REVIEW ESSAY
What Was the Cultural Revolution?
On Alessandro Russo's *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*

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The editors of *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, published in 2006 and based on a 2003 conference at UC San Diego, wrote in their introduction that "the study of the late Mao period is now so far into the past that it is no longer burdened by the demand for relevance to the country's current evolution".[1] What did this turn to "history" mean? Much of the work on the Cultural Revolution outside China had been done by social scientists (Perry, MacFarquhar, Walder, Chan, Rosen, Unger, Han, and later Andreas, Wu, and others), though their work was hardly differentiable from that of historians. Did the Cultural Revolution "as history" give us a different kind of understanding? The introduction noted the plethora of recently available research materials—primary and secondary sources, memoirs, Red Guard publications, local gazetteers and other official and unofficial documents, the latter later including "garbage" collected from scrap paper dealers—that made a stark contrast with the spotty source materials that informed the Kremlinological studies of an earlier period. The field agenda outlined in the 2006 volume was fairly broad: deeper analysis of the big questions such as elite-non-elite interactions and "the human toll", a more finely grained approach to motives and interests, finer periodization of struggles and violence, regional variations, et al. Much of that agenda has continued to be realized.

Near in time to that intervention came a call for a very different kind of work: "International Center for the Study of the Cultural Revolution: Elements of a Project" by Alain Badiou and Alessandro Russo, published in a volume on "The Asian Sixties" that I edited[2]. Badiou's and Russo's piece also cited the vastly increased access to research materials of all kinds, but the motivation was quite different:

> This dead end [consequent to the "negation" of the Cultural Revolution] is symptomatic of a fundamental confusion in the attitude of these disciplines versus the political situations; a confusion that cannot be without profound consequences for the consistency and the intellectual fate of these disciplines. If there is no conceivable space for the study and research of this most recent political situation, one that shaped opinion and created a rupture on a global scale, what can be said of any other contemporary or past political situation? The 'negation' of the Cultural Revolution has been the precedent for the historical revision of the meaning of the October Revolution, and, more essentially, of the French Revolution. The intellectual crisis of contemporary historiography is of the same order in all these cases. The central issue of this crisis is the disarticulation of the conceptual relations between history, politics, and the state; these relations, previously accepted, were all crucial references in the constitution of a vast network of knowledge and orientations of research. (p. 701)

This is an agenda that puts politics at the center of knowledge, as formative of knowledge. Badiou and Russo warn here of the unintended effect of "history" as commonly practiced, and link the negation of the Cultural Revolution to the negation of revolutionary sequences that began with the French revolution (Francois Furet's work is emblematic here) and included the Bolshevik and other twentieth-century revolutions, revolutions whose telos, under the sign of negation, was restoration, failure, chaos, violence, or denounced under the ideologeme of "totalitarianism".

As all readers of Freud know, "negation" does not banish its object from thought but maintains its presence in a repressed or symbolic form. And under its particular sign of negation, the Cultural Revolution has been available for a range of agendas, most prominently perhaps the contemporary Chinese state's central political and administrative program, *weiwen* (stability maintenance), for which the Cultural Revolution has served as threatening revenant. "Negation" has a more directly repressive function, though, which is the foreclosure of forms of knowledge, understanding, new ways of thinking, new terms and new slogans that revolutionary events can bring into existence. The project, then, with regard to the Cultural Revolution, is not merely to fill gaps in the historical record, or to write "positive" accounts to counterbalance the dominant negation, but to make the Cultural Revolution available to thought, to allow the forms of thinking of the party form, of extra-party organization, of the political character of the working class, as well as of the State itself and its various modes of capture and containment that were brought into possibility by that event.

One of the project's first components was a 2006 conference at the University of Washington, Seattle, organized by Tani Barlow, titled "Is a History of the Cultural Revolution Possible?". Participants included Alain Badiou, Lin Chun, Gao Mobo, Han Shaogong, Fabio Lanza, Rebecca Karl, Alexander Day, Wang Hui, Claudia Pozzana, Alessandro Russo, Donald Lowe, this author, and others. An unexpected group of audience members were delegates from the Maoist-oriented Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and its youth organization. Alain Badiou was just becoming known in U.S. communist circles, particularly for his discussions of the communist hypothesis, equality, and the revolutionary sequences beginning with the French revolution and ending, in Badiou's account, with the Cultural Revolution. The RCP—probably the only U.S. party at that time for whom revolutionary seizure of state power was on the political agenda—was interested in Badiou and his positions (the journal *positions* had published its special issue on Badiou and the Cultural Revolution in 2005) due to its possible relevance to the party's own revolutionary politics, and party members in the audience gave nightly reports to the party leadership. The RCP decided ultimately that Badiou was a Rousseauist, and "a communist locked within the confines of the bourgeois world."[3]

The RCP also complained that Badiou saw the Cultural Revolution's revolutionary politics as directed against the party-state itself, rather than at capitalist roaders within the party. This is an accurate judgment: for Badiou, for Sylvain Lazarus, and for Russo—the three of them were in close dialog as Russo's work on the Cultural Revolution began to be published—politics must operate at a distance from the State. I suspect that, in addition to the RCP, this antagonism toward the state was not common among the academic participants at the conference. Most were sympathetic to the 1949 revolution, and to the revolutionary character of the pre-Cultural Revolution state. Groupuscular and anachronistic though they may have seemed to many of the academic participants, the RCP comrades at the very least understood that the political stakes in the encounter with the Cultural Revolution were high (although this was never reflected in the party's own fairly commonplace analyses).

The Seattle conference, in its very title, presented the problem that the Cultural Revolution poses for knowledge. Was "history"—as a mode of knowledge, a discipline, a particular organization of temporality—adequate to the eventfulness of the Cultural Revolution? Alessandro Russo's implied response was no. As Badiou wrote,

> history is ultimately a 'relation of the State'. It follows that any contemporary freedom of thought presupposes, by virtue of the rupture with the most subtle forms of historicism, a distancing of the State, of which one of the paradigms is the clear separation between politics (as thought) and the State.[4]

Could "histories" of the Cultural Revolution be outside the state? Could they end anywhere but factional violence, repression, and the failure of the revolutionary project? The project for Alessandro Russo, as well as for Alain Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus--who were in earlier stages of his inquiry his key theoretical interlocutors on the Cultural

Revolution and on politics as a whole--was the Cultural Revolution in thought, both outside historicism and outside the State. This meant treating the Cultural Revolution not descriptively, which by its formal and rhetorical nature creates a continuity between what has happened and what is, but prescriptively, in Sylvain Lazarus's sense:

> Separated from history, politics no longer has to do with time but, rather, with the prescriptive. The evacuation of time and the removal of time as a category effects the separation of history and politics, thereby breaking with an age-old tradition that saw a given politics as bound up with a given history and a given history as bound up with a given politics … Now, the possible in the prescriptive is not an attribute of what will come, any more than it can be inferred from what is. It is not related to time, not as a prediction nor as a consequence—it is the eruption of a category in subjectivity that presents a break. The possible of the prescriptive is not the future in its relationship to a past but, rather, a difference, a subjective leap.[5]

The prescriptive aspect of a mode of politics is precarious of course. Under what conditions, and how, does prescription lose its effectivity? What forecloses the subjective leap? Throughout *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, [6] Russo describes the Cultural Revolution as "an experiment," "a mass political laboratory for reassessing communism" (3). Discussion and analysis of this experiment could answer these and related questions. That discussion, the theoretical evaluation of that ten-year experiment sought by Mao near the end of his life, was foreclosed by Deng Xiaoping, who "categorically quashed Mao's proposal for a vast campaign of self-critical reflections on the decade." (6)

> Impeding the revolutionaries from taking stock of their enterprise was the prerequisite for breaking their subjective determination, sowing political disorientation among the masses, and placing all political decisions firmly in the hands of a government elite that wished to settle accounts with whatever mass political experimentation it labeled as mere chaos and anarchy. (6)

Theoretical evaluation and stock-taking have been part of the revolutionary project, arguably, since Hegel's writings on the French Revolution, and have included Marx on the French revolutions, the American Civil War, and the Paris Commune, as well as the range of communist theorizing with the Bolshevik, German, Austrian, Spanish, Cuban, and Chinese revolutions. The revolutions and upheavals of the Long Sixties outside of China were similarly crucial sites of theoretical evaluation: Cabral, Fanon, Italian autonomism, etc. These, then, are the stakes for the project of a study of the Cultural Revolution: to contribute to the project of theoretical evaluation and assessment, a necessary step in the furtherance and reimagination of the communist, egalitarian project.

