural', which in Chinese means rather 'pertaining to civilization' and, in the old Marxist jargon, 'belonging to the superstructure')" (Ibid, 494).

While this characterization is not only reductive in the strict sense, even implicitly drawing on the field of sinology he frequently castigates and its epistemological presuppositions of cultural difference, it also in a very dramatic way articulates Badiou's absential reading of the cultural in the Cultural Revolution. For while the Cultural Revolution is indeed, as Badiou says, the 'development of a historical contradiction', its primary contradiction is not located in the saturation of the party-state as the site of politics. Instead, it is in the problem of what Badiou in 1975 called the concentration and release of reason: how can a communist ideology become hegemonic, between and within the party and the people? The necessity of the name *Cultural* Revolution is not due to the destruction of the old in all of the individuated elements of the superstructure (although it is that as well!), but is rather because culture, as in Lacan's usage in *Seminar XX*, is the name for the envelope of the all of human practices. It

¹¹ As Bruno Bosteels notes, Badiou's French phrasing diverges from the English translation but Badiou does not give a textual citation for this quotation. In English the first sentence of the Sixteen-Point decision is "the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution now unfolding is a great revolution that touches people to their very soul, and constitutes a new stage in the development of the socialist revolution in our country, a stage which is both broader and deeper". See Kuang Huan Fan, ed., *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: Selected Documents* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 162.

is the holding of our backs, and it is this that is the target and arrow of the Cultural Revolution.¹²

This becomes all the more significant given that Badiou calls the Cultural Revolution the ‘last’ revolution because of the aforementioned ‘saturation’ of the party-state. Mao too thinks that the Cultural Revolution is the ‘last’ revolution, not in the sense of without furtherance, but rather because cultural revolutions will keep repeating, perhaps an infinite number of times, long after Badiou seeks to close the sequence with the entrance of the workers to Peking University to stop the student brawls and which marks the moment of the turn of the party from one that organizes revolution to order (Badiou 2005a, 511). The problem Badiou cannot digest is the possibility that the people of a communist party-state do not become a ‘faithful’ communist subject and that the last instance in this problem for communism is situated in the subjective dimensions of a cultural revolution that is between and within the party-state and the people.

But when Badiou says that cultural means ‘civilizational’ as in the ‘old marxist jargon of the superstructure’, he forecloses the profundity of the experiments and transformations in ideological subjection generated by the Cultural Revolution that can be synoptically recapitulated as “the intervention of the proletariat in ideology” (Macciocchi 1972, 435). Two examples will demonstrate the consequences of misrecognizing the relationship between cultural revolution, ideology and hegemony. The first is regarding the relationship of the masses and the party, and the second is regarding the army and the state.

Badiou proposes a logical rejoinder to the Cultural Revolution: if, as Mao says, the party is good and the vast majority of the cadres are good, why must there be a revolution of the party? (Badiou 2005a, 487). In brief, we can say that it is because the revolution of the party is not *caused* by the problem of whether the party is good or bad. Instead, the primary *reason* is a ‘self-consciousness’ in the party-state that ‘knows’ it is not yet adequate to the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The aim of the Cultural

¹² In an effort to indicate this vexed relation of the party and the people, Mao writes, “The Communist Party’s propaganda policy in such matters should be, ‘Draw the bow without shooting, just indicate the motions’” (Mao 1965a, 46).

Revolution is thus to obliterate the *cause* that animates an understanding that the economic revolution does not eradicate class struggle.

