

MASTER SIGNIFIER: A BRIEF GENEALOGY OF LACANO-MAOISM¹

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Historical studies of Mao Tse-tung and Maoism are mostly damning moralisations. As for Mao's influence in philosophy, such studies are rare if not completely non-existent. By conducting a brief genealogy of Lacano-Maoism, a hybrid of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Maoist politics which emerged post-May 68 in France and whose adherents still include Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, this article considers the extent to which this fusion of Mao and Lacan may still have implications for contemporary philosophy and related theoretical discourses. The article speculates on Mao, not as a historical figure, but as a "master signifier" in French theory of the 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords: Badiou – Lacan – Mao – Politics – Psychoanalysis – Revolution – Theory – Žižek

Introduction. Mao Tse-tung has exerted a considerable influence in French philosophy, one whose true scope is arguably yet to be fully explored. I want to restrict myself in this essay to the reception of Mao in the realm of theory – the theory which originates in France and which today extends to a number of fields outside philosophy, notably to political and critical theory, literary and cultural studies – in Great Britain, the United States, Australia, as well as many other Anglophone countries around the world.

Mao's status in the aforementioned theory, I claim, is that of a master signifier. What is a master signifier? The function of a master signifier is to "make understandable [*lisible*]" speech.² In linguistic terms, according to the psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller, the master signifier "succeeds in making the signifier and the signified correspond, halting them in their contrary shift of meaning [*glissement*]."³ In psychoanalysis such shifts or "slips of the tongue" mark the beginning of the transference through which the subject

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at The Second International Conference on Chinese Form of Marxist Literary Criticism, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China, 9-14 April 2013. I would like to thank the organizers for their kind invitation to the event as well as the editors of *Filozofia* for accepting the article for publication.

² Jacques-Alain Miller, "inconscient ≠ psychanalyse", *Le Cours de Jacques-Alain Miller, Ecole de la cause freudienne*, no date. Accessed 1 September 2014. <http://www.causefreudienne.net/etudier/le-cours-de-jacques-alain-miller/inconscient-different-psychanalyse>

³ Ibid.

generates a new meaning – a new master signifier – through word association.

Mao was of course a master signifier in the sense of an ideological rallying point for the radical left whose politics swept across France in May 68, and inspiring the students' and workers' movements there for several of the following years. These movements coincided with Mao's unleashing of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, which officially lasted from 1966 to 1976. But Mao was not always equal to the direction of the political events he unleashed, and so was not always up to the task of halting contrary shifts of meaning. Clearly there are historical explanations for the contradictions which afflicted and ultimately undermined the revolutionary movements in China and France in the 1970s. However, my approach here will be theoretical and, in drawing on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, concerned with the discursive register of revolutionary politics, and ultimately limited to the general discursive field in which any master signifier must operate as a linguistic term. In other words, "Mao" serves as a signifier for the inventive and revolutionary potentials of theory itself, rather than as the biography from which historical or political lessons can be drawn. There are more than enough biographies of Mao already in circulation.⁴ It is important to underline the fact that Mao's personal history and politics are not my primary concern. Indeed, there is still something compelling to Lacan's thoroughly rationalist idea that all subjective (or, strictly speaking, analytic) experience is formalizable (rather than a question of interpretation). No serious discussion of contemporary theory can ignore its formalistic or scientific basis. This will be the basis of my argument at least.

The Mao Paradox. Perhaps the first philosopher in France, if not the West, to admit the influence of Mao in his philosophy (or "Theory" with a capital "T"), was Louis Althusser. In Althusser's *Pour Marx* (1965) there are a handful of references to Mao and his famous Yenan essay *On Contradiction* (1937). Furthermore, unposted correspondence from November 1963 confirms that Althusser self-censored a lengthy Mao quotation from "On the Materialist Dialectic" prior to its publication in *La Pensée*, in August 1963, at the request of the editor in chief.⁵ Althusser's interest in Mao can be understood in at least two ways. The first relates to philosophy. In the late 1950s and early 60s an intellectual battle was being conducted in France between phenomenologists on one side – principally Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – and the so-called "structuralists" on the other – principally Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Althusser himself. Among the latter thinkers only Althusser was a Marxist and member of the French Communist Party (PCF). However, what these "structuralists"⁶ alleg-

⁴ See e.g. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's *Mao: the Unknown Story* (London: Cape, 2005) for a typically bitter and depressing rendering of Mao as a tyrant responsible for more deaths than Hitler and Stalin.

