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1967: The Shanghai Commune, French Maoism & the Case of Alain Badiou

Abstract

*Alain Badiou's Maoism has long been the subject of controversy. In this paper, we approach the topic of Badiou's Maoism by way of the references he and his erstwhile Maoist group, the UCFML, made to the 1967 Shanghai Commune. We argue that Badiou and the UCFML's invocations of Mao and Mao's writings are subordinate to their interpretation of the political stakes of the Shanghai Commune as a privileged episode in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. We proceed by comparing Badiou and the UCFML to two of the most prominent French Maoist groups, the PCMLF and the GP, before situating Badiou's use of Mao's name within the conceptual terms of his 1982 work *Theory of the Subject*.*

Keywords: Alain Badiou; Cultural Revolution; French Maoism; Mao Tse-tung; politics; *Theory of the Subject*

In addition to being one of the world's most celebrated contemporary philosophers, Alain Badiou is infamous for his fidelity to Maoism, a political movement he actively participated in for well over a decade and which remains a constant reference point in his later work.¹ A number of invectives, polemics, expressions of incredulity and hagiographic defences have been devoted to this topic in recent years.² Our own attempt to explain Badiou's Maoism will take a slightly different approach to existing scholarship. We aim to engage with the topic of Badiou's Maoism by way of his repeated invocation of a singular event in political history, one that occurred exactly fifty years after the Russian Revolution: the Shanghai Commune of 1967.³ Indeed, our contention will be that Badiou's Maoism can only be understood if the figure of Mao, along with the Maoist works on which Badiou draws, are seen as subordinate to his

¹ For a relatively recent statement by Badiou on his Maoist activities and convictions, see Badiou 2010, pp.101-105.

² For excellent existing scholarship on this topic, see the 2005 edition of *positions: east asia cultures critique* devoted to Badiou and his Maoist group, the UCFML, in particular the article by Bruno Bosteels, Bosteels 2005: *positions: east asia culture critique*, edited by Bruno Bosteels. *Alain Badiou and Cultural Revolution*, special issue of *positions: east asia culture critique*, 13 (2005), pp. 576-634. See also Bourseiller 2008, Wolin 2010 and Laruelle 2013.

³ Badiou has recently composed a preface to Hongsheng Jiang's book on the Commune, *La Commune de Shanghai et la Commune de Paris*. See Jiang 2014, pp. 21-34, in which he discusses the Commune at length. See also Badiou 2010, pp. 131-135, 161-162.

understanding of the Commune as both an event and an inquiry into the possibilities of communist politics. Our aim in this paper will therefore be to explain the *priority* of the Commune in Badiou's understanding of Mao and Maoism. To showcase the importance of the Commune in Badiou's discourse, consider the following passage from his book *Theory of the Subject*, where he implicitly invokes the Commune in order to distinguish his reading of Hegel's dialectic from structuralism:

...neither I nor Hegel are structuralists. I think, for example, that, in its antagonistic determination that is specific to the new revisionist bourgeoisie, the proletariat emerges as a positive newness. This happens, timidly, during May '68 in France, and, with great uproar, in January 1967 in China—for instance, in the guise of a thoroughly transformed Marxism (Maoism) (Badiou 2009, p. 11).⁴

How are we to understand the link Badiou establishes here between May '68 and the Shanghai Commune, two events that are separated both temporally and geographically? In what sense do they portend and even necessitate a new Maoist future for Marxism? While Badiou has long been read as a typical French fetishist of the events of May '68, we argue that these events are actually significant to him only to the extent that they echo and attempt to verify the events of their Chinese predecessor and prototype. But what was it about these events that allowed Badiou to build a bridge between the Chinese and French situations? Answering this question involves returning to the phenomenon of French Maoism in general. The first part of our paper will therefore be devoted to sketching the political space of French Maoism with a view to situating Badiou, along with his erstwhile political organisation, the UCFML (*Union des communistes français marxiste-léniniste*), within it. Following this, we will compare Badiou's Maoism to the two most prominent French Maoist groups: the PCMLF (*Parti communiste marxiste-léniniste français*) and the GP (*Gauche prolétarienne*). We will draw both on the UCFML's collective publications, in particular its retrospective 'Ten Years of Maoism', and Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*. The latter is a hybrid work of philosophy, militant politics, psychoanalysis and poetic and dramatic criticism. Yet it is above all a work that emerged from—at the same time as it provided a sophisticated theorisation of—the political practices of the UCFML, whose full name was in fact the 'Group for the Foundation of the Union of French Communists, Marxist-Leninist'. We will return to the significance of this name below.⁵ Badiou himself was, if not the leader, then a significant member of the Group's inner circle (Bourseiller 2008, p. 215). In light of this, we contend that the philosophical positions defended in *Theory of the Subject* are best understood as a theoretical systematisation of the Group's specifically French Maoist politics. Unfortunately, however, *Theory of the Subject* has seldom been read as a significant expression of French Maoism, no doubt due to a combination of both its forbidding complexity and the fact that the published text, along with the seminar sessions from which it was derived, come several years after what historians typically consider to be the French Maoist moment.⁶ For us, by contrast, the philosophical sophistication of the text, combined with the fact that it constitutes a sort of post-mortem of the Maoist moment written by one of its key participants, might well help to deepen and perhaps even shift our understanding of the repercussions of the Chinese experience of socialism on

⁴ For other occasions where the Shanghai Commune is explicitly mentioned in *Theory of the Subject*, see Badiou 2009, pp. 8, 231.

⁵ For Badiou's own discussion of the Group's name, see Badiou 2011, pp. 8-10.