Badiou's question here is, in Mao's idiom, idealistic and metaphysical, not materialist and dialectical. For the party of the Cultural Revolution is not "a metaphysical category nor a 'Thomist *credo*'" (Macciocchi 1972, 473). It is not an 'end' (*finis*). When asked to explain what 'wrong ideas' are, a 'revolutionary subject' says to Macciocchi, it is like this: "a person thinks, I have fought in the rebellion, *therefore* I should become a party member. This is wrong. Why? Because there are no communists by *right*... This concept [communist by right] is totally contrary to the idea of uninterrupted revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat" (Ibid, 427). Indeed, this massive criticism of the party by the masses in front of everyone (through the writing of *dazibao* and struggle-criticism-transformation sessions) generates what Badiou calls the impasse of the factionalism of the Cultural Revolution (Badiou 2005a, 493). The aim of the Cultural Revolution however is not to *secure* the party. It is to *strengthen* the party. Its aim is "diminishing the purely coercive power of the state apparatus" (Macciocchi 1972, 435). It thus evinces another satisfaction entirely than the one corresponding to whether the party and the cadres are good or not.

The second example is with regards to the army. Badiou writes that the place of the army and the state evinces another failure of the Cultural Revolution. He writes, "Classically, Marxism indicates that a revolution must break down the repressive apparatus of the state it aims to transform from top to bottom" (Badiou 2005a, 493). But the Sixteen-Point Decision sets forth that the People's Liberation Army will instruct Red Socialist Education. Installing the army directly within the party state amounts to a failure of this revolution for Badiou; "here again, the centralized authority of the party comes back" (Ibid, 493). The logical entailment of this unfolds when, in the Wuhan and Canton sequences of 1967, the repressive apparatus of the army is marshalled against the people (particularly 'the left'). The revolutionary party-state, for Badiou, is thus not able to rid itself of an army against the people.

While the People's Liberation Army undoubtedly constitutes a repressive state apparatus, the 'culturally revolutionary' event of the Cultural Revolution, is that the army realizes a *primarily* ideological, not

repressive, state apparatus. It is guided by the four firsts, "man should take primacy over weapons, political work over other work, ideological work over routine political work, and in ideological work, living ideas in people's minds over ideas in books" (Macciocchi 1972, 86). Macciocchi repeats this point frequently: "the people's army makes the primacy of the political sphere its key principle"; "the army seems to be a kind of guardian of ideology here" (Ibid, 384, 193). It should furthermore be noted that while Badiou seeks to narrow the duration of the Cultural Revolution to exclusively comprise the events between August 1966 and March 1968, Mao had already, in 'On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party' of December 1929, said that "the Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution" (Mao 1965a, 106) and in 'On Protracted War' of May 1938, that "the most fundamental (condition) is the extensive political mobilization of the whole army and people...because victory is impossible without it" (Mao 1965b, 187).

In order to grasp this profound transformation in the mode of ideological subjection, Macciocchi offers a depiction of why the People's Liberation Army in the Cultural Revolution is not of the same kind or category of army as those of post-Westphalian European states. Her explanation of this difference bears implicit reference to the well-known sentence in Part I of *Capital*, where, because of the capitalist value form, Marx writes, "some men count for more when inside a gold braided uniform than others" (Marx 1976, 143). For Macciocchi writes, the generals of the People's Liberation Army *have no stripes or braids on their jackets*. They are "commanders without rank" (Macciocchi 1972, 313). When Macciocchi asks someone in the army, how do you recognize the commanding officer?, he responds, "he personally knows him from his work, and not because of some *external* rank or 'stripe'". (Ibid, 384 emphasis added). There are no external stripes or golden braids in the scene of ideological subjection that bind the army and the masses. The army is instead, as is said so often in the Cultural Revolution, like a fish in the water of the masses and the party. Such an intervention in the coats of the army unbuilds the primal scene of ideology and interpellation, whereby the golden braids on coats shine through the social being of the capitalist value form.

Badiou is of course factually correct to identify that the repressive function of the army has not yet been overcome. But in so doing, he thereby represses the reason for the invention and intervention of constituting the army as a primarily ideological, rather than repressive, apparatus. The army indeed remains a repressive organ. But as one person said to Macciocchi, "China still has to walk a hard road...Do you think that everything was resolved? You would be mistaken to think that, and we want you to see what our country still lacks, despite its achievements" (Macciocchi 1972, 219). A repressive state apparatus indeed cannot transform absolutely what is most profound in the human being. This clarifies the aforementioned thesis of Mao recorded by Macciocchi: "the assumption of power by ideological means is absolutely necessary if...hegemony is the goal" (Macciocchi 1972, 436). Badiou excises this fundamental relationship of hegemony, ideology, and cultural revolution, and for that reason, the meaning of cultural in its equivalence to the ideological in a radical sense.