Russo has been engaged with the Cultural Revolution for much of his career, and first published on it in English in 1998. He had previously published on educational sociology and on contemporary poetry in China, and in 1990 published a record of a 1989 "workers' inquiry" in a factory in Guangzhou, [7] an inquiry that also featured prominently in Sylvain Lazarus's *Anthropology of the Name*. His long association with Badiou and Lazarus was crucial to their own writing and thinking about revolutionary China. His project was shaped in part, he writes, by an effort to answer a question Badiou had posed to him: was the Cultural Revolution the last revolution? (vii) Russo was also one of the earliest Western thinkers to have sustained contact with scholars from what came to be known as the New Left in China. His influence on Wang Hui, particularly in the early stage of Wang Hui's political writing, prior to his recent closer embrace of the State, was significant; there are many traces of Russo's thought in Wang Hui's writing of depoliticization. In what follows, I will focus primarily on the theoretical contributions in *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*, which comprise not simply an interpretation or history of the Cultural Revolution, but a thinking from it aimed at engaging with our current period's impasses, as well as revolutionary possibility in general.

Peasants Think: On the Limits of Historical Materialism

Russo's book opens with what he calls a "theatrical prologue"; the book's first three chapters, comprising Part One, concern issues and debates around Yao Wenyuan's November 10, 1965, essay "On the new historical play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*", commonly seen as inaugurating the Cultural Revolution: "The curtain opens on a scene set in the Ming era." (11. I will revisit the theatrical dimension of the book as a whole and some implications thereof later in this essay). As most readers know, Yao had criticized Wu Han's historical drama about a Ming official dismissed from office due to his conflict with corrupt local gentry from several perspectives: Wu's mistaken identification of Hai Rui with the interests of peasants rather than that of the imperial state, Wu's confusion over the profound difference between feudal-era and socialist-era morality, Wu's insufficient grasp of class, et al. Months of widespread discussion and debate followed. Russo's philological-theoretical approach to the documentary evidence aims to refute the dominant "historicist" accounts that focus on Mao and his allies' manipulation and maneuvering, or on Mao as powerful behind-the-scenes controller. Russo also shows that between the publication of Yao's essay and the promulgation of the February 12, 1966 "Outline Report on the Current Academic Discussion"—the effort of Peng Zhen and his allies, approved by the Central Committee, aimed at calming and containing the controversy—not only had public discussion been lively, widespread, and multi-faceted, but Mao himself had been fairly peripheral. Russo does, however, place considerable emphasis on a remark made by Mao in December 1966, identifying Hai Rui with Peng Dehuai, whom Mao had attacked as leader of an anti-Party clique and dismissed after the 1959 Lushan conference which had convened to discuss problems that had arisen during the Great Leap forward. Notwithstanding Wu Han's insistence that his play had no allegorical intent, Mao's remark inserted another layer into the discussion, which concerned the nature of peasant revolutionary subjectivity. This is one of Russo's foci in the book's first part.

In a critical review of Eric Wolf's 1969 *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, a widely referenced work that put peasant revolution firmly on the twentieth-century conceptual map, Jairus Banaji points to the need for "a far more rigorous marxist approach to the 'peasant question'. As it is, the vacuum is filled by bourgeois sociological theory on the one hand, and theoretical ambiguity on the other."[8] Since Banaji's review, Marxist and Marxist-adjacent approaches to the "peasant question" have proliferated. Russo brings attention to a dimension of the Lushan conference of which Banaji and many other Marxists were probably unaware: it comprised the effort of a socialist state that had mobilized a revolutionary peasant military force to reflect on "whether the Chinese Communist Party would be able to promote the peasants' *political* existence" (28). The Great Leap forward had revealed impasses in that project. Russo suggests that although the social infrastructure for political transformation of the peasantry—communes, canteens, etc.—had been put in place, the Party had still not been able to organize peasants politically.

> The impasse in the way of the Great Leap Forward arose when the criteria for assessing the peasantry's political enfranchisement were based exclusively—one might say almost automatically—on productivity, a view that became the predominant attitude in the party state. (32)

Through a careful reading of Li Rui's—hardly sympathetic to Russo's standpoint—meticulous record of the Lushan conference and other contemporary sources, Russo refutes the standard historiographical account, which paints Peng Dehuai as a lone hero speaking the truth to Mao and his sycophantic followers. As he does throughout the volume, Russo wants to emphasize the comprehensiveness and open character of debates. He makes the case that Mao was committed to egalitarian experiments in peasant organization, seeking alternatives to forced collectivization as well as to the Soviet model emphasizing development of heavy industry requiring the exploitation of the agricultural sector. The famine and its consequences put an end to further experimentation. This is the

first of several weighty political-theoretical discussions that ended inconclusively.

The question of peasant subjectivity perdured, however, and became linked to the Hai Rui controversies. Through a close reading of the work of historian Jian Bozan and his critic Qi Benyu, Russo uncovers a common position on the peasantry: that despite the achievements of peasant rebellion, peasants could not constitute an historical advancement of the productive forces and therefore had limited political capacity.

> Albeit in more radical or more moderate version, both authors shared the idea that the logic of history decided the day over politics. History determines the existence, or the inexistence, of peasant's political subjectivities; what the peasants are able or not able to know and to think is secondary. For one, peasant cognizance remains impossible; for the other it is at best unconscious. (46)

Sylvain Lazarus's maxim "people think", developed at length in *Anthropology of the Name* and referenced above in the section heading, argues against any proposition that would hold that an a priori historical determination of subjectivity—most commonly "peasants" in Marxist thought— precludes politics. In Russo's analysis, the foreclosed discussion of peasant political subjectivity at the Lushan conference revealed an aporia in historical materialism that surfaced again in the controversy over Yao's essay. Although the Cultural Revolution as it unfolded would not engage the specific question of peasant political subjectivity under socialism in any depth, and this prematurely terminated inquiry had major consequences as well, this opening scene gave indications of the political stakes. There were others.

The Probable Defeat

"A Probable Defeat and Revisionism", the first chapter in Part II, comprising one of the book's most original and politically significant theoretical contributions, exists in two earlier versions, with differing emphases.[9] Stimulated by a number of remarks by Mao where he predicted the "probable defeat" of the revolutionary project and the likelihood of capitalist restoration, Russo explores a politics that, once again, is opposed to "history". It was only under the consolidation of state authority in the Soviet Union, with consequences familiar to us all, that Stalin proclaimed, over and over, the necessary and ultimate victory of socialism. Socialist states worldwide have in the name of that telos subverted or distorted egalitarian possibility in the name of state capacity, development of the productive forces, and other modes of consolidation of power. The Chinese Communist Party, in a version of this telos, continues to this day to claim that its current economic system will one day lead to communism. Against this, Russo poses the notion of "the probable defeat", taken from some of Mao's remarks, which is neither cynicism nor pessimism nor romanticism, but an acknowledgment of the precarity and rarity of the political. No organizational forms, political structures, or institutions are permanently immune to capitalist restoration. The Chinese critique of the Soviet Union in the 1960s maintained that capitalism had already been restored in the land of the most significant revolution in history; the attack on "capitalist roaders" within the party suggested the danger of an organic development of capitalism from within the socialist state. Given that precarity, revolutionary politics in a revolutionary state requires experimentation, questioning, and continued invention of new political forms and experiences.