⁶ For the best discussion of the book's relation to Maoism, see Bosteels 2011.

political life in the Hexagon. Similarly, no extensive study of the UCFML's position within the field of French Maoism currently exists.⁷ The group's extant publications remain for the most part both untranslated and difficult to find,⁸ while the political struggles in which it was engaged are fading from popular and even scholarly memory. Our paper therefore aims to rectify these two omissions by way of a simultaneous study of key philosophical moments from *Theory of the Subject* and the UCFML's political practice. In what sense were Badiou and his Group Maoists? And what role did the Shanghai Commune of 1967 play in both inspiring and orienting their politics?

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As scholars from Christophe Bourseiller to Richard Wolin have described, if the Chinese experience of socialism—filtered as it was through the powerful proper name of Mao Tse-tung—resonated so strongly with sections of the French left both before and after May '68, then this was because Maoism was thought to involve a critique of Soviet socialism; to provide backing to Third Worldist ideas that might deserve the adherence of those who had fought in anti-colonial struggles; and to propose a series of directives, such as “serving the people”, which promised to rejuvenate a moribund Marxism. Presenting themselves as the true inheritors of Leninism in a period where the Soviets, following the death of Stalin in 1953 and Khrushchev's secret speech of 1956, were pursuing a policy of peaceful coexistence, the Chinese were seen, through the eyes of some on the anti-Stalinist French left, as inhabiting a vibrant socialist society that compared favourably to the glacial bureaucratism of the USSR (Wolin 2010, pp. 11-15). This sentiment was compounded in the French situation by the perceived reactionary drift of the PCF, a perception reinforced by the Communist's collaboration with the Gaullists in the return to order following May '68. The key directive the French Maoists received from the Chinese after the Sino-Soviet split—or, alternatively, after the Cultural Revolution—was the necessity of struggling on two fronts; that is, of struggling against the “two bourgeoisies”, the “old” and the “new” (UCFML 1981a, p. 30, UCFML 1981b, pp. 81). For the French Maoists, any communist political struggle would be handicapped if it allowed itself to be co-opted by the “new bureaucratic bourgeoisie” (Badiou 2009, p. 11) made up of the PCF, a satellite of the CPSU, and its accompanying trade union, the CGT. In the Maoists' eyes, these institutions were “revisionist”, not “revolutionary”. Their nominal adherence to the communist cause hid the fact that they ultimately functioned to render the working class' interests and political prospects homogenous to post-War capitalism. As Badiou writes in *Theory of the Subject*, “revisionism [...] is never anything but the specific and homogenous form, adapted to the working class, of the general bourgeois and imperialist space” (Badiou 2009, p. 9). Given that, in the final analysis, the tactics and strategy of the PCF-CGT were almost entirely dictated by Moscow, the French Maoists were undoubtedly correct in their low estimation of the PCF and the CGT's effectiveness in advancing the cause of French progressive movements during this period. Specifically, the Soviet policies of détente and of a peaceful transition to socialism meant that the PCF-CGT had to adopt a set of interlinked economic, political and ideological directives, which coalesced to make the

⁷ Bourseiller devotes only a few pages to discussing the UCFML: see Bourseiller 2008, pp. 215, 397-402. Wolin's book, despite devoting an entire ‘Excursus’ to Badiou, has little to say about the UCFML's actual activities. See Wolin 2010, pp. 155-167. Again, Bosteels' work is doubtless the best existing study of the UCFML in relation to the two other major Maoist groups, the PCMLF and the GP. See in particular Bosteels, 2005, pp. 588, 629-630. We hope in the present article to extend and deepen Bosteels' insights.

⁸ Selections of their writings have nevertheless been translated and published in the 2005 edition of *positions: east asia critique*, mentioned above.

Communists an ultimately conservative political force. That said, the intellectual arm of the PCF did not present these wild oscillations in doctrine and policy as if they were simply the shibboleths of their subservience to the Soviets. Instead, Communist intellectuals argued that mutations in post-War capitalism had made a peaceful transition to socialism eminently possible. Correlatively, revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat were no longer necessary. The centrepiece of their argument was the theory of state-monopoly capitalism.⁹ For the PCF-CGT, the post-War era represented a new era in capitalism, one that was characterised by planning, nationalisations and social welfare, all of which were processes that had subtracted substantial sectors of the economy from the law of profit. The key contradiction in capitalist society was now between ownership by big capital and ownership by the state, not between capital and labour. The PCF-CGT sought, therefore, to extend the domain of the economy already under public control by parliamentary means and the actions of the union bureaucracy. In *Marxism-Leninism and Revisionism Faced With the Economic Crisis*, a collective work of economic analysis published by a group of researchers closely associated with the UCFML, Badiou's Maoist comrades describe this strategy and its underlying theory as follows:

For the revisionists, the whole of the state-managed sector no longer functions as capital, because it 'has the possibility of acting without taking into account the law of profit'. [...] This is the meaning of the major revisionist dilemma: 'Public service or service of monopolies?' This is the reason for their watchword: 'No to the privatization of public services' (Groupe Yenan-économie 1976, p. 88).¹⁰

The theory of state-monopoly capitalism, or STAMOCAP as it was colloquially known, gave intellectual cover to the policies demanded of the PCF by the PCSU. As the Maoists understood, the political corollary of all this was the denial of any "antagonistic contradiction" (Badiou 2009, p. 24) between capitalism and the transition to socialism and communism, along with a decidedly un-Marxist elevation of the bourgeois state to the status of an asylum from—rather than an instrument of—the depredations of international capital.

A set of sins thus made it impossible for the Maoists to consider the PCF-CGT the bearers of the egalitarian-universalist ideal of which they claimed to be the inheritors. These same failings also justified the Maoists denouncing these traditional organisations as the "new bourgeoisie" (UCFML 1981a, p. 30). The PCF was associated with the worst of Stalinism and Soviet imperialism; it had a poor history on the colonial question; had abandoned the political primacy of revolution; and most recently had stifled the flame of May '68. For their part, the CGT were seen by the Maoists as systematically keeping the demands of workers below a certain antagonistic threshold so as to maintain the Communist's objective collusion with the state's protectionist policies. The watchword of the Communist-backed union, as Badiou wrote in a 1976 pamphlet, was "negotiation". What this meant was "precluding as a matter of necessity taking the contradiction between classes to its extreme" (Badiou 2012, p. 187) in the course of a union's campaign to improve wages and conditions. Whatever local successes the CGT enjoyed, the union's strategy of "negotiation" ultimately meant that its actions could never achieve anything beyond shoring up the Communists' power

⁹ For a superb discussion of the theory of state-monopoly capitalism and its critique by the UCFML, see Walker 2012.