In elucidating this relationship of revolutionary culture and ideology, Macciocchi refers to the work of Joachim Schickel in his *China: die Revolution der Literatur* (1969). Schickel writes, "Culture in Chinese is *wenhua*. *Wen* means *the written* in the highest sense of the word, the *written text*. *Hua* means 'to change, to become transformed, to evolve, to become something through what is written, to become a scholar'" (Cited in Macciocchi 1972, 185). If this seems like another instance of presenting the cultural of the Cultural Revolution by means of sinology and cultural relativism, Macciocchi draws attention away from that tendency by emphasizing its collocation with Mao's principle of revolution: "the movement of transformation in the world of objective reality is without end, and hence man is never done learning the truth in practice" (Ibid, 279). The mass-line organization of practices in the Cultural Revolution does not merely disrupt the way the masses think. Instead, it cultivates an organization for thinking and cultural revolution by the masses themselves.

3. 'Doing it Yourself Means Developing the Internal Cause'

Mao Tse-Tung's thought, and more specifically the 'political understanding' of the masses and the party-state as re-determined by the

events of the Cultural Revolution, had a significant impact on Louis Althusser's thought.¹³ Already in 1966, Louis Althusser affirmed the unprecedented dimensions and world historical event of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁴ But the effects generated by this encounter did not immediately dissipate. More than a decade later, in "The Crisis of Marxism" (1977), Althusser locates the eponymous problem and its "*burning* political questions" of the "revolutionary democratic transformation of the State" with "the development of initiatives among the people" (Althusser 1978). And in his 1976 address to the Catalan College of Building Engineers and Technical Architects, Althusser says that new forms appropriate for mass democracy "come from experience: and this experience is achieved through the masses' practice and [is] concentrated in the experience of class struggle" (Althusser 2015, 176). These formulations strongly suggest that the Cultural Revolution did not quickly dissipate as a 'thought object' for Althusser.

Althusser is of course not alone in identifying the cardinal significance of the Cultural Revolution. Badiou, decades later, writes "our Maoism will have been the experience and the name of a capital transition. And without this transition, or there where nobody is loyal to it, there is nothing" (Badiou 2005a, 507). Macciocchi posits that the Cultural Revolution has changed the course of humanity and "a new person is being created" therein (Macciocchi 1972, 126). In order to qualify these grand imputations, we want to identify the particular characteristic of this unprecedented world historical event in its internalization of the relation of learning philosophy, cultural revolution and mass-line organization.

For this, we turn to Maria Antonietta Macciocchi's testimonial of her dislocatory, 'direct experience' with the Cultural Revolution. Macciocchi was a member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) from the

¹³ For a particularly insightful account of this relation, see Fang Yan, "The Althusser-Mao Problematic and the Reconstruction of Historical Materialism: Maoism, China and Althusser on Ideology" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20, no.3 (2018).

¹⁴ An Anonymous text attributed to Althusser from 1966 opens, "Whatever position he or she takes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, no communist is permitted to simply or automatically 'deal with' this matter, with no other form of examination, as a mere fact among others, *as one argument among others*. The C.R. is not, first of all, an argument: it is first and foremost an *historical fact*. It is not one fact among others. It is an *unprecedented* fact." See [Attributed to Louis Althusser], Anonymous tr. Jason E. Smith, "On the Cultural Revolution" *Décalsages* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1-19. I thank Warren Montag for bringing this text to my attention.