The concept of the "probable defeat" was of a different order than other contemporary political categories, such as revisionism, left, right, bureaucracy, or authority. It was not a prominent part of political discourse; it did not appear in big character posters or slogans; the only person other than Mao who is quoted as expressing anything similar is Zhang Chunqiao, who said at his trial in 1981 about the restoration of capitalism: "In accordance with the rules of this world, I have long thought that such a day would come." (3). The notion of the probable defeat generates a relationship to temporality and to history that differs in important ways from the Benjaminian project of resisting "teleological interpretations of the past by recovering the 'infinite possibilities' that Maoism once offered,

and that many people pursued, often using Mao's ideas to take them places that even Mao did not want them to go", as a recent call for a "Maoist" historiography of the PRC put it.[10] Laudable as that project is, the probable defeat underscores a scene of political experimentation that is not directed toward any future or any possibility, since the precariousness delivered by the very real probability of defeat would never be eliminated. As Russo wrote in an earlier essay on "the probable defeat",

> What the Cultural Revolution, and in general the 'Long Sixties,' brings to closure, is not history, but rather the transitivity of history and politics, which was a pivotal concept of the governmental discourse of the socialist states. The Cultural Revolution was the mass laboratory that has proven the insurmountable limit of an alleged historical guarantee for egalitarian politics.[11]

The probable defeat, then, is revolutionary politics without guarantees. Central to the "historical guarantee" was the dictatorship of the proletariat itself, whose position on that historical telos was as the transitional form between socialism and communism. This, as we shall see later in this essay, was thrown into question as well.

The controversy around Yao Wenyuan's article, and the attempt by the Central Committee to limit and contain discussion, revealed the extent to which cultural and political authority had hampered the capacity for experimentation and questioning, even as the political intensity that the discussion and debates had aroused was quickening. This new political movement demanded new organizational forms and modalities.

Dismissal and Pluralization

The Chinese term for "dismissal", in the translated title "Hai Rui Dismissed from Office"—*ba guan* 罢官— is traditionally used in two ways: as a transitive verb, "to dismiss [someone] from office, or, more commonly in the imperial period, as an intransitive—"to leave office [oneself]. Mao's identification of Hai Rui with Peng Dehuai, and the identification of capitalist roaders within the party leadership, put "dismissal" at the center of Cultural Revolution politics in its early days. But who—and this is why I raise the term's ambiguity of agency--would be the agents of dismissal? In Part III of his book, "A Political Test for Class Politics",Russo identifies two registers of politics, dismissal and pluralization. Dismissal, the scene of power politics, is the more common register:

> the subjective automatism that is omnipresent in every course of action that results in the overthrowing, more or less violently, those who govern the life of others from their positions of authority at every level. The same automatism commands the resistance of established authorities to new competitors, as well as all sorts of rivalry among the latter to establish their supremacy in a bureaucratic hierarchy. (145)

Pluralization—Russo proposes this concept as constituting an egalitarian exception or invention—is less common and is the register of greatest novelty in the Cultural Revolution. Cultural Revolution "pluralization" precedes factionalism, both ontologically and historically; this is Russo's most significant difference from the dominant understanding of Red Guard factionalism. Central to the concept of pluralization is a radical egalitarianism with roots in the first revolutionary sequence:

> Saint-Just pointedly argued that equality does not mean that an individual can lay claim "to having the same power" (puissance) as any other, in that there is no such thing as "legitimate power" (puissance légitime). Rather, "the spirit of equality" means that "every individual is an equal portion of sovereignty" (une portion égale de la souveraineté).
>
> This sharing of sovereignty in "equal portions" leads to the radical idea that any individual has the possibility to initiate inventive forms of collective organization. The multiplicity of organizational inventions is therefore a major criterion of any egalitarian invention, or rather its

> unmeasurable measure. Since political equality cannot be but a set of inventive processes, and nobody has prior knowledge of how to establish it, such an invention should result from countless initiatives for experimenting with organizational forms capable of curbing the ordinary hierarchical rituals of the social condition. (147)

Mao's initial wholehearted support for this new, spontaneously generated political form thus constituted a radical experiment, perhaps the most radical experiment in the nearly two-hundred-year revolutionary era that spanned the years from St. Just to the global sixties.

The "truth" of pluralization was the organizations' existence, and it is thus natural that the groups' proclamations in their initial phases, mostly in the form of *dazibao*, centered on their legitimacy and their authority. Pluralization, however, has a temporal character at great variance from the recursive and reactive temporality of dismissal.[12] The radical egalitarian moment of pluralization was revealed to be as precarious as the revolution itself. Central to Russo's analysis, and to his privileging of the truth of pluralization over a depoliticized factionalism, is his periodization: a waxing phase from June 1966 to January 1967, where the political thrust concerned the scope of pluralization, and a waning phase, increasingly dominated by factional struggle, often with a class identarian cast, from January 1967 to the summer of 1968, at which point the independent organizations ceased to exist. The crux of the problem was the articulation of pluralization and dismissal: "how to reconcile the continuing rise of forms of self-organization and the processes of readjusting the positions of authority in the various ranks of the governmental order." (160). Although Mao was initially sanguine about the process of political renewal in the context of a multiplicity of organizations, the logic of dismissal— "the automatism regulating the relations among governing subjectivities" (161)—had a depoliticizing character (in Badiou, Russo, and Lazarus's sense of politics) that proved difficult to overcome.

The May 16 Circular (1966), which occasioned the dismissal of Peng Zhen's group and the repudiation of the initial politics of containment, announced that there were those in positions of authority who were taking the capitalist road, and thus merited attack. The Circular also argued for the continued centrality of class in a socialist state. This proved to be a double-edged sword. Among the targets of the coming struggle were those who had stated or implied, in the Hai Rui discussion, that "truth" did not have a class character. For Russo, this class-based version of truth constituted "a political-philosophical tangle that led to an irresolvable impasse." (124). In the view of politics we are considering here, politics had a "singular" status which could be erased by the admixture of philosophy or history. The primacy of politics depends on this singularity, and while the insistence on the class nature of truth points to the possibility of a prescriptive relationship between politics and a philosophy to come, the suturing of philosophy and politics leads to anti-philosophical and antipolitical consequences that are ultimately "one and the same as the Stalinist worldview of historical materialism" (125). Russo's diagnosis of the waning phase of pluralization and the descent into factionalism points to confluences with state power logics that the Cultural Revolution sought to disrupt.

How did a depoliticizing factionalism come to characterize the original scene of pluralization and multiplicity? Russo explains the waning phase from multiple perspectives, but pointedly rejects recourse to deep structural antagonism or a Durkheimian "social fact". Although most Cultural Revolution scholarship now rejects the idea that factions were identity based, the discourse of class identity was both a constraint on the pluralization process—Red Guard groups commonly restricted their memberships to those with "good" class backgrounds—and central to the language of factional antagonism, particularly under the hegemony of the "bloodline theory" of revolutionary character. More importantly for Russo, ascription of class identity was an exercise of state power, even though its aim was an egalitarian replacement of the prior class order. "Though materialist, historical, and scientific, it actually functioned in the socialist state as cognate to the structure of every governmental

power, which by means of the recognition of the various parts of a hierarchically structured society operates according to criteria that ritually discipline society's collective life." (155).

The waning character of pluralization during the summer and fall of 1966 was evident in the deformed political conduct of rebel activities, including attacks on the "four olds" and other performances.

> On the whole, destroying the four olds was an ambiguous campaign, seemingly supported at the highest levels of the party, whose aim was to direct the attention of student movements toward irrelevant objectives and deflect it from the real issues. By orienting student activism toward a series of obvious class enemies, it would be easier for those who were assigned to counteract pluralization to keep the situation under control. (157)

A different position on class politics was possible, even in the waning phase of the pluralization period. The Cultural Revolution leadership was initially hostile to the bloodline theory, and the generally favorable reaction to Yu Luoke's "On Class Origins," his very popular essay attacking it, —begun in the summer of 1966 and initially published in January 1967—is an indication of a road not taken. The Cultural Revolution leadership denounced Yu's essay in April, Yu was arrested in January of 1968, and he was executed two years later.