¹⁰ Cited in Walker 2012, p. 54.

within the existing parliamentary and capitalist regime. The contradiction between bosses and unionised workers was an example of a “weak” or “structural” contradiction, not a “strong” contradiction that might lead to the destruction of the society that had given birth to the struggling parties. The reference here is to Mao’s model of “antagonistic contradiction” from *On Contradiction* (Badiou 2009, p. 25). As Badiou writes:

There exists no contradiction in principle between the mode of capitalist exploitation and the edification of permanent workers’ organisations, which aim to intervene in the process of the fluctuation of the price of the labour force and in the incessant transformations of the rate of surplus value (Badiou 2012, pp. 188-189).

Not only did union campaigns function to stabilise society and control prices (Badiou 2012, p. 189), these campaigns were increasingly waged, and often explicitly so, in the name of a “native” class of French worker whose working and living conditions were won and maintained at the expense of a significant underclass of immigrant workers. Worse still, with the onset of protracted economic crises in the early 1970’s and rising unemployment throughout the decade, the PCF-CGT decided to demonise immigrant workers so as to increase support amongst the “French” working class (UCFML 1981b, p. 3). For the Maoists, the Communists’ opportunistic fear mongering was of a piece with the chauvinism they had displayed throughout post-War anti-colonial struggles, most notably the Algerian War. They were therefore poorly placed to aid what was perhaps the most radical political force of the post-’68 years in France: the growing number of struggles waged by immigrant workers, such as the rent strike in the SONACOTRA hostels—a struggle to which we will soon turn.¹¹

For all of these reasons, a space had opened up to the left of the PCF-CGT in the pre- and post-’68 period. But this space would have remained empty had it not been filled by movements or events that attested to the existence of a consequent political force that was communist in nature but opposed to the existing communist party apparatuses. This was the space that the Shanghai Commune of 1967 filled, at least for Badiou and the UCFML. As is well known, the Commune involved rebel workers, students and revolutionary party leaders overthrowing the local communist party in Shanghai and establishing a Commune modelled on the Paris Commune of 1871. For Badiou and the UCFML, this event, however fragile and fleeting, constituted the first sign that a new period had begun in the history of egalitarian political movements. That France’s own revolt against the PCF and the CGT began just a year later could only add to their sense that a page had been turned in the book of communist history. In short, the Maoism of Badiou and the UCFML began as an attempt to be faithful to the promise of these two events. As the Group write in ‘Ten Years of Maoism’:

Our convictions [...] are rooted in the experience, the universal significance and the assessment of the Cultural Revolution. Between the years 1966 and 1976, but above all between 1966 and 1969, the revolution in China saw the first mass political revolts against the new revisionist bourgeoisie that was present both in the Party and in the State (UCFML 1981a, 30).

¹¹ For excellent scholarship on the SONACOTRA rent strike, see Hmed 2007 and Hmed 2009. See also the UCFML 1981b.

What came first, then, for the UCFML, were “mass political revolts”. Then, in second place, came their analysis of these “revolts” in terms of what they meant for Marxism: “Mao gave the first indications, from a Marxist perspective, of what the novelty of this revolutionary class struggle consisted in”. However, as the UCFML went on to write, “our definition of Maoism, tied as it is to our political experience, has deepened and developed” (UCFML 1981a, 30). Indeed, as we will see further on, whatever clarity Mao’s writings brought to these novel political events, the UCFML strictly delimited the role Mao could play in their political imaginary, tactics and strategy: the Shanghai Commune always took pride of place in their conception of the political stakes of the new conjuncture.

That said, Badiou and the UCFML were in fact distinguished within the field of French Maoism by the importance they accorded the Commune. While references to China and to Mao were a constant in French Maoist circles, these references meant different things to different people depending on their political background; their reading of events from the Cultural Revolution and May ’68; and their relation to existing institutions on the French left. The Shanghai Commune was in no way a common point of reference, nor was its signification fixed. Indeed, the relation of subordination the UCFML instituted between such “revolts” and Mao Tse-tung Thought was most certainly not common. Thus, while we have so described the field of French Maoism in broad terms, we must now mark out the lines of division within it so as to bring out the singularity of Badiou and the UCFML’s Maoism. To do this, we will contrast the Group with the two other most significant Maoist groups: the PCMLF and the GP.

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We will begin with the PCMLF. Those who founded this party in 1967 were members of an older generation of Communist militants who fundamentally agreed with the strategy and tactics of the PCF, even if they were deeply dissatisfied with its post-Stalinist practices (Bourseiller 2008, p. 96). For representative figures such as François Marty, who had fought in the Resistance and been disappointed when the PCF downed its arms following the Liberation, Maoism was a shot in the arm of good old Leninism and Stalinism. As Bourseiller writes, Marty was one of a family of Communists who “supported Bolshevik positions, applauded the Soviet intervention in Hungary and criticized destalinization” (Bourseiller 2008, p. 55). Importantly, the old guard in the PCMLF leadership were inspired by the Sino-Soviet split, not by the Cultural Revolution, towards which they were highly ambivalent (Bourseiller 2008, p. 54). But the PCMLF’s leadership was also made up of those who had been active during the Algerian War of Independence and had supported the FLN. For this second family of militants, their entrance into Maoism was made less by way of a fidelity to Stalinism and more by a sense that their Third Worldist convictions were best expressed by a political movement emanating from the world’s most powerful Third World country—a country that also appeared to possess a dynamic communist culture (Bourseiller 2008, p. 55). A figure like Jacques Jurquet was exemplary of this group of militants. Bourseiller describes his trajectory as follows:

When the Algerian War broke out, [Jurquet] came into conflict with the line of the PCF, which had agreed to vote for the special powers demanded by the government of the socialist Guy Mollet. Then the crisis between China and the USSR broke out. The staunchly Third Worldist positions of the Chinese could not but seduce him (Bourseiller 2008, p. 57).