1940s. Her impact on Louis Althusser's thinking regarding the Cultural Revolution has likely been underestimated, when it has been acknowledged at all.¹⁵ Her work, published in 1971 as *Dalla China: Dopo la Rivoluzione Culturale*, was translated first into French and then into English by a team of seven translators in 1972 on Monthly Review Press as *Daily Life in Revolutionary China*.¹⁶ Macciocchi calls herself in her travel to China as a representative of the PCI with her husband, "the first communist 'explorers' from the West" and a "barefoot doctor of politics" (Macciocchi 1972, 24; 462).

In underlining her experience of dislocation, Macciocchi opens by recalling that in her travel to China, she felt like she was going to Mars (Ibid, 1). She presents three introductory images of the Cultural Revolution to initially express her extraterrestrial arrival: the forward march of Socialism; politicization; and an antitechnocratic world, an antimodel of industrial hyperdevelopment (Ibid, 17-8). This is not merely another world, but rather the determinate negation of the capitalist world. After awaking on her first morning, taking breakfast in the hotel restaurant, she refinds the primal scene as follows:

From time to time the restaurant lounge is suddenly invaded by a crowd of young people - the hotel workers. Carrying their little red Mao books, they disappear into a neighboring room where they hold a political meeting at which they analyze events and engage in criticism and self-criticism. We hear them at the end of the meeting, intoning Mao's most famous sayings or singing a gay popular marching song, such as "the helmsman guides the ship, Mao Tse tung guides the revolution" (Ibid, 28).

Although appearing only in the first pages of the book, the scene conclusively sets forth the place to and from which the discourse of the

¹⁵ In his 1980 interview with RAI, Althusser said, "everything has come to me through women". See Louis Althusser, "The Crisis of Marxism: An Interview with Louis Althusser," Verso, July 11 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3312-the-crisis-of-marxism-an-interview-with-louis-althusser>.

¹⁶ The title in English likely refers to the English language title *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion 1250-1276*, written by Jacques Gernet in 1962, which in French is *La Vie Quotidienne en Chine   la Veille de l'Invasion Mongole 1250-1276* (1959).

book is directed. Philosophy is grasping and being grasped by the masses during this Cultural Revolution. The book asks, 'what does she want?'

This *practice* of learning philosophy, in the group and self-study of Mao's little red book, by the masses is a widely commented upon, if not belittled, practice of the Cultural Revolution. While many have said that it inculcated a cultic adoration of Mao, habituating recourse to his thought for everything, even growing tomatoes, Macciocchi recognizes that this practice of learning philosophy is not exactly an indoctrination of so-called Asiatic despotism. Instead, learning philosophy makes millions protagonists of their own lives. She writes, Shanghai in 1967 was a city of 10 million philosophers (Ibid, 345). What could this mean? We will return to this relation of living and thinking in conclusion. For now, we follow Macciocchi's analysis of the practice of learning philosophy in mass-line organization, in order to understand how the Cultural Revolution dislocates capitalist ideology and its modes of subjection.

Nothing demonstrates this dislocatory practice more for Macciocchi than the writings of *dazibao*, 'big-character posters'. Factories are filled, inside and out, with them. They bear an originary significance for the Cultural Revolution for the following reason. After the May 16 Circular, which unmasks Liu Shao Chi and the 'Khrushchev-style persons' in the party, a philosophy professor, Nie Yuanzi, wrote and hung the first 'big-character poster' at Peking University on June 1, 1966. This begins the opening of the Cultural Revolution and commences its practice known as the 'bombarding of the headquarters'. With this 'big-character poster', the *practice* of thinking and writing that 'comprador intellectuals', 'petty politicians', 'bourgeois professors' and not one single worker lead the University began to be written, read and learned. Macciocchi calls this practice "an almost absolute expression of human freedom, and an individual participation in public life practically unknown in Europe" (Macciocchi 1972, 319). Recalling Schickel's exposition of *wenhua* (文化, culture) as the transformation of and through the written, these 'big-character posters' are the "ruthless criticism of all that exists" (Marx 1975, 142). They moreover actualize a revolutionary culture that is practiced through one's participation in the written. The study of the little red book and the writings of 'big-character posters' thereby provide a positive testimony for Althusser's thesis: with Marx, there is a new practice of

philosophy.¹⁷ But the masses must liberate themselves, Mao says. No one is born red.