Russo's analysis puts the Shanghai "January Storm" of 1967 at the center of the transformation of the Cultural Revolution's subjective experimental energies. The pluralization phase among Shanghai workers raised questions of profound importance concerning the relationship between the Party and workers. What was the nature of worker subjectivity? Did the proletariat still exist? What was the meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat? Workers in Shanghai, particularly in the large *danwei*, had begun to question the nature and organization of work. The greatest significance of the January events, in Russo's analysis, was the transformation of the factory into a political site. What was the significance of the existence of the Workers' General Headquarters (上海工人革命造反派司令部),whose right to existence was recognized by Zhang Chunqiao in late 1966, despite the objection of the Shanghai Party leadership, and whose victory Mao proclaimed to constitute a "seizure of power"? The Cultural Revolution leadership itself was originally uncertain, and Russo suggests that Mao himself didn't fully understand it. In Russo's analysis, the event occasioned

> a dramatic face-to-face encounter between a vision of communism as a set of experimental inventions, which the self-organization of the rebels brought into the political arena, and the vision of communism as a form of government, which was then hegemonic in the socialist states. The main divide between the Cultural Revolution and the revolutionary culture passed through these visions. (173)

Experiment or government? Foucault's enigmatic claim that denied the existence of a socialist governmentality coincided with this:

> What governmentality is possible as a strictly, intrinsically, and autonomously socialist governmentality? In any case, we know only that if there is a really socialist governmentality, then it is not hidden within socialism and its texts. It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented."[13]

Foucault was pointing to the aporetic character of state formation in post-revolutionary regimes, where inventiveness and experimentation were too often sacrificed to geopolitical or developmental exigencies. The Commune was an initial form of that invention, the first of its kind in the twentieth-century revolutionary states. But Mao had complicated its innovativeness by characterizing it as a "seizure of power", which emerged as a dominant ideologeme with disastrous consequences. The substitution of the Commune by the Revolutionary Committee—initially designed, and probably correctly so, Russo suggests, to reduce factionalism—resulted in a model of authority nationwide that would preside, despite its pacifying intentions, over the Cultural Revolution's most violent and destructive phase. Factional struggle increased in intensity, for under

the logic of "seizure of power", defeat at the hands of another faction would lead to certain victimization, and the factional struggles—increasingly violent—would become simple struggles for survival. [14]

Why was "seizure of power" able to have that effect? To answer this question, Russo turns to Althusser's notion of the "void in discourse", a reference to new concepts necessary for theory (Althusser originally referred to Marx), but not able to be articulated within contemporary available discursive formations. The resulting "void" is filled with old concepts that play "a substitute role" in a new framework of thought. "Seizure of power" was such a substitute concept: it described what took place in October of 1949, and thus became identified with revolutionary subjectivity itself, but its effects in 1967 were very different. That is because these "voids" can do more than hold a place: they can function "retroactively to bring the political innovations in progress back within the conceptual framework with respect to which those innovations had appeared in excess." (202). The Party, as a political form, had reached its limits. It could not accommodate a form of political experimentation that was beyond and outside it; nor could the revolutionaries fashion a relationship to the Party and the State that could enable an original mode of governmentality. The result was stasis:

> Given its central role in that "epistemic" fabric, the concept of seizure of power ended up acting as a recompacting factor but in an altogether formulaic way that was inversely proportional to the structural weakening that it had induced. The result was that it drained the ongoing experimentation of its political vitality. (234)

The gradual rise of factionalism during the waning phase of the pluralization process brought an end to the multiplicity that was pluralization's essence, reducing the field of multiplicity to an antagonistic binary—split along varied and often random axes of alignment, and increasingly without political content. From spring 1967 to summer 1968 "the independent organizations ran out of any subjective novelty and finally ceased to exist." (150)

Russo ends his discussion of the pluralization-dismissal dynamic with an account of the transcript of the July 28, 1968, meeting between Mao, joined by others in the Cultural Revolution Central Group (Jiang Qing, Yao Wenyuan, Lin Biao, and others) and leaders of the main Red Guard organizations in Beijing's universities, a meeting which effectively ended the existence of independent organizations. The transcript was a very theatrical record, complete with stage directions and indication of tone. Framing the great bulk of his account of Cultural Revolution political invention between two "plays"—*Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* and the transcript—Russo notes the intimacy between the theatre and politics. A certain theatricality pervades the whole of *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Cult*ure: the word "scene" commonly characterizes the book's temporal progression, which is punctuated by declarations, also of a theatrical character. This is not incidental. There are also theatrical diimensions to the Althusserian "void"—the afterlife of a concept in a changed political situation—as Althusser suggests in his discussion of Bertolazzi's play *El Nost Milan*. [15] Badiou has also written on the proximity of theatre to politics:

> Theatre organizes, through its temporal setup, a collective summoning of the Idea. It is an activity that is essentially (and not accidentally) public, which is something, by the way, that the text of a play in itself is not at all. Event and experience are for a public. This is what I will call the quasi-political dimension of theatrical truth.
>
> It is theatre, in the circle of its provisional repetition, that figures the knotted components of politics. Theater is the figurative reknotting of politics, and this is regardless of its subject matter. [16]

Theater's relation to the presentation of truth thus has elements in common with the presentation of a political event in a temporal register that differs significantly from the "historical".

I bring up the temporality of the theatre—its condensation, its eventfulness, and its generativity, as a way to address certain questions that could be

raised about Russo's analysis, particularly from those less attuned to the work of his comrades, or former comrades, in philosophy. Russo's Cultural Revolution is short—its inventive, innovative phase lasts from the end of 1965 to the spring of 1967, when pluralization, a key political concept, enters its waning period. Discussion about issues of great import— the political character of the peasantry, the significance of extra-party organization, the nature of class under socialism, the nature of worker subjectivity and its relation to the state—are stillborn, truncated, or inconclusive. Russo's Cultural Revolution produces concepts and ideas, truths even, but not in the form of lessons or conclusions. Take "pluralization" itself, the initial form of Cultural Revolution politics. Thinking pluralization forms new modes of thought—the distinction between organizational form and ideology, for example, is no longer relevant—and the extraction of that thought is one of the singular achievements of the book.

The Unknotting

There is a final stillborn discussion that both concludes and clarifies the motive force for the book's existence, the failed nation-wide discussion and analysis of the Cultural Revolution itself. Between the two dramatic scenes, Russo's mode of theoretical emplotment—the movement of the mass organizations and the ideas to which they gave form, the periodic declarations, and Mao's appraisal and encouragement of the movements—is tightly knotted. As we enter the Cultural Revolution's period of denouement (the literal meaning of denouement is "unknotting") in Part IV, the coordinates for thought are less clear. There are many reasons for this. The disappearance of the mass organizations broke—temporarily at least—the relay between workers and cadres. The era of military control from 1968 to 1971 was an era of deep repression (an era which has been used in the negation discourse to characterize the whole Cultural Revolution) that constituted a near void in political or theoretical innovation. The 1971 Lin Biao incident, too, was an obscure and disorienting development. Following the death of Lin Biao, though, with the rehabilitation and return of many workers from the "radical" factions who had been dismissed under the period of military authority, there was a wave of repoliticization in leadership and in other social sectors. The political situation post-1971, however, had a new character. Both "conservatives" and "radicals" had chafed under military authority, although "radicals" certainly suffered more. In this new era, and until Mao's death, leadership at all levels—from Beijing to the factories—was shared by radicals and conservatives. In his denouement, Russo focuses on several campaigns supported by Mao—criticize Lin Biao criticize Confucius, criticize Confucianism support Legalism, bourgeois right, socialist new things, workers' theoretical study and workers' universities—that were especially significant in the factories. The workers' attack on the Stakhanovite regime (Russo commonly uses this term) of factory management and worker discipline which had begun in 1967, was revived, But it must be born in mind that, unlike the period from 1966 to 1968, this "Second Cultural Revolution", as Wang Hongwen referred to it[17], took place within a regime of shared power.