Troubled by the growing popularity of Maoism, from 1963 onwards the PCF set out to disband all existing 'Associations d'amitié franco-chinoise'. Ironically, the members of these 'Associations' had been instructed by Peking to work within the PCF, not against it (Bourseiller 2008, p. 57). In a further irony, despite being violently attacked by the PCF's paramilitary wing—Jacques Jurquet, for instance, had to travel everywhere with a loaded revolver and a large dog (Bourseiller 2008, p. 61)—the PCMLF decided that it was necessary to create a party modelled on that of their enemies, the PCF. Badiou registers this irony in his own description of the PCMLF:

I believe there have been three different interpretations of Maoism in France. The first, and the oldest, was that, contrary to the USSR under Khrushchev, China held on to an original hardline Stalinism—and that the abandonment of Stalinism would lead sooner or later to a general dissolution (in which regard they weren't mistaken). These people started the PCMLF believing they would rebuild a genuine Communist party of class struggle, against the revisionism of the official PCF and the USSR. It was both a dogmatic and a nostalgic interpretation (Badiou 2008, pp. 13-131).

There were other reasons, besides a general conservatism on the part of an older generation of communists, for the PCMLF leadership's decision to construct a party that resembled the PCF. At this time, despite their nascent organisation being small and isolated, the PCMLF could look to other Mao-inspired parties being formed all across Europe and the wider world: a new communist international seemed to be in the offing. Moreover, if the Chinese took any notice of the PCMLF at all, it was because they demanded that a single party represent their line in each country: "Why this favourable treatment", Bourseiller asks, "which touched the PCMLF to the exclusion of other pro-Chinese groups? Quite simply because Kang Sheng and Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, were partisans of the monopoly of representation" (Bourseiller 2008, p. 204). The PCMLF was thus playing a long game, restricting its operations in France in the hope the party would eventually be elected France's representative in a post-Soviet communist international.

Following the events of May '68, the PCMLF was banned by the French government. The party decided to continue in a clandestine manner, a strategy that destined it to irrelevance and impotence since it inevitably brought out its most Bolshevik tendencies, which contradicted the libertarian spirit of May '68. Of those young student recruits who flowed into the organisation after the May events, most were dismayed by a party committed to an iron discipline that led nowhere, not least because of the French state's over-the-top reaction against it (Bourseiller 2008, p. 199).

The PCMLF dissolved early in 1970, its members splitting into 'Front Rouge' and the PCML, which itself split into the PCRML and the PCOF. In Badiou's eyes, the PCMLF had fatally blunted the efficacy of its actions by subordinating its politics to the Chinese state. By contrast, the UCFML, rather than wagering on the future existence of a new communist international centred on Peking, preferred to privilege the application of lessons inspired by the Cultural Revolution to local French struggles, such as the plight of immigrant workers. As the 'Group' write in their retrospective text 'Ten Years of Maoism':

In contradistinction to certain groups like the PCMLF, we owe absolutely nothing to the Chinese state and have never had any links to it. For us, China

has never been a model to follow. What founds our judgement is rooted in our own experience, that is, in the creative application of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to the concrete conditions of revolution in France. (UCFML 1981a, p. 49).

For the UCFML, what legitimised and motivated political action was not the existence of a powerful state that proclaimed to be the incorruptible incarnation of the political principles of a mummified revolution. Rather, as we already know, it was the existence of mass movements that verified the real efficacy of these principles, such as the Shanghai Commune. On this point, the UCFML understood themselves to be reprising a gesture performed before them by Lenin; a gesture whose meaning had been obscured by the time of the Third International:

The reference to China, in terms of the international communist movement, is not a reference to the Chinese state, nor even, in a central way, to the characteristics of Chinese society. It is a reference to class struggle in China, to its antagonistic explosion. [...] In truth, this is not radically new: even if the Third International sometimes seemed to forget it, its very existence did not have its origin in the objective existence of the Soviet State, but in the universal lessons of the Revolution of October 1917. Further back still, Lenin was educated by the French proletariat and the experience of the Paris Commune (UCFML 1981a, p. 51).

And now the UCFML were educating themselves at the school of the Chinese proletariat, in particular the Shanghai proletariat of 1967. The reference in the above passage to the “antagonistic explosion” of the Commune echoes the passage from *Theory of the Subject* we quoted at the beginning of this paper. Both the Shanghai Commune and May ’68 verified the existence of a progressive force committed not only to communism, but to the overthrow of the existing communist bureaucracy. As such, both were nascent forms of what Mao called “antagonistic contradiction”. With their studied indifference to the Chinese state, the UCFML sought out other mass movements in France that might verify the possibility of communist movements that would follow a very different path from what had become the revisionism, racism, corruption and compromise of the PCF-CGT. Such was the case with their long-term support of the SONACOTRA rent strike movement, where tens of thousands of immigrant workers organised to improve their housing conditions and working rights (UCFML 1981b).