⁵ Louis Althusser, "Unposted Letter to Lucien Sève (24 November 1963)." Alt2.C6-02. Althusser Fond 2, Correspondence. *Archives de Louis Althusser*. L'IMEC.

⁶ In the Italian foreword published in the English translation of *Reading Capital* (1970) Althusser says: "With a very few exceptions ... our interpretation of Marx has generally been recognized and

edly shared was a commitment to the human sciences (and principally structural linguistics) and their progressive approach to the study of human beings in society. Althusser's allegiance to structuralism is at least debatable (as is Foucault's⁷), a fact made abundantly clear in a polemical seminar Althusser gave in 1966 denouncing Lévi-Strauss' structuralist methodology.⁸

Althusser's battle against phenomenology can be understood on the same terms as his battle against Hegelian Marxism. And not just against the "bad Hegel" or the idealist aspects of Hegel that Lenin famously criticised. For Althusser, Hegel had to be purged from Marxist doctrine; this was the measure of Marxism's scientificity and its modernism i.e. its consistency with the 20th century revolutions in Russia and China, as well as with the progressive development of the human sciences in the West. Let us quote briefly Althusser from his essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (1962) from *Pour Marx*:

Mao Tse-tung's pamphlet *On Contradiction* (1937) contains a whole series of analyses in which the Marxist conception of contradiction appears in a quite un-Hegelian light. Its essential concepts would be sought in vain in Hegel: principal and secondary contradiction; principal and secondary aspect of a contradiction; antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction; law of the uneven development of a contradiction.⁹

Althusser concludes this passage by noting that Mao's essay is both "descriptive" and "abstract." For Althusser, Mao's essay is certainly not a work of philosophy. However, the influence of Mao on Althusser's philosophy is perfectly emblematic of the interdisciplinary nature of French intellectual life from the late 1950s. That a philosophy professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, an institution not known for its cosmopolitan eclecticism, could draw philosophical inspiration from the work of Mao was testimony to the revolution taking place in French intellectual life at that time. And this trend in philosophical inventiveness would also inspire many of Althusser's students, many of whom would emerge in the 1960s and 70s as important theorists in their own right.

Mao also had tactical significance for Althusser. Apart from an intellectual or philosophical battle, Althusser's other battle during the 1960s was "internal," and was being waged against "theoretical sterility" in the PCF, of which Althusser was a lifelong member. In 1956 Khrushchev's famous speech at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party had opened the way to de-Stalinization. Although supposedly a "liberation" from

judged, in homage to the current fashion, as 'structuralist'... We believe that despite the terminological ambiguity, the profound tendency of our texts was not attached to the 'structuralist' ideology." Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books 1970).

⁷ Foucault's resistance to the label (and to any label) is well known, although his early work does at least recognize the displacement of philosophy by the human sciences, among them structural linguistics, in the era of modernity.

⁸ Althusser, "On Lévi-Strauss" in *The Humanist Controversy*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2003).

⁹ Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1969), 94n.

Stalinist dogmatism – a liberation welcomed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) – the response of the PCF's chief theoretician, Roger Garaudy, marked a revisionist turn toward Marxist humanism: "We should realize how much we risk throwing overboard," Garaudy would write in 1963, "if we underestimate the Hegelian heritage in Marx: not only his youthful works, Engels and Lenin, but also *Capital* itself."¹⁰ For Althusser, faced with this kind of regressive thinking, Mao was a beacon of intellectual renewal since Mao himself had, during the 1920s and 30s, waged a successful battle against dogmatism in the Chinese Communist Party without lapsing into precisely this kind of petty bourgeois revisionism. The ideological heritage of Marx's early works, with their notions of "freedom" and "man," was as foreign to Althusser's conception of Marxism in the 1960s as it was to Mao's in the 1930s. For both Althusser and Mao, Marxism was politically, ideologically and theoretically closed to compromise.