This practice of learning philosophy and thinking philosophically evinces for Macciocchi an actually existing change in what is most fundamental in human beings. She writes, "this is how the little red book fits in, the book we are supposed to laugh at. At first you are haunted by it, you see it everywhere. Then you realize that it is essential, that it brings philosophical reasoning and dialectical materialism to every Chinese" (Macciocchi 1972, 147). She demonstrates this in her dialogues with factory workers. One worker explains why philosophy is studied:

By studying philosophy, we learned that we could have a *subjective initiative*, and that material force became in turn a spiritual force, capable of changing society. Goals and tasks weren't enough. The problem is a problem of method, and it is this problem that must be solved (Ibid, 142).

"We were ridiculed by Liu Shao Chi", the worker said. "We would have given in had we not been convinced that philosophy is a weapon of revolutionary struggle...the 'protracted war' to study philosophy has begun among the workers" (Ibid, 144). And as "another worker from the dyeing workshop at textile factory number 2 in Tianjin" said:

I study philosophy in order to apply it to technical innovation...At the factory we didn't have the high temperature fixing baths which you need to prevent the material being dyed from stretching and losing its shape. We had always imported this equipment. The problem was this: were we going to ask the state to buy a foreign machine or did we dare to make one ourselves? It was a contradiction between two conceptions of the world. To rely on a foreign source is a metaphysical attitude - it is placing your trust in

¹⁷ While not seeking to refute this thesis, Macciocchi provides an interesting modification to the putative notion of this 'newness'. For she records that of all the 'foreign' commentators on the Cultural Revolution, it was a Catholic diplomat in China who she felt singularly understood the event. He said that the proper historical analogy here is not with the early church, but instead with the eleventh and twelfth centuries, "when the Church was the center of everything" and when "people built great stone cathedrals as a testimony to their faith" (Macciocchi 1972, 109).

an *external cause*. Doing it yourself means developing the *internal cause*. The external cause is the condition whereas the internal cause is basic. To rely on external factors is to depend on something which will betray you, and to progress slowly and gradually is revisionism (Ibid, 148).

He continues:

Man is a living entity whereas we are working with what is inert so it has to bend to man's will. Under the leadership of the Communist party, and as long as man exists, we can invent anything. It is necessary to liberate the intelligence, to dare to think, dare to act. The study of proletarian philosophy gives us this liberation...by studying the theoretical works of Mao...(we) discover(ed) the great truth that knowledge originates in practice...We made dozens of electrical circuits, and we made mistakes. But once we solved that problem, the machine was completed. It cost one-tenth of what an imported model would have cost (Ibid, 148-9).

And in response to the obvious capitalist, if not also marxian, question of how long did it take to make the heating baths, the worker responds: "We do not know how long it took to build it. *You can't compare our experience with capitalist societies*. This equipment is the fruit of our working-class consciousness. By raising our consciousness, we have increased production and our own capacities" (Ibid, 149; emphasis added). The worker's testimony of studying philosophy echoes the dislocatory, 'direct experience' which Althusser said is without a mode of extrinsic comparability.

This mass-line practice is not simply developed for 'employee' wellness. It instead exemplifies what Fabio Bruschi has recently identified as a communist practice of politics that "suppresses the separation of the political sphere... from the relation of production" (Bruschi 2020, 104). We note that this concept, if not practice, emerges long before Badiou's narrow chronological confines for the Cultural Revolution. In 'Pay Attention to Economic Work' of August 1933, in response to the left deviationists who "thought it impossible to spare time for economic

construction because the revolutionary war keeps people busy enough”, Mao says, “such views are wrong” (Mao 1965a, 129). For it is *in* economic construction that co-operative movement is developed (Ibid, 131). Economic work is undertaken *in* revolutionary ideological work. One does not wait for a peace (that never comes in imperialism) for economic work.