Returning to the PCMLF, in the theoretical terms Badiou uses in *Theory of the Subject* the party represented a “rightist deviation” (TOTS 12): not only had their leadership fallen back on a party model that had proven ineffective in France; their nostalgic dreams of the Popular Front had led them to ignore what was truly novel both about post-War capitalism and the new revolutionary possibilities that had emerged in its wake (UCFML 1981a, p. 42). Specifically, the PCMLF had failed to be receptive to the novelty of the post-GPCR and post-May ’68 context—a novelty that was both on the side of potential alliances, such as with immigrant workers, and on the side of enemies. While they seemed to be opposed to the PCF, the PCMLF had reprised so many elements of the Communist’s organisational model that they had become the PCF’s diminutive mirror image. Most egregiously, they had failed to learn what Badiou and the UCFML considered the key lesson of events like the Shanghai Commune: that true

communists could and should struggle against—and not with or on the model of — existing communist parties.

That said, the UCFML did not condone a pure revolt against the party as an end in itself. In fact, they affirmed the irreducible necessity of organisation. Badiou even goes so far as to claim that the organisation of proletarian politics is the most significant innovation of modern-day Marxism. This is what had allowed it to advance beyond previous forms of egalitarian politics:

... Marxism-Leninism presupposes a phenomenon of the accumulation of new ideas, which are antagonistic to the dominant order [...] These conditions are fulfilled as soon as there exists a permanent capacity to overcome the dispersion of experiences and to elaborate a subjective force that is neither sporadic nor tied to a particular episode of the class struggle, but which operates as the place in which an assessment is made of the experiences of all successive struggles (Badiou 2012, p. 179).

If the UCFML combatted the PCMLF on its “right”, it was therefore not in the name of an aversion to organisation. But despite their support for the party form, Badiou and the UCFML did not set out to establish a party in abstraction from existing struggles, as the PCMLF did. Rather, they attempted to bring the question of the constitution of a “communist party of a new type” (UCFML 1981b, p. 5) into the heart of contemporary political movements, such as the SONACOTRA rent strike. In other words, they sought to make the constitution of a party a key strategic question, offering it up as a matter of collective debate. This explains the long list of supplementary substantives at the beginning of the UCFML’s full name—a list that stands in the precise place where the founders of the PCMLF had presumptively put the word “Party”: that is, the UCFML were not a party, but only a group whose political work consisted in unifying all those who could be convinced that a “communist party of a new type” would eventually be necessary if they were to succeed in their struggles. For instance, during the SONACOTRA rent strike, while always supporting the directives of the movement’s own ‘Comité de coordination’, members of the UCFML encouraged strikers to steadily extend the domain of their struggle to the rest of French society and to organise alongside native French people. As their text ‘The Political History of the SONACOTRA Hostels’ explains: “the UCFML is an organisation whose political project is to construct in France the party of the international proletariat” (UCFML 1981b, p. 113). In *Theory of the Subject* Badiou himself affirms this project: “The whole question of contemporary politics comes down to this: is the international proletariat of France going to exist?” (Badiou 2009, p. 311). Events like the Shanghai Commune and their uncertain echoes in France gave the UCFML reasons to think that a “communist party of a new type”—one that exposed and transcended the PCF-CGT’s conservatism and chauvinism—could indeed come into being. But most importantly, the nature of these events meant that this party did indeed have to be a “party of a *new* type”. How, in other words, could a movement whose aim was to break apart the parties of the Third International eventually institute a novel form of communist organisation? For Badiou and the UCFML, Mao was indeed a theorist of a new party form. Paraphrasing the Chairman’s writings on the topic, Badiou states: “From the party to the masses, in which it installs and unlimits itself, the trajectory never crosses a stable frontier” (Badiou 2009, p. 91). In other words, following Mao’s summation of the lessons of the Cultural Revolution, there was to be no “stable frontier” between the agents of a mass movement and its leaders; and there were certainly no leaders who arrived ready-made

to the scene of a political struggle. As we will see further on, Badiou articulates a Mao-inspired ethics of “confidence” to orient this precarious process. In contrast to the PCMLF, for the UCFML Mao was not, therefore, a new Stalin—a hardline communist leader capable of arresting the decline of the international communist movement by virtue of his elevated position within a powerful party apparatus. Rather, what counted for them were events like the Shanghai Commune. Mao was important only insofar as he was the theorist of these events—the person who thought through their consequences in real time. And when the UCFML did associate Mao with the question of the party, it was only insofar as he conceived of a party that was “post-Leninist” (UCFML 1981a, p. 6); a party, in other words, that had learnt the lessons of the Commune’s break with the Third International’s communist parties.

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We now turn to the GP. Despite their official recognition by Peking and the exquisite communist credentials of some of its leadership, the PCMLF were well behind the GP in terms of numbers and—perhaps most importantly—public exposure. Indeed, the GP have a particular importance for Badiou since he believes that their reading of the post-’68 situation, the tactics they employed and the nature of their leaders were doomed in advance to give rise to the kind of renegacy witnessed among many prominent French intellectuals in the late-1970’s. The GP were formed after the UJCML (*Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes*) was banned by the French government following May ’68 (Bourseiller 2008, pp. 151-156). The new group brought together former militants from the UJC alongside more libertarian-minded members of the ‘Mouvement du 22 Mars’, most notably the students Alain Geismar and Serge July. It was led by a group of charismatic young petty bourgeois and bourgeois students and intellectuals including Benny Lévy, Tony Lévy, Olivier Rolin, Jean-Pierre le Dantec, and the two aforementioned students—all of whom would go on to play prominent roles in French political and cultural life following their involvement in the Maoist movement. The GP employed very different tactics to the PCMLF; tactics that Badiou describes as terroristic or anarchistic:

...the ultra-left interpretation of Maoism of the GP was almost anarchist: you launched bold attacks, set up stunts, made ‘revolution in the head’, ‘melted into the masses’, always with a very keen eye to the media. The organization was highly centralized—in secret; in public it dissolved itself every five minutes in order to ‘liberate’ the energy of the masses (Badiou 2008, p. 131).