The most important of these initiatives, Russo suggests, centered on questions around the dictatorship of the proletariat, questions that had acquired new saliency after the challenges posed by the rise of independent workers' organizations within the context of the *danwei*, which encompassed much more that what is commonly associated with a place of production.

> The change that the political existence of workers' organizations outside the party wrought in the established ideological relationships formerly linking worker to factory, as well as to state and party, inevitably produced destabilizing effects on all the organizational planes, from the most elementary workshop relations to the implementation of tasks assigned by the state plan. The very existence of a chain of command in the factory, the technical regulations, the production discipline, the job assignments, the peculiar forms of wages (only partly in money; much consisted of the various benefits that state workers enjoyed), and the sociality of the danwei itself became

> questions that could not be decided simply on the basis of the previous socialist factory order. (253)

Mao's questions, Russo emphasizes, took the form of questions, and in this period the answers were not clear or forthcoming. Joel Andreas's 2019 book *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China*, which appeared too late for Russo to consult[18], confirms the innovativeness and importance of theoretical discussions in the factories.

> Elaborating on ideas in vogue in radical circles at that time, they developed their own theories about class contradictions in socialist societies, proposing that the principal contradiction was between the managers and the managed, and that this contradiction would become antagonistic if the differences between the two were not diminished and if the managed were not able to democratically supervise the managers.[19]

Andreas also shows that by all measures, the period between Lin Biao's death and Mao's death represented an apogee of worker power in the factories: the percentage of workers in the "permanent" status was the highest it had ever been, and there were numerous mechanisms for worker advancement, worker acquisition of technical knowledge, and democratization of the supervisory mechanisms.[20] This was in a context, though, of the continuing power of the "conservative" elements in factory leadership who advocated order and control. These were very different conditions from the new forms of worker subjectivity in a transformed factory space that had begun to emerge in January 1967. Given the scene of shared power, a faultline emerged between order vs. the perceived "chaos" of political discussion and analysis or, to put it another way, order vs. theory. Russo suggests that Mao's call, late in his life, for a reappraisal of the Cultural Revolution was genuine and open-ended; Mao's invitation of discussion of the rights of the bourgeoisie within a dictatorship of the proletariat had been one proof of that. Deng Xiaoping, whom Mao had brought back into the leadership in 1974, was of course a strong advocate of order and authority, but more significantly, from Russo's perspective, is his refusal of reappraisal, opting instead for a "thoroughgoing negation". As Deng wrote, shortly after removing the right to strike which Mao had included in the 1975 constitution, "Speaking out freely, airing one's views fully, writing big character posters and holding big debates have never played a positive role."[21]

One can imagine many pathways forward from the political scene in 1975. Wu Yiching's *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (2014) is a very different political analysis from Russo's, considering the radical energies of the Cultural Revolution as directed against state authority *tout court*, with the state (including Mao, Zhang Chunqiao, and their allies) functioning throughout as agent of suppression and containment.[22] In Wu's framework, the radical energies of the Cultural Revolution endured, in variant forms, throughout the later 1970s after Mao's death, in the Li Yi Zhe and Chen Erjin protests, in the April 1976 demonstrations in Tiananmen, and in 1978's Democracy Wall. Russo would, I imagine, see congruent political energies in some of these movements, albeit within a rapidly changing political field, with very different consequences for thought. As the history of the eighties, nineties, and beyond has revealed though, these movements, absent the particular knotting of the Cultural Revolution itself, were readily capable of articulation with the capitalist order. One can also imagine that the advances in workplace democracy in the period between 1972 and 1976 could have evolved into something like Yugoslavian workers' self-management, perhaps in a form closer to that initially imagined by Yugoslav theorists Edvard Kardelj, Milovan Đilas, Boris Kidrič, et al., rather than the rapid transformation to a regime of commodified labor power. But even Yugoslav self-management in its greatly attenuated form did not survive its encounter with global capitalism.

On his deathbed, Mao reaffirmed his conviction that it was right to rebel, that as long as there is oppression there will be opposition.[23] Yet the legacy of unanswered questions and truncated discussion endures. The contemporary Chinese state has presided over one of the world's most successful capitalist economies, albeit with stunning levels of

inequality. The Chinese Communist Party continues to maintain, that it is the party of the working class, an important factor, according to Russo, in precluding the rise of independent workers' organizations. Russo terms this the "mummification of the working class" (280 ff), whereby the state discursive centrality of the working class, wholly depoliticized and incapable of political initiative outside the party, becomes one of the state's key stabilizing factors. I would add to this that under Xi Jinping, a contemporary version of the Stalinist telos—the ultimate victory of socialism—against which Russo's notion of the "probable defeat" constituted a revolutionary challenge, has had similar stabilizing effects. During the 1990s and into what I have called "the WTO years" (2005-2015)[24], the many voices in China calling for a complete and open turn to a liberal, capitalist polity gave rise to a group of intellectuals who came to be known as the New Left, whose opposition to commodification, inequality, commercialization, privatization, and other neoliberal ills commonly extended to criticism of state policy, as well as to advocacy of greater workplace democracy, or of peasant and worker empowerment. The Xi Jinping regime has reaffirmed its commitment to Marxist-Leninism, in a formulaic manner of course, and to China's eventual realization of "communism", all while continuing the path of "reform" begun by Deng Xiaoping, including the strengthening and consolidation of state capacity, with vastly increased powers of surveillance and control of political activity. Liberal or neoliberal critics of the regime, whether from the journalistic, academic, or private sectors, have largely been silenced. The New Left has largely ceased to exist. Most of them have become cheerleaders for the Xi regime. The few left critical voices remaining are largely silent on matters of contemporary relevance. Russo writes in his Acknowledgments that much of the work in his book was an attempt to answer a question posed by Badiou: was the Cultural Revolution "the last revolution"? [25] Like the questions posed by Mao in the denouement, this question too remains unanswered by the end of Russo's book. Still, for all who would pose the question, What is a Revolution? in its political and theoretical registers, Russo's book is invaluable. It should be widely read, both inside and outside the China field.

Questions

The editors asked me to pose some questions for Alessandro Russo. I have a few below, but encourage Professor Russo to take up whatever questions he deems important, whether or not they appear below, in his discussion.

1. In this review article I have tried to give readers a sense of one dimension of the intellectual context out of which your analysis has emerged, specifically your work with Alain Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus. You may feel I have overemphasized this. Lazarus, to whom you referred in several earlier versions of essays that became part of this book, does not appear at all, and the references to Badiou are fewer. For example, in contrast to earlier versions of chapters of the book, you do not explicitly reference either "sequence" or "saturation", concepts important to both Badiou and Lazarus. Are there reasons for this?

2. At various points in your book, you refer to the need for more research on certain movements, debates, or issues. Regarding which Cultural Revolution phenomena do you think there are the most pressing needs for further research? You have stated that further research into the Cultural Revolution is particularly important for the current period, when the emancipatory/egalitarian agenda seems far removed

3. In your work Mao functions, similarly to all great revolutionaries, primarily as an "index" of the vital part of the revolution, to use Badiou's term, and not as a general or director. That emphasis notwithstanding, can you see any negative consequences to Mao's very considerable personal authority?

4. You recount that the major theoretical discussion that did not take place in the mid-1970s concerned the dictatorship of the proletariat. These lack leads, in your analysis, to the emergence of a capitalist

> regime of commodified labor. Could you suggest some directions that discussion could have taken, or some new categories of thought that might have been available?