Whether the stakes involved in battling this revisionist tendency were, in the French political conjuncture of the late 1950s and early 60s, as high as those confronting Mao in the 1930s, or even comparable, is not immediately clear. However, what does seem fairly clear is the fact that in the context of de-Stalinization and the Sino-Soviet split of the late 1950s and early 60s, the figure of Mao helps to open up an entirely different theoretical universe in French intellectual life.

Mao represents a deep conceptual paradox in the history of Marxism. Even Mao himself recognizes this in the essays he writes prior to taking power in 1949. "Why is it that red political power can exist in China?"¹¹ he asks in 1928. After all, Mao's political experience, somewhat like Lenin's, seems to completely contradict the Marxist theory of history; while, at the same time, Mao himself remains violently opposed to revisionism. Consider Mao's theory of the uneven development of a social formation comprising "plural" contradictions and antagonisms, a theory which is far from orthodox in its reading of historical materialism and the role of the economic base as the determinant factor of superstructural relations.¹² Mao is in this sense both a conservative and radical figure, both orthodox and avant-garde, proclaiming his political practice within the revolutionary tradition of Marx, Engels and Lenin, while at the same time challenging and (re)inventing that very same tradition.

The paradox that Mao represents arguably helps to explain his appeal and significance as a revolutionary figure particularly for the student movements of the late 1960s. Alain Badiou often makes the point that both the Cultural Revolution in China and the events of May 68 in France were complex responses to the possibilities of conducting mass politics in contemporary society and to the forms of State power which tend to counteract such politics.¹³

¹⁰ Roger Garaudy quoted in Althusser, *ibid.*, 163n.

¹¹ Mao Tse-tung, *Why is it that Red Political Power Can Exist in China?* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1968).

¹² Cf. Althusser, *ibid.*, 250, 254-5.

¹³ See Alain Badiou, "The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?" in *The Communist Hy-*

Mao's influence on Althusser was in philosophy. But the extent of this influence was conditioned by Althusser's membership of the PCF. Althusser was limited in what he could say about Mao and China for ideological reasons, so after the publication of *Pour Marx* in 1965 references to Mao faded away in his published work. However, it is worth mentioning the essay that was published in *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes* in November 1966 under the title "Sur la révolution culturelle" ("On the Cultural Revolution"). It provides a ringing endorsement not simply of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, but of its "theoretical and political lessons" which "*all* communists... must adopt".¹⁴ Although the article is unsigned it's taken for granted today that Althusser was the author (the *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes* journal was edited by Dominique Lecourt and other of Althusser's students at the Ecole Normale, and distributed by the Union of Communist Students (UEC), the student wing of the PCF).¹⁵

From Althusser to Lacan. The influence of the French philosopher Alain Badiou also warrants special attention when considering Mao in French theory. In the late 1950s Badiou had been a student of Althusser at the Ecole Normale (Badiou graduated in 1961, but continued to attend research seminars there for most of the 1960s). Badiou is an interesting and important case study because he personifies many of the conflicts and tensions in French theory and politics which emerged in this context, and which still exist today.¹⁶ First of all, it's worth noting that in the 1960s Badiou was strongly anti-communist. Unlike Althusser and many of his students, Badiou was not a member of the PCF. Instead, he was a founding member of the United Socialist Party (PSU) in the late 1950s.¹⁷ And so unlike Althusser and the Althusserians (Etienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, Roger Establet and Pierre Macherey, who would all contribute to the first edition of *Reading Capital*¹⁸) Badiou was less constrained by the dominant Communist Party ideology in the philosophical and political debates of the 1960s. The other important thing to note about Badiou is that it was he who, in 1961, would prepare a report, at the behest of Althusser, on the seminars of Jacques Lacan, which at that time were being held at the Sainte-Anne

pothesis, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010).

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, "Sur la révolution culturelle", *Cahiers marxistes-léninistes*, November-December 1966, 16.