The final ‘big-character poster’ Macciocchi depicts hanging in the factory vividly expresses this new practice of philosophy. It states:

When you find it difficult to read the thought of Mao, try to get help from others. When there isn't as much work to do, take advantage of the free time to study philosophy. On the road, think about it. Before going to bed, read a little. In the morning, read a little more. After you have done some studying, write down your thoughts. And think through what you have learned about philosophy (Ibid, 149-50).

Transformation only occurs through *participating* (‘try to get help from others’, ‘write down your thoughts’). This rectification through participation is perhaps where we can finally localize this ‘fundamental change in humanity’ of the Cultural Revolution. Its aim is already articulated in the earliest writings of Mao, particularly ‘On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party’ of December 1929. In formulating a practical method for mass democracy and party rectitude, Mao says that “at meetings, all participants should be encouraged to voice their opinions as fully as possible...inner-party criticism is a weapon for strengthening the Party organization and increasing its fighting capacity...and it should not be used as a means of personal attack” (Mao 1965a, 109-110). The aim is to eradicate the ‘employee’ mentality in the party, people and army; “this passive mentality of an ‘employee’ of the revolution is also a manifestation of individualism...*they do not realize that they themselves are the makers of the revolution*” (Ibid, emphasis added). But when this *participating realization* does take place, as Mao says, “an enormous power radiates from them” (Macciocchi 1972, 345). We can now repeat Althusser’s remark in the 1976 address in Barcelona that new forms of mass democracy come about through “experience...achieved through the masses’ practice and concentrated in the experience of class struggle” (Althusser 2015, 176). It

is not only new experience but a new and different power or person that is effectuated. Macciocchi records her own surprise that at round-table discussions that lasted for six or eight hours, participants never appeared tired.

4. 'To be a Leninist Elsewhere'

In conclusion, we now return to Macciocchi's aforementioned thesis that hegemony is the key concept for understanding the Cultural Revolution. Her elucidation draws on Althusser's own definitive contributions to the concepts of ideology and hegemony. We first recall that the Marxist concept of hegemony conceptually eschews the absolute separation of base and superstructure. As Paul Thomas aptly put it recently, hegemony is "a particular practice of consolidating social forces and condensing them into political power on a mass basis - the mode of the production of the modern 'political'" (Thomas 2009, 194).

In outlining the particular characteristics of this political practice during the Cultural Revolution, Macciocchi departs from the problem which Lenin anticipates: the corpse of the old society is decomposing amongst us; the corpse cannot be placed in a coffin, buried and be done with. As the 'relations of production' are "engendered in large part by the political superstructure and the ideological apparatus which is established in close relationship with it" (Macciocchi 1972, 470), the Cultural Revolution is the event that aims to 'dialectically simplify' the problem that the Soviets plus electrification, or the Soviets plus the party as vanguard, fails to overcome. That is, in the idiom Badiou uses in 1975, it seeks to overcome to failure to generate the conditions that concentrate and release communist reason or hegemony. Hence Mao's anticipation that there will be many more cultural revolutions, perhaps an infinite number (Ibid, 317).

This returns us to our primary and orienting question, of why the cultural in Cultural Revolution means ideological in a fundamental sense, and why its foundational declaration posits that it sets out to change what is most fundamental in human beings. To parse this, Macciocchi brings forth a schematic contrast with Gramsci and Althusser in order to situate the importance of hegemony in the historical contradiction that is the Cultural Revolution.