As both Bourseiller and Badiou claim, the GP’s terroristic, violent but principally spectacular activities—street ambushes of the police, kidnappings, lootings of expensive Parisian stores—were geared towards making visible the lines of fracture in France at the time, in particular the PCF-CGT’s collusion with the “old bourgeoisie”. But with the repressive measures their activities provoked, the GP also hoped to demonstrate the objective weakness of the French state. All of this was done in order to inspire the working class to take the revolution into their own hands (Bourseiller 2008, p. 154). If the French state had to mobilise the CRS to control a small group of students, surely it was secretly weak and could easily be overthrown by an organised revolt of workers? All of the GP’s activities were therefore performed beneath the implicit gaze of a slumbering proletariat, a revolutionary class that needed only to be convinced of its own strength. In terms of the ethical orientations Badiou identifies in *Theory of the Subject*, the GP were partisans of “belief” (Badiou 2009, p. 327): that is,

they posited the substantial existence of a subject of communist politics: the working class. It was only within such a horizon of “belief” that their destructive actions made any strategic sense. This meant that there were points on which the GP resembled the UCFML, and others where it was unquestionably distinct from it. On the one hand, in contrast to the PCMLF, the GP shared with the UCFML the conviction that they could not elect themselves as leaders of the working class’ political party; they could at best sacrifice themselves in its service. Bourseiller describes this aspect of the GP’s strategy as follows:

This is the essential difference that separated the GP from the PCMLF: for Benny Lévy’s organisation, the communist Party is not yet formed. It has to be born spontaneously from struggles, at the heart of strikes and protests. The revolutionaries’ role is not to abstractly constitute a self-proclaimed party, but to put themselves at the service of the people in order to rouse it and orient towards the founding of the party. There is, in the spontaneist interpretation of Maoism, a messianic dimension. One endlessly awaits the spontaneous creation of the party, for such a creation will signify the immanence of the red dawn; but one prohibits oneself from rushing ahead of the working class’ desires (Bourseiller 2008, pp. 154-155).

As we will see below, the UCFML absolutely rejected the implicitly “messianic” side of the GP’s politics. Yet, they too read Mao’s injunctions to “serve the people” and “have confidence in the people” as prohibiting them from constituting a party without the masses’ initiative. For both groups, Maoism meant rejecting the elitism implicit in the Leninist model of the party.

On the other hand, however, for Badiou and the UCFML the GP’s fatal philosophical error lay in their “belief” in the substantial existence of the working class *qua* an essentially revolutionary force. Badiou remarks on the GP’s “conviction that the Maoists were in a position to take power or at least to overturn the situation very rapidly” (Badiou 2008, p. 129): it was as if the extraordinary historical example of Mao and the Cultural Revolution had transmitted a promise to them; a promise that the working class revolution was at hand. For the UCFML, by contrast, there was no imagined addressee called the working class that was sunk in a temporary state of impotence. Instead, all political action had to be undertaken in the midst of existing mass movements, which they themselves had not artificially sparked. Moreover, they believed they had to engage with the concrete concerns of localised political movements, even if they still argued within them for the strategic necessity of a party and of pursuing a communist politics. As they write in ‘Ten Years of Maoism’, “the antagonism has to be constituted from the point of view of the masses themselves and supported by a directing kernel that is internal to this subjectivity” (UCFML 1981a, p. 12). There was no sense in engaging in the kind of activities the GP promoted, since these were completely cut off from actual movements. The GP could justify their practices from a communist perspective only insofar as they believed that the working class would eventually take up the struggle in the midst of the mayhem the GP’s members had unleashed. In the meantime, however, what resulted from the group’s actions was an infinite cycle of violence in which nothing new could ever come into existence: the GP became ever more provocative, the French state ever more repressive. As Bourseiller writes, “the attitude of the forces of order under the reign of Georges Pompidou was ultimately characterised by a clumsy and exaggerated campaign of repression, which set off a phenomenon of radicalisation” (Bourseiller

2008, p. 175). In *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou obliquely approaches the GP's model of political action by way of the Sophoclean couple of Antigone and Creon, which he correlates with two psychoanalytical concepts, anxiety and superego. Following Lacan, Badiou sees anxiety as provoked by the loss of any stable symbolic point of reference. The superego, for its part, is a figure who stands less for the symbolic law per se and instead for the senseless violence that is required to supplement it in the face of its own porosity or incompleteness. On this model, the GP dissolved the symbolic law by way of hysterical provocations, but in doing so it both provoked anxiety and brought forth a superego-like figure, which took the form of Pompidou's forces of law and order. In other words, the GP's actions inevitably mobilised the state's repressive apparatus in the same way a neurotic's fear of a symbolic space insufficiently governed by norms gives rise to a paralysing superegoic guilt; or the way a "hysteric" like Antigone calls forth a figure like Creon (Lacan 1997). In short, both psychoanalytically and politically, anxiety and the superego are indissoluble. Badiou describes the apparent "contradiction" between these two forces as follows: "The contradiction is tragic insofar as it leaves no way out other than death. Why? Because it is not governed by any new right" (Badiou 2009, p. 163). By contrast, Badiou's Group sought to act under the sign of what he describes as Aeschylus' two figures of the courage and justice: that is, while they believed it was inevitable for a revolutionary politics to confront both anxiety and the superego, particularly insofar as such a politics minimally involved violating the existing law, they also thought it had to go beyond this destructive pairing and courageously construct an entirely new law—a "new right", or "justice" (Badiou 2009, p. 160), as Badiou puts it in the simplest terms possible. For instance, while the SONACOTRA rent strike movement certainly suffered the full force of the state's repressive apparatus at the same time as it provoked the immigrant worker's anxiety by situating them, for the movement's duration, in an extra-legal zone situated between their status as guest workers and their hoped-for status as future citizens of a thoroughly transformed French polity, ideally this simultaneous invocation of anxiety and the superego would also have inspired their courage to live, think and act in ways that could not be rendered intelligible by the terms of the old law but only in the light of a new and "just" law. In practice, this would have involved, first, allowing the movement to consolidate itself through organisational forms that would have helped it persevere once its demands had provoked the repressive response of the state; and second, deepening and enriching these organisational forms by permitting them to be shaped by principles that were neither simply disciplinary nor pragmatic, but involved hitherto unseen forms of acting, working and thinking in common that would have permitted hitherto unseen or even "impossible" forms of connection between the strikers' particular grievances and the broader, global struggle of a "generic" humanity against capitalism and imperialism (UCFML 1981b, pp. 78-92). In light of this strategy, we can see how Badiou and the UCFML's political engagement can be read using Badiou's schematism of the four necessary subjective figures: anxiety, superego, courage and justice. The GP, by contrast, remained trapped at the level of the first dyad, thereby never passing beyond to the second.