¹⁵ See François Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume 1*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 280-283.

¹⁶ As an example of the ongoing conflicts consider the exchange between Badiou and Jacques-Alain Miller whom Badiou accuses of being a "renegade" in eds. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, *Concept and Form, 2 volumes* (London and New York: Verso, 2012). The allegation provoked a very forceful response from Miller in an open letter to Hallward published on 26 February 2013, and circulated on the internet. See Miller, "L'affaire Badiou versus JAM", in *Regle du jeu*, 4 March 2013. Accessed 1 September 2014. <http://laregledujeu.org/2013/03/04/12609/laffaire-badiou-versus-jam/>

¹⁷ For an account of Badiou's political biography see Jason Barker, *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jacques Rancière, *Lire le capital, 2 tomes* (Paris: Maspero, 1965).

Hospital in Paris.¹⁹ Badiou was on this occasion the “bridge” between Lacan and the Althusserians, and Althusser’s emerging attempts to integrate psychoanalysis into his own work. In 1964, Althusser would declare that Lacan’s return to Freud was analogous to his own return to Marx; where Freud had discovered the science of the unconscious, Marx had discovered the science of historical materialism²⁰; and that both Lacan and Althusser were continuing the scientific revolution that their respective masters had inaugurated.

But Badiou’s relation to Althusserian Marxism was somewhat transitional and partial, and his importance as a theoretical bridge relates instead to the emergence of so-called Lacano-Maoism in France, or the body of theory that fuses together the revolutionary politics of Mao and the psychoanalysis of Lacan. Of course, what defines their ideas – and indeed their fusion – as “revolutionary” is on the one hand implicit in the context I have been describing. However, the important thing to note is that revolution, as far as Badiou is concerned, is more than a context or conjuncture. Badiou remains convinced that thinking, in and of itself, is a revolutionary act, and that the theory that thinks revolution has practical consequences for theory. In this sense theory is not an application of thinking to the “real world.” Instead, thinking is thought-practice. In other words, theory and practice operate together; they are ontologically equivalent. As Badiou explains in *Metapolitics*:

Politics is a thought. This statement excludes all recourse to the theory/practice pairing. There is certainly a ‘doing’ of politics, but it is immediately the pure and simple experience of a thought, its localisation. Doing politics cannot be distinguished from thinking politics.²¹

This is the way in which we need to think the “fusion” of Mao and Lacan. In other words, we need to think Mao and Lacan not in terms of making an alliance between the insights of a practitioner (Mao) and of a theorist (Lacan). This would be an error. After all, in addition to theory, Lacan was first and foremost a clinical practitioner of psychoanalysis (and Mao a political theorist of revolution). Lacano-Maoism is not a “unity of opposites.” Lacano-Maoism is instead an antagonistic and problematic “unity” whose incongruity and internal tension were arguably also part of its appeal to political militants like Badiou. Although the remainder of this discussion will only serve to introduce general orientations, and is related to the history of Maoism in France,²² I think it’s possible to study Lacano-Maoism as a theoretical phenomenon in its own right, at least in the way I have defined theory as harbouring revolutionary implications in the realm of thought, or as “thought-practice”.

¹⁹ Alain Badiou and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan, passé présent* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 15.

²⁰ See Althusser, “Freud and Lacan” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 46.

²² See A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

Orientations. Badiou is perhaps the most important theorist of Lacano-Maoism. His seminars of the 1970s represent one of the most coherent and imaginative attempts to politicise Lacan's ideas, fusing not just Mao and Lacan, but drawing heavily on literature and poetry, especially the work of Mallarmé. Badiou would in 1982 eventually publish these seminars in a volume entitled *Theory of the Subject* which is arguably the most sophisticated and synoptic endeavour in Lacano-Maoism. Equally we must cite *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, the short-lived theoretical journal published between 1966 and 1969 by students at the Ecole Normale. Apart from Badiou, the editorial board of the *Cahiers* comprised Alain Grosrichard, Jacques-Alain Miller and Jean-Claude Milner, all of whom were followers of Lacan; and all of whom (apart from Badiou) would become members of the Maoist political organisation La Gauche Prolétarienne (GP), or Proletarian Left, in the aftermath of May 68.²³