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[1] Joseph Esherick, Paul Pickowicz, Andrew Walder, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History: An Introduction". In Esherick, Pickowicz, Walder, ed. *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*. Stanford 2006, p. 16. Note: All page number references to *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture* will be in the text in parentheses.

[2] Alain Badiou and Alessandro Russo, "International Center for the Study of the Cultural Revolution: Elements of a Project", in "The Asian Sixties", special issue. Christopher Connery, ed. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7:4. December 2006, p. 701-704.

[3] Raymond Lotta, Nayi Duniya, and K. J. A., "Alain Badiou's "Politics of Emancipation." A Communism Locked Within the Confines of the Bourgeois World". *Demarcations: A Journal of Communist Theory and Polemic*. Issue 1, Summer-Fall 2009. In a reply to a letter to the editor in a subsequent issue, Demarcations made its difference with Badiou explicit: the RCP was committed to the party-state form:

> But through Badiou's prism, the GPCR is reduced, distorted, and redefined as a popular movement – not against those high-ranking elements of state and party that sought to take China down the capitalist road – but against the "party-state" itself, that is, against the leading role of the vanguard party in socialist society. In this re-telling, Mao ultimately thwarted the mass movement, and the Cultural Revolution came to defeat when the institutions of party-state asserted their dominance. At a time when anti-communism is concentrated in the verdict that the "party-state" has been – and is – an oppressive bureaucratic-authoritarian power over the masses, rather than one of emancipation, Badiou merely reinforces this verdict. This is both fundamentally untrue and very harmful, because, as shown in the polemic against Badiou, without the "party-state", there is no emancipating humanity.

"Reply to Letters to the Editor.". *Demarcations: A Journal of Communist Theory and Polemic*. Issue 2, Summer-Fall 2009. http://www.demarcations-journal.org/issue02/demarcations-letter_and_response.html. The RCP's hostility to "egalitarianism" in general was central to its politics (and a central limitation on its political impact), whereas for Badiou equality operated ontologically, and was the sole determinant of genuine political activity. I spoke at the conference with several members of the youth organization who had hoped for a closer and more comradely engagement with Badiou. They subsequently left the party.

[4] Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*. Jason Barker, trans. New York: Verso, 2005. P. 43.

[5] Sylvain Lazarus, *Anthropology of the Name*. Gila Walker, trans. New York: Seagull,2015 p. xxvi

[6] Alessandro Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*. Durham: Duke 2020. Page numbers of passages in this book will follow quotations.

[7] Alessandro Russo, *Ouvrier et "danwei" : Note de recherche sur une enquète d'anthropologie ouvrière menée à Canton en avril 1989*. Paris: Université de Paris, 1990.

[8] Jairus Banaji, "Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century". *International Socialism*, no. 51, April-June 1972, p. 33.

[9] Alessandro Russo, "The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Cultural Revolution". *positions* 6:1 (1998), pp. 179-202. Alessandro Russo, "Egalitarian Inventions and Political Symptoms: A Reassessment of Mao's Statement's on 'The Probable Defeat'". *Crisis and Critique* 3:1 (2006), pp. 259-279. The latter was a special issue on Stalin and Stalinism.

[10] Aminda Smith, "Foreword: The Maoism of PRC History". *Positions* 29:4 (2021), p. 660.

[11] Alessandro Russo, "Egalitarian Inventions and Political Symptoms: A Reassessment of Mao's Statement's on 'The Probable Defeat'", p. 264.

[12] Asad Haider makes innovative use of Russo's notions of pluralization and dismissal in a discussion that touches on contemporary impasses of depoliticization. "Dismissal: The Relevance of the Cultural Revolution". *The Point*, issue 23 (2020) https://thepointmag.com/politics/dismissal/.

[13] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Macmillan, 2008), 94.

[14] The work of Andrew Walder, a scholar with no sympathies for the political project of the Cultural Revolution, makes clear in several books and essays that the great bulk of Cultural Revolution violence came after the "pluralization" phase. See the analysis of motivations for factional struggle in Andrew G. Walder, *Agents of Disorder: Inside China's Cultural Revolution* (Harvard, 2019). Also Dong Guoqiang and Andrew Walder, *A Decade of Upheaval: The Cultural Revolution in Rural China* (Princeton, 2021), p. 187.

[15] Louis Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Theater': Bertolazzi and Brecht, Notes on a Materialist Theater". In Althusser, *For Marx* (Ben Brewster, trans). Penguin 1969, p. 140..

[16] Alain Badiou, Rhapsody *for the Theatre*. Bruno Bosteels, ed. and trans. Martin Puchner, trans. Verso 2014, p. 13.

[17] Quoted in Joel Andreas, *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China*. Oxford 2019, p. 150.

[18] See my discussion of Andreas's book in the *PRC History Review*, 5:2 (December 2020) http://prchistory.org/the-prc-history-review-5-2/.

[19] Joel Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 156

[20] Ibid. Chapter Six.

[21] Quoted in ibid, p. 167.

[22] Wu Yiching, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis*. Harvard 2014. See my review of Wu's book: Christopher Connery, *The Margins and the Center: For a New History of the Cultural Revolution*. Viewpoint Magazine. 2014. https://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/28/the-margins-and-the-center-for-a-new-history-of-the-cultural-revolution/

[23] Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, 165

[24] Christopher Connery, "World Factory". *Made in China*. January-April 2020. https://madeinchinajournal.com/2020/05/11/world-factory/

[25] In an essay entitled "The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?" (note the question mark), Badiou drew on Sylvain Lazarus's concept of "saturation" to describe the point at which a political form or category—in this case the Party State—exhausts its efficacy and its possibility, requiring a thinking and a practice beyond it. In some of his earlier writing on the Cultural Revolution, Russo also deployed the concept of saturation. It is not used in *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture*. Alain Badiou, "The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?" *positions* 13:3 Winter 2005, pp. 481-514.

Response

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Christopher Connery's essay "What Was the Cultural Revolution?" is a comprehensive critical introduction that examines my book in depth and invites reflection on several vital questions. The best that an author could desire. Besides allowing me to look at the book from a certain distance, this response is an opportunity to continue an intellectual exchange that has lasted for two decades. Professor Connery reconstructs in detail the itinerary and the context in which the book was written. We have crossed paths several times on projects and initiatives.

As he recalls at the beginning of his essay, in the early 2000s, the idea was widespread among China scholars that the Cultural Revolution, and more generally Maoist politics, no longer had any relevance in the study of contemporary China. Therefore, the revolutionary decade could be definitively entrusted to the care of history, which, in turn, was a fully stabilized field of knowledge because it was finally free from political concerns.
This was the sense of the 2003 San Diego conference title, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History," which Connery quotes in comparison with the conference organized by Tani Barlow in Seattle in 2006, "Is a History of the Cultural Revolution Possible?", which we both attended. The main difference was evidently in that question mark. Connery thoroughly explains why we did not take a historical understanding of the Cultural Revolution for granted in our conference.

As for the other main difference between the two conferences, concerning the contemporary relevance of Maoist politics, now, two decades later, we can see other arguments for the need to rethink the Cultural Revolution, which have to do with the current situation of impending global war.

We are witnessing the harbingers of a new world war, which unequivocally emerged with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This situation has been developing for some years, with the growing hostility between the USA and China and the establishment of an almost unchallenged hegemony of American power over European governments – an alliance ostensibly anti-Russia, but ultimately anti-China.

There is no doubt that the Chinese government is one of the great protagonists of this situation. To read the logic of its decisions, however, nothing is more misleading than categories such as democracy vs. totalitarianism – clearly derived from the Cold War and alas back in vogue – not to mention the typically colonialist pair of West vs. East. These are not analytical categories at all but only slogans of war propaganda. Their specular counterpart in China today is the exaltation of the "state capacity" vs. "crisis of representation,"" as well as the moral superiority of the virtuous East, which restores its multi-millennial glory against the decadence of the libertine West. Moreover, both sides share the conviction that all Maoist politics, at least from 1958 to 1976 but even earlier, is irrelevant as a point of reference.