These four subjective figures also allow us to better understand the meaning of Badiou's explicit invocations of Mao's name in *Theory of the Subject* and in the UCFML's publications. So far we have seen how Mao's writings were secondary to the "antagonistic explosion" of events like the Shanghai Commune. Yet in reading Badiou and the UCFML's writings from this period it is impossible not to notice their extraordinary degree of investment in the proper name of Mao Tse-tung. To take just one example, in *Theory of the Subject*, after writing that "the masses experience [...]"

the socialist State and the party at its helm [as] a rat's nest of bourgeois bureaucrats", Badiou affirms that it "belongs to Mao's imperishable initiative" (Badiou 2009, p. 82) to have called for a politics that would overthrow this party. Indeed, it frequently seems as if, without Mao's intervention, the contemporary stakes of communist politics would have never come into view: "Mao has posited for the first time that there is no hope in engendering communism in a linear fashion from the socialist State" (Badiou 2009, p. 88). Did Badiou and the UCFML share the GP's intrinsically theological conception of Mao and of the politics he inspired?

The four subjective figures Badiou delineates in *Theory of the Subject* help us to answer this question. As we know, the encounter with the law's instability is an obligatory point of passage for the political subject. Both the Shanghai Commune and the SONACOTRA rent strike brought out a point of impossibility in the space of world politics: that of the existence of a communist politics that was not subordinate to the "new bureaucratic bourgeoisie" But in order for the courage of these two political subjects not to devolve into anxiety, they inevitably required, Badiou argued, a fixed point of reference with which to sustain themselves. This fixed point, which provided a transcendent guarantee for the precarious process of constructing a "new right", was of course, imaginary. Indeed, it was imaginary in two senses of the term: firstly, it did not exist; and secondly, it implied, as per Lacan's imaginary, the false predicate of plenitude. Nevertheless, if the derivative, insubstantial and precarious nature of this imaginary figure is properly understood and controlled, invoking such an imaginary fixed point need not be a politically disastrous move. Badiou captures this point in the following passage from *Theory of the Subject*:

...there is nothing more structural and, in the last instance, nothing more impoverished than the imaginary [...] At the same time, I confess that the pressure of the imaginary, once we recognize its principle, by no means demands that we become scandalized. Even the famous 'cult of personality', in its manifest correlation to the oblique anxieties of just bravery, seems to me to stem from the inevitable presumption of the One much more so than from the dictatorial infamies which pass for real and which if needed are compatible with the most mediocre images. Nobody has ever needed the cult of Guy Mollet's personality in order to give their massive consent, during the Algerian war, to the massacre of a million Algerians, including torture and the camps (Badiou, 2009, p. 302).

In other words, what defines a politics is not the presence or absence of an imaginary figure of plenitude that presides over it. The latter is, at best, a supplement, albeit one that is both necessary and dangerous. For the same reason, for Badiou and the UCFML what was essential to their Maoism was not the proper name or personality of Mao. Rather, it was events like the Shanghai Commune and their equivalents in France; events that broke apart the old law that had previously governed the space of political possibility and, in doing so, marked the inception of a process by which a new law, a new egalitarian social dispensation, might be constructed. Mao was only the minimal mark of unicity they used to group these events together. For at root, these events involved all four subjective figures: an anxious dissolution of the law; the violent backlash of the superego; the courage to act without the law (that is, not only illegally, but in ways diagonal to all that had previously passed for knowledge—of justice, of politics, of being-in-common); and the pursuit of communist justice. The UCFML's invocation of Mao was derivative of these subjective processes; specifically, of the way

their anxiety was kept at bay and their courage sustained by reference to a supposedly transcendent point: namely, Mao Tse-tung Thought (Badiou 2009, p. 298). All of the above allows Badiou to present the following retrospective overview of his involvement in the Maoist movement:

I certainly participated in the ‘cult of Mao’, by means of which I, like millions more, figured the fixed point with which to gauge the radical turnabout of courage and the complete transformation of both my practical existence and my convictions during the second half of the 1960s and the early 70s – years of grandeur if ever there were any. In retrospect, I have come to know its ridiculous aspects, the unrealities of the subjective trajectory by which this cult traced an imaginary diagonal and which, exposed to the real, I can now designate with clarity. But I confess that I feel no remorse whatsoever for having traversed this experience, not even for nourishing an uncontrollable nostalgia when I remember those years [...] As for the leftists of the post-68 era, I consider them less the victims of a devastating illusion, as they pretend today, than carried away beyond themselves by history, from whence they drew certain images, unifying consequences and not only the illusory cause of their determination (Badiou 2009, pp. 302-303).

As Badiou argues here, Mao and the figure of intellectual and political plenitude he represented was not the “cause” of French Maoism. He thus concludes: “The imaginary comes in to consolidate the real and not in order to install the semblant” (Badiou 2009, p. 303). In other words, in the political subject’s encounter with the real, understood as an encounter with the law’s inconsistency, a figure like Mao serves a limited though undeniable pragmatic purpose. The “cult of Mao” was therefore a sideshow relative to the true theatre of Maoist action.