I also want to make the following point about my brief genealogy of theory. Lacano-Maoism is not to be understood as a "legacy." Most academics in Great Britain, Europe, the United States and elsewhere would certainly regard the idea that Mao remains, to this day, a master signifier for theory with a mixture of bewilderment and disgust. In Western academia Mao is rarely taken seriously by anyone other than legal historians who see in him a pathological case study of totalitarianism. But in sharp contrast to these moral denunciations what I want to suggest is that *it is impossible to think theory today without "working through" (this is an appropriate word from psychoanalysis) the Lacano-Maoist genealogy.*

Apart from Badiou, who proudly admits to never having reneged on his Maoist writings, and continues to draw on them in his philosophy, I shall also briefly mention Slavoj Žižek, whose book *The Sublime Object Of Ideology* was published in 1989, seven years after the publication of Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*. Admittedly there are no references to Mao in Žižek's book, although in Žižek's more recent work Mao is regularly cited with approval.²⁴ Like *Theory of the Subject*, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* represents another attempt to politicise Lacan's ideas. Žižek is a former student of the Lacanian analyst and once editorial board member of *Cahiers pour l'analyse* Jacques-Alain Miller, whose philosophy and politics of the late 1960s (Miller was also a member of the GP) flourished on the ideological terrain of Lacano-Maoism. One can therefore assume that Žižek's ideas equally owe a good deal of their fertility to this terrain.

What are the main axioms of Lacano-Maoism? To state them exhaustively would demand a much longer and more detailed presentation of a field which harbours its fair share of ideological divisions. But the books which represent the two poles of the spectrum are Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* and Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet's *The Angel: Ontology of the Revolution, Book 1*.²⁵ Both provide fairly revealing glimpses –

²³ A sample of the ten volumes of the *Cahiers pour l'analyse* is published in eds. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, *Concept and Form*.

²⁴ See e.g. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 188-194.

²⁵ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009) [Alain

albeit from radically opposing points of view²⁶ – of the conjuncture, or theory-politics conjunction, in France during the 1970s. But I should also repeat the point that such works are of more than cultural or historical significance. They remain extremely novel and indispensable exercises in theory.

Let me outline some general orientations.

1. “Things may be tied, but in the end they must be severed,” declares Mao. “There is nothing which cannot be severed.”²⁷ “One divides into Two” is the guiding principle of the dialectical thinking one finds in both Mao and Lacan. Indeed, in the natural world, in social life, as well as in the analytic situation of transference, we encounter the struggle between opposites: opposing species, classes, and the struggle between analyst and analysand. For Lacan the subject is, in essence, a being in language, split or barred from the object of its speech. All synthesis or unity is therefore temporary and imaginary. The subject is generated through language, represented by signifiers which frustrate and divide its intentions. In politics the fact that the subject is *in essence* divided immediately dispels any lingering idealism for a united working class which is, by contrast, “internally split... marked by mass movements, between the onset of its true political identity, on one hand, and, on the other, its latent corruption by bourgeois or imperialist ideas and practices...” The working class in other words is the name for the divided (revolutionary) subject swept along in the flux and evanescence of mass movements; whereas “proletariat” designates its political unity, its “directive for combat”.²⁸

2. “Bourgeois” is a key signifier for Lacano-Maoism. Lacan’s return to Freud is founded on the scientificity of psychoanalysis and the rejection of ego and behavioural psychologies which seek to “recover” the “patient” from his or her “illness.” Lacan’s rationalist approach rejects the valorisation of the “American way of life,” or any attempt to turn the patient into a good little consumer. In other words, Lacan does not aim to reinforce the defence mechanisms of the patient’s ego. For Lacan the ego is the problem. On this point Lacan’s de-valorisation of the ego coincides with Mao’s hostility not simply to the bourgeoisie as a social class, but to all forms of bourgeois consciousness (this also explains the importance of Mao for Althusser, who equally opposed bourgeois humanism in the realm of philosophy). Lacan’s “anti-bourgeois” position was arguably the reason why his work was adopted so enthusiastically by French Maoists (although it’s important to note that Lacan himself always resisted attempts by revolutionaries to flirt with or ap-

Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 1982)]; Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L'Ange: Ontologie de la révolution, tome 1* (Paris: Grasset, 1976).