Nevertheless, a critical rethinking of the Cultural Revolution is unavoidable today. It stands as a decisive crossroads for analyzing the global confrontation and the circumstances in which the Chinese government operates. At the same time, it is a primary positive reference for seeking a way out of the impending war.

I will highlight here three converging themes, which can only be examined in comparison with the Cultural Revolution and, indeed, with its defeat:

i. the specific forms of authority prevailing in Chinese capitalism;
ii. the contradiction between the two major capitalist powers, which overdetermines the situation of the world war and its developments;

iii. the epochal character of the Cultural Revolution, located at the final edge of twentieth-century state communism.

The first of these themes has a mainly descriptive value on the functioning of governance in China today. The other two themes imply abstract theoretical issues on the intertwining between capitalism, global war, and extra-capitalist political experiments.

(*i*) The first element in the present-day relevance of the Cultural Revolution, barely hidden behind its "thorough negation," concerns the coalition of the two authorities with which the Chinese government exercises power: the classically prescriptive one of capitalist command and the interdictory one of the CCP.[1] This specific form of dual authority, unique in the world, is the main result of the defeat of the Cultural Revolution and the assessment Deng Xiaoping made of it. He by no means restored the conditions of 1965 or 1957 but created an entirely new situation, which he derived from the Cultural Revolution through his "negation."

Professor Connery rightly recalls the actual positive meaning in which "negation" operates (in Freud's sense). It "affirms" something essential that cannot be stated otherwise, given the censorship to which it is subjected. The fact that "negation," even "thorough negation," has been an obsessively repeated keyword of post-Mao CCP ideology confirms its specific value. The Cultural Revolution was censored, but no new stable government could avoid acknowledging that it had brought out an unavoidable reality principle: masses of Chinese workers had sought an independent political existence, external to the CCP and even in opposition to it.

The "negation" of the Cultural Revolution was by no means "thorough." Deng made a carefully selective negation. On the one hand, he nullified any egalitarian political experimentation that arose in that decade, especially in the factories, as a source of disorder and anarchy. On the other hand, Deng had to acknowledge that those experiments had revealed the insurmountable impasse of the CCP's authority based on an alleged consubstantial relationship with the "working class" in the industrial *danwei* system. After the January Storm in Shanghai, when new forms of independent political organization among the workers emerged, it became impossible to restore the previous authority. There were two ways. One, supported by the Maoists and attempted especially in the final years of the revolutionary decade, was experimenting with new political relationships between workers and the factory.

The other path, pursued with the utmost determination by Deng once he came to power, was to place workers' labor under the command of the capitalist authority – a prescriptive authority, in the sense that it unconditionally imposes times and ways of supplying the workforce. With the addition, however, of a fundamental supplement, the interdictory authority of the CCP, i.e., the prohibition of any independent organization of employees, since the CCP is the only legitimate "vanguard of the working class."

The coalition of these two forms of authority also involves profound and ultimately insoluble contradictions. The capitalist authority claims its primacy in commanding the workforce, which the authority of the CCP is no longer able to guarantee by itself. The latter, in turn, claims to have created the conditions of capitalist property and, above all, to be the fundamental factor of its "stability" (the actual keyword of the Chinese government discourse). All the disputes between the CCP leadership and the big Chinese capitalists center around which of the two authorities counts more than the other. In recent years the interdictory authority has been predominant, but the game is not over. Which of the two authorities is the more essential in ensuring "stability"? That is, in obtaining obedience from the workforce? As much as they both try to "deny" the capital-labor contradiction, this remains the source of the structural instability of the Chinese political system.

(*ii*) That the capitalist road can have communism as its goal is the most extremist and blatantly fraudulent version of the vision of politics guaranteed by history. The only goal of capitalism can be nothing other than unlimited profit and the valorization of capital through the extortion of surplus labor. That capitalism leads to communism through the "development of the productive forces" has been one

of the fundamental components of Deng Xiaoping's ideology since the last years of the Cultural Revolution. It was the ideology of the "historical" necessity of capitalism. Added to this, in the era of Xi Jinping, is the promise of a peaceful development of global capitalism, to which Chinese capitalism would make a fundamental contribution.

Instead, the prodromes of a global war in Europe, on the horizon of the US-China conflicts that have already emerged in recent years, show how illusory a balance of interests between capitalist powers is. The promise of a win-win enjoyment, shared by capitalists worldwide, obscures the cannibalistic essence of inter-capitalist relations.

The Chinese government exposes the entire country to a frontal conflict with the US power without declaring the real stake – the conquest of new markets on a global level – instead passing it off as a defense of China's cultural and even moral identity. Its opponent does the same in the name of an identity of the democratic and liberal "West." The identitarianism dominant everywhere is a decisive war factor, and it poisons the masses by dragging them into delirious clashes in defense of their self-image.

Capitalism, established in China as the only response the CCP could give to its loss of authority during the Cultural Revolution, could not stop at the local market and necessarily found itself caught up in global market competition. In this sense, the Belt and Road Initiative was an obligatory choice. This was the point when Chinese capitalism, although it had initially brought enormous profits to capitalists around the world thanks to delocalization, triggered harsh reactions from the US power in defense of its supremacy.

Here lies an apparent paradox. In the early 1970s, when China was experimenting with the most radical ways to overcome capitalism, it was possible to start a peace policy with the highest capitalist power. It was Mao, well before Deng, who invited the Americans to a negotiation. Now that China has taken the capitalist road, it is "doomed" to military confrontation with the USA. Does fate compel "China" to defend its "identity" militarily from the threats of US-centered unipolar capitalism, which does not accept its benevolent multipolarity?

(*iii*) There have been other paths. The Maoist politics of the 1960s represents the best example of how the prospect of going beyond capital could be a major factor in limiting the destructiveness of world wars. The twentieth century was the century of the globalization of war but also the one in which the existence of ideas organized to overcome capitalism played a decisive role in limiting wars. The Bolshevik uprising interrupted the carnage of the First World War; the Patriotic War of the USSR and the various people's wars in Europe and China were decisive in the defeat of the Axis. Even the Cold War did not become "hot" because it involved a "civil" conflict over which of the two models of society and State was more just.

The issue of the relationship between extra-capitalist experiments and world wars implies a political assessment of twentieth-century communism, which is still to be done. An episode can exemplify the limitation of war that egalitarian experimentation exercised: Mao's foreign and military policies in the mid-1960s. Two were his most significant positions. In foreign policy, he fully supported the Vietnamese resistance but, at the same time, categorically rejected any alliance with the USSR. Moreover, he gave special attention to how to limit the State's military apparatus from becoming a separate entity.

The two positions were consistent but also extremely against the tide. The American escalation in Vietnam prompted many CCP leaders to hope for a military alliance with the USSR against the USA. At the same time, they promoted a "professionalization" of the army, so that it could be ready for the new military challenges. Mao instead affirmed, on the one hand, the need to continue without concessions in the criticism of Soviet revisionism and, on the other hand, to entrust the army with highly civilian tasks and objectives, even calling it to be a "great school" for the limitation of the social division of labor.

The famous "Letter to Lin Biao of May 7, 1966" (known as the "May 7th Directive") outlined a political program that had to be implemented "even in the event of a new world war."[2] The soldiers should also have been partly workers, peasants, and

students, and at the same time, each of these activities should have been carried out in rotation by everyone.

It is well known that this “Directive” is considered today, at best, as an example of Mao’s utopianism. Nevertheless, precisely the perseverance in that egalitarian political program made it possible to limit the looming threat of the transformation of the Cold War into a global military conflict. It was fortunate for China and the world that Liu Shaoqi’s and Deng Xiaoping's politics did not prevail at the time. They both supported a military alliance with the USSR and a separate status for the state military.[3]

Today, on the contrary, China is being dragged into the spiral of world war, not for external causes (the US military threat to which it should adapt) but for internal causes, which also exercise their primacy in this case. The capitalist road, and at the same time, the expansion of the bureaucratic-military apparatuses of the Chinese State, inexorably lead to war.