In this outline, she writes, Althusser posits that ideological state apparatuses generate an ‘immanent’ consensus among the dominated without *absolutely* eradicating coercion. Gramsci, on the other hand, posits a sequence: coercion characterizes the ‘economic-corporate’ stage, which precedes a posterior, hegemonic stage. Thus, the socialist, not capitalist, state is the highest form of hegemony. In *Notes on Machiavelli*, Gramsci at one point calls this hegemonic state ‘democracy’. In this stage, “the increasingly important elements of a controlled society assert themselves” (Ibid, 472). This will on the superstructural level cause an activity which is “above all negative, a criticism of the past” (Ibid), an aim and action which both Badiou and Macciocchi note indeed characterizes the Cultural Revolution.

But Macciocchi writes that Althusser’s ‘immanent’ position comports more closely with the historical destination of the Cultural Revolution than Gramsci’s account of ‘stages’.¹⁸ For while the economistic socialist state of the Chinese Communist Party cannot absolutely eradicate coercion, the party of the Cultural Revolution repeatedly revolutionizes itself, seeking with each experiment a diminution of its own coercive power, rather than the a finite, ‘final’ stage. And yet Macciocchi’s schema does not simply excise Gramsci’s contribution. On the contrary, Gramsci’s identification of the intensification of hegemony as democracy itself clarifies the at first seemingly paradoxical identity in the Cultural Revolution of ‘dictatorship’ (of the proletariat) and (true proletarian) ‘democracy’. As Macciocchi tirelessly insists, Mao’s thought and the communist party of the Cultural Revolution is an anti-dogmatic and anti-Stalinist party-state. This is what creates the at first paradoxical appearance of the utter fidelity to Mao’s thought, even to grow tomatoes, and the immense unleashing of human freedom, such as is evident in the massive practice of writing ‘big-character posters’. This is the attempt to deepen the ties of the party and the people, in a people’s, not socialist, democracy.

¹⁸ In 1976, Althusser complicates the idea of a ‘stage-ist’ Gramsci by writing that Gramsci, “or, at least...some Gramsci scholars in line with Togliatti’s interpretation say – the hegemony that exists prior to taking state power is not only the hegemony of the proletariat over its allies (that is, Lenin’s thesis) but also its hegemony *over all society*; as a consequence, the dictatorship of the proletariat becomes the privileged means of seizing state power” (Althusser 2015, 154).

But Macciocchi also identifies a "more profound difference in emphasis between Gramsci and Althusser. It lies in the indication of the historical moment when the function of hegemony (or the organization of consensus around a social group) becomes possible" (Ibid). She characterizes this as follows:

In *Notes on Machiavelli*, Gramsci tends to attribute it [hegemony] also to the political party as such, and thus believes it to be equally possible *before the actual conquest of state power* by a given social class. Althusser on the other hand, implicitly postulates the 'statist' character of every effective ideological activity. The conquest of power then becomes a necessary condition for the organization of consensus by way of the state ideological apparatus (and the very function of the political power, now renewed). Seen from this angle, Althusser's concept seems closer than that of Gramsci to certain strategic Chinese concepts (Ibid).

This helps identify a fundamental discrepancy between Macciocchi's position of reading Gramsci through Althusser and Badiou's late reading of the Cultural Revolution. The party in the Cultural Revolution is not, according to Macciocchi, "a metaphysical category nor a Thomist *credo*" (Ibid, 473). Instead, it constantly experiments on the very 'conquest of power' itself as a way of organizing 'consensus'. This is not done by the 'party in-itself'. Instead, "the proletariat 'intervenes' in the party, the ideological apparatus of the power system, and elsewhere" (Ibid). The mass-line criticizes in the open the officials and opens the party to 'new blood of the proletariat'.¹⁹ Thus, the seeming paradox that "the hegemonic role of the party is strengthened in the vast confrontation which is proletarian democracy" (Ibid). This is because the "*internal* relationship

¹⁹ Here we note that the Cultural Revolution minimally splits with a notion of communist political practice as the "autonomous initiatives of the masses" and "the re-appropriation by the masses of their political capacity" (Bruschi 2020, 107). For the masses and the party in the Cultural Revolution are engaged in an internal, not external, relation of theoretical and political practice. There are therefore no masses in-themselves as much as there is no party in-itself in the Cultural Revolution. These theoretical practices rewritten in the dialect of the Cultural Revolution would be the 'semi-autonomous initiatives of the masses' and the 'masses re-appropriating the army and the party's political capacity'. See Mao's depiction of this relation below as an 'endless spiral'.