²⁶ See the critical review of *The Angel* by Georges Peyrol (a.k.a. Alain Badiou), “Un ange est passé” in eds. Alain Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus, *La situation actuelle sur le front philosophique*, Cahiers Yenan No. 4 (Paris: Maspero, 1977).

²⁷ Quoted in Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes*, 188.

²⁸ Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 8.

appropriate his ideas²⁹). In Althusser's case there is his preference for the Maoist over the orthodox Marxist topography of base and superstructure. Badiou takes this preference one stage further in his *Theory of the Subject*, rejecting the Hegelian "contradiction" between bourgeoisie and proletariat in favour of a topology of "places" and "torsions": "The true contrary of the proletariat," Badiou writes, "is not the bourgeoisie. It is the bourgeois world..." And: "The famous contradiction proletariat-bourgeoisie is a limited, structural scheme, which allows the torsion of the Whole – whose force is traced by the proletariat as subject – to escape." And: "the project of the proletariat, its internal being, is not to contradict the bourgeoisie, or to undermine it. This project is communism, and nothing else. Or the abolition of every place where something like a proletariat can be formed. The political project of the proletariat is the disappearance of the space of placing of classes. It is the loss, for the historical something, of every index of class."³⁰ In other words what we are confronted with here is the readjustment of a revolutionary subject in accordance with its own internal dynamics – which at the same time constitute its reciprocal dynamics with the social totality or Whole – rather than an objective determination of the struggle between rival classes *within* an overarching social totality or Whole.

3. A crucial methodological distinction in Lacan is that between instinct [*Instinkt*] and drive [*Trieb*], two terms which were both originally translated as "instinct" in the Standard English Edition of Freud's works. Freud observes that humans are distinct from animals by virtue of their sexual drives. By contrast animals compulsively seek the satisfaction of their biological instincts. This distinction is crucial because it enables Lacan to pursue a highly rationalist approach to psychoanalysis in which psychic phenomena are neither purely descriptive, nor purely normative. The unconscious, as Lacan says, "is structured as a language." This means, among other things, that language in the form of "culture" – rather than "nature" – not only *develops* the human psyche in the functional sense; language *constitutes* the human psyche. If the subject resists adapting its behaviour then this is because the social world to which the subject must adapt is, like all psychic phenomena, intelligible only through language. In fact, Lacan famously defined "the world" as "the fantasy through which thought sustains itself"; whereas "reality" was the "grimace of the real".³¹ It is difficult to think of an idea that seduced political militants quite as much as this one did in "driving" the rebellions of May 68 – rebellions which in this sense can be seen as rebellions against human nature itself – an idea translated onto

²⁹ This point warrants much greater attention. Suffice to say here that Lacan's ambiguous status as a talisman or theoretical Master for revolutionaries was one he certainly exploited, even when denouncing revolutionaries openly, as he did at Vincennes in a famous speech in 1969. For a more detailed treatment of this question see Jason Barker, "De l'état au maître: Badiou et le post-marxisme", in eds. Bruno Bessana and Oliver Feltham, *Ecrits autour de la pensée d'Alain Badiou* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).

³⁰ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 25. This reference is to the French edition; the translations are my own.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, *Television*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990), 6.

Parisian walls in the iconic slogan, “Be realistic: demand the impossible.” That the very structures of conscious social reality are illusory or ideological, and not real, was an idea eventually adopted by Althusser in his famous text from 1970 “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”³² And needless to say such an insight, which may lead the subject to draw completely counterintuitive consequences from the seemingly objective laws of social reality, was a common experience during the Cultural Revolution.