While the invocation of Mao in the UCFML’s discourse might well seem to function as a species of catechism, the Group strictly refused to engage in any apotheosis of Mao, just as they refused the GP’s “belief” in the existence of a latently revolutionary working class. Arguably, this allowed the UCFML to maintain their political commitments well beyond the GP’s short though spectacular lifespan. Even Bourseiller remarks on the UCFML’s “extraordinary longevity” (Bourseiller 2008, p. 215). As Badiou argues, the GP’s “belief”, by contrast, was destined to evaporate the moment it became clear the proletariat—*their* proletariat—did not exist. Of course, it was not as if Badiou and the UCFML refused to accept the existence of a mass of exploited workers. But they did refuse the idea that progressive political consequences necessarily flowed from the “weak difference” between bourgeoisie and proletariat *qua* economically-defined classes. Failing to grasp this point meant that the GP’s members were doomed to disappointment—but also to eventually denouncing, when the historical (and mediatic) tide turned, their youthful dogmatic belief. As Badiou writes in 1979, many years after the GP had dissipated and its most prominent members had become renegades: “Now they tell us they had taken ‘the masses’ as a master signifier. This is correct” (TOTS 327). While prominent figures like André Glucksmann set about portraying Marxism (from its German Idealist origins) as a royal road to the gulag, such as in *Les maîtres penseurs* (1977), for Badiou the “Marxism” which Glucksmann celebrated and then execrated was never more than the Marxism of the GP: an incoherent Messianism based on a spurious social ontology and a self-defeating strategy. The GP, therefore, was correct to denounce *itself*, but incorrect when they mistook this auto-critique for having revealed some original sin of any theory of praxis

which dared to break with what Badiou would later denounce as “capitalo-parliamentarianism”. But the GP’s Marxism was not, and never had been, the only Marxism; indeed, for Badiou and the UCFML, the GP’s political strategy rested upon a fundamental misunderstanding not only of Marx, but of Mao’s innovations and clarifications. To the GP’s discourse of “belief”, Badiou therefore opposes his own Mao-inspired discourse of “confidence”:

From 1976 onward, our intellectuals have lost confidence en masse, arguing instead—without being totally wrong about this—that they had never been more than believers. Does one always have to believe in order to have confidence? As far as I am concerned, I have confidence in the people and in the working class in direct proportion to my lack of belief in them (Badiou 2009, p. 322).

To have confidence in the people, as Mao demanded, was, the UCFML believed, to wager that everyone was capable of playing a part in the constitution of a political party. By establishing their own groups by fiat, and by doing so at an almost absolute distance from the true site of contemporary political struggles in France, both the PCMLF and the GP, their rhetoric and disavowals notwithstanding, had taken an elitist path: they had thereby betrayed what the UCFML believed was an essential element in the message of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. They had also misunderstood what Mao’s reference to “confidence” actually meant, at least as far as Badiou was concerned: namely, that there was no straight path from social being (even an exploited social being) to emancipation; only a precarious, haphazard yet committed process of purification by which political movements progressively stripped themselves of everything that made them homogeneous to the status quo counted as political action. Only such a process gave them a chance of achieving their egalitarian aims; aims which were both invisible and nonsensical to the logic which governed and sustained the present situation. The only appropriate attitude in such circumstances was “confidence”; a “confidence” that applied to a movement’s capacity to verify, point by point, the fact that true equality was not beyond the bounds of the possible—or, more precisely, that it was not beyond the bounds of the political subject’s capacity to make what was currently impossible possible. According to Badiou, the GP’s leaders gave up the moment they started to believe that the object of their former faith, the revolutionary working class, was incapable of sweeping them to power. For GP leaders like Gérard and Jacques-Alain Miller to disengage from political action at the point they did meant they were “people who saw their undertaking not as the start of a long journey with a great deal of ebb and flow, but as an avenue towards power” (Badiou 2008, p. 126). In other words, despite their invocation of the Maoist slogan to “get off their horse”, the GP leaders had never truly de-classed themselves: they had retained a sense of social election. Riding the wave of Maoism and its related struggles in France had simply been a false start in what they considered their inevitable ascension to power. By contrast, the UCFML promised nothing—neither to those it struggled with, nor to its own leadership:

As was said during the central intervention of the UCFML at the meeting of the 28th of February, 1981, we promise nothing. As a consequence, there is no reason to follow us, nor to be disappointed by us. Against our own possible deviations, against our own possible degeneration, there is no other guarantee than the work that is done to bring about a political maturity—in the working class, amongst the people, and also amongst the democrats—on the question of the party (UCFML 1981a, p. 155).

And just as they promised nothing, so it should be said that Mao promised nothing to the UCFML. For not only did they reject the deification of the Chinese leader, which ran rampant elsewhere, their refusal of the GP's politics of "belief" entailed refusing any teleological conception of political action. This is the sense for Badiou of Mao's maxim: "Success, failure, new success, new failure, and thus all the way to the final victory", a maxim Badiou qualifies by stating: "There is no final victory that is not relative. Every victory is the beginning of a failure of a new type" (Badiou 2009, p. 91). If there was a promise anywhere in Badiou and the UCFML's political theory, it was the one made by the Shanghai Commune, May '68 and movements like the SONACOTRA rent strike—the promise that the space of political possibility was not exhausted by the "grey tyranny" which had been the ignominious fate of the parties of the Third International. Yet, this promise itself was nothing outside of the efforts the UCFML made to verify its efficacy in concrete situations; efforts that were guided by the lessons of the Shanghai Commune, which Mao codified but which substantially revised the Leninist conception of the party and prohibited both messianism and elitism. In short, in their submission of the proper name of Mao to the event of the Shanghai Commune, Badiou and the UCFML's invocations of the Great Helmsman were ultimately subordinated to the goal of dispensing with any Great Helmsman in politics, now and in the future.

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