between party and masses is precisely what defines a revolutionary party" (Ibid, 436-7). Badiou, on the other hand, says that the Cultural Revolution evinces that "free politics" are "impossible...from the framework of the party-state that imprisons it" (Badiou 2005a, 506-7). But the aim of the Cultural Revolution is a hegemonic form whose ends are not found in 'free politics'. Its consensus is formed through attacks on the coercive action of the communist party state. These are massive revolutionary practices whose aim is the concentration or consolidation of communist constituent power. They are thus not, pace Badiou, marginal to the state. They are rather a project whose telos is the destruction of the coercive power of the ideological state apparatus, writ large.

This practice is in absolute opposition to the Stalinist notion of the party where the party is the vanguard and absolute leader. As Macciocchi writes, "in China, the party is the instrument of revolution not of administration" (Macciocchi 1972, 473). This is expressed extraordinarily adequately in Mao's 1943 writing, "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership":

In all the practical work of our party, all correct leadership is necessarily 'from the masses to the masses'. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again, in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital, richer each time (Ibid, 440; Mao 1965c, 119).

The sentence immediately following this quotation, which Macciocchi does not reproduce in her own text, is: "such is the Marxist theory of knowledge" (Mao 1965c, 119). By 2002, Badiou has excised this vital 'concentration' through the endless spiral between the masses and the party from reason. Without this internal relation, his thesis that the

Cultural Revolution indicates that the party-state as a site of politics is saturated is suspect at best. The cultural in the Cultural Revolution has much less to do with the 'old marxist jargon' of the superstructure and much more to do with experimentally attempting to generate practices that reproduce 'satisfactions' that do not emerge from and with capitalist hegemony.

5. 'An Extremely Fierce and Strenuous Debate'

Returning to Macciocchi's statement that with the Cultural Revolution, 10 million people-as-philosophers in Shanghai have become protagonists of their own life, we repeat the question: what does she mean by this? In order to answer, we recall that Badiou concludes his *Logics of Worlds* with the question of what it means to live. He writes that the singularity of the human being is not of the "order of lived experience, nor to that of expression" (Badiou 2009, 510). Instead, it is the capacity to be "incorporat(ed) into the exception of a truth..." 'To live' and 'to live for an idea' are one and the same thing" (Ibid).

The practice of mass-line philosophical thinking during the Cultural Revolution indeed seems to testify to this amphibolous notion of living and truth. But this living truth does not emerge without destruction and peripeteias. As Mao says, "a revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another" (Mao 1965a, 28). Shanghai in 1967 was "swept by an extremely fierce and strenuous debate" (Macciocchi 1972, 336). There is a struggle of two lines. To express this, Macciocchi records the story of a 73-year-old lady, who, late in her life, becomes an enthusiastic and committed communist. 'Living for this idea', she left her husband to die at home alone so she could attend a revolutionary criticism group meeting in the commune. She said to those telling her to stay with him, "the death of my husband would be less important than the activity of the revolutionary criticism group. If my husband dies, the collective will be able to do everything necessary for him" (Macciocchi 1972, 227). Ideological state apparatuses are indeed overturned in a true Cultural Revolution.

The readings of the Cultural Revolution presented by Badiou and Macciocchi suggest that a communist culture of class struggle *can* concentrate reason to break repetitively reactionary formations. By repeatedly asking 'who transforms whom' by means of mass-line organizations, the masses enjoy a storming, not only of heaven, but of themselves. Nothing so expresses the existence of another satisfaction than the capitalist one as workers in factories studying philosophy in order to distinguish a fundamental reason from the mere condition of a cause. Philosophical thinking and writing in cultural revolution has no other meaning than the re-determination of everything.

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