4. Another key concept in Lacan is “desire.” In English, desire can signify “wish” or “demand” but Lacan, again following Freud’s terminological distinctions, conceives desire instead on the basis of an unconscious psychic mechanism. Desire is ambivalent, unpredictable and seemingly irrational; it does not know what it wants. Such vacillation calls for an ethics of psychoanalysis or an ethic which can “realize” the seemingly impossible promise of the subject’s own desire. The slogan of this ethic is “do not give up on your desire.” But let’s be clear that this slogan is an injunction or order. To desire is a duty. Rather than being a selfish act of gratification desire is a selfless act serving a principle. But what happens when this injunction on the subject to desire confronts the law, or the prohibition to stop desiring? Won’t it necessarily result in compromise? Clearly there is a lingering ethical ambivalence or ambiguity for a subject who is told in one moment to “Serve the people” and, in the next, “It is right to rebel.”³³ Is it right to break the law in pursuit of one’s desire? As ethical subjects, can we operate “beyond” or “without” the law in the service of what is right? Might this not amount to a case of “law without law”? There are important examples from the revolutionary histories of both France and China where this question has been tested in practice. Let me mention just two specific cases, selected more or less at random, although of course there are countless others. The first is Mao’s directive of 22 August 1966 that all police interference and arrests of the Red Guards are illegal. The second is the arrest and summary execution, on 3 April 1871, of General Gustave Flourens, an elected member of the Paris Commune, at the hands of a French military policeman. In each case, who was acting legally and/or in pursuit of the moral Good, and indeed whether both amount to the same thing, are precisely the type of ethical questions relating to the social functioning of desire and the limits of the law which remain emblematic of Lacano-Maoism as a whole.

5. Lacan’s most important insight for literary theory is the idea that desire is mediated by language, and that language is a socio-cultural medium. Modern literary criticism, drawing heavily on Freud and Lacan’s work, demonstrates how the text conceals and reveals unconscious desire through a network of repression and sublimation. As Slavoj Žižek often observes, consumerism, with its market-based emphasis on “diversity” and

³² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

³³ Of course these are both slogans adopted by the Red Guards during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

“difference,” is today perhaps the surest way of *not* getting what one wants and therefore, in effect, of giving up on one’s desire. Moreover, succumbing voluntarily to the “pleasure of the text” is arguably one way of giving up. Consumerism promises us everything as desiring subjects, but delivers nothing; it may be likened to a tale of courtly love where privation is deemed “erotic,” or a narrative in which the protagonist loses a political struggle and then through his experience of melancholy becomes a “good person.” However, Lacan also provides the resources to think (desire) beyond privation when he says that “ethics is to be articulated through the location of man in relation to the real.”³⁴ A number of contemporary theorists, notably Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, but also lesser known figures such as Gilles Grelet,³⁵ broadly set out from this or closely related propositions. This is the idea that there is a real beyond symbolization and/or formalization, that language is what frustrates and alienates the subject, and that – nonetheless – such things as subjective acts do exist, acts which both subvert and transform the order of symbolic reality.

6. For several years now, at least since Foucault’s work was embraced so enthusiastically by the Anglophone academy, it has been a fashionable and somewhat predictable gesture to want to denounce every discourse of the master, to expose the power lurking behind every statement of knowledge and authority, and automatically to disbelieve and mistrust everything the master says. In literary theory we are used to hearing about “The Death of the Author.” And there are numerous essays and remarks by Jacques Derrida and his followers on writing and *différance* which, beginning in the 1970s, made Lacan’s supposed “mastery” the explicit target of their resentment. In her introduction to a book of collected essays on feminine sexuality of which, somewhat ironically, Lacan is named as the author, Jacqueline Rose alleges that “Lacan was implicated in the phallogentrism he described, just as his utterance constantly rejoins the mastery which he sought to undermine.”³⁶ Such an opinion certainly highlights the difficulty of citing Lacan as any kind of authority. However, it fails to recognize and properly distinguish the person of the author from theory, and theory from clinical practice. This is not to say that Lacan himself didn’t encounter very practical difficulties regarding the termination of analysis, or the so-called Freudian “impasse.” This is the point where, in every analysis, the analysand’s desire becomes blocked. But the way through this impasse *has nothing to do with a sexual relation*, one which would privilege male over female sexuality. Nor, to return to Rose’s point, does it have anything to do with Lacan as a phallic symbol or “head” of a school. Rose may be looking for a contradiction which doesn’t exist. In the words of Jacques-Alain Miller, “The unconscious knows nothing of the relation of man to woman and wo-

³⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 11.