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After considering the current relevance of the Cultural Revolution, here below are some answers to the final questions that Professor Connery asks, in a different order from his list.

(3) How negatively did his "personal authority" affect Mao himself? It is known that Mao was annoyed by the “cult of personality” orchestrated by Lin Biao. As he wrote in a famous letter to Jiang Qing in 1966, “I say so for the consequences it has on myself.” Mao was present in introspection. Equally explicit is the distancing from any position of higher authority that he holds during the meeting with the leaders of the Beijing Red Guards (the “Conclusive scene”). However harsh and direct the criticisms addressed to the students, Mao's attitude is remarkably egalitarian. He also often intervenes to decisively curb the superiority posture of other CCP leaders present at that meeting.

The most negative consequences did not come so much from an excess of Mao's personal authority as from his being wrapped up in a figure of the State, and even worse at the point of fusion of the Party and the State. Much of his anxieties in the last decade go back to the problem of how to undo that fusion. At the same time, how to personally escape the injunction of embodying the superego of an entire country.

(4) We must rethink the value and limits of the political campaigns of the final years of the Cultural Revolution. The principal among them is the "study of the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat." First of all, the originality of a mass political campaign of highly theoretical content should be underlined, and similar was the characteristic of the criticism of Confucianism. The fact that the last two major political campaigns of the Cultural Revolution had such intensely theoretical content and even involved some specialized historiographical knowledge shows that Mao pinned great hopes on mass political intelligence.

We must also consider these study movements in the context of the final years of the revolutionary decade. As suggested in the book, they can be seen as preparatory steps towards a goal, which Mao ultimately failed to achieve, of mass political assessment of the Cultural Revolution.

As for the missed objectives of the study campaign, Mao said from the beginning that without fundamental "clarification" of this theory, the capitalist rule would have been quickly restored. Also, in this case, Mao struck the “probable defeat” chord. Mao did not believe in the existence of historical laws which guaranteed the transition from socialism to communism. Indeed, he stressed several times that an imminent transition from socialism to capitalism was much more likely.

Nonetheless, faced with the probable finitude of that space of political experimentation, which is itself epochal, Mao believes that it was necessary to rethink its entire theoretical framework, to identify its vital nodes, and above all, the unresolved ones. He asked questions that he could not answer alone: a clarification could be found only by engaging the masses. At the same time, that campaign required those theories to be articulated with ongoing collective experimentation in various fields, the “newborn socialist things.” Therefore, they, too,

were precarious, not guaranteed by any historical destiny, yet necessary and urgent experiments.

There were at least two points of impasse in campaign to study the dictatorship of the proletariat. One is the question of the relationship between the Party and the State. Rather than directing the withering away of the State, the Communist Party duplicated its articulation at every level (something which continues to this day). This issue remained marginal to that campaign, even though Mao eventually stated that "the bourgeoisie is right in the Communist Party." His final judgment was that the Communist Party was not only an organizational instrument inadequate for the task of egalitarian political experimentation but it was instead its most radical antagonist. The issue was discussed for a few months among the people closest to the Maoist group, a small minority, such as the magazines *Xuexi yu pipan* and *Beijing daxue xuebao*. However, only a few notable articles examined the issue in depth. It was also viewed with great impatience by the majority of the Party leaders who were reconstituting themselves into a dominant faction under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.

The other weak point of the Left was that it did not mention any possible form of mass organization independent of the Party, something which had constituted the political novelty of the first months of the Cultural Revolution. Since no assessment had been made of the origins and decline of those organizations, any political evaluation of those innovations remained unresolved. The greatest weakness of the Maoist Left was that it was unable to critically rethink the problem of what had led to the Red Guards' factional self-destruction; indeed, it ultimately denied the issue.

The point of arrival of those political campaigns, so theoretically intense, was to prepare a mass political intelligence trained to deal with the most challenging issue. It was, as Mao said, 有所不足 *yousuo buzu*, what had not been up to the political experiment of the Cultural Revolution. Deng was uncompromising in opposing this latest initiative by Mao. The lack of such an assessment of the early Cultural Revolution allowed for the drastic closure of that experimentation and the ensuing large-scale restoration of the commodification of the workforce.

(2) There are various possible research directions for the revolutionary decade. For focusing on the singularity of that infinite multiplicity of political situations, an essential path would be the study of the transcripts of internal political meetings of independent organizations. It would also include relevant political experiments of the following years (for example, some "workers' universities"). The primary hypothesis is that it is precisely at the level of those meetings that the growth and decline of political organizations must have manifested themselves, with all the contradictory positions that must have existed at that moment. There must be several transcripts similar to the "Conclusive Scene." In China, it was a typical habit of participants in political meetings to keep at least a summary, if not quite a detailed description (one example is Li Rui's "Lushan diary"). Finding those "minutes" should not be easy, but it should not be impossible either.

(1) "Sequence" and "saturation" are concepts formulated by Lazarus in the eighties. I shared them with him and Badiou in the first phase of my work, but they are not present in the book. There was a period, more than twenty years until the late 2000s, in which a shared intellectual space existed. Some concepts, projects, and initiatives, without too many copyright concerns, were mutually encouraged, even if provisional and incomplete. Not without disagreements, which nonetheless fueled a certain vitality. Everyone was looking for something in common in different ways. When that intellectual space was interrupted, there was no longer any way to mutually compare those concepts' development and value.

I no longer refer to "sequence" and "saturation" in this book because I realized they do not touch the essential issue. Both concepts focus only on the finite dimension but do not touch upon the potentially infinite character of egalitarian political inventions. These inventions are exceptions to the present rules of the world; they involve repeated attempts and experiments, have their inherent precariousness, have no previous guarantees, are inevitably uncertain, and are discontinuous and finite. However, if they are inventions, they affirm a

novelty of thought, the universality of which aims beyond their end, that is, the exhaustion of their specific ideological and organizational conditions.

Moreover, there are two converging singularities of the Cultural Revolution that the mere ascertainment of its "finitude" obscures. First, that end was foreseen from the beginning, and the urgency of the political mobilization went beyond its "probable defeat." Furthermore, there was the coincidence of another probable end, that of an entire era of political paths beyond capitalism. The relevance of Maoism lies in having promoted mass political scrutiny of twentieth-century state communism and, at the same time, having attempted a different path, even in the awareness that such experimentation would probably have failed, marking the failure of that era.

The Cultural Revolution (its fundamental political novelties, not the set of facts) anticipates that double end and, doing so, positions itself beyond it. The questions it opened would have required innumerable experiments, and it would have taken "dozens of Cultural Revolutions," said Mao.

The Chinese revolutionary decade is the broadest and most protracted event of what Christopher Connery has called the "unfinished project" of the 1960s. Unfinished, in the double sense of not completed and to be continued. At the same time, it is situated beyond its finitude, or as Alain Badiou says, the Cultural Revolution is the ultimate example of "infinite politics."

The current situation of the beginning of a new global war is the result of the global establishment of capitalism. To find a way out, a reassessment of the communist exceptions to capitalism and their defeat is indispensable. Rethinking the Cultural Revolution is vital as the only opening available for an assessment of twentieth-century communism.

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[1] We have elaborated on this topic with Claudia Pozzana, in an article based on a series of research trips to China in recent years. See https://sinosfere.com/2020/07/26/claudia-pozzana-e-alessandro-russo-hong-kong-due-sistemi-una-guerra-incombente/

[2] English version, https://china.usc.edu/mao-zedong-"notes-report-further-improving-army's-agricultural-work-rear-service-department-military.

[3] Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo, "Facing the WW4", in *Continental Thought and Theory. A Journal of Intellectual Freedom*, special issue, "War: Cold, Hot and…Tepid?". Forthcoming.