³⁵ See Gilles Grelet, *Déclarer la gnose. D’une guerre qui revient à la culture* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002).

³⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole freudienne*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1982), 56.

man to man.”³⁷ The ultimate end of analysis involves the *subversion* of the sexual relationship, a relationship which marks the subject as a subject of castration. Or in the vocabulary of Lacan, the subject unblocks its desire when it no longer seeks justification in the Other. In Lardreau and Jambet’s Maoist take on Lacan this subversion of the sexual relationship extends so far as the repudiation of what they perceive as the servitude ingrained in desire itself (both Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari are their explicit targets). Against the sexual liberation of desiring-production Lardreau and Jambet propose two possible paths, relative and absolute, leading out of such servitude. The first they term “ideological revolution,” which corresponds to a hiatus in an ongoing neurosis. Here we might say the subject simply transfers its dependency from one master to the next, overthrowing one regime or authority figure only to replace it with another. Interestingly, Lacan calls this type of transference “resistance” in the sense that the real is that which *necessarily*, or structurally, resists symbolization.³⁸ In this restricted form of rebellion, the absolute goal of changing the world or reinventing the self is relativized and rationalized as the inevitable halfway house of reform. The second path, “cultural revolution,” is by contrast what the psychoanalyst would define as psychotic, whereby the gap between subject and other – or Rebel and Master in Lardreau and Jambet’s terms – completely collapses. This is where Kant’s revolutionary enthusiasm topples over into outright fanaticism.

Conclusion. An important response emerges from these six orientations to the allegations that were first leveled against all “master thinkers” by André Glucksmann, the former member of the Maoist GP and one of the poster boys, along with Bernard-Henri Lévy, of the New Philosophy of the 1970s.³⁹ Firstly, it is not clear that the Master thinks. The function of the Master is only to be obeyed, to make all signifiers signify in his name – to halt the “contrary shift of meaning” [*glissement*] – to make all desire answer to his injunction. By contrast the revolutionary act is a purification of desire. As such it is the point where the Master’s power of suggestion or persuasion over the subject is suspended, which for the analysand can also mark the termination of analysis, or the end of “repression” in the case of the political militant. The Master, the One of authority, is finally revealed for what it is: nothing significant. The subject comes to recognize the Master as the cause or lure of false wants or desires. What follows need not mean the subject adopting an “ascetic consciousness,” as it does for Lardreau and Jambet, but may involve desire, or rather *the drives*,⁴⁰ gaining relative freedom or autonomy from repression. Let me

³⁷ Jacques-Alain Miller, “Another Lacan,” *The Symptom* 10, 2009. Accessed 1 September 2014. <http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?p=1>

³⁸ See Bruce Fink, “The Master Signifier and the Four Discourses” in ed. Dany Nobus, *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Other Press, 1998), 42-43.

³⁹ André Glucksmann, *Les Maîtres Penseurs* (Paris: Grasset, 1977).

⁴⁰ The distinction between “drive” and “desire” is crucial here. Slavoj Žižek has often explored this distinction, in books such as *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (1993) and *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997).

underline the point: *relative* autonomy, since both politics and theory always operate on the basis of some inaugural axioms.

It's often the strange fate of divisive figures to end up immortalized on the face of the national currency – as is Mao in China today – as if we believe that by placing them there we can control them better than we can control the currency. In conclusion, I hope this brief survey may serve to demonstrate that the figure of Mao Tse-tung, although undeniably foreign to our modern concerns and seemingly remote from contemporary philosophy and theory, is of more than mere passing historical interest, and has much wider ongoing implications for such discourses and for the shifting meanings we encounter in that often unyielding thing known as the social world